

Pearl and Periwinkle

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CHAPTER I

MYRA'S DREADFUL CHILDREN

Miss Hetty Maise, having spent the night in fitful spells of slumber, at last awakened by the beams of sunlight, sat up in bed with a start, quite unrefreshed and possessed of an uncomfortable feeling that something unpleasant was about to happen. A venturesome sunbeam, casting its light upon a picture on the heavy walnut dresser, seemed to recall the cause of her sleepless night and present uneasy state of mind. Drawing her lips tightly together she frowned severely at the inquisitive intruder.

"Those children," she thought, "Myra's dreadful children! If the minister himself hadn't insisted that it was my plain duty to take them I shouldn't have done it. It seems almost a sin to take in two children who have been circus performers."

Miss Hetty was up by this time, for she hated to be idle. In fact the minister's son had once remarked that she was accustomed to stir her cake batter while she was reading her Bible; but then the minister's son was inclined to be irreverent at times.

But even he would have felt sorry for Miss Hetty this morning. To adopt two children when you know nothing whatever about their care was by no means a pleasant prospect. Besides, these children were the son and daughter of the outcast of the family, an only sister half-forgotten though only two months deceased. The thing itself was pathetic, yet it seemed an imposition: above all to adopt two children who had traveled all their young lives with a circus was at least to Miss Hetty's mind almost scandalous.

Often during the morning she absently folded her hand and in unaccustomed idleness gazed, as if dazed, down the quiet village street as if expecting help from that source. Once, having aroused herself, she had gone to an old trunk, her deceased mother's, and drew out two faded pictures tied with an old ribbon and folded over a lock of yellow hair. The first picture, the face of a girl that smiled up at her so sweetly and trustingly, caused unbidden tears to well up in her eyes, just as it had always affected her mother. The second picture was regarded with more interest though with less affection. Here was the same loved face, but beside it the merry, dark face of the actor husband for whom she had left her home, and in her arms their first baby branded--as Miss Hetty thought--with the heathenish name of Periwinkle. A letter had accompanied this photograph, but it had never been answered. Several years later another letter had been received, telling of the death of her husband and of the illness of Periwinkle's two year old sister, Pearl.

Though Myra had died but two months before and if perhaps then her younger sister had felt any pang of pity for the orphaned children, it did not enter her thoughts this morning. She plumped up the pillows on the prim horsehair sofa, painfully recalling the pillow fight she had once seen between her cousin's children. Children were a nuisance, and these two--Myra's dreadful boy and girl--were bound to be more than that.

Her sense of indignation reaching a higher pitch every minute, she spitefully slammed the front door and left the house just as the clock struck eleven. Her heels clicked on the sidewalk sharply in full sympathy with her state of mind as she walked down the street of the village. And then, as she might have expected, she met the one person whom she least of all desired to meet. An icy stare on her part, a stiff formal bow from the man passing--that was all, but she knew that in that brief interval he had had ample opportunity to observe that she was worried and cross and looked every day of her twenty-nine lonely years; and of course it could not but give him much satisfaction. This disturbing thought crowded out the remembrance of the unloved, unwelcome niece and nephew until a sharp curve in the road brought into view the smoke begrimed depot and, drawn up before it, the train which had just come to a puffing, throbbing standstill like a wild horse unwilling to pause in its mad race.

Several of Miss Hetty's acquaintances, gathered on the station platform, were not accorded the usual recognition, for her eyes were fixed intently on the childish pair alighting from the train. The one, a tall, slender lad of about thirteen, with curls of golden yellow hair clustering over a broad forehead, a mouth whose sensitive delicately modeled lips together with the shadowy depths of deep grey eyes indicated even in one so young the temperament of a dreamer, first engaged her attention. But little Pearl! Hair black as night when only one star is shining and eyes like the double image of that star; a figure as tiny as the dream of a fairy: that was Pearl.

It was not her childish charm however that made Miss Hetty gasp. It was the enormous bow, half covering her head, and the butterfly comb that caught back her curls. The ribbon seemed larger than the silk frock buoyant with many skirts and quite abbreviated, while the little high-heeled shoes seemed designed for anything rather than wear.

For a time the children stood quite alone on the platform. Their first appearance had held Miss Hetty spellbound at

her position near the door. She felt rather than heard a suppressed chuckle run through the small crowd. Then suddenly her gaze met a pair of compelling brown eyes, not cold and scrutinizing as they had been when their owner had passed her a short time before, but sympathetic and friendly. She blushed furiously and, quickly walking toward the forlorn pair, extended to each a cold hand of welcome.

"Come Periwinkle, come Pearl," she said, not ungently. "I am your Aunty Hetty and have come to take you home." And holding her head high and her eyes straight ahead, she led the strange pair past the tall gentlemen on the platform.

"Do you know, Aunt Hetty, I thought it was you," said the boy eagerly as they left the station. "You look a little like our mother did. She told us lots about you, and so did the Fat Woman."

"The fat woman," exclaimed Miss Hetty somewhat in surprise. "Who is she?"

"She looked after us," replied Pearl in a voice so sweet that in spite of her aversion to her duty Miss Hetty's heart began to warm to her unwelcome charges. "Even while mother was living she cared for us, and she told us all we know. She got me all my clothes. She was so jolly and nice, and so was Mr. Barleydon, and I didn't want to leave the circus, I didn't, but Periwinkle did."

"Why did Periwinkle want to leave," asked Miss Hetty, now becoming much interested, although she did purse up her lips when she spoke the obnoxious name. Periwinkle answered for himself: "I didn't like the trapezes, nor the everlasting traveling. I wanted to be in a home like mother told us about and go to school. And besides that, I didn't want Pearl to be like the spangled circus ladies, even if some of them were lovely and the Fat Woman perfectly grand; so was one of the clowns. You can't imagine, Aunt Hetty, what a noble, charitable fellow Jerry was. I disliked to leave them. But how I hated the snake-charmer; you can't imagine, Auntie."

Aunt Hetty shivered at the mere mention of a snake-charmer. She could easily sympathize with Periwinkle in his aversion for her.

"You use pretty big words for a boy, Periwinkle," was, however, all that she said.

"Yes, the Fat Woman said she couldn't account for them, but she taught us, and she is a very brilliant woman. Little Pearl can read splendid. You can't imagine, Aunt Hetty."

"You said that the Fat Woman told you about me," hinted Miss Hetty, forgetting that she didn't wish to know anything about these worldly people.

"O yes," replied Pearl, also desirous of furnishing her aunt with some more information concerning her friend, the Fat Woman. "She said as you would be different from the ladies we were used to, but you'd be our relation and mean all for our good, and we was to put up with you as you'd put up with us, and to respect you and love you like we did her. But you won't mind just at first, will you, if we can't love you quite so much as her, 'cause the Fat Woman was very dear to me and Periwinkle."

A sudden something gushed up in the heart of Miss Maise, the something that makes the Fat Woman and the clown and all of us kin, but it died down as quickly, and she only said:

"I shall expect you to be good children and obey me, that is all."

"Not love you?" asked her young nephew in surprise.

The hard look faded again from Aunt Hetty's face as she yielding to such an irresistible entreaty, hesitatingly replied:

"Yes--yes, a little if you can."

CHAPTER II

PIGS, CABBAGES, AND--MR. ROBERT GREY

The day following the arrival of Pearl and Periwinkle at their Aunt Hetty's home was Sunday. But the children were not permitted to attend the church service since the time had been too short to procure suitable clothing for Pearl. Miss Maise, feeling that she would be setting a poor example in remaining at home herself, determined at least to attempt the instruction of the children in their Sunday-school lesson. Immediately then after the breakfast dishes were washed she called them into the living room.

