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GLENLOCH GIRLS

By GRACE M. REMICK

Author of
GLENLOCH GIRLS ABROAD
GLENLOCH GIRLS' CLUB
GLENLOCH GIRLS AT CAMP WEST

ILLUSTRATED BY ADA C. WILLLAMSON

To my little cousin

KATHARINE McC. REMICK

whose unfailing interest and appreciation have helped me to write this book.

Introduction

This is the story of a pleasant winter in the lives of some everyday girls and boys. That doesn't sound exciting, does it? And yet, if you stop to think, you will remember that most girls and boys live comparatively simple lives and that it is given only to a few to have strange adventures and do valorous deeds. Ruth Shirley, one of the girls, expects to be very forlorn, but, finding a new home in Glenloch, she is welcomed by the kindest of friends and becomes a Glenloch Girl in heart and name. One of the boys is obliged to learn the lesson of patience and courage when that which he most prizes is taken away and he supposes it will never be regained. Like all the rest of us, these young people have their follies and faults. On the whole, however, they are truthful, good-natured, peaceable young citizens, full

of the business of the hour, but beginning already to plan for the mysterious future which to them promises so much. Those who are interested in the story of their good times together may be glad to read in "Glenloch Girls Abroad" how Ruth meets her father, what tidings she has from Glenloch, and something of the new friends she makes on the other side of the ocean. They will be interested also in the further doings of The Social Six, as they are related in "Glenloch Girls' Club." And the adventures and good times of "Glenloch Girls at Camp West."

GRACE M. REMICK.

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CHAPTER I

RUTH'S FATHER

Just as the key clicked in the lock and the front door opened, a bright face peeped over the baluster from the hall above. "Why, papa," said a dismayed voice, "you're very early and I'm not dressed. I wanted to be at the door to meet you tonight of all nights."

"I'm sorry I'm not welcome, Ruthie," said papa, pretending to be very much hurt. "Shall I go out and walk up and down the block until you are ready to receive me?"

"No, indeed, you absurd boy. I'll be down there in three minutes and a half. Don't get interested in a book, will you, for I want to talk with you."

"Ail right, my dear," replied papa dutifully, and Ruth flew off to her room to put the finishing touches to her toilet.

A few minutes later she appeared in the library with flushed cheeks and very bright eyes. "Now, Popsy, sit down here," she said, leading him to the big armchair and sitting down in front of him. "Do you know what day this is, sir?" she continued, trying to look very stern.

"I think I do," he answered meekly; "it's the seventeenth of
September, I believe."

"And what day is that?" still more sternly.

"That is, why, bless my soul, so it is, that's—-"

"Your birthday," finished Ruth triumphantly. "And we're going to celebrate it just by ourselves. You aren't going out this evening, are you, Popsy?"

"No, dear, I shall be very glad to stay at home with you. I am afraid, though, that I shan't be a very good birthday boy, for there are some business plans that are troubling me, and I want to talk them over with you."

"Business plans?" said Ruth, surprised. "Why, papa, I never supposed
I could help you about business plans."

"These particular plans have so much to do with you, little girl, that it's only fair to tell you about them before I decide. However, we won't talk about them until after dinner, for I'm as hungry as a bear."

"Well, do run upstairs and get ready now, for dinner will be ready in a few minutes, and I'm dying to give you your birthday surprise."

"Dear me, I thought it was enough of a shock to have a birthday, without more surprises. Give it to me by degrees, please, for in my starving condition I can't bear much."

Ruth watched her father as he ran lightly up the stairs, and wondered if any other girl had such a great, strong, handsome papa. "He's my very best chum," she said to herself, "and sometimes he doesn't seem a bit older than I do."

Just as the maid announced dinner, papa appeared and Ruth met him at the foot of the stairs with a sweeping courtesy. He responded with a ceremonious bow, and the proffer of his arm, which Ruth took with great gravity.

"Aren't we grand?" she said in a satisfied tone. "It makes me feel dreadfully grown up to have you treat me so politely."

"I'll stop then," laughed papa. "Fourteen is old enough, and I don't want my girl to turn into a young lady just yet."

"Now shut your eyes, Popsy, and don't look until I get you into your chair," said Ruth as they reached the dining-room door.

Her father obediently shut his eyes, and Ruth led him to his place at the table. Then she slipped around to her own chair, and clapping her hands said triumphantly, "Now look."

"Oh—o-oh!" gasped her father, almost before he had opened his eyes. "This is truly superb. Ruth, you're an artist."

"Mary helped me do it," said Ruth, smiling at the pretty maid; "but I planned it every bit myself. I thought I would make it a pink and white birthday because pink is your favorite color."

Mr. Shirley looked at the pretty table with appreciative eyes. In the centre a bowl of pink roses reflected in its shining facets the lights of the pink candies which filled the candelabra at the ends of the table. Broad, pink satin ribbons, with rosebuds and maidenhair fern dropped upon them at intervals, ran from the flower bowl in the centre to the comers of the polished table, and in front of papa's plate was a huge birthday cake resplendent with pink and white icing and glittering with candies.

"You don't have to eat the birthday cake first," said Ruth, as Mr. Shirley looked somewhat apprehensively in its direction. "You see I made it myself, and I thought I couldn't possibly wait all through dinner for it to be put on, so I told Mary we'd make it a sort of glorified supper, and we could have the cake to look at while we were eating the other things."

"Do you mean to tell me that you made this gorgeous concoction yourself?" asked papa, looking at her admiringly. "To think I should have had such a genius in my house and not have known it."

"I've been practicing ever since the first of September," answered Ruth proudly, "and Nora said that this one looked quite perfect. But you mustn't take too long over your supper, for there's another surprise coming when we are all by ourselves in the library."

"You don't say so. How can I wait until then?" said Mr. Shirley, beginning to attack the salad with great energy.

It was a delightful birthday supper, Ruth thought, for her father was his funniest self, and she laughed so much that she had scarcely time to eat. The cake was a great success, and Mr. Shirley praised the maker of it so warmly that she blushed rosily and flew around the table to give him a hug and kiss.

"Now for surprise number two," cried Ruth as they left the table and went into the cozy library. "Sit in the big chair, papa, and I'll bring it to you."

Mr. Shirley waited with pretended anxiety while Ruth opened a drawer in the desk and took out a small box. "This is for the best of fathers and the best of chums," she said giving it to him with a kiss.

"From the best of little daughters," he added as he opened the box. Inside was a velvet case and opening that he found a gold locket on which his monogram had been engraved.

"It's for you to wear on your watch-chain," said Ruth. "Now open it."

Mr. Shirley pressed the tiny spring, and the locket flew open disclosing two miniatures beautifully painted. One of Ruth with merry brown eyes and brown curls tied in a knot in her neck, and the other of a sweet-faced, tender-eyed woman whom Ruth much resembled.

"Popsy, dear," said Ruth, "I couldn't think of anything you would like half so well as these, so I took the money Uncle Jerry sent me last birthday and had them painted for you. Isn't it sweet of mamma?" she added softly.

"Nothing you could have given me would have pleased me so much," said Mr. Shirley with an odd little choke in his voice. "Those are the two dearest faces I could possibly see, and they shall go with me everywhere."

"I'm so glad you like it. And now, papa, let's have the business plans. It makes me feel very important to think that you are going to talk business with me."

"Dear, I'm afraid it's going to make you unhappy, and I hate to spoil our pleasant evening together. Shan't we get the birthday safely over, and put off the business plans until tomorrow?"

"Seems to me I remember that you are always telling me something about 'never putting off until

tomorrow,' etc., etc. No, sir," she continued with mock sternness, "I want to hear all about it."

Still her father hesitated, until Ruth said hopefully, "You haven't lost all your money, have you? That would be so romantic and interesting. I think I should go out as a cook, and perhaps you could get a place as butler in the same house. If it happened just now, though, I should have to feed them on birthday cake until I learned to make something else."

Mr. Shirley threw back his head and laughed. "You're a good planner, Ruthie, but I hardly think you'll be obliged to go out as a cook just yet. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I really can't say that I have lost any money."

"Well, then, please tell me all about it, and I'll listen very quietly," said Ruth perching herself on the arm of the big chair.

"It's just this, little daughter," answered Mr. Shirley, putting his arm around Ruth and drawing her closer; "it has been decided that it will be a profitable thing for us to open a branch house in Germany, and it is important that some member of the firm should be over there for a year or two to start it."

"And are you the one to go?" cried Ruth, clapping her hands. "Why should you think that would make me unhappy, when it is one of the dreams of my life to go abroad?"

"That's just where the trouble comes, Ruthie," said her father tenderly. "I have thought it all over carefully, and I cannot make myself think that it would be right or wise to take you over there with me for the first year. For six months, at least, I shall be traveling nearly all the time, and I should neither want to take you with me nor to leave you in a pension."

"But, father, I'd be willing to stay alone if I could only see you once in a while," cried Ruth with quivering lips. "Or you could get me a German governess, and——"

"Darling, I've thought over every possible plan, and it still seems to me better for you not to go over during my first year," answered Mr. Shirley soberly.

"Oh, papa, I can't bear it," sobbed Ruth, burying her face on her father's shoulder. "We've been such chums for the last year, and I can't get along without you. Besides," she said, checking her tears and looking at him with a pitiful attempt at a smile, "when mamma died she told me I must try to take her place and always take care of you, and how can I if you go so far away?"

There was another burst of sobs, and all Mr. Shirley could do was to hold her close and stroke the soft curls with a remorseful hand. At last when it seemed to him that he could bear it no longer she raised her tear-stained face, and said as she used to say when she was a little girl, "I'm going to be good now, papa."

"That's my brave girl," said Mr. Shirley much relieved. "Here, let me help you wipe your eyes, darling. You need something bigger than that scrap of a handkerchief after such a shower."

Ruth laughed weakly as papa sopped her eyes in an unskilful but efficacious manner. Then as she lay back in his arms quite tired out after her storm of tears she said soberly, "Tell me all the rest now, papa, please. What do you mean to do with me?"

"That is the hardest question of all to decide," answered Mr. Shirley gravely. "I never realized before quite how hard it would be to find a suitable home for such an attractive young person as you are. If Uncle Jerry would only find a wife and settle down within the next month you could go to him, but I'm afraid we can't manage that."

"Within a month, papa? Must it be so soon as that?" asked Ruth, looking at him with eyes that threatened to overflow again.

"I'm afraid it must, dear," answered Mr. Shirley. "You see the sooner I get to Germany the better it will be for the business, and if you and I have a hard thing to do we may as well get it over as soon as possible."

Ruth shut her eyes for a moment and clenched her hands. She was determined not to cry again, at least not when she was with her father.

"You must have some plan for me in your mind, papa," she said at last very quietly; "please tell me what it is."

"Well, dear, there are three ways out of it. You must either go to school, have some one come and live

with you here, or go to live in the family of some one we know."

"I've always thought I should just love to go to boarding-school," said Ruth thoughtfully, "but now it seems to me I should hate it. And I should simply die if you left me in this house, for I should miss you and mamma every minute."

"That's just what I feared," said Mr. Shirley, "and as to the boarding-school plan, there are several reasons why I should prefer to give that up for this year. That leaves plan number three to be considered, and today I've had what I think is a brilliant idea regarding it."

"What is it, papa?" asked Ruth, beginning to get interested.

"It seems to me that if I leave you with any of our friends here in Chicago you will be constantly reminded of mamma and me and will miss us more than you would if you were in some place where we had never been together. Just as I was thinking this all over for the hundredth time this morning a letter came from my old college chum, Henry Hamilton. It was largely a business letter, but at the end he inquired for you, and said that they wished very much that they had a daughter growing up in their family."

"Seems to me I've heard mamma speak of Mrs. Hamilton," said Ruth musingly. "Didn't they play together when they were little girls?"

"Why, yes, of course they did. Mrs. Hamilton was Mary Ashley, and you remember that funny story mamma used to tell you about the time they thought they heard a burglar."

"Oh, yes, and how they went into Boston to a big fair and they lost Mary Ashley's mother, who was taking care of them and had such a funny time getting home," said Ruth.

"Well, I called on them the last time I went East, and found them living not far from Boston in a very delightful home, and when that letter reminded me of them today I thought at once that their home would be just the place for you if they were willing to take you."

"Are there any children in the family?"

"One boy about sixteen," replied Mr. Shirley.

"Dear me! I wish he had a sister. But, papa, have you any idea that they'll want to take a strange girl into their family for a whole year? If they will take me I shall be so much nearer Europe, shan't I?"

"Of course you will, darling, and I somehow have the feeling that they'll be glad to have you with them," said Mr. Shirley. "Now if you agree with me that it is best to try this plan, I'll write tonight, for I'm sorry to say our plans must be made quickly."

Ruth's eyes filled with tears which she could not hide. "It all seems so horrid to me when I think of being without you, papa," she said slowly, "that I can't make any choice. You'll have to do just as you think best, and perhaps I shall learn to be brave."

Mr. Shirley hugged her tight for a moment without speaking. Then he said tenderly, "Darling, go to bed now and try to sleep. Perhaps in the morning things will look brighter to you. We'll talk it over then and see what is best to be done."

Ruth kissed him and tried to smile, "Goodnight, papa; I'll be a better chum tomorrow," she said with an effort, and then went quickly from the room.

CHAPTER II

THREE CHUMS

"Why, how delightful, Henry," cried Mrs. Hamilton, as she finished reading a letter which her husband had just handed to her. "Of course we want the little girl to come at once."

"Of course," agreed Mr. Hamilton with equal heartiness. "It will be nice to have a little daughter around the house to bring me my slippers and play and sing to me when I am tired. But what will Arthur think of it?" inquired Mr. Hamilton with a note of anxiety in his voice.

"I hadn't thought of that," answered his wife, her bright face clouding. "I dare say he won't like it at all, but I don't see that we can let him decide it. Perhaps it may do him good in the end."

"Well, I shall leave you to settle it with him," said Mr. Hamilton rising from the table. "For some reason nothing I say seems to make much of an impression on him nowadays."

"I must say that I get dreadfully discouraged, too," confessed his wife. "He is so hopelessly indifferent to everything he used to like; he utterly refuses to see one of the boys or girls, and he sits for hours at a time doing absolutely nothing. I can see that the doctor is really anxious about him," she continued.

"Keep up your courage, dear," said Mr. Hamilton with more cheerfulness than he felt. "Perhaps we shall find a way out of it soon."

"I'll go up now and tell Arthur about Ruth," said Mrs. Hamilton as she said goodbye to her husband in the hall. "That will give him something to think of, whether he likes the prospect or not."

As Mrs. Hamilton entered the little sitting-room which used to be the pride of her son's heart, it was so full of warmth and light and brightness that, for a moment, in spite of herself, she felt as if she must see the cheery boy of six months before. Everything so suggested him, and it was so clearly the room of a boy who loved all kinds of outdoor exercise. A pair of tennis racquets crossed on the wall had evidently resigned their place for the time being to the golf clubs which stood in one comer. A couple of paddles occupied another comer, and rigged on the wall near the door was a complicated arrangement of ropes, pulleys and weights designed to exercise every muscle in the human body. Mrs. Hamilton sighed involuntarily as her eye rested on a silver cup which stood proudly on the centre table, a mute witness to the prowess of its owner. It was the prize for a hundred yard dash in which Arthur had borne off the honors.

"He'll never be able to do that again, poor laddie," she said to herself, as she waited a moment to brush the tears from her eyes before opening the door into the next room.

"Good-morning, dear boy," she said brightly, as she entered a room which seemed doubly gloomy to her after the brightness of the one she had left. "You should provide a boy with a torch so that your visitors can see to get across the room. What ho! have I found you at last?" she continued, as she took her son's hand in a tender grasp and gave him a good-morning kiss.

"Do let's have some sunshine, Arthur," she said, putting up the curtain and letting in a flood of light. "There, now I feel more at home. Why don't you get the benefit of the morning sunshine?"

"I don't like to look out just at this time in the morning, mother," he answered briefly.

Mrs. Hamilton understood in a flash, for just as they were speaking a gay group of boys and girls had passed the window, and Arthur, who had turned involuntarily to look at them, had closed his eyes quickly as though to shut out the pleasant sight.

"Dr. Holland says you may begin to study again, now, Arthur," said his mother cheerfully, "and it seems to me you might be ready for college next fall if you do a little every day. You may have a tutor any time you are ready."

"What's the use?" answered Arthur languidly. "I can't do anything in athletics with this confounded leg, and I don't want to go there just to limp around and grind."

"My dear boy, college training is occasionally useful in the way of improving one's mind as well as muscles," said Mrs. Hamilton with mild sarcasm. "Dear, don't think I am unsympathetic," she added quickly as her son. frowned impatiently. "I realize, in part, at least, what it must be to you to give up your dreams of athletic glory; but I know, too, that no one else can fight this battle for you. You've got to face the question squarely, and I have faith that you will come out a conqueror if you put your best self into the effort."

"Mother, you don't begin to know," said Arthur slowly, "what this means to me. It's not alone giving up the athletics, though that's hard enough, but it's the sensitiveness I feel about letting any one see that I'm lame. I believe I was rather proud before," he continued with a faint smile, "because I was straight and strong and could almost always beat the other boys at any game we tried; I know it always seemed to me the most dreadful thing in the world to be crippled in any way, and now I've got to hop around with a crutch all the rest of my life. Oh, I believe I'd rather die," he ended bitterly.

"Arthur, dear, I can understand that feeling perfectly," answered his mother eagerly, "for at your age I had it as strongly as you have. I think it is only natural to rejoice in strength and straightness and skill, and to be sensitive if in any way they are taken away from us. But for all our sakes you've got to

bring yourself out of this unhappy condition. Begin with your crutches about your room, and when you get a little skill surprise father and me by coming downstairs. We miss our boy more than I can say."

There was silence for a moment and then Mrs. Hamilton said:

"I came up with a pocketful of news and have almost forgotten to tell you about it. We are to have a new member in our family; a little girl, the daughter of an old friend of mine, is coming to live with us for a whole year."

"How old is she?" asked Arthur indifferently.

"I'm not quite sure," answered his mother, relieved to find that he took it so calmly, "but I think she is about fourteen."

"Fourteen! Gracious!" ejaculated Arthur sitting bolt upright in his dismay. "You don't mean to say that we've got to have a girl fourteen years old in this house? I thought you meant a child about four or five when you said 'little girl.'"

Mrs. Hamilton couldn't help laughing at his comical look of apprehension. "I think she's quite harmless, Arthur, and perhaps you may find her really agreeable when you know her."

"You know I don't know how to get on with girls, mother," he answered ruefully. "I shall keep out of her way as much as possible, she may be sure of that."

"I am sorry to find you so ungraciously disposed toward our guest," said Mrs. Hamilton quietly, "for I hoped you would help me to make it pleasant for her. Her mother died only a little more than a year ago, and now she is going to lose her father for a year, so I am afraid the poor child will be rather forlorn."

"We shall make a pretty pair for you and father to get along with," said Arthur half ashamed. "I'm blue and disagreeable most of the time, and she'll probably be ready to burst into tears at a moment's notice."

"There are other ways of giving way to one's feelings that are fully as bad as tears, I think, my son," said Mrs. Hamilton significantly.

Arthur said nothing, but his chin went down upon his hand in a way that seemed to signify that he knew what his mother meant.

Mrs. Hamilton looked at the curly head remorsefully, and longed to pet and comfort as only mothers can. She knew, however, that Arthur must be made to see that he was spoiling his life by giving way to this great trial which had come to him.

"Well, dear boy," she said at last, "I must go now and write to
Ruth and tell her that I shall be glad to welcome her here."

"How soon will she get here?" asked Arthur in a resigned tone.

"Her father wrote that he expects to sail on the fifteenth of October, and as he wants to have two or three days in New York before sailing that will probably bring her here about the twelfth or thirteenth. Not quite three weeks, you see."

"The time does seem short," said Arthur, trying to appear politely interested.

His mother laughed. "I'll leave you to prepare your mind for this new infliction while I write the note and do my marketing. Don't forget that you are going to practice with the crutches as soon as possible; I shall be so proud of you when you can walk downstairs."

Mrs. Hamilton a little later at her desk was just beginning the pleasant task of writing to Ruth, when the sound of the doorbell and a quick scamper of feet up the stairs made her put down her pen with a smile. "Why, girls," she said as a trio of bright faces appeared in the doorway. "How does it happen that you are out of school at this hour of the day?"

"Something happened to the gas-pipes, and there was an awful smell of gas, and all sorts of workmen walking around the building, so we were sent home," answered the tallest of the three girls. "And we thought we'd come in and see you for a few minutes, if you weren't busy and didn't mind."

"I'm almost never too busy to see you and Charlotte and Dorothy, Betty, and I'm particularly glad just now, for I want to consult you all about something."

"How fine," said Dorothy. "I love to be consulted, don't you, girls?"

"You see," continued Mrs. Hamilton, "I am going to borrow a daughter for a whole year, and I thought you three would be the very ones to help me make her happy."

"We will. We'd like to," answered the girls. "How old is she?" asked Charlotte. "And what's her name?" put in Dorothy. "I always like to know the name before I begin to think very much about a person."

"Her name is Ruth Shirley, and she's just fourteen, I believe. She lost a very lovely mother about a year ago, and now her father is obliged to go abroad on business, so I suspect the poor child will feel lonely and homesick for a while."

"We'll give her all the good times we can," said Betty warmly.
"When do you expect her, Mrs. Hamilton?"

"In less than three weeks, I think, and that reminds me that I want you all to advise me about making her room pretty. Let's go and look at it now and discuss ways and means."

"Oh, you are going to give her the pink room," cried Dorothy as they entered it. "I think this is the loveliest room in the house." It was a pretty room, with its delicate pink and white paper, its dainty draperies and white furniture, and the girls wondered what more it could need in the way of preparation.

"It seems to me this is fine enough for any one," said Charlotte, who usually thought aloud quite frankly. "I don't see what you can do to make it prettier."

"Perhaps not so much prettier as a little more homelike, Charlotte. For one thing I mean to have some andirons so that there can be a fire made here when necessary, for this is likely to be a cold room in winter."

"That will be jolly," murmured Charlotte. "If there's anything I adore it's an open fire with a rug before it. I hope she's a nice, quiet girl and likes to read," she added with pretended anxiety, "for in that case I shouldn't mind having her in the room with me when I am enjoying her fire."

They all laughed and Dorothy said, "Charlotte is such an old bookworm that she won't know how to get on with any one who doesn't like to read. For my part I hope she will be full of fun and like having a good time better than poking in books all the time."

"Well," said Betty pensively, "I hope she likes cats."

"Well, girls, I hope Ruth will satisfy your expectations," said Mrs. Hamilton. "And now I want you to do something for me. I want each of you to think of something that will make the room look more homelike and more like a girl's room. You may select anything you like and if I can get it I shall, for I want you all to feel that you have had a share in making the room pretty."

"I know something," began Dorothy.

"Don't tell, don't tell," interrupted Charlotte. "Let's tell Mrs. Hamilton secretly, and after the room is finished we'll see if we can guess what each one suggested."

"That's a clever idea, Lottchen," said Betty, who admired all that
Charlotte said or did.

This agreed upon, the girls said they must go, and Mrs. Hamilton settled down to her letter once more.

"MY DEAR RUTH" (she wrote):

"I can't wait any longer to tell you how delighted I am to know that you are coming to us for a whole year. I have always wanted a daughter of my own, and the next best thing to that will be to have a borrowed one. I am afraid you are not so full of delight at the prospect as Mr. Hamilton and I are, but we hope to be able to drive away at least a part of the homesickness, and we already feel an affection for the little girl who is coming to us.

"I am going to send you a photograph of some girls who have just been in to see me and who have heard the news of your coming. I am very fond of them, and they call themselves my 'visiting daughters,' and run in to see me at all hours and on all sorts of errands. They are very glad to know you are coming and are already wondering how you look and whether you will like them. The one in the middle of the picture is Charlotte Eastman, and the plump little girl on her right is Betty Ellsworth. The

other is Dorothy Marshall. I shall not tell you anything more about them, because you will soon see them and learn to know them for yourself."

Just here Mrs. Hamilton paused in her letter. "She must know that I have a son, and I'm afraid she'll think it strange if I don't mention him," she said to herself. "I can't tell her that he is dreading her coming, and I certainly can't say with truth that he is expecting her with pleasure. Well, a very little will do and I can explain later."

"My son, Arthur," the letter went on, "is slowly recovering from the effects of a severe accident. He has not yet left his room, but I hope by the time you arrive he will have greatly improved.

"And now, my dear, I'll close my note and hurry it off so that it may soon assure you of our hearty welcome. With kindest regards to your father, and love to yourself, I am,

"Yours very sincerely,

"MARY A. HAMILTON."

Mrs. Hamilton's eyes were very tender as she folded and sealed her letter. "Poor little girl," she said half aloud, "I suspect she thinks her heart is broken, but we must try to mend it for her."

CHAPTER III

THE NEWCOMER

At three o'clock on the afternoon of the twelfth of October the Hamilton house was very still. Mrs. Hamilton had gone into town, the housemaid was taking her "afternoon out," and the cook, who had been kept awake by toothache the night before, was enjoying a nap.

Just about this time Arthur peered cautiously from his room. No one being in sight he came out slowly and carefully on his crutches. "I can do miles of exercise in this hall," he said to himself with grim satisfaction, "as long as there is no one to watch me."

He went up and down once, and then with great effort for a second time. Just as he was about ready to start again, the door-bell rang. He went carefully toward the door of his own room, always afraid of toppling over, and paused when he got there to listen. The bell rang again, this time more insistently, and he wondered impatiently where Katie and Ellen were, and why some one didn't go to the door. A third peal of the bell sent him back to the hall window. From there he could see the depot carriage with a trunk on the back, and the driver looking expectantly at the house. He could hear voices on the steps below, but could see no one until, after a fourth ring, a gentleman and a young girl went slowly down the steps and stood looking back at the house.

"It's that girl, and she's come a day too soon," gasped Arthur. He threw up the hall window and spoke to them.

"If you will wait a moment longer," he said, "I will try to find some one to open the door for you."

The gentleman bowed and thanked him, the girl smiled, and Arthur left the window, inwardly vowing vengeance on faithless maids who didn't attend to their duties. He groaned as he suddenly remembered that it was Katie's afternoon out. He might as well go downstairs himself as take the long journey through the house to find Ellen.

"If I try to go down on these old sticks, they'll have to break open the door and pick me up," he said to himself with a rueful smile." I'll try it baby fashion." Sitting down, he let his crutches slide along beside him, and holding the injured leg straight out before him hitched along from stair to stair until he reached the bottom. Then with even greater caution than he had used before he walked to the door and opened it.

A bright-faced girl stood on the step and without waiting for Arthur to speak said pleasantly, "I am Ruth Shirley, and I am afraid you are not expecting me until to-morrow."

"I am sure mother didn't expect you to-day, for she has gone in town and won't be back before five o'clock," said Arthur, unpleasantly conscious of his crutches, his dressing-gown and his distracted-

looking hair.

Ruth turned to the gentleman who was with her and held out her hand. "Thank you very much, Mr. Ingersoll, for taking care of me so nicely. I shall write father all about your kindness."

"It was a very great pleasure, Miss Ruth," answered Mr. Ingersoll, "and I shall hope some day to be able to tell your father what a delightful traveling companion I found you. I am only sorry that I must say good-bye so soon." The driver having carried in her trunk, Ruth shook hands warmly with Mr. Ingersoll and watched him with a little homesick pang as he stepped into the carriage and was driven away. Then she walked into the house with the curious idea that she was either just waking from a dream or was just going to begin one.

"I feel like those funny little girls in the wonderland stories who open mysterious doors and have ail sorts of adventures," she said with a nervous little laugh.

Arthur was distinctly conscious that he wished she had opened some other mysterious door than his own. What on earth should he do with a strange girl for the next hour or more?

"You'd like to go up to your room, I'm sure," he said at last with almost a gasp of relief. "I'll show you," he added, and then stopped short. How was he going to get up those stairs again? Would it be possible for him to make such an exhibition of himself with the eyes of a girl upon him?

"I think you'll have to let me tell you where it is," he said finally. "It is the last room on the right as you go toward the back of the house, and I think you will find everything there to make you comfortable until my mother gets home."

Ruth was rather awed by his excessive dignity, and because she was a little nervous, and tired from her long journey, felt an intense desire to laugh at him, at herself, or at nothing at all, for that matter. She managed to restrain herself, however, and with a meek "thank you," picked up her bag and went up-stairs.

Arthur saw her disappear with a sigh of relief. "I'll wait until she gets nicely settled in her room, and then I'll crawl up-stairs," he said to himself, dropping wearily into one of the hall chairs. He had sat there but a moment when to his horror he heard some one coming quickly through the dining-room, and then a surprised voice said:

"Why, Arthur! How good it seems to see you down-stairs again!"

"Oh, hello, Betty," answered Arthur, immensely relieved to find that it was no one more formidable. "How did you get in?"

"I slipped in the back door and found Ellen just coming down-stairs rubbing her eyes. She said she thought she heard the bell ring, but wasn't sure," finished Betty with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "I saw it all from my window, and knew your mother had gone in town, so I thought I'd run over and see if I could do anything for any one."

"You're a trump, Betty, and you can do something," answered Arthur gratefully. "Of course I had to ask her to go up to her room, and I was just thinking she'd be rather forlorn sitting there until mother gets here. It will be just the thing for you to go up and talk to her."

"Well, I will," said Betty, and started up the stairs. Half-way up she paused and then came back. "I've got to run back home, Arthur. There's something I want to get before I meet Ruth, and I won't be gone a minute."

She was out of the house in a second, and Arthur left to himself wondered if he should have time to get up-stairs before her return. "I should be afraid to try it," he thought; "she's as quick as a flash, and I should probably be stuck half-way up by the time she got back. I'll wait until the girls get to talking and then they won't hear anything."

In the meantime the pretty pink room was doing its best to make the new occupant feel at home.

"What a dear room!" Ruth said involuntarily as she stepped across the threshold, and, as if to welcome the little mistress, the andirons gleamed brightly, the polished teakettle shone with all its might, and a capacious couch heaped with pillows and covered with a gay Bagdad looked so comfortable that Ruth longed to try it at once. She couldn't resist the temptation to peep into the desk which stood in the comer, and she oh-ed with delight over the dainty paper and the pretty silver penholder with her name engraved on it.

"I suppose you must belong to me, you dear room," she said half aloud, "but I didn't think that I

should have such a pretty one."

She looked at the desk with great satisfaction. She opened the little drawers and found to her surprise that one was filled with foreign note-paper in delicate blue. "Just what I want for my letters to papa," she thought with a little sigh, "and it was so thoughtful of them to get blue, for that will express my feelings so much better."

"It's quite like having a fairy godmother," she said aloud, as her eye took in a carved book-rack filled with books, and wandered to the pretty tea-table where a tall chocolate pot seemed to proclaim that nothing so harmful as tea should be taken by the girls who might make merry there.

"She's every bit as nice as a fairy god-mother," said a gay voice, and Ruth turned suddenly to see standing in the doorway a plump, red-haired girl with a fuzzy black kitten nestling on her shoulder.

"On, you are Betty, I know," cried Ruth, much to the astonishment of her guest.

"I am, but I don't see how you knew," answered Betty, opening her brown eyes very wide.

"Oh, the fairy godmother wrote me about you," laughed Ruth, "and I've looked at your picture at intervals all the way on from Chicago."

"Then you know Charlotte and Dorothy, too, and we shan't seem like strangers," said Betty with great satisfaction. "I live just across the street, and I saw you come and knew Mrs. Hamilton had gone in town, so I thought I'd run over and see you."

Ruth smiled gratefully. "I'm glad you did, for I do feel just a bit lonesome. What a darling kitten," she continued, stroking the soft head as the black mite blinked sleepily at her and stretched out a tiny paw.

"I thought I'd bring him over," said Betty, "because kittens are such a comfort to me, and I hoped you liked them, too. Mrs. Hamilton says you may have a kitten if you want one, and I thought this one would look so well on your white rug that I chose him."

"Is he really for me?" cried Ruth as she took him gently in her arms and sat down on the rug. "You couldn't have brought me anything I should have liked better. I had to give away my kitten when I left home and I had begun to miss the dear thing already."

"I told the girls I was sure you liked kittens," said Betty triumphantly, "and now I shall crow over them, for they are always laughing at me for liking them so much. Charlotte says that a kitten is my trade-mark."

"Tell me about Charlotte," said Ruth eagerly. "Is she as much like her picture as you are?"

"Charlotte is a dear, and I know you'll like her, though some of the girls call her queer and odd and never do get really acquainted with her. She's tall and thin and doesn't look very strong, and I'm afraid you won't think her a bit pretty. I'm so fond of her, though, that she always looks pretty to me," ended Betty loyally, trying to do full justice to her friend and yet be honest.

"She sounds interesting," murmured Ruth, rubbing the sleepy kitten under its chin and beginning to feel less homesick.

"Interesting! I should say so!" replied Betty energetically. "Why, she's the cleverest girl I know; there isn't anything she can't do; and she writes the most beautiful stories. I don't see how, for it's more than I can do to write the essays we have in school."

"I don't mind so much writing essays, but I do hate arithmetic and algebra, and I never can get them through my head. Papa says I must go to school here, but I'm afraid I shan't be far enough along to go in the class with you," said Ruth soberly.

"Oh, that will be too bad. But if you can't, you can probably go in with Dorothy, for she's a class behind Charlotte and me. Dolly's great fun," continued Betty; "she has long braids of really golden hair, and blue eyes and the prettiest color in her cheeks. She's full of fun and always ready for a good time. Her father has a great deal of money, I suppose, for she has an allowance and lots of pretty clothes, and doesn't have to economize the way Charlotte and I do."

"I have an allowance, but it isn't a very big one and I never know where it goes to," confessed Ruth. "Papa wants me to keep a cash account this winter, and send it over to him every month. but I know I shall make awful work of it."

