

FICTION

Amy Ella Blanchard

The Four Corners

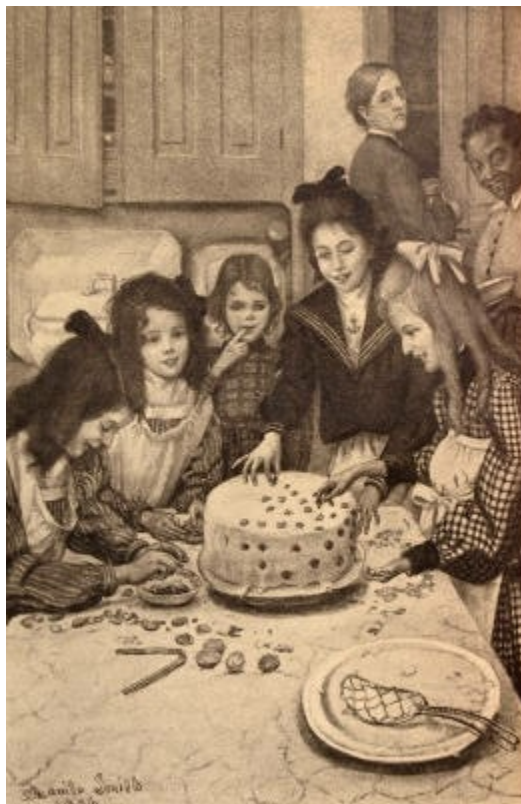


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FICTION

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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IT WAS A MOST DELECTABLE PIECE OF COOKERY WHEN IT WAS DONE

THE FOUR CORNERS

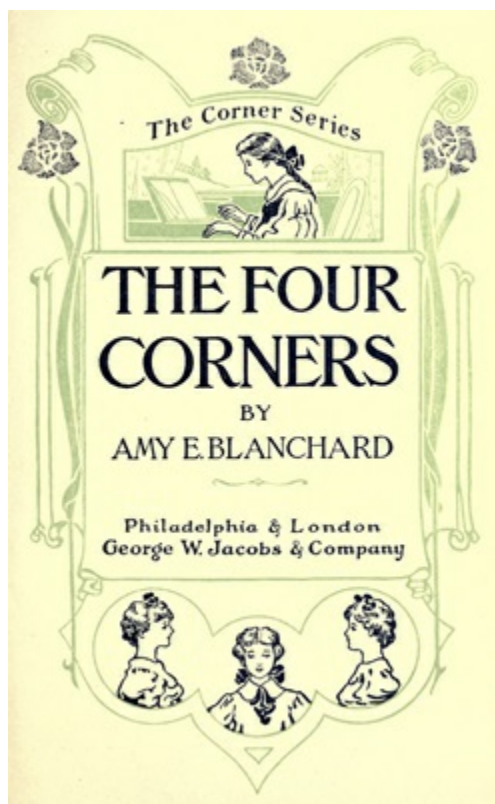
The Corner Series

THE FOUR CORNERS
BY
AMY E. BLANCHARD

Philadelphia & London
George W. Jacobs & Company

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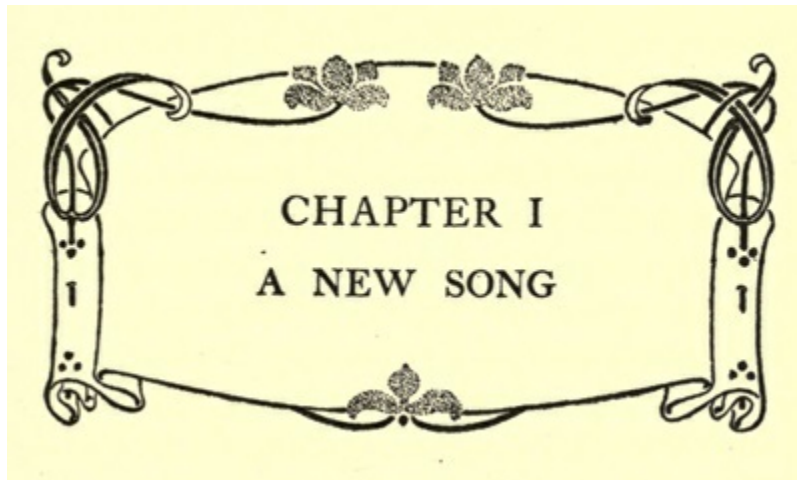
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CHAPTER I A NEW SONG

The town itself was one that stood at the foot of Virginia's blue mountains. The house where the Corners lived was on the edge of the town, facing a street which ended at the front gate. At the side of the garden another long street wound its way uphill and was called the old County Road when it began to go down grade. The house was a rambling old affair which had not been painted for some years and was, therefore, of an indescribable hue. One wing was shut up, but the remainder was made excellent use of by four lively girls, of whom the eldest was Nancy Weston. She was variously known as Nan, Nance or Nannie, though she greatly preferred Nannette and sometimes stealthily signed herself so. When she was, as her Cousin Phil expressed it, "on the bias," he often delighted to tease her by calling her Sharp Corner, but her Aunt Sarah often declared that West Corner suited her perfectly since from that quarter sprang up the briskest, as well as the most agreeable, of breezes.

Next to Nan came Mary Lee. She was always called by both names as is a Virginia custom. After Mary Lee came Jacqueline, or Jack as she was called, and her twin sister, Jean. Mary Lee was very unlike Nan, and though there was less than two years difference in their ages, she seemed the older of the two. She was less impetuous, more quiet and reserved, though more self-absorbed and less thoughtful for others. Neither was she so original as Nan and generally followed some one's lead, most frequently that of her Cousin Phil Lewis who was her special comrade, for Mary Lee adored open-air sports, especially boyish ones. Nan liked these intermittently, though when she did enter into them she was liable to be more daring and impetuous than her sister.

Phil lived scarce a block away and, since the confines of his own dooryard were limited, he preferred to spend much of his time within the larger range of his cousins' three acres. He and Mary Lee were about the same age and had many tastes in common; both were devoted to animals, and had a tendency to fads over which they became very enthusiastic for the time being. Phil was a wiry, dark, little fellow quite Mary Lee's opposite, she being fair-haired and blue-eyed with a slow drawl in speaking. Nan spoke more nervously when she was excited, though she, too, spoke with a lingering accent upon certain words. Nan's eyes were sometimes a grayish blue, sometimes almost a hazel, and at times showed the color of deep and tranquil pools of water, an indescribable hue. Their expression changed as did their color and when languidly drooped under their long dark lashes, seemed those of a sentimental romantic maid, but, when in moments of excitement, Nan opened them wide, they glowed like two stars. Her eyes were Nan's best feature. She did not possess a straight nose like Mary Lee's nor such a rosebud of a mouth, but her flashing smile showed even, white little teeth, and the oval of her face was perfect.

The twins were much alike in coloring and feature, but in expression were so different that even the most casual observer could not fail to distinguish Jack from Jean. They had blue eyes like Mary Lee but were dark-haired like Nan. Jack was, as Aunt Sarah Dent expressed it, "a pickle." She had a dreamy pathetic countenance and wore a saintly expression when she was plotting her worst mischief. At her best she was angelic; at her worst she was impish, and just how she would eventually turn out no one could foretell.

Jean was a sweet-tempered, affectionate child, gentle and obedient. Once in a while it seemed as if she felt it a duty to be naughty, but the naughtiness was always as if it were a pretense, and was more of a bluster than an exhibition of actual original sin. "There is no mistake that Jack is full of the old Adam," Aunt Sarah was wont to declare, "but Jean always acts to me as if she wasn't quite sure that she ought to be human."

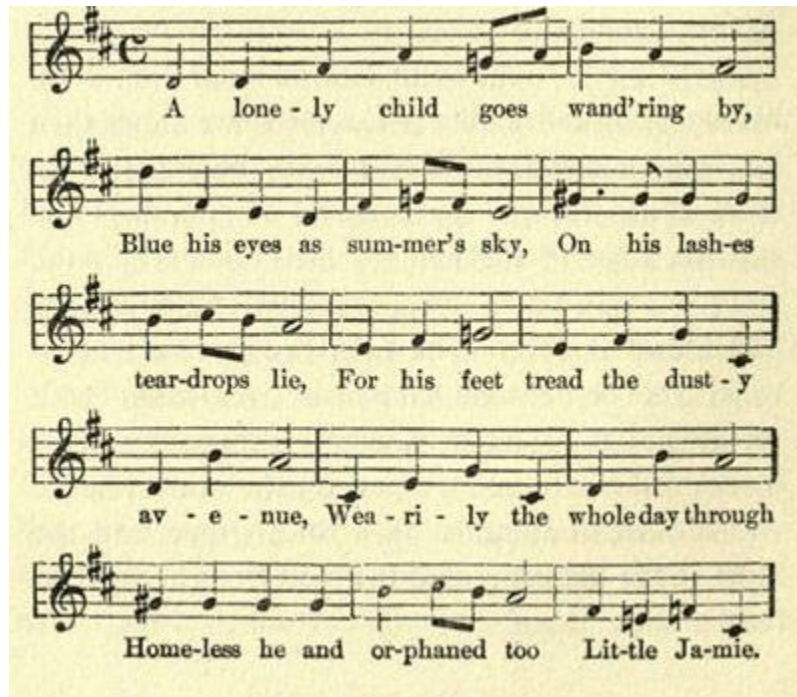
Nan was overflowing with sentiment, a lover of music, books, and pictures, yet liking nothing better than to whirl in and help in domestic emergencies. She had much inventive and mechanical talent which most of the others lacked. She was usually the sunniest and most sweet-tempered of persons, but had her moody days when she "flocked by herself," and liked to brood upon sombre subjects or weave lugubrious ballads which she set to melancholy tunes. These moody moments occurred but seldom and were generally the outcome of hurt feelings after some teasing bout with one of her sisters or some contrite condition following a deserved lecture from her mother or her Aunt Sarah.

Aunt Sarah Dent often came to make long stays with the family after the death of the children's father. A small life insurance and the little place at the end of the street was about all that was left to their mother. Aunt Sarah had a modest income of her own which she cheerfully added to the family exchequer and, therefore, her coming usually meant some added comforts, so they managed fairly well. A woman came in to wash and clean, but the rest of the work was done by the family with the assistance of a half-grown colored girl, and an old negro man, Landy by name. It was supposed that his name in its beginning had been Philander, but he had forgotten and no one else knew. He was a little bent, dried-up old dinky, but was tough and wiry and could accomplish more than many younger ones of his color, whom he scorned openly.

Add to the family an old mule named Pete, a handsome Angora cat called Lady Gray, and a mongrel dog whose name was Trouble, and you have its membership.

It was one afternoon in late summer that Nan, having been called Sharp Corner more times than her temper would amiably permit, had gone to a haunt much favored by herself. This was at the extreme edge of the place, a little nook where the orchard ended and a few stunted pines lapped over into the next field. The field had not been cultivated for some time and was overgrown with weeds and a young growth of pine and fir trees. It was rather a desolate spot, for the nearest house was hidden in summer by a thick grove, and the slope of the hill prevented the road from being seen from this point.

Creeping through the rail fence Nan felt that she had placed herself outside trammeling conditions and made her way to where a fallen log, covered with moss, invited her. This was Nan's piano. She seated herself upon a pile of sticks and stones which she had heaped up before the log. In front of her she had constructed a sort of rack, using a bit of wood which she had nailed to the log. Against the rack she placed a newspaper clipping which she secured from blowing away by means of a pin. After a few graceful sweeps of her hands up and down the pretended key-board, she wailed forth to a silent accompaniment:



There was more of the song but Nan sang the first stanza over and over again. At the close of the performance her eyes were full of tears and her voice vibrated with emotion as she quavered forth: "Little Jamie." A flock of crows in the field beyond rose from the stubbly undergrowth with solemn caws and sailed off to the grove beyond. The birds of ill-omen exactly suited Nan's mood. She took an aesthetic delight in their presence. They seemed to be applauding her. She went to the other side of the log and lay down upon the dry pine needles, her head against the log and her eyes fixed upon the blue sky. Her thoughts were with the verses she had cut from a country newspaper. She thought they were delightful, and her fancy brought before her an orphan boy tattered and torn but beautiful as a dream. She felt all the enthusiasm of a true composer as she hummed over the tune she had made.

"I will publish it some day," she said. "The next time everybody is busy and out of the sitting-room, I will try to write it so I will not forget it. I think, myself, that it is lovely and I ought to get a great deal of money for it, enough to buy a piano."

The possession of a piano was Nan's dearest wish. The only musical instrument of which the family could boast was an old wheezy melodeon which stood in the sitting-room. It skipped notes once in a while, especially in its middle range, and was at once a source of pleasure and disappointment to Nan. Her Aunt Sarah declared that it drove her wild to hear Nan try to pick out tunes on it, so the girl usually had to be sure of having the place to herself before she dared to make attempts at music. Feeble little attempts these were, for she knew scarce anything beyond the mere rudiments. But to a great love of music she added a true ear, a good memory, and boundless ambition and perseverance.

"It will be autumn soon," Nan went on to herself, her thoughts still wandering in a vague dream. "I think I like autumn best of all seasons. I'd like to write poetry about it. When I am a great musician, I will write a piece of music and call it 'Autumn Whispers,' and it will sound like the wind in the trees and the corn shocks. Then I will write another and that will be called 'Autumn Secrets.' It will be about golden sunshine and shining red leaves and little pools of water in the hollows that look as if a piece of blue sky had dropped in them. I wish I could write music that would be a picture and a poem, too; it would be nice to have them all together. Trouble, where did you come from? I know Phil is around

somewhere," she exclaimed, suddenly, sitting up very straight. "I don't want him to find me here. He has called me 'Sharp Corner' once too often to-day."

She jumped up and bending low, ran along the line of fence toward the hollow which intervened between this and the next rise of ground. Trouble stood still for a moment, uncertainly looking after her, then he trotted off in an opposite direction.

Pursuing her way, Nan reached the small stream which ran through the hollow. Ferns and mosses were here in abundance. Here and there a cardinal flower flaunted its red banner. Low aground trailed the hedge bindweed, and in the field beyond a slim spire of goldenrod showed itself. This attracted Nan's notice. "I said it would be autumn soon," she said, "for there is the first goldenrod of the season. I must get that piece for Aunt Sarah, though if she has an idea of where it came from, she won't have it." She gave a hasty glance in the direction of the house beyond sheltering trees as she gained the other side of the brook to gather her ambitious spray of goldenrod, for that house set in the grove of oaks belonged to Grandmother Corner, whose grandchildren were strangers to her. The running brook was the barrier which they seldom crossed and, when they did, it was secretly. The big buff house was closed, the green shutters tightly fastened, the door boarded up and the gate locked, for its owner was abroad. With her daughter Helen, she had been in Europe ever since Nan could remember.

Sometimes Nan would push her way through the hedge which surrounded the lawn, plunge through the long grass and stand staring up at the silent house where her father had been born. Certain accounts given by old Landy made her believe that it was of palatial magnificence and she longed to see its interior. Once when the care-taker had made one of his infrequent visits, one of the lower windows was opened, and Nan who had long watched and waited for such an opportunity, tiptoed up to peep in. At first she saw nothing but ghostly sheeted furniture and pictures shrouded in muslin cases, bare floors and uncurtained windows. She was about to creep away disappointed when she saw the man upon a ladder uncovering a picture. It was of a stately lady in a velvet gown, the slender fingers half hidden by costly lace, and Nan gazed with all her eyes at the haughty face. Was it her grandmother's portrait, she wondered. She watched till the man readjusted the covering and then she crept away dreaming of a day when she might see the original of the portrait and when she might be allowed to walk through those silent rooms again restored to their former splendor.

On this afternoon, however, she did not go near the house, but followed the stream for a short distance, crossed back again and came around the other side of her own home garden where old Landy was at work, talking to himself as was his wont.

"Reckon dese yer vines is done fo'. Clar 'em erway. No mo' beans on 'em. How co'n comin' on? Get a mess offen dis row by Sunday. Tomats plenty. Melons gittin' good an' ripe." He stooped down to tap a large melon with his bony knuckles. "She jest a bus'in' wid sweetness by 'nother week. Um, um, she fa'r make me dribble at de mouf to look at huh."

"Who-o-o!" came a long-drawn owlsh cry from behind him.

"Who dat?" cried Landy, pulling himself erect from his contemplation of the melon. "Whicher one o' yuh chilluns is it? Hyar, yuh, Jack er Phil er whomsoever yuh is, git outen fumbehin' dat co'n brake. I sees yuh."

A suppressed giggle from Nan made known her whereabouts, and she arose up from behind the tall tasseled corn. "You didn't see me or you wouldn't have called me Phil or Jack, but you heard me, didn't you? Did you think I was a real sure enough owl, Unc' Landy?"

"Humph! I knows ole hooty-owl better'n dat. I knows yuh is a humming varmint."

"Oh, Unc' Landy! the idea of calling me a varmint. I am not one at all."

"Den wha' fo' yuh grubbin' roun' in de gyardin' stuff lak ole mole?" he asked chuckling.

"Same reason you do; to see how it is getting on. When will the watermelons be ready to eat? It seems to me they are very late this year."

"Dey is late. I say dey is, but nex' week, ef de Lord sees fittin', we bus' open dis one. She de fust to be pick. I layin' out to lif huh fum huh sandy baid nex' Tuesday."

"And we'll have it for dinner. Oh, my! I wish it were ready now. Did they used to have a watermelon patch over at Grandmother Corner's? There isn't any now."

"How yuh so wise?"

"Oh, I've been all around the place. I know just where the garden used to be."

"Yo' ma say yuh chilluns ain't to ha'nt de ole place."