Miss Hetty did not know just how to begin. The children sat quietly, regarding her with wide-open eyes, and under their questioning gaze she felt rather uneasy. A cloth-covered catechism was lying on the table and this she finally took up. Glancing at the first page opened she abruptly asked her niece:

"Are you a Christian?"

Pearl gazed at her inquiringly, but gave no answer. Miss Hetty was prepared for the worst now.

"Do you believe in God?" she continued.

"Yes," answered the child in a surprised tone.

"Who is He?" was the next question asked.

Pearl pointed a little forefinger upward. "Up there," she said in that awed tone in which little children speak of God, no matter how limited their knowledge concerning Him. And all of Miss Hetty's questions convinced her that Pearl's religion was limited to the knowledge that God lives "up there."

Periwinkle admitted that he knew little more except that their mother had told them that God always sees them.

"And don't you know any Scripture passages, nor Bible stories, nor your Catechism? and don't you know that God punishes children who do not love His Word?" asked their aunt in much surprise.

"But we never heard him speak a word," cried Pearl in reply.

Miss Hetty gazed at the child in eloquent silence. Then she arose, unlocked the bookcase and selected two books.

"Learn the first two pages by the time I come back," she said. "I'll leave you for half an hour. I know no other way of helping you."

There was silence for five minutes after their aunt with an indignant swish of skirts had left the room. Pearl was the first to break the silence.

"Do you think this is much fun, Peri?" she inquired, looking up with a puzzled frown.

"No, I don't. I don't understand it. The Fat Woman never gave us a lesson unless she explained it first."

"Let's not study any more then. It's dreadfully hot in here and the air smells awful nice comin' through the window. Just like tulips and roses and several brands of perfume jumbled together. Say, Periwinkle, if you opened that window ever so little I could just fly right out to that yellow butterfly that's wiping his feet on Aunt Hetty's flowers."

Pearl's wish was always law to her adoring brother. He set her free, and as soon as he saw her "flying away," he daringly raised the window still higher and jumped out quietly himself.

Hand in hand they skipped down the street as noiselessly as snowbirds in the snowdrift and as gracefully as two windblown leaves. Many people were walking along the street, all dressed in their best clothes and all going in one direction. Suddenly Periwinkle clutched his sister's hand.

"Look, Pearl," he exclaimed excitedly, "there's that tall man with the nice brown eyes, and the tan shoes who looked at Aunt Hetty so funny at the station yesterday. Should we speak to him?"

"It would be nice of us," Pearl replied, and always accustomed to act on the impulse, she called, "Howdy do, Mister! Why is everybody going this way this morning?"

The man, thus addressed, stopped and, looking down on them with one of those smiles of comradeship that won their hearts at once, replied:

"Why, hello! It's Sunday, you know, and we are all going to church. Don't you want to come along?"

"Oh, Aunt Hetty wouldn't--she don't like my clothes, you know."

"I think they're real pretty," replied their new-found friend, smiling a little because of their answer. "Silk aren't they?"

"Yes, trimmed with satin and snow-flake chiffon. I guess we'll go with you, Mister."

"Good!" There was a ring in his voice that the children could not understand. To walk to church hand in hand with the niece and nephew of Hetty Maise would be a novel experience not unattended with some humor--that appealed to him: to win their love would be the victory he most desired.

"Won't you tell me your names, please," he whispered as they entered the church.

"Periwinkle and Pearl Toddles, relatives of Miss Hetty Maise," was the whispered reply.

Having introduced himself as Robert Grey, their new acquaintance led them down the broad aisle of the church. As soon as the organ began to sound its sonorous tones Pearl forgot her strange surroundings entirely and sat between her brother and Mr. Grey as if in a trance. Not until the sermon was well under way did she move, and then only to lean against Periwinkle and whisper, "Isn't this fun, Peri?" "Not fun exactly," he whispered in reply, "but awfully nice. Hush, Pearl, and if you get tired just practice on your multiplication table."

It was not until after the doxology had been sung and they had come out into the open air that the children spoke again.

"Wasn't it wonderful?" asked Periwinkle dreamily. "Do you know what I thought of, Mr. Grey, when the man was speaking? He said we should do good to all people. How I wish I'd have heard him say that before I hit that boy that sneaked around the tent at Higginsport. That man makes you feel like you want to be good, doesn't he?"

"Will you bring us again?" asked Pearl, with a wistful look on her anxious face. "I like music even better than riding around the ring."

"Your aunt, Miss Maise--will bring you next Sunday," was the only promise that Mr. Grey could hold out for them.

"We wish you could go with us too. Thank you for taking us," they called as they left him.

The hands of the clock on the school-house were pointing to twelve when Pearl and Periwinkle crawled quietly into the parlor through the still open window. Their books were on the floor where they had dropped them, but before they could have picked them up, had they so desired, Miss Hetty came in. "Came in" is expressing it very mildly. Even Periwinkle with his extensive vocabulary could not think of an adequate word to describe the manner of her entrance.

"You have been disobedient. Don't tell me you haven't. You've been playing on the street. Don't tell me--"

The children, however, did not attempt to interrupt her or defend themselves until she had finished her scolding. Then her nephew let his thunderbolt fall.

"We've been to church with Mr. Robert Grey."

"To church--with--Mr. Grey!" gasped Miss Maise, sinking into the nearest chair and staring at the two young culprits as if she thought that the heat had affected their minds. "To church--with--Robert Grey!"

"Yes, Aunt Hetty. Mr. Robert Grey with the brown eyes. I should think if anybody was named Grey their eyes ought to be grey,--"

"Periwinkle Toddles! Did Mr. Grey have the nerve to come to my house and steal you away to be made a laughing stock of in church?"

The boy flushed but tried to be courteous in his answer.

"I didn't see anybody laugh at us, Aunt Hetty. And Mr. Grey didn't steal us away. We got tired of sitting here and so we ran out in the street and he saw us and took us with him. Some children sang, and a man talked and we had a dandy time. I'm sorry that I disobeyed you, but I'm glad I went and I don't know whether I'm gladder or sorrier. So I don't much care what you do to me."

"You will be punished severely," replied their aunt, "for running away and going to church with that man."

"Why, what is wrong with him?" queried the niece, remembering Mr. Grey's wonderful smile and how nicely he had treated them.

Miss Hetty was silent for a moment. She was uncertain just which was the best way to answer this question. Finally she said, "Pearl, Periwinkle! There is something I must tell you; something that you must find out before you begin school the week after next. It may be hard for you to understand this but you must know it so that you will not make any mistakes again. You know there are only two families in this village, two families that have any influence, I mean. They are the Maises and the Greys and their relatives. They used to be good friends; in fact, such good friends that two of them promised to become even more to one another. Three years ago a quarrel began. My father had a very fine pig, a Poland China, very fat--I remember. One night it strayed into neighbor Grey's cabbage patch, and being a pig, did much damage. Mr. Grey came to father who promised to keep Glenny--the pig--at home. That same night it got out again and Mr. Grey who was rather hot tempered sicked his dog on it. The big fellow killed our finest pig. Father went to law about it, but died before it came to court, and the lawsuit was dropped. But the quarrel kept on just the same. The Greys clung together and so did the Maises. Every one else in the village sided with one or the other. I thought I'd better tell you this before you started to school. The Maises and Greys pass each other without speaking now."

"Why, I think that's silly," said Peri energetically "and Mr. Grey don't look like a fellow to get sore over a pig."

"He did his best to avoid getting mixed up in the trouble," admitted Miss Maise, "but it was his father's dog that killed the pig, and he just couldn't help himself perhaps. Everyone got mixed up in it somehow, and I don't believe any power under the sun can make the Maises and the Greys friends again. But if you think I've forgotten how disobedient you've been, you are much mistaken!"