"I tried it once when grandma gave me five dollars to spend just as I liked," said Betty with a laugh. "I got along pretty well considering it was the first time, but when I came to balance it I was forty-three

cents short and so I wrote at the end, 'Gone, I know not where, forty-three cents.' I showed it to father, and he has never got over it; he said it was the most poetical entry he had ever seen in a cash account."

Just then there was a knock at the door, and Betty opened it to find Ellen standing there, with her face wreathed in smiles and a tray in her hands.

"Mr. Arthur thought you might be hungry, Miss," she said to Ruth, "and so I brought you up a cup of chocolate and a bit of bread and butter to make you last till dinner time. I thought perhaps Miss Betty might like some, too," she added with a sly smile.

"Did you ever know the time when I wasn't ready for a cup of your chocolate, Ellen?" replied Betty enthusiastically. "She makes the best chocolate you ever tasted, Ruth."

"Oh, now you're flatterin' me, Miss Betty, dear," said Ellen, backing out of the door in pretended confusion.

"Not a bit of it. You know it's so yourself," called Betty as the door closed. "Wasn't it nice of Arthur to think of it?" she added, as they settled down to their cozy lunch.

"Very," answered Ruth, who, at sight of the thin bread and butter and the steaming chocolate topped with small mountains of whipped cream, had just found out that she was really hungry and couldn't wait another moment.

While the girls had been talking, Arthur had been trying to make up his mind to start up the stairs again. The flight looked endless to him, and after the excitement and effort he had just been through he felt weak and miserable. Time after time he decided to start, and once he got as far as the stairs, but a sudden sound drove him back to the hall sofa again. How could he tell that Betty might not come down at any minute and perhaps bring Ruth with her? At last a brilliant idea struck him. Ruth must be hungry after her journey, and if Ellen should take up a lunch it would keep them busy for some time at least. He made his way out into the kitchen, where Ellen received him with wonder and delight, and almost cried over him, so great was her joy at seeing him down-stairs once more. Then, having waited until the tray was safely in Ruth's room, he started up-stairs. It was no small undertaking to hitch along, one stair at a time, dragging a stiff, painful leg, and pulling his crutches after him. At last, however, with only three more stairs before him, he stopped to rest a moment and began to breathe more easily.

"There," said Ruth, as she finished her last piece of bread and butter and set down her cup with hardly a drop in it, "I feel like another girl. I didn't know how hungry I was. I couldn't eat any dinner on the train because I felt so badly over leaving papa and——"

A strange noise interrupted her. A noise of some one or something clattering, bumping, sliding down-stairs.

"What do you think it is, Betty?" asked Ruth turning pale.

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out," answered Betty, who had already started for the hall. As they reached the top of the stairs they stopped short, for there sat Arthur, very red, very much out of breath and, it must be confessed, very cross.

"Oh, Arthur, how you scared us! I thought some one was just about killed," cried Betty.

"It was those confounded crutches," answered Arthur gruffly. "They slipped just as I reached the top stair, and I nearly broke my neck trying to catch them. I don't see how I am going to get into my room unless you'll get them for me, Betty," he added helplessly.

"Why, of course; how stupid of me not to think of it!" said Betty, as she slipped by him and ran lightly down the stairs.

Ruth stood in the hall feeling very ill at ease. She wished Arthur would laugh and make things seem less solemn. Then as he didn't look at her or say a word she went back into her room again.

"Wasn't that too bad?" said Betty softly as she came in and closed the door. "Arthur is dreadfully sensitive about his lameness, and I am afraid it will take him a long time to get over this afternoon's experience. Why, just think, this is the first time I've seen him since his accident."

Betty was trying to look sober, but her eyes were dancing with merriment in spite of her efforts. Finally she gave a half-stifled little laugh as she said, "I was dreadfully sorry for him, but he was so funny sitting there at the top of the stairs and looking so dignified and cross. I almost know he'd been doing his best to get up without letting us hear him."

Betty's laugh was irresistible, and Ruth, who had been on the verge of either laughter or tears ail day, couldn't help joining in.

"Oh, oh," laughed Betty, burying her face in a cushion. "Sh, sh, he'll hear us," she gasped, as Ruth gave an answering peal of laughter. "It's dreadful of us," said Betty at last, sitting up and wiping her eyes, "to laugh at that poor boy. I'm just ashamed."

"So am I," gasped Ruth, "but you're really too funny when you laugh and I couldn't help it."

Betty's eyes twinkled, and Ruth looked as though a fresh burst were imminent when a pleasant voice said in the doorway:

"Well, I hear that my girl has stolen a march on me and got here before I expected her. Your father's telegram has only just arrived, my dear, and I am so sorry that I wasn't here to welcome you."

Ruth looked with eager curiosity at the tall, gracious woman who came toward her. Then she put both hands into the welcoming ones outstretched to meet her, and said with a little quiver in her voice:

"Papa said that the moment I saw you I should feel at home, and I do."

CHAPTER IV

A NEW CLUB

The first days in the new home, while Mr. Shirley was still in New York and within reach, were hard to bear and unpleasant to think of afterward. The new friends were so anxious to help her through the hard time that they scarcely gave her time to think, but in spite of their kindness, Ruth went to bed at night with a lonesome ache in her throat, and got up in the morning with the wild desire to take the first train to New York and catch papa before he should sail.

When at last the day and hour of sailing had come and gone, Ruth found it easier to resign herself to the inevitable, and began to really enjoy life instead of only seeming to do so.

Glenloch was a beautiful town, just far enough from Boston to make it seem like the country, and yet near enough so that concerts and shopping were within easy reach. To Ruth, who, except for brief visits East, had been accustomed ail her life to the level stretches of the Middle West, the New England hills, just now radiant in their autumn coloring were a constant source of delight.

She had been kept so busy seeing Glenloch, meeting Mrs. Hamilton's friends and getting acquainted with her own special chums that she had hardly had time to settle her belongings. Saturday morning, therefore, found her at work in good earnest, for the girls were coming in that afternoon, and she wanted her pretty room to look its prettiest.

"Not homesick, I hope, dear," said Mrs. Hamilton, coming into the room about noon to find Ruth curled up in the big armchair with the black kitten on her lap.

"No, only resting after putting my room in order. I've been so busy and the days have flown so fast that I haven't wholly unpacked my trunk until this morning."

"The pictures make the room look very homelike," said Mrs. Hamilton, glancing at the photographs which adorned desk, mantel and table. "Are these all friends of yours?" she added with a sly smile, as her eye caught the picture of the little Queen of Holland in quaint peasant costume.

"No, most of them are what papa calls my 'admirations,'" answered Ruth with a laugh. "That picture of Queen Wilhelmina is my great joy because she looks like such a nice girl. The others are mostly musicians and composers. Papa bought them to encourage me in my music, because he is so anxious I shall make a success of it."

"Why, this is interesting. I haven't had time yet to find out about your talents. Do you sing or play the piano?"

"A little of both, but I like the violin best and I've taken lessons on it since I was eight years old. I am all out of practice now," she added soberly, "for I've done hardly anything at it since mamma died. She

was so fond of it that everything I play reminds me of her, and I can't bear it yet."

"Perhaps you will feel like beginning again this winter," said Mrs. Hamilton, putting her arm around her.

"I am sure I shall," answered Ruth gratefully, giving the kind arm a little squeeze. "Papa thought that just as soon as I got well started in school it would be a good plan for me to go into Boston for violin lessons."

"That will be delightful," said Mrs. Hamilton heartily, "and I shall have to begin practicing so that I can play your accompaniments. Since Arthur has been ill I have neglected my piano dreadfully. I used to play duets with him a great deal, but I suppose nothing would persuade him to touch the piano now."

"Will he never be any better?"

"The doctor gives us every reason to hope that he will be almost well if he can only get over this terrible depression. His father and I can only stand by and help all we can while he fights this battle for himself." There was a long pause while Mrs. Hamilton looked thoughtfully out of the window as though facing problems harder than she could solve, and Ruth racked her brain to think of something encouraging to say.

"If I could only help I should be very glad," she said at last, timidly.

"I am sure you would," answered Mrs. Hamilton with a grateful kiss. "And now what are your plans for this afternoon?" she added brightly.

"Oh, the girls are coming in, and I am going to try to get really acquainted with them. It's so interesting to have three new friends at the same time."

"They are very nice girls, and each so different from the other that I sometimes wonder why they are such close friends."

"I am just a little bit afraid of Charlotte still," confessed Ruth. "She seems to know so much, and she makes such funny, sharp speeches. But I feel as though I'd known Betty for years."

"Poor Charlotte has had a different sort of life from the others," said Mrs. Hamilton with a sigh, "and it has helped to bring out the sharp comers in her nature. Her mother is an invalid, and Charlotte has had a great deal of care and responsibility."

"Betty thinks everything that Charlotte does is just right," said Ruth.

"Betty is one of the most loyal friends imaginable. She puts her dearest friends on pedestals, and bestows her time and her services freely upon them. I've known her ever since she was a baby, and she has always been the same sunshiny little soul."

"She just suits me because she always has a kitten or two trailing after her," said Ruth. with a laugh. "Dorothy's a dear, too, and in fact I'm sure we are all going to be such good chums that I shan't know which one I like best."

"That's the very nicest way," answered Mrs. Hamilton. "Bless me, is it lunch time?" she added as Katie appeared in the doorway. "You are an entertaining hostess, my dear, and you have made me forget how fast time flies."

Ruth was glad that the cool afternoon gave an excuse for a fire, for she loved the crackle and warmth, and the soft color that the fire-glow threw over everything. As she looked around her pretty room with a satisfied air, there was a patter of feet on the stairs, a suppressed giggle and then a knock.

"Come in, come in," cried Ruth, throwing the door wide open. "I was beginning to be afraid you weren't coming."

"It's my fault, as usual," said Charlotte in a resigned tone. "The girls called for me, and just as we were going to start one of the twins fell into a kettle of grape-juice that had been left to cool in the summer-kitchen."

"Oh! Was he badly burned?" cried Ruth.

"No, it was cold, but he'll be purple for the next week, I suppose. Of course I had to stop and wring him out and make him as clean as I could. He's a sight, though."

The contrast between Charlotte's tragic tone and the picture she gave of her small brother was too much for Ruth's gravity, and she laughed till the tears came.

"How old are they, and do they do those things often?" she gasped at last.

"They're six, and they do," said Charlotte briefly. "If ever a day passes that one of those boys doesn't do something to harrow our feelings I know that it is a sure sign that something more awful than usual is going to happen the next day."

"It must be exciting to have a large family," said Ruth with a tinge of longing in her voice.

"It is; desperately exciting," said Charlotte drily. "Now I call this luxury," she added, dropping down on the fur rug. "Just imagine having a place like this where you can be absolutely alone with books and pictures and fire. You're a lucky girl, Ruth."

"It's a perfectly dear room, and I love it," added Ruth. "It was so good of all of you to help plan it before you even knew me. Let's make some fudge, girls," she added. "Who's the best fudge-maker here?"

"Not I," answered Charlotte lazily. "I'm second to none on eating it, though."

"Dolly's fudge is great," said Betty.

"You make it then, Dorothy, and I'll help when your arm gets tired," said Ruth, getting the chafing-dish from the shelf under the table. "We'll put the cups on the mantel, girls, and cover the table with this enamel cloth that Mrs. Hamilton gave me this morning. Isn't she a dear? She thinks of everything to make me have a good time."

"Have you got much acquainted with Arthur yet?" asked Dorothy, who was busily mixing the ingredients for the candy.

"Haven't seen him since the day I came," answered Ruth, looking at Betty with a twinkle in her eye, "and I certainly didn't get very well acquainted with him then."

"It's a shame that he shuts himself up; he's just about breaking his mother's heart," declared Dorothy, stirring the savory mixture with unnecessary vehemence.

"He used to be great fun, and we miss him dreadfully at all our parties," said Betty with a sigh. "He isn't even willing to see Frank and Joe, and they used to be such chums."

"We might form ourselves into a society for 'The Restoration to the World of Arthur Hamilton, Esquire; T.R.T.T.W.O.A.H.E.': wouldn't that make a fine name for a secret society?" said Charlotte, who hadn't stirred from the rug. "Don't you want me to help you make the fudge, girls?" she added amiably, as Dorothy and then Ruth gave it a vigorous beating.

"Thank you, lazybones. It's done now. But you can help put things in order," said Dorothy slyly.

Charlotte groaned. "You know that's what I hate most of all. I should rather have made the fudge."

"Speaking of societies," broke in Betty, who had been in a brown study for several minutes, "let's have a club of some kind."

"Good idea, Bettikins," approved Charlotte. "Let's make it a dramatic club, and I'll do the heroes."

"With only four in the club you would have to be hero and villain and the heroine's white-haired father all in the same play," said Ruth with a laugh. "It would take all the rest of us to play the other parts."

"I mean really a nice club," continued Betty, pursuing her own idea with great seriousness, "and meet once a week and do something."

"Rather vague, that," murmured Charlotte. "If that's all there is to it we're a club now."

"What's your idea, Betty?" asked Dorothy encouragingly. "Anything but sewing. I utterly refuse to join that kind of a club."

"I knew a girl in Chicago," said Ruth, "who belonged to a cooking club. They met every two weeks at the different houses to practice, and once in two months they cooked a supper and invited other girls and boys. She said they had great fun and really learned a great deal."

"That's just my idea," declared Betty promptly, "only I couldn't get it quite clear in my own mind."

"I don't like cooking," said Charlotte soberly, "but I suppose it wouldn't hurt me to know something about it."

"The first thing, of course, is to ask our mothers and Mrs. Hamilton," said Dorothy, who was always practical. "I know mamma will be glad to have me learn, though I'm afraid the cook won't like to have us in her kitchen."

"Our Hannah wouldn't mind if you met at our house every time," said Betty.

"That can all be settled later when we find out whether we can really do it," declared Charlotte impatiently. "In the meantime I'm pining for a piece of that fudge; isn't it hard yet, Dolly?"

"Just right," answered Dorothy, taking it in from the window-ledge.

"Dorothy, this is certainly the best fudge I ever tasted," declared Ruth impressively. "Mine was never half so good. Girls, I move that in consideration of Miss Dorothy Marshall's skill as a maker of fudge she be made president of the new club."

"Second the motion," cried both the girls at once, and as there was no one left to vote on it, it was declared settled.

Dorothy rose, bowed, tapped on the table with the chafing-dish spoon, and said with a fair imitation of her mother's stately manner:

"Ladies, I thank you for the honor you have conferred upon me." Then dropping her official manner, she added, "Let's keep it a dead secret at first from the boys, because they never tell us anything about their old Candle Club."

"What's that?" asked Ruth with great interest.

"Oh, six of the boys belong to it, and they've fixed up one of the rooms above our stable," answered Dorothy. "They call it the Candle Club because at first they used candles, but now the name doesn't fit."

"They might call themselves 'electric sparks,' now," drawled Charlotte; "but boys are so unprogressive."

"We shall need some more officers," said Betty. "I think Charlotte ought to be secretary because she likes to write, and Ruth—"

What Ruth was to be was not destined to be told at that meeting, for just at that moment there was a loud knock which made the girls jump. Ruth opened the door and for a second saw no one. Then a plump, curly-haired boy, very purple as to his face and hands, and rather bedraggled as to his general appearance, walked in hesitatingly. Close at his heels followed a depressed-looking Scotch terrier. At sight of the latter, every individual hair on Fuzzy's spine stood up straight, and with remarks in several different languages he fled to the top of a high-backed chair, where he sat and glared at the enemy.

The girls were convulsed with laughter, and the small visitor, abashed, fled to Charlotte and buried his face in her lap.

"Irving Eastman, what are you here for?" demanded Charlotte sternly, trying to raise the curly beau so that she might look the culprit in the face.

"Wanted to find you," came in smothered accents from her lap. "Me and Tatterth got lonethome."

"Why didn't you stay with Stanley and the others?"

"Couldn't. Couthin Jothie came and took them out to walk, and I couldn't go 'cauth I wath all blue."

"How did you get in here?"

"The door wath open, and I came upthtairth and then I couldn't find you. But I found Arthur, and Tatterth and I thtayed with him."

The girls looked at each other in amazement.

"What did you do in Arthur's room, Irving?" asked Betty soothingly.

"I talked to him and he gave me thith." The purple cherub raised his head and opening one fat hand displayed a small carved bear of Swiss manufacture. "He thaid it could be my bear for alwayth," he declared triumphantly.

"What did Arthur say when you walked into his room?" asked Dorothy.

"He laughed so hard I wath going to come away, but he called me back."

"Girls, he laughed," repeated Charlotte impressively. "Irving,
I ought to scold you, but this time you are an angel in disguise.
Perhaps this is the first step in the Restoration of A. H., Esq."

"Let's take another, then, by sending him a plate of fudge," suggested Ruth.

"Just the thing," exclaimed Betty and Dorothy together, and they immediately hooked little fingers and proceeded to wish.

"Irving, can you carry some fudge to Arthur?" continued Ruth, heaping up one of her daintiest saucers. "If you will take this without spilling any, you shall have some to take home with you."

"I gueth tho," said Irving with an angelic smile, feeling himself the hero of the occasion.

"Just give the dish to Arthur and come right back," said Charlotte decidedly. "It's time to go anyway," she continued, "and I must take the Infant home as soon as possible, or mother will worry."

"He thayth 'thankth,'" said Irving in aloud voice, strolling down the hall and leaving Arthur's door wide open behind him.

"Shut the door, Irving," said Charlotte in a loud whisper.

"I think he better have it open," answered Irving, who did not feel disposed to take any extra steps.

"Irving," began Charlotte sternly, then stopped in amazement at the unexpected sound of Arthur's voice.

"Never mind the door, Irving," he said, "The fudge is out of sight, girls, or will be in a few moments. Much obliged."

CHAPTER V

THE SOCIAL SIX

It was about time for news of the steamer's arrival to reach Ruth, and in spite of her many new experiences the thought of her father was always uppermost in her mind. The morning and evening newspapers meant to her simply the shipping news, and, several days before the steamer could possibly arrive, she began her daily study of the shipping lists. Eight days had seemed long to wait for news of one's best-beloved chum, but Ruth had to confess that the time had been filled so full that it had passed quickly. Starting in school had not been so great an ordeal as she had expected. To her joy she was to be allowed to see what she could do in the class with Betty and Charlotte, and she was determined to succeed, though she knew it meant harder work than she had ever done in her life.

The Glenloch Academy was the pride of Glenloch and the envy of the surrounding towns. The money for its establishment and maintenance had been left the town by a public-spirited citizen, and the fund had been so generous that the best in the way of teachers and equipaient had been made possible. It took the place of a high school in its methods of study, gave a thorough preparation for college, and offered six years of the most liberal training to those whose school education must of necessity stop there. Ruth felt an interest at once in her new teachers, was charmed with the idea of doing regular gymnasium work in the fine gymnasium which had lately been added to the school, and altogether felt that her lines had fallen in pleasant places.

"Don't be in such a rush," called Dorothy, as Ruth ran down the school steps. "I want to talk to you."

"I'm in a hurry every day now," confessed Ruth, "to get home and see if I have any news from papa. Mr. Hamilton thinks that by to-night surely the ship's arrival will be cabled, and I have a faint hope that I may have a cablegram from papa almost any minute."

"I'll walk around your way," said Dorothy. "Doesn't it make you feel terribly important to be expecting a cablegram?"

"Why, I don't know," laughed Ruth, "perhaps it does, a little. It's been such a long time to wait to hear that papa is safe that I can't think of anything else."

As she finished speaking a long, low call made them both turn to see Charlotte and Betty running after them.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, Ruth?" called Charlotte as they got within speaking distance. "We want you to go to walk with the 'Social Six.'"

Dorothy raised her eyebrows questioningly, and Ruth asked curiously, "The Social Six? Who under the sun are the Social Six?"

"It's all right, Dolly," said Betty reassuringly. "You see," she added, turning to Ruth, "we couldn't tell you about them at first, because we had all agreed never to have more than six in the club and our number was full. But just to-day one of the girls has told us that she is going to resign at this meeting, so we want you to join right away if you will." "Why, of course I will," said Ruth, with perfect faith that whatever the three wanted her to do would be worth doing. "But what is the club for and what do you do?"

"It's a walking club in spring and fall," answered Betty.

"And a skating club when we have ice," added Dorothy. "That's the best part of it all, for we have bonfires on the edge of the pond, and go to some house for supper when we get through skating."

"Well, it all sounds lovely, and I shall be delighted to join. What time do you start?" asked Ruth.

"At two sharp, and we are to meet at the schoolhouse," answered Charlotte. "Miss Burton is going with us this afternoon, and she's to be made an honorary member of the club." "All right. I'll be there," said Ruth, as the girls left her at Mr. Hamilton's door.

Once in the house she looked first to see if there were letters or the much-desired cablegram, and finding nothing ran up-stairs to get ready for lunch. The house was strangely still, and she missed Mrs. Hamilton's cordial welcome, which she had found vastly comforting in these first days of feeling so much alone.

On her desk was a note which she hastened to open.

"MY DEAR RUTH" (it began):

"I am sorry you will find neither a cablegram nor me writing for you this noon. Mr. Hamilton has telephoned me that friends of ours are in town who will not have time to come out to us. So we are all to dine together in Boston to-night. I am sorry that you will have two lonely meals, and hope some of the girls will dine with you. Invite them for me, and forgive me for leaving you in such unexpected solitude.

"Yours lovingly,

"AUNT MARY."

"How sweet of her to sign herself that way," thought Ruth, as she folded the note. "I do miss her, and I'm glad there's something pleasant ahead for this afternoon."

The Social Six to a girl were prompt at the meeting-place, and as Miss Burton appeared just as the clock was striking two, the expedition started with no delay. "It's a perfect day for Bear Hill," said Dorothy enthusiastically, as she led the way with Miss Burton, and unconsciously tried to imitate her swinging gait. Since Miss Burton had taken charge of the gymnasium, Dorothy, who was always to the fore in out-of-door life, had been more than ever devoted to everything pertaining to physical culture.

"See Dolly walk," said Charlotte, who was ambling along in the extreme rear; "she walks as though she positively enjoyed the mere motion of it, while I am so lazy that I shouldn't even belong to the club if it weren't for being with the girls, and for the fun we have at our parties."

As they crossed the railroad and entered the narrow wood-path on the other side, the girls fell into single file and walked on steadily, talking gaily. It was one of those brilliant October days when all the warmth of the fleeting summer is in the air; when the sky is a radiant blue, and the red and gold of the foliage casts a glory over the sombre woods.

Ruth was enchanted. "I've never seen anything so beautiful," she said breathlessly, as, after a long walk through the winding, shaded path, they came out into the open, and almost at the top of the hill.

"Wait till you get to the tip-top," said Dorothy, her eyes sparkling from the exercise. "Can you stand it to climb for five minutes more?"

"Of course," answered Ruth stoutly, "though I'm not sorry that we're almost there," she added in a low tone to Katharine French who, with Alice Stevens and Louise Cobb, made up the membership of the club.

The climb of the last five minutes was harder than ail the rest, and Ruth groaned as she sank on the ground at the very top. "My Chicago training hasn't prepared me for this," she said plaintively. "You'll have to take me in hand, Miss Burton, and help me to get my muscles in condition."

"Don't sit too long on the ground now," laughed Miss Burton, "or we shall have to carry you home."

"Miss Burton, would you and Ruth mind going over behind that big rock for a few minutes?" asked Dorothy. "The club always has its business meeting the first thing, and as we are to admit a new member it will take longer than usual."

Over behind the big rock proved to be a very agreeable place to sit, for the girls had covered some smaller rocks with pine boughs and a golf cape, and the view of the surrounding country was glorious.

"Rather different from Chicago, isn't it, Ruth?" asked Miss Burton.
"I'm a Western girl myself, and I taught in Chicago for ayear, so
I know how this must seem to you."

"Are you really a Western girl?" cried Ruth interested at once. "Then you won't mind if I talk Chicago to you once in a while, will you? This is quite the most beautiful place I've ever lived in, but," she added honestly, "I'm dreadfully homesick for Chicago sometimes, and I don't like to confess it because they are all so lovely to me."

"Come and talk to me when you feel like that," said Miss Burton, with one of her radiant smiles; "it will do us both good."

"I'd love to," said Ruth fervently, "and——"

She was interrupted by a call from the girls, and with Miss Burton hastened to join the others, only to stop short in amazement as they rounded the rock against which they had been sitting. The girls had worked fast and with no noise, and it was so undeniably a gypsy camp into which Ruth had walked that she could hardly believe her eyes. A small fire was built on some rocks, and over it hung in the crotch of a branch an odd-looking kettle. Three of the girls had unbraided their hair and made themselves gay with artificial flowers, bright ribbons and brilliant scarfs. Alice Stevens, who was dark enough to look really like a gypsy, was reading Louise Cobb's hand, while Betty looked on and occasionally stirred an imaginary something in the kettle. Charlotte, Dorothy and Katharine French, who were all tall and preferred masculine parts, sat on the other side of the fire dressed in colored paper caps, and bright sashes draped over one shoulder.

Miss Burton broke the silence by clapping her hands. "It's fine, girls," she cried with enthusiasm. "I didn't know we were to see anything really artistic."

"We only do this when we admit a new member," said Betty.

"And not then unless the weather happens to be just right," added
Dorothy. "But we must hurry and make Ruth a member. Go on, Betty."

"Kneel here, Ruth," said Betty, who was presiding officer for the day. Then looking as solemn as her dimples and twinkling eyes would permit, she added, "Being about to lose a well-beloved member of our club," here ail looked at Louise Cobb, "we are at liberty to admit another. Do you desire to become a member of this club?"

"I do," answered Ruth, much impressed.

"Do you promise to further our interests in all possible ways and to keep our secrets?"

"I do."

"Then I pronounce you a fully initiated member," said Betty, striking her on the shoulder with a twig tipped with scarlet leaves. "We really haven't any secrets," she added unofficially, "except that we don't want the other boys and girls to know where we go or that we dress up like this. We don't make our

honorary members promise anything, but we know Miss Burton won't tell."

"Of course not," said Miss Burton. "I feel too much honored to be admitted to the club to betray their secrets."

"Now, Ruth," continued Betty, "the next thing is that the new member must do something; sing or dance or tell a story."

"Oh!" gasped Ruth. "I'll resign at once. Imagine me singing or dancing when I'm so tired I can hardly move; and as for story-telling, I simply can't."

"Perhaps you'd rather recite a poem," said Charlotte.

"May I have it as short as I please?" asked Ruth as if an idea had struck her, and as Betty nodded assent, she added, "Give me five minutes by myself and I'll do it."

The girls chatted while Ruth went just out of hearing and communed with herself.

"Time's up, Ruth," called Dorothy.

"All right," answered Ruth, walking into the circle and sitting down, while she met the expectant eyes with a roguish twinkle in her own. Then she recited:

"There was a young girl from the West,
Who very much needed a rest.
When asked, 'Can you sing?'
She replied, 'Not a thing:'
And felt very sadly depressed."

Ruth suited her expression to her last words in so comical a fashion that the girls shouted with laughter.

"However did you do it, Ruth?" asked Betty. "I couldn't make a rhyme to save me."

"Oh, father and I got into the habit of making up those five-liners, and I often do it just for fun."

"We're proud to have such a poetess in the Social Six," said Charlotte, making her a sweeping bow with her hand on her heart.

"Miss Burton, we don't insist that our honorary member shall perform, but we'd like it if you would," said Betty.

Miss Burton smiled good-naturedly. "I would tell you a story, only I am afraid our Western member would be too stiff to move if she sat through it. How would you like to postpone my part of the program until after school some day, and then come and have a cup of chocolate with me?"

"Oh, lovely!" cried Dorothy, always ready for anything that Miss Burton proposed.

As she spoke a sound as of some one sliding came from behind the big rock, and then a low but unmistakable chuckle.

"It's some of those horrid boys," said Dorothy tragically.

The girls tore off caps and sashes, but before they could wholly divest themselves of their gypsy appearance two heads peered around the rock and a pleading voice said, "Please, may we come in?"

"Indeed you may not," cried Dorothy, quite white with anger. "I think you're the meanest boy I ever saw, Frank Marshall, and you're not one bit better, Bert. Between you, you always spoil all my good times. I think it's the most despicable thing to spy on people, and——"

There was such a sudden stillness about her that Dorothy became conscious of Miss Burton's troubled expression and Ruth's surprised face.

"Well, I don't care; it was a mean trick," she muttered as she turned her back on the boys and walked away.

"Honestly, girls, we didn't mean to make you mad," said Frank as his sister finished. "We came up for a walk and didn't know any one was here till we saw the smoke from your fire. We came over to find out about that, and heard the young lady from the West recite her poem. We should have gone off without letting you know if Bert hadn't slipped on the rock."

"Of course," added Bert with an extremely virtuous air, "if we had guessed that this was the famous club we should have put our fingers in our ears and have run away."

"You sinner," said Betty, who couldn't help laughing, "you know you have tried ever since we have had the club to make me tell you about it."

"I propose," said Miss Burton, "that we put the boys on their honor not to tell what they have seen and heard."

"Second the motion," said Charlotte with great promptness. "We have them there, for boys never tell when they're on honor."

"Good for you, Charlotte," said Frank gratefully. "We'll promise, won't we, Bert?"

"Of course," agreed Bert. "And, girls," he continued, "we've got some potatoes roasting in the ashes near here that'll be just the thing to brace you up for the walk home. Come along and help us eat 'em."

"I should say we would," accepted Charlotte. "Did you ever know us to refuse anything to eat?"

The little feast and the walk home became the jolliest things possible. Tired as she was, no one was merrier than Ruth. for in her inmost heart she was sure that she should find news of her father waiting for her.

CHAPTER VI

BAD NEWS AND GOOD

As she entered the house, Ruth's first glance was at the hall table, but there was no important-looking yellow envelope to suggest that her cablegram had arrived. Then her eye fell on the evening paper; perhaps that might tell that the "Utopia" was safely in port. She started to turn to the shipping news, but her gaze was caught by a headline on the first page, and she stood rigid, holding the paper in her shaking hands and trying to make sense of what she was reading.

"The 'Utopia' storm-swept
A passenger injured."

That was what she seemed to read, and below it an inch of fine type announced that during the severe storm which had hampered all ocean travel for the last few days the "Utopia" had been swept by heavy waves, and one of the passengers injured.

One of the passengers injured! That, of course, meant father! Ruth read it time after time until the printed words swam before her eyes, and she groped blindly for a chair so that she need not fall. There she sat feeling that limbs and tongue were in chains, and that she could neither move nor speak.

Katie, passing through the hall, was startled by the sight of the rigid little figure in the big hall chair, and frightened out of her wits when her sympathetic questions failed to bring forth any response. She flew out into the kitchen to Ellen, who came hurrying in with a face full of anxiety, and, kneeling before Ruth, took both the cold hands in her own warm clasp.

"What is it, Miss Ruth, darlin'? Tell me," she said coaxingly. At the friendly, human touch, Ruth's face relaxed. "Oh, Ellen," she cried, clinging to her closely, "some one on papa's steamer has been injured in the storm, and I know it must be papa."

Ellen looked dazed, and Ruth gave her the paper, pointing out the paragraph as she did so.

"Sure, Miss Ruth, I can't read it quickly when my mind is so unaisy.
Just read it to me, honey."

So Ruth read it over for the twentieth time and was surprised to find Ellen still looking cheerful as she finished.

"They don't give any names," said Ellen thoughtfully, "and wasn't it you yourself was telling me that there was over a hundred cabin passengers on that boat, to say nothing of the steerage?"

"Why, yes," answered Ruth, "but—"

"Well, then," interrupted Ellen, "there's at laste ninety-nine chances out of a hundred that your blessed father never had a hair of his head touched, and that's sayin' a good deal, darlin'."

"It is indeed, Miss Ruth," added Katie, who had been hovering around anxious to do something to help.

Ruth began to look a bit comforted, and Ellen went on, "I do belave from me soul, Miss Ruth, dear, that before you go to bed tonight you'll have word from your father. At any rate, you can't bring it any faster, nor help it one bit by worryin' about it. So now, darlin', go upstairs and bathe your face and smooth your pretty curls, and we'll put such a nice dinner on the table for you that you can't help eatin'."

"It's a shame the poor little thing has got to eat her dinner all alone," said Ellen, as she and Katie went back to the kitchen. "I've a great mind—" But what she had a mind to do wasn't told, for she vanished from the kitchen and Katie heard her climbing the back stairs.

She went straight to Arthur's room, knocked, and hardly waiting for an answer walked in. Arthur, who was absorbed in a book, looked up surprised at her sudden entrance.

"It's only meself, Mr. Arthur," said Ellen, quite out of breath, "and it's a great favor I've come up to ask of you. You see," she went on hurriedly, "poor little Miss Ruth has got word in tonight's paper that there's been an accident on her father's boat, and she's that frightened and worried that she doesn't know what to do with herself. It's too bad for her to have to eat her dinner with nothing but her own sad thoughts for company, and I thought perhaps you—"

"Oh, no, Ellen, I can't," interrupted Arthur decidedly; "why, I don't really know her yet."

"The more shame to you that you don't when she's been livin' in your house for two weeks," answered Ellen, as much surprised at her own boldness as Arthur was. "I've been livin' with your mother ever since you was a wee baby, Mr. Arthur, and there ain't any one outside your own family who loves you more than I do, but I must say I'm disappointed in you."

Arthur looked at her in amazement, but Ellen went on without giving him a chance to speak.

"Don't you know that life is just made up of knock-downs and get-ups," she said quaintly, "and whatever will you do if you stay down the first time you're hit?"

Something in the homely little sermon touched a responsive chord in Arthur as nothing else had done. "You're a good fellow, Ellen," he said affectionately, "and to prove that I think so I'm going down to dinner tonight."

"Oh, Mr. Arthur," cried Ellen, almost on the point of tears, and saving herself from it only by wringing her apron convulsively in both hands. "It's the angel boy you are to take all the hard things I said so sweetly. And it's that glad I am that you're going down, for I don't belave Miss Ruth could eat a mite of dinner without some man or other to encourage her about her father."