"I know and I don't haunt it; I just go there once in a while. I haven't been for a long, long time. I don't see, anyhow,

why we can't go when it was father's home."

"Yuh nuvver sees yo' ma er yo' auntie cross de brook."

"No, but then----"

"Den wha' fo' yuh do what dey don' do?"

"I do lots of things which they don't do and they do lots of things I don't do; that's no reason. When do you reckon my Grandmother Corner will come back?"

"Das mo'n any huming know, I tell yuh, honey. She done taken huh disagreeables an' huh hity-tyties long wid huh. Das all I kyar to know. She want de yarh an' all dat derein is, das what she want; mebbe she fin' it off yandah in dem quare countries, but she don't git back dem ha'sh words she speak to yo' pa on his las' day. Dey a-follerin' huh an' a gnawin' an' a clawin' at huh heart. She cyamt git rid o' dem wha'soevah she go, though she try to flee fum 'em."

The picture of her grandmother's fleeing from place to place pursued by bitter words in the form of skeleton-like creatures who gnashed their teeth and clawed with bony fingers took hold of Nan's imagination. Her mother never mentioned Grandmother Corner's name, and from old Landy Nan gleaned all that she knew of her. Heretofore, what had been told her did not cause her to give much love to this unknown grandmother, but now she began to feel rather sorry for her. "I wish you took care of the big house," she said, "for then you could let me go in there to see the pictures and beautiful things, and I could play on the piano."

"Humph! I say let you in. Ef it depen' upon ole Landy yuh ain' nuvver go inside de do'. Nobody tell me go but onct. I ain't nuvver pass my foot ovah de do'-sill agin whilst I lives on dis yarh."

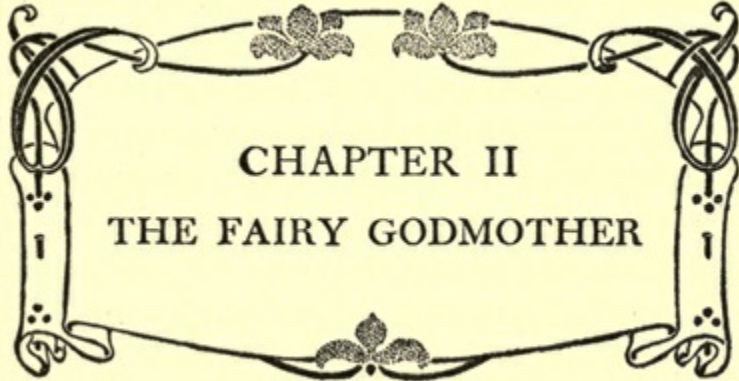
While he talked Landy slashed away at the dead vines vindictively. As he clawed at them with his lean black fingers he made Nan think of the bitter words which pursued her grandmother. They must appear something like Landy, only more bony and wicked-looking. Nan laughed at the conceit.

"Tain't nothin' to larf at," grumbled Landy. "Dese yer fambly q'urrels is turrble things. Yo' pa know yo' gran'ma don't like be crossed 'bout de propuppy, but he feel lak he bleedged to say what he think, an' she tu'n on him an' de las' word she uvver give mek him have de heart-ache. Yo' ma ain' fergit dat, an' das fo' why she don' lak you chilluns to go trespassin' on de ole place. Hit yo' gran'ma's an' she got full an' plenty whilst yo' pa what oughter had his share done got nothin' ter leave yuh-alls but dis little ole place. Das why I laks ter mek hit smile an' see de melons grow plum big an' de co'n-fiel' lookin' prosp'ous. Yo' gran'pa mean yo' pa to hev his shar' but de ole lady hol' on to uvvry thing whilst she 'bove groun'. Nemmin', yuh-alls has full an' plenty to eat. Ain' de tomats jest a-humpin' deyse'fs? Yo' ma has pickles an' cans o' 'em fo' de whole wintah, dey so many."

"I like the little yellow ones best," remarked Nan, who was tired of the old man's long monologue. He was given to reciting these bits of family history to her though to no one outside the family itself would he have breathed a word. "I think these make the very nicest preserves," continued Nan, "and I like them raw, too. I always feel as if I were eating golden fairy fruit only they aren't sweet like I imagine fairy fruit would be." She stooped to gather a tiny red tomato from the vines at her feet. They used to call these love-apples, Aunt Sarah says, and they thought they were poisonous. "I am glad they found out it wasn't so," she said, popping the red morsel into her mouth. "What are you going to do now, Landy?"

"Gwine tek a tu'n at de fence." When Landy's other occupations did not demand attention there was always the fence to turn to; something upon which to exhaust his energies. It was patched and mended beyond hope now, Mrs. Corner thought, and the repairs were creeping from the side to the front, for Landy had frequently "borrowed from Peter to pay Paul," and when a paling was missing from the front he had always promptly supplied it from the sides, replacing it by a board, a post, or whatever came handy, so that the two side fences presented a curious style of building. White, green or gray boards took their place as occasion required. Tops from empty boxes set forth some address in staring black letters, a bit of wire fence was hitched to a cedar post on one side and an old bed-slat on the other; but the fence served its purpose to keep out wandering cattle from the garden which was Landy's pride. And though Mrs. Corner sighed when she went that way, there was no money to be spared for new fences so the old one was eked out from year to year.

Leaving Landy to work upon the fence, Nan supplied herself with more small tomatoes and went up to the house thinking of the grandmother across seas and determining to curb her own tongue lest it lead her into such trying ordeals as the being haunted by bitter words.



CHAPTER II
THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

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As she entered the long living-room, Nan found it deserted except for the presence of Lady Gray, who sleepily stretched out her paws on the broad window-sill where she was taking a nap, and winked one eye at Nan. "Nobody here, at least nobody who counts, if you will excuse the remark, Lady Gray," said Nan, "so I can try my song."

She went to the corner where the melodeon stood. It was piled high with a variety of things; her mother's work-basket, Aunt Sarah's knitting, a scrap-book, and some sheets of paper from which Nan was taking cuttings, the twins' dolls, and a pile of books which she herself had taken from the shelves. All these had to be removed before the song could be tried.

The warm summer sunshine sifted in through the vines that covered the western windows and disclosed the dinginess of the room. An old-fashioned paper, discolored by time, covered the walls; its green and gold had been pleasant to look upon in days gone by, but now it was patched and streaked. Upon the floor was a worn carpet; handsome old mahogany furniture which had lost its polish gave a well-filled appearance to the room, though the springs of the long sofa had been greatly weakened by frequent jumpings upon them, so that the seat of the sofa presented an uphill and down-dale surface, not rendered more inviting by the neutral-toned, frayed upholstery.

A tall secretary with a beautifully leaded glass top had been chosen by some yellow-jackets as a place for building purposes, and they were droning about their mud-bedaubed residences along the edge of the secretary's top.

A handsome centre-table with claw feet was littered with books and magazines. A set of chairs in about the same condition as the sofa evidenced that a constant use had been made of them. The shades at the windows were in a more or less worn condition. Over the mantel hung a portrait of a man in gray uniform, one hand on his sword. His eyes were like Nan's.

Nan began industriously to pick out her tune by working the pedals of the old melodeon vigorously, an operation which was followed by a long-drawn wheezing complaint from somewhere in the interior of the instrument. But Nan did not perceive any reason for amusement; she carefully wrote down her notes one by one, saying aloud "*D, d, f, a*,--I wish that note would sound. I think it must be *a--b, a*,--I wonder if it is *a*; it comes so often, too, I ought to know. Oh, dear, *e* is out of order, too. Let me see, where was I? Oh, yes, 'blue his eyes,' it is eyes that ought to be *e*. I reckon I'll know what it is anyhow, even if I don't get it exactly right. 'Blue his eyes,'" she sang softly.

"Nannie," came a voice from the window, "do shut up that dreadful wheezing thing; I want to take a nap."

Nan jumped up and closed the melodeon with a bang. Why was it that Aunt Sarah always wanted to take a nap when she was "composing"? It was always so. Aunt Sarah might go days and never think of napping in the daytime, but let Nan but send forth one note and, if Aunt Sarah were anywhere within hearing distance, there came the order to stop. "I wish I could have it all to myself somewhere out of the way," she said. "I'll ask mother if I may get Landy to take it over in one of the old rooms, or up in the attic or somewhere so nobody will hear me."

Acting upon this idea she sought out her mother who was busy at her sewing-machine. Mrs. Comer looked up brightly, though she did not stop her work when Nan appeared. "Well, daughter?" she said.

"Oh, mother, mayn't I have the old melodeon all to myself somewhere; over in the barn, or in one of the shut up rooms of the wing or in the garret or somewhere so nobody can hear when I am playing?"

"Playing?" An amused pucker came around Mrs. Comer's eyes. "It is truly playing that you do with it. I don't see how I can let you have it, for it is so useful to pile things on in the living-room."

"But mother, a table would do just as well."

"If one had the table."

"I'm sure there must be one somewhere in the garret."

"None that is whole."

"There's one that is only a little rickety in the legs, and Landy could mend that."

"Landy has no time for such things, at least, unless they are absolutely necessary. He has all that he can do."

"Oh, but I do want it so very much. Aunt Sarah always wants to take a nap the minute I begin to play and I always have to stop."

Mrs. Comer smiled again. "I'm not surprised. Don't be unreasonable, Nan. You know it is trying to hear any one wheeze out impossible tunes with one finger, or make distracting discords which are agony to a sensitive ear. You are getting

too big to want to drum."

A lump arose in Nan's throat. She was shy of divulging her ambitions. Her mother did not understand that she did not want to drum, but that this was a serious matter. She would not explain, however, but she hurried away with a sense of being aggrieved. Mary Lee and Phil were at that moment deeply interested in watching a family of tadpoles which were about to lose their tails. The two children kept them in an old half-cask and spent many moments in bending over it. Jack and Jean were playing house with paper-dolls in the orchard. No one wanted Nan and she did want her music. She made one more attempt, returning slowly to her mother's door. "If you only just knew, mother, how awfully much I want it, you'd let me have it."

Her mother stopped stitching. "Poor little girl," she spoke sympathetically, "I wish you could have lessons, and that I could give you a good piano to practice on, for I do appreciate your love of music, but dear, I don't see that your efforts on that old worn-out melodeon will bring you the slightest reward; in fact, I have heard it said that it is not well to allow a child to practice on a poor instrument. Now, be reasonable, darling, and don't want impossibilities. You know mother would give you your every heart's desire if she could."

"I know," said Nan weakly as she turned again from the room. A sudden inspiration had seized her, and her heart beat very fast as she made her way back to the retreat in the pines and from there to the hollow and on to the very threshold of the house at Uplands, the old Corner place. She tried the door but it did not yield to her efforts. From window to window she went making an effort to open each. To the side door, the back door and around to the porch on the north side. There were side lights to the door here, and, shading her eyes, Nan tried to peer through into the dimness.

Nan thought she heard sounds within and felt a little scared, then all at once she saw a form in black garments flit across the hall, and with a suppressed scream she turned and fled, crashing through the weeds and underbrush, leaping across the brook and reaching her retreat frightened and wondering. There could be no mistake; some one was certainly there. Was it flesh and blood presence or some ghostly visitor? Uplands had the reputation of being haunted and Nan really believed she had seen the ghost of her great-great-grandmother.

She sat quaking and yet half trying to make up her mind to return for further investigation when a shadow fell across the spot where she sat, and, looking up, she saw a strange little lady standing before her, looking down at her wistfully. The lady was all in black and though her face was young, and her cheeks showed softly pink, her hair was very white. Nan had not seen her approach, and it appeared almost as if she had dropped from the skies. "Who are you?" inquired the little lady.

"One of the four Corners," returned Nan with a sudden smile.

"Which one?"

"Nan."

"I was sure of it. And why were you trying to get into that house?" The little lady nodded toward Uplands.

"Because it is my grandmother's and--and----" She glanced up shyly at the stranger.

"Go on, please," said the lady, taking a seat on an end of Nan's pretended piano. "Did you want anything in particular?"

There was something compelling in the lady's manner, and Nan replied, "Yes, I did. I know I really ought not to have gone, for mother doesn't like us even to cross the brook. She never actually forbids it, but she looks distressed if she finds out that any of us have been over, but I wanted awfully to see if I could get in and try to open the piano. It seems so perfectly dreadful for it to stand there month after month and year after year, no good to anybody, when I'd give my right hand to have it."

"If you gave your right hand for it," said the lady, suddenly dimpling, "you could only play bass, you know, and I don't believe you would care for that."

Nan laughed. "No, I wouldn't. I like the fine high notes, though sometimes I think the growling bass of the organ at church is beautiful. It makes me think of what it says in the Psalter: 'The noise of the seas, the noise of the waves, and the tumult of the people.'"

The lady nodded understandingly and was silently thoughtful for some moments, then she said, "This is a nice little spot." She put her hand upon Nan's improvised music-rack. "What is this for?" she asked.

Nan blushed. "It's just to hold up the music, you know. That's my piano where you are sitting."

"Goodness!" cried the lady, jumping up. "How undignified of me to sit on a piano. Please pardon me; I didn't know."

"Of course not." Nan's eyes grew starlike. It was not only very delightful but very exciting to meet one who so perfectly understood. "You see," she went on, "all I have at home is a dreadful old melodeon that skips notes and

wheezes like our old Pete; he has the heaves, you know."

"Poor old Pete," said the lady, with a tender retrospective look in her eyes. "You have the melodeon, yes, and then?"

"Aunt Sarah always wants to take a nap the minute I begin to play, and to-day," her voice dropped and she went nearer to her visitor, "I had made a new tune and I did so want to write it down. I came out here first and tried it; it sounded very well, I thought, but I had written only a little of it when I had to shut the melodeon. Aunt Sarah always does have such inconvenient times for taking naps," she sighed.

"Won't you let me hear your song, or your tune?" said the lady, politely seating herself with an expectant air upon a stump further off.

Nan's cheeks grew redder. She did not like to seem ungracious to this stranger who showed such an unusual interest in her performances and yet her only audience heretofore had been the creatures of the field and the air. "No one has ever heard it but the crows," she said hesitatingly, then impulsively: "You won't laugh?"

"Indeed no, of course not," returned the lady with some real indignation at such a suspicion.

Nan sat still long enough to screw up her courage to the active point, and then drawing from her blouse a bit of paper, she seated herself before her log-piano and began her song. The lady, with cheek in hand, leaned forward and listened intently. Once there was a slight flicker of amusement in her eyes, but for the most part her face was tenderly serious. At the close of the song she said gently: "Thank you, dear. I think that is a very sweet little air for one so young as you to think of. May I see?" She extended her hand for Nan's half-written song. "How will you finish it?" she asked.

"I don't know. I'll have to wait till Aunt Sarah goes out or goes away. I hope I shall not forget it before then. I'll sing it over every day and then maybe I won't forget."

The lady looked at her thoughtfully for a minute. "Can you keep a secret?" she asked suddenly.

"Oh, yes. Why, nobody, not even Mary Lee, has an idea about this." She waved her hand to include her music-room retreat.

"Then promise not to tell a soul."

"I promise." Nan's eyes grew eager.



SHE SEATED HERSELF BEFORE HER LOG PIANO AND BEGAN HER SONG

"I am your fairy godmother, and if you will meet me under the sunset tree to-morrow morning at ten o'clock, I will conduct you to a place where you can finish your song undisturbed, for I guarantee Aunt Sarah will not be caught napping within hearing of you and the melodeon."

"Oh, how perfectly delicious," cried Nan, her imagination all afire. "I'd love that. Where is the sunset tree? It is such a lovely name for it."

The lady pointed to a huge oak just across the brook. "It is called that because one can see the sunset so finely from there. Have you never been up to look at the sun go down behind the hills? There is one little notch between the mountains over there and at a certain season of the year the sun drops right down into it."

"I have never seen it," said Nan, regretfully. "I wonder why no one ever told me about it. I think sunset tree is such a lovely name and it is just the spot for a trysting place. It would be a lovely secret, but I never had a real important one from mother before. I shall have to tell her about going up there; not right away, but some day. It always comes out sooner or later and I would rather tell just mother, if you don't mind."

"So you may. I'm glad you feel that way about it. Little girls should never have secrets they cannot tell their mothers. In three days you may tell her, if you think it would be right to keep silence that long."

"Oh, that will not be very long. I could keep the secret longer if you said so."

"That will be long enough. Now, shut your eyes while you count one hundred slowly or the queen of the fairies will not let me appear again. The spell will be broken if you so much as peep, or if you do not count aloud."

Nan closed her eyes very tight and began to count. She gave a little interrupting gasp as she felt a light kiss on her cheek, but she kept steadily on till she had reached the desired number. Then she opened her eyes and looked around. There was no one in sight. The afternoon sun was sinking behind the trees, and the cows were returning home along the county road. With the weight of such a secret as she had never before carried, Nan ran home in a happy tumult of excited expectation. At the back of the house she came upon Mary Lee and Phil still absorbed in their polywogs.

"Come see," cried Mary Lee, "they are too funny for anything, Nan. They are the interestingest things I ever saw."

Nan went up to look. "What is so wonderful about polywogs?" she asked.

"You'd think yourself wonderful," said Phil indignantly, "if you could change yourself from a swimming beast into a hopping one and be as awfully amphibious as they are."

Nan laughed and drew her finger slowly through the water in the cask. "They aren't half so wonderful as fairies," she said. "They can change themselves into all sorts of things."

"Oh, pshaw! Everybody knows that there are no real fairies. These can really change before your very eyes; we've watched them from day to day, haven't we, Mary Lee?"

"Yes, we have," was the answer. "Nan always likes foolish make-believe things, but we like the real ones."