"It's a shame, Periwinkle, to tie a big boy like you to a chair, but I see I can't trust you." With these words she drew a ball of twine from her pocket and to his great shame began securing him. Then she fastened little Pearl in a like manner.

"I'll bring you bread and milk for your dinner," she said, "and perhaps you won't be so anxious to run away the next time."

"But just the same," said Pearl when her aunt had left, as if she at least had found much consolation in the thought, "we went to a good place."

Her brother however did not reply; he was thinking of a Poland China pig in a cabbage patch and comparing its loss with that of Mr. Grey's priceless friendship.



CHAPTER III

AT THE SHRINE OF JOE SMITH

The occasion of the first meeting with the minister was a memorable one for Pearl and Periwinkle. "As good as Clown Jerry," was Pearl's rather startling statement, while Periwinkle assured Aunt Hetty that the preacher was even more brilliant than the Fat Woman.

It so happened that this meeting took place that very Sunday afternoon when the two children were doing penance for their morning's escapade. The minister had called for the special purpose of meeting Miss Hetty's new charges, very much to that good lady's dismay. She afterward declared it to be one of the tricks of fate that the minister should have called at that particular time, especially since her niece still wore that horrid blue dress of which she so much disapproved. But the minister did not seem to notice neither the dress nor the fastenings which confined the children. He seemed rather to be impressed by Pearl's wonderfully expressive face and the startling sweetness of her voice, while Periwinkle's precociousness and quaint, grown-up ways attracted him very much.

"Let the children come to see me soon, Miss Hetty," he urged, "and I may be able to give them some instruction along the lines in which you say they lack so much. Joe could help them in their lessons too." And then turning to Pearl and Periwinkle, he asked: "How would you like to come to the parsonage, and go over your lessons with my son?"

"Would he play with us?" queried Pearl.

With a hearty laugh the minister replied: "I'm almost afraid he would. He is still a boy even though he is nineteen and goes to college. I am sure that he still knows how to play. He's the only boy I have--all I have--and I suppose I've spoiled him."

"When shall I send the children, Rev. Smith?" asked Miss Maise.

"Tomorrow, or the next day," was the prompt reply. "This is mid-August. We can't begin too soon."

Tuesday afternoon the children wended their way to the parsonage. Pearl was clad in a starched gingham dress, uncomfortably high about the neck, and with sleeves of an unaccustomed length. The minister himself met them at the door and ushered them into a room that from all appearances was meant to be used as a comfortable and cozy living room--even though there were some evidences of disorder which they knew their aunt would not have approved of.

"Amuse yourselves for a minute, while I try to find Joe. It is rather difficult to keep track of him," said the minister as he left them alone.

When a few minutes later, the minister, followed by his son, was about to enter the room he stopped, and, grasping his son's arm warningly, they both, unperceived, watched the two children.

Left to their own resources the children had not remained inactive. Their curious eyes taking in all the strange surroundings, they saw many things that interested them. One of the pictures on the east wall particularly impressed them. It portrayed the figure of a man, his face lighted up with a wonderfully tender expression, while in his arms and round about him were small children, alone or with their mothers. The afternoon sun, shining through the open window, seemed to shed a radiant halo over the whole group and to make the picture stand out in bold relief. Standing before the picture in silent wonder, they had not noticed the approach of the minister and his son. The minister quietly withdrew, and when the children turned as if by common impulse, they saw only a young man whose ingratiating smile at once opened a way to their hearts.

Their previous experience in coming in contact with people enabled them to become acquainted with the minister's son and to feel themselves the very best of friends in less time than it ordinarily takes children to overcome their natural timidity in the presence of strangers. Nor was it any wonder that a close friendship was formed so quickly, for Joseph Smith was that type of grown up boy whom all children feel instinctively to be their friend.

After the first greetings and establishment of this friendship, Pearl turned with childlike determination to the matter uppermost in her curious mind.

"What is the name of that picture?" she asked, pointing at the one which had attracted their attention.

"That is 'Christ Blessing the Children,'" replied Joe, and then he hesitated. His father had asked him to help the children with their arithmetic; he had not specified that he turn missionary as well as teacher. Work of that kind was not

exactly in his line. Like so many lads of his age he seldom spoke on religious topics, although his faith was a vital factor in his life. But catching sight of the enraptured face of little Pearl, he felt certain facts flashing through his mind, something about Christ's love for little ones and that we should not offend one of them.

So he bravely began to tell the sweet story, though somewhat rapidly and not any too clearly.

"Jesus Christ, the only Son of God whom God loved very much, lived on earth and walked with His disciples. His disciples were the men who followed Him and heard His teachings and tried to be like Him by doing good and helping others. The mothers who lived where Jesus was preaching heard of His kindness. They had heard also how He healed some of their sick friends. So they brought their children to Him so that He might bless them. Now when the disciples saw the women with the little children they told them to go back to their homes. They said that Christ was too busy to bother with children. But Jesus did not want them to do this and he told his disciples, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the Kingdom of God.' He loved little children and He also wanted them in His kingdom. He then took them in His arms and blessed them, just as you see in this picture."

A solemn stillness followed while the two turned again to view the lovely painting. Finally Periwinkle broke the silence:

"He must have been very good to take such an interest in the little children." Thereupon all thought of the arithmetic lesson vanished, and Joe briefly told the whole beautiful story from the night of the angels' song until Jesus Christ again returned to His throne in heaven.

When Joe had finished his recital, Periwinkle looked up with sparkling eyes.

"Oh, how glad I am to know that! How I wish the Fat Woman could have heard it! She'd been so interested. I think she always thought herself better than the rest of the circus people."

A certain short prayer with somewhat similar meaning occurred to the minister's son, but he only smiled at the pharisaical egotism of the Fat Woman. After all she had trained the children morally, if not religiously, and this made the teaching of Christian truths far less difficult. Children reared in love are almost always ready to accept the story of the Supreme Love.

"She never said anything about faith," continued Periwinkle in his thoughtful way. "But she told us, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' Maybe," he ventured with some hesitancy, "that was her faith. Do you suppose it would be just as good, Joe?"

Joe was somewhat surprised that his young pupil had thus unconsciously stumbled upon a disputed point that has led many minds astray, but he answered firmly and with conviction:

"No, Peri; the Fat Woman could not keep the law of love perfectly. Do you think she did?" he challenged suddenly.

"No," cried Pearl, who had been listening intently. "Once or twice she slapped us when we hadn't done a thing, and sometimes she got very spiteful at Mr. Barleydon, and she used to tell mother that the tight-rope walker made her sick. That's not doing unto others as we wish them to do unto us. But," the loyal youngster hastened to defend her friend, "the tight-rope walker was enough to make anybody sick and then I guess the Fat Woman never heard about Jesus saying: 'Love your enemies.'"

"Perhaps she did know it," replied Joe, "but she couldn't have kept the rule perfectly anyway. Nobody can, Pearl, even those who know God's law best, although they must always try very hard. God showed His great love for us by sending Jesus Christ to keep the law for us. He could not do wrong or fail to keep the law. And now if we believe in Him and come to Him as children come to their father for help, He will count it the same as if our lives were as good and perfect as His own.--But I'm afraid that I can't make it clear to you and it will be pretty hard to understand," he added.

"Joe," said Periwinkle gravely, his hands in his pockets and his eyes on his young friend's face, "did you ever hear anything you didn't just exactly want to understand, something that's too nice to get right down on a footing with yourself? Once I was reading one of Mr. Barleydon's books of poetry that made you feel like a breeze was carrying you right up to the gates of heaven. Mr. Barleydon looked at me in surprise, then looked at the book and asked kind of funny, 'Do you understand it, boy?' 'No sir!' I told him, 'but somehow I feel it better for not being able to understand it quite.' And that's how I feel about some of the things you told us. Do you suppose that's all right?"