"I'll get down before she does if I can," said Arthur, reaching for his crutches, "and see what the paper says about the steamer."

"That'a right, Mr. Arthur, do," answered Ellen, "and I'll hurry down and see to the dinner." But she stopped on her way to knock on Ruth's door and say coaxingly, "You won't change your mind, Miss Ruth, dear; you'll surely come down."

Ruth, who was sitting in the big chair with the black kitten in her arms, looked up soberly. "I don't believe I'll come down after all, Ellen; I'm not a bit hungry, and I'm sure I couldn't eat a mouthful."

"Oh, but Miss Ruth," cried Ellen in despair, "you'll spoil all my plans if you don't. I've just persuaded Mr. Arthur to come down so that you needn't be alone, and perhaps if he comes the once he will every day. Just think how happy it will make his father and mother!"

Ruth's forehead puckered into a frown. She felt much more like sitting in front of her fire and thinking sad, lonely thoughts. But it was such a small thing to do for Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton, who had been so kind to her, and it would mean so much to them if it did help Arthur to conquer his dread of taking up the old life again. Then, too, it would be a triumph to tell the girls that one member of the society for the restoration of Arthur Hamilton to the world had already begun the good work.

It was with a little smile that she looked up at Ellen, who was anxiously waiting for her answer, and

said, "I'll go down, of course; I should be a selfish pig not to when you are all so good to me."

"That's a darlin," cried Ellen much relieved. "And would you please try to make him feel that it's a great favor to you for him to come down? You know the men have to be managed a bit," she added slyly.

Ruth made a hasty dinner toilet by running a comb through her waving locks, patting the big bow at the back of her head, and putting on a fresh collar. Then she went slowly downstairs, wishing she knew just what to say to Arthur.

To her relief he looked up from the paper he was reading and said just as if they had been meeting every day for the past two weeks, "I'm sure this report makes it seem worse than it is, Ruth. I don't believe there is any real reason for you to worry about your father."

"Do you really think so? I suppose it's foolish to worry, but it's pretty hard when he's so far away and I haven't heard for so long."

There was a suspicious quaver in her voice that made Arthur's thoughts turn longingly to the safe shelter of his own room. What if he should have a weeping girl on his hands! He turned cold at the thought. "Oh, I'm sure you'll get some word from your father before morning," he said with such anxious haste that quick-witted Ruth guessed at once what he was dreading.

"You think I'm going to cry, but I'm not," she announced with great dignity. "I hate to cry before people anyway, and I specially wouldn't before a boy."

"Good for you! I wouldn't cry before a boy either," answered Arthur with a twinkle in his eye, and then they both laughed and felt better.

"It was good of you to come down to dinner tonight," said Ruth as they began on their soup. "If I'd been alone I shouldn't have been able to keep my mind off that awful newspaper heading for a minute."

"We can telephone in town after a while and find out what they know at the steamship company's office. I can't help feeling, though, that the newspaper report is very likely exaggerated."

Ruth felt much comforted by this masculine view of the situation, and racked her brain to think up some interesting subjects for conversation, for she wanted to show him that girls could be calm and self-possessed even under the most trying circumstances.

"Are you fond of football?" she asked suddenly, when the long silence was getting on her nerves, and she felt that she must say something. Before he could answer, it flashed across her mind with painful distinctness that it was at football that Arthur had been injured. The color flashed into her cheeks, and she unconsciously looked so appealingly at Arthur that he came to the rescue at once.

"Of course I am," he asserted stoutly. "It's a great old game, and we've got some ripping good players in Glenloch. You ought to see some of the Saturday games."

"I should love to," she responded with a fervor that showed her relief, and then silence fell again. Ruth was in despair. With athletics cut out, what could she talk about to a boy, particularly when she was anxious to avoid any reference to anything which would make her think of her father?

"I'm reading a great book now," said Arthur, whose thoughts for the last few minutes had been much the same as Ruth's, and who felt that if he didn't say something soon he never should.

"Oh, what is it? Tell me about it," said Ruth, with such touching anxiety to help the conversation along that Arthur chuckled silently.

"It's one of Clark Russell's sea stories, and I've just left my hero in such an exciting situation that I can hardly wait to see how he is coming out."

It was Ruth's turn to feel amused now. "Too bad that you had to stop to eat dinner with a mere girl, isn't it?" she said saucily.

Arthur laughed. "I was getting so hungry and thirsty out there in mid-ocean with my hero, waiting for a sail to turn up, that I really needed my dinner. Jiminy! it must be awful to have anything happen to you on the ocean," he continued absent-mindedly; "you must feel so awfully far away from every one and so helpless."

"Oh, please don't," cried Ruth with such real terror in her voice that Arthur woke suddenly to a realization of what he'd been saying.

"Of all stupid numskulls!" he said impatiently. "Look here, Ruth, you can cry if you want to after that, and I won't say a word. I deserve some punishment for being such a forgetful idiot."

Ruth couldn't help laughing at his penitent expression. "I don't want to cry any more than you want me to. And you're not a forgetful idiot any more than I am. Let's call it square," she ended significantly.

"All right, and I'll stand up for girls from now on."

"Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything, fair lady, that you may see fit to ask," replied Arthur dramatically.

"Then come down to your meals every day," demanded Ruth, inwardly quaking, but outwardly calm and innocent looking.

Arthur looked as if he were about to protest, but changed his mind and said firmly, "I never go back on my word, so I'll do it."

Fearing to spoil her victory by saying anything more, Ruth rose from the table and walked into the hall, leaving Arthur to follow more slowly. Just as she did so, the bell rang, a sharp, clear peal, and Katie hurried to the door to return in a second with a yellow envelope, and a small book for Ruth to sign.

Ruth's hands shook with excitement as she tried to use the stub of a pencil, and she felt grateful when Arthur took book and all from her saying gently, "You open your cablegram; I'll sign the book."

Ruth was actually pale as she tore open the envelope, but the color came back to her cheeks as she read the one word written there. "It says 'sound,'" she cried exultantly, "and papa said that one word could mean everything I wanted it to mean. That he is well, and has had a pleasant voyage, and has arrived safely. Oh, I am so happy. It's good news! The best of news, Ellen," she added, as the good soul's beaming face appeared in the doorway. "Oh, I can't keep still," and catching Ellen around her massive waist, Ruth almost whirled her off her feet in a wild dance of joy.

"Miss Ruth, Miss Ruth, darlin', behave yourself," protested Ellen, who like other unwieldy objects went on from sheer momentum when once started. "How can you expect a fat old thing like me to dance?"

"Oh, Ellen, that did me heaps of good," and Ruth sank panting into a chair, while Arthur laughed as he had never expected to laugh again, and Ellen tried to look cross, but failed in the attempt.

There was a quick rattle of a key in the lock, and the door opened suddenly to admit Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton. Their surprise as they surveyed the jolly group was funny to see, and Ruth and Arthur went off into a fresh fit of mirth, while Ellen slipped shamefacedly into the kitchen.

"We gave up our dinner party, and came home," said Mrs. Hamilton, "because we were afraid that Ruth would be worried about—" She stopped suddenly, realizing too late that there was no need of telling Ruth why she should be worried, since evidently she didn't know.

"Oh, I am dreadfully—I mean I was," cried Ruth incoherently, "and I don't know what I should have done if Ellen hadn't comforted me, and Arthur hadn't come down to dinner. But it's all right now, for my cablegram says 'sound,' and that means everything good."

"So it does, so it does, little girl," said Mr. Hamilton, much relieved. "It makes you as happy as it makes me feel to see this tall boy of mine down here. Got back to us for keeps now, Arthur?" he asked, as he put his arm around his son's shoulder with a smile that went straight to the boy's heart.

"Yes, sir, I think so," mumbled Arthur, who found it hard to live up to his standard of manliness, as he felt the quick clasp of his mother's hand and saw the look in her eyes.

For a moment the three stood there, a little world in themselves.
Then Mrs. Hamilton stretched out a welcoming hand to Ruth.

"You belong too, little daughter," she said lovingly. "We're going to have good times together, we four. You shall see."

CHAPTER VII

"Now, young ladies, please come to order," said Dorothy, rapping on the table with a wooden spoon, which seemed the most appropriate symbol of office for the president of a cooking club.

It was a day in late November, and the afternoon sun streaming in at the windows of the Ellsworth kitchen smiled broadly at the sight of six cooks in caps and aprons. This was the first working meeting of the club, and as the girls had thought it better to make six the membership, Katharine French and Alice Stevens had been invited to join.

"Usually," continued Dorothy, in an official manner which she flattered herself was in close imitation of the president of the Glenloch Fortnightly Club, "Usually we shall choose our dishes beforehand and bring the materials for making them. As this is the first meeting, Mrs. Ellsworth is going to let us use her materials, and she thinks that we'd better get up a simple supper for our first attempt. I thought that popovers, scalloped oysters, baked apples, cake, chocolate and some simple dessert would be nice, and after this you can make things as elaborate as you like."

Dorothy looked so dignified and important as she finished her little speech that irrepressible Charlotte longed to tickle her or rumple her hair, two things that the neat Dorothy loathed. As she couldn't she only said meekly, "Please, ma'am, are we to choose which we'd rather cook? If we are, I prefer the apples."

"So do I," laughed Katharine; "you're not any lazier than I am,
Charlotte."

"We'll have to write the names of things on slips of paper and draw for them," said Dorothy, "and no matter what you get you must do the best you can with it."

"My, but you are stern, Dolly," said Betty admiringly. "I should probably have let them spend the next half hour wrangling about what they'll do."

Charlotte, who had been made secretary, wrote the names of the various dishes on slips of paper and put them in the hat which Betty brought her. Then with a low bow she presented the hat to Dorothy, who drew the slip on which was written "scalloped oysters."

"How noble of you, Dolly, to draw the one we should all have hated," cried Ruth. "Oh, I'm not sure but this is just as bad," she added, as the slip marked "dessert" fell to her lot. Betty found herself staring at the word "popovers," while Katharine and Alice drew cake and chocolate respectively.

"Girls, I don't need to tell you that 'the lame and the lazy are always provided for,'" cried Charlotte, as she triumphantly flourished the "baked apple" slip. "I will prepare my portion of the feast and then read a while."

"Oh, I forgot to say," said Betty, "that mother suggested that the one who baked the apples might even up things by building the fire. She said one of the first duties of a cook was to know how to manage the stove."

"I wouldn't have believed it of you, Betty," groaned Charlotte, as she made up a face. "I don't know anything about building a fire. How under the sun shall I begin?"

"Read this and grow wise," answered Betty, thrusting an open cookbook under Charlotte's nose. "That tells you just how to do it."

Each of the other girls having brought a cookbook buried herself in it for the time being, while Charlotte, left to her own resources, proceeded to build the fire. First she read with great care the directions in the cookbook, and then looked rather helplessly at the stove.

"This is the front draught, of course," she murmured, "but where's the oven draught? Betty, do tell me where the oven draught is on this stove."

Betty flew over from the further side of the big kitchen, and pointed out the oven draught. Then she absorbed herself again in her book so completely that Charlotte hadn't the courage to ask for further instructions. She noticed a damper in the stovepipe, and wanted to ask about that, but pride forbade. "I'll do this alone or perish in the attempt," she said to herself with noble courage, and proceeding on the principle that she ought to change the existing condition of everything, she turned the one in the stovepipe and speedily forgot all about it. Then she put in a layer of twisted papers, laid the kindlings artistically, with air-spaces between the sticks, and before putting on the covers stood off to admire her work. She looked around for sympathy, but the girls were ail absorbed in their books, and no one gave

her a glanee. Then with the sigh of unappreciated genius, she covered the stove, and touched a match to the papers through the front grate.

The kitchen was very still except for the crackle of the fire. The sunshine came like a shower of gold through the west window, glorifying everything it touched. Charlotte, feeling extremely capable, began with great energy to add an extra polish to the apples which she was to bake.

Suddenly Dorothy raised her head and sniffed the air. "I smell smoke. Oh, Charlotte, look at your stove," she cried.

Even as she spoke the smoke poured out around the covers in great volume. Clouds of smoke forced their way through hitherto unsuspected cracks.

"Open the windows," gasped Betty, whom the stinging wood smoke almost blinded.

"Perhaps I turned the dampers wrong," cried Charlotte, making a dash for the stove, and turning the oven draught. The result was disastrous, for the smoke rolled out with still greater violence, only to be met and beaten back into the room by the air from the windows. Charlotte turned the oven draught again, and then stood helpless.

Suddenly Betty bethought herself of what her mother had told her. "There's a damper in the stovepipe," she choked, covering her streaming eyes with one hand, and waving the other wildly in the air. "Did you touch that?"

"Yes," gasped Charlotte.

"Well, turn it the way it isn't, quick," and while Charlotte reached for the damper, Betty groped her way to the sink to soothe her afflicted eyes with cold water.

Coughing, and with smarting eyes, the girls stood around, while as if by magic the clouds of smoke diminished to tiny streams and then died away altogether.

"How beautifully simple," said Charlotte grimly. "That makes me feel small."

"It wasn't your fault," said Betty. "Mother told me to be sure to remember that that damper in the pipe wasn't to be changed, and of course I had to forget."

Charlotte lifted the cover, and surveyed the fire with a critical though somewhat humbled air. Then after letting it burn up a little she put in a goodly supply of coal and went back to her apples.

"The cake and the apples must go in as soon as the oven is hot," said Dorothy, emerging from her cook-book. "That will leave the oven free for my oysters and Betty's popovers."

Ruth gave a squeal of delight. "I've found a recipe for a pudding that sounds perfectly fascinating, and the cooking can be done on the top of the stove, which is an advantage."

"I can't decide between a chocolate cream cake and a cake with caramel filling," wailed Katharine, who loved rich, mushy, sweet things.

"Goodness, child," said Dorothy, with that superior air which she so often affected, "don't try anything so hard the first time. Find something simple."

"Crushed again," muttered Katharine, only loud enough for Ruth to hear. "Dolly loves to manage everything. You mustn't even breathe hard, girls, for ten minutes, and don't walk so heavily," she said as she carried her cake pan across the kitchen and deposited it in the oven. "This cake is going to be simply dandy, and my heart will be broken if it falls."

"Better not leave the oven door open so long then," said Betty, who having nothing to do for the moment was interesting herself in her neighbor's affairs.

Katharine, who had been absorbed in gazing proudly at her creation, started guiltily, and the oven door slipping from her fingers shut itself with a crash that filled her with horror.

"Do you suppose that old door's spoiled it?" she said in a despairing voice. "I don't see how it can fall, though, till it has begun to rise," she added hopefully to Betty as she went back to the table to clear away her cooking dishes.

"Just give a look at my apples when you're looking at your cake, will you, Kit?" asked Charlotte, who had produced a small book from some mysterious hiding-place, and was slipping off into a comer with it.

"That isn't fair," called Dorothy sharply, but Charlotte pretended not to hear, and Dorothy with a shrug of the shoulders gave her up as a hopeless case. Dorothy and Charlotte were apt to turn their sharp edges toward each other, though either would have defended the other had an outsider interfered.

"Dear me, things look too good to be true," said Ruth a little later as Katharine took her cake, golden-brown and deliciously light, from the oven. "It seems as though some one would have to make a failure of something."

"It won't be my apples," proclaimed Charlotte with great pride. "Now I call that an artistic piece of cookery; they're not all mushy and cooked to death, but they've split open just enough to show that they're done."

"Small credit to you," laughed Alice. "If it hadn't been for Katharine you wouldn't have come out of your book for the next hour."

"Don't be envious, Al," answered Charlotte sweetly. "Perhaps your chocolate will be as good as my apples."

"There," said Ruth with a sigh of relief, "now that can cool, and
I'll put the finishing touches on later."

Suddenly the door-bell rang sharply. "You'll have to go to the door, girls," said Betty, poking her head into the dining-room, "for there's no one besides us in the house."

There was a murmur of conversation at the door, and then Ruth came flying into the kitchen with shining eyes and flushed cheeks. "There's the dearest little old woman at the door, girls," she said, "with soap and pins and needles to sell, and I'm so sorry for her because she says she hasn't sold a thing today. And she's the cleanest-looking old dear you ever saw, and don't you think we might ask her to stay to supper?"

Ruth stopped for lack of breath, and her face fell as she saw plainly that both Dorothy and Betty disapproved of her plan. She started slowly toward the door, wondering how much money she had in her purse, and whether it would be enough to get the old woman her supper, when help came from an unexpected quarter. Charlotte, who at that moment was so completely a Knight of the Round Table that she could hardly refrain from using the language of chivalry, and who saw in this instance a chance to bring chivalric ideas into practical use, said excitedly, "Why not, girls, if she's clean? She certainly can't run off with the silver with six of us to watch her."

"She's very respectable looking," pleaded Ruth; "her clothes are neat, and she looks as though—as though she'd seen better days."

"Mother said she wished we could make our club helpful to some one besides ourselves," said Betty slowly; "perhaps this is one of the ways."

"Of course it is," answered Ruth, and was about to make a wild dash for the door when she remembered that Dorothy was president and ought to have the deciding voice. "What do you say, Dolly?" she asked coaxingly. Dorothy frowned. "I don't approve of it a bit," she said, "but as you all seem to be against me I won't say anything more about it." Ruth walked slowly toward the front door, feeling very undecided, but Charlotte, who had followed her, helped her to a decision by saying softly, "Go ahead and invite her, Ruth; Dolly will come round ail right."

Seated in the kitchen the old woman didn't look at all dangerous even to Dorothy's suspicious eyes. She was dressed neatly in black, and, though politely urged, refused to take off either bonnet or shawl. Much conversation with her was impossible, for she was very deaf and mumbled so in talking that it was hard to understand her. The girls couldn't help liking the rosy face with its crown of snowy hair under a black veil, and they felt, too, that gentle glow of pride which comes of exceeding virtue. The old lady's bright eyes traveled from one to the other of them as they worked, and occasionally her whole frame trembled as though with emotion.

"Poor old soul! Perhaps she had daughters of her own," said Alice in a low voice.

It was impossible for the old woman to have heard, but it seemed almost as though she had, for just at that moment she sighed deeply, and drawing from her bag a neatly folded handkerchief wiped her eyes. Then she settled her spectacles on her nose and looked up at Ruth with a brave smile. The girls were touched by her courage, and each resolved privately to buy some of her pins and needles before she left the house.

At last everything was ready and the girls looked at the table with pardonable pride. "My, but I'm hungry," sighed Ruth, "and everything looks so good."

"I don't see why my popovers aren't poppier," said Betty anxiously. "I thought I followed—Oh, goose! Idiot! What do you think I did?" she wailed. "I wanted to be sure to have enough, so I doubled the recipe—but I forgot to double the eggs!"

Betty's despair was so comical that the girls couldn't help laughing, in spite of the fact that the popovers had not fulfilled the end and aim of their existence.

"Oh, Betty, to leave out the poppiest part of them," laughed Charlotte; "now just look at my apples; not a thing left out in cooking those."

The girls shouted again, and the old woman looked around the table as though wondering what the fun was about.

The supper progressed merrily, and everything, even the unambitious popovers, tasted good to the hungry cooke. Their guest paid the highest possible compliment to her hostesses by devouring with great eagerness everything that was offered to her. After she had been served three times to scalloped oysters, and had eaten five popovers and two baked apples, the girls looked at each other in amazement.

"The poor old thing probably hasn't had a square meal in years," said Charlotte softly.

"She'll never be able to walk if she eats ail that cake and pudding she has on her plate," said Dorothy anxiously, "and that's her second cup of chocolate. Why, she's got an appetite like—like a boy."

There was a subdued chuckle from the other end of the table followed by a laugh which ail the girls recognized. Then the old woman, very red in the face and very much hampered by her skirts, pushed back her chair and started for the door.

Quick as a flash Dorothy, looking very determined, stood with her back against the door. "Guard the other door, girls, and some one help me here!" she cried. "Now, Joe Bancroft, who helped you get up this trick?"

Joe, to whom laughter and eating were the main objects of life, threw back his head and laughed until he choked, and grew so red in the face that the girls were actually frightened.

"Oh, oh," he gasped at last, "that's done me lots of good. I think
I could eat a little more supper now."

He looked so funny standing there in the neat, black skirt topped by the respectable bonnet and shawl, the spectacles and white hair, that the girls went off into shrieks of merriment. Even Dorothy, who was really angry, couldn't wholly resist the fun of the situation, but she was sober again in a moment and said sternly, "You haven't told us yet who are the others. You never got this up all by yourself, I know."

"Honor forbids me to mention the names of my partners in crime," answered Joe with great solemnity. "They will all be glad to know that you were so kind to a poor old woman—who may have had daughters of her own," he added with a naughty twinkle in his eye.

"Oh, this is too much. Do let him go, Dolly," begged Charlotte.
"We know well enough that Frank and Bert are in it, and probably
Phil Canfield and Jack."

"No, not Phil and Jack," said Joe quickly, and then groaned inwardly over his stupidity.

"Thanks. That's all we wanted to know," answered Charlotte with triumph in her voice.

"That's one for you, Charlotte. You had me there ail right. Now, ladies, with your kind permission I'll go, leaving you in part payment for my gorgeous supper my stock in trade."

He drew from his bag and laid solemnly on the table one paper of pins, one of needles, and a cake of soap. Then, seeing that the girls at the other door had relaxed their watchfulness, he slipped past them, through the kitchen and out the back door.

A shout of boyish laughter greeted him, and Dorothy groaned as she heard it. "Why didn't you keep him, girls? I was going to make him wash the dishes," she said mournfully.

"It's much nicer to have him out of the way," answered Ruth. "Besides, I want to taste my pudding

and Katharine's cake if that greedy boy has left any of it."

"Betty's mother will be so pleased to hear that we've begun so soon to make our club helpful to some one else," observed Charlotte pensively, as they finished washing the dishes, and the club ended its first meeting with a burst of laughter.

CHAPTER VIII

CHARLOTTE'S PROBLEMS

There was a cold rain, freezing as it fell, and the outdoor world looked cheerless and forsaken. In Ruth's room the fire was evidently doing its best to make one forget that it was winter and almost Christmas. Ruth was absorbed in the tying of a gorgeous lavender bow which was to adorn a sweet-grass basket standing on the table near her. So intent was she on her work that she heard no footsteps in the hall, and she jumped violently when a voice at the door said, "Well, this is the cheerfulest place I've found. May I come in and stay a little while?"

"Why, Charlotte, of course you may. I'm delighted to see you," and Ruth's glance swept the table and bed to see if any gift were in sight which ought to be concealed.

"Don't stop your work; just let me lie here and look at the fire. Meanwhile you can say nice, soothing things to me, for I'm tired and cross." Charlotte stretched herself on the rug and even laid her cheek for an instant on the black kitten, a concession that would have filled Betty's soul with joy.

"What's the matter?" asked Ruth a bit absently, as she held the basket out at arm's length and gazed critically at the bow.

"Oh, we're in several different shades of dark-blue over at our house," answered Charlotte. "Mother has shut herself up with a raging headache, Molly has quarreled with her best chum and refuses to be comforted, and one of the twins has the earache. To crown it ail, Melina, who is usually cheerful, is going around the kitchen looking as though she'd lost her last friend, and I actually haven't had the courage yet to find out what's the matter with her. Fortunately for every one, Cousin Josie blew in, and when she saw how things were going she made me go out for an hour, and said she'd stay with the children."

"It must be hard to manage so many," said Ruth who longed to help but didn't know how. "I'm sure I think you're awfully brave to be so cheerful all the time."

"Oh, but I'm not; I'm the most doleful thing you ever knew at home sometimes. And every little while I have to play baby and fuss it all out to some one. You happen to be the victim this time, but if it hadn't been you it would have been Mrs. Hamilton, or Betty." Charlotte's voice quavered, and there was a long silence while she stared gloomily into the fire and Ruth searched her mind for something comforting to say. At last she said hesitatingly, "I wish there was something I could do to help."

"I know you do," answered Charlotte with a smile. "But you can't except just by understanding, and letting me tell my woes to you occasionally. After I've really been in the dumps I'm the most courageous thing you ever saw, and feel that I can accomplish wonders. I suppose the reason I feel blue just now is because Christmas is so near."

"Christmas! Why, don't you just love Christmas?"

"Love it! I should say not. I usually hate it."

Ruth's eyes opened very wide as she stared at Charlotte. That any sane girl should hate Christmas was incomprehensible.

"Christmas won't seem the same to me this year," she said soberly, "but I love it and I'm going to have as good a time as I can. Why do you hate it, Charlotte?"

"Oh, for various reasons. Mother always seems sicker at this season, and father looks anxious and more tired. I always feel that he's trying to squeeze out a little more money to give us a good time, and doesn't see how he possibly can. As for me, I'm so hopelessly in debt to other people in the way of presents that I shall never swim out." Charlotte tried to speak lightly, but it was a dismal failure.

"I never felt about it in just that way,—I mean about being in debt to people. I dare say I've missed giving sometimes when I should have given, if that's the way of it. I love to choose and make presents for the people I'm fond of, and that's what Christmas means to me."

"Well, that's very lovely and quite the proper way to think of it, I know, but it wouldn't seem quite so easy to you if you didn't have any money to spend."

"Why not make things?" asked Ruth innocently.

Charlotte laughed. "Bless your heart, child, doesn't it cost money to buy materials? And I do all the sewing I can possibly make up my mind to in helping to keep the twins from falling out of their clothes. You never saw such holes."

There was a long silence while Charlotte lay still, apparently trying to go to sleep, and Ruth's forehead puckered itself into wrinkles as she wrestled with a weighty problem.

Suddenly Charlotte opened her eyes. "Look here, Ruth," she said bluntly, "I didn't mean to come over here and tell a tale of woe about not having any money, and I'm ashamed because I have. Please forget all about it."

"Oh, Charlotte," cried Ruth, dropping scissors, thimble and spool with a clatter as she got up from her chair. "Oh, Charlotte, I wish you would let me do something I want very much to do."

As she spoke Ruth threw herself on the couch beside Charlotte and put her arms about her. Charlotte, who was most undemonstrative, was vaguely comforted by the friendly embrace, and to her own surprise found herself returning it.

"Charlotte," pleaded Ruth, "I've really more money than I need for Christmas presents this year, for Uncle Jerry sent me a check to use just as I please. Now won't you let me give you your present now, and give it to you in money, so that you may have the fun of using it before Christmas? Oh, oh, don't you dare say a word yet if you can't say yes," she said fiercely, putting her hand over Charlotte's mouth, and in her anxiety pressing so hard that Charlotte gasped for breath.

"Don't you see what a pleasure you'd be giving me?" Ruth went on.
"I do so love to give people what they really want, and it's so
hard to know. And there won't a soul know about it except us, and
I'm dying to have a secret with some one."

Charlotte couldn't help laughing, Ruth's manner was so funny and anxious. "Thank you very much, Ruth, but I really couldn't," she said at last decidedly. "They wouldn't be my presents if I used your money for them; and besides, it makes me feel as though I'd no business to complain to you as I've done."

"Oh, Charlotte, they will be. It won't be my money, for I shall give it to you to use just as you please, and what's the good of having a friend if you don't tell her your troubles once in a while?"

Charlotte was silent and troubled, but she smiled a little at Ruth's mixed-up sentences. Ruth thought this was a good sign and rushed on without giving her a chance for a positive refusal.

"Don't you suppose I know how hard it is for a proud old thing like you to do it? But I'm just selfish enough to try to tease you into it because it's going to be such a favor to me. Do, Charlotte, that's a dear."

With Ruth's arms tightly around her, and Ruth's brown eyes looking at her with mischievous pleading, Charlotte found it difficult to be disappointing. "Well—" she said at last.

"You will!" cried Ruth in a tone of rapture. "Oh, Charlotte, you're a darling, and I'll do as much for you some day."

"I feel as though I'd been in a hold-up," murmured Charlotte, as Ruth released her after another violent squeeze, and went to her desk.

"I don't wonder," laughed Ruth coming back with an envelope in her hand. "Now, Charlotte, I don't want to hurry you, but your hour is up, and I think you'd better go. I have a premonition that the twins have fallen into something or other."

Charlotte rose lazily and held out her arms for the coat which
Ruth was holding and into the pocket of which she had slipped the
envelope. "You're a sly thing," she said. "You're afraid if I stay

I'll go back on my bargain."

"Never," laughed Ruth. "You're not that kind. Can't you go into Boston with me to-morrow and do some shopping? It will be almost the last chance before Christmas."

"Why, yes. I think so. I'm almost sure I can." Charlotte started to go, but turned and gripped Ruth's hand. "You're a trump, Ruth, and you've helped me lots," she said with an effort, "but I must say I don't feel quite right about taking that money."

"Oh, but I do. I shall enjoy it more than any other present I'm giving. We'll have a great time to-morrow spending it."

Once out of the house Charlotte couldn't resist the temptation to take a peep at the contents of the envelope. As she caught a glimpse of a crisp five dollar bill her first impulse was to go immediately and make Ruth take it back. She half turned, and waited irresolutely until the cold sting of the rain forced her to realize that the middle of the street was no place for deciding a weighty question. Then she went slowly toward home, uncomfortable because she had taken the money, happy because of the affection and sympathy Ruth had shown her.

At home a more cheerful atmosphere reigned, and Charlotte felt her spirits rise as she walked into the up-stairs sitting-room where the children were. "You're an angel of peace, Cousin Josie," said Charlotte gratefully. "I'll try to keep them happy until bedtime, though I'm no such genius at it as you are."

Charlotte felt so cheered and comforted that she thought of poor Melina, whose sorrows she had not yet investigated, and turned toward the kitchen. Melina was one of those rare maids-of-all-work whose services cannot be estimated, nor can they be paid for in mere money. Coming into the family when Charlotte was a small child, she had taken each successive baby into her heart, and had worked for them all as faithfully and lovingly as if they belonged to her.

As she walked into the room she was startled to find Melina rocking hard with her apron thrown over her face and audible sniffs going on behind it. The chair was making such a noise that at first she didn't hear Charlotte, and the latter had time to wonder whether it wouldn't be better to steal away softly and come in later. She knew she should hate to be found crying and she supposed Melina would. Before she could decide Melina threw down the apron and jumped up.

"Land, how you scared me," she said huskily. "I guess I was just having a kind of a little nap."

"Oh, was that it?" answered Charlotte. She felt the delicacy of the situation, and hated to pry into things that others didn't want her to know.

"Any cookies, Melina?" she continued carelessly. "I thought I'd take some up to the children. My, but these are good! Who was it in your family used to like them so much? Oh, I know, it was your nephew down in Maine. How is he now, Melina? Does he get any better?"

Melina's answer was so indistinct that Charlotte looked at her in amazement to see two great tears rolling slowly down her cheeks. "Oh, Melina, is he worse, and is that what makes you feel so bad?" she cried sympathetically.

"No, he ain't worse. If anything he's a little mite better."

"What is the matter then? Don't you want to tell me? Perhaps father or some of us could help."

Melina shook her head. "It's only that I ain't got quite enough money to make him the Christmas present I'd planned for him, and what's worse I've been fool enough to write him it was coming. It's one of those new-fangled beds so that he can be wheeled around, and the end raises so that he can sit up a little. He's counting on it so that I can't bear to disappoint him. All I need is five dollars, and I thought sure I should have it because some one owes me just that much. But I got a letter to-day saying she couldn't pay it until after the first of January, so there 'tis."

"If father was only home he could fix it ail right, but I'm afraid mother hasn't five dollars she could spare just now," said Charlotte doubtfully.

"If she had I wouldn't take it," answered Melina, whose business principles were founded on a rock. "Your father paid me up to yesterday, and it ain't time for me to have any more."

"Oh, Melina, wait!" cried Charlotte, and she flashed out of the room and up the stairs, leaving Melina to wonder what had come over the girl. She was back in a moment, hiding both hands behind her as she came into the kitchen. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement, and she was so different from the

ordinarily languid Charlotte that Melina looked at her in astonishment.

"Melina," she said earnestly, "do you remember when I was a little girl and I used to beg you over and over again to say which hand you'd take? Now, please, please choose now."

Melina hesitated, but Charlotte's manner was so persuasive that she couldn't resist, and murmuring, "left hand nearest the heart," touched that one.

Charlotte pushed something crisp and crackling into her hand. "It's mine to do just what I please with," she cried exultantly, "and I never wanted to do anything more than I want to do this."

Melina stared at the five dollar bill in her hand. Then she held it out to Charlotte again. "I can't take your money," she said. "I ain't saying that I wouldn't like to have it, but I can't take it."

Charlotte looked at her pleadingly. Then she remembered how Ruth had won her over. "But, Melina, it's a favor to me. You've always been doing me favors, I know, but you might do just this one more."

Melina shook her head. "It's no use," she began, and then stopped aghast, for Charlotte, the self-controlled, the hater of tears, startled Melina and fell forever in her own estimation by bursting into sobs. "For the land's sake, child, don't do that," ejaculated Melina, almost whirling herself off her feet in her frantic efforts to decide whether to throw water on her or burn feathers under her nose.

Those who rarely cry are likely to do so with great violence when they once give themselves up to it, and Charlotte's rending sobs drove poor Melina to the verge of distraction. At last she gathered the girl's slender figure into her arms and sat down in the big rocker.

"There, there, lamb," she said, "put your head on Melina's shoulder and cry all you want to," and she held her tenderly until the gasping sobs grew less frequent.

"Oh, Melina, if you could only make up your mind to take that money," said Charlotte at last, getting up and trying hard to keep back the persistent tears. "I do want that poor boy to have his bed right away. I think I could stop crying if you only would."

Melina's thin lips tightened.

"Well," she said at last, grudgingly, "I'll take it and call it a loan. I must say, though, that I think you took an unfair advantage of me. I ain't seen you cry since you was little more than a baby."

"I didn't do it to get my own way. I've been holding on to myself all day, and that was just the last straw that made me let go. Don't call it a loan, for I never want to see it again. Keep it till you find some one who needs it as much as you do just now, and then pass it along. Wouldn't it be interesting to see how far five dollars could travel if it was passed from one to another that way?"