"Fairy godmothers are real," Nan answered back over her shoulder as she left the pair discussing the proper treatment of their present pets. They paid no attention to her speech and she laughed to herself, exulting in her secret. Before she reached the house she heard a wail from the direction of the orchard, and perceived Jean sitting on the ground under a tree. As Nan approached, she whimpered softly.

"What's the matter, kitten?" asked Nan.

"Jack was pretending I was a calf," said Jean, mournfully, "and she hobbled me to the tree so I couldn't get to my mother, and now she's gone off and I can't get the rope untied."

"Poor little calf, and the cows all coming home, too. Never mind, I'll untie you. Where is Jack?"

"She was going for her cows, but I reckon she's done forgot it."

"Don't say done forgot; that sounds like Mitty and Unc' Landy."

Jean hung her head. She was used to these chidings from her eldest sister. She had a curious babyish way of speaking, not being easily able to make the sounds of *th* or *qu*. "I know it isn't crite right," she said, "but I forget sometimes."

Nan put her arms around her. "Of course you do. We all forget some things sometimes. Come with me and let us hunt up Jack. I'll venture to say she's in some mischief."

She was not far wrong in her conjectures, for after a half hour's diligent searching, Jack was found. She had discovered a can of white paint, supplied by Aunt Sarah for the betterment of the front fence which Landy had proudly commenced to adorn with a shining coat of whiteness. He had been called away when he had made but little progress and Jack had taken up the job with great glee. She was in the height of her enjoyment, daubing on great masses of white which dribbled down the palings wastefully. The child herself was smeared from hair ribbon to shoe-strings and was a sight to behold.

"Jack Corner!" exclaimed Nan. "You dreadful child! Just look at you, and, oh, dear, how you are wasting paint. It won't begin to be enough to finish the fence the way you have been using it. Unc' Landy will give you Jesse."

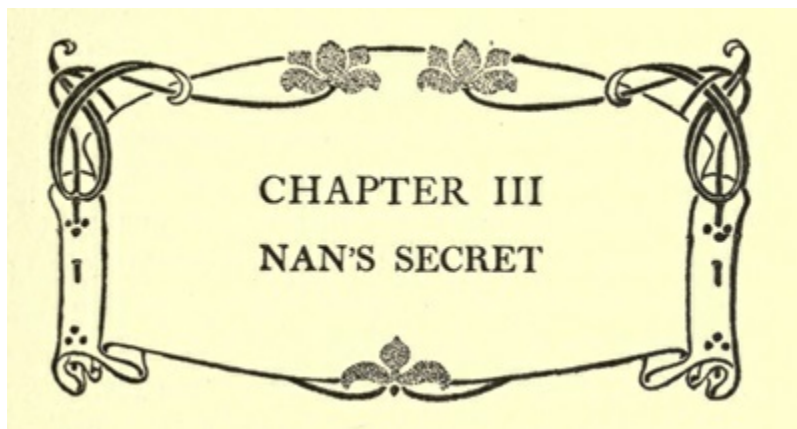
"Some one's always giving me Jesse," complained Jack. "You all keep saying Unc' Landy has so much to do and I am only helping him."

"Pretty help, using up the paint and ruining your clothes. March yourself straight into the house, miss." Nan took hold of Jack's shoulder which was twitched away, and with a vicious fling of the dripping brush directly at Nan, Jack turned and fled.

"She is the most trying child," said Nan, deftly dodging the brush, though not without receiving some drops upon her frock. "I declare, there isn't a day when she doesn't do something dreadful."

"She just fought she was helping," put in Jean, always ready to defend her twin by imputing worthy motives to her performances.

"Maybe she did, but it's pretty poor help," said Nan, stooping to pick a plantain leaf with which to wipe off the worst spots from her skirt. "Aunt Sarah was so good as to buy the paint. I know she went without something to do it, and now for Jack to do her so mean as to play this scurvy trick is too bad. I'm all done out with Jack. It's lucky we found her when we did or there wouldn't have been even as much paint as there is. I must go tell Unc' Landy at once. Maybe he can scrape off some of this before it dries. Help indeed! It gives him double work." Her last words were spoken to thin air, for Jean had hurried off to comfort Jack and Nan was left to break the news to Unc' Landy.



CHAPTER III NAN'S SECRET

When Nan opened her eyes the next morning it was with a consciousness that something pleasantly exciting was to happen, and she lost no time in hurrying down-stairs and, after breakfast, in getting through her prescribed duties with more than usual haste. Her mother smiled to see that she was so eager and businesslike and that her moodiness of the day before had departed, while Aunt Sarah said: "I hope your fancy will not lead you to try the tune the old cow died of to-day, Nannie."

Nan smiled but made no reply. What matter if Aunt Sarah did cast slurs upon her musical attempts? There were persons in the world who took them seriously, and she felt a thrill of satisfaction as she thought of the soft white hair and blue eyes of her fairy godmother.

It was with some difficulty that she was able to reach the sunset tree without being seen. Jack, in penitential mood, and Jean looking for sympathy, followed her everywhere, and it was not till she had robbed a rose bush of its red berry-like seeds and had constructed a wonderful set of dishes, a lamp, and a whole family of people from the berries, that the reward of her ingenuity came to her in the delight of the children over these novel toys and in their content with a corner of the porch for a playroom. After seeing them well established, Nan set off.

"I've dusted the living-room, made my bed, picked up after Jack, and I believe that is all," she told herself. "There's Phil coming, I am thankful to say, so Mary Lee will not tag me." She paid no heed to the question, "Where are you going?" which Mary Lee called after her, but kept on till the barn hid her from sight. She hoped she had not kept her friend waiting and that she would not become impatient and leave, for it was after ten. But as she came up to the tree she saw the sombre little figure sitting quietly there. "I was so afraid you couldn't wait," said Nan breathlessly. "The children were so tiresome and wanted all sorts of things done for them so I couldn't get away before."

"There's plenty of time," replied her friend. "Sit down and cool off; you've come too fast in the hot sun. Tell me about the children."

"Jean is a dear, and Jack can be perfectly fascinating when she chooses. They are the twins, you know. Jack's name is Jacqueline. Aunt Sarah says she was mixed together with more original sin than any of us, and if there hadn't been a lot of angel used in her make up she doesn't know what would become of her. She is simply dear this morning, but yesterday afternoon!" And Nan gave an account of Jack's muddle with the paint.

Her companion laughed. "She must keep you in hot water," she said. "Tell me about Mary Lee."

"Oh, do you know there is a Mary Lee?" said Nan in surprise. "But of course everybody knows us. She is named for our mother, and I am named for papa's sister Nancy Weston who died. We called Jack and Jean after papa. His name was John and Jean is the French for John, only we give it the Scotch pronunciation. Papa was always called Jack and so Jacqueline is called that."

"Yes, I know--I mean I see," returned her companion. "Come, now, shall we go on? Are you ready to be conducted to the place of your desires? You must go blindfolded."

"How lovely! That makes it so deliciously mysterious. I hope I shall not fall and bump my nose."

"I'll take care that you do not. Let me tie this over your eyes." She drew a soft silken scarf from a bag she held, and made it fast over Nan's eyes. "Can you see?" she asked.

"No, indeed, I can't. Not the leastest little bit."

"Now give me your hands. There, I'll put them around my waist and you will walk just behind me."

Their way was made very cautiously and slowly and at last Nan set foot upon a board floor. "Now I can lead you," said her guide. "One step up, please."

Nan was led along the floor for some distance making one sharp turn, and then was gently forced to a seat. "There," said her guide. "Sit here perfectly still till you hear a bell ring; then you may untie your scarf, but you must not leave the room till I come for you."

Nan sat very still. Presently she heard a light footstep cross the floor, then a door closed and after a few minutes a bell in the distance tinkled softly. Up went her hands and the scarf was withdrawn in a jiffy. She found herself sitting before an open piano. On each side of her were set lighted candles in tall brass candlesticks. Into the room no gleam of daylight made its way. In the shadowy corners were sheeted chairs and sofas and on the wall were covered pictures. Nan recognized the place at once. It was the drawing-room of her grandmother's house and over the mantel must be the very portrait she had once gazed upon with such delight. Now it was screened from view. "I just wonder who in the world she is," exclaimed Nan thinking of her guide. "I'd like to know how she got in here and all about it. Perhaps she is

some of our kinsfolk who has come down here to look after something for grandmother. I'm going to ask her."

Having made this decision, she turned her attention to the piano. In spite of long disuse it gave forth mellow and delightful tones as she touched it softly. It seemed very big and important after the little melodeon, but soon the girl gained confidence and became absorbed in writing down her little song which she did note by note, calling each aloud. "I am not sure that it is just right," she said as she concluded her task, "but it is as right as I can make it."

She arose from her seat and tiptoed around the room, lifting the covers from the shrouded furniture and getting glimpses of dim brocade and silky plush. Then she went back to the piano. All was so still in the house that Nan felt the absolute freedom of one without an audience. She touched the keys gently at first, but, gaining confidence and inspiration, went on playing by ear snatches of this and that, becoming perfectly absorbed in the happiness of making melody.

She was so carried away by her performance that she neither saw nor heard the door open and was not aware of any one's presence till a soft voice said: "I declare, the blessed child really has talent."

"Oh!" Nan sprang to her feet. "Were you listening?"

"I have been for a short time only. How did you get along with your song?"

"Pretty well. I don't know whether it is exactly right. I don't know much about time, and sharps and flats."

"May I see? Perhaps I can help you."

Nan timidly held out her little awkwardly written tune and the lady scanned it carefully. "You haven't your sharps and naturals just right," she remarked. "You see this is the sign of a natural," and taking Nan's pencil she made the necessary corrections, then sitting down to the piano she played the simple air through and afterward went off into a dreamy waltz while Nan listened spellbound.

"Please tell me who you are," the child cried when the music ceased.

"I did tell you. I am your fairy godmother. You may leave out the fairy if you like, for I am quite substantial."

"Are you kin to--to grandmother? Did she send you?"

"She did not send me and has no idea I am here."

Nan stared. "I know, of course, just where I am," she said. "This is Grandmother Corner's house. I saw into this very room once and I saw that," she indicated the portrait. "I just saw it for a minute and I do so want to see it real good. Could I?" she asked, wistfully.

"Why do you want to see it?" asked her companion.

"Because I love it. Oh, I know, I know," she went on hastily. "Landy has told me."

"Has told you what?"

"I can't tell you unless you are kinsfolk."

"You can tell me anything because there is nothing I don't know about this house and those who used to live here."

"Oh, then, you know how cruel my grandmother was to papa, and how she couldn't bear his marrying mother."

"It wasn't because it was herself," put in the other eagerly. "There was no objection to Mary personally, but she hated to give him up to any one. She would have felt the same way if he had wanted to marry a princess. She never did get over the fact of sharing him with some one else; she never will."

"I didn't know all that, but I knew about the bitter words and how they have been haunting her, and I feel so very sorry for her. I know it would break my mother's heart to lose one of us," said Nan, "and if she had been cross to us and anything had happened that we were hurt meantime she would never forgive herself. Why, when Jack has been her naughtiest, mother never misses kissing her good-night. Last night Jack had to be put right to bed for punishment and before I went to sleep I heard mother in the nursery and Jack was crying, then when mother came to kiss me good-night I saw she had been crying, too. She is such a dear mother."

"She must be," said the little lady, her voice a-tremble, "and you are right to feel sorry for your grandmother. She needs all your love and sympathy."

"I wonder if I shall ever see her," said Nan wistfully.

"I hope so. I think so."

"And may I see the picture?"

"It is too high to reach, I am afraid."

"Oh, but I can get a pole or something and lift up the cover," said Nan, quick to see a way.

"Run, then, and find one."

Nan disappeared and soon returned with an ancient broom, the handle of which was used to lift the cover sufficiently so that by the dim light of the candles, which her friend held high, Nan beheld the portrait again.

"Thank you, so much," she said gratefully. "I am very glad you are kin of ours, even if I don't know who you are. I love you and I am going to try to love my grandmother."

The little lady suddenly put her arms around her and held her close. "You are a dear, dear child, and I love you, too," she said. "Some day you shall see me again. Kiss me, Nancy."

Nan held up her sweet red mouth to receive the warm kiss. "I shall be seeing your grandmother before long," said her friend, holding the girl's hands and looking tenderly at her.

"But she is in Europe."

"And are there no steamers that cross the ocean?"

"Are you going there, then?"

"That is my intention."

"Then, are you going to tell her about me? Will she care to know?" Nan paused before she said hesitatingly, "Would it make her very mad if I sent a kiss to her?"

"Dear child, no. It would make her very glad, and would help to ease her sad heart, I am sure."

"Then I'll do it. Take this, please." Nan pressed a hearty kiss on the lady's lips. "Then," she added: "I must tell mother, you know."

"Of course. You may tell her day after to-morrow that you met your godmother."

"My fairy godmother."

"As you like. Now you must run along. Good-bye till we meet again. One more kiss, Nannie, for your Aunt Helen."

"Oh, yes, I always forget her. I was so little when I last saw her, you know. But I'll send her a kiss if you want me to. Good-bye, dear fairy godmother. Ask the queen of the fairies to send you this way soon again."

The candle-lighted room, the little white-haired figure, the shrouded portrait all seemed unreal as Nan stepped out again into the bright sunlight. She longed to tell her mother all about it, but she reflected that the secret was not all her own and determined to be silent till the time was up. Only one question did she ask and the answer almost made her betray herself. "Mother," she said when her mother came to say good-night, "who was my godmother?"

"Your Aunt Helen," was the reply.

Nan sat straight up in bed her eyes wide with surprise. "Why, why," she stammered, but she immediately nestled down again.

"Did you never know that?" asked her mother.

"If I did I forgot," replied Nan, and she lay awake for a long time thinking of the strangeness of the morning's experience. She could scarcely wait till the time rolled around and brought her to the day when she could tell her mother the story of her secret meeting. It seemed to her that since the day before yesterday her mental self had grown prodigiously. Mary Lee, a year and a half younger seemed now such a child, although heretofore she had been considered the more mature. Once in a while the two had discussed their grandmother and the Corner family, but Mary Lee was not greatly interested in the subject and had concluded the conversation by saying: "I don't care a picayune where she is or what she thinks. She has never done anything for me and she might as well be out of the world as in it, as far as we are concerned. I'm never going to bother my head about her, and I don't see why you want to, Nan."

This crushing indifference satisfied Nan that Mary Lee was not to be confided in when the silent house at Uplands, like a magnet, drew Nan toward it, and she was rather glad that she did not want to tell any one but her mother, for had a sympathetic spirit been ready to hear the secret would have been hard to keep.

When the eventful day came she followed Mrs. Corner from dining-room to pantry and from pantry to kitchen waiting for a chance to give her confidence. "When shall you be through, mother?" she asked. "It seems as if you had so much more than usual to do this morning."

"No more, than always," returned her mother. "Why are you so impatiently following me up, Nan? What is it? Can't you tell me now?"

Nan glanced at Mitty and the washerwoman who were eating their breakfast. "It's a secret," she said in a low tone, "a very important secret."

Mrs. Corner smiled. Nan's secrets were not usually of great importance except in her own estimation. "Well, I shall be in my room as soon as I give out the meal and sugar; you can come to me then, if you can't tell me here. Suppose you pass the time away in looking up Jack. It is about time she was getting into mischief again. She always chooses Monday morning for some sort of escapade; I suppose keeping bottled up over Sunday is too much for her."

"I'll go see where she is," agreed Nan. "She won't be painting the fence this time, I know."

Jack was discovered before a tub in the wash house. In the absence of Ginny, the washerwoman, at breakfast, she had seized the opportunity of taking her place and was about to plunge her best muslin frock into the water with the stockings and underwear when Nan came upon her. "Jacqueline Corner, what are you up to now?" cried Nan, snatching the frock from her.

"I'm just helping Ginny to wash," replied Jack with her usual air of injured innocence when discovered under such circumstances.

"You were just helping Landy when you wasted the paint and ruined your blue frock," said Nan sarcastically. "Walk yourself right out of here. Ginny is perfectly capable of doing the washing without your assistance. Besides that lawn frock doesn't go in with black stockings; a pretty mess you'd make of it. Ginny won't thank you for mixing up her wash when she's sorted it all out. Try your energies upon something you know about, young lady."

Jack flung herself away. "You're always saying I mustn't do this and I mustn't do that," she complained. "You're a regular old cross-patch. You're not my mother to order me around."

"Mother sent me to see after you, so there," returned Nan. "I'm next to mother, too, for I'm next oldest. Where's Jean?"

"I don't know and I don't care," returned Jack, sullenly.

"Who's a cross-patch now? Here comes Ginny; you'd better make tracks out of here."

Jack fled and Nan returned to the house to find her mother ready to sit down to her sewing. The girl carefully shut the door and then established herself on an ottoman near her mother. "What does my Aunt Helen look like?" she asked abruptly.

Her mother looked up in surprise. "That's the second time lately that you have asked me about your Aunt Helen. Why this sudden interest, Nannie?"

"I'll tell you presently. It's part of the secret."

"Oh, it is. Well then, Helen has dark hair and blue eyes, a fair skin and little hands and feet. She is quite small, not much taller than you."

"It all sounds right," said Nan reflectively, "except the hair. Is she quite old, mother?"

"She is younger than I."

"Oh, then, of course, it is some one else, only my little lady has a very young smile. Maybe she isn't so awfully old. Could any one younger than you have real white hair, mother?"

"Why, yes, I have seen persons much younger whose hair had turned quite gray. Sometimes hair turns gray quite suddenly from illness or grief or trouble."

"Could Aunt Helen's hair be gray by this time?"

"It could be, though it was dark when I saw her last."

Nan pondered upon this and then said: "Well, anyhow, whoever it was, she told me I was to tell you that she was my godmother. Did I have two godmothers?"