"I think, Peri," said Joe soberly, "that is the real understanding."

"Say, you know what a fellow's driving at," cried Periwinkle with delight. "Jerry, the clown was sympathetic like that. I think that Jerry, next to you and your dad, is the most Christian person, I know. Aunt Hetty ain't one though," he finished rather bluntly.

"Why Peri," protested the minister's son, "your Aunt Hetty is one of the best workers in the church. She belongs--" Joe smiled as he hesitated, "to our Ladies Aid, the Adult Bible Class, the Ladies Missionary Society, and if I am not mistaken also to a Temperance Union, an Anti-cigarette Club and a host of others."

"But she doesn't love her enemies," was Periwinkle's reply.

Joe smiled to see how deep an impression this injunction made on both children.

"And all the Greys are her enemies," continued Periwinkle, "especially Mr. Robert Grey. Now I think he is a fine man."

"He is," was the warm rejoinder.

"I guess they were in love once. And then--just because of a pig--I think it's dreadful, Joe."

The boy had touched on a subject that was a matter of concern with his teacher and one to which he had given much thought.

"Peri," he cried, "if I had the chance my father has every Sunday, I would tell them that they are showing themselves to be mighty poor Christians. But then dad knows best, of course. He's had years of experience to help him. Only I don't see how he stands it. For three years he has been trying to bring the Maises and the Greys together and he is not discouraged, though I can't see any results, Peri--" Joe stopped suddenly.

"What, Joe?"

"You'll be starting to school soon. There will be Greys and Maises there. I know that if I speak to them about it--and I will--the Greys won't pitch into you unless you start something."

"I won't do it. I'd just as lief fight a Maise as a Grey any day. I ain't--b i g o t e d."

A sudden smile lit up the features of Joe Smith. It shone from his eyes, parted his lips, lurked in the dimple in his chin, and then slowly died away. His eyes held it the longest.

That smile had won many a friend for the lad. It made him a favorite at college, in the village, and in the church with the Greys and the Maises alike. But never had it made a greater conquest than now. Every child and every grown-up whose heart is young is a hero-worshiper. In the heart of Periwinkle a new fire was kindled, a new shrine built. Then and there he decided that his every deed should be worthy of his Ideal.

"You don't want me to fight at all," he questioned after a moment of silent adoration. "And I won't unless they pitch into Pearl. Why, here comes your father and I guess it's most supper-time."

"Oh," laughed the minister, entering the room, "Miss Hetty's table would make an appeal to anyone. I know you could not resist it, or I would ask you to stay here for your supper."

"We'll come again, thank you," said Pearl, "but it's cream pie tonight, please, and I helped Aunt Hetty make it."

"Pearl," said Periwinkle when they were started on their way home, "there's one thing I want you to notice, Smith called me Peri and from now on that's my name. Periwinkle sounds like a sissy. There was once a great man named Perry. Will you remember, Pearl?"

"Yes, Periwinkle," replied his sister absent-mindedly, "but don't you love the story he told us?"

"It was beautiful," replied her brother, "and I think it's splendid to try to do good because Jesus loved people so, and because Joe Smith loves Him too."

CHAPTER IV

THE CLAN

Preparations for the "big dinner" to which all the Maises had been invited and to which, knowing the good treat which was in store, they had been eagerly looking forward, were about complete. This dinner was to be held at Miss Hetty's home, as a birthday celebration in honor of the "clan leader," as the minister's son had designated that worthy man. Jeoffrey Maise was the twin brother of the deceased owner of the famous pig and it was he who had always maintained the bloodless but bitter feud with the greatest fervor. It was always his eloquence and burning hatred that rekindled the flame when the blaze of enmity showed any signs of abating.

He had now reached his sixty-fifth year and to do him honor Aunt Hetty assisted by a bevy of rosy-cheeked nieces and cousins, had brewed and baked and stewed one hot morning in late August. Altogether eight families of Maises, arrayed in their best, sallied out to the white-gabled home of their spinster relative. Not only were they prompted to attend because of the prospect of revelling in the contents of Miss Hetty's famous kitchen, but they would also have the opportunity of meeting the "circus children."

Pearl and Periwinkle had up to this time met only a few of their mother's relatives, but on this day they submitted to a deluge of kisses, questions, stares, and advances that wellnigh overwhelmed them, but which they nevertheless met with commendable equanimity. On the whole their aunts and great-aunts, uncles and great-uncles, cousins and near-cousins were better pleased with the children than perhaps the children were with them. The common agreement was that Myra's boy and girl were exceptionally pretty, bright, and not at all ill-mannered; although they perhaps lacked the shyness of their village cousins.

When dinner at last was over, the big living room became the scene of an important family council. A vivacious girl of sixteen clad in a smart white linen frock with shoes to match, took her young cousins in charge, expecting to entertain them, while their elders were engaged in a discussion that would in no way likely be of interest to young minds. She informed them that she was the only child of Eldon Maise and how she spent her winters in a fashionable boarding school, only coming to the country in summer to spend her vacation. Eldon Maise, as Peri knew, was the rich man of the "clan." But the lively prattle of his sister and their dainty cousin on topics of interests common only to girls, bored him and he soon found himself becoming interested in the conversation of his elders.

"You say Jim Grey's son-in-law is running for postmaster?" the guest of honor was asking.

"So I hear," replied his nephew Eldon in his cold, quiet way.

"You don't intend to sign his petition, Eldon?" demanded the old man, his suspicion aroused by the matter-of-fact answer of his nephew.

"Oh, business is business, Uncle," retorted the younger man, rather abruptly. "I can't afford to provoke the illwill of the Greys. If Holner comes to me, I dare say I shall sign his paper."

"And you a son of your father!" cried Jeoffrey Maise, much aroused by this apparent defection from a family duty. "You to go back on us and help the other side!"

"Oh, Uncle," replied his broader-minded nephew in an even tone, "that little thing occurred so long ago. We aren't living in the Kentucky hills, you know. Family feuds are not in fashion in this state. I'm sure I don't care much if you want to keep up the old grudge, but I don't want it to interfere with my business. It's been damaging enough already."

An older brother of Hetty and Eldon drew his pipe slowly from his mouth and looked impressively upon the company. Jim Maise had never received the "lamin" of which the younger members of the family boasted, but he had what he himself fondly called "hoss sense." At any rate he was always listened to attentively as befitted an eldest son.

"Wall," he drawled, "I reckon this here post-office affair don't come too late for us to get even with some of the things the Greys have done to us. Only it don't strike near enough home. Holner ain't nothing but a son-in-law of the old man's half-brother. Now if we could strike a blow to Robert Grey, or his sister Kitty and her family, it would be something like. Nothin' real bad but just humblin'-like."

Periwinkle's heart beat faster at the mention of Robert Grey in this connection and Hetty stirred nervously in her chair. She had it in her power, as they all knew, to humiliate Kitty Farwell and incidentally Kitty's brother, Robert Grey. Hetty had not forgotten that Kitty was quite influential in causing the final "break" between herself and Robert. When she spoke her voice sounded strange and hard.

"The mortgage on Mrs. Farwell's place is due in October," she suggested rather hesitatingly.

"I was coming to that, Hetty," cried Jeffrey eagerly. "Who holds the mortgage now that Myra is gone. It always seemed to me to be mighty generous of your ma, to will all her property to Myra when your pa disinherited her."

"I hold it," replied Miss Hetty tersely, "as legal guardian of Myra's children and heirs."