"Talk about goodness," muttered Melina as Charlotte disappeared, "that child's a wonder,—sometimes."

CHAPTER IX

OUT OF THE SNOW

Charlotte woke the next morning feeling vaguely uncomfortable and wondering what was the reason for it. Suddenly it occurred to her that to-day she must see Ruth and must give a reason for not going to Boston with her. To explain what she had done with the money was out of the question, for Charlotte would have been more unwilling to tell of the performance of a good deed than to confess that she had done something wrong. If she gave no reason and simply said she couldn't go Ruth might think she was going to use the money for herself, and that would be unbearable. But, of course, it would be enough to say that it was Melina's only chance to go in town, and she couldn't disappoint her. The fact that her mother was still sick in bed would be sufficient reason why Charlotte couldn't leave on the same day.

Melina, herself, was cross, and worked as though she had a personal grudge against every dish and piece of furniture she touched. The twins and Molly were actually scared into silence, and forbore to make their usual demands on her time and patience. Charlotte, who understood, kept them and herself as much out of the way as possible, and helped all she could so that Melina might take an early train.

As soon as breakfast was over, Charlotte went to Mrs. Hamilton's and found Ruth just getting ready for her trip to Boston.

"Why, Charlotte, you're surely not ready so early as this," she said in surprise as her friend walked into her room.

"Why, no; the fact is I can't go to-day. Melina wants to go, and mother is still too sick to be left alone with the children. I came over early because I thought you might want to ask some one else."

"Oh, dear! Can't Melina wait till to-morrow? I'm dreadfully disappointed." Ruth looked so reproachful that Charlotte found it harder than she had anticipated.

"You see," she explained, "Melina wants to send something off to her nephew in Maine, and if she doesn't start it to-day it won't get there for Christmas."

"Bother Melina's nephew! I'd set my heart on having you with me to-day, and you know why."

Charlotte did know why, and much to her own sorrow. "I'm sorry it's happened so," she began, but Ruth interrupted her.

"It isn't really necessary for me to go to-day. Why can't we both go to-morrow? We don't mind if the stores are crowded."

Poor Charlotte looked positively unhappy. In all the labyrinth of thought through which she had wandered this exceedingly simple solution of the matter hadn't occurred to her.

"Why, I might," she stammered feeling her way. "No, I can't," she went on decidedly. "The truth is, Ruth, I'm not going to buy any Christmas presents this year, after all."

"Oh," said Ruth coldly. "Then, of course, you won't want to go in town."

"No, I think I'd better not. I'm sorry,—I can't explain."

"You don't need to explain. You have a perfect right to do as you please, of course." Ruth's tone was so freezingly polite that Charlotte almost shivered.

"I must run back home," she said at last with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Would you like to have me ask Betty or Dolly to go with you?"

"No, thank you," and Ruth busied herself in the tying of a bow with such complete absorption that Charlotte felt that the best and only thing she could do was to go. She was so absorbed in her own disagreeable thoughts that she plodded along through the snow with her head down, and almost ran over Joe, who was patiently standing in the middle of the walk hoping for just that result.

"Why don't you warn a fellow when you are coming down upon him like a ship under full sail, Charlotte?" he asked with pretended indignation.

"Get right out of my way, little boy," answered Charlotte, with assumed scorn. "I suppose now that vacation has begun you children will be under my feet all the time."

Joe chuckled softly. He would have been disappointed if Charlotte had answered in any other way.

"What's the matter with you, Charlotte?" he asked as she passed him and he fell into line behind her. "You look as though you had lost your last friend."

"I feel so," remarked Charlotte briefly, and in a flash was sorry she had said it.

"I didn't think Ruth was that kind," Joe said after a pause.

"What kind? She isn't. There isn't anything the matter, and it's all my fault. Ruth's all right, and I don't blame her a bit."

Joe grinned appreciatively behind her back over this mixed statement of affairs. Then he said, "Good for you, Charlotte. You're all right, too. What are you going to do this morning?"

"Shovel snow. It's the only kind of work that I really enjoy."

"Let me help. I like to shovel snow when it isn't in my own yard."

"Run off and play with the other boys," answered Charlotte ungratefully. "I have the twins and Molly on my hands, and that will be enough for one day."

"Don't be foolish and refuse a good thing when it's offered you," said Joe good-naturedly. "I'll help you amuse them."

"Well, come along in then, and read while I get the children ready. Oh, they're out now," she added, as they turned the comer and saw the twins, looking like industrious brownies, rolling a huge snowball across the yard, while Molly was expending her artistic talent on the building of a snow-man.

The clean snow-drifts, glittering in the sunshine, fired Charlotte with the desire to play as she used to play when a child. "Get the shovels, Joe," she commanded, "and after we've cleared the piazza, let's build a snow-house and freeze it."

"And my man can be the man that owns it, out for a walk in his garden," chimed in Molly, who had been too much absorbed in her work to speak before.

"Nice weather for gardening," said Joe with a wink, as he started after the shovels.

Work is a cure for many sorrows, and Charlotte felt her heart grow lighter as she helped Joe cut great blocks of snow and pile them symmetrically. Betty, who had wandered over to see Charlotte, proved a most efficient helper, and Frank and Bert, driving by almost hidden under the branches of a stately Christmas tree, shouted their greetings and came back later to join in the work.

Both boys and girls worked hard, and the result was a snow hut large enough to shelter a good-sized family of Esquimaux. An arched doorway gave entrance to the interior, which was divided into two rooms. It had taken a large amount of snow to build it, and really much skill, for the day was growing warmer and it was almost impossible to make the structure firm enough to stand.

"There," said Charlotte, as she stuck a tiny American flag just over the entrance, "I consider that the finishing touch. Now if you boys will come over this afternoon and freeze it it will probably last for some time."

"What a short morning!" exclaimed Betty as the church clock struck twelve. "I'm as warm as toast and as hungry as a bear."

"Come in and help me get out the lunch Melina left for us," begged Charlotte, "and then we can rest till the boys come over this afternoon."

The boys left in a cloud of snowballs, but Joe found a chance to say softly to Charlotte as he passed her, "Feeling better, Charlotte? You look it."

"Run along and don't be foolish," answered Charlotte disdainfully.

"Goodness! Melina must have thought she was going to feed an army," laughed Betty, as Charlotte brought out sandwiches, cookies, brown bread and a plate heaped with the cunning apple turnovers for which Melina was famous. "Doesn't everything look good?"

"Don't you want to make us some cocoa, Bettina? Yours is so good."

Betty laughed. "Of course, you sly old thing. You know I love to show off on cooking, don't you?"

"Good reason why; because you're so clever about it. I wish I weren't such a stupid about doing all the things a girl is expected to do, and I truly wish I didn't hate it all so."

"You can do other things," answered Betty loyally; "things I'd be only too glad to do if I could. You ought to have heard all the nice things Ruth said about you the other day."

Charlotte's heart sank. The joy of working in the keen, clear air had almost made her forget the unpleasantness of the morning. Now it ail came back to her with a rush. Ruth would never again say nice things about her, and there would be an end, of course, to ail the delightful intimacy which had seemed to promise so much pleasure for the winter.

"Charlotte, Charlotte, Irving is climbing on the table to get a turnover," announced Molly in a tone of dignified disapproval, and Charlotte came to the rescue just in time to defeat the plans of the small pirate, whose schemes for getting what he wanted were without end.

It was a jolly lunch, for they were all too hungry to notice Charlotte's sudden depression, and the twins kept Betty in a perpetual state of amusement. To Charlotte, however, the tempting food might as well have been something far less appetizing, for the keen discomfort she was feeling took away all sense of pleasure.

"I don't believe I want to work any more on the snow-house," she said soberly, as she and Betty

finished putting away the dishes. "You and the boys can finish up if you like, but I'm almost too tired to move."

"Well, I don't care," answered Betty good-naturedly. "I ought to be working on my Christmas presents anyway, and I've had a pretty good airing this morning. Can't you bring some sewing over to my house?"

"Sewing! You know I hate it. I hate Christmas presents, too, and
I shall be glad when Christmas is over."

Betty gazed at her in such consternation that Charlotte couldn't help laughing. "Don't mind me, Bettikins," she said penitently; "I'm a cross, disagreeable thing, and I ought to know better, Only, if you love me, don't say Christmas anywhere in my neighborhood, or I shall certainly explode into some badness."

Betty looked puzzled, but wisely refrained from asking any questions. "Don't make yourself out too much of a villain," she said with a comforting pat, "for I shan't believe it, and I shall keep on liking you just the same."

With a look at the twins and Molly, who were safely at work in the snow, Charlotte went up-stairs to her mother, wishing in her heart that she could take her troubles to her as other girls did to their mothers, but knowing from long experience that nothing of the kind was possible. Mrs. Eastman had been so long an invalid that Charlotte could hardly remember the time when it had not been the first object of her father, and later of herself, to spare her mother every care and excitement. To-day was one of Mrs. Eastman's better days, and Charlotte found her dressed and sitting by the window when she went in with the tray.

"Why, mother, how good it seems to see you sitting up," she said happily; "are you really feeling better?"

"Yes, really better; so much so that I thought I would give my good little daughter a pleasant surprise when she came up to see me."

Charlotte looked at her mother with delight. It was many weeks since she had heard that cheerful tone, had seen the blue eyes so clear, and the sweet face so untroubled.

"Oh, Mumsey, you are so pretty when you don't have that horrid pain," she said, setting the tray on the table and kneeling down to rest her head on her mother's knee.

Mrs. Eastman laughed softly, and patted the tired head with a tender hand. "I'm glad I look pretty to you," she said. "But where are Molly and the twins?"

"Out in the yard digging in the snow. The boys and Betty were here this morning, and we made a grand snow-house, but no one has come back to finish up." Charlotte looked out as she spoke and opened the window a crack to remind Irving that he couldn't prance around on top of the snow-house, because it wasn't strong enough yet for such treatment.

"Don't you believe you'll be able to come down-stairs pretty soon? Perhaps you can be with us on Christmas Day; oh, Mumsey," and Charlotte glowed with delighted anticipation. "It won't make so very much difference, after all," she added soberly, "for Christmas won't be much different from any other day."

"Yes, it will; it shall, darling," said Mrs. Eastman. "I know we can't spend much money for presents, but we'll trim the house, and we'll have popcorn and apples and—"

Just what her mother intended to add Charlotte never knew, for a wild shriek from the yard made her rush to the window in terror. At first she could not tell what had happened. Then she realized that Molly was dancing wildly around wringing her hands, that Irving's startled face and sturdy shoulders were emerging from the ruins of the snow-house, and that no one else was in sight.

"Stanley, where is Stanley?" she called, opening the window wide.

"Under the snow," shrieked Molly. "He can't get out, he can't get out."

Charlotte said afterward that she never felt sure whether she went out of the window or over the stairs. She realized only that some one came swiftly behind her and she screamed, "Go back, go back; I'll get him out."

But the figure kept silently on, and, before Charlotte could prevent, her mother was pulling Irving

with all her strength.

"Help me lift him," she cried piteously; "my other baby is under all this snow."

No one knew better than Charlotte the weight of snow which had fallen on poor Stanley, and she felt sick with terror as they at last set Irving on his feet.

"Run for Dr. Holland, Molly, and tell the neighbors to come here," she said in a voice sharp with fear. Then she seized a shovel which lay near and began to lift off the snow with a care and slowness which made her mother frantic,

"Give me the shovel, Charlotte; my baby will smother while you work so slowly."

"Stop, mother," answered Charlotte. "We may hurt him if we use the shovel any more. Now I must use my hands."

It seemed hours before Charlotte, plunging in the snow and throwing it aside with her arms and her whole body, felt the touch of her brother's coat. And then still hours before she could draw out the limp, little body.

"Give him to me," cried Mrs. Eastman snatching him to her breast, and running toward the house. "Get hot water, Charlotte, and blankets." Charlotte tried to run, but couldn't. She was vaguely conscious that a sleigh had stopped outside the gate, that figures were hurrying toward the house, that Joe, looking exceedingly red and anxious but withal rather indistinct, had almost reached her, and then she forgot everything.

When she opened her eyes she was on the library sofa, and Mrs. Hamilton and Betty were smiling reassuringly at her. She looked at them a moment without speaking, and then all that had happened came sharply back to her.

"Where is Stanley?" she cried, starting up in alarm.

"Stanley is all right, dear," answered Mrs. Hamilton, putting a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Dr. Holland says that by to-morrow he won't know that anything has happened to him."

"And mother? She was out there in the cold and snow."

"She says it hasn't hurt her a bit and she will insist on staying up to take care of Stanley. Truly they are all right, Charlotte, and you mustn't worry." Betty's tone was so motherly and insistent that Charlotte couldn't help smiling. She closed her eyes sleepily and didn't even trouble to open them when she felt herself lifted from the sofa and carried up-stairs.

When she awoke it was quite dark in the room except for the light from the open fire. She could hear in the sitting-room a subdued murmur of voices, and now and then Irving's giggle, promptly suppressed by the stern Molly. As she lay there in drowsy comfort Melina stole into the room and coming softly to the bed peered sharply at her.

"Hullo," said Charlotte with a suddeness that made Melina jump.
"What time is it, and how is every one?"

"Goodness, I thought you was asleep. They're all right. I've just made your ma go to bed, though she declares she never felt better in her life. Stanley's sitting up on the sofa with the pillows ail around him, feeling like a little king, and Molly's proud as Punch to be nurse. Now what would you like for your supper?"

"My! Is it supper-time? Oh, bring me anything good. You know what
I like."

"There's a girl in the kitchen—the one that's staying with Mrs. Hamilton. She wanted I should come up to see how you are, and she says she'll come to see you just as soon as you want her."

"Oh, ask her to come now, Melina, please. I feel quite well enough to see her."

Melina began to protest, but Charlotte's eagerness conquered, and she went grumbling down-stairs to call Ruth.

"Oh, Charlotte, you're a dear to let me come and tell you how mean I feel. I don't believe I should have slept to-night if I couldn't 'fess up' to somebody."

Charlotte looked at her in astonishment and Ruth went on, "You see I know all about what you did

with the money, for Melina sat with me coming out on the train."

"Melina told you!" said Charlotte, hardly able to believe her own ears.

"Yes, I remembered her face and said something to her. She was so full of joy over having sent the bed off to her nephew that before she knew it she had told me all about him, and about the five dollars, too."

"She probably won't tell anything again in a hundred years," murmured Charlotte, looking so embarrassed and uncomfortable that Ruth couldn't help seeing it.

"You're a funny girl to be so ashamed of your good deeds. But, honestly, Charlotte, I'll never tell if you don't want me to. I'm simply bowed down with shame myself to think I was so mean and hateful this morning."

"Oh, that's ail right, Ruth," said Charlotte warmly, "and I'm not going to be horrid about Christmas any more. I think this will be the happiest one I've ever had."

CHAPTER X

CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

The day before Christmas Ruth awoke with an ache in her heart, and an inexpressible longing for mother and father. It was even worse, she thought, than the Christmas before when grief for her mother was so keenly new. Then, she and her father had been so occupied making the hard day easier for each other that it had passed almost pleasantly. But now, with her best chum so far away, the longing for her mother increased tenfold, and Ruth found herself wishing that she could go to sleep again, and not wake until the holidays were over.

It was hard to look cheerful at the breakfast-table, and every one missed the gay laugh and chatter which usually made the meal so pleasant.

"You're not ill, child, are you?" asked Mr. Hamilton as he rose from the table.

"Oh, no," answered Ruth quickly, feeling that it would be rank ingratitude to look melancholy after ail their kindness to her.

"That's right," he said with a farewell pat. "We can't have you looking sober. You know I depend on you to give me a merry Christmas."

"I'll try," answered Ruth dutifully, but she felt that it would be an impossibility for her to add to any one's happiness.

"Perhaps you will help me a little, Ruth," said Mrs. Hamilton as they finished breakfast. "I'm going to pack and deliver some Christmas baskets this morning, and I really need some assistance in order to get through with it."

"I'd love to. Mother and I always did that, and I used to think it almost the nicest part of Christmas. Mayn't I buy something to put in the baskets, or have you all that you can use?"

"It would be very nice if you would, for I've just heard of a family this morning where the children haven't the necessary winter clothing. There are four children, the oldest about seven and the youngest a baby, and I'm sure you will find a great many things they need at the little store near the post-office. If you feel like taking that off my mind I shall be truly grateful."

"Indeed I do," and Ruth, looking more cheerful already, ran off to put on her coat and gay little hat. It is undeniable that doing for others is the best cure for an ache in one's own heart, and Ruth felt almost happy for the next half hour as she bought little suits of underwear, warm petticoats and stockings, and red mittens enough for the entire family. She felt quite like Santa Claus as she walked down the street, for she had made a last purchase of toys and candy, and enticing-looking bundles stuck out in all directions. Those who passed couldn't help smiling at the pretty girl who, for the time, at least, was the embodiment of Christmas cheer.

"There, that was fun," she said with a sigh of satisfaction as she deposited her bundles on the table. "Now, let me help you pack."

For the remainder of the morning there was no time to be unhappy, for by the time the baskets were packed the sleigh was at the door. Mrs. Hamilton's errands took them to the outskirts of the town, where great fields of snow spread their dazzling whiteness, and the cool, crisp air blew the cobwebs from one's brain. Ruth learned a helpful lesson in the art of giving, for Mrs. Hamilton was as beautifully simple and friendly with the poor women she visited as with her wealthier friends, and it was a pleasure to see the good comradeship with which she entered into their joys and sorrows.

"This is my last visit for the morning," said Mrs. Hamilton, as the sleigh drew up before a neat little house. "I have just a little Christmas remembrance to leave here, and I think you may find this the most attractive place of all."

Ruth followed Mrs. Hamilton into the house with real curiosity, only to be met by a cheerful, rosy-cheeked woman who looked clean and wholesome, though not especially interesting. She was putting an extra polish on her little parlor, which already looked spotless, and singing softly as she did so. As the song stopped Ruth realized that the words were French and she began to feel curious immediately.

"Ah, Mrs. Hamilton, it ees a great pleasure to see you," the woman said as Mrs. Hamilton shook hands with her. "Marie will be so happy. She has so wearied for you."

Mrs. Hamilton and Ruth followed the good woman into the little room, which was dining-room and sitting-room combined, and where on a couch lay a girl a year or two older than Ruth. The great dark eyes, looking out of the palest face Ruth had ever seen, lighted up with joy, and a flashing smile disclosed faultless teeth as the girl said with an accent even more marked than Mrs. Perrier's, "It ees my angel of mercy come again. I am so glad, so glad."

"I thought you might get tired of such an old angel, Marie," laughed Mrs. Hamilton, "so I've brought a younger one along with me. Come here, Ruth, and let me make you acquainted with my friend, Marie Borel, who has left her Swiss mountains, and has come to America to do great things."

"Such great things I have done!" said Marie, reproachfully. "The first thing ees to get seeck so that my good aunt should have to take care of me. I do not like to make so much trouble."

"It is nothing," said her aunt affectionately as she patted the thin hand. "The uncle and I, we care only for your pain and trouble. It ees a pleasure to have you with us."

Marie looked at her with such loving gratitude in her soft eyes that her aunt retreated to the kitchen where Mrs. Hamilton followed her on the pretext of obtaining a promised recipe.

Left to themselves the girls chatted in friendliest fashion, and Ruth soon learned at least the outlines of Marie's story. Her father had been pastor in a quaint little town of French Switzerland, and there Marie had been born and had lived until death had taken both father and mother within a year. Then, heart-broken over her loss, she had accepted with gratitude an invitation from her aunt, who had gone to America with her husband when Marie was a little girl.

It was a trial of Ruth's self-control when Marie told so simply and pathetically of the death of her mother and father, for her own loss seemed so terribly near. "I've lost my mother, too, Marie," she said softly, "and my father has gone so far away that sometimes I feel quite alone."

"Ah, then you can understand how hard it is to be brave when one has so great a sorrow."

"Indeed I can. And I'm not always brave. But tell me what happened to you after you got here."

"Something, my grief, perhaps, or the voyage, made me so seeck. But it ees much better already, for now I can read a little and can also sew." As she spoke Marie took from a little bag lying by her side a piece of embroidery which to Ruth's eyes seemed a marvel of neatness and beauty.

"Oh, how lovely!" she said admiringly. "How can you do such fine even work?"

"We are taught to make such fine stitches when we are very little girls," answered Marie much gratified at the praise. "And I also make the pillow lace. Have you ever seen that made?"

Ruth looked with greatest interest at the plump cushion with its rows of pins, and watched intently while the thin hands deftly tossed the bobbins around in most mysterious fashion.

"Oh, you do that so fast and so carelessly," she said at last, "and yet that beautiful pattern comes so perfectly." "Isn't it wonderful, Ruth?" asked Mrs. Hamilton, coming into the room. "I hoped Marie would

show you her lace pillow and her embroidery."

"It's perfectly fascinating," declared Ruth, "and I'd like to learn, but I know I should tie all those threads in a tight knot right away."

"Come over and I will teach you a simple pattern that in my country quite little children learn to make," urged Marie, who longed for another visit from her new friend.

"I'll come again gladly, but I'm not sure that I shall ever have courage to attempt anything so wonderful," laughed Ruth as she rose to go.

"I'm so glad you took me there, Aunt Mary," she said as they got into the sleigh. "You seem to know just what to do for people when they are miserable."

"I knew that what you wanted most I couldn't give you, dear, so I tried the next best thing."

"Marie was so cheerful and patient that it made me ashamed to be anything else when I'm so well and have father. Only it seems as though I never wanted my mother more than I do to-day." Ruth's voice trembled and the tears filled her eyes.

"Dear, we think you are brave, and we have appreciated your struggles more than you suspect," said Mrs. Hamilton tenderly. "We are so grateful for what you have done for Arthur, and the whole house seems more cheerful when our borrowed daughter is in it."

Ruth's face brightened, and her hand sought Mrs. Hamilton's under the robe and squeezed it hard. She was silent for a moment and then she cried gayly, "From now on I 'solomon promidge,' as some one used to say, to be good and cheerful for the rest of the day."

"That's right, darling; and now let's see if any Christmas greetings have arrived while we've been away," said Mrs. Hamilton as they entered the house.

"I should say they had," said Arthur, who had just come down to lunch, and was scrutinizing the addresses on several interesting looking packages. "Here's a heavy box for Ruth, and several small packages for you, mother."

"Oh, would you open it now, or would you wait until to-morrow?" cried Ruth, as she weighed the package in her hands and studied the outside. "It's too fascinating, and I really can't wait," she decided, and cutting the string with the knife Arthur held out to her, she soon disclosed a box of unmistakable intent.

"Tyler's!" she said rapturously, "and five pounds of it, I'm sure. That's Uncle Jerry's writing on the envelope. 'For the Social Six, whose acquaintance I hope to make in the near future.' How dear of him! And that means that he's coming to Boston some time this winter! Oh, I shall be so happy if he does."

"He's a wise young man to pave the way beforehand so sweetly," said Mrs. Hamilton with a laugh. "Ail the girls will think him quite perfect."

"He's the nicest uncle that ever lived, and we do have such good times together. He's only twelve years older than I am, you know, and he seems more like a brother than an uncle." As Ruth spoke the front door opened suddenly and Mr. Hamilton entered.

"Am I just in time for lunch?" he asked gaily. "I thought I'd come out early to-day and play with Ruth. Besides, I have a package here which she might like to investigate."

He gave Ruth a bundle which was almost covered with seals, stamps and addresses, and a letter which bore a foreign postmark.

"From father," exclaimed Ruth. "Excuse me if I open it now. Do listen to this," she said as her eyes traveled quickly over the familiar handwriting. "'The package which I am sending in Mr. Hamilton's care contains some little gifts for the girls and boys about whom you have written to me. They have all been so kind to you that I am glad to express my gratitude to them even in so slight a manner. I shall leave you to bestow them as you think fit, and only hope that they will enjoy them as much as I have enjoyed choosing them.'

"Isn't that the loveliest thing you ever heard of?" said Ruth, turning to Mrs. Hamilton. "Won't we have fun deciding about them?"

"Let's have an impromptu party, to-night, if we can get the girls and boys together," said Mrs. Hamilton, who was as much a girl as Ruth about some things.

"Splendid!" said Ruth, and then added in comical dismay, "I don't see how you expect me to eat any lunch with such exciting times in prospect."

"We'll eat and plan at the same moment," consoled Mrs. Hamilton, "and then you won't feel that you're losing precious time."

It was decided that they should invite only the Social Six girls, and the boys of the Candle Club, and to Ruth was left the pleasant task of telephoning where she could, and sending John with notes to the others. Every one in the house was busy, for each wanted to have a hand in making Ruth's first party in her new home a happy one. Delicious odors began to come from the kitchen, where Ellen was flying around with a red and beaming face, and even Arthur was shut up in his room carrying out mysterious directions his mother had given him.

"I've been racking my brains to think up some quite novel way to give these presents," said Ruth as she and Mrs. Hamilton finished making their selections.

"Just leave it to me. I have a plan for that, and all you need to do is to make them into nice little packages. You can use these small cards for marking them."

Ruth sat in her room making her parcels gay with gold cord and sprigs of holly until she heard Mrs. Hamilton calling her. Then she went down-stairs to find the family assembled in the dining-room for a light and early supper. Until they had met at the table it had not occurred to Ruth to wonder how Arthur would take this sudden festivity.

So it was with real purpose but with an apparently careless manner that she stopped him on his way to the stairs to say, "Do be down before any one comes, for I want you to help me out. I feel really embarrassed over my first party."

"I'm not coming down," he answered abruptly.

"Not coming down? Oh, Arthur, that's too bad of you. Does your mother know?"

"No, not yet. I told her I'd try, and I have, but I can't manage it." Arthur's face and manner were so forlorn that it took all Ruth's courage to continue. She glanced around but there was no one within hearing, and at last she said, "Why won't you come down? Is it because you can't bear to have the boys and girls see you on crutches?"

Arthur nodded uncomfortably. He hated to talk of this to any one, and he hadn't expected any determined interference in his plans.

"Don't you suppose they ail know about it? And if they do will just seeing you make any difference?" continued Ruth, quite surprised at her own eloquence, and still persistently barring the way to the stairs. "I know that they are all longing to have you with them again, and that none of the good times seem the same without you. I heard Frank and Joe say the other day that if you kept up this sort of thing much longer they were going to make a raid on your room and have it out with you."

"I wish they would," answered Arthur gloomily. "Perhaps they might knock some sense into me."

"Well, if you want to know what I think," Ruth went on, feeling that her courage was fast departing, and on that very account growing more and more severe, "I think it's cowardly to shut yourself away from your friends and spoil everything like this. I dare say you are one of the very boys who think that ail girls are cry-babies, but I can't see why it isn't playing baby to do as you are doing."

CHAPTER XI

ARTHUR COMES BACK

As soon as Arthur was out of sight Ruth flew up the stairs and into her room.

"Oh, dear! Now I have done it!" she thought, throwing herself on the couch and clasping her hands behind her head. "Just as we were beginning to be good friends, too. Why didn't I keep still and let his mother manage it?"

Ruth's cheeks were very red and her hands hot and unsteady as she put on her dainty silk gown. She had expected to enjoy the evening so much, and now, for the moment, at least, she would be thankful if there were to be no party. She tormented herself by thinking that perhaps if she had not interfered things might have gone better. What boy could ever forgive being called a coward and a baby? Would she, herself, have been braver or more cheerful if she had suddenly been condemned to crutches and so inactive a life?

Fortunately for her the sound of the door-bell made her run hastily down-stairs to receive her guests. It was a relief to find Mrs. Hamilton in the big music-room, for though she was accustomed to meeting the three boys who had arrived first, they seemed strangely formal and unfamiliar in the dignity of their party clothes. They were doing their best to be cheerful and entertaining, for all felt oppressed by the fact that there was to be a party in the Hamilton house without Arthur as host.

Joe, who with Frank and Arthur had formed a trio noted for its loyalty and good fellowship, looked as solemn as a boy who resembled a good-natured cherub could, and shook hands with Mrs. Hamilton and Ruth with a fervor that made them wince. Arthur had been his hero and chum ever since they were small boys in knickerbockers. They had gone to school together, and had been preparing for the same college when the accident happened which had so changed Arthur. It had been the first real sorrow of Joe's life to be shut away from Arthur, and he felt that he should never be reconciled to it.

Philip and John Canfield were brothers who had come lately to Glenloch, and were much liked by the boys and girls. Phil, the elder, was a quiet, studious boy, much interested in mechanics and electricity, and preparing for a course in one of the well-known scientific schools. He was devoted to his younger brother, who was a brilliant, artistic lad, but not very strong. The family had come to Glenloch on account of the fine air, and the out-of-door life.

Glenloch young people were never late in arriving at a party, and almost before Ruth realized it ail her guests had come.

"What shall we do first?" she whispered to Charlotte, who was looking really pretty in her red dress, though a little pale still from her recent fright.

"Let's play Twenty Questions. That breaks the ice beautifully, for we always get so excited over it."

Dorothy and Bert Ellsworth were selected as leaders and began at once to choose their supporters. They had not progressed far, however, when an exclamation from Joe, who was standing in the background, made them all turn to look at him. He was staring past Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton out into the hall, his eyes very big and round, and a broad smile on his face. Before he could speak a voice from the hall, a voice that tried very hard to be steady, said:

"Can you find a place for me on one of the sides?"

Then, and only then, Joe came to life. Leaping toward the door he seized the owner of the voice by the shoulders with a force that threatened to overbalance him.

"It's Art!" he almost shrieked, "by glory, it's Arthur. Of course you can have a place. You can be on both sides. You can own the whole party if you want to."

"Hold on, old man," said Arthur with a laugh as he started slowly into the room with Joe's arm around his shoulders. "Don't rush me too hard, for I'm not so steady on my pins as I used to be."

Almost before the words were ont of his mouth there was a general rush of boys in his direction.

"Take care of the sticks, Joe," ordered Frank; "now, Phil, gently there," and before Arthur could protest he was lifted skilfully in the arms of his chums, borne in triumphal procession across the long room, and deposited in the biggest armchair.

"What's the matter with Arthur?" piped Jack, as the boys settled themselves on the floor around the big chair, and in response a ringing chorus of boys and girls lustily asserted, "He's all right!"

Arthur held his head high and smiled bravely, but his paleness told what a struggle for self-control he was making. Quite unconsciously he looked appealingly at his mother, but saw only her back as she went quickly from the room.

Betty, who had a positive genius for sensing situations and smoothing over hard places, saw the look and came to the rescue at once. "Get up, children," she commanded with mock severity; "this is a party, and we don't sit on the floor at parties. Besides, we're going to play a game."

"Oh, we'd rather talk to Arthur," answered Bert bluntly. "You girls can play games in the library if you

want to."

There was a chorus of protest from the girls, in the midst of which Frank and Joe set Bert forcibly on his feet, while Phil said paternally, "Son, son, is that the way you talk to your sister? You're going to have plenty of chance to talk to Arthur from now on, so come along and play like a good little boy."

It was Dorothy's turn to choose, and she took what her brother called a mean advantage by immediately choosing Arthur and establishing her camp around the big chair. Bert's side went reluctantly into the library, and the game began by sending Philip and Katharine into the hall to choose what the others should guess.

In spite of the fact that what she most wanted had come to pass Ruth still felt uncomfortable, indeed almost unhappy. To be sure Arthur had come down, but would he ever forgive what she had said to him? She had been quick to see that at first he had resented her advent into the family, and it was with a secret pride that she had lately realized that they were getting to be good friends. "Now I have spoiled all that," she thought mournfully. "He may be glad I made him come down, but I know he'll never forget the horrid things I said."

Katharine and Philip fondly hoped that they had chosen something which would puzzle their friends for some time. It was not long, however, before Charlotte, whose skilful questioning was the admiration of her own side and the despair of the other, had gradually drawn from Philip the fact that the object thought of was the right eye of the first fish Frank had caught the last time he went fishing. As Philip reluctantly assented there was a shout of joy from Bert's side, and an answering chorus of groans from the music-room. Then Charlotte and Jack went out and tried their best to think of something almost unguessable, and at last Ruth was sent out to wait for some one from the other side who seemed to be slow in coming.

She sat down in one of the hall chairs, but started up again and would have liked to run away when she heard the familiar tap of the crutches on the polished floor. It was silly to feel so embarrassed, she thought; she had meant well, at least, in what she had done, and if she had gone too far she was sorry but it couldn't be helped now. She tried to think only of the game they were playing and said brightly to Arthur as he approached:

"I hope you've thought of something hard, for I'm so stupid I can't think of a thing."

"Oh, hang the game," he answered impatiently. "See here, Ruth, it's not very easy for me to say things, but I've just been waiting for the chance to tell you that you've done something for me to-night that I shall never forget."

"Oh, but I want you to forget all those horrid things I said, and I take them all back this very minute. I think it's very fine and brave of you to come down and act just the same as ever."

Arthur looked as if the little speech pleased him, though, being a boy, of course he couldn't say so.

"It's taken three of you to reform me," he said with a little laugh. "Mother has tried her hand at it, and good old Ellen, and now you have put on the finishing touch. At least, I hope it's the finishing touch," he added soberly.

"Of course it is. You can never feel like shutting yourself up again when you see how they all want you, and how happy you make your mother and father."

"I shall be an ungrateful beast if I don't please my mother and father. You must give me a push if you see me going backward, Ruth. What's the use of a borrowed sister if she can't help a fellow along?"

"I will, and you must help me, for boys always have very strict ideas as to how their sisters should behave," said Ruth with a mischievous twinkle. "My, but I feel better," she added with a sigh. "You've been such an awful load on my conscience, Arthur Hamilton, that I haven't enjoyed one minute of my party. Now I'm going to have a good time."

She started toward the door of the library just as Joe's voice called from the music-room, "What under the sun are you two people taking so long about?"