"Yes, but I was one. What is all this about? Whom have you seen, and where did you see her?"

Nan launched forth into her story, her mother listening so attentively that her sewing lay untouched in her lap. When Nan had concluded, Mrs. Corner picked up her work again, but she was so agitated that she was unable to thread her needle.

"Who was she? Who was she?" queried Nan.

"Your Aunt Helen, without doubt."

"But I thought she was in Europe with my grandmother."

"So I thought. She evidently came over on some matter of business, leaving your grandmother there."

"Are you sorry I saw her, mother?" asked Nan, leaning her elbows on her mother's lap and looking up into her face. "I told her I ought not to go to Uplands because you don't like us to. Are you sorry I went? Are you angry, mother?"

"No, I think I am glad, Nannie."

"Then I am glad, but why didn't she come to see you when she was so near? Did she say mean horrid things, too? I can't imagine her doing anything hateful and mean."

A pained expression passed over Mrs. Corner's face. "What do you know about that sad time, Nannie? I have never mentioned it to you children."

"No, but Unc' Landy told me grandmother said bitter things. I know you didn't though."

Mrs. Corner sighed. "I said one thing, Nannie, that I have often regretted since, and it is because of it that your Aunt Helen did not let me know of her being here. It was in a moment of deep distress. I was hurt, indignant. I felt that I had been left desolate with insufficient means to support my children, and in the only interview I had with your grandmother I said, 'I hope I shall never again behold the face of one of the Corner family except the children of my beloved husband who bear his name.'"

"I don't blame you," said Nan, taking her mother's hand between her own. "They were horribly mean to go off with their money and not give you a penny. They ought at least to have let you live in the big house and use the piano."

Her mother smiled. "That is the way you look at it. Well, we get along somehow without them, thanks to Aunt Sarah. I am sorry I did not try to be more friendly to Helen. She was dominated by her mother and it was no doubt a choice between her and you children. She was very fond of you as a baby and she has not forgotten. Her mother's sadly jealous and envious spirit is what has made all the trouble."

"I was four years old when they went away," said Nan. "I don't remember them at all, though I remember dear daddy perfectly."

"Let's not talk of it any more," said Mrs. Corner.

"Aunt Helen said we might see each other again some day. Do you suppose they will come back and will be nice to us and let us go up there sometimes?"

"We cannot say. I do not look into the future to find such possibilities, Nannie. You must not build too many air-castles."

"Oh, but I like to," replied Nan. "It's lots of fun to do it and if they don't amount to anything I've had the fun of the building and nobody's hurt when they tumble down."

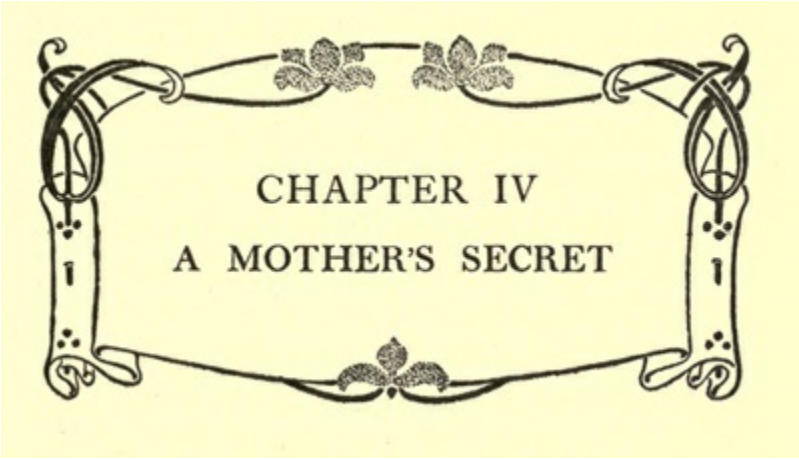
"In that case I suppose it doesn't make much difference, and when one is naturally a castle-builder it is hard to give up the habit."

"It isn't as bad as sucking one's fingers as Jean does, for it doesn't put my mouth out of shape; it only amuses me and I often forget my castles an hour after they are ten stories high. I suppose I am not to tell the children about Aunt Helen."

"I think I wouldn't yet."

"No," said Nan with a mature air. "I think it's best not. They mightn't understand. Besides, as she isn't a polywog nor a newly hatched bird, Mary Lee wouldn't be very much interested in her."





CHAPTER IV
A MOTHER'S SECRET

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The first days of autumn brought back school days. Aunt Sarah had gone to visit a nephew in lower Maryland, leaving behind her mementoes in the form of the coat of paint for the front fence, a new cover for the living-room table, and many stitches put in made-over garments for the children. She had further dispensed her bounty in a direction of which the children as yet knew nothing, and it was Nan who first heard of it from her mother.

Aunt Sarah's absence was felt in more ways than one. Mrs. Corner was her favorite niece. A tiny grave in the old churchyard marked the resting place of her namesake, Nan's elder sister, who was her mother's first-born and who lived but three short months. It may have been that Aunt Sarah's heart went out more tenderly toward her own sister's child because of this loss which was so heavy a grief to them both, but whether it was because of this bond between them or because they mutually loved and respected each other, it is true that any sacrifices which Miss Dent felt she could make she made for the Corner family, and when she was with them no task was too heavy for her, and her wise counsel and helpful hands were greatly missed by Mrs. Corner.

It was just after Aunt Sarah's departure, and while school was still a novelty, that Nan, running in to tell her mother of the day's doings, noticed that Mrs. Corner was sewing not for one of the children but for herself. This was so unusual that Nan remarked it, and forgetting her school gossip exclaimed, "Why, mother, you are making a new frock! Where did you get it?"

Her mother dropped her work with a sigh. Nan noticed that the dear face was pale and sad. "Aunt Sarah gave it to me," was the answer. There was silence for a few moments after this, while Mrs. Corner went on with her work of measuring off the black breadths. "I have something to tell you, little daughter," she then said. "You had a secret to tell me a little while ago, and now I have one to tell you." She paused. "It isn't a happy secret, Nan," she went on, "but as you are my eldest and my staff to lean upon, you must try to help me bear it without rebelling."

Nan grew very sober. This was such a melancholy beginning that she feared what might follow, but being a young person who never thrust aside unpleasant things when she knew they must be met she said firmly, "Don't bother about me, mother; I'll be as brave as a lion."

The scissors snipped along the edges of the pattern while Mrs. Corner bent over her work. Presently she said, "It is this, Nannie: that I must leave you for awhile."

All sorts of notions flew to Nan's mind. Was her mother perhaps going to Europe to hunt up her Aunt Helen? Was she going to see Cousin Henry Dent in Maryland? "Oh, mother," she cried, "tell me quick. Where are you going?"

"I am going to the Adirondacks, Nannie."

"The Adirondacks?" Nan looked the surprise she felt. "Why in the world are you going there? You don't know any one up in those regions, do you?"

"No, and that makes it harder. I am going for my health, Nannie."

The blood forsook Nan's cheeks. She felt as if she were sinking down, down, and it took all her effort to check a rising sob. All she did, however, was to hold her nether lip closely between her teeth and to draw a quivering sigh. Then she gasped out: "Oh, mother, mother, it doesn't mean--it can't mean--"

"It doesn't mean anything very serious--yet," said Mrs. Corner dropping her scissors and sitting down by Nan's side. "But the doctor says if I go now the tendency will probably be overcome. If I stay it may mean that the disease will get the better of me, and dear Aunt Sarah has made it possible for me to go. Only a few months, Nan, and Aunt Sarah will come and stay with you while I am away. Now, I want you to stand by Aunt Sarah. She has made, and will continue to make every sacrifice for your mother, and you must make sacrifices for her."

"Oh, I will," cried Nan. "I won't touch the melodeon, and I won't nag the others any more than I can help. Aunt Sarah is good. Oh, I know she is so good, but she isn't--she isn't--you." This time the tears would have their way and they began to course down Nan's cheeks though she sat up straight and tried to blink them away. "And--and"--she went on, "she doesn't--it's hard to make her understand things like it's not always being a waste of time to do what you like and all that."

"I know, but, dear, remember that persons are very likely to respond to what you expect of them, and you will find Aunt Sarah very sympathetic if you take her the right way."

Nan was not at all sure that she could find that right way but she did not say so. She only looked at her toes very mournfully and wondered if it had happened to be Aunt Helen instead of great-aunt Sarah who was to be left in charge whether she would have minded it so much.

"No mother could have had my interests more at heart," continued Mrs. Corner. "Think how she has toiled and sacrificed herself for me, and it is entirely due to her that I am able to go, for not only has she provided the money for my journey, an expensive one, but she has thought of a way to pay my board while I am away, and it is just here, Nan, that I shall have to depend upon you to stand by Aunt Sarah. Cousin Tom Gordon's two boys are to board here and go to school. They want to prepare for the University and it seems a godsend that they are coming this year, for it will make my going away possible. Of course this is a new element. Two boys coming into a family will make new conditions and you must consider that Aunt Sarah is very unselfishly and devotedly undertaking a greater responsibility than we have any right to ask of her. So, Nan, try to play the part of peacemaker always. Be the sweetener of tart speeches; be the sunshine that drives away the clouds. Aunt Sarah loves you and appreciates you, though she has a little crisp way which your over-sensitiveness finds harsh. Never mind that. Be patient and wise and sweet, so will you help your mother and bring her back speedily."

"I'll try, oh, I'll try," said Nan. This was a secret indeed. What plans! What changes! "When do the boys come, and when do you go?" she asked.

"I go next week. Aunt Sarah will try to be here before I leave and before the boys arrive. They expect to get here on the fifteenth."

"Such a little while; such a little while." Nan caught her mother's hand and covered it with kisses. "And when shall you be back?" she asked.

"That I cannot say. It will depend upon what the doctors say."

Nan sat holding her mother's hand against her cheek. It would be their first separation and it would be a hard one. Every now and then the tears gushed to her eyes, though she tried to force them back. "Are you going to tell the others why you are going?" she asked.

"No," returned Mrs. Corner slowly. "I think we will not tell them just why." That *we* gave Nan a sense of partnership in these schemes. It elevated her to a place beside her mother and Aunt Sarah. She was their confidante and it behooved her to adjust her shoulder to a certain burden of responsibility.

"Tell me about the boys," she said. "Are they nice boys?"

"I hope so. If they are not you must try to make them so. Their names are Randolph and Ashby. Randolph is a year older than you and Ashby a year younger."

"Where will they sleep?" asked Nan, coming down to practical things.

"They can have the room Aunt Sarah always occupies and she can sleep in my room with Jean and Jack."

"Will she like that? Couldn't Mary Lee and I go into your room and let the boys have ours? Your room is so big and with two double beds in it we could do very well. Aunt Sarah always likes that southwest room and it would be warmer in winter."

Mrs. Corner looked pleased at this evidence of consideration. "I am sure that would be a much more comfortable plan for all but you and Mary Lee. It would be some trouble to move all your belongings. I thought the other way would be more convenient; still, if you don't mind----"

"Oh, no, we won't let ourselves mind," said Nan; then, a little shamefacedly, "besides, it would seem more like being near you to sleep in your bed."

Her mother gave the hand that held hers a little squeeze. "Now, I must go on with my work," she said. "I shall have to get this done before I go."

"Can't I help?" asked Nan eagerly.

"Not on this, I'm afraid."

"Then I'll do the other things that you do. I'll go see if Mitty has everything out for supper." She picked up the key basket but paused before leaving the room. "May I tell Mary Lee and the twins about the boys coming and your going if I don't tell why?"

"Yes, I shall be glad if you would." And Nan flew to assume the important office of giving information which would cause a sensation.

She found Mary Lee placidly nursing a decrepit duck which had fallen into the slop barrel, showing in her pursuit of dainties an eagerness which did not accord with her age. Having been rescued and well washed by Mary Lee, she was now lying in that young person's lap rolled in an old bit of horse blanket, her restless eyes alone giving evidence of her uncurbed ambition.

"Come here, Mary Lee, I have a mighty big piece of news to tell you," cried Nan. "I'm going to tell you first."

"You come here," said Mary Lee. "I can't put the duck down till she gets dry."

"How ridiculous! As if a duck cared whether she was wet or dry," said Nan, going up and giving the duck a friendly poke, eliciting a remonstrative "Quack!"

"You'd care if you had fallen into a slop barrel and had to be dipped out in a bucket and lathered all over and rinsed off," said Mary Lee.

"I wouldn't be so foolish as to fall into a slop barrel in the first place. Ducks are such greedy things. I don't see how she got up there."

"She walked up a board like anybody," returned Mary Lee.

"Well, anywhere that she could swim would have done for her bath. It was silly to go through all that fuss of bathing her when she's just a duck that loves water like any other duck."

"What is your news?" asked Mary Lee, changing the subject. "I don't believe it's anything much. You always get so excited over trifles."

"I reckon you won't call this a trifle," replied Nan, "when I tell you that mother is going away for weeks and that Aunt Sarah is coming back to look after us, and that Randolph and Ashby Gordon are coming here to board all winter. I should think that was something to get excited over," she said triumphantly.

Mary Lee stared. "You're making it all up just to fool me."

"I'm not, either. What in the world would I want to do that for? It's true, every word of it. You can ask mother if it isn't."

"What's she going for?" asked Mary Lee.

"Oh, just because. Grown people have their reasons for doing things and we can't always be told them," replied Nan, with, it must be said, rather a condescending air.

"Do you know why?" asked her sister, determined upon getting to the heart of the matter.

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't."

"If you do, I think you are downright mean not to tell me. I'm 'most as old as you, and she's my mother as much as she is yours."

These latter facts Nan could not deny, so she answered weakly, "Well, anyhow, I shan't tell."

Mary Lee was slow to wrath, but once aroused she did not hesitate to speak her worst. She deposited her roll of horse blanket upon the ground and the duck with satisfied quacks waddled forth from the encumbering folds, glad of her freedom. "You are altogether too high and mighty, Nancy Weston Corner," said Mary Lee, quite outraged by Nan's refusal. "You're a scurvy old pullet, so there!"

"I like your way of calling names," returned Nan contemptuously. "I should think any one could tell that you had been near a slop barrel; you talk like it."

Mary Lee did not wait for further words, but fled to her mother, Nan following, taking the shorter way and reaching her mother first. "I tried to tell Mary Lee without saying why," she began breathlessly, "and she called me a horrid name, so I don't know how it will turn out."

"I think we shall have to tell her," said Mrs. Corner. "I did not realize that it might be difficult for you."

"She's coming now," said Nan.

Mary Lee's footsteps were hastily approaching. She burst into the room with, "Mother, is it true that you are going away?"

"Yes, dear child."

"What for? Nan was so mean and wouldn't tell me."

"I didn't give Nan permission to tell you why I was going."

"She needn't have been so disagreeable about it though," said Mary Lee. "Why didn't she say that you told her not to tell?"

"You didn't give me a chance," put in Nan. "You called me a scurvy old pullet before I could explain."

"What a name, Mary Lee," said Mrs. Corner reprovingly. "Where did you hear it?"

"Phil says it."

"Don't say it again. If you lose your temper like that and cannot bridle your tongue, I am afraid your mother will have many sorry moments while she is away trying to regain her health."

In an instant Mary Lee was on her knees by her mother's side. "Are you ill, mother?" she asked anxiously.

"Not very, but I may be if I do not have a change of climate, so I am going to take a trip. I have hardly left this place for eight years and more. I shall come back trig as a trivet, Mary Lee, so don't be troubled about me."

Nan left her mother to explain matters further and sought the twins who were amicably swinging under a big tree. As she unfolded her news to them the point which at first seemed to be most important was the coming of the two boys. Jack objected to their arrival, Jean welcomed it, and straightway they began a discussion in the midst of which Nan left them. Her brain was buzzing with the many thoughts which her interview with her mother suggested. She determined to be zealous in good works, and immediately hunted up Mitty that she might see that all was going well in the kitchen.

Mitty had not much respect for one younger than herself and paid no attention when Nan entered, but kept on singing in a high shrill key:

"Whe-e-en Eve eat de apple,
Whe-e-e-en Eve eat de apple,
Whe-en Eve eat de apple,
Lord, what a try-y-in' time."

"Mitty, have you everything out for supper?" asked Nan with her mother's manner.

Mitty rolled her eyes in Nan's direction, but vouchsafed no reply, continuing to sing in a little higher key:

"When she-e gabe de co' to Adam,
Whe-en she gabe de co' to Adam,
Whe-e-en she gabe de co' to Adam,
Lord, what a try-y-yin' time."

"I want to know," repeated Nan severely, "if you have everything out for supper?"

"I has what I has," returned Mitty, breaking some splinters of wood across her knee.

"I wish you'd answer me properly," said Nan, impatiently.

"Yuh ain' de lady ob de house," returned Mitty, provokingly. "Yuh ain' but jest a little peepin' chick. Yuh ain' even fryin' size yet."

"I think when mother sends me with a message, it is your place to answer me," said Nan with her head in the air. "I will see if Unc' Landy can get you to tell me what mother wants to know." And she stalked out.

As Unc' Landy was Mitty's grandfather, and the only being of whom she stood in awe, this had its effect. "I tell yuh, Miss Nan, 'deed an' 'deed I will," cried Mitty, running after her and hastily enumerating the necessary articles to be given out from the pantry. "'Tain' no buttah, 'tain' no sugah, jest a little bit o' co'n meal. Oh, Miss Nan!"

But Nan had passed beyond hearing and was resolutely turning her steps toward Unc' Landy's quarters, a comfortable brick cabin which stood about fifty yards from the house. The old man was sitting before its door industriously mending a hoe-handle. It was not often that Nan complained of Mitty, for she, too, well knew the effect of such a course. Upon this occasion, however, she felt that her future authority depended upon establishing present relations and that it would never do to let Mitty know she had worsted the eldest daughter of the house. "Unc' Landy, I wish you'd speak to Mitty," said Nan. "She wouldn't tell me what to give out for supper and mother gave me the keys to attend to it for her; she's busy sewing."