"Kitty cannot pay it?" questioned her brother Eldon quietly.

He and Mrs. Farwell had been playmates and youthful sweethearts.

"Hardly," replied his sister with a grim smile. "Kitty is scarcely worth the eight hundred it demands. Since that shiftless husband of hers died, she has all she can do to make ends meet and keep her three children together."

At this heartless reply a smile of ill-disguised contempt might have been detected on the face of at least one of the men present. But as he was only a "poor relation" dependent for his very means of livelihood upon the generosity of Jeffrey and Eldon Maise he wisely remained silent.

"Won't Robert interfere?" urged one of the women. "He'll surely help his sister."

The leader of the clan laughed shortly.

"What's Robert got," he demanded, "that ain't tied up so tight it won't do him any good now? Of course the Greys will pretend to come to Kitty's aid, if Hetty closes up on her. But it will be humiliating enough to all of them even if they do pay the money. You see it isn't generally known that there is a mortgage on the Farwell place."

"I'm not so sure that they can pay it," interrupted Eldon in that cold tone that was like a mask, hiding perhaps a warm depth of feeling; or perhaps it was only the expression as cool as the iciness of his spoken thoughts. "I happen to know of an account against Elbert Grey that will cripple that branch of the family for the time being. Ashur could no more turn over the money than could Robert, and Lisbeth is so tied up that he is out of the question. As a matter of fact the Greys would be up against it."

"Have you warned Kitty?" asked Jeffrey Maise, turning to Miss Hetty.

"Not yet. But I shall warn her, and give her as much time--as the law allows."

"Good for you!"

"Hetty!" Eldon's voice held a note of cold reproach. "You--a woman--would you try to ruin a widow and three helpless orphans?"

"There you go again," passionately declared his sister, feeling the force of his argument, yet anxiously seeking to justify her position. "You claim to be a man of business, and yet you would condemn me for taking what is lawfully mine. Please remember, Eldon, that I am doing it for the sake of our departed sister's children. Aren't they orphans themselves? Won't they need the money as much as those Farwell young ones do? Pearl's voice is little short of remarkable, but it takes money to train it. Peri must go to college some day, you all agree. Very well. But some one must pay the expenses. They shall have it too, in spite of you, Eldon. I'll warrant you wouldn't do less for your Alois."

Throughout this conversation Periwinkle had remained silent, though his interest and bewilderment increased every moment. At Miss Hetty's words a look of understanding displaced his puzzled frown. Springing to his feet, he unhesitatingly addressed the astonished company in such a respectful yet determined manner that his presumption could not but be pardoned.

"Aunt Hetty," he demanded, "did you say that thing that you called a mortgage belonged to Pearl and me?"

"Yes," replied his aunt shortly, "and I as your legal guardian, may do with it as I see fit."

"That is a strange law," replied her questioner. "But I tell you, Aunt Hetty, I won't have any of the money you take from those poor people, nor will Pearl. I'd rather be a beggar. And I know I'd feel worse than a beggar, if we took her place from her. Oh, how can you, how dare you work against Mr. Grey when he is so good? Hasn't Joe Smith's father ever told you to love your enemies?"

"Periwinkle," protested his aunt weakly. For the first time in her life she felt utterly helpless and incapable of reply.

"Periwinkle Toddles!" she repeated, but she could not meet the look in his reproachful grey eyes. His great-uncle Jeffrey recovering first from the shock finally came to her aid.

"Boy," he thundered. "What do you know of this? In my day children didn't speak until they were told to do so. The young rascal needs a sound thrashing, Hetty."

But Miss Hetty had been so affected by the childish rebuke that she could not find it in her heart to be angry with her nephew.

"Think how the child was raised, Uncle," she pleaded.

"Peri, didn't the--the Fat Woman ever tell you to respect your elders?"

"Yes, Aunt Hetty, I think so," the boy replied, surprised at unexpected softness of her tone. "Least ways she told us to respect everybody that was worthy of it. She was a very brilliant woman," he added, turning to his Uncle Eldon with a rare smile. And then for a moment the mask that hid the soul of that man was lifted, for he replied with a sudden and unusual warmth: "At any rate she deserves credit for training a boy, whom I would be glad to call my son."

It was too much for Periwinkle. Tears suddenly filled his eyes. He wanted to thank his good, kind uncle but he could not let them see him in tears. Turning his back abruptly on the company and starting for the door, he said in muffled tones:

"I must find sister--But, Aunt Hetty, if it's for her and me you want to take that money from Mrs. Farwell, please, please don't. We'd much rather not and--" he stopped at the door and turned about for his final thrust, "don't you think that Jesus would much rather you wouldn't?"

He was gone and silence reigned for a time. It was Jeffrey, as usual, who broke it.

"Perhaps, Hetty, we had better not be too hasty with that mortgage," he said as if almost ashamed to express any feeling of charity toward the Greys.

"I've already decided that," was her curt reply.

Eldon looked at his sister in approval and the "poor relative" in the corner was so pleased that, forgetting for once to be cautious, he burst forth in a hearty "hurrah."



CHAPTER V

THE WALL THAT PARTED

While this exciting conference was in session, dainty Alois Maise and little Pearl, finding that the deliberations of their elders were interfering too much with their own private conversation, had left the room. After tripping gaily down the village street at Alois's urgent invitation, Pearl consented to visit the Eldon Maise mansion. The beautiful home captivated the orphan whose life in the circus had deprived her of all real comfort such as she saw here. But it was before the piano that she paused the longest. And when she sang for Alois, that young lady was much gratified to discover that Pearl's singing was as exquisite as the charm of her spoken words.

"I'm going to tell Joe Smith," she cried in delight. "You must sing in the Children's Choir." The expectation that these words aroused was sufficient to make Pearl happy as a lark for a week. Joe heard her and Peri sing and both were admitted in the choir.

On the second week in September, when the magic of autumn had transformed the fields and orchards and groves into tints of gold, and colors of brilliant hue, the village school began. It was the first time Myra's children had ever gone to school, but the Fat Woman had proved such a good teacher that they were only a year or so behind in their studies. This only served as an incentive to make them study. Periwinkle especially made rapid progress. Pearl however was not so fond of books, but her ways were so gentle and charming that no one objected when she had to count up her sums on the rosy tips of her dainty fingers.

Joe Smith had kept his promise to use his influence with the Greys to protect his young friends from annoyance: for all the little Greys, from Zeke to Mehitable, treated the newcomers quite politely. But this attitude on the part of the Greys was not quite to the liking of the rest of the Maises and they showed their resentment. To have the Greys patronizing their two prime favorites was too bitter a pill to swallow. But a few days after school opened, Emil Maise and Zeke Grey spent two hours at the brook, each bathing a pair of swollen eyes.

The "accident" had occurred when the two had fought a rough and tumble battle because Pearl--a Maise--had presumed to give her pencil to Zeke Grey to sharpen; and the courageous Zeke had dared to sharpen it before the very eyes of Emil. Such accidents are hard to explain to parents and so the brook had been the only alternative. But when news of the fight reached the ears of the teacher, the ruler descended on Grey and Maise alike, while Pearl wide-eyed, wept for both and made the lads shake hands before she would speak to either of them.

When Esther Tull of the Grey "camp" furtively pushed Ruth Hayton's lunchbox out of the open window, Pearl shared her own lunch with her cousin Ruth. Periwinkle however had regarded the Tull girl with such fine contempt that she gave Ruth a bead ring as a peace offering and Ruth then wrote her name in Esther's autograph album.