Ruth flew back to Arthur in dismay. "Oh, in another second I should have walked straight back to my own side without choosing a thing," she gasped. "Do think of something quick."

Arthur shouted with laughter. "I'd have given anything if you had," he choked. "I should have liked to see your face when you came to."

"Mean boy!" she said sternly. "You can only pay up for that by thinking of something immediately,

before I count five. One, two, three, four—-"

"The tip of Fuzzy's tail," answered Arthur, making a useless grab for the object in question as its small proprietor disappeared up the stairs.

"All right. But they'll guess it in a minute," declared Ruth as they took their separate ways. Contrary to her expectations it proved a hard one, and they were all in gales of merriment before Betty, whose thoughts turned easily to cats, started the questioning in the right direction. Charades came next, then a game proposed by Philip, and after that supper was announced.

Ruth, who had not been let into the secret of the final arrangements, felt a thrill of delight when she saw the pretty table. A tiny Christmas tree hung with glittering ornaments, and dotted with twinkling candies was the centerpiece, while a border of delicate green vine brightened with sprigs of holly ran all around the table. At the foot of the little tree were heaped mysterious parcels wrapped in white tissue-paper and tied with gold cord. Now Ruth knew what Arthur had been so busy over all the afternoon, for the place cards were small and very funny snapshots of the guests themselves, neatly mounted, and with the date in gold lettering.

"The mental effort of playing guessing games gives me almost an appetite," said Joe pensively, as he watched with hungry eyes a platter of chicken coming his way. There was a general shout at this, for Joe was always eating, and never hesitated to proclaim that he considered the serving of the refreshments the nicest part of a party.

"You have a fairly good appetite for a boy," remarked Ruth, "or for a white-haired lady either," she added demurely.

Every one laughed and Joe groaned. He had tried to keep it a dead secret that his grandmother had been highly indignant because he had borrowed her best gown without leave, and had cut off his allowance for several weeks, but it had leaked out, and the girls didn't mean he should hear the last of it.

"Never mind, old boy," said Arthur. "There's more food in sight and still more in the kitchen, so pitch in."

It was a delicious supper of chicken and creamed potatoes, crisp rolls and foamy chocolate, and Ellen's unrivaled ice-cream and cake to top off with. As they were finishing the ice-cream, Katie appeared with a tray on which reposed six pound boxes and an equal number of half pound boxes. All eyes were upon her as she gave a large box to each girl and a small box to each boy.

"Wow!" said the irrepressible Joe, lifting his box and letting it fly into the air, so great was his astonishment at finding it empty.

"Oh, here's richness!" cried Dorothy, taking off the cover of hers to disclose row upon row of tempting chocolates.

The boys with one accord uncovered their boxes, only to find them empty, and a low groan went around the table.

"I say, Betty, I always did like you," said Frank, gazing covetously at the sweets so near at hand.

"Tell them about it, Ruth," laughed Mrs. Hamilton.

Ruth tried to look very solemn as she gazed around the table. "This, boys," she said impressively, "is intended for an object-lesson, to show you how nice and kind and generous, and—and everything else that's good, girls can be when they have the slightest chance. My Uncle Jerry, who hopes soon to know you all, has sent this candy to the girls, and now it's their turn to do the next thing."

"Give me your box then, and let me fill it at once before I am tempted to keep it ail myself," groaned Charlotte, reaching for Joe's box. "And 'think shame to yourself' for your greediness in the past."

Meanwhile Mrs. Hamilton was busy with the packages placed around the little Christmas tree. From somewhere in the midst of the greenery she extracted a bunch of red and white ribbons and, holding them so that it was impossible to see to which packages they were attached, she offered them to each in turn saying, "Girls white, and boys red, please.

"Now pull and see what you'll get," she said as the last ribbon left her hand. "These are gifts which have come across the ocean to you from Ruth's father."

The ribbons were purposely so tangled that at first it was like pulling in an unwilling fish. There was

much friendly squabbling, and then a chorus of ohs and ahs as the gifts were finally opened.

"Just what I wanted," contentedly sighed Dorothy as she clasped a turquoise-studded bracelet on her round arm. "What a perfectly elegant father you must have, Ruth!"

"I should say so," came in a duet from Betty and Katharine who were respectively gloating over a string of pearl beads and a pretty hatpin. Alice had found a silver belt-buckle in her parcel, and Charlotte was gazing at a coral necklace with great satisfaction.

"What vain creatures girls are," said Frank maliciously as he gazed at the absorbed young ladies. "Now we men, ahem, are presented with practical gifts." As he spoke he held up a fine knife with views of Nuremberg on the handle.

"You spoke too soon, Frank," said Phil, showing a pair of cuff links, while Joe made every one laugh by assuming dandified airs as he stuck in his tie a pretty scarf-pin. Arthur peacefully attached a silver pencil to his watch-chain, Bert transferred his small change to a pigskin purse, and Jack slashed imaginary villains with a knife similar to Frank's.

"But where's your present, Ruth?" asked Betty. "You ought to have the nicest of all." Ruth, who had been absorbed in watching the others, came to herself with a start. "Why—why, I actually forgot to choose something for myself. I meant to, though," she added honestly.

"How will this do?" asked Mrs. Hamilton, producing a package that no one had seen before.

"Why, did father send another package?" said Ruth, looking so surprised that every one shouted with laughter. The girls eagerly crowded around her as she cut the cord and disclosed an attractive-looking box. Opening this she discovered a dainty velvet case in which reposed the prettiest watch she had ever seen. It was hung on a slender chain, and Ruth put it around her neck at once and tucked the little watch under her belt.

"Isn't it a darling?" she said happily. "Father always gives me what I most want."

"Let's see the wheels go round," suggested Phil, and Ruth opened the case to find a little picture of her father, taken since he went away, and looking so very like him that for a moment she could hardly speak.

"That's my father," she said when she could find her voice. Both girls and boys crowded around to look at the kind, handsome face gazing at them from out the little watch, and Ruth's heart swelled with pride and affection as she listened to their admiring remarks.

"Let's show them the game we tried the other night," said Dorothy to her brother as they all returned to the music-room.

"Oh, that's too hard for them," answered Frank with affected superiority. "They couldn't guess anything so difficult as that."

"Try it and see," clamored two or three voices.

So Frank with one finger drew a large circle in the air, and with elaborate gestures made two points for the eyes and a line each for nose and mouth. As he did so he recited solemnly:

"The moon is large and full and round; Two eyes, a nose and mouth."

"Now see if you can do it just as I did," he said to Jack, who sat next him.

Jack tried, imitating as nearly as he could remember all of Frank's peculiar movements of hand and arm, but as he finished Dorothy and Frank shouted, "No; not right."

"Do it again, Frank," begged Charlotte, watching him sharply.

Frank did it again, and this time with even more elaboration of gesture. The eyes were poked in with great firmness, the nose in its airy curves looked like no possible human feature, and the mouth was so decidedly turned up at the comers that one might have fancied it was laughing at them.

Charlotte thought she knew; she had noticed a peculiar curve in Frank's little finger, and the sudden way in which he had dropped his hand both times. So she tried her fate with great courage, only to fail as Jack had done.

"You do it, Dorothy," said Betty.

Dorothy did it, but her method was so different from Frank's that she gave them no discoverable clue. The features she made were all small and precise, and she put in a few meaningless flourishes which puzzled them more than ever.

Then Arthur, who had been watching quietly, said the little speech and made the drawing in a way quite different from either Frank or Dorothy, and to the surprise of all the two wise ones admitted him at once into their fellowship.

"All right, old fellow," laughed Frank. "Now there are three of us who know."

At last Betty, with a gurgle of triumph, did it in the required way. Then Phil saw the point, and Alice discovered it almost at the same time. Finally there was a circle of waving arms, and a chorus of voices announcing that:

"The moon is large and full and round; Two eyes, a nose and mouth."

Only Ruth failed to guess the secret, and, though she waved with the others and tried her best to imitate all the various methods at once, she still failed every time.

"Your arm's in my way, Ruth," said Joe, who happened to be sitting on her right.

"I'll do it with the other, then," responded Ruth good-naturedly. To her surprise this attempt was greeted with a shout of, "That's right," and then every one laughed at her dazed expression.

"Why, I've done it that way dozens of times," she protested.

"No, you haven't," came in a laughing chorus. "Look at us once more."

Ruth looked and for the first time realized that each one was using the left hand to make the picture. "What a stupid I am," she said ruefully. "To think I let all you Glenloch girls and boys get ahead of Chicago."

"You're a Glenloch girl yourself, now," put in Katharine.

"So I am, and I know a trick game, too. If Betty will come out in the hall with me I'll have my revenge on you."

She started toward the door as she spoke, but a loud peal of the door-bell sent her flying back into the room again.

Mr. Hamilton opened the door and took in a yellow envelope which he handed to Ruth.

She tore it open eagerly and her face flushed with pleasure as she read the message. "It's from father," she cried, looking at the expectant faces around her. "He must have guessed that we might be having a party, for he says, 'Merry Christmas to all.' I just wish he could know you all, for I'm sure he'd like you."

As she stood there smiling happily, Frank had a sudden inspiration. Seizing the hands of Charlotte and Alice, who were nearest him, he began to dance around Ruth, singing at the top of his voice:

"For she's a jolly good fellow, For she's a jolly good fellow, For she's a jolly good fellow, And we're very glad she came."

All joined in as Mrs. Hamilton caught it on the piano, and Ruth stood surrounded by a circle of beaming faces, and feeling that the world was a very good sort of place after all.

As the laughing crowd broke ranks, Ruth was mysteriously drawn aside by Charlotte, Betty and Dorothy.

"Allow us to crown you," said Charlotte, placing an available holly wreath on Ruth's head, "as the only successful member of the 'S. F. T. R. O. A. H. T. T. W.' The object of this society having been fulfilled, the society will now be officially dissolved."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Ruth much mystified.

"Don't you remember the society we planned the first day we met in your room?" demanded Dorothy. "Well, look there, and there, and see if you haven't accomplished its object."

Ruth looked and found it truly a pleasant sight. Arthur, the central figure of a group of boys, looked happier than she had ever seen him, and was evidently making plans for future good times, while his father and mother beamed contentedly on him from a little distance.

CHAPTER XII

LOST AND FOUND

Ten days after Christmas the ice was declared quite perfect, and the Social Six were to have their first skating-party of the season on Holden's Pond. It was planned to invite the usual boys, to begin skating at about half-past six, and to go to Katharine French's house at half-past eight for supper and games. Betty's married brother and his wife, who were great favorites with the girls and boys, were to chaperone the party.

Ruth was greatly excited over the prospect, for she had hardly done more than learn to stand up on her Christmas skates, and she longed to be able to glide off as gracefully as Dorothy did. She looked very gay in her red suit, with a jaunty tam-o'-shanter set rakishly on the brown curls, and even Arthur smiled involuntarily at the pretty picture as she came into the library to say good-bye.

"I wish you were going, Arthur," she said. "But, at least, you'll escape one trial; you won't have to hold me up."

"I believe I could stand even that," answered Arthur wistfully. And then because he had set himself to the task of keeping cheerful, he added, "Just wait until next winter; I'll get up a special skating-party for you, and whiz you over the ice at a great rate."

"I hope by that time I'll be able to whiz a little by myself. Just now I can only wabble and squeal. Oh, I must hurry, for there's the whistle," and with a gay good-bye Ruth flew out of the house.

Arthur went slowly over to the window to watch the jolly crowd out of sight. Then he went back to his book and began reading with an unconscious sigh which made his mother and father look at each other with troubled eyes.

As they neared the pond with its twinkling bonfires, it seemed to Ruth there would be small chance for an inexperienced skater in the midst of the many dark figures which were gliding in every direction. She felt better about it, however, when she found Philip taking possession of her to put on her skates, and then starting off at a slow, steady glide which at once gave her confidence. She had almost begun to feel that she could really skate, when Frank came up and took her for a mad dash around the pond at a pace that fairly made her tremble. She was glad to get back once more to the little inlet which the club had chosen for its meeting-place, and where on the bank they had built their bonfire. Joe and Charlotte skated along at about the same moment, and Ruth was secretly glad to have Joe claim her as his next partner.

"You're doing wonders, my dear," said pretty Mrs. Ellsworth, as Ruth came back to the meeting-place after her comfortable spin with Joe. "Here's Jack waiting to take you out as soon as you are rested, and I'll get Joe to help me find my husband."

Jack was a fine skater, and Ruth felt so encouraged by her last attempt that she really enjoyed her skate with him and began to long to do something by herself. As they came back after circling the pond, she said earnestly, "Now you go and have a skate with some one who knows how. I want to rest a minute, and try all by myself in this inlet, where I shall be out of the way."

Jack refused at first to leave her alone, but she insisted, and as Betty went by at that moment he was off in pursuit before he fairly realized what he was doing. He quieted his own conscience and Betty's protests by promising to find Bert and send him back to Ruth immediately.

Left to herself, Ruth started out, very timidly at first and very unevenly. Finding herself still on her feet she gained confidence and struck out more boldly. The inlet seemed altogether too small, and she skated out a little way, still keeping near the shore and well out of the track of the skaters.

She was so busy watching her own feet that she didn't notice Betty and Jack as they flashed by until they shouted their congratulations on her success. Then Bert and Dorothy came along and stopped to tell her that they would all meet at the bonfire in fifteen minutes, and go from there to Katharine's house. They tried to persuade her to skate around the pond with them, but she was so in love with her own efforts that she said no and sent them off in a hurry. Then she tried again with new courage, and struck out with such energy that before she knew it she had left the edge of the pond, and was skating with quick and fairly steady strokes in the direction, opposite to that in which Bert and Dorothy had gone. It startled her when she realized that she had left the meeting-place far behind, and she knew she ought to turn about and try to get back there. But she was so fascinated by her own success that she hated to turn for fear the spell would be broken.

Suddenly she caught the toe of her skate in a crack, made a frantic effort to keep herself from falling, and then went with a crash flat on her face on the ice. It seemed an age to her before she could move; then she tried to get up, and some one, rather unskilfully, helped her to her feet. As she stood there half dazed and shaking, she put her hand to her face and brought it away all wet.

"Oh, dear, my nose is bleeding," she said aloud, and then became conscious that she had an audience of two small boys, who were grinning at her unsympathetically.

"Won't you please take off my skates?" she said as pleasantly as she could, for it made her very angry to see them laughing at her. She longed to get out of their sight as quickly as possible, and she wondered if she could ever make her way across the ice and back to the meeting-place with her knees trembling under her in such unwonted fashion. Then she thought of how she must look with her face streaked with blood, and she decided it would be better to go home. She felt quite sure that if she went a little way across the field to the left she should find the road they had come down earlier in the evening.

"It didn't take us so very long to come down here," she thought, as she plunged through the snow, "and after I've repaired damages Uncle Henry will see that I get back to the party."

Her nose was still bleeding, but she stopped it after a while with applications of snow. Her head ached, and she felt sure the afflicted nose was swelling and that she should be a fright. She wished that she hadn't tried to be so smart, that she had stayed in the little inlet, and all the useless wishes that one makes when it is too late.

When she came to the road she felt better, and walked along as cheerfully as her increasing aches would permit. Now that she was getting farther away from the pond it was very still, painfully still, she thought. The moon had disappeared, but the sky was thickly sown with stars and the glistening snow-mantle was more beautiful than ever. For some reason the road seemed strangely unfamiliar, and Ruth faltered and almost turned back as she remembered that she had never before been out alone in the evening. It had been so light at the pond, with the many bonfires, and so noisily gay that she had not realized until now what the loneliness of the walk would be.

"It was stupid of me not to have one of those small boys go for Bert or Phil," she said to herself. "I should rather it would be Phil, because he takes care of one so nicely, and I'm sure he wouldn't laugh. I'd be willing to have them laugh at me, though, if I could only see them."

By this time Ruth should have begun to see houses, and she had already decided that she should stop at the first one she saw and ask for help. But to her dismay no houses appeared, and the road seemed narrower and more shut in by trees than it had before.

Still she clung tenaciously to the idea that she was on the right road, and that if she kept on long enough she should come to the houses. She tried to comfort herself by thinking that she had been too absorbed on the way down to notice how the road turned and how far the houses really were from the pond. Her head ached enough to make her feel a little dazed, and her nose seemed as large as a small apple when she cautiously touched it.

Suddenly she was quite sure that she was on the wrong road, and realized that she had no idea in which direction to go to get home. Besides that she was so tired that she could hardly keep on walking. Tears started to her eyes, but she winked them away. "I won't cry," she said boldly, as though she thought that speaking aloud would make it more binding upon her. "And I will keep moving, for then I can't freeze, and it seems terrifically cold."

She stood still for a moment trying to peer into the darkness ahead of her and wondering whether there might be houses near, or whether it would be better to go back and try to find the pond.

Suddenly on the still, cold air floated the sound of a voice. "Ruth!" it called,—and then after a moment of silence, "Ruth Shirley!" The sound was so drawn-out, so far-reaching, that as it echoed about her Ruth positively shook with fright and excitement. Then she started in the direction from which it seemed to come, a pathetic little figure stumbling from weariness.

After Ruth's departure Arthur tried hard to fix his mind on his story, but even the charm of Treasure Island failed to distract him. In spite of himself his thoughts turned always to the starlit winter night, and to the pond gay with bonfires and torches and covered with boys and girls. After a while he closed the book with a snap, and went to the piano, where he softly tried over some new music Ruth had left there. Then came a sound of sleigh-bells, the tramp of feet on the piazza, and the peal of the door-bell.

As Katie opened the door, a cyclone swept in which resolved itself into Phil, Frank and Joe, all talking at once. "We've come to take you over to Katharine's for the supper, and you've got to go," they

announced almost as one man.

"It's no use for you to say no," continued Phil, "for we shall use force if necessary. We've had our orders not to come back without you, and you surely wouldn't deprive our dear little Joe of the chance of a supper."

Joe clasped his hands and wriggled imploringly, while Frank tried to hasten matters by going in search of Arthur's overcoat.

"Well, I'll go," said Arthur hesitatingly. "You'll have to boost me out to the sleigh, for I couldn't take a step on this snow."

"Of course. Frank and I will bear your lordship to the sleigh, and Joe can bring the stick. I'm glad that it's only one crutch now, old fellow," ended Phil so affectionately that Mrs. Hamilton could have hugged him.

"It's going to be one cane in—well, I don't dare to say just how long, but soon," announced Arthur with such determination that, "Hurrah," "Bully for you," "You're a brick," came from the boys simultaneously.

To Arthur the quick rush through the keen air, the tingle of the flying snow-needles against his face, above all the wholesome companionship of his chums, were as rain in thirsty places. The jokes of the boys seemed the wittiest things he had ever heard, and he shouted with laughter.

As they reached the piazza Betty opened the door. "Have you seen Ruth?" she asked anxiously. "She has disappeared, and all the others except Katharine are out hunting for her."

"Disappeared!" said Frank, looking as though he could not believe his ears. "How under the sun could she manage to disappear? Wasn't Jack with her?"

"Yes, but she wanted to be left alone for a while to practice, and when we were ready to start for Katharine's she was nowhere to be found. Oh, do hurry and don't stop for explanations." Phil and Joe were already out of the house, and Frank was soon at their heels.

"It's horrid to be left behind to wait, isn't it, Arthur?" said Betty, feeling very helpless and realizing how much more so Arthur must feel.

"It makes me feel like a log," answered Arthur. He was tramping up and down the long parlor and in his excitement doing better work with his crutch than he had ever done. "I'm going out on the piazza, Betty," he announced. "I can't stand it any longer in the house."

As he went through the hall his eye fell on the megaphone which hung there, and with a dim idea that it might be of use to him he tucked it under his free arm. The piazza was clean and dry, and he walked its length, finding the exertion a relief to his feelings. The megaphone was an awkward burden, and he started to put it down, only to snatch it up again before it had touched the piazza floor. When he had brought it out he had thought he might shout a triumphant "found" through it. Now a better purpose suggested itself to him.

"Ruth! Ruth Shirley!" he called, and his ringing voice flew through the air in waves of sound.

"Oh, do you see her?" shrieked Katharine, opening the front door.

"No, but I hope she can hear me. I've an idea that she tried to go home for some reason, and that she has lost herself on one of those winding roads that lead from the pond. Anyway, I'm going to shout every two minutes, and the sound may help her find her way." Katharine retreated, and the two girls wandered about restlessly in the house and listened for each call of Ruth's name. Suddenly there was a hurried thump of the crutch and Arthur shouted excitedly: "She's coming, girls; run and meet her."

The two girls flew out of the house to see just turning into the yard a weary-looking girl who was unmistakably Ruth. They rushed to meet her and half carried her up the steps and into the house, while Arthur shouted a rousing "found" through the megaphone.

"Is that the voice that's been calling me?" asked Ruth as he followed them into the house. "I believe if it hadn't been for that I should have given up."

"But where have you been and how did you manage to get lost?" questioned Betty.

"Oh, don't ask me any questions now, but give me a looking-glass and some powder so that I can fix this dreadful nose before the others get here," implored Ruth. "I'm tired to death, but I started out to make myself look better before I came to your party, and I want to do it."

The three girls vanished up-stairs, leaving Arthur to poke the fire and chuckle quietly over this truly feminine ending to the tragedy.

"She's the real thing," he said to himself. "Doesn't want to be pitied and fussed over."

By the time the others had gathered, Ruth came down-stairs and was besieged at once with questions.

"It was so foolish of me," she said as she finished telling her story. "I might so easily have sent one of those small boys across the pond. All I could think of at first was to go somewhere where I could take care of my poor nose." As she spoke she shut one eye and gazed with the other at her red and swollen nose.

"I think the swelling's going down a little, don't you?" she asked anxiously.

They all laughed, and Jack said almost as if he felt it a personal grievance, "I don't believe you were so scared as we were after all."

It was a jolly supper, but to Ruth, who ached from head to foot, it seemed as if it would never end. She did her best to behave as usual, and succeeded so well that for some time no one noticed how pale and tired she looked.

As they got up from the table, Arthur said suddenly: "Say, Phil,
I'm awfully tired. Do you mind getting out your old nag now? And,
Ruth, wouldn't you like to go home too?"

"Oh, yes," answered Ruth, so eagerly that the others realized at once the cause of Arthur's sudden weariness. No one said a word, but the girls almost fell over each other in their endeavors to assist her, and the boys rushed the sleigh to the door in great haste.

"Ladies first," said Phil gallantly, and before Ruth realized what was happening, he and Frank had gently picked her up and deposited her in the sleigh. Then came Arthur, and then the boys piled in on the front seat.

Mrs. Hamilton met them at the front door. "I'm so glad you came home early, children. Ruth, you must be tired to death after skating."

"I am. Oh, I am," answered Ruth with a little laugh, and then she surprised herself by throwing both arms about Mrs. Hamilton's neck and bursting into tears.

"Don't you dare to think I'm crying, Arthur Hamilton," she managed to say between her sobs. "I said I wouldn't, and I won't," and then realizing the absurdity of what she was saying, she laughed as unrestrainedly as she had cried.

The sight of Mrs. Hamilton's worried face and Arthur's helpless alarm brought her to her senses, and she said penitently, "Do forgive me for being so foolish. I've tried so hard not to cry that when I felt Aunt Mary's arms around me it just had to come out."

"Darling, the best place for you is in bed, and I shall see that you're tucked in all 'comfy,'" said Mrs. Hamilton tenderly.

As she started up the stairs, Ruth turned to Arthur who was slowly following. "I really do believe you saved my life," she said earnestly. "I was so frightened and tired and achy that I couldn't have gone many more steps if that blessed old voice hadn't led me."

"Oh, some one would have found you before long," answered Arthur, who hated to take any undeserved credit to himself.

"Perhaps," assented Ruth doubtfully. "At any rate it would have been a trifle cold sitting there waiting to be found, and I prefer to think you saved my life. It makes me feel much more important."

"Ail right, we'll call it so then," said Arthur with a laugh. "And now we're square again, as we were on the night when we first ate dinner together, for if I saved your life you have certainly saved my common sense."

"I must say I like it to hear you compare your common sense with my life. However, I'll shake hands on it," and with a laughing good-night Ruth followed Mrs. Hamilton into the pink room.

Arthur thumped along into his own room and went happily to bed, feeling that girls were pluckier

that he had thought them, and that even crutch-bearers could accomplish something in the world.

CHAPTER XIII

MISS CYNTHIA

"Come down to the pond with me this afternoon," said Dorothy as she and Ruth parted on their way home from school a few days after the skating-party, "and we'll go into a quiet comer and practice until you feel sure of yourself."

"All right; I'll go," Ruth answered, "but I can't stay long; I must study for at least an hour before dinner."

"Well, be at my house by two, and then we shall have the pond almost to ourselves for a while, and we'll be ready to go home by the time the crowd gets there."

Dorothy was a good teacher and in the hour they spent on the pond
Ruth gained both skill and confidence.

"I never shall be nervous again about it," she said with enthusiasm as they took a last swing around the pond together. "It's like so many other things; you have to get the feeling of it before you can really enjoy it."

"That's so," assented Dorothy; "you probably never will lose it now. My, but it's growing colder every minute, isn't it? Let's hurry home, and I'll make some hot chocolate. You'll have plenty of time before you need to study."

Ruth stooped to take off her skates at once. "I'm really as hungry as a bear," she confessed, "and a cup of your chocolate will be fine."

When the girls entered the house Dorothy stopped short as she caught the sound of voices in the library. She listened intently a second, then she frowned, put her finger on her lips, and grasping Ruth by the hand led her softly across the hall and up-stairs. Not until they had reached the large room in the third story and had closed the door did she break the silence which enfolded them.

"For pity's sake," asked Ruth as she took off her coat and hat, "what is it and who is it?"

"Oh, it's only Miss Cynthia," answered Dolly carelessly. "I didn't want mother to know I'm in the house."

"Who's Miss Cynthia?" pursued Ruth with great curiosity, "and why don't you want your mother to know?"

"Why, Miss Cynthia Atwood, of course. Don't you know her yet? You're fortunate, that's all I can say. She lives in that funny little house near the library, and she's the last surviving member of one of the oldest families here. I ought to know, for she's told me times enough."

"But why don't you like her?" persisted Ruth, who was toasting herself in front of the open fire while Dorothy got out the materials for the chocolate.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Dolly with a shrug. "She's tiresome and inquisitive, and she's always coming round to make visitations on days when she ought not to be out, and then we girls or the boys have to see that she gets home safely. I can't help slipping out of her way whenever I can."

"Well, you certainly slipped this time," said Ruth with a laugh. "I didn't really know what was going to happen to me. What a good-timey looking room this is, Dolly," she went on, glancing about her. "I always feel when I am up here as if I can't go away until I've tried every one of these games."

It was a huge room, rather bare of ornament except for the pictures Frank and Dorothy had put up, but wholly suggestive of good times, as Ruth had said. Nothing was too good for use, and everything promised pleasure of the most wholesome kind.

"Father and mother like us to have our best times at home," said Dolly sipping her chocolate with a critical air, "and Frank and I have had this room for a playroom ever since I can remember."

"It must be fine to have a brother or sister," said Ruth wistfully.
"I don't think only children have half so much fun."

"They miss some quarrels, too," laughed Dolly. "Poor old Frankie! He's splendid discipline for my temper, for he can be the most exasperating boy I ever saw. I suppose I'm just as exasperating, though," she added honestly.

"Is that four o'clock?" asked Ruth suddenly. "Dear me, I must go, though I'd much rather stay here. Your chocolate is great, Dolly, and those nice little wafers were perfect with it."

"I hate to have you go, but I'll walk over with you just to get a little more air," said Dolly, settling her fur turban on her blonde locks. "Now we must go down softly, for Miss Cynthia may still be here. I dare say Frank is somewhere about, and mother can get him to take her home," she added, as if she half felt the need of an apology. "I'm sure it's his turn to go, anyway."

It was with the feeling of being guilty conspirators that the girls stole down-stairs and tiptoed softly across the hall, and they both jumped violently, when, even as Dorothy had her hand on the door-knob, Mrs. Marshall's voice called:

"Dorothy, is that you, dear?"

"Yes, mother," answered Dorothy in a voice expressive of resigned despair. Then she added in a tragic whisper, "We are lost! There is no escape from our unhappy fate!"

"Dorothy, Miss Cynthia is here, and I want you to see that she gets safely home," said her mother.

"Yes, mother," answered Dorothy again, looking at Ruth with an
I-told-you-so expression. "Don't you dare to leave me, Ruth Shirley,"
she went on fiercely. "You'll have plenty of time to go with me.
Come on in now and be introduced to her."

Ruth hardly knew what picture she had formed of Miss Cynthia, but she certainly hadn't expected to meet the pretty, pink-cheeked old lady to whom Mrs. Marshall presented her. She was the smallest, most delicate of creatures, with snowy hair and bright blue eyes, which in darting glances seemed to absorb in minutest detail the person to whom she was talking.

"And so this is Ruth Shirley," she said, holding one of Ruth's hands in both her tiny ones. "I'm very glad to know you, my dear. It seems as if Mrs. Hamilton might have brought you over to call on me before this. But then I'm used to being forgotten. How are Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton, and how is that dear boy, Arthur?" Miss Cynthia paused for breath and Ruth gladly released her hand.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton are very well," she answered, "and Arthur is much—"

"I always said he would be better if he would only make an effort," interrupted Miss Cynthia triumphantly. "But I began to be afraid he never would, and I thought it most likely that he would go off into a decline, I've often told Mary Hamilton that I should be worried to death if he were my boy. Do you hear from your father often? It must be pretty bad to have him so far away; so many things can happen nowadays that you can't tell from one day to the next where you'll be or how you'll be. Of course you know that, though, having lost your mother, poor child."

"She hears very often from her father," said Mrs. Marshall, noticing Ruth's flushed cheeks, "and he makes the distance seem very short by sending cablegrams every once in a while. Now, Miss Cynthia, let me help you on with your cape, and then you can start out with an escort on each side of you."

"Now, girls, you'll have to excuse me if I don't talk much," said Miss Cynthia apologetically, as they were leaving the house; "this icy wind makes my throat feel sore. But I shall be delighted to hear you talk. Girls always have such a lot to say to each other."

"Please come in and rest yourselves," said Miss Cynthia with urgent hospitality, as they reached the door of the small old-fashioned looking house which Ruth had often noticed before.

Dorothy began hasty explanations about being in a hurry to get home, but Miss Cynthia laid an imploring hand on Ruth's arm and, looking at her with real appeal in her blue eyes, almost drew her into the house.

"We'll let Dorothy go if she must," she said decidedly, "but I want to get acquainted with you, child, and I'm terribly lonesome, too, these winter afternoons."

Even with every desire to escape Ruth couldn't resist the pleading old eyes which were looking at her

almost tearfully.

"Do come in, Dolly," she begged; "I shall have time before I need to study to stay a little while." But almost as she spoke Dorothy vanished unaccountably, and there was nothing left for Ruth but to follow Miss Cynthia.

"Come right into the parlor and sit down, while I find Luella and have her light a lamp," said the old lady, hurrying out of the room with surprising agility.

The room was so dark that at first Ruth hardly dared to move, then as her eyes became accustomed to the gloom she found her way to a chair and sat down on the edge of it. She didn't enjoy the situation in which she found herself, and she wished she were out of it. Even the algebra which she must study as soon as she got home possessed a charm for her in comparison with the present moment. She half smiled as she thought of the suddenness with which Dorothy had faded from sight.

"She might have waited after getting me into this," she said to herself impatiently.

Just then with a suddenness which sent her flying out of her chair a harsh voice said almost in her ear:

"Cheer up! Cheer up! Don't you cry!" and then followed an unintelligible variety of sounds ending with a cackling laugh.

Ruth knew almost at once that it must be a parrot, but the surprise had been so great that she stood shaking in the middle of the room, not daring to move for fear of stepping on the uncanny bird. She remembered that once when she was a very little girl she had confidingly held out her finger to a parrot and that the unfriendly creature had immediately taken a bite out of it. She wished that the light would come; it made her nervous to be in a dark room with only a voice for company.

"Who's afraid?" asked the parrot with surprising distinctness.

"I am, Polly," answered Ruth with great truthfulness, and just then the maid brought in a lamp and her mistress followed.

"Oh, you bad bird," said Miss Cynthia reproachfully, as the friendly gleam of the lamp disclosed the parrot perched on the back of the chair next to the one on which Ruth had been sitting. "You bad Ebenezer, you've opened your cage again. Isn't it clever of him. to do it?"

"Very clever," answered Ruth politely, but she still kept a safe distance from Ebenezer, who cocked his head on one side to look at her. and then burst into a hoarse, chuckling laugh as though he had seen something very funny.

"That bird is such a comfort to me," sighed Miss Cynthia, smoothing the gay plumage. "I named him Ebenezer because it's so nice to have a man's name that you can call naturally in case you think some one's in the house. I got a man that worked for us to teach him what to answer when I call his name. Just listen, my dear."

Miss Cynthia stepped into the hall. "Ebenezer! Ebenezer!" she called loudly, and to Ruth's amusement Ebenezer answered promptly in a voice that sounded surprisingly like that of a man, "Yes, I'm coming."

"I guess that would scare a burglar some," remarked Miss Cynthia, complacently, "particularly as you never could tell but that Ebenezer might be right close to the man's ear when he answered. I taught him to say 'Cheer up, cheer up; don't you cry,' because sometimes I'm dreadfully lonesome. It helps out even to have a bird to talk to."

She looked very sober as she ended, but Ebenezer, fixing a solemn eye on her, barked loudly and then mewed like a cat, evidently desiring to make his mistress feel that she had a large family to comfort her.

"He thinks he's a whole menagerie," laughed Ruth.

"Shake hands with her, Ebenezer, and settle it," commanded Miss Cynthia, and at the word the bird stretched out his funny claw, which Ruth took in gingerly fashion.

"Ebenezer likes young folks as well as I do," said his mistress soberly, "but somehow they don't care much about coming to see us. Aren't you the girl who likes lace and embroidery?" she asked suddenly. "I've heard about your going over to see that Swiss girl make lace. I've been looking over a chest this morning and I've left all the old dresses out to air. Would you like to see them?"