Unc' Landy seized the hoe-handle upon which he was at work, and made an energetic progress toward the kitchen, catching the unlucky Mitty as she was about to flee. Brandishing his hoe-handle, he threateningly cried: "Wha' yo' mannahs? I teach yuh show yo' sassy ways to one of de fambly!"

Up went Mitty's arm to defend herself from the impending blow while she whimpered forth: "I done say 'tain' no buttah; 'tain' no sugah; the's a little bit o' meal; an' Miss Nan ain' hyah me."

"Ef I bus' yo' haid open den mebbe she kin hyah yuh nex' time," said Unc' Landy catching the girl's shoulder and beginning to bang her head against the door.

But here Nan, feeling that Mitty was scared into good behavior interfered. "That will do, Unc' Landy. If she told me, it is all right."

"She gwine speak loudah an' quickah nex' time," said Unc' Landy, shaking his hoe-handle at Mitty. "Yuh tell Miss Nan

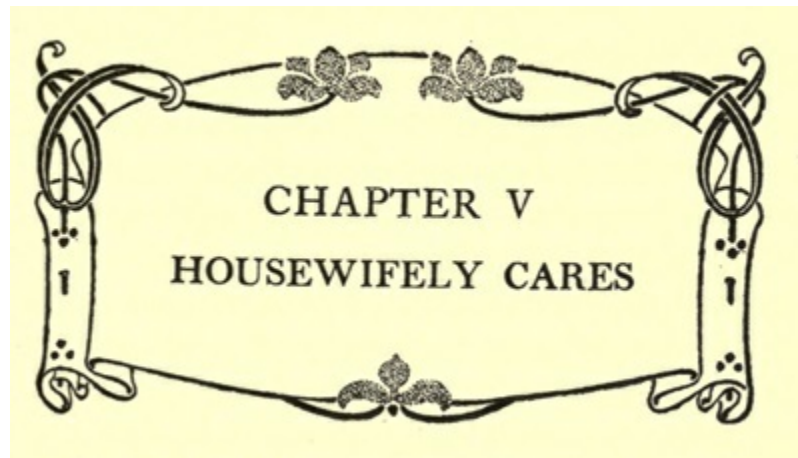
what she ast yuh, er I'll fetch Mr. Hoe ober hyah agin an' try both ends, so yuh see which yuh lak bes'." And he went off muttering about "dese yer no 'count young niggahs what so busy tryin' to be sma't dey ain' no time to larn sense."

The thoroughly humbled Mitty meekly answered all Nan's questions and Nan felt that she was fortified with authority for some time to come.

Nan was always shocked and repelled by Unc' Landy's methods, and only in extreme cases was she willing to appeal to him. Such appeals, sometimes bringing swifter and more extreme punishment, so affected Nan as to make her avoid Unc' Landy for days. He was always so very tender and courteous to every member of the "fambly" that it seemed almost incredible that he should be so merciless to one of his own flesh and blood, but such was a common attitude of the older negroes toward the younger ones, and his was not an unusual case. When Mrs. Corner was on hand she never permitted the old man to exercise his rights toward Mitty, but once or twice when the girl had overstepped bounds in his presence, he had meted out punishment to her later on, so she feared him while she respected him, praising him lavishly to her boon companions.

"Gran'daddy got a pow'ful long ahm," she would say, "an' man, I say he swif an' strong, mos' lak angel Gabr'el wid he swo'd an' trumpet. I mos' as feared o' gran'daddy as I is o' angel Gabr'el. Ef gran'daddy call me an' angel Gabr'el blow he trumpet at de same time I don' know which I bleedged to min'. I specs I run a bilin' to gran'daddy fust."

Having established her position in the kitchen, Nan returned to her mother. Every moment seemed precious now, and that night after Mary Lee was asleep, Nan crept softly from her bed and laid herself down by her mother whose arms clasped her close, but who did not allow her to remain. "It is not well for you to sleep with me, dear," she said. "It will be better for us both if you go back to your own room." Nan obeyed, but it was an anxious hour that she spent before sleep visited her. The night hours brought her many forebodings, and she felt that her young spirit was stretching beyond the limits of childhood toward that larger and less happy region of womanhood.



CHAPTER V HOUSEWIFELY CARES

The day for Mrs. Corner's departure came around all too soon. Aunt Sarah was to have arrived the evening before, but up to the last moment she had not come, and Mrs. Corner felt that she could not wait since all her arrangements were made. "I am positive she will be here to-day," she told Nan, "probably by the noon train, and the boys will not come till to-morrow, so you will have no trouble, even if Aunt Sarah should not come till night."

There were many tears and embraces at the last moment. Even Jean's placidity was disturbed and when the train which held her mother, moved out of sight, she flung herself in Nan's arms sobbing, "Oh, I didn't want her to go, I didn't."

Jack rubbed her eyes with none too clean fists and reiterated: "I promised I'd be good; I promised I'd be good." As for Mary Lee she slipped an arm around her elder sister, but "Oh, Nan! Oh, Nan!" was all she could say. Nan herself bravely kept back the tears but her feeling of helplessness and desolation was almost more than she could bear. Mother, who had never left them for so much as a night, gone far away where they could not and should not reach her. No one to advise, to comfort, to sympathize. No one to confide in. It was all blackness and darkness without that blessed mother.

Four very sober children returned to the house to eat their dinner alone. Even the importance of sitting at the head of the table brought no joy to Nan, and the fact that Phil's mother had sent them over a dish of frozen custard brought none of them any great enjoyment.

Mitty had taken advantage of the occasion to announce that she was going to a "fessible." She informed Nan that she had asked Mrs. Corner's consent weeks before and had been told that when the Sons and Daughters of Moses and Aaron had their "fessible" she could go. There was really nothing to say, and Mitty, adorned in a rattling, stiffly starched petticoat over which as stiffly a starched pink lawn stood out magnificently, started forth, bearing her purple parasol and wearing her brilliant yellow hat trimmed with blue roses.

"She certainly is a sight," remarked Mary Lee, watching Mitty's exit. "Wouldn't her feathers drop if she should get wet? Oh, Nan, I do believe a thunder-storm is coming up. Look at that black cloud."

"Now don't begin to be scary," said Nan, coming to the window. If there was one thing above another of which Mary Lee was scared it was a thunder-storm; it completely demoralized her, and she would always retire to the darkest corner, crouching there in dread of each flash of lightning and clap of thunder. Nan scanned the sky and then said calmly, "Well, I think it is very likely we will have a shower; we generally do when the Sons and Daughters have their festival."

It had been a sultry day, and the low-hanging clouds began to increase in mass, showing jagged edges, and following one another up the sky, black, threatening, rolling forms. In the course of half an hour, the first peal of distant thunder came to their ears and Mary Lee began to tremble. "It seems a thousand times worse when mother isn't here," she complained. "It seems dreadful for us four children to be here all alone. Suppose the lightning should strike the house."

"Then mother would be safe," said Nan, exultantly.

"But it wouldn't do her any good if we should all be killed," Mary Lee returned lugubriously.

"Suppose it should strike the train mother is in?" said Jean in a frightened tone.

"Oh, it couldn't," Nan reassured her. "It goes so fast that it would get beyond the storm. The sun is probably shining bright where mother is by this time."

This was more comforting; nevertheless Mary Lee's fears increased in proportion to the loudness of the thunderclaps. "I'm sure we are not safe here," she declared. "It is getting worse and worse, Nan." A terrific crash which seemed to come from directly overhead gave proof to the truth of her words. Jean clung to her and even Jack looked scared. Mary Lee cowered down in the corner and covered her face.

"Come, I'll tell you what we'll do," said Nan, though by no means unaffrighted herself; "we'll do what Aunt Sarah's grandmother used to do; we'll all go up-stairs; it's safer there, and we'll pile all the pillows on mother's bed--we'll pull it into the middle of the room first--and then we'll all get on it and say hymns. There isn't any feather-bed like they used to have, but the pillows will answer the same purpose. Come, Mary Lee." They all rushed up-stairs, and, between thunderclaps, gathered pillows from the different rooms, and then established themselves upon them in the middle of the bed.

"Aunt Sarah said they never used to feel afraid when their grandmother commenced to say the hymns, and she taught me the best one to say. Keep still, Jack, and I'll say it." A second violent crash of thunder drowned her words and Mary Lee threw herself prone upon her face, calling out: "Put some pillows over me so I can't see nor hear."

"We can't; we're sitting on them," returned Nan. "You are perfectly safe, Mary Lee. Now listen and you won't mind the

thunder." And she began the fine old hymn:

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform,
He plants His footsteps on the sea,
And rides upon the storm."

"It scares me for Him to ride upon the storm," faltered Jean.

"But you know if He is in the storm, He is right here to take care of us," said Nan, reassuringly. Jean was satisfied. Even Mary Lee raised her head when Nan had finished the hymn. "Now it is your turn," said Nan. "What will you say, Mary Lee?"

"I think I like 'Jesus, Lover of My Soul,' but I don't know it very well. Do you dare get down and bring me my hymnal, Nan? I wouldn't ask you only I could no more leave this spot than fly."

"I don't mind, I'm sure," responded Nan readily. "I think the worst is over anyhow." But she had scarcely returned with the book when another loud peal sent her scrambling to her nest in the pillows and it was some moments before Mary Lee could gain courage to sit up and repeat the hymn, which she could not do without frequent peepings at the page before her.

"Now Jack, it's your turn," Nan prompted.

Jack was always ready and she began and said through without faltering the hymn beginning: "Dear Jesus ever at my side." There was a most uplifted and saintlike expression on the child's face as, with clasped hands, she repeated the closing lines:

"But when I sleep, Thou sleepest not,
But watchest patiently."

One would have supposed Jack to be a most lovely and angelic person, and, in truth, for the time being, she was angelic.

Jean's turn came last. "I can't fink of anyfing but 'Jesus, tender Shepherd, Hear Me,' and it isn't bedtime yet," she said.

"Never mind if it isn't," said Nan; "it is quite dark and that will do very nicely." So Jean added her hymn while the storm still raged. However, they were all comforted, and finding that the plan of Aunt Sarah's grandmother worked so well, Nan proposed that they should not stop but should take another round of hymns.

"It would be nicer to sing them I think," said Jack.

"So it would," the others agreed, "and then nobody would have to remember all, for, if one should forget the hymnal will be right here."

"Let's sing 'Now the day is over,'" said Jack.

"But it isn't over," objected the literal Jean. However as this was a general favorite, they sang it through and by that time the storm was passing over and they felt they could safely leave the feather pillows.

"It was a splendid plan," declared Mary Lee. "Once or twice I almost forgot to be afraid, though I do wish Unc' Landy could have been somewhere in the house."

"I don't know how he could have helped matters," returned Nan, "though I shouldn't have minded his being on hand. I don't believe he has gone to the festival and very likely has been out in all the storm stopping leaks in the barn; it's what he generally does. Gracious! what's that?"

A thundering knock at the door stopped them in their work of returning the pillows to their places. "Who can it be?" said Nan.

"Maybe it's some one from Cousin Mag Lewis's to see if we are all right," said Mary Lee. "I shouldn't wonder if it were Phil."

"Well, you go see."

Mary Lee ran down-stairs to the door. It was still raining a little as the puddles in the front walk showed. The vines were dripping and the flowers hung heavy heads. Mary Lee did not notice these things, however, for two strange lads stood before her. She at once surmised who they were. "Come right in," she said. "Just put your umbrellas in that corner of the porch. I'll tell Nan you are here."

"We are Randolph and Ashby Gordon," said the boys.

"I know," returned Mary Lee, and sped up the stairs leaving the boys to deposit their wet umbrellas on the porch. "Nan, Nan," called the girl, "they've come, and Aunt Sarah isn't here."

"Who has come?" Nan questioned from the top of the steps.

"The boys, our cousins, Randolph and Ashby. They are at the front door."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Nan. "What did you say to them, Mary Lee?"

"I didn't say anything except to tell them where to put their umbrellas. Come right down, please, Nan."

"Their bed isn't made or anything," said Nan, pausing to look across at the open doorway which disclosed a room not yet in good order. "I'll have to explain, I suppose."

She went sedately down-stairs to find the two boys standing in the front hall. "Oh, how do you do?" she began. "We didn't expect you to-day"—and then feeling that this was scarcely a welcoming speech, she hesitated, blushing at not being ready for the occasion.

"I know," said the elder boy, "and we must apologize for being ahead of time, but we found that we could get here to-day and have company all the way. A friend of father's, one of the professors at the University, was coming, and he insisted upon our taking the same train. I hope it doesn't make any difference to you."

"No," Nan faltered, "only Aunt Sarah hasn't come yet and your room isn't quite ready."

"Oh, no matter," returned the boy, courteously enough, but rather distantly.

"You see, mother went away only this morning," Nan continued her explanations, "and Mitty, our girl, has gone out, but if you will just walk into the living-room and make yourselves at home, I can soon get everything in order. I'm Nan, you know. It was Mary Lee who opened the door and the twins are up-stairs. We had a heavy storm, didn't we?"

"We certainly did," replied Randolph, following her into the room. His brother silently entered with him.

"Please make yourselves at home," repeated Nan.

Having established her guests, she flew up-stairs. "They're here sure enough," she said. "You all will have to help me get the room ready; fortunately it has been swept. Jean, get some clean towels and the piece of soap from mother's room. I suppose we shall have to give them soap. Jack, I wish you would get some water. No, you'd better not," she called. But Jack, finding a chance to help and rather liking the task imposed upon her, was already half way down-stairs. With Mary Lee's assistance, the bed was made and the room was soon tidy. Then Nan returned below stairs to decide what to have for supper. She would put the best foot forward, and, though she was racking her brains for a proper bill of fare, she would not show her anxiety. Her own efforts in the way of cooking had been limited, for her mother had always been there to take the weight of responsibility. She could make tea, but perhaps the boys didn't drink it; she would find out. She would have to attempt either biscuits or batter bread, for, of course, cold bread was out of the question. There was no cold meat. She would fry some bacon. Bacon and eggs would do nicely. She would set Mary Lee to paring and cutting up some peaches. There could be sliced tomatoes, too. If the bread question could be settled, they would do very well. She would bake some potatoes in case her bread was a failure. She sent Jean to find Mary Lee and tell her to come to the kitchen and then she set to work.

"They're just like company," was the remark with which she greeted Mary Lee. "They don't act a bit as if they belonged to us. The little one, Ashby, hardly opened his lips, and the other one was polite enough but acted as if we weren't kinsfolk at all, but just strangers who were going to take them to board. I'm going to have bacon and eggs for supper. I wish you'd see if Unc' Landy is around anywhere; he can cut the bacon for us. I'm afraid I could not do it well, and I shall have to try some biscuits. I've made the fire, Mary Lee, and I wish you'd put a few potatoes in the oven. Where's Jack? There isn't a speck of cake in the house and they look as though they were used to having it."

"How can Jack do anything about it?" inquired Mary Lee, rolling the potatoes into a pan preparatory to washing them.

"I'm going to send her over to Cousin Mag's to see if she has any. I'd better write a note for Jack gets things mixed sometimes." She ran to her room and scribbled a note to Mrs. Lewis, as the two families often accommodated one another in this way. Having despatched Jack upon her errand, Nan turned her attention again to the supper. Unc' Landy had evidently been storm-stayed somewhere and had not yet returned, so the bacon was cut rather clumsily and set over the fire to sizzle. To Mary Lee was given the responsibility of preparing the peaches and setting the table. Nan suggested that she put on the very best of everything.

"Oh, need we do that?" she said. "We'll have to wash them up afterward, you know, for Mitty will not be here to do it, and it would be awful if we were to break anything."

"Never mind," returned Nan, "I'll take the risk. We must show them that we have nice silver and china. Go on and do as I say, Mary Lee."

Mary Lee obeyed and Nan turned to her other tasks. "I wonder how long it takes bacon to cook," she said to herself, "and I wonder how much flour I shall need for the biscuits. I'll have to guess at it. Dear me, how does any one ever learn all those things?" She carefully sifted her flour and then measured out her baking powder accurately. As she was hesitating as to the amount of lard required, she realized that the kitchen was full of smoke from burning bacon, and, hurrying to the stove, she discovered that every slice was hard and black.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, "it's ruined, and I'll have to cut more; it's such a trouble, too. I'll finish the biscuits first, for I see the bacon will cook while they are baking." The interruption made her forget the salt for her biscuits, and she set rather a rough, ragged looking panful in the oven.

The next lot of bacon was cooked more successfully, though some slices were thick at one end and thin at the other. Some were short, some were long, quite unlike the neat curly bits which usually appeared upon the table. Mary Lee came in as she was concluding her tasks and her comments upon the looks of the dish did not reassure Nan.

However, she rose to the occasion. "They won't show when I've covered them with the fried eggs," she declared. "Dear me, Mary Lee, I'll never lift the eggs without breaking them. I'll have to let them cook more, I reckon. Hand me the cake-turner, please; maybe I can do better with that, and won't you look at the biscuits? They ought to be done by this time."

Mary Lee announced that they looked done.

"Try the potatoes."

A squeal from Mary Lee followed this operation, for she squeezed one potato too hard and it burst with a pop, burning her thumb.

Nan dressed the burn with a plaster of baking soda and dished up the potatoes herself. "Where's Jean?" she asked.

"She put on her best frock and is in the living-room entertaining the gentlemen," returned Mary Lee. "It's time Jack came back, don't you think, Nan?"