These incidents did not escape the notice of the teacher who with growing hope saw that what had appeared to be impossible was gradually taking place. She had tried everything within her power to break down this wall of hatred that separated the two factions, but the barrier had proved invincible to her every effort. And now she saw that while she, armed with the rod of authority and exercising the strictest discipline, had made a dismal failure, these two orphaned circus children were unconsciously melting the icy wall with the benevolent sunshine of their smiles and the warm love beams of their tender young hearts.

The minister heard of it too and although he shook his head rather doubtfully over the teacher's hopeful predictions, yet he wrote cheerfully to his son: "I can't understand it. The children seem to know the magic of some fairy alchemy, for whatever they touch becomes like them--lovely."

But it was not all smooth sailing, especially for the boy. Periwinkle had never known his grandfather Maise, but he nevertheless held the old gentleman in high esteem. Therefore when Washington Grey called that relative "a mean old fellow," Peri's fist darted out with amazing rapidity but was just as quickly withheld before it reached Washington's eye. And that lad, wondering at his escape, showed his appreciation by presenting Periwinkle a horse-hair chain the next day which was accepted with all the graciousness of Peri's sweet nature. The teacher, observant as ever, and wondering too, blessed Myra's "dreadful" children in her heart.

CHAPTER VI

JOE SMITH'S CHOICE

Joe Smith's den in the dormitory of his dearly beloved Alma Mater was the favorite haunt of not only his intimate friends but of many other students who had yielded to the charm of his personality. His influence for good and his popularity with the student body had also attracted the attention and commendation of the faculty, whose opinion was best expressed by one of their number who had openly made a statement to the effect that when the boys were with Smith they were quite as safe as when in company with their teachers. But on this particular evening in early November Joe was alone. It had been a dreary depressing day with the cold rain beating on the rattling window panes and a complaining wind whistling mournfully through the bare trees. The young man's face almost seemed to reflect the gloominess of the dull gray evening sky into which he gazed with the vain hope of discovering a let-up that at least would permit a pleasant evening's walk.

A knock at the door interrupted his gloomy reflections and in his eager haste to admit his visitors he knocked over several pieces of furniture that impeded his progress.

The next moment four boisterous forms, not awaiting Joe's invitation burst into the room rather unceremoniously. Two of them were Sophomore room-mates whose rooms were located on the same floor of the dormitory. Joe did not know them intimately but he did know that they were regarded rather dubiously by some of the students who had had dealings with them. In fact there was a rumor that the younger of the two was closely watched by the authorities. The other two were from the city, but were frequent callers at the college.

As a rule Joe shunned the company of the two "Sophs," but this evening he was glad that it was the merry quartette that had thus visited him rather than some of his quieter and more studious friends.

"What's on tonight, Joe?" began one by way of opening the conversation.

"Nothing," replied Joe gloomily, kicking spitefully at the mantle top, "unless you fellows will stay and spend the evening."

"And all become as glum as you," replied another, mimicking Joe's dejected appearance.

"See here, Joe, we want you to come with us tonight. Why can't you?"

Joe whistled dolefully, but his interest aroused, he inquired questioningly:

"Where are you going?"

"To Bordell's--for a harmless little game of pool. Everybody goes, everybody but a 'Percy dear,'" replied the younger of the Sophomores with an air of superiority.

Joe's face flushed and he faced the speaker, but the other Sophomore spoke before Joe's indignant thoughts could find utterance.

"That's all you know about it, Rex," he said reprovingly. "Why, lots of splendid fellows never play billiards and they aren't mollycoddles by any means. I do think though that they are depriving themselves of innocent pleasures."

Then turning to Joe in a very conciliatory tone he again urged, "Come Smith, you'll go with us tonight," and he rested his hand persuasively on Joe's shoulder. There was something wonderfully fascinating about the older of these two Sophomores; so Joe thought. But he only said, "And after Bordell's, I suppose, will come Steinberg's?"

His four visitors laughed in hearty unison, and the one whom they called Rex exclaimed in a sarcastic tone:

"There's no harm in that, is there? A drink never hurts a *gentleman*."

"But it doesn't always leave them gentlemen," remarked Joe emphatically.

"Of course, Smith," replied the elder of the Sophomores assuming a persuasive tone, "we shan't urge you. We asked you because we like you, and because you like a little harmless fun. If you don't come I'm afraid you'll regret it when you are here alone. Or, by the way, won't Reydal come?"

"Yes, Reydal," and from the woe-begotten tone of his voice the happy-go-lucky visitors knew they had scored a point. Suddenly Joe's boyish laugh rang out--that laugh that won for him so many friends. "Reydal," he repeated, still laughing. "Reydal, with his philosophy of gloom, and his face as long as a gypsy's tale of woe. He will sit opposite me

here by the fire; he'll spread his coat, open his book, and try to hide his mouth and chin behind his number twenty collar. Then from the depths of shining celluloid he'll quote his own views, contradicting some by-gone philosopher, until the welcome stroke of ten relieves me. Poor Reydal, how can I escape him?"

A sense of shame for this uncharitable attitude toward his most intimate college chum possessed Joe Smith before he had finished his humorous sarcasm, but he was in an unaccountable mood just then.

"We've told you how you can escape him," urged one of the boys from town as they started for the door. "We've got some visiting to do in the dorm, but will call for you in an hour or so, and if you should decide not to go with us--there is always Reydal."

Joe joined with them in the laughter that followed this sally, and then reentered the room, thrilled with a delightful feeling of anticipated adventure.

"There's no harm," he assured himself as if repeating a lesson. Just then another knock sounded and a cheery voice called, "The lion's share for you tonight Smith," and the evening mail was thrown on the table. The minister's son looked it over carelessly, too excited to take an interest in it, until his eyes caught the sight of a square envelope addressed in round childish letters.

He tore it open with a quick characteristic gesture, and as he did so a small photograph fell out. Two childish faces with eyes equally appealing and lovely gazed up at him. Joe regarded it with the look of tenderness which he always felt for children, and then placed it on a conspicuous place on the mantle. He then directed his attention to the enclosed letter which was written in Periwinkle's now familiar hand. The letter told of their experiences at school, of Pearl's singing in the children's choir, and of his interest in a boys' Bible class which he had joined. He mentioned that Aunt Hetty had given Mrs. Farwell a long extension on the mortgage held against her and that Robert Grey had paid in part already and that the money had been laid aside until he was old enough to go to Joe's college.

"Aunt Hetty is very good to us," the letter continued. "She says we are improving in conduct. But I told her it was because of you, Smith. Pearl says I can't be as good as you. She is right, but that don't keep me from trying. I am afraid, Smith, that Washington Grey would still have a black eye, if I hadn't thought of you just before I was going to hit him. I thought to myself, 'Smith wouldn't do anything that wasn't right, and if I want to be like him I've got to try pretty hard.' Pearl sends her love, Smith, and so do I. She is making you something for Christmas, but it's going to be a surprise. Good-bye for now.

Your friend,
Perry Toddles."

Having finished reading the letter, Joe rose and flung the window wide-open, breathing deeply of the moisture-laden air. Something seemed to be choking him--"Smith wouldn't do anything that wasn't right!" His mind was in a turmoil--how that thought conflicted with the impulse of the previous moment. Below, the city lights, seductive and full of mystery, sent their alluring invitation through the fog. Down there he would find congenial friends and pleasure--as youth desired it. Here--yes, but "Smith wouldn't do anything that wasn't right, and I want to be just like him."

The sound of music, alluring, enticing, came faintly to his ears; the lights signalled frantically and the wily city smiled her invitation more urgently than ever before--and then that compelling voice of a conscience that responded to the inviolable faith of his little hero-worshipper--"Smith wouldn't do anything--"

The door burst open violently. "Ready, old Pal?" Their chorused inquiry brought him to his feet--he hesitated--and then closing the window with a bang the minister's son faced his questioners.