Ruth assented eagerly. This would be an easy way for her to finish her call, and she loved to see old-fashioned things. Miss Cynthia was pleased at her enthusiasm, and after returning Ebenezer to his despised cage, an attention which he acknowledged by pecking gently at her white hair and screaming "Bad bird, bad bird," led the way up the short, steep flight of stairs.

"What a dear room!" exclaimed Ruth giving a quick glance about her. Then as her eyes fell upon the treasures spread upon the bed she cried out with pleasure.

"What a beautiful blue gown! Did somebody really ever wear it?"

"That was my great-aunt's wedding gown, my Great-aunt Cynthia. It was given to the niece who was named for her, and then to me on account of the name."

Ruth gazed admiringly at the shining satin, blue as a summer sky, and made in the quaint fashion of years long past.

"Here are the shoes and the gloves which went with it," continued Miss Cynthia, "and a fan which she carried. These little lace tuckers were hers, too. She never lived to wear out all her pretty fineries, poor little soul, but I've been told that her short life was a happy one and a very sweet memory to all who knew her."

Miss Cynthia's voice and eyes were strangely gentle as she talked about the youthful great-aunt whose shining gown had been one of her choicest treasures for so many years, and Ruth began to like her.

"Do you know how she looked?" she asked with real interest in her voice. "I should like to imagine her in this lovely dress."

"My aunt," answered Miss Cynthia musingly, "was too young when she died to remember her; but she has told me many times that her father, who was the first Cynthia's brother, often said she was the prettiest creature the sun ever shone on, with black hair and rosy cheeks and blue eyes that were like violets. I like to talk about her," added Miss Cynthia. "Here are more things my Aunt Cynthia left me."

Ruth, who had an instinctive liking for delicate fabrics and fine embroideries, reveled in the beautiful pieces of hand-work which Miss Cynthia showed her. There was a muslin gown embroidered so profusely that one wondered if the patient needlewoman had any eyes left when her artistic work was completed. There were fichus, small and large, with patterns simple and elaborate, looking as though a breath might blow them out of existence, so fragile was their substance. Ruth laughed gleefully at the face which looked out at her from the mirror when Miss Cynthia told her to put on a queer, old bonnet which she called a calash. There was a ribbon hanging under her chin which the old lady called a bridle, and when Ruth pulled it the bonnet stretched like the top of an old-fashioned chaise.

"How funny," laughed Ruth. "Did you. really ever wear one like this?"

"That was my dear mother's," answered Miss Cynthia, "but I can just remember having one when I was a little girl."

"Oh, dear. I hate to leave all these interesting things, but I must go home," said Ruth, reluctantly laying the calash on the bed, and taking a last look at the beautiful things displayed there. "I've had a lovely call, Miss Cynthia, and I thank you so much for letting me see these wonderful old dresses."

"My dear, if you would prize it I should like you to have this handkerchief which was my Great-aunt Cynthia's."

"Oh, Miss Cynthia, I couldn't take anything so lovely," protested
Ruth.

"My dear child, there's no one else who will care for these things as I have done, and it's been a great pleasure to show them to some one who is sympathetic, and—and I know my little great-aunt would have liked you to have it if she could have known you."

Miss Cynthia's voice was trembling and her eyes looked clouded and wistful. Ruth could hardly believe that this was the sharp-voiced, prying old lady whom she had wished to escape meeting earlier in the afternoon.

"Dear Miss Cynthia," she answered impulsively, "I never shall forget your Great-aunt Cynthia, and I shall be delighted to own something that belonged to her. I'm sure I never had anything half so lovely as this cobwebby handkerchief. Have the other girls," she went on hesitatingly, "ever seen these beautiful old things?" She would have liked to ask that they might all see them together some day, but

she hardly dared.

"No," said Miss Cynthia ungraciously, "they haven't. The girls in this town don't care anything about me or my belongings, and they never come here if they can help it. The boys are nicer." And forthwith Miss Cynthia told Ruth some of the kind things the boys had done for her, and grew quite gentle and friendly again in the telling.

"I often wish I knew something I could do for them," she added.
"It's so hard to think of anything that would really please boys."

"If they should see the bundles of letters you have there, Miss Cynthia," suggested Ruth, "I'm sure they'd ask you if you could spare any stamps. They're all crazy over their collections."

"Are they really?" asked Miss Cynthia, as if a new idea had been given her. "Why, my dear, those are letters from all over the world written to my blessed father. One of his dearest friends was a sea-captain who sailed everywhere, and always mailed letters to my father from every port he touched."

Even as she spoke, Miss Cynthia was excitedly slipping the letters out of their envelopes. "Here," she said, thrusting a package into Ruth's hands. "You help me, and then you may take them home to Arthur, and he can divide with the others. Of course I don't know which ones they will like, so I'll send them all."

"Good-bye, Miss Cynthia. I can hardly wait to show these to the boys," said Ruth as her hostess came slowly down the steep stairs behind her, and then she jumped and almost screamed when, "Good-bye, good-bye; come again," came hoarsely from under her very feet.

"It's only Ebenezer out again," said Miss Cynthia serenely. "I must have the catch on that door made stronger."

Five minutes later Ruth rang the door-bell at home, and, as she stepped into the house, Dorothy came toward her from the library.

"Oh, did you think I was perfectly dreadful?" cried Dolly, putting on a very penitent expression.

"Well, yes, I did just at first. Then Ebenezer told me to 'cheer up' and after that, to tell the truth, I forgot all about you. I've had a perfectly lovely time."

"A lovely time!" echoed Dorothy. "Well, you are a funny girl."

"Are the boys here with Arthur?" Ruth went on, noticing for the first time the hum of voices in the library.

"Yes," answered Dolly. "They're busy over their everlasting stamps as usual. I've just been in to see if Frank was ready to go home and I told them where you were."

"Do come in again with me," begged Ruth, "and see if they like what
I have for them."

A stormy discussion was in progress when they entered the room, but Phil, who never forgot his good manners, got up to find chairs for the young ladies, and the other boys fired a volley of questions at Ruth, who could hardly stop to answer them, so great was her excitement. She laid the old envelopes on the table with an air of triumph. "I do hope you'll find something there that's really valuable," she added, "for Miss Cynthia was so pleased at the idea of giving you something you would like. She said you boys had always been so nice to her."

Ruth's face and manner were the perfection of innocence, but for some reason there was a tinge of discomfort in the manner of the boys gathered around the table.

"That looks like a good one, Phil," said Arthur, pushing an envelope across the table. "Just look it up in the catalogue, will you?"

"She said that Joe," Ruth went on relentlessly, "had always been very good about doing errands for her and seeing her home from his grandmother's."

"I never did anything for her," blustered Joe, turning red, "except what I had to."

"And she told me that for one whole winter, Frank and Bert kept all her paths clean," pursued Ruth, purposely refraining from looking at her unhappy victims, "and wouldn't take a cent for it when she wanted to pay them."

"We did it just because we happened to want to," growled Frank, looking as uncomfortably guilty as though he had been discovered in some bad action.

"Say, there are some dandy stamps here," said Phil, fearing that his turn was coming next and anxious to change the conversation. "Did you ever see one like that, Art?"

The boys poked over the stamps in an excited silence, gazed at them through lenses, and hunted in the catalogue with an absorbed interest which seemed to make them quite forget their guests. Every few minutes they found a new treasure.

At last Ruth got up with an air of pretended indignation and walked toward the door saying, "Come on, Dolly; let's go. We don't seem to be wanted here."

"Please don't go," said Arthur with an air so distressingly polite that it wouldn't have deceived any one.

"All right for you," laughed Ruth as she closed the library door behind her; "just wait until I bring you stamps again."

For a few minutes after the departure of the girls not a word was spoken. Then Joe gave vent to a sudden groan and put his hand to his head.

"Is my hair entirely burnt off on the top of my head?" he asked in comical despair. "These are the hottest coals of fire I've ever had handed out to me, That wretch of a Ruth knew she was making us squirm."

"I'm afraid the poor old lady never had any chance to be grateful to me," said Arthur uncomfortably.

"The worst of it is," confessed Frank, "that father was paying Bert and me for every bit of that shoveling and Miss Cynthia never knew it. I feel as if I wanted to go right round there and do something for her this very minute."

"So do I," agreed Joe and Bert almost at the same time.

"Let's form a secret order," suggested Arthur, "and pledge ourselves to make Miss Cynthia as happy as possible for the rest of her life."

No one answered for a moment and then Phil said thoughtfully, "We might call it the 'Order of the Moon.' Cynthia is one of the names for the moon, you know. Don't you remember, Art, we were reading in class this morning about 'fair Cynthia's rays' or something like that?"

"That's great!" said Frank, "and that name will drive the girls wild, for they'll never guess what it means."

And so the "Order of the Moon" was established then and there, and to the credit of the boys be it said that the fine purpose for which it was started was faithfully carried out.

CHAPTER XIV

TINY ELSA

It was the usual custom for Ruth and Arthur to play together for an hour after dinner, and they had just got fairly under way one evening when Arthur stopped in the middle of a measure and began to count the fire alarm. In a small town every one listens when an alarm is struck, and many go to the fire.

"Sixty-five," said Arthur, as the sound died away on the air.
"That's in the factory settlement, isn't it, father?"

"Yes," answered his father, counting again as a second alarm sounded.
"Get on a warm coat, Ruth. and we'll see what's burning."

"Why don't you let John take you in the sleigh," suggested Mrs. Hamilton, "and then Arthur can go with you." She had been quick to notice the regret in Arthur's face, for now that he was beginning to get out again he longed to do everything the others did.

"Oh, mother, they can't wait for John to harness," he said quickly, as his father hesitated before replying. "If they did the fire would be out."

"That's right, son. Very likely it's not much of a fire anyway, but a little run in this frosty air won't hurt Ruth and me. Are you warmly dressed, little girl; overshoes on and mittens?" added Mr. Hamilton, as Ruth came down-stairs.

"Very warmly dressed, Uncle Henry. I've got so much on that probably
I shan't be able to run at all."

Once out in the cold, starlit night none of the warm garments seemed superfluous, and Ruth ran and walked by turns in order to keep up with Mr. Hamilton's long strides. As they reached Mr. Marshall's house Dorothy and her father and Frank joined them, and just ahead they could see the Ellsworth boys with Betty and Charlotte.

"Some one says it's that old brown house that was almost ready to fall to pieces anyway," said Jack coming up behind them with Phil.

"Was any one living there?" asked Mr. Marshall.

"I saw some children playing out in the yard when I drove by the other day," answered Frank. "Come on, boys, let's run for it," he added, as a turn in the road enabled them to see the fire.

"Isn't it dreadful?" shuddered Ruth as, with fascinated gaze, she watched the flames fasten hungrily upon one part after another of the doomed house, and sweep into the air as though exulting in their triumph. "Do you suppose these other houses will have to go too?"

"I hardly think so," answered Mr. Hamilton. "They are beginning to get the fire under, and they are keeping the other roofs wet."

"Stay here with the girls and Mr. Hamilton, Dolly," said Mr. Marshall suddenly. "I want to go over and talk to some of these people."

A little crowd had collected around the door of one of the cottages, and as Mr. Marshall walked toward them the girls looked after him with eyes that were frankly curious.

"I remember coming up here with Aunt Mary the day before Christmas," said Ruth. "And she left a Christmas basket at this very same brown house, if I'm not mistaken. Yes, I'm sure of it, and there were five or six children in the family. Oh, I hope they all got out safely."

"Lucky that it was early in the evening," observed Charlotte, stamping her feet to get some warmth into them. "I can't stay much longer, girls; I'm so cold that—"

"Here comes Mr. Marshall," interrupted Betty eagerly. "Wait a minute, Char, and we'll all go."

Mr. Marshall, who had been inside one of the houses, came toward them with something clasped in his arms, and as he drew near they could see that it was apparently a baby rolled in a heavy shawl. The child had put both arms around his neck and was hiding her eyes on his shoulder when he reached the little group. He looked very grave, and the girlish faces grew sober in sympathy even before he spoke.

"Oh, father, is the baby hurt?" asked Dorothy anxiously.

"Not injured, dear, but left very much alone. She is a little German girl, and she and her mother had only been here a few days. The mother wanted to get work in the factory, and had taken a room for herself and the baby with the German family which lived in the brown house. Every one got out safely, but the excitement was too much for the poor young mother. She must have had a weak heart, I'm afraid, for she had to go away and leave her baby."

Ruth's eyes filled with tears as she realized what he meant, and she stretched out her arms impulsively toward the baby.

"Poor little soul," she said with a choke in her voice; "is she old enough to know what happened?"

As she spoke the baby raised her head and stared in startled wonder at the pitying faces about her. The shawl fell back a little from her head, and, in the brilliant light from the fire, the girls could see golden rings of hair clustering around a face delicately pink and white. The big brown eyes gazed at them for a moment, then with a little sob she buried her head on Mr. Marshall's shoulder again.

"I must look like some one she has known," he said softly, as he wrapped the shawl closely around her, "for the minute she saw me she held out her arms to me, and no one could get her away. These

poor people around here have enough to look out for over night, so I'll take this baby home. Do you think you can help take care of her for a while, daughter?"

"Oh, yes, I'd love to," assented Dolly eagerly. "I wish she'd let me take her," but for the present, at least, the sorrowful baby refused to leave her safe resting-place, and only clung more tightly to Mr. Marshall when the girls tried to beguile her.

Mr. Hamilton and Betty's older brothers stayed to make some arrangements for the poor family that had been turned out-of-doors, and, as by this time the fire was well under control, the spectators dispersed in various directions. The girls and boys escorted Mr. Marshall and the baby home, and then left Ruth at her own door.

By the time she had finished telling Mrs. Hamilton and Arthur about the fire and the forlorn baby, Mr. Hamilton appeared and was at once besieged with questions.

"I wish you had been there, Mary," he said to his wife; "you always seem to know how to make every one comfortable. It is wonderful to me to see how good those people are to each other. They were only too anxious to shelter that poor Schmidt family, in which there are six children, and I didn't know whether we should ever get them peaceably divided up. I tried to get more information about the baby's mother; but no one seems to know anything except that she was called Mrs. Winter, and had lost her husband quite recently."

"Was she a young woman?" asked Mrs. Hamilton.

"She looked hardly more than a girl as she lay there, and her face was so refined and sweet that I couldn't help fancying that the early part of her life had been spent under very different conditions from these."

"Didn't the woman they lived with know anything more about them?" asked Ruth, much disappointed.

"Poor Mrs. Schmidt was so excited, and so anxious to see that her own brood was safe and to be well cared for, that she didn't know much about anything else. The poor little mother had only been with her a few days, and beyond the fact that she seemed very sad and had cried a great deal, and that the little one's name was Elsa, she could tell me nothing. Oh, she did say that the mother and baby looked very much alike, the same large, brown eyes, and the same fair complexion and fair hair."

"The baby is a perfect little beauty," said Ruth, "and I quite envy Dolly the fun of having her in the house. I'm going over the first thing in the morning to see her."

Fortunately the next day was Saturday, and one by one the girls dropped into Dorothy's house to see the pretty baby. Alice and Katharine, who hadn't seen the fire the night before, had to hear the whole story from the other girls, and all were much impressed when Ruth happened to mention that Mr. Hamilton had thought the poor young mother looked better than her surroundings.

"I shouldn't wonder a bit," said Dorothy impressively. "Everything about this baby was just as clean and sweet as could be. Her mother must have taken her right out of bed, for she had nothing on but her little nightie when father brought her home. Mother found some baby clothes of mine, and I had such fun dressing her this morning."

"How old do you suppose she is?" asked Betty.

"Oh, I know. Mrs. Schmidt told father last night that she was two years old," answered Dorothy.

While the girls were talking about her the baby had sat quietly on Dorothy's lap looking from one to another with her solemn, brown eyes. Ruth and Betty had made several attempts to get her to sit with them, but she only turned her head away and nestled closer to Dorothy, much to that young lady's delight.

"I wish mother would let me keep her always," said Dolly with a little sigh. "I should just love to take care of her."

"For how long?" laughed Charlotte.

"Now, Charlotte, don't be horrid. Just because you get tired of children is no reason I should," answered Dorothy, putting on the superior air which Charlotte couldn't stand.

"Oh, fudge, you wouldn't like it any better than I do if you really couldn't get out of it," snapped Charlotte.

"I'm the only one who really needs her, because I haven't any sister or brother," said Ruth, holding

out her arms once more to the baby. "And, of course, I can't have her."

To her surprise this time the little Elsa half smiled at her, and, as though wanting to make up to her for the sister she couldn't have, put out her own chubby hands. Ruth took her quickly before she should have time to repent and sat down with her.

"She saw your watch," said Dorothy as the baby put up a timid finger to touch it.

"I'm glad there's something about me she likes," retorted Ruth quickly. "Perhaps in time, Dolly, she'll love me for myself alone, as she does you."

Dorothy colored, and it seemed as if the baby were likely to be the innocent cause of trouble, but Betty, who was a born peacemaker, stepped into the breach with eager unconsciousness. She had been thinking deeply for some minutes and her smooth forehead was puckered perplexedly as she spoke.

"You're always laughing at me for my queer ideas, girls, but this time I've really thought of something," she said with repressed excitement."

"Does it hurt, Betsy?" inquired Charlotte with pretended anxiety.

"Why can't the Social Six," went on Betty, ignoring her flippant friend, "adopt the baby and bring her up?"

"For goodness' sake, Betty, what do you think we are, millionaires?" protested Charlotte.

"No, of course not. But I know that I could earn a little money every week if I wanted to work for it, and I can't bear to think of this darling baby going into an orphan asylum."

Betty leaned over and kissed the dimpled hand as she spoke, looking so tender and motherly that the girls forgot to laugh at her. The baby, who had been sitting contentedly on Ruth's lap, received the kiss with favor, and then looking at the girls hovering around her smiled sweetly as if taking them all into her affection at once.

"Isn't she a perfect dear?" cried Dorothy, going down on her knees before her. "I'm with you, Betty; she shall have most of my allowance every week, and I know that we can get lots of help if we are only in earnest about it."

"I'd just love to have the club do it," said Ruth with her usual enthusiasm. "And wherever I am I shall be a member of the club just the same, and always be ready to help out with little Elsa. I know father and Uncle Jerry will be interested in her, too."

"We can all sew for her," suggested Alice, a proposition which caused
Dorothy and Charlotte to look at each other in disgusted silence.

"But where is she going to live?" inquired Katharine, who frequently put a damper on the enthusiasm of her friends by some exceedingly practical question. "We can't plant her out in the square at an equal distance from all of us."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Betty. "I hate to be brought down so suddenly. I'd forgotten that she'd have to have a home. I was just thinking of clothes and education, and I had it all planned that she should be a great singer or a writer, and take care of us in our old age."

Betty's flight of fancy was so absurd that the girls shouted with laughter, and seeing them so merry little Elsa laughed too, and showed her white teeth.

"She's ail right, girls; she can see a joke," said Charlotte, who in spite of herself began to feel the baby's charm.

"Poor little kiddie! I'm sure she's very brave to laugh at the idea of having to support us all," giggled Ruth.

"Let's ask mother about it," suggested Dorothy, as Mrs. Marshall came into the room, and the busy woman, who was never too much occupied to listen to her daughter's plans, or to lend a helping hand, sat down as calmly as though she had nothing else to do. She had already begun to consider the problem of Elsa's future, and she decided immediately that Betty's idea was a good one, and as helpful for the girls as for the baby.

"You might board her at Mrs. Hall's," she suggested, after listening to a rather disjointed narrative from the entire club.

"Of course. The very thing," murmured Betty. "Why didn't we think of it ourselves?"

"And you must organize your work in a businesslike way," continued Mrs. Marshall. "You might start an Elsa fund with what you can collect among yourselves, no matter how small. Then you can see who will be willing to promise regular subscriptions. You will need a treasurer to take charge of the fund, and a secretary to manage your correspondence."

The girls looked very thoughtful; they had hardly realized that their plan would assume so much importance.

"You must understand, girls, before you go into this, that you are undertaking a serious thing and one you cannot give up lightly," continued their adviser. "For my own part I can't think of any better use to which you can put your energy and your club funds than to the care of this dear, motherless baby. Of course, you know that we shall do all we can to find out if she has any relatives, but there seems small chance of success, as we haven't the slightest clue to follow."

The girls were silent as Mrs. Marshall went out of the room. Then Betty, taking the baby in her arms said, "Come here, littlest club girl; we can't initiate you yet, but you've got six new mothers, and you'll be taken care of to within an inch of your life."

Then began a busy time for the members of the Social Six. Dorothy was made secretary and Charlotte treasurer of the Elsa Fund, which started out with the imposing sum of three dollars, taken bodily from the club treasury.

In order to help the cause along, Mrs. Marshall invited the ladies of the Fortnightly Club to meet at her house, and Betty was persuaded to tell them what the girls hoped to do for the baby. It was rather a halting little speech, but she ended it most effectively by stepping to the door and bringing in little Elsa, who had been waiting in the hall for this very moment. As Betty stood there before them all smiling at the rosy baby in her arms, the sound of Ruth's violin broke the silence. It was the simplest lullaby she was playing, but she made it so tender and appealing that the hearts of the mothers went out to the dear baby who had no mother, and all were eager to help.

By the time Mrs. Hall came in to take Elsa home, a substantial sum was promised for the fund, and duly noted by Charlotte, who comforted herself for her own lack of money by keeping the accounts in the most businesslike manner. It was no small task, for promises of contributions came in so readily that the treasurer was obliged to take most of her spare time out of school to keep her books in order.

To her surprise Melina came to her with an air of great mystery and, first making sure that no one was within sight or hearing, held out to her a five dollar bill.

"I want to git that five dollars off my mind and start it movin'," she said grimly when Charlotte looked at her in wonder. "No, there ain't no use of your refusing. That baby needs it as much as any one I know just now, and that was the idea, you know, that I should pass it on."

Charlotte realized that she couldn't refuse without hurting Melina's feelings. "All right," she said, "I'll take it for her, and when she gets old enough to understand it I'll explain that she must start it on again."

For a while it seemed almost as though little Elsa might be hurt by too much care. The six young mothers made all sorts of errands into Mrs. Hall's that they might have a chance to play with the baby, who seemed to love them all with great impartiality. Ruth and Dorothy almost quarreled one afternoon because each claimed the privilege of taking her out and neither one was willing to give up. Just as it threatened to become serious, Betty, who had come in a few minutes later, slipped off with the baby while the other two were arguing. She did it so cleverly that when they discovered her treachery they made common cause against her, and went amiably home together vowing vengeance upon Miss Betty for her slyness.

By the end of three weeks the novelty had worn off a little and the girls no longer struggled to be first in the baby's affections, but were frequently willing to omit going to see her for a day or two. And just then, when the mothers were beginning to smile and shake their heads over the situation, something happened which again made little Miss Elsa the centre of interest.

Mrs. Schmidt, prowling around the blackened ruins of her former home, came upon a metal box, locked and little harmed by the flames, which she remembered as belonging to the baby's mother. In great excitement she took it to Mrs. Hamilton and that evening the girls were called in solemn conclave to see the box opened.

First, Mr. Hamilton took out four photographs which were passed from one to another. One pictured

a gray-haired man in military clothes, very erect, very stern and fine-looking. Another was of a plump, placid, elderly lady who looked the very picture of motherliness.

"I know that's the baby's grandmother and grandfather," said Dorothy positively, and no one had any other opinion to offer.

Mr. Hamilton uttered an exclamation of surprise as he took the third picture from the paper which enfolded it. "That's the poor little mother," he said softly, and the girls crowded around eagerly to gaze at the pretty, girlish creature looking out at them with hopeful eyes which foreshadowed no hint of her sad fate.

The girls were very sober, and no one broke the silence as Mr. Harnilton unwrapped the remaining picture. It was a young man with a thim, delicate face and large eyes rather sad in their expression. On the back was written in German, "Karl von Winterbach, to his beloved wife."

"He looks like the picture of some German poet," murmured Charlotte thoughtfully.

"The poor little soul had evidently dropped part of her name," said
Mr. Hamilton, "for the people in the settlement knew her only as
Mrs. Winter."

There was not much else in the box; a few ornaments, a little faded needlebook which looked as though it had been kept for memory's sake, and two letters. One of the letters was unsealed, and Mr. Hamilton took out a slip of paper which said with pathetic brevity, "If I am dead please send this letter to my dear father. He will care for my baby. Emilie von Winterbach."

The girls scrutinized the address on the other letter with the most excited interest.

To the Herr Baron von Grunwald, 10 Sommerstrasse, Dresden, Germany, read Ruth slowly over Mr. Hamilton's shoulder. "Why, girls, he's a baron; Elsa's grandfather is a baron."

"I knew she looked aristocratic," remarked Betty in a satisfied tone. "I shall go the first thing in the morning to offer her my humble services."

"Well, young ladies, it looks very much as if the Social Six would be deprived of their youngest member," said Mr. Hamilton as he put pictures and letters back into the box. "I shall send that letter to-morrow morning, and another with it telling all we know about little Elsa's mother, and I am sure we shall hear something as soon as possible from the Herr Baron von Grunwald."

The prospect of losing the club baby made her all the more precious in the eyes of her six adopted mothers, and during the weeks while they waited for news from across the ocean, they were lavish in care and affection. They planned to make an elaborate traveling wardrobe for her, and worked courageously at it every minute they could spare. Even Charlotte and Dorothy took a hand. Time was lacking, however, and their ideas of what their baby really needed grew less expansive as the days went on. The Candle Club boys felt that they were offering a neat and appropriate tribute when they presented the small lady with six pairs of shoes, two black, two white, and a pair each of red and blue.

"Those are good enough for a baron's granddaughter, don't you think?" asked Jack, who had been deputed to present them at a meeting of the Social Six. "I think they're rather neat, myself," he added with modest pride, as he stood off and gazed admiringly at them.

"They are lovely," said Ruth warmly. "Have some fudge. And here, take some back to the boys to show that we appreciate their kindness."

"I just know they waited to give them. until they felt sure we were making fudge," grumbled Dolly as Jack departed. "I know their tricks."

"I don't care," laughed Ruth. "We've had plenty anyway, and it was nice of them to spend their money on shoes."

The girls were in Ruth's room, and the rest of the house was very still, for Mrs. Hamilton had gone to Boston and Arthur was out with the boys. Tongues were flying fast, and no one heard the bell ring. Presently Katie appeared in the doorway with the card-tray saying:

"Miss Ruth, there is a gentleman down-stairs who wants to see Mrs.
Hamilton, and I can't make him understand where she is."

Ruth looked at the card curiously and then fell back on the sofa with a startled face.

"Girls, it's the Baron von Grunwald," she gasped, "and he's come without any warning. Oh, why did

Aunt Mary go into town to-day!"

"It's much more likely to be one of the boys playing a joke on us," said Dolly who hadn't had a chance to see the exceedingly correct-looking card which Ruth was crushing in her agitation. "I don't believe there has been time yet for Elsa's relatives to get here."

"Pretty nearly four weeks ago that Uncle Henry sent the letters," replied Ruth. "You can't make me believe the boys could get up anything like this," she added, displaying the card.

"You'll have to go down right off," said Dorothy, quite convinced.
"You mustn't keep him waiting."

"Oh, why not one of you?" groaned Ruth. "He won't know the difference, and you've lived in Glenloch longer."

"Goosey. As if that made any difference," laughed Charlotte.

"You know more German than any one of us," said Katharine comfortingly.

"Horrors! Shall I have to talk to him in German?" asked poor Ruth in despair.

"Of course," said Betty. "Didn't Katie say that she couldn't make him understand?"

Ruth would have liked to run and hide, but instead she went slowly down-stairs and walked straight into the parlor without giving herself time to think.

The tall, gray-haired man who rose to meet her was so like the picture in the box that Ruth felt almost as if she knew him, and she would have known just what to say if the dreaded German hadn't embarrassed her. She shook hands with him in silence, and then for a moment struggled to find a conversational opening which shouldn't plunge her into deeper distress.

The kind old man evidently understood her difficulty, for his sad face grew gentle as he said with slow distinctness:

"I can understand English, Fraulein."

He smiled at the extreme relief expressed in Ruth's face and went on speaking.

"I have come so quick as I can from Germany, Fraulein, my little grandchild to see, and I find that I am arrived before my letter gets here. I have seen in Boston Mr. Hamilton, and he has told me how to find his home and that he will come also so soon as he can."

Ruth drew a breath of relief. "If you will excuse me I will send for the baby this very minute," she said, and went quickly from the room.

"Girls, go get Elsa and bring her here as fast as you can," she exclaimed, popping her head into her own room. "He's perfectly elegant," and then she was gone again.

Betty and Dorothy running down the stairs soon after heard the steady hum of conversation in the parlor, and smiled to think how soon Ruth's terror had vanished. For Ruth the next twenty minutes seemed very long, and she spent it trying to make the Herr Baron feel at home, and hoping against hope that Mrs. Hamilton would arrive by the next train.

To her joy it happened as she had wished, for Mrs. Hamilton and the baby arrived at the house almost in the same moment. Little Elsa had grown so used to petting and attention that she was friendliness itself and went to her grandfather with a gurgle of delight. He, poor man, almost lost his self-control at sight of her, for she was wonderfully like his own lost daughter. Ruth slipped out of the room, because she couldn't bear to see his grief, and went back to the girls, who were waiting for her with eager curiosity.

A little later Mrs. Hamilton came to them.

"Uncle Henry has come and has taken the Baron off to talk with Mrs. Schmidt and Mrs. Hall," she said in answer to their questions. "The poor man says his only daughter married against his wishes, but that he should have willingly forgiven her and her husband if they had only given him the chance. He is delighted with little Elsa, and so grateful to you girls for befriending her. He hopes to get Mrs. Hall to go with him and the baby to Dresden, and then he will send her back here. He is very anxious to meet the club girls and thank them for what they have done, and he's invited us all to visit him if we go to Germany."

"When will he start for home?" asked Ruth.

"As soon as he can get away," answered Mrs. Hamilton. "And that reminds me that I must see if I can do anything for Mrs. Hall to help matters along. I can sympathize with the poor grandfather's desire to get the baby to her grandmother as soon as possible."

Left to themselves the girls looked at each other blankly.

"So that's the end of the club baby," sighed Betty.

"Why, no, she can be our German member," said Ruth decidedly.

CHAPTER XV

PETER PAN

It was Saturday morning, and Ruth sat down at her desk to write her regular letter to her father. She laid out her paper, fitted a fresh pen into the silver holder, and then looked at the calendar. As she found the date her eyes grew very thoughtful.

"Six months to a day," she murmured. "How fast the time has gone."
Then she began her letter.

"Glenloch, March 17th.

"Darling father:

"I wonder if you remember that just six months ago to-day you and I were celebrating your birthday together, and that I was heartbroken when you told me what was going to happen to us. Nothing could have made me believe then that I could be so happy now, or that the time could possibly seem so short. I wonder if you would think I've changed any. I'm an inch taller than I was when you saw me last, and I weigh ten pounds more, so I've accomplished something in six months. I don't believe you've grown an inch; at least not an up and down inch.

"I just wish you could taste some of my cooking. If I went out as cook now, I shouldn't have to feed the family on birthday cake, for I can make perfectly scrumptious little baking-powder biscuit, and my salad dressing is a joy forever. I can do other things, of course, but these are my specialties. Oh, and I can make a maple fudge that just melts in your mouth. I sent a box of it to Uncle Jerry, and he wrote back right off that I could consider myself engaged as cook whenever he set up housekeeping.

"I read almost every bit of your German letter myself, though I had to get Aunt Mary to help me out once or twice. It made me want to study all the harder to see how quickly she read it. It's ten times easier now to work hard on French and German, because I hope that I shall need to use them before very long. Oh, Popsy, won't it be joyful when I can come over to you!!!! It would take more than four hundred exclamation points to express my feelings, so you must please imagine the rest of them.

"I don't want to make you too proud of your daughter, but I must just tell you that I got an A in French history last month. We have a dandy history teacher who makes everything interesting, and then I keep thinking that I must know all about these things before I go abroad, and that helps lots.

"More than anything I love the Gym. I just wish you could see Miss Burton; she's the dearest, sweetest teacher I ever had, and so pretty that I want to look at her all the time. She's a splendid teacher, too, and the girls are all wild over the lessons and over her.

"I take only one violin lesson a week now, because, though you may find it hard to believe, I am really working too hard at school to go into Boston twice a week. I practice every day and Arthur and I play together almost every evening. Arthur is so changed and so jolly now. He uses only one cane and says he means to walk without any soon. He acts as if he couldn't get enough of the boys and girls, and his father and mother look perfectly radiant whenever their eyes light on him. He's gone back to school, and he and Joe are making all sorts of plans about college.

"I suppose you never noticed that I didn't tell you what Uncle Henry gave me for a Christmas present, or perhaps you thought he didn't give me anything. Well, he did give me one of the very nicest presents

I ever had, and that was a course of lessons at a riding-school in Boston. I was perfectly delighted, and I knew I shouldn't have to ask you about it because you've always meant to have me learn to ride. I've been going in every Wednesday since Christmas, taking a violin lesson first, and then meeting Uncle Henry to go to the riding-school. He said he was so particular about borrowed articles that he would never let me go alone. My, but it was hard at first, and I thought I never should learn to hold my whip and my reins and myself in the proper way. I had such a darling horse, though, and it was such fun, that I couldn't help sticking to it, and now the riding-master says that I really ride very well.

"A week ago Uncle Henry surprised me by buying the horse I've been riding and he's out in the stable this very minute. He thinks I'm quite ready to ride with him out here, and he's coming home to lunch so that we can start off early this afternoon. That last sentence sounds rather mixed. Of course I mean that it's the horse that's in the stable, and it's Uncle Henry, not the horse, who's coming home to lunch.