"High time," returned Nan, carefully transferring the rest of the eggs from pan to dish. "I've only broken one, Mary Lee, and the bacon is quite covered. Everything is nearly ready, but, oh, dear, how does any one ever do it quickly and easily? It is impossible to keep your mind on bacon and eggs and biscuits and potatoes all at once, and how any one remembers more than that is beyond me. There, we came near forgetting the peaches. Get them out of the pantry, and bring some fine sugar to put over them."

"It's getting pretty late," remarked Mary Lee, looking down the street, "but here comes Jack at last."

"I know it's late and I expect those boys are starved, but I can't help it; I've done my best."

"I should think you had," said Mary Lee; "you oughtn't to have had so much."

"I'm sorry I had potatoes, for they made you burn yourself. Well, Jack," as that young person entered the kitchen mud-stained and tearful, "what have you been doing? What is the matter?"

Jack held out a flattened parcel. "I fell down," she sobbed, "and I fell plumb on the cake."

"Goodness!" cried Nan. "Do see, Mary Lee, if it's fit to eat. I can't, for my hands are all peach juice from cutting up the peaches. Did you hurt yourself, Jack?"

"I hurt my feelings awfully, 'cause I spoiled the cake."

Mary Lee anxiously examined the contents of the parcel. The cake, fortunately, had been sent on a tin plate, which saved it from utter destruction. "It is quite good in places," she declared. "We'll put the mashed pieces underneath."

Nan laughed in spite of fatigue and anxiety. "Then it will match the dish of bacon," she said. "Never mind, Jack, you did your best and we are much obliged to you; the cake will taste good and we girls can eat the flat pieces. Now, are we all ready?"

"I think so," said Mary Lee, nursing her injured thumb. And the flushed and anxious housekeeper arranged her dishes upon the carefully set table.

"It looks beautiful," said Jack.

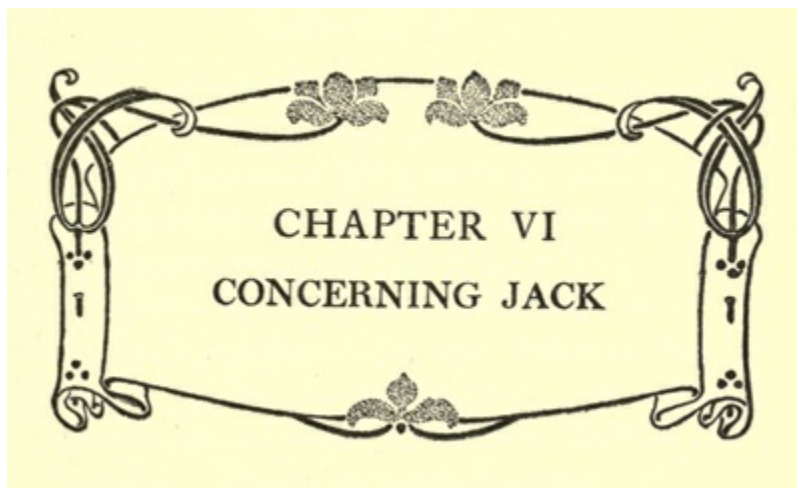
"I'm glad you thought of the flowers for the middle of the table, Mary Lee," remarked Nan, who was critically examining her board. "Yes, I think it looks very well. Now, I'll go and call them."

The meal went off fairly well in spite of the chunks of bacon and the mashed cake. To be sure, it was rather a solemn affair. Conversation flagged, for both boys and girls felt ill at ease. Nan was covered with confusion when she tasted her biscuits, and was obliged to excuse herself when she suddenly remembered the tomatoes which she had sliced and placed on the ice and when she caught an odor of burning bread. She rescued the last pan of biscuits just in time, only

one or two having burned at the bottom.

After supper there was the task of clearing away, and when this was over and the last dish safely put away, it was a tired Nan who sent her sisters off to bed and sat waiting for the boys who had gone out to have a look at the town. There was no hope of seeing Aunt Sarah that night, for the last train was in, and Nan curled herself up in her mother's big chair by the window, feeling quite desperate when she thought of breakfast without the help of either Mitty or Aunt Sarah.

After the boys had returned and Nan was at last lying by Mary Lee, the very thought of the dear absent one sent the tears coursing down her cheeks, so that the pillow her mother's head had so often pressed was wet before the tired child fell asleep. It began to rain again, and all through the night the sound of the pattering drops made Nan dream that her mother was weeping, and longing for home and children.



CHAPTER VI CONCERNING JACK

The consciousness of her responsibilities made Nan awaken with a start quite early in the morning. After her festivities, Mitty could not be expected to appear before nine o'clock, consequently, the matter of breakfast depended entirely upon Nan. She was sufficiently rested after her night's sleep to look upon the day's prospects with more calmness than had seemed possible the night before. The storm had passed; all the fears and dreams vanished in the sunshine. The whole world appeared fairer. The heavy rain had washed the dust from the leaves; the grass sprang up in livelier green; the morning-glories over the porch were fresh and beautiful; the very earth looked refreshed. Birds were singing in the bushes; a rooster was lustily crowing from a fence rail.

"It has cleared off beautifully," said Nan as she opened the kitchen door to look out. "Good morning, Lady Gray," she greeted the big cat which came purring to rub against her. "I hope my stormy time is over, too," she went on. "It certainly was a gray day yesterday, but to-day Aunt Sarah will surely come and Mitty will be back, so there is only breakfast to trouble me. I haven't the least idea what I ought to have, or, I should say, what I can have. I thought Aunt Sarah would be here to decide all such things. I can't have bacon and eggs again! Unc' Landy! Ah, Unc' Landy!" she called to the old man who was just issuing from his cabin.

He came toward her. "Mawnin,' miss," he said, taking off his battered hat with a bow. "Fine day arter de rain."

"It is indeed. Unc' Landy, I want you to cut some slices of ham for me."

"Yass, miss. Whar dat Mitty?"

"Now you know Mitty won't get back till nine o'clock. She never does after a festival or a picnic or a parlor social, as she calls it. She is too sleepy after staying up half the night."

"Po' miserble sinnah," grumbled Unc' Landy. "Bad man git her suah ef her foots keep on a-twitchen' when de banjo play."

"Oh, Mitty is all right," returned Nan smiling. "You are too hard on her, Unc' Landy."

"'Tain' no use talkin' to dese yer light-haided young uns," he replied. "Yuh jest bleeded to beat erligion inter 'em. Dey foots is on de broad road to destruction, and yuh bleeded to drive 'em back wid er stick, jest lak a sheep er a heifer er a pig when dey gits outer de parf. How much ham yuh reckon yuh wants, honey?"

"Oh, a couple of slices. I suppose you can tell how long to cook it. I had an awful time with my supper last night, and it wasn't very good after all. I forgot to put salt in the biscuits and the bacon was chunky."

"Whafo' yuh mek any fuss jest fo' yuh-alls?" said Unc' Landy. "Why yuh don' jest picnic till yo' Aunt Sarah come? 'Tain' no diffunce ef yuh chilluns ain' got a comp'ny brekfus."

"But it is a difference when we have two strangers."

"Strangers? Who dey?" Unc' Landy looked greatly surprised.

"The Gordon boys, Randolph and Ashby. They were to have come to-day, you know, but they got here yesterday instead."

"Law, honey, is dat so? An' de ole man ain' on han' to he'p yuh-alls out when dat fool chile Mitty away. Now, ain' dat scan'lous fo' Unc' Landy git ketched in de rain an' not git home in time fo' suppah? I clar it righ down owdacious. Nemmine, don' yuh worry, chile, I fix yo' brekfus. What yuh reckon yuh have?"

"Ham; you know I asked you to cut it."

"Brile ham. Yes'm, and a pone, aig pone. How dat do?"

"I used all the eggs last night."

"Dey mo' in de hen-house, I reckon. I git 'em. Coffee, yuh bleeded ter have a good cup of coffee."

"Well, yes, I suppose Randolph drinks it and maybe Ashby does. We'll have it, anyhow."

"Might fry some taters, er tomats," suggested Unc' Landy.

"Yes, they would be good."

"Den go 'long an' set de table, honey, whilst I git de aigs, an' den' yuh come tell ole Landy whar things is an' he git yo' brekfus. He cook, yass 'm, dat he kin. He domeskit, Landy are." And chuckling at this self praise the old man jogged down to the hen-house while Nan flew to set the table, greatly relieved at having so capable an assistant.

The breakfast turned out to be all it should. The ham was cooked to a turn; the egg pone, light and puffy, came to the table hot and delicious; the coffee was perfect; the tomatoes fried brown and surrounded by a tempting gravy. Nan tried to make conversation and her sisters ably assisted her, but the boys were not very responsive, though Nan concluded it was shyness and not pride which prevented them from being more talkative. They escaped as soon as the meal was over and Nan drew a sigh of relief. "They certainly aren't very good company," she remarked. "Jean seems the only one they will have anything to say to."

"You forget she dressed up in her best and entertained them yesterday," said Mary Lee, laughing. "What did you talk about, kitten?"

"Oh, fings to eat, and--and horses and--dogs."

"No wonder then they found something to say," laughed Nan. "Now run along and get ready for school. Mary Lee will start later and I may not get there at all."

"There isn't going to be any school to-day," returned Jean.

"Why not? Who said so?"

"Jack said so."

"How did she find out?"

"I don't know. She said this morning when we were getting dressed that there wasn't going to be any school to-day."

"It isn't a holiday. I'd like to know why," said Nan reflectively. "Are you sure, Jean?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I asked Jack twice and both times she said: 'There isn't going to be any school.'"

"To be sure we weren't there yesterday," said Nan, "and she probably heard from some one over at Cousin Mag's. Where is Jack?"

"I don't know."

"Go find her, there's a good girl."

Jean went out. She saw nothing of her twin, so she sought the dog who would be a willing and able help in finding Jack.

As she stood at the gate, looking up and down the street, the two boys came out. "What are you looking for?" asked Randolph.

"I'm looking for Trouble," she replied.

The boy gave a short laugh. "You'll find it soon enough if you look for it," he said, passing on and leaving Jean much puzzled by his remark. Finding neither Jack nor Trouble in this direction, she sought Unc' Landy and Trouble was discovered gnawing a ham bone by the old man's cabin door. "Come, Trouble, find Jack," called Jean.

The dog dropped his bone, cocked his head to one side, flopped an ear over one eye and looked at her brightly.

"Find Jack. Come, where's Jack?" repeated Jean. Then Trouble understood, and set off down the street, Jean following.

Just before the schoolhouse was reached, Jack was discovered sitting on the steps of a vacant house. She had settled herself there before any of the school children came that way. There were too many interesting things occurring for Jack to wish to waste her time at school, and she had argued out a plan of proceeding which ought to satisfy everybody, she reflected. There could be no school without scholars and she would see to it that there were no scholars. As each child came along she promptly called out: "There isn't going to be any school to-day." She felt that this was strict truth. The first arrivals turned back all too readily and repeated Jack's words to the others they met, so that within the schoolroom the teacher wondered and waited till ten o'clock. By that time Jack, feeling that the day was saved, left the steps where she had been sitting and went to the station to wait the first train in from Washington.

Before this, however, Trouble had discovered her to Jean in his most polite manner. "Nan wants you, Jack," announced Jean, running up.

"I don't care. She's not my mother," returned Jack.

"You'd better come."

"I will when I'm ready."

"I'm going straight home to tell her."

"I don't care."

"I don't see what you want to sit here for all by yourself."

"Because I choose."

In this mood Jack was not companionable, as Jean knew to her sorrow, and so, after a look of virtuous reproach at her sister, and a lifting of her head in scorn, she walked off with switching skirts, pounding down her heels very hard and calling back: "I'll tell Aunt Sarah too."

"She hasn't come yet," called Jack in return.

"You don't know whether she has or not," came the reply in fainter tones.

"I do so. The train doesn't get in till eleven. Ba-ah!" Then Jean indignantly pursued her way to pour forth her grievance in Nan's ear.

"She was sitting on the steps of the old Southall house," she reported, "and she wouldn't come when I said you wanted her. She said 'Ba-ah!' too, and she told me she'd come when she was ready."

Nan knew Jack's eccentricities of old, and that she should choose to be sitting on the steps of the Southall house was not a matter of surprise, though she wondered why Jack preferred to be there to enjoying her own home garden on a holiday. But she did not think it wise to try to force an obedience which very likely would not be given, so she said: "Well, never mind, let her stay there if she likes it. Perhaps she is waiting for some one. Isn't that Mitty coming? It looks like her yellow hat."

"It is Mitty," Jean assured her, "but her hat looks funny and she's got on an old calico wrapper."

Mitty entered rather shamefacedly. She had a tale of woe to tell. She had been caught in the rain and her clothes had suffered. She had gone to the "fessible," however, but it rained so hard that she, with most of the others, had to stay all night. There was a fight which scared her nearly to death, and there was no place to sleep, for the older persons took up all the floor space. She had walked home when daylight came, and had gone to bed at her mother's, but she was "clean tuckered out." And, indeed, at intervals during the rest of the day, one or another of the girls came upon her sound asleep over her work.

At eleven o'clock came Aunt Sarah, accompanied by Jack, who had met her at the train. Ordinarily Nan would not have been so overjoyed to see Aunt Sarah. There were too frequent passages of arms between them for the girl to look forward to her great aunt's visit with unalloyed pleasure, but this time Miss Dent was given an exuberant welcome, not only by Nan, but by the others. "We thought you would never get here," said Nan.

"I thought so myself," returned Aunt Sarah. "Henry Dent made me miss the train by five minutes yesterday morning, so I had to take the afternoon train. That was an hour late owing to a washout, so I couldn't make connection in Washington, but had to stay all night there with Cousin Lou, though I did get the earliest train this morning. Your mother got off safely, Jack tells me. Why aren't you children at school?"

"There wasn't any school to-day," promptly replied Jean.

"How's that?" Miss Dent turned sharply.

"I don't know," said Jean.

"Did you hear the reason?" asked Nan, turning to Jack. She had been so occupied that the question of school had given her very little thought that day.

"There wasn't one of the scholars there," replied Jack truthfully and with a guileless look.

"How do you know?"

"I was down there and saw."

"Down where? Did you go to the schoolhouse?"

"I didn't go in."

"Didn't Miss Lawrence come?"

Jack hesitated, but she was equal to the emergency. "I didn't see her," she made answer.

"I wonder if she is ill," said Mary Lee. "We didn't hear that she was yesterday, and yet Jack knew this morning before breakfast that there wasn't to be any school. She told us so."

"How did you find out?" Aunt Sarah fixed a keen look upon Jack. "Look here, Jacqueline Corner, it strikes me that there is a screw loose somewhere. Did you tell your sister that there wouldn't be any school so you could have a holiday?"

Jack faced her questioner unflinchingly. "It's just as I said, Aunt Sarah. There wasn't truly any school to-day."

"I'll find out the why and wherefore," replied Aunt Sarah, shaking her head warningly. "How did you get along, Nan? I

suppose with Mitty and Unc' Landy you have had no trouble."

"We had an awful time," Nan answered. "Mitty took an afternoon and evening off. Mother promised her long ago that she should go to the festival of the Sons and Daughters of Moses and Aaron and we had a terrible thunder-storm that scared us nearly to death and that kept Unc' Landy from getting back from the mill where he had gone for some feed. Then the boys came and it was pitch dark before I could get supper ready."

"Yes, and Jack fell down and mashed the cake so some of it was crite flat," put in Jean.

"I don't care; it was dreadfully slippery coming up the hill and, anyhow, it tasted good. Randolph ate two pieces," protested Jack.

"So did you," retorted Jean.

"Hush, hush your squabbling, children," said Aunt Sarah. "Well, Nan, you did have your hands full. I'd have been more put out than I was if I had known those boys were here. I suppose, though, you didn't make any difference for them, just two youngsters like them."

"Indeed we did make a difference," Jack told her proudly. "We had out all the best china and silver, and Nan made biscuits, and we borrowed cake from Cousin Mag, and all that."

"For pity's sake, what did you make all that fuss for over two young cubs of boys?"

"We wanted to give them a good impression," said Nan, with dignity. "Mother says so much depends upon the first impression."

Aunt Sarah laughed. "Well, you might have saved yourselves in my opinion. What are the lads like? Nice fellows?"

"I suppose so," returned Nan doubtfully. "They haven't given us much of a chance to find out. Randolph says very little and Ashby nothing at all except: 'Please pass the bread' or 'Please pass the butter.'"

"Those remarks don't furnish much of a clue to character," remarked Aunt Sarah with a little smile. "Probably they are bashful and are not used to girls. Here in a houseful of them with no older person they feel mighty queer, I have no doubt. Their tongues will loosen up after a few days. You put them in your room? Your mother wrote that you wanted to."

"Yes, and we made it look pretty well. There is a broken chair that Unc' Landy is going to mend, and some of our clothes are still in the press."

"Well, I'll get myself settled and we'll soon have things in running order," returned Aunt Sarah, rising to go to her room.

Nan gave a sigh of relief. It lifted a great weight from her shoulders to have capable Aunt Sarah on hand, to know that in a few minutes the black cashmere would be substituted by a neat calico and that, in her working garb, Aunt Sarah would take control.

"Come, Mary Lee," said Nan, "Aunt Sarah will see to everything. There is really nothing for us to do, so let's go work in our gardens. It's a splendid day for weeding."