"I'm not going," he replied quietly but resolutely.

"Not going?" echoed his visitors quite taken aback. They had been so sure of him. They needed him, a student who stood in so well with the professors.

"Not going," said Rex and continued with a sneering laugh, "I suppose you prefer Reydal?"

"Yes," was the rejoinder, "I prefer--Reydal."

Then moved by a sudden impulse Joe called out: "Come in fellows I want to tell you why I can not go."

He took the picture from the mantle and handed it to them.

"Here is a little girl who believes in me with all her heart, and here is a boy who wants to be just like myself. He doesn't believe that Smith would do anything that was not square. It makes a lot of difference when anyone believes in

you like that."

Feeling the force of Joe's argument and realizing the futility of attempting to change his decision, his disappointed visitors left. But many times that evening, in the midst of their hilarious fun, thoughts of those who believed in them as the boy and girl believed in Joe persisted in rising uncalled in their minds.

Some minutes after the four had left, a tall broad form, whose neck encased in an enormous collar rendered him especially conspicuous, entered the room without the ceremony of knocking.

"I've come to discuss with you a rather abstruse statement which I have found in Bersey's 'The Human Mind,'" boomed forth a voice from the depths of the said collar.

"Sit down, Reydal, sit down," urged Joe, placing the easiest chair in the den before the fire. "We still have two hours for our chat."



CHAPTER VII

PERIWINKLE BREAKS THE ICE

The opening days of December brought in their wake a cold spell that was more severe than had been experienced for many years so early in the season. The thermometer began to drop suddenly Friday evening, and Monday morning found the ponds ice-covered and crowded with merry school children on skates. Winter's little joke in arriving ahead of scheduled time met with their approval, even though their elders may have had reason to complain. Periwinkle and Pearl were also there, taking their first skating lesson. The teacher, watching at the window, was glad to see that Emil Maise and Washington Grey were helping Peri, while the girls of both "clans" were trying to keep Pearl on her feet.

After school was dismissed Pearl and Peri in company with one of their second cousins (George--a freckled-face red-headed youngster) hurried to a pond that glistened in the field back of Robert Grey's home. The three had been there but a few minutes when a wistful little face peered at them from Mr. Grey's back fence. It was Kitty Farwell's second son, timid little Bobby, one of the primary pupils at the village school. Pearl called to him to join them.

Bobby came running gleefully, his red-stockinged legs kicking up the soft snow in mimic clouds. After racing with the little chap for a few minutes, Pearl ran back to the older lads to have her skates put on again. Then laughing and shouting, the three joined hands and skated along the pond edge while little Bobby, left alone, slid nearer and nearer toward the center of the pond. Suddenly a piercing scream reached the ears of the three skaters and they turned just in time to see Bobby's golden head disappear under the ice. For a moment all stood still as though rooted to the spot; then Pearl and George ran as fast as their legs could carry them to the house of Mr. Grey. Peri, obeying the heroic impulse of his brave heart ran quickly but cautiously toward the thinning ice in the centre of the pond. Bobby had come to the surface and, though much frightened, had managed to grasp the edge of the broken ice. When Periwinkle came within a few feet of the child he flung himself down and wriggled carefully toward Bobby until he was able to get hold of his collar. In this position he managed to hold Bobby's head above water, but found it perilous to move or attempt to pull him up on the ice. His right arm grew numb with the weight and his left hand, cramped and twisted by his sprawling posture, pained him severely. He knew that help would come soon, but an eternity seemed to pass before he heard Mr. Grey's encouraging call, "Hold on Peri, just a minute longer." Periwinkle did hang on desperately until Mr. Grey, with the help of rails and a rope, rescued them both from their dangerous position. Then Periwinkle grew faint and dizzy and knew nothing more until he found himself on Mr. Grey's couch with Mr. Grey and Pearl bending anxiously over him. Bobby's mother, having bundled the little fellow up like a department store package, had wheeled his little cot close up to the stove, while Bobby himself howled lustily, really none the worse for his little adventure. But Periwinkle had sprained his left wrist as Mr. Grey saw when he bathed and dressed the injured hand. His first thought was to call the doctor, but before he could do so the boy opened his eyes and begged to be taken home. Thereupon Robert Grey wrapped him up in his great fur coat and carried him as easily as if he were a baby to Miss Hetty's home.

Hetty met them at the door, her heart cold with fear. She now realized for the first time how dear Myra's children had become to her. Without a word she admitted Mr. Grey with his burden and calmly heard his account of Periwinkle's heroic deed. Not until he had placed Periwinkle in a large armchair before the fire and had turned to go did Miss Hetty address him.

"I must thank you," she said tremulously, holding Peri's hand tightly in her own, "you have saved his life."

"As he saved my nephew's," replied Robert Grey, but his voice faltered as he realized that for the first time in years he was speaking to *her* and that *she* was grateful to him.

Miss Maise however took no notice of his emotion.

"That was his duty," she said coldly. "Peri is a Maise through and through. He is too brave and kind to let anyone or anything perish. He risked his life to save your nephew as he would have risked his life to save Alois' terrier."

Stung by her words and manner, Mr. Grey turned again to go; yet in spite of his rebuff he thought that Hetty looked very beautiful with the sunset glow lighting up her golden head, though as cold as the snow clad peaks lighted up by the gold of the descending sun. It was Periwinkle's voice however that called him back again. "I'm so glad you came just when you did Mr. Grey," he murmured gratefully, "and Aunt Hetty and Pearl and I ain't no end thankful to you for being so kind as to carry me home, when I weigh such a heap, thanks to Aunt Hetty's corn-bread, the minister says. You do believe in the Fat Woman's golden rule, don't you?" and then he added meditatively, "I wonder whether you believe in that other rule, 'Love your enemies,' you know?"

The color rose to Miss Hetty's cheeks at her nephew's last words and deepened as Mr. Grey said quietly:

"Perhaps I believe in them too much for my own good." And the glance he directed toward the boy's aunt was half reproachful, half tender. Hetty turned quickly to wipe a bit of imaginary dust from the table, but Mr. Grey turned once more as he reached the door:

"May I send the doctor up, Miss Maise?"

Miss Maise had been trying to muster up courage to ask him that very thing, for she did not want him to think too harshly of her. Now that he had really asked, however, she replied crisply:

"Thank you, Pearl can go for me. Good evening, Mr. Grey. You have been most kind to Periwinkle."

Mr. Grey felt as if she had tried to hurry his departure, but, had he been able to read Miss Hetty's thoughts just then, his heart would have been much lighter.

Naturally enough, Peri became a hero in the village. He had saved the life of one of the Greys at the risk of his own, and the Greys could not but help making a fuss over him. The village children had learned already to love the kindhearted boy and his sweet sister; now their parents came to regard them with the same affection.

This change was noticed by the minister and in his next letter to his son he wrote: "The barriers between the two factions are slowly crumbling, simply because those children will not recognize them. Strangely enough, the strongest resistance is made by Hetty and Robert Grey, but Pearl or her brother will take them by surprise some time and then all will be well. I must tell you of something that will cause you much pleasure. It seems that the children's mother had told them of our Christmas services here and they were making great plans for Christmas eve. They have never seen a Christmas tree. Miss Hetty had not the heart to tell them that for three years we have had no Christmas Eve service, neither had Robert Grey--nor I. So one Sunday when Peri was home with his sprained wrist and Pearl of course was with him I made one final appeal to the congregation after the Sunday-school service. I could see that it was what they had all been longing for. To show you how both families feel toward those children I need mention only that Eldon Maise and Robert Grey, almost in one breath, made the motion that we have children's services on Christmas Eve this year. You must hurry home for the event."