"There, that cat is out of the bag and I feel better. I suppose they'll all laugh at me for telling, but I don't care. I thought at first it would be great fun to surprise you after I got over there, but I might have known I couldn't keep such a lovely secret all that time.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you that Aunt Mary said her part of the present was to be my riding-habit, and the first time Arthur went into Boston he brought me the prettiest little riding-crop I've ever seen.

"Mercy! My arm's stiff from writing so much, and my little watch tells me that it's almost lunch-time. I never wrote such a long letter before and I do hope you'll be properly grateful for it. I've known you to complain of the shortness of my letters, but you can't this time.

"With heaps of love to you, I am "Your faithfulest, lovingest chum,

"Ruth."

"There! The dearest of fathers ought to be satisfied with that," thought Ruth as she slipped her letter into the envelope, sealed it and stamped it. "Now for lunch and then my ride."

"Isn't he a beauty, Arthur?" called Ruth, coming out on the piazza in all the glory of her dark-blue habit, high boots and gauntlet gloves.

Arthur, who had a pocketful of sugar and was dividing it impartially between the two horses, turned at the sound of the voice and gave her an approving glance.

"He certainly is," he answered, "and he's going to have a very swell-looking rider, too. I like that blue dress and that neat little hat."

"Glad you're suited," laughed Ruth. "He ought to have a name; do think up a nice name right off now so that I can have something to call him this afternoon."

"I like your way of ordering me to think up things on the moment," protested Arthur in an aggrieved tone.

"Of course you like it. Do think quick, because Uncle Henry is just ready to start."

"Peter Pan," suggested Arthur. "And then he'll never grow old and bony and lame."

"Clever boy," said Ruth approvingly as they started off. "That name suits me exactly. Can't you just see him doing a shadow dance with me on his back?"

Arthur watched them until a curve in the road hid them from sight. Then as he started toward the house a familiar voice hailed him, and he turned to see Dr. Holland looking at him with approving eyes.

"Pretty nice looking pair of riders, aren't they? Why don't you go in for that sort of thing, my boy?"

"I shall just as soon as you say I can, doctor."

"Go ahead then, with my blessing. You've always been so used to riding that the exercise will be the best thing in the world for you. Leg still pain you any?"

"A little, but it's growing stronger every day."

"Well, keep it up, young man, and you'll come out all right," said the doctor heartily as he drove off, leaving Arthur to find his mother and tell her the good news.

In the meantime Ruth and Mr. Hamilton were riding at an easy pace down the road past the old mill. It was a rare day for March. The snow had been gone for a fortnight, and to-day the air and sunshine

were full of promises of spring.

To Ruth the ride was a perfect delight. She was happy because the sun shone, and because fleecy clouds were chasing each other across a blue sky. She loved the hint of spring in the air, and the fresh breeze which blew over the lake. Most of all she delighted in Peter Pan, who responded to her slightest touch, and flew over the ground so smoothly and surely that fear was impossible.

As they rounded the lake and came out on the side nearest the centre of the town, Ruth saw a house which seemed strangely familiar to her.

"Why, it's Mrs. Perrier's house, and there's Marie out on the porch," she said in great surprise. "I haven't seen it from this side before and I didn't know it at first. Do you think we might stop and see Marie for just a few minutes? I haven't been to see her for two weeks, and I'm afraid she'll think I'm neglecting her."

Mr. Hamilton looked at his watch. "Yes, we shall have time to make a short call on that sunshiny porch and still get you back in time for Miss Burton."

Marie was sitting in a steamer chair, well wrapped up, and so absorbed in her work that she saw nothing of her guests until they were almost at her side. When she looked up a warm color flushed her pale cheeks, and she tried to conceal the sheet of paper on which she had been working.

"This is Mr. Hamilton, Marie, and this is my friend, Marie Borel, Uncle Henry," said Ruth quickly. "You two should be very good friends, for Uncle Henry's just been telling me how fond he is of Switzerland."

"Ah, do you love my country?" cried Marie, all her embarrassment forgotten. "It ees so good to hear that; I am sometimes so homeseeck for my mountains."

"Indeed I do love your mountains and your lakes and the good people who live there," responded Mr. Hamilton with a warmth that delighted Marie's homesick heart.

"But I must speak to my aunt," said Marie struggling to rise from her many wraps. "You will perhaps come into the house." "No, sit still, and I'll tell Mrs. Perrier we're here," urged Ruth. "We can stay only a few minutes, and we like to sit here in the sunshine."

She disappeared into the house, and while she was gone Mr. Hamilton set himself to the pleasant task of getting acquainted with the shy girl whose wonderful dark eyes looked so confidingly at him. It needed only a few sympathetic questions to induce her to tell him of the little town nestled at the foot of the Jura Mountains, of the sparkling lake on which she used to look from her chamber window, and of the Jungfrau, seventy miles away, but seeming so near in clear weather.

"I know just where your old home is, Marie," he said kindly, when, in her pretty, broken English, she had pictured her birthplace to him. "I don't wonder that you are homesick, for even I often long for a sight of those beautiful mountains."

"It gives me much good to talk of them to some one who knows how beautiful they are," answered Marie simply. "But here comes Miss Ruth, and—"

"Now, Marie, don't you scold me," interrupted Ruth gaily. "I just couldn't help bringing out your lace pillow and your embroidery for Uncle Henry to see."

"Oh, a gentleman," laughed Marie, "a gentleman, he does not care for fine stitches."

"There, isn't that beautiful, Uncle Henry?" persisted Ruth. "And what do you think? I've learned to make a very simple pattern."

"You don't say so!" said Uncle Henry, much impressed. "Couldn't you—couldn't you make me something to wear?"

"What shall it be?" laughed Ruth. "I'll tell you. If you'll promise to have a black velvet suit and wear it to the office every day, I'll make you a large lace collar to wear with it."

"I'll let you know when I leave the order for the suit. It will be time enough to begin. on the collar then," answered Mr. Hamilton, much amused at the idea. "I'm afraid we must be saying good-bye to Marie now," he added with a glance at his watch, "or you won't have any time to rest before starting out again."

But just then Mrs. Perrier came out on the porch carrying a tray, and nothing would do but that Mr.

Hamilton and Ruth must taste her home-made grape-juice, and the little cakes made from a recipe she had brought from Switzerland. They were almost as thin as paper, and so deliciously crisp and toothsome-looking that Ruth couldn't resist them.

"Oh, Uncle Henry," she cried impulsively, "I am so hungry: and you have a hungry look, too, hasn't he, Marie? Never mind if we don't get home quite so soon; I can rest while I'm eating."

"Just as you say, my dear," answered Mr. Hamilton with proper meekness. He was having an unusual and interesting experience himself, and didn't in the least mind staying.

The little lunch was delicious, and Ruth sighed as she finished the last cake she felt she could possibly eat. Mr. Hamilton stooped to pick up his whip before saying good-bye, and as he did so dislodged a book which was tucked into the steamer chair. It fell to the floor, and a paper fluttered out of it and floated almost to Ruth's feet. She picked it up to return it, but her eye was caught by a pencil sketch which stood out boldly.

"Why, Marie," she cried in astonishment, "did you draw this? It's that little piece of the shore of the lake that I've been looking at while I've sat here. Do let me show it to Uncle Henry."

"Eet ees nothing," faltered Marie, full of shy embarrassment. "I cannot make eet look as I see eet."

Mr. Hamilton studied the little sketch with kindly, critical eyes. Then he apparently forgot that there was need to hurry, for to Ruth's surprise he sat down again by Marie's chair, saying earnestly: "Have you more sketches in that book I knocked down, child? Let me see them if you have."

His manner was so serious, so compelling, that Marie gave him the book without a word. There were sketches in pencil and sketches in water-color. Those in the first part of the book were tiny drawings of the interior of Mrs. Perrier's house, with now and again that smiling woman herself in a characteristic pose. Once in a while there was a sketch in color of mountains, lake and sky done evidently from memory. All crude and faulty, but showing so much strength, so much individuality and color-sense, that Mr. Hamilton turned the leaves of the little book again and again, and finally laid it down reluctantly, saying:

"If I only had time, Marie, I should like to talk them all over with you. There is so much promise in them that you must keep on trying; you must study as soon as you are strong enough."

"I am so glad that you think I am not wasting my time when I do such things," she answered wistfully. "They will never look as I want them to look, but I cannot help trying. I shall hope to study some day."

Marie walked to where the horses were tied to show Ruth how much she had improved, and as they turned to wave a last good-bye to her Mr. Hamilton said impressively, "Ruth, do you know we've discovered a genius there. I firmly believe that girl will make a name for herself some day. We must help her."

"I should like to," answered Ruth, who all the way home seemed to be in a brown study.

CHAPTER XVI

TELLING FORTUNES

"I'm very sorry to be late," said Ruth penitently, as she walked into Miss Burton's little sitting-room to find the three other girls there before her.

"We were just wondering whether that fiery steed had carried you off so far that you couldn't get back," laughed Miss Burton.

"He's a beauty, and I'd have given anything to have my father see you ride off on him," said Dorothy, who longed to ride, but hadn't yet been able to persuade her father that it was a necessary part of her education.

"You see we didn't wait for you," continued Miss Burton, "so take off your hat and coat, and you shall

have a cup of chocolate and some bread and butter as soon as you are ready."

"Riding does give one such an appetite," murmured Ruth apologetically, forgetting that they didn't know that she had been feasting only about an hour before. "But what were you talking about, girls, as I came up-stairs? Your voices sounded so earnest that I felt quite curious."

"We were talking about Mildred Walker," answered Betty. "I don't believe you ever heard of her, Ruth, but she's a girl who always lived here until about three years ago. Her father had a good deal of money, and suddenly he made a great deal more and they went to New York to live. They lived pretty extravagantly, I guess, and now he has lost all his money and is very sick, and Mildred will have to do something to help support the family. She's only nineteen, and she's never done anything but have a good time all her life, so we were wondering how she would get along."

"When my father heard about it," said Dorothy, "he slapped his hand down on the table and said, 'There, that settles it; my girl shall learn to do something to support herself in case need comes.' He looked so fierce and decided that I should have been quite worried if I hadn't made up my mind some time ago what I wanted to do."

"Oh, Dolly, what is it?" cried Ruth, almost upsetting her cup in her earnestness.

"Why, physical culture, of course," answered Dorothy. "I haven't any talent for anything else, and I just love that."

"It's a very good choice, Dorothy, for, even if you're never obliged to teach, it helps one in many ways," said Miss Burton. "I've always been very thankful that my wise father felt just as yours does, for when the time came I was able to take hold and do my part. When father helped me plan my education there seemed no possible chance that I should be obliged to earn my own living, but it came suddenly, as as it so often does, and I'm glad to think that both father and mother lived to see me working happily and successfully."

Miss Burton was smiling as she finished, but there was a soft mistiness in her brown eyes which touched the hearts of her adoring audience.

"Dear little Miss Burton," said Ruth, giving her a swift hug, "we can't be sorry that you had to earn your living if we try, for if you hadn't we never should have known you."

"Who can tell?" said Charlotte with mock solemnity. "Perhaps she might have come into our lives in some other way. Perhaps even now some one is drawing near to us who may be destined to play an important part in our lives or hers." Charlotte's voice grew deeper as she spoke, and her eyes had a faraway look.

"Oh, Charlotte, you goose. You make me feel positively creepy," cried Betty.

"You don't see any one over my shoulder, I hope," said Dorothy with an involuntary backward glance.

"Now, Miss Burton," said Charlotte with a laugh, "I leave it to you if that isn't sufficient proof that I ought to be an actress."

"I'm afraid the modern manager would require still more proof than that, Charlotte," answered Miss Burton, much amused. "But you certainly did that well."

"Let's all tell what we think we could do if we had to," proposed
Betty. "What should you do, Ruth?"

"I suppose that after I've studied the violin a few years more I could give lessons," said Ruth thoughtfully. "But somehow I don't seem to look forward to it with any wild joy. Whenever I plan ahead, I always think of myself as in a home, making things look pretty, and having lots of dinner-parties. I believe I should like to be a model hostess," she added honestly.

"Oh, Ruth, just a society woman?" asked Charlotte with scorn in her voice.

"Ruth's idea means more than that, Charlotte, if you think of it in its broadest sense," interposed Miss Burton. "To be a perfect hostess implies capacity for managing one's household, a wide culture, forgetfulness of self and a ready appreciation of the needs of others, sincerity, charm, interest in one's fellow beings, and so many other good qualities that I can't stop to mention them. It's really a beautiful ideal, and Ruth is fortunate in living with a woman who is one of the few perfect hostesses I know."

"I don't think I quite realized before how much it meant," said Ruth. "But it must have been watching Aunt Mary that made me think of it, for I used to have quite different ideas. It just occurs to me," she

added with an infections laugh, "that the last time I remember saying anything about it I told father that when I grew up I should keep a candy-shop."

"And eat all you wanted, of course," added Charlotte as they all laughed. "That was my first idea, too."

"And what's your present idea?" asked Betty.

"Oh, mine's so big and impossible, and so slow in coming, that I can't bear to talk about it," answered Charlotte, grown suddenly shy, and then she relapsed into silence, and no amount of urging would make her speak.

"No one asks me about mine," said Betty plaintively after a pause in the conversation, "and I'm just dying to tell."

"Oh, Betty, forgive us, and divulge the secret this very minute," laughed Miss Burton.

"Well," began Betty slyly, "I'm going to be different from the rest of you; I'm going to be married and keep house. And my husband's going to be an invalid, at least I think I shall have him an invalid, and I shall have to support the family. Oh, I forgot to say that before I'm married I'm going to learn all about cooking and—and domestic science. Then I shall do all my own housework, and make cake for the neighbors, and cater for lunch-parties, and raise chickens and squabs, and keep bees, and grow violets and mushrooms, and have an herb-garden. Oh, and in my leisure moments—"

Miss Burton and the girls were quite helpless with laughter by this time, and Betty interrupted herself to look at them with pretended astonishment.

"I was just about to say," she went on severely, "when you interrupted me by laughing so rudely, that in my leisure moments I should make clothing for the children and myself, and also furnish fancy articles for the Woman's Exchange."

"Oh, Betty, when you are funny you are the funniest thing I ever saw," gasped Charlotte, going off into a fresh burst of laughter.

"I'm much obliged to you, Betty, for that laugh," said Miss Burton, wiping her eyes, "and I hope I'll be there to see when you get that model establishment of yours in running order."

"I'll send you samples of the various things if you're not on hand," responded Betty with a twinkle. "But really, Miss Burton," she added with sudden seriousness, "I do want to take a course in cooking and domestic science."

"Judging by the specimens of your cooking I've eaten I should think it would be the thing for you to do," replied Miss Burton heartily. "The opportunities for teaching in that line are many, and even if you never have to earn money by it, to know how to cook is a very great accomplishment."

"I dare say," said Charlotte, "that we shall all do something absolutely different from what we are planning now. Probably Betty will marry a millionaire, and Dolly will take in sewing. Who can say that Ruth may not be an artist? And I—well, I think my strong point is cooking, and I shall undoubtedly be feeding starving families on baked apples for years to come."

"Oh, fudge," said Dolly, much disgusted with her part of the prophecy.
"You can't tell fortunes for me, Charlotte; I won't have it."

"I'm sure to be an artist," laughed Ruth. "I can draw a pig with my eyes shut just as well as I can with them open. I should love to splash on color, though."

"You might be a house-painter," said Betty meditatively. "When my millionaire builds his house I'll employ you to do the painting."

"And Charlotte can be cook," suggested Ruth. "But speaking of artists, girls, makes me think of what I've been wanting to ask you ever since I got here. Uncle Henry and I called on Marie this afternoon and found her sitting on the piazza in the sunshine. Just as we were leaving we found out quite by accident that she has been making perfectly lovely little sketches, and Uncle Henry thinks she's a genius. He told her she must study as soon as she got strong, and you should have seen the longing look in those great dark eyes of hers."

"I suppose she hasn't a cent that she feels she can use for lessons," said Miss Burton thoughtfully. She, as well as Ruth's special chums, had become very much interested in Marie, and Mrs. Perrier's little house had been the goal of many a breezy walk.

"I think Uncle Henry means to help her, of course," continued Ruth, "but I was wondering if there wasn't something we could do to earn money. Wouldn't it be great if the Cooking Club could do something to help?"

"I should say it would," responded Dorothy with the greatest enthusiasm. "Didn't we begin to try even at our first meeting to make our club helpful to others?"

"I hope we shan't miss the mark the way we did that time," groaned
Charlotte with a disgusted expression on her face.

"Oh, but didn't Joe look too absurd in that ladylike black skirt and bonnet?" said Ruth going off into a fit of laughter. "I don't care if the joke was mostly on me; it was the funniest thing I ever saw."

"We never could pay him off with anything half so clever," laughed
Betty. "But, girls, it's Marie who wants to be an artist, not Joe.
Who's got an idea?"

"Let's have a supper in the Town Hall and cook all we can ourselves and solicit the rest," proposed Dorothy.

"Too much outside work when we're in school," protested Charlotte.

"If we could have it four weeks from now it would come in the April vacation," persisted Dorothy.

"Why not have some sort of an entertainment," suggested Miss Burton, "and seat your audience at small tables? Then at the end of the entertainment you could serve light refreshments."

"And we could have tableaux and perhaps some music," cried Ruth in a burst of inspiration. "You'd help us out with it, wouldn't you, Miss Burton?"

"Of course I would. I've had to plan such things several times."

"Let's choose the prettiest girls we can find in the school for waitresses," said Betty, "and have them wear cunning aprons and big bows on their heads."

"Why not have the thing open an hour or so before the entertainment begins, and give them a chance to buy home-made candy and salted almonds and some of those specialties which the gifted members of our club delight in making?" suggested Charlotte. "We shall need all the money we can get, for just the price of the tickets won't amount to very much."

"That's a practical idea, Charlotte," said Miss Burton. "And if you'd like it perhaps I can make some money for you by reading palms. The boys could build a little tent for me, and I could give each applicant five minutes of my valuable time."

"Oh, Miss Burton, can you really read palms?" cried Betty much impressed.

"Well, Betty," said Miss Burton with her radiant smile, "I can, at least, make it interesting for persons who like to have their palms read. And fortunately I have a costume which I wore for this same purpose at a Charity Bazar in Chicago."

"That will be great," said Dorothy. "Oh, girls, I think this is going to be the grandest affair we've ever had in Glenloch. Can't you just see how everything is going to look?"

"We'll get the boys to help decorate the hall," suggested Betty.

"They'll be useful in lots of ways," added Charlotte. "Boys come in handy sometimes."

"We must have a business meeting right away with Kit and Alice," continued the practical Dorothy. "We shan't accomplish anything until we know just what each one is to do."

"There's just one thing," said Ruth hesitatingly. "Do you suppose we can make a success of it without telling people what we are going to do with the money? Of course I know," she went on hurriedly, "that our own families must be told, but it seems to me it will be much pleasanter for Marie if it isn't generally known."

"That's so," declared Dorothy. "It would be horrid for her to feel that she is being made an object of charity for the town. Let's tell just our mothers and fathers, and swear them to secrecy."

"If we give a good entertainment," added Charlotte, "no one will have any right to ask what we're going to do with the money."

"Good," cried Ruth, much relieved. "I felt almost sorry I'd proposed it when I began to think about poor Marie."

"Girls, girls, it's half-past six," cried Betty, as Miss Burton's clock struck the half-hour. "I actually haven't heard that clock strike before this afternoon."

"Mercy me! We have dinner at six," and Ruth turned to find her coat and hat.

At that moment there was a knock, and Miss Burton's landlady poked her head into the room to say there was a gentleman at the door who wanted to see Miss Ruth Shirley.

"It must be Mr. Hamilton," said Ruth, who felt guilty on account of the lateness of the hour. "I'll call down and tell him I'll be there in a minute."

"It's not Mr. Hamilton. It's no one I know," answered Mrs. Stearns.

Ruth looked puzzled. "Oh, do come down with me," she implored, catching Miss Burton's hand, and together they went along the hall and down to the turn in the stairs. Then, as Ruth caught sight of the tall, handsome man standing in the hall with the lamplight shining full upon his face, she forgot everything else in the world, and getting over the remaining stairs in some incomprehensible way, threw herself into his outstretched arms.

"Oh, Uncle Jerry, Uncle Jerry!" she cried with a little break in her voice as she buried her head on his shoulder. She was quite unconscious that, though his arms tightened around her, his eyes were fixed with eager longing on the smiling girl who had stopped half-way down the stairs. There was a long second of silence. Uncle Jerry's face went white and then red. Margaret Burton's smile faded, and an expression of perplexity took its place. Then she came down the stairs, and holding out her hand said:

"I see you haven't forgotten me, Mr. Harper. I am very glad to see you again."

Ruth looked up in amazement as Uncle Jerry took the white hand in both of his. "Why, Miss Burton," he began impetuously, "I—" and then something made him look up to the hall above where three heads were gazing over the railing with eager curiosity.

"I am more than glad to meet you here," he continued lamely. "I—I had no idea of meeting an old friend."

"Miss Burton, you never told me that you knew my Uncle Jerry, and I've talked about him lots of times," protested Ruth in an aggrieved voice.

"Well, of course, I supposed your Uncle Jerry was Jeremiah Shirley," laughed Miss Burton. "You never told me that Jerry stood for Jerome, nor that his last name wasn't the same as yours."

"Why, so I didn't. And I suppose all the girls think your name is Jeremiah, and they're probably sorry for you. I'll run up now and get my hat, and bring them down to be properly introduced."

It seemed only a minute, and a very short one at that, to Jerome Harper, before Ruth came down-stairs again with the girls behind her. He ventured a little protesting glance at Miss Burton as she stepped into the background, and allowed the chattering girls to absorb him. Being Ruth's Uncle Jerry it was plainly his duty to show himself in the best possible light to these, her friends, and he did it in so charming a manner that they all fell in love with him on the spot.

They left the house together, and only Dorothy noticed that Uncle Jerry lingered a little to say good-bye to Miss Burton. Dorothy usually did notice everything connected with Miss Burton, and just then she had been thinking how pretty she looked in her simple white wool gown, with her fair hair low on her neck and her brown eyes shining.

"What under the sun made you say that some one might be coming to play an important part in Miss Burton's life, Char?" she said in a low tone to Charlotte as they started off. "Did you really have a feeling?"

"A feeling? No, goosey; of course I didn't. Why do you ask?"

Dorothy pinched her arm to hush her, and nodded significantly at
Uncle Jerry, who was just ahead of them with Betty and Ruth.

Charlotte looked surprised and then scornful. "I hate to see any one getting up a romance out of nothing," she whispered almost crossly. "They're just old acquaintances, of course."

But Dorothy knew that Charlotte hadn't seen Uncle Jerry's face as he said good-bye.

CHAPTER XVII

UNCLE JERRY

Uncle Jerry stayed only until Monday morning, and his visit seemed so short to Ruth that after he had gone she could hardly believe that it had really happened. Neither could she quite reconcile herself to the fact that out of that brief time he had taken two whole hours away from his only niece to call on Miss Burton. Her only consolation was that he had promised to return for the night of the grand entertainment, and he thought it probable that he should be able then to stay a week.

She had little time to think about her own affairs, for with the date of the entertainment once set the days flew by on wings. It was planned for the second Wednesday in April, which would come in the middle of the spring vacation, and thus give the girls a chance to rest after it was over. Once in the midst of their preparations, the girls began to realize how big a thing they had undertaken, and were fearful that they should not be able to make it a financial success. Fortunately their elders realized it, too, and came promptly to the rescue. Mr. Hamilton offered to pay for the hall, Mr. Marshall agreed to provide the tables and chairs, and to pay for having the stage enlarged, and the Candle Club boys devoted themselves to their hard-working friends, and were ready to do anything to help.

As time went on the lofty ideals with which the girls had started gradually diminished in fervor. At first they had planned to make the ice-cream and cake, but later they accepted with a gratitude that was almost pathetic Mrs. Hamilton's offer to take upon her own shoulders the duty of providing both of these necessities.

In spite of all this assistance, however, the week before the performance passed in a mad whirl of rehearsals and preparation of costumes, topped off on the very day before by the making of candy and the doing of innumerable last things. Even at nine o'clock on Tuesday evening Ruth and Arthur were still at work packing into paper boxes the crisp wafers which Ruth had engaged Mrs. Perrier to make for her.

"Fifteen, seventeen, nineteen," murmured Ruth. "Oh, dear, I'm so tired and sleepy I don't know whether there are twenty-five or twenty-four in two dozen."

"Go to bed then," laughed Arthur, "and I'll finish. There are not many more, anyway, and you've got the hustle of your life before you to-morrow."

Ruth pulled herself out of her chair slowly but with evident willingness. "Some folks don't give boys credit for being half so nice as they are, but I do," she announced with a smile of sleepy gratitude as she started out of the room.

Wednesday morning the Town Hall was the scene of such excited animation that it was difficult to tell whether anything was being accomplished or not. The Cooking Club girls and the Candle Club boys together with a dozen picked helpers had assembled to decorate the hall, and for the moment there seemed an endless confusion of boys, step-ladders, hammers and cheese-cloth.

"For goodness' sake, Phil," begged Dorothy, leaving a group of girls and running over to where Phil and Arthur were talking together, "won't you and Arthur take the management of this decoration? You've done it before and you know how it ought to look."

"All right, your Majesty," responded Phil. "Come on, Art; let's agree on a general scheme, and then you can boss this side of the room and I'll take the other."

"Ruth! Ruth! you're wanted," called a half-dozen voices at once, and Ruth stopped her work to find John, Mr. Hamilton's man, waiting at the door with a good-sized box.

"It's just come by express, Miss Ruth," said John, "and 'twas labeled
Town Hall, so Mrs. Hamilton thought you'd better open it here."

"Help me open it, some one, please," begged Ruth, and as the top boards were quickly ripped off, she took out first a letter from New York in Uncle Jerry's writing.

"Dear Ruth" (it began):

"I have just stumbled on a little shop devoted to souvenirs of Switzerland. The proprietor has a bad attack of homesickness, and can't stand New York any longer, so he is selling out at a sacrifice. It occurred to me that I might kill two birds, etc., by contributing to the good cause at Glenloch and

helping this poor fellow at the same time. I thought you might make a little something by selling them for any price you can get.

"I shall probably get there almost as soon as the box, so won't stop to write more.

"Yours with love, Uncle Jerry."

Ruth had an interested audience as she unrolled some of the packages and peeped into others to see what they contained, and could he have heard the enthusiastic comments Uncle Jerry would have felt still more sure of his place in the hearts of his Glenloch friends.

"It's wasting time to look at them now," said Ruth with a sigh.
"We must arrange a table and put them on it this afternoon."

"What a pity that we couldn't have some one in Swiss costume to sell them," suggested Charlotte, who had paused in her work to take one look.

Ruth took in a quick breath as the idea struck her. "Do you suppose Mrs. Perrier,—or Marie," she thought aloud. "Why, Marie might even feel well enough to come herself if we sent for her and sent her home. Couldn't some one, couldn't you, Arthur, ride over and ask her?"

"Why, yes," agreed Arthur, hurrying after John to tell him to bring Peter Pan to the hall. He came back again in a minute to find Ruth and say coaxingly:

"Say, Ruth, John's got the carriage outside here, and why can't you just slip out and drive over with me? It'll do you good to get away from this noise and confusion for a while."

"Oh, I can't, possibly. It would be mean when the others are working so hard."

"You'll be back before they know you're gone," pleaded Arthur. "It'll do you so much good that you'll be able to work a great deal faster," added the wily youth.

"Go away, and don't tempt me," laughed Ruth. She started to leave him, but turned back to say earnestly: "Let's make Charlotte go with you. She's got a splitting headache, and she won't be fit for anything to-night if she doesn't rest for a while."

Arthur felt that he hadn't got quite all he was asking for, but he fell in with Ruth's idea cheerfully, and their united arguments persuaded Charlotte to go for the restful drive through the wooded roads.

They were back almost before Ruth could realize that they had started, and announced with an air of triumph that Marie would be delighted to come, and that Mrs. Perrier had a costume which could easily be made to do.

"And I begged her to bring her lace pillow," said Charlotte. "I thought that would add a touch to the whole occasion."

Ruth gave her a rapturous hug. "It will," she said joyfully. "And isn't it all going to be the finest thing you ever saw?"

The hall hummed like a beehive as the work went on, and little by little things took shape and began to promise a harmonious whole. It really seemed as though some good fairy were watching over affairs, for the carpenters finished their work and went at an early hour, the chairs and tables arrived in good season, and the big picture-frame which had been put together for the girls proved to be all that could be desired.

To be sure there were disagreements, and even accidents, for Bert and a step-ladder had a difference of opinion and collapsed together, and Betty dropped a pail of paste on Jack, who had politely stopped to admire the artistic work she and Frank were doing on the palmist's tent. As he was looking up and had just opened his mouth to say something complimentary the result was disastrous, and the poor fellow stood there blinded and gasping until Dorothy carne to the rescue with a wet towel.

At one o'clock the workers departed for lunch, a few of the boys and girls promising to come back in the early afternoon to finish the little that was left.

"I haven't the slightest idea whether it is going to look pretty or not," said Ruth wearily as they left the hall.

"Just wait until it's lighted," consoled Betty. "Then you'll see."

When the earliest of the audience arrived that evening the old hall, dressed in her best, was waiting

to receive them. The cool green and white of the draperies softened the plainness of the walls, and a huge, round ball made of red and yellow roses and glittering with diamond dust swung from the centre chandelier and glowed in its light. Smaller balls hung from the side-brackets, each enclosing an electric bulb which shone with soft radiance through the vivid red and pale yellow of the roses.

In the comer nearest the door was a booth draped in pink and blue, and here two pretty girls in white were ready to sell the various delicacies made by the members of the Cooking Club. The girls had worked hard, and Ruth's maple fudge, Dorothy's creamed walnuts and dates, Katharine's salted nuts, and Alice's peanut brittle made such a tempting array that none could see without wanting to buy. Betty's contribution was a dozen glasses of delicious-looking orange marmalade, and behind them were piled boxes of Mrs. Perrier's crisp Swiss wafers.

As a joke Charlotte had brought in quite unexpectedly at the last moment a huge pan of baked apples, and she insisted on having them on the table in spite of the fact that the pan in its nest of pink crepe paper took up a large amount of space.

"The rest of you are represented by your masterpieces," she said, rolling out the long words with great relish. "So why shouldn't I put mine there? I'm sure I shall never achieve anything more perfect than those baked apples, and they're much more digestible than all that sweet stuff."

As usual Charlotte's argument was unanswerable, and the apples remained on the table, forming a sturdy and wholesome contrast to their more dainty companions.

At the front of the hall and quite near the stage sat Marie dressed in the pretty Bernese costume with its velvet bodice, and silver pins and chains. Before her was a table covered with Swiss carved work, bears, paper-knives, picture-frames, watch-stands and dainty edelweiss pins. Her eyes were sparkling and a faint color stole into her cheeks as she chatted in her soft voice with those who came to look at her wares.

In spite of the attractiveness of good things to eat and pretty things to see, the most popular place in the hall was the gaily decorated tent where Miss Burton in gypsy costume read palms. From the time the hall was opened there was a waiting group outside the tent where Dorothy took the money, and cut each five minutes off on the dot so that she might get in as many as possible. So many applicants were there that, when at half-past seven Ruth's Uncle Jerry arrived with the Hamiltons and a party of their Boston friends, there seemed to be no immediate chance that he would be able to penetrate the mysteries of the future with the aid of Miss Burton.

"Dear me, Miss Dorothy," he said beseechingly, "can't you make a special appointment for me? I'm afraid my life-line isn't strong enough to bear me up under such a disappointment."

"I'm afraid I can't, Mr. Harper," answered Dorothy firmly. "There are enough waiting now to keep the palmist busy until the entertainment begins, and after that you must take your chance with the others."

In the depths of her heart Dorothy was glad to turn away Uncle Jerry. He was altogether too much in a hurry, she thought with a little frown. She didn't want any one to like Miss Burton too much.

Uncle Jerry wandered off disconsolately, but solaced himself by buying candy and Swiss carvings until his hands were so full that he couldn't manage his parcels. Then, in a fit of desperation, he returned them all to the young ladies from whom he had bought them, begging them to sell them over again for the good of the cause.

At five minutes before eight there was a burst of applause as Phil appeared on the stage and requested the audience to be seated at the small tables, as the entertainment was about to begin.

When the confusion had subsided into silence, some one at the piano began to play softly, and the curtain parted to show in the frame a beautiful Spanish girl with fan and mantilla. Following her in quick succession came a fair-haired English girl, a smiling maiden from Japan with arched eyebrows and bright-colored parasol, and a rosy Dutch girl in cap and kerchief. Then a Turk sitting cross-legged upon his cushion smoked his long pipe and beamed affably on the audience, an Esquimaux gentleman came from his igloo in the north to pose for a moment, and a boyish Uncle Sam and John Bull shook hands fraternally.

Each picture was shown twice, but it was ail too short for the enthusiastic audience, which applauded so vociferously that Frank was obliged to step before the curtain and announce that owing to lack of time no encores could be given.

Then followed representations of celebrated paintings; the Girl with the Muff, a pathetic Nydia, and the charming little Dutch girl holding a cat. Molly Eastman posed for that with Bagheera, Betty's

largest cat, clutched tightly in her arms. When Bagheera heard the applause he struggled wildly to escape, nearly knocking Molly over as he leaped from her arms just as the curtain covered the frame. Molly looked ready to cry because her picture could not be shown a second time, then snatching up her beloved Teddy bear, which went everywhere she did, she stood, triumphant, waiting for the curtain to be drawn. It was too good to be lost, and the boys pulled the curtain twice, much to Molly's joy and the delight of the audience.

This was the end of the first part of the program, and there was a buzz of conversation which softened into silence as the school orchestra filed on the stage. It was warmly greeted, for this was its first public appearance, and the proud parents of the performers were anxious to hear the results of their practice together. Like wise boys they didn't try to do anything great, but delighted the hearts of their hearers with a simple arrangement of some of the old patriotic songs that every one loves. They ended with the Star Spangled Banner and played it with so much spirit that the entire audience rose to do honor to the grand old song.