The girls' gardens were side by side. In Nan's grew currant bushes, a dwarf apple-tree, tiny tomatoes, yellow and red, sweet corn, and in one corner, pleasant smelling herbs, thyme, tansy, sage, lavender and bergamot. Flowering beans ran over her share of the fence, and a rollicking pumpkin vine sprawled its length along the line between this and Mary Lee's garden. All in Nan's garden appealed to the senses. She gloated over the delicate pink blooms which covered her small tree in the spring. She reveled in the shining red currants hanging in clusters among the green leaves. She delighted in the scarlet and yellow tomatoes, in the delicate bloom of the lavender, the graceful green of the tansy, the perfume of the bergamot. These gardens were theirs provided they raised something useful, and Nan had kept within the limits, but her mother smiled to see how she had chosen.

Mary Lee, on the contrary, showed a practical utilitarianism. Potatoes, onions, large lusty tomatoes, solid cabbages, mighty turnips, radishes and lettuce were what she aspired to cultivate, and right well did the crops show.

"I think I'll have an asparagus bed next year," said Nan bending down to gather a leaf of bergamot. "It looks so pretty and feathery, and after it is once started it is no trouble at all."

"It will take up a lot of room," returned Mary Lee. "I do wish you'd pull up that old pumpkin vine; it's getting all in among my turnips."

"It's too late in the season for it to hurt them," returned Nan nonchalantly, "and I really can't keep it on my side, Mary Lee, unless I sit here all day and all night watching it, for it grows so fast I'm continually having to unwind it from something. I believe it is a fairy vine, an ogre--no, it's too jolly to be an ogre. It may be a playful giant that grabs at everybody just to be funny."

"I don't think it's a bit funny," replied Mary Lee, not possessing Nan's humor. "I just wish you'd come and get it away from my side."

Nan stepped across the twig fence which separated the two gardens. "Come here, old Giant Pumpkin-head," she said. "You must stop curling your fingers around everything you see. Stay on your own side." She dragged the obtrusive length of vine across to her own garden. "He does spread mighty near over the whole place," she continued. "I'm afraid I shall have to put a spell on him another year. Oh, I know where I'll have him next season."

"Where?" asked Mary Lee industriously pulling up weeds which yielded easily after the rain.

"Oh, never mind where. I can't tell just yet," Nan hastened to say, for her thought was to allow a pumpkin vine to have its own way upon the edge of the field where she had her retreat. She, too, fell to pulling weeds, but presently she cried: "Mary Lee, Mary Lee, Miss Lawrence is coming up the street and I believe she is coming to our house."

"Then she isn't ill," returned Mary Lee, brushing the earth from her hands.

"No, and here comes Jack running for dear life. I must go see what she wants. Heigho, Jack!"

The child came tumultuously toward them. "Oh, Nan, don't let her see me," she cried.

"Let who see you?"

"Miss Lawrence. She's coming after me."

"Coming after you? and why? You know she's not bothering about you unless you have been up to some trick. Have you, Jack?"

Jack clung to Nan's hand. "I didn't tell a story. There couldn't be any school when there were no scholars, could there?"

"No, I suppose not."

"I did so want to help," said Jack. "I knew you would have to stay home and get dinner if Aunt Sarah didn't come, and I wanted to go and meet her if she did."

"But what did you do?" Nan drew the child to one side. "Now tell sister the whole truth, Jack, and unless it is something perfectly dreadful, I'll try to get you let off. What did you do?"

"I just told Carrie Duke and Laura Fitchett there wouldn't be any school, and they went and told a whole lot of the others, and when any one else came along I told them, too. There wasn't any school, so I didn't tell a story."

Nan giggled outright. She couldn't help it. Of course, it was not right, but the plan was so ingenious and the logic so like Jack's that she couldn't be angry. Moreover, she was but a child herself who liked a holiday. "I'll tell you what to do," she advised. "You go over to Cousin Mag's and tell her I'll send back some cake to-morrow, that I am very much obliged to her for helping us out, that Aunt Sarah has come and that we shall have no more trouble. Then I'll go up to the house and say I have sent you on an errand. You may stay over there for a little while, if you like. Of course," she added, feeling that perhaps she was too lenient, "you did very wrong, and if Miss Lawrence asks me I shall have to tell her what you did, but if she is very mad you'd better not be on hand, especially as Aunt Sarah is there, too. Now, run along."

"Oh, Nan, you are so dear," cried Jack, giving her a hug. "I haven't been comfortable all day, and when I saw Miss Lawrence coming, and I felt so afraid, like Adam and Eve in the garden, I knew I hadn't done right. It didn't seem very wrong when I first thought about it this morning."

"I can't say it was right," said Nan with decision, "but go now." And Jack took the benefit of her advice.

"I'm going up to the house to see Miss Lawrence," Nan called to Mary Lee. "Will you come, too?"

"Not unless she particularly wants me. My hands are a sight, and I do want to finish this weeding while the ground is so nice and soft."

Nan went slowly toward the house. She did not mean to excuse Jack but she meant to shield her. It was always Nan's way and Jack realized that her eldest sister was her most tolerant friend. There were occasions when even Nan's patience gave out, but her mother feeling for her little sister was too strong for her not to love this wayward one, perhaps, best of all.

She found Miss Lawrence and Miss Dent in animated conversation. Miss Lawrence was hardly through her greeting before she began to question. "Why weren't you at school to-day, Nan?" she asked.

"I couldn't come, Miss Lawrence. Mother went yesterday, and our girl was away, too, so I just had so much to do I couldn't come."

"Oh, I see. Miss Dent has been telling me of your mother's absence. I am sorry."

"Nan, where is Jack?" asked Miss Sarah.

"I sent her on an errand, Aunt Sarah. She'll be back after a while."

"Do you know anything of her having reported that there would be no school to-day?" asked Miss Lawrence severely. "Not a scholar came though I waited till after ten. I could not imagine why it was and have tried to trace the cause. From what I learned Jack was the first one who started the report. Why did she think there would be no school?"

Nan glanced at her Aunt Sarah and was relieved to see that she did not wear her severest look though Miss Lawrence looked sternly unsmiling. "I don't think the way Jack looked at it," began Nan, addressing Miss Lawrence, "that she meant to tell a story. She said there couldn't be any school if there were no scholars, and so she saw to it that there were no scholars. She always wants to help and she knew how busy I would be, but she knew, too, that I would insist upon her going to school and so she thought out this plan for having a holiday."

There was actually a smile on Aunt Sarah's face.

"That's Jack all over," she said. "And I know full well that from her point of view she believed she wasn't telling a story."

"That's what she said to me," Nan again asserted.

"It's most astonishing," said Miss Lawrence, but even in her eyes there was a flicker of amusement as she glanced at Miss Dent. "Of course, she must be punished," she went on, "for she must realize how wrong it was and such things cannot be overlooked."

"She didn't really think about its being wrong till she saw you coming," said Nan, "and then she was scared to death, poor little Jack."

This was most tactful of Nan, for Miss Lawrence had a great horror of being dreaded and disliked. She believed in firmness but in gentle and loving control, so she said, "She should not have been scared of me, Nan. I am never unjust, I hope."

"What are you going to do to her?" asked Nan, feeling that she must learn the worst. "If it's very bad, Miss Lawrence, please let me take the punishment; I'm bigger, you know."

The tears sprang to Miss Lawrence's eyes. Nan had scored a second time, all unconsciously. "Why, my dear, do you believe I could be harsh enough to inflict anything dreadful upon a little girl? I assure you I shall do nothing worse than keep her in after school and give her a lecture, not an unkind one, but I hope to be able to make her understand the nature of an untruth better than she does now. I am glad to know the exact facts, Nan; it will make it easier for me to deal with her."

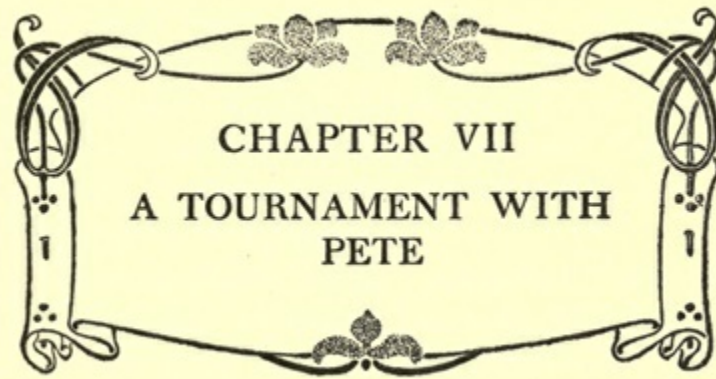
"Shall you tell the whole school?" asked Nan anxiously.

Miss Lawrence considered the question. "No, I think not. I will simply tell them that a false report arose and that another time they must come to see for themselves, and that any announcement of a holiday will be made from the desk by me personally." She then bade Miss Dent good-bye, and stooped to kiss Nan whose championship had won the day for naughty little Jack.

Jack took her punishment stoically and the only remark about it was in answer to her sister's question: "Was it very dreadful, Jack? Was she awfully solemn and terrible?"

Jack's reply was philosophical: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," she said gravely. And that was all any one was ever able to get out of Jack.





CHAPTER VII
A TOURNAMENT WITH
PETE

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As Aunt Sarah prophesied, the boys thawed out in a few days, but did not promise by their manner to offer any real companionship. Mary Lee made a point of avoiding them while Nan was perfectly indifferent, and only Jean went out of her way to be agreeable.

"I think they're horrid," complained Mary Lee. "Just because they have a finer house than this one and their father has been some high muck-a-muck they think they can look down on us."

"I don't believe they look down exactly; I think it's because we are girls, and they're not used to playing with girls. We belong to the same family and it isn't anything much to be a Congressman. I'm sure they're polite enough."

"But they're not a bit like Phil," replied Mary Lee who measured all boys by that standard.

"It's because they're not used to girls," insisted Nan; "that's what Aunt Sarah says, and Phil has been used to us ever since he was born."

"But Phil says they're stuck up," persisted Mary Lee, "and a boy ought to know."

"Oh, well, who cares?" returned Nan. "I'm sure I don't, and I don't want boys tagging after me wherever I go," which was something of a fling at Mary Lee who generally preferred Phil's company to that of any of her sisters.

It was Phil, after all, who did bring about a better understanding between the cousins, so that all spent many a holiday in common. It was one Saturday when Phil came over to propose a "sure-enough" tournament, that the fun commenced. He had his own horse and proposed to beg, borrow or--

"Not steal one for me," interrupted Mary Lee.

"I'll get one some way," said Phil. "We must have more than one to enter the lists. The more the better."

As a tournament was sufficiently romantic to appeal to Nan she eagerly put in, "I'll be a knight."

"What'll you ride?" asked Mary Lee.

"Pete."

Phil tumbled back on the grass with a shout of laughter, for Pete was the old mule which Unc' Landy used for all farming purposes. He was aged, half blind and evilly disposed, so his entering a contest like a tournament seemed the height of absurdity.

"You laugh mighty soon," retorted Nan. "Maybe you reckon I can't ride Pete. I can do more with him than any one."

"I think he'd be lots of fun," said Phil, sitting up, his eyes twinkling with mirth. "I'll bring Lightfoot and maybe I can get sister Polly's mare for Mary Lee."

"Oh, I'd love that," cried Mary Lee, enthusiastically. "Who'll be the spectators?"

"We don't need any except the kids. Jack and Jean will do," returned Phil. "We'll just ride for the fun of the thing, you see."

"We can have a make-believe audience," said Nan eagerly. "I'd love that. Where can we have it, Phil?"

"Oh, over in the field, back where the road comes in."

"How about rings? We must have rings."

"One will do. We can't expect to have many. I can fix up one over the gate and if we take that we shall do well."

"That will be a fine place," said Nan, hugging her knees. "Go 'long, Phil, and get your horses and I'll see about Pete. Unc' Landy isn't using him to-day."

Phil went off with a chuckle, promising to return in half an hour, and Nan flew to the house. It was her intention to outdo them all in the matter of costume. Phil had declared his intention of tying some sort of sash around his waist and of wearing his brother Tom's Rough Rider hat with a feather in it. Mary Lee said she would put on a red jacket and tie a silk handkerchief around her head.

"I'll get up something," said Nan evasively. She might not have the swiftest steed but she could have the grandest costume. Whatever Nan went into, she did with all her heart and her enthusiasm went to full lengths whenever she entered any contest.

Nan had the faculty of mentally placing objects in their relative places once she had seen them, and on her way to the

house she quickly made an inventory of those things she should need. First there was Jack's plaid skirt; it would about come to her knees. A pair of leathern leggings her mother had worn as part of her riding costume when a girl, she remembered seeing in a trunk in the attic. In this same trunk, to her satisfaction, she came across some strips of plaid like the skirt; these she considered a great find and bore them down-stairs with the leggings.

Having arrayed herself in a green shirt-waist, the plaid skirt and the leggings, Nan rummaged among her treasures to find an old cairngorm pin which had belonged to her Grandmother Lee, and which her mother had once given her as a birthday gift, lacking anything new. Fashioning the plaid strips into a scarf by pinning the longer ones together, she fastened them at the shoulder with the pin. Then her deft fingers contrived from some stiff paper, a sort of Scotch cap. She gave this a coat of shoe polish which dried quickly, and as a finishing touch she pinned to it a long peacock feather which some one had once given her.

When all was ready Nan surveyed herself in the glass with much pride. Her ideas had been gleaned from some pictures of Highland costumes which she had often seen at her Cousin Mag's, and she had determined to take the name of the Knight of Snowdown, knowing and loving well her "Lady of the Lake."

On her way from the house she stopped in the pantry and took three apples from the barrel standing there. One of these she carefully pared and slipped the paring into her pocket; the others she took with her to the stable yard where old Pete stood, his head over the fence. She rubbed his nose gently and gave him the pared apple. If there was anything Pete loved, it was apples, and with these as a reward Nan knew she could do anything with him, and indeed he allowed her to adjust his bridle and to strap a folded horse blanket upon him and to mount him easily, a bit of apple being the recompense for such amiable behavior.

As Nan rode in state out of the yard in the direction of the field, Ashby Gordon saw her and was fascinated by her appearance.

"What are you going to do?" he called after her.

Nan flashed him a merry look over her shoulder, but made no reply.

There was something entirely too enticing in the possibilities her looks presented and Ashby's curiosity got the better of him. He ran to find Randolph. "Come on, Ran," he said. "I wish you'd see Nan. She looks stunning and she's riding old Pete somewhere. Come on."

More impressed by Ashby's manner than his words, Randolph followed his brother. As they went out they caught sight of Nan just disappearing down the road behind the barn. A dip in the hill hid her from view in another moment, but they determined to take the same direction to see what was going on. Arriving upon the scene, they found Phil on Lightfoot, Mary Lee riding her Cousin Polly's Beauty, and the twins seated as spectators.

"What's going on?" asked Randolph.

"A tournament," said Phil. "There is the grandstand if you want to look on."

"Oh, but I'd like to be in it, if I only had my horse here," said Ran.

"So would I," put in Ashby. "My! but Nan looks great. What are you, Nan?"

"I'm the Knight of Snowdown, Mary Lee is the Knight of the Red Jacket and Phil is the Knight of Morro Castle because he is wearing a Rough Rider hat."

"It's rather too big," said Phil. "I've got to take a reef in it."

"We've only one ring," said Nan, "but we have a large assemblage to look on. The Goldenrod family are nearly all here. The Oaks are out in force and the Maples are dressed up in their gayest clothes, you see."

Ran looked at her with more interest than he had ever shown. "I say," he remarked, "you look like the real thing. Who's your herald?"

"Oh, we haven't any. Phil is going to call out: 'Prepare to charge,' and 'Charge,' unless," she said graciously, "you'd like to do it."

"I'd like it first-rate," said Ran heartily.

"All right. That will help us out finely, won't it, Phil?"

To which Phil replied: "It will make it more real, I reckon."

"The other two had selected their ladies before I reached here," said Nan, "so if I win I'll have to crown a make-believe. The crown is of red maple leaves. Jean is making it now."

"If you win," said Mary Lee contemptuously, being rather put out at the appearance of the Gordon boys upon the scene.

"Yes, Miss High-and-Mighty," returned Nan. "Because you have the best mount, you needn't think you're going to have it all your own way. It isn't the riding; it's the taking the ring. Two out of three goes. Where are the lances, Phil?"

Phil produced three long straight poles made from saplings, sharpened at the end, and soon all three knights were mounted and in line. But just before the herald uttered his first call, Nan lowered her lance, drew from her pocket a piece of apple paring and tied it upon the pole.

"What in the world are you doing?" cried Phil.

"I'm doing this to make Pete go," was the answer. "If he smells this, he'll try to run for it."

"That's not fair," cried Mary Lee.

"It is, isn't it, boys? When she has the best horse she ought to let me do it, I think," declared Nan.

"Oh, there wouldn't anything make that old creature go," said Phil disparagingly. "He always sleeps while Unc' Landy has him in the plough, and I reckon he'll do it now. Let her tole him on any way she likes, Mary Lee; it will be more fun."

The Knight of the Red Jacket was the first to start, but with such impetus did her steed go that it took all her wits to hold in the spirited mare and her lunge at the ring brought no result.

Nan came next. Pete, with the apple paring dangling within a foot of his nose, got up his best speed and galloped with noble effort to overtake this tid-bit.

"Good boy, Pete," cried Ashby, clapping his hands, and the sly old mule, as if understanding, dashed along at a rate which surprised every one. Nan had ridden him bare-back too often not to know his paces and though he had never before taken quite such a gait she was secure in her faith in him and actually took the ring, laughing as she slipped down and offered Pete the bit of apple paring.

"I told you it was skill and not paces," said she as she came back.

Phil was the next, and he, too, took the ring.

"It's not fair," pouted Mary Lee. "If you had this horse, you'd go so fast you couldn't see anything."

"I'll change with you," cried Nan quickly.