When Joe finished reading these good news he indulged in a regular dance of delight, waltzing his table and other articles of furniture around in such a way that, had they been possessed of the power of speech, a very strong protest would have been forthcoming.

"Hurrah! Peri has broken the ice at last," he exclaimed. "At least he has cracked it and it won't take much more to finish the job. Won't there be a big splash though when the Maises and Greys all tumble in. Those circus children of Myra Maise are the best things that ever strayed into the parish."

CHAPTER VIII

EVEN UNTO BETHLEHEM

After Periwinkle's recovery the children's visits to Mr. Grey's home became quite frequent. Miss Maise wisely concluded that if the Greys wanted to idolize Myra's children she might as well not interfere. Pearl especially loved to visit there, for Mr. Grey, who was quite an accomplished musician, seeing her interest, helped her in her music and they spent many delightful hours in playing and singing. One Friday evening, two weeks before Christmas, Pearl had just finished singing a most wonderful melody with such sweetness and tenderness that Mr. Grey seemed almost entranced.

"Isn't it lovely?" asked Pearl breathlessly. "If that were only a church song I could sing it in the choir. The music is really church music, isn't it?" she added critically. "I believe the angel's 'Glory' song must have sounded something like this one."

"The very thing," exclaimed Mr. Grey with delight. "Nothing could suit your voice better than this song. Now if I would write a Christmas song for this music would you sing it at church on Christmas Eve?"

"Oh, Mr. Grey," cried the excited girl, "could you do that? I thought it took a wise man to write a poem." Mr. Grey passed over the uncomplimentary remark with a smile.

"I used to be rather clever at rhyming things, Pearl," he said. "If I only could write half of what is in my heart, it might make a very presentable song. And now if you will come tomorrow afternoon we'll practise it," adding, "but, Pearl dear, you must promise me not to sing it to anybody--not even to your aunt--before Christmas."

The Christmas season found Pearl and Periwinkle busily engaged in all sorts of preparations. They helped Miss Hetty bake wonderful Christmas cakes. Their combined efforts were necessary to make what they thought would be just the thing for Joe Smith. And Pearl did not hesitate to call on Miss Hetty to show her how to hemstitch a handkerchief for Robert Grey. The most fun of all, however, was to get Miss Hetty's present into the house and stow it safely away, which they finally accomplished when Miss Hetty happened to discover that there were some things which had to be attended to in the attic.

But best of all was the joy of helping Zeke Grey and Emil Maise cut down the enormous tree for the church. Nor did the children wonder, nor take any credit to themselves when the son-in-law of Jeoffrey Maise worked side by side with the nephew of Jim Grey, to set the tree in place.

Yet when it came to filling the candy sacks and decorating the tree these tasks were assigned as separate duties to the ladies of the two clans. Both parties still could not forget the past even around the children's Christmas tree. The minister's son was everywhere and so too was Alois Maise who was just home for the holidays.

While the church was thus the scene of festive preparation, Pearl was busily engaged in rehearsing her song with Mr. Grey.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "I didn't imagine that my words would fit so well. They don't amount to much in themselves, girly, but you must sing into them all that my heart would say. Sing as you do now, and the minister and Joe and I, and perhaps--perhaps Aunt Hetty will bless you forever, dear."

The delight of dressing that evening, the joy of the hurried supper, the happiness in walking hand in hand with the beloved aunt to the brightly lighted church! How could Miss Hetty or the children ever forget that night!

"Do you know, Auntie," said Peri thoughtfully, while the soft snow fell about them, "I'm thinking of my last Christmas. How much different this one is. Now we have you, and a home, and Mr. Grey, and Joe and everything we need and everybody loves us. Even Pearl wouldn't go back to the circus for anything. But I keep thinking tonight of what the Fat Woman said, last Christmas when Jerry the clown gave her a silver mirror. She said, 'Thanks awfully for making me remember that Christmas is here again. But I guess it ain't so much what we give and get as it is the way we feel about giving and getting it round Christmas time.' I told this to Joe Smith yesterday and he said, 'Yes, Peri, the spirit of Christmas is the Spirit of Him whose birthday we celebrate.' Oh, Aunt Hetty, aren't you--aren't you hoping that I'll grow up to be like Smith some day? I wish that I could do something for him. It's grand to do things to make people happy and good. I reckon the two are about the same thing, happiness and goodness. Oh, just look how the church is lit up! Have I talked too much, Aunt Hetty?"

By this time they were at the church door and, trembling with excitement, they entered. Pearl and Periwinkle took

their places in the children's choir, beaming with happiness and joy, while Aunty Hetty, with a sparkle in her eyes and a new warmth in her heart, took her place near the front.

Joe Smith occupied an advantageous position from which he could see everything that was going on. There for the first time did he realize all that the children of the circus had done for the parish.

His heart was gladdened when he saw an old lady of the Grey "clan" smiling sweetly as she accepted Alois Maise's proffer of her little gilt-edge hymnbook. He smiled to himself as Hetty Maise made room for Kitty Farwell when the latter, arriving late, found her own pew occupied. His smile broadened into a grin as he watched them singing from the same book, held at arm's length, as if they still were afraid of each other.

The program "passed off" much as all Christmas Eve services do, an occasional prompting, a song a trifle off key, a crying baby quickly hushed with peppermints or crackers.

But beneath it all there was a deep undercurrent of some unexplainable feeling. A ruddy glow suffused Miss Hetty's cheeks. Robert Grey felt the presence of some great unknown joy. The primary youngsters lisping their faltering words, the men lighting the candles that sent forth the glorious message sparkling from the trees, all seemed moved.

"Was the angels' song, 'Peace, good will,' at last to be realized? was it finally to find its true response in the forgiving, loving hearts of his faction-split congregation?" that was the minister's hopeful thought. Wise in experience, he recognized this pervading influence--knew that it only needed an impulse, like a spark in a powder magazine, to bring about its expression.

At last it was all over but Pearl's song. A dainty figure dressed entirely in white stepped reverently before the altar--the sweet charm of childish innocence making its appeal even before a note was sung.

The tense silence was broken. Sweet tones with throbbing notes of appeal, carrying with them that Christmas message of immeasurable love, penetrated every corner of the house of worship and the heart of every listener. The story that she sung--that oft-repeated but never old message of love, of peace, of good-will, that binds the heart to God and makes the whole world kin--yes they had heard it often--but now their hearts, long irritated by selfish pride and hate, yielded to this sweet-voiced appeal, so softly yet so compellingly beating on these fast-crumbling barriers.

The song was ended. For a moment there was hushed silence. Then Jeoffrey, then Herman Grey Lane, Miss Hetty, Robert Grey--everyone arose, and the minister stood before them with tears streaming from his eyes and falteringly yet fervently pronounced upon them the benediction.

After the doxology had been sung with more fervor than melody, things happened so fast that Pearl and Periwinkle never could get them straightened out. Very little was said, but people smiled at one another through tears and clasped hands silently. And strangest of all Mr. Grey and Aunt Hetty were leaving church together, and seemed to have actually forgotten their existence. But she turned at the door, and they heard her say softly:

"The children, Robert, the dear children!" and she came back and kissed them as she had never done before.

"Peri shall go to college in a few years," said Mr. Grey, "and Pearl shall study music." Then he kissed them also and Miss Hetty with a pretty blush called him their Uncle Robert.

The last candle on the tree twinkled and went out. Pearl, borne aloft in Uncle Robert's arms, had grown very tired and sleepy. It was Peri who told her the next day how the minister had come up just as they were leaving and had spoken some words that sounded very much like a benediction.

FINIS