With the second drawing of the curtain, ten dainty Japanese ladies fluttered upon the stage with mincing steps, waving gay fans and bowing low as they drew up in line before the audience. So much did the flowing garments, the fan-bedecked hair and the slanting eyebrows change the girls that even some of the mothers failed at first to recognize their own daughters.

"I see Charlotte, and that one on the end is Ruth," announced the irrepressible Molly Eastman loudly, and then buried her head on her father's shoulder when every one turned to look at her.

The fan drill was beautiful to see, for the intricate marching, the delicate swaying of the figures, was done with a precision which gave no chance for criticism. The performers came out to bow their thanks for the hearty applause, and, when the audience refused to be satisfied, fluttered out again with fans held coquettishly before their faces. Then each girl extracted from her flowing sleeve a paper bird, and holding it as high as she could reach began to fan it into motion. It was a pretty sight; the gaily-colored birds flying in all directions, and the graceful girls, quick of eye and action, doing their utmost to keep them from falling. There were one or two narrow escapes, but not one really reached the floor, and at a signal they were caught upon the outstretched fans and the little ladies had fled.

"If that looks easy to you just try it," said Mrs. Hamilton during the pause in the program. "I made an attempt at it the other day when Ruth was practicing at home, and I found it the hardest thing I've undertaken for some time. It's wonderful training for the eye and muscles."

As she finished speaking, slow, dreamy music began on the piano and the curtains were pulled apart, disclosing a pedestal on which stood Dorothy in a flowing Greek robe and with her golden hair dressed in classic fashion. At first she was like a beautiful statue, then, as the music proceeded, she went through a series of poses, each one so vivid and graceful that when she became a statue once more and the curtain hid her from sight the hall rang with applause.

The program was already so long that Dorothy refused to repeat her number, and when the curtain was drawn again four fine lads stepped out to swing Indian clubs. The boys did it well and the fathers and mothers glowed with pride over the straight young figures and the easy grace which made the clubs seem like mere toys.

The last number was announced as a march by the Glenloch Academy children, and the boy who made the announcement couldn't keep from laughing as he hurriedly got out of sight.

"Rather unusual, isn't it, for boys and girls of that age to allow themselves to be called 'children'?" asked Mr. Hamilton, but even as he spoke his question was answered, for as the piano began a simple melody in rushed twelve children, blowing horns, jumping ropes, and pinching and pulling each other in very real fashion. There was a roar of laughter from the audience, for the boys were all figures of fun in their checked aprons and tassel caps. Tall Phil was a sight never to be forgotten as he smiled amiably on the world at large, but Joe had the best of it, for he was so plump and rosy that he looked fairly like the child he was trying to represent. The girls wore skirts which stuck out stiffly all around, and had their hair braided in pigtails and tied with ribbons to match their sashes. Betty looked the very picture of innocent, chubby childhood, and couldn't forbear making eyes at her adoring father, who sat near the stage, and seemed to find it difficult to look at any one but his engaging little daughter.

The piano struck up a stirring march, and the merry children dropped their toys and formed in line with Jack and Ruth as leaders. The performers did their best to make it as childlike as possible, and it was an amusing procession that the two captains led through intricate ways. It had an ending alike unexpected by performers and audience, for as they were going through one of the last figures, Joe slipped, made a heroic effort to recover his balance, and then sat flat on the floor facing the audience. He had such a funny, surprised look on his face that every one in the hall roared with laughter, much to

his discomfiture. Then an idea seized him, and scrambling to his feet he put both fists in his eyes and bellowed like a naughty child. The others kept on marching, but he stood there inconsolable, until Betty, always quick to think, gave him a little shake in passing and held out to him a bright red apple she'd been nibbling. An ecstatic smile spread over his face, he grabbed the apple, took a big bite, and fell into line just as they all marched off the stage. So cleverly was it done that the audience decided that the fall had been intentional, and the whole thing a part of the performance, and gave Master Joe an extra salvo of applause when the children returned to make their bows.

As the curtains fell together for the last time, twenty-five girls dressed in white and carrying trays came into the hall. They wore coquettish little aprons, and large ribbon bows in a variety of color, and suggested butterflies as they flitted among the tables. One by one the performers, most of them still in costume, slipped out from behind the scenes.

"Is your lemonade good, Uncle Jerry, and are you having a nice time?" asked the Japanese maiden leaning confidingly on Mr. Harper's shoulder.

"Yes, to both the questions, 'Yuki-San,'" replied her uncle affectionately. "But, Ruth," he was speaking now in a low tone, "I shan't be really happy until I have my palm read; and perhaps not then," he finished inaudibly.

Ruth glanced quickly toward the palmist's tent. "Miss Burton said she should keep busy while the refreshments were served so as to make as much money as possible. I'll see if she can take you now."

Uncle Jerry watched until he saw Ruth beckon to him. Then he made his way quickly to the tent, and started in just as Dorothy resumed her position outside as guardian.

"Only five minutes, Mr. Harper," said Dorothy decidedly.

"Give me ten, Miss Dorothy," pleaded Uncle Jerry, "and I'll give you four times the price of admission. It's for the good of the cause, you know."

"For the good of the cause, then," she answered grudgingly. "Ten minutes and not an atom more."

"You're a terror, Dolly," laughed Ruth, slipping into the chair beside her. "How can you be so severe with my beloved Uncle Jerry?"

Dorothy's answer was slow in coming, and Ruth went on happily without waiting. "Don't you think we've made a big success? Everything's sold except two or three boxes of candy and a loaf or two of cake. And Marie's perfectly radiant because several people have given her orders for lace and embroidery."

Dorothy was holding her watch in her hand and almost counting each second as it ticked away. "Eight and a half," she murmured. "Why, yes, I do think it's a success, and won't it be fun when we can take the money over to Mrs. Perrier's and surprise Marie? Time's up, Mr. Harper," she added with cruel promptness, and Uncle Jerry, fearing the invasion of other applicants, didn't dare to disobey.

Dorothy looked at him critically as he emerged from the tent. There was no mistaking the triumphant light in his eye, and she saw that she must resign herself to defeat.

"Did she give you a good fortune, Uncle Jerry?" inquired Ruth.

"Splendid. The best in the world," he answered with such happiness in his voice that Dorothy felt her resentment fading away. "Now, Miss Japan, let's go and buy everything there is left," he added.

Dorothy watched them as they strolled away, and saw Uncle Jerry draw Ruth into a quiet comer, where he told her something that made her clasp her hands and look at him with beaming eyes.

"They haven't the least idea I've guessed," said Dolly to herself with a sad little shake of the head, "but I'll show them that a girl can keep a secret even when she hasn't been asked to."

CHAPTER XVIII

THOSE RIDICULOUS BOYS

"It's terribly romantic," said Ruth with a satisfied sigh. "She didn't know he cared anything about her, and he thought she couldn't care for him because she went away from Chicago without letting him know or leaving him her address."

"And they're really engaged?" asked Betty for the third time. "I can't believe it."

It was a warm afternoon in May, and all the girls were out in Mrs. Hamilton's garden drying their hair after a shampoo. To the surprise of every one the spring had made good its early promises, and buds and blossoms had hurried forth with quivering eagerness. The soft breeze which rustled the leaves and played caressingly with the floating locks was as mild as in summer, and the girls felt that pleasant languor which comes with the first warm days.

"Yes, really engaged. Uncle Jerry wanted to settle it when he first found her here in Glenloch, but she made him wait until he came the second time," answered Ruth shaking her hair to the breeze which curled it into tendrils. "I've been simply bursting to tell you ever since the entertainment, but I had to wait until Miss Burton said I might."

"I think it's funny you didn't guess. I felt it in my bones from the first minute I saw him," said Dorothy. "And I was perfectly sure of it when I saw him tell you, Ruth."

"Why, Dolly, you're a witch! And you never said a word to any one?" asked Ruth incredulously.

"No. I didn't think Miss Burton would want me to. And I'm so jealous of you that I can't see straight, because, of course, she'll have to like you best," finished Dorothy with a mournful sigh.

"She'll think you're a trump when I tell her that you truly guessed and never said a word," comforted Ruth. "The only other thing I can do is to offer you a share in Uncle Jerry."

"You'll have to divide him in small pieces if you're going to share him," said Charlotte. "Did you ever see anything like the way the boys took to him?"

"Between the two clubs he had small chance to be alone with Miss
Burton that week he was here," laughed Betty.

"He was a dear to take us all to Boston and give us such a dandy time," murmured Charlotte.

"What a week we had," said Alice, pulling her black locks apart to get out the snarls. "Can't you just see Marie's face when we gave her that two hundred dollars?"

"She's so happy now," added Ruth, "and she's getting better every day. Arthur and I rode by there yesterday, and she was out helping her aunt make a garden."

"Isn't your hair most dry, girls?" asked Dorothy, with a sudden change of subject. "Let's hurry and put it up any old way, and then have some tennis."

There was a simultaneous groan from Katharine and Charlotte.

"I didn't expect anything of you two lazy things," said Dorothy coolly. "I'm glad you don't want to, for that leaves just the four of us without any fuss about deciding."

"I'd like to play," said Ruth, tugging at her refractory curls, "only you'll have to wait till I do my hair properly, and take this mess of towels into the house."

"Oh, Ruth, if I didn't like you so much I should say you were pernickety," cried Dorothy impatiently.

"I suppose I am fussy," confessed Ruth. "But mother was always very particular about having me keep my own things in order, and especially about leaving other people's belongings the way I found them, and I can't get over the habit."

"For goodness' sake, you sound as if you thought it was a crime," said Charlotte. "I only wish I had a few such bad habits as that."

"I'm a shining example for you, Charlotte," laughed Betty, "for I cleared up my top bureau drawer to-day."

"You're a shining example for me in more ways than one, Betsy," answered Charlotte with such unexpected earnestness that rosy Betty grew rosier than ever.

For a few minutes the girls worked busily, and the hair, black, brown, shining gold and burnished copper, was soon adorning the heads of its owners in the accustomed way. Ruth and Betty took in the

towels and brought out racquets and balls. Charlotte and Katharine languidly changed their seats to where they could watch the court, and the other four began a vigorous game.

It was a long and hotly contested deuce set, and ended in favor of Dorothy and Alice just as Katie appeared with tray and glasses.

"Ellen thought you'd like some lemonade, Miss Ruth. I'll bring it out directly."

Ellen's lemonade was a work of art; full of tantalizing and unexpected flavors of orange, mint and clove. The girls, who knew it of old, groaned with pleasure at sight of the frosty-looking pitcher with sprigs of mint at the top.

"This is richness," sighed Dorothy, as she settled herself on the big rug and took one of the fresh chocolate-frosted cakes that Katie had brought out.

"Ellen's the best old dear," said Ruth. "I never even have to ask for things."

"There's a letter on the tray," said Betty suddenly. "No, not a letter, because there's no stamp on it, but it's for you, Ruth."

Ruth picked it up and opened it. Then she laughed and held it out to the girls, reading aloud as she did so.

The Candle Club Presents its compliments to The Cooking Club And requests the pleasure of its company Saturday, May eighteenth, At half-after six

The Club Room

"My, but they're formal," said Dorothy. "Will you look at the elegance of 'half-after six'?"

"Jack did the invitations with his new typewriter, I suppose," said Betty. "I wonder how many sheets of paper he spoiled."

"Of course we'll all go," said Charlotte, lazily pulling herself up from her seat on the ground. "It's perfectly lovely sitting here and drinking this delicious lemonade, and I hate to mention it, but I've got to get home, girls. Betty, you ought to walk 'round my way to-night; I went with you last night."

"Wait till I get the last drop out of my glass," gurgled Betty, pulling away at her straw with great diligence.

"We're all going," added Dorothy. "It's almost six anyway."

Ruth went with them to the front of the house and then back to the tennis ground to pick up racquets and balls. It was so cool and still and beautiful in the garden that she sat down on the rug again with her hands clasped around her knees. The old apple-tree covered with pink and white blossoms rustled softly overhead, a fat robin cocked his eye at her as he listened for worms, and from the other side of the garden came the faint, melodious tinkle of the little fountain.

Something flipped into the grass beside her and the robin flew away.

"It's just a penny," called a gay voice, "the one they're always offering for your thoughts, you know."

Ruth looked up as Arthur dropped down on the rug beside her. "They're worth so much more that I couldn't let you have them for a penny," she said with a laugh.

"Make it a spring bargain sale and give 'em to me at a great reduction," he suggested.

"They were perfectly good thoughts," answered Ruth. "I was just wondering how I happened to drop down in such a lovely place, and why every one is so nice to me, and thinking how I shall miss you all when father sends for me."

"Don't begin to think about that," protested Arthur quickly. "You know you came for a year, a whole year."

"I know," laughed Ruth. "I don't believe you were a bit pleased when you heard that I was coming for a whole year. I really think you've got used to me very nicely."

"It's astonishing how soon we get used to things that we know we must put up with," said Arthur with a sigh of resignation. "Oh, by the way, there's something I forgot to tell you," he added.

"What is it?" cried Ruth eagerly.

"You won't tell the other girls, will you?"

"Why no, if you really don't want me to."

Arthur looked thoughtful. "I wouldn't for a while, anyway," he said at last.

"I won't tell until you say I may," said Ruth with great decision.

"Well, then,—I was sent out here to ask you to come in to dinner," chuckled the graceless youth, picking himself up from the ground, and making off with surprising agility.

"Oh, you villain," groaned Ruth, throwing a tennis ball at him with such unexpectedly good aim that it hit him squarely in the back.

"Good shot! How did it happen? Oh, but you did bite nicely that time," and Arthur laughed again at her pretended rage.

"If you ever want to be forgiven, come back here and help me take in the racquets and balls," called Ruth, starting toward the house.

"Sure, I will," responded Arthur amiably. "Give me all the racquets and you can take the balls. I know," he continued a moment later, "why every one is so nice to you."

"Is this another sell?" demanded Ruth.

"No, this is truth. You'll find the answer in Mary's Little Lamb if you change the words a little. You look up the last verse and see if I'm not right."

Ruth looked thoughtfully at him as they entered the house, and then sternly repressing the pleased smile that flitted over her face said with assumed indifference:

"I hope that's a compliment, but how can you expect me to remember the rhymes of my childhood?"

The days went by so fast that Ruth could hardly keep the run of the calendar. They were full days, with hard work at school, delightful rides on Peter Pan with Arthur or his father to accompany her, and pleasant afternoons with the girls at one house or another. Then there were important letters from her father and Uncle Jerry which necessitated lengthy replies, and frequent conferences with Miss Burton and Mrs. Hamilton.

On the night of the Candle Club party the girls met first at Dorothy's house, and went out into the stable together. A large room on the second floor had been given up to the boys who had furnished and decorated it to suit their taste and their opportunities. An old piano, begged for by Frank when the Marshalls were buying a new one, stood under one of the electric lights and looked well-used. That it had outlived its most tuneful days was not to be denied, but Arthur could still coax college songs out of it, and for miscellaneous strumming and tunes with one finger it was invaluable. It was also a convenient place on which to leave sweaters, hats and books, and altogether the boys considered it one of the most valuable of their possessions.

The furniture of the club room could hardly be called ornamental, but it was certainly comfortable. A couple of steamer chairs, a roomy couch covered with bright cushions, and an ancient bookcase offered an impartial welcome to the lazy and the studious, and bore mute witness to the fact that many happy hours had been passed there. The boys had made the room gay with banners, and trophies of past victories, and red curtains and a few rugs added to the general cheerfulness.

Mr. and Mrs. Marshall went out to the stable with the girls, and as they went up the narrow stairs there was a shout of laughter from the club room, laughter so mirth-compelling that the girls giggled involuntarily. At Mr. Marshall's peremptory knock there was a sudden stillness; then the door opened a crack and in a choked voice Arthur said, "Just hold the line a second, please, and we'll let you in."

Almost as he spoke there was a low, "all right now," from Joe, and Arthur threw the door wide open. For an instant the guests coming from the dark stairway into the brightly lighted room could hardly see; then as they took in the general appearance of their hosts the room rang with laughter.

The boys were all dressed in shirt-waists and skirts, with neat white collars and little bows of various kinds. The skirts came to the tops of their boots, and as they had donned the heaviest, biggest boots they could find, the result was amusing. They all wore frivolous little aprons, and on their heads jaunty white caps perched on hair which made the girls go off into fresh fits of merriment. It was the most wonderful hair-dressing the girls had ever seen; heavy braids, thick curls, even pompadours—and all made out of yarn.

"What happened that made you keep us waiting?" asked Ruth as she wiped real tears from her eyes.

"Betty fell over his skirt and had to fix it on again," said Phil with a twinkle, realizing that the girls hadn't yet taken in the full meaning of the performance.

Then it was the boys' turn to laugh, for, looking at Joe's red wig, the girls knew at once what Phil meant, and each hurried to pick out the imitation of herself.

"Do you mean to tell me I look like that?" asked Dorothy, pointing a scornful finger at Jack, who was deeply engaged in tightening a large, black bow which dangled at the end of his long, yellow braid.

"Why, Dolly, I flattered myself I was the handsomest one of the bunch, and now you speak harshly to me," protested Jack in a tone of great grief.

"So far as beauty goes there isn't much choice between you," said Charlotte meditatively. Her eye was taking in Phil's tall, slender figure, upon which the skirt hung in limp folds. His brown braids were twined about his head in a coronet, a style with which Charlotte's mirror was familiar.

"Oh, those ridiculous boys! Do see my bunch of curls," shrieked Ruth, getting around where she could better see the back of Arthur's head.

"Whatever made you think to do it, you silly things?" asked Betty, eyeing with disfavor the magenta-colored hair which graced the head of her double.

"Why, we are going to cook a supper for you to-night, and we thought we couldn't follow better models as to dress than the celebrated Cooking Club," answered Phil making a low bow with his hand on his heart.

"Do get to work, then," said Dolly with great disdain. "Let's see if you can imitate our cooking as remarkably as you have our looks."

A long table stood in the middle of the room, covered with a white cloth, and on it reposed several chafing-dishes, a pile of plates, forks, spoons and knives, and a quantity of paper napkins. Olives, crisp little pickles and plates of crackers were the only visible evidences of food, and to the hungry girls the prospect was not encouraging.

"If you will kindly be seated, young ladies," said Frank, whose woolly black locks made his imposing manner ridiculous, "we will now show you how much we know."

"How little, you mean," added his sister in an audible whisper.

"I'm not going to have Dolly near me while I cook," said Frank decidedly. "You go and watch Arthur, Dolly; that's a good girl."

"Don't watch me," groaned Arthur. "Charlotte and Ruth have got their eyes glued on everything I'm doing already. Watch Phil, Dorothy. He's much nicer than I am."

Mr. and Mrs. Marshall slipped quietly away about this time, and then, with their guests showing an irritating and undue interest in all that they did, the boys began the preparation of the supper. As the work progressed, wigs were pushed out of place and finally discarded; hooks and eyes, too fragile for such muscular young ladies, loosed their hold, and skirts were trampled under foot and cast aside. At last it was only six boys in girlish-looking waists who were working with pretended confidence but real anxiety under the eyes of their unsparing critics.

It leaked out afterward that the boys had been practicing for several weeks on the special dishes they made, and it was a great relief to the girls to find this out. On this evening, however, the lordly creatures asserted that cooking was an art that reached perfection only when man undertook it, and that a man knew by instinct quantities, seasoning and time of preparation.

The girls, though not half believing, watched with a surprise not unmixed with awe while Phil cooked a lobster a la Newburg, seasoned to perfection, Arthur prepared delicious creamed potatoes, and Frank did up cold lamb in hot currant jelly in the most approved style. There were potato chips and buttered brown bread to eat with the lobster, and warm rolls to go with the second course. Everything was so good that the girls could only wonder and eat.

"Could I have a glass of water, please?" begged Ruth just before the feast began.

"Sure. Oh, wait a minute and I'll get you something better than water," said Joe, plunging down the stairs and into the house, to return in a moment laden with bottles of ginger-ale.

"Now watch him open them, Ruth," said Charlotte with pretended admiration. "See how skilfully he does it. No girl could ever attain to anything like that. After all boys are superior beings and—"

"Wow," gasped Joe, as a fountain of ginger-ale rose from the bottle and struck him squarely in the face.

"Here, take that bottle out of the way. It's going all over my creamed potatoes," shouted Arthur.

Blinded and dripping, Joe made a frantic effort to head the bottle another way, and in the attempt turned a liberal portion over Bert, who was standing near.

"I was just about to say," continued Charlotte calmly, "that boys always do everything in such a complete way."

"Well they know when not to talk," growled Joe, mopping himself with a napkin, and frowning darkly at the offending young lady.

It was a supper of gayety, and good things to eat. The boys were so proud of their cooking that they disliked to let the conversation wander from that particular subject, and brought it back by some skilful remark whenever they thought the interest of the girls was flagging. Each club toasted the other, and Jack toasted the ladies, ending with the sentence, which became a byword in Glenloch, "Girls are all right if you only know how to manage 'em."

"What a lot of dishes," said Betty with a sigh as they rose from the table.

"We will now show you how the powerful masculine mind handles the problem of dishes," proclaimed Phil.

"Do those dishes worry us? Not at all," added Bert as the boys lifted the table bodily and put it in a comer of the room.

"Now you see 'em," said Joe, helping to unfold two screens borrowed for the occasion, "and now you don't."

"Yes, but they're there all the same," argued Dorothy unconvinced.

"Mrs. Flinn will change all that, little sister," answered her brother condescendingly. "We have bribed her to spend to-morrow morning cleaning the club room, and she thinks we are 'blissed young gintlemen.'"

"Get over on the piano stool, Art, and give us that new music you were playing last night," begged Joe.

"No, don't play new things," implored Dorothy. "Play some college songs."

And so Arthur played and they all sang; some on the pitch and some off, but all happy, and each one deeply satisfied with his own share of the performance. At last, swinging around on the piano stool, Arthur looked at Ruth and said mysteriously, "You may as well tell them your news now, Ruth."

Every one turned to look at Ruth with such sudden interest that the color flashed into her face.

"It isn't enough to make you all look so curious," she laughed. "It's only that I can't have many more parties with you, because my father has sent for me, and I am to sail on the 'Utopia' a month from to-day."

There was a moment of mournful and incredulous silence; then Dorothy said indignantly, "I call that a mean shame; you were promised to us for a year, and that would make it next October."

"I know. But you see father will be ready for me sooner than he thought, and much as I should love to spend the summer here, I do want to be with him."

"Strange," murmured Joe.

"And—and there's more news," continued Ruth. "Uncle Jerry and Miss Burton are going to be married a week before I sail, and go over with me for a wedding trip,"

"Tell us all about it," pleaded Betty, throwing herself on the floor at Ruth's feet.

"I have; just about. You see Miss Burton's father and mother are dead, and she hasn't any near relations except a sister who lives way out in Seattle. So Mrs. Hamilton has invited her to be married at her house, and it's going to be a very private wedding."

Distinct disappointment was visible in the girlish faces as Ruth finished.

"But." she continued hurriedly, "there is to be a reception after the ceremony, and all of us girls are to be invited to help receive and the boys to usher."

"How perfectly lovely!" exclaimed Betty.

"I don't think so," mourned Dolly. "What shall we do with Ruth and Miss Burton both gone?"

"Tell them the rest, Ruth," urged Arthur.

"The rest? Oh, yes. After the reception Uncle Jerry and his wife—doesn't that sound grand?—are going off somewhere for a week, and Mrs. Hamilton is going to take me to New York to meet them."

"And Mr. Hamilton and Mr. A. Hamilton are going, too," added Arthur with great satisfaction.

It was Ruth's turn to look surprised. "Why how perfectly grand! You never said a word."

"Father just suggested it to-night and I thought I'd surprise you. He's planning to have four days there before you sail."

"Fine old plans," said Betty soberly. "It's all very nice for Ruth, but I feel as if all the dolls I ever had were stuffed with sawdust."

"So do I," added Dorothy, with a little catch in her voice. Charlotte said nothing, but to the surprise of every one she put her arm around Ruth in a way that was more eloquent than words.

The Candle Club party threatened to end in melancholy fashion, but the irrepressible Joe came to the rescue as usual. "Ruth can't leave the country," he announced decidedly. "She has too much live stock to look after. To my knowledge she owns half a horse, and the whole of a very enterprising kitten."

Every one laughed, for all knew that Fuzzy's latest escapade had been the theft of a string of sausages which he had proudly brought home untouched to show to his mistress.

"It's just as well for me to go before my live stock gets me into trouble," laughed Ruth. "As for my half of Peter Pan, I shall will that to Arthur to keep until—"

"Until you come back, of course," interrupted Arthur. "Your father may have you for a while, and then you must come back to Glenloch, and this time for a whole year."

"Hear, hear," came in eager chorus from the others, and the party broke up happily after all.

CHAPTER XIX

"HOME, SWEET HOME"

As the "Utopia" made her slow way out into the harbor Ruth's eyes clung lovingly to the three people who were waving farewell to her from the end of the pier. For some time she could see them distinctly, could tell which was Aunt Mary and which Arthur. Then the figures on the pier began to melt into each other, the waving handkerchiefs became mere white specks in the distance, and Ruth looked up to find Uncle Jerry watching her with quizzical gaze.

"I don't see why that band wants to play 'Home, Sweet Home,'" she said impatiently as she turned away from the side. "I don't think it's nice to work on people's feelings that way."

Uncle Jerry laughed. "You're not the first one who's thought that," he said consolingly. "Your aunt and a steamer chair are waiting for you on the other side, so come along and look at your letters and parcels."

"My aunt," repeated Ruth. "How ridiculous it seems to think of that little young thing being my aunt."

"Not any more absurd, I'm sure, than that a little young thing like me should be your uncle. I'm only

five feet eleven, and a hundred and eighty pounds in weight."

Ruth laughed merrily, as Uncle Jerry meant she should, and just then they came to their chairs, and to the pretty new aunt smiling a welcome.

"You were so absorbed that we left you for a moment while we secured our chairs." she said as Ruth dropped down beside her. "I'm glad you've come, for I'm so anxious to know what's in these mysterious packages."

"I brought them up from your stateroom in my bag," added Uncle Jerry. "I thought you could entertain your youthful uncle and aunt by taking out one at a time. Sort of a grab-bag arrangement, you know."

Ruth drew out one of the packages and looked at it curiously. "That's Katharine's writing," she said, as she studied the address. Inside was a round flat pincushion made of blue velvet and embroidered with a spray of apple-blossoms. Around its edge was a fancy arrangement of pins of all colors, and fastened at the back hung a sort of needle-book with leaves of coarse net in which were run invisible hairpins. On a sheet of paper was written in Alice's small, neat hand:

Pins for your collar and pins for your hair, Pins for your belt, and some to spare For any old thing you may want to do. And not only pins, but our love so true We send in this little package to you. Katharine —Alice.

"Isn't that dear of them?" cried Ruth. "I suppose they made it, and I shall hang it up in my room just as soon as I get a room."

Number two proved to be a letter from Charlotte, and as Ruth opened it a dainty handkerchief trimmed with narrow lace insertion and bordered with pink wash ribbon dropped into her lap.

"DEAR OLD RUTH" (the letter ran):

"Don't fall overboard when I tell you I trimmed this handkerchief myself, and more than that, don't look at the stitches. I thought I couldn't show my devotion to you more than by poking a needle in and out.

"Glenloch won't seem the same without you, and I can't bear to think you've really gone. Do write to me often and tell me all the interesting things you see and do.

"I can hear weeping and wailing out in the yard, and I know the twins are into some mischief, so I must stop.

"Love to Uncle and Aunt Jerry from "Yours disconsolately, "CHARLOTTE."

"I should say that was devotion," said Ruth much touched. "Charlotte hates sewing, and that handkerchief must have been awfully fussy to do. But isn't that a nice name she's given you, Aunt Jerry? I like that and think I shall use it."

The next package was a small book from Marie, filled with little water-color sketches of Glenloch. Ruth and Mrs. Jerry took such a long time over it that Uncle Jerry got quite impatient, and threatened to draw the next one himself if Ruth didn't hurry.

This time she brought out a rolled sheet of paper, and opening it found a snapshot of Betty's merry face stuck in the centre, and all around her a circle of kitten pictures. At the bottom she had written:

"DEAR RUTH:

"Once a lady told me that nothing tasted so good to her on shipboard as some home-made cookies some one had given her, so I thought I'd try it for you. I packed them in a new tin pail with a tight cover, and I hope they'll keep crisp until you can eat them.

"Arthur promised to leave them in your stateroom, so if you don't find them you'll know it's his fault.

"I shall go in often and pet Fuzzy so that he won't miss you too much.

"Yours with love and kisses,

"BETTY."

"Isn't that Betty all over?" said Mrs. Jerry with a laugh. "So practical and helpful and anxious to comfort some one, if it's only a kitten."

"That accounts for the package down below that I didn't bring up," said Uncle Jerry. "I didn't realize it belonged to Ruth."

"Those cookies will taste good," laughed Ruth. "She couldn't have sent anything more—more Bettyesque."

The next thing was carefully packed and required much unwrapping, but as the last paper was taken off Ruth squealed with delight over a little traveling clock in a brown leather case. Enclosed with it were five cards each bearing a message. The first one that she read said in a small, even hand:

"This clock is to tick away the hours until you come back to us.
Please hurry so that it won't get too tired.—PHIL."

Then a boyish-looking writing announced, "'Time and tide wait for no man,' but Glenloch and the Candle Club will wait for the nicest girl that ever came out of the West.—JACK."

"Dear me! Am I blushing, Aunt Jerry?" asked Ruth quite overpowered by this last tribute. "This next is Frank's; I know his funny, scrawly writing."

"'Backward, turn backward, oh, Time in thy flight.' Give us our
Ruth again just for to-night."

"Isn't that neat and sentimental? Now I shall go in and play and sing 'My Bonnie lies over the Ocean.' Aren't you glad you're out of ear-shot?—Frank."

Card number four was enlivened by a funny drawing of a boy with his fists in his eyes standing in a pool of tears, and under it the inscription: "Bert; his feelings to a T."

The last card said in writing so small that Ruth could hardly read it:

"Dear Ruth:

"Hope you'll like the clock. We know you are fond of a good time(-keeper). I am growing thin because I miss you so. Not a morsel of food has passed my lips to-day; it has all gone in. My kindest regards to Emperor William.

"Love to Uncle Jerry and Mrs. Jerry.

"Yours,"

"Joe."

Ruth sat back in her chair quite overwhelmed by her latest gift. "Isn't that a dear clock, and aren't they perfectly dandy boys?" she asked as she fished around in the bag which was growing empty.

"Here's something from Dolly," she added as she drew out a tiny package with a note attached.

"DEAR RUTH" (the note said):

"I've decided not to be jealous any more, and just to prove it I'm sending you my heart.

"Do write soon to

"Yours lovingly, DOROTHY."

Ruth hastened to open the package and found in a little box a tiny, gold heart. "How lovely! Dolly heard me say I wanted one of these little hearts," she said in a satisfied tone. "And isn't it sweet of her to forgive me for letting Uncle Jerry marry you?" she added with a laugh.

"Now there are just two more packages; a small and a large. Which shall I take?"

"Take the large one; you've just opened a small one," advised Uncle
Jerry.

Ruth pulled out a large, square package, and opened it to find a handsome album filled with snapshots of Glenloch scenes and Glenloch friends.

"That's from Arthur, I know, though it doesn't say so, and that's what he's been so busy and secret over all these last weeks."

Ruth turned the leaves knowing that here, at least, she should find an unfailing source of pleasure.

There were single pictures and groups of all the girls and boys she knew best, some of them so funny she could hardly see for laughing. There was Joe as the nice old lady; all the Candle Club boys in the costumes they wore at the last party; Ruth herself starting off on Peter Pan for a ride with Uncle Henry; Fuzzy in his most bewitching attitudes; and others so suggestive of the good times that had been that Ruth finally closed the book with almost a sigh.

"Well, now for the last package," she said diving into the bag. "Oh, here's a note from Arthur that I didn't find before." She tucked the envelope down in her lap, and opened first the little box to which was attached a note from Mrs. Hamilton. In the box was a brooch, a holly wreath in delicate greenish gold with tiny rubies for berries. The note said:

"DEAREST OF BORROWED DAUGHTERS:

"This is from Uncle Henry and me to remind you of the Christmas
when you did so much for us. I am beginning to miss you even as
I write this, and I don't like to think of our home without you.
Come to us again soon. With much love,

"AUNT MARY."

Ruth's eyes were suspiciously misty as she held the note and the little box out to Mrs. Jerry. "You'll have to read that for yourself," she said with a choke in her voice.

Then she opened Arthur's note, which began:

"DEAR RUTH:

"This is not a sell, but a real secret. Father has just told me that if everything goes well we three will take a trip abroad next year and meet you and your father. We want you to travel with us if we do. Isn't that great? You can tell your people, but we don't want it told in Glenloch just yet. I'm going to work like everything this fall so that when the time comes there won't be anything on my part to keep us from going.

"Keep jolly, and remember that you're a Glenloch girl and must come back to us before long.

Yours, ARTHUR."

"Here's a grand surprise, and you two can be in the secret," she said as she handed the note to Uncle Jerry. "Isn't it fine to think that the Glenloch good times haven't come to an end?" she continued. "Do you remember the story of the 'Princess and the Goblins,' and how the little Princess always felt safe so long as she held one end of her fairy grandmother's thread? Well, I feel as if I am taking with me the ends of any number of threads; one from each of the girls, and a very important one from Aunt Mary, and a great many others, too. I'm going to keep tight hold of them all, and some day they will pull me back to Glenloch, I'm sure."

Ruth sat silent for some time looking out with eyes that hardly saw the heavenly blue of the sky, or the sparkle of the waves as they rose and fell in the sunshine. Then, as though her spirit had already traversed the unending stretch of ocean, she said with a throb of exultation in her voice:

"Now, six days of this, and then Germany and—my father."

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