"Suppose you do that," proposed Ran. "Then each one will have a fair test. Nan can ride Mary Lee's mare next time and Phil can take Pete. Then the third time Phil can ride the mare, Mary Lee can ride Pete, and Nan Lightfoot; that will give every one an equal test."

Mary Lee objected to this, mainly because Ran had proposed it, but the others overruled her and so it was arranged, Nan a second time coming off victorious, Phil knocking the ring from its place and Mary Lee scoring not at all.

The third time no one won for Pete absolutely refused to carry Mary Lee. He planted his feet obstinately and firmly and when urged by repeated blows from Ashby at the rear, kicked out so viciously that Ashby speedily got out of the way. So Nan and Mary Lee were obliged to change back again, but even then Mary Lee was no more successful, for by this time Pete's temper had been tried beyond pacifying and he was sulky. No amount of coaxing would urge him to go faster than a slow walk, so it was decided to lead him aside and Nan made her third essay upon Phil's horse, without taking a ring. However, as it was, the odds were in her favor, for she had outdistanced her rivals and had shown herself the most expert in the tourney. Therefore, it was she who was to bestow the crown upon her chosen lady.



THE TOURNAMENT

"You might take one of us," said Jack wistfully, who longed to be queen of Love and Beauty.

"I wish I could, but you didn't wear my colors and I can't offend a brother knight or we might have a joust which would end in bloodshed," said Nan seriously, swinging the wreath of red and yellow leaves upon her lance. "I'm sure I don't want to give offense," she added.

Jack looked disappointed. "I thought, of course, you'd choose me, Nan," she said.

"I will next time. We'll try it again some day, and this time Phil can crown you as a maid of honor."

This satisfied Jack who felt that to be the only lady to wear a crown was sufficient honor.

Nan stood swinging her wreath and looking uncertainly around the field. Upon a tall bramble a single spray of white shone out, the bush evidently having miscalculated the season and having imagined that it was still summer. "Ah, my Lady Bramble," cried Nan, "I will crown you, for you must have expected something unusual or you wouldn't be showing yourself at this time of year." And she flung her garland over the bramble bush.

But just here their play was interrupted by a voice at the fence, saying, "Who got dat mewl?"

Nan ran toward Unc' Landy who looked at her in disapproving surprise. "What all dis? Dis ain' no way fo' young ladies to dress. None o' de fambly evah done disher way 'scusin' dey goes to er ball."

"It's a tournament, Unc' Landy, and I took the ring," cried Nan joyously. "You ought to have seen Pete run the first time, but he was awfully obstinate at the last."

"Pete? You ain' ride dat ole mewl to no tournymint?"

"Yes, I did and he ran, really he did. I'll tell you why." And Nan told how she had lured on the old creature by the odor of apples.

At this story all Unc' Landy's disapproval vanished and he burst into a loud guffaw. "I say yuh meks him run," he cried. "I knows now how to git wuk outen him."

"Oh, but you mustn't fool him," said Nan. "I gave him the apple afterward. It would never do to make him run that way every day or he'd die in his tracks."

"He sholy would ef he keep up dat gait. Come erlong hyar, yuh ole fool creetur. Whafo' yuh kickin' up yo' heels lak yuh young an' frolicsome? I knows yo' age. Come on hyar." And he led off the old mule while every now and then he doubled over with mirth, repeating: "I say run."

"It was great fun," declared Ran. "I didn't know girls ever did such things."

"We do," returned Nan. "We do all sorts of things and mother doesn't care so long as it isn't actually wrong. She likes us to be out-of-doors. We girls play baseball and do lots of things like that."

"Nan won't always play," complained Mary Lee. "She gets too young ladyish sometimes and goes off somewhere to mope."

"I don't mope," returned Nan, "but there are other things I like to do. I don't like boys' games all the time, only sometimes. I don't like to go fishing because I hate squirming worms on hooks, and I feel sorry for poor gasping fish."

"Oh, but we have to have them for food," said Ashby.

"I know we do, but I'd rather not do the catching. I'll let you do that," she added laughing.

They were all on thoroughly good terms by this time and since the afternoon was not over, they took turns in riding, Ran showing himself so expert as to pick up his cap from the ground while going at full speed. He was able, too, to ride standing, bareback or any other way, winning great applause for his cow-boy acts.

"I believe I'll ask father to let us have our horses up here," he said. "It would be no end of comfort and if we had some kind of trap we could take you girls off on long drives."

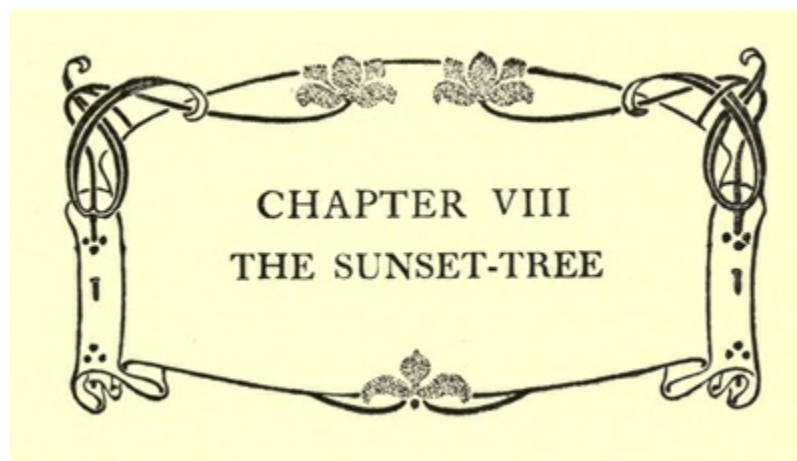
"We have an old phaeton," said Nan; "it's rather dingy looking, but that is all that is the matter with it, and there is the sleigh. We don't need either since we sold the horses, but mother doesn't like to part with them for the small price we could get for them and she says maybe some day we can afford to keep a horse."

"We must surely see about having our horses here," repeated Ran, and that very night he wrote home to his father to make the request.

A week later the horses arrived and were stabled near-by. Polly Lewis was generous enough to send her mare to one of the girls once in a while and so many a long and delightful ride did the cousins have. Sometimes several of them would pile into the old phaeton and sometimes two would go horseback and the rest would drive. Strange to say, though Mary Lee was so much less impetuous than Nan, and fonder of boys' sports, she sat a horse less well and was never the graceful and fearless rider that Nan was, though many a girl might have envied even her good seat and steady hand.

There were other tourneys, too, when Randolph generally was victor and crowned Jean who was his special favorite, thus causing pangs of jealousy in Jack's ambitious heart. Nan, seeing this, resolved to do her best for Jack's sake and practiced so diligently that once Ran's successes rendering him careless, she actually did take the championship from him and to Jack's great delight, crowned this little sister, making a flowery speech as she did so.

Aunt Sarah smiled contemptuously at these performances which she called "fool nonsense," but since the children kept well, were not in bad company, and did not neglect their school duties, she did not forbid them their exciting plays. After the arrival of the horses belonging to the Gordon boys, Pete was not again expected to play the part of a curvetting steed, but was allowed to rest on his laurels.



CHAPTER VIII THE SUNSET-TREE

Although the girls had plenty of time for play, Aunt Sarah saw to it that they had no really idle moments. She was the most industrious of persons herself and accomplished wonders which she explained by saying her daily nap of half an hour so fortified her that she could do two days' work in one by taking two rests in the twenty-four hours. She was quick to perceive defects in young people and in a half sarcastic, half humorous way, commented upon them. Upon Jean, such remarks had little effect; they angered Jack, slightly annoyed Mary Lee, but they hurt Nan to the quick, she being the most sensitive of them all. Proud and romantic, high-spirited and impatient, she was often thrown from a pinnacle of eager expectation into the depths of a present discomfort. It was on such occasions that she fled to her nook in the pines which she had finally named "Place o' Pines." Here she would often solace herself by writing to her mother whom she missed, perhaps, more than any of the others did. Reports coming from Mrs. Corner were on the whole favorable. "If I can stay long enough," she wrote, "the doctors give me every hope of entire recovery."

It was one afternoon when Aunt Sarah had been particularly exacting that Nan fled to Place o' Pines. She had not been there for some time, having been occupied in too many ways to have many moods. This, however, had been a particularly horrid day. In the first place she had come down late to breakfast and Aunt Sarah had said: "Good-afternoon," when she entered the dining-room. That made all the others giggle and she felt so small. She needn't have been late, of course, but while she was putting on her shoes and stockings she thought of a new tune and had been humming it over so as not to lose the air, and, as she sat there dreaming, the time slipped away.

Then of course, Mary Lee might have seen that she was in a bad humor and should not have teased her about dawdling, making her answer sharply.

"You old sharp corner," Mary Lee then had said.

"You're a Corner yourself as much as I am," Nan had retorted. "You're an angle; you're an angle worm," was Mary Lee's triumphant reply. And then Randolph had shouted with laughter. Nan's cheeks reddened as she remembered his mirth. She hated to be laughed at, especially by boys, and by older boys worst of all. She didn't mind Ashby and Phil so much, for they were younger, but she did very much mind Randolph's laughter, so she had taken to her heels and had not spoken to any of them since. She hoped they would let her alone and that she would be safe in her hiding-place till supper-time.

It was two months since her mother had left home and longer since she had parted from her Aunt Helen. As she came through the orchard to where the pines stood sombrely green, she saw a charred space just outside her tiny grove. The boys had evidently been there roasting potatoes, for there were skins and corn-husks scattered about.

"Oh, dear," sighed Nan, "if they have found out my darling grove, I shall never have any more peace." But, apparently, the boys had not entered the charmed castle, for as Nan crept through the underbrush she saw that all was as she had left it, only a bit of white paper fluttered from the music rack to which it was fastened by a pin.

"They have been here after all," she exclaimed, "and have found me out. I suppose that is some foolish note they have left." She took the paper to the edge of the grove where it was lighter and read:

"Come, come, come,
Come to the sunset-tree.
The day is past and gone;
The woodman's axe lies free,
And the reaper's work is done.

"Come at ten o'clock to-morrow by command of your

"FAIRY GODMOTHER.

"October 14."

Surprised and pleased, Nan's first thought was "I must go tell mother." Then with a rush came the recollection of her mother's absence. She was the only one who knew the secret. Her Aunt Helen had returned. Had she come alone?

Nan looked across the little brook toward Uplands. The house seemed as silent and deserted as in the weeks and months past. Slipping the paper into her blouse, she determined to go and reconnoitre.

The house looked grim and uninviting. Nan wondered if ever it had seemed otherwise, if ever the doors had been thrown open and from the windows had looked smiling faces, her Aunt Nancy's, her Aunt Helen's, her father's. The stick-tights and jimson weed held her with detaining hands as she ran back through the unmown lawn. They seemed

like unseen fingers from fairies under a spell. Nan wondered at what mystic word the doors of this haunted dwelling would fly open to her.

"Suppose," Nan said to herself, "an ogre lived in that dark woods and I was in his power." She gave a little self-reproachful sigh as she reached the sunset-tree. "Mother would tell me that I was in the power of an ogre, I suppose," she continued, sitting down on the gnarled roots which stretched far along above soil. "Mother would say old ogre Impatience and the bad fairy that makes me get to dreaming, had me in their clutches. Maybe they have. I wish I could tell my fairy godmother about it, and that she could give me a phial of precious liquid to squeeze on the ogre's eyelids so he would go to sleep and never wake up; and I wish she would give me a charm to change the fairy that makes me dream into one that would make me jump right up and get dressed in a jiffy. I wonder why it is I always love so to moon over my shoes and stockings. All sorts of ideas come to me then. Perhaps if I did nothing but put on shoes and stockings I'd some day have an idea come to me that would be worth while." The whimsy of spending the rest of her life in putting on shoes and stockings made her laugh.

The sunset was gorgeous gold and red over the top of the hill. Lakes and mountains and turreted cities appeared in the sky. "The holy city," said Nan, becoming grave. "That is where papa is. Now up go the roses," she went on as pink clouds detached themselves and drifted off overhead. "I'm sending you those roses, papa," she said. "Please take them into heaven with you and I'll try to get rid of the ogre Impatience and the Poppy fairy. Poppies put you to sleep they say, so I'll call her that. To-morrow I'll stand on one foot to put on my shoes and stockings, for if I sit down I am lost. I wish I knew, papa darling, if you could look through those bright golden cracks in the sky and could see me standing here under the sunset-tree."

She returned soberly home and deliberately sought out Mary Lee and the boys whom she found practicing the double shuffle on the back porch.

"Where have you been?" asked Ran, pleasantly.

"In the enchanted woods," returned Nan, "but it was getting gruesome there so I came away."

Ran laughed. He was getting used to these speeches from Nan, and rather liked them.

"I can do it now," said Mary Lee eagerly. "I got Mitty to show me. See, Nan." And she executed the step easily.

"I don't know that step, but I know another one," said Nan, glad to perceive that her ill temper of the morning was forgotten, and being a little ashamed of supposing that they would miss her much when she went off alone.

The noise of their break-downs brought Aunt Sarah to the door. "What in the world are you all doing?" she asked.

"Just doing some steps," replied Mary Lee, expertly executing her double shuffle.

"You might have been better employed," returned Aunt Sarah. "It would have been just as well, Mary Lee, if you had been giving some attention to darning your stockings. There is a fine large hole in the knee of one where you scraped it against a tree you were climbing, I suppose. And, Nan, it wouldn't do any harm if you were to see where you left the shirt-waist you took off this morning. We are not Japanese to hang up things on the floor."

"I wish we were," answered Nan. "I'd like to wear kimonos and shoes that slip up and down at the heel, and I'd not mind living in a house made of paper screens."

"Poor protection they'd be to you," replied Aunt Sarah, "for you would punch a hole in every one before a day was over."

Nan was not destructive and considered this an unjust imputation, so she stalked off with her head in the air. She didn't believe but that she had hung up the shirt-waist and that it had slipped down. Aunt Sarah was so particular and was always dinging at her about leaving bureau drawers and closet doors unclosed. When one is in a hurry, how is it possible always to see that everything is just so?

She found the waist not on the floor of the closet, but by the chair where she had laid her clothes the night before. There were some of Jack's belongings, too, strewed around the room, but Mary Lee's and Jean's were carefully put away. Nan hung up the waist and then sat down by the window. Suppose the things in the big house at Uplands had been allowed to lie around helter-skelter, she didn't believe it would look so attractive as she imagined. This brought a new train of thought which she carried out, leaning her arms on the sill, her chin resting upon them till Aunt Sarah's entrance aroused her from her reverie.

"Up in the clouds, I suppose," she exclaimed. "You ought to live in a balloon or a sky-scraper, Nan, you so seldom want to come down to earth. I want you to find Jack and Jean and tell them to come in and get ready for supper."

Nan departed on her errand, smiling to herself in the thought that she had a secret from them all. She was out of sorts with everybody in the house, but to-morrow would be the sunset-tree and Aunt Helen.

She was promptly on hand at the trysting-place the next morning, though finding some difficulty in getting there in time as it seemed that Aunt Sarah had a hundred things for her to do. That she did not dream over them goes without the saying, and Aunt Sarah congratulated herself upon the seeming improvement under her reproofs. Promptly, as Nan appeared, the little figure of her Aunt Helen was seen approaching her. She did not wait for Nan to come up but ran toward her and clasped her in her arms, and Nan gave her as close a hug. Her imagination was strongly appealed to by this relative, so little known and who had chosen such fascinating methods of becoming acquainted.

"You dear Aunt Helen," cried Nan, "where did you come from?"

"You know me then," said her aunt.

"Oh, yes. When I told mother, she guessed who you were."

"And she let you come to meet me to-day?" said Miss Helen, with a strain of eagerness in her voice.

"She didn't know. She wasn't here to ask. She's gone away, you know."

"I didn't know. Tell me about it, please."

Nan poured forth her woes and fears concerning her mother.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," sighed Miss Helen. "We didn't know. Oh, my dear."

"Do you think she may be very ill?" asked Nan her eyes wide with alarm.

"I hope not. I hope not." Her aunt spoke more cheerfully. "No doubt she will get quite well where she is."

"She says she will if she can stay long enough."

"She must stay." Miss Helen spoke with decision. "Did she mind very much, Nancy, that you met me?"

"Oh, no; she was glad. She said----" the girl hesitated.

"Go on, please." Miss Helen spoke pleadingly.

"She told me that she had said something that she regretted."

"And that was----" Miss Helen leaned forward eagerly and caught Nan's hand in a tight clasp.

"That she never wanted to see any of the Corner family again," here Nan hurried on. "It wasn't any wonder, was it, when she was in such trouble and distress?"

"I never blamed her," murmured her aunt.

"She said she ought to have tried to be friendly to you and"--Nan looked up shyly, "that you used to love me dearly."

"I've always loved you dearly," returned her aunt warmly, "and I hope I always shall. Ah, my dear, you don't know what it is to have those dreadful bitternesses come into a family. I loved you all, your father, your mother, you children, but I loved my mother, too, and she needed me, for I was all she had left, and--well, never mind now. I am so very glad time has softened your mother's feeling, toward me at least, and I am so sorry, so very sorry, that she is not well. Poor dear Jack, it would have been a blow to him."

"Don't say that! Don't!" cried Nan. "It makes me feel as if I ought to be scared and trembly about mother and I don't want to." She put her head down in Miss Helen's lap and burst into tears.

"My dearest child," cried Miss Helen, "please don't cry. You make me so miserable."

"I won't cry," said Nan lifting her head. "She is better, oh, she is, Aunt Helen."

"I am sure of it, darling. Now, do you want to know what brings me here?"

"I do indeed."

"I have crossed the ocean twice since I saw you. I took your kiss to your grandmother all the way over with me, and oh, Nannie, dear, you don't know how much it meant to her! The first tears I have seen her shed for many a long day came to her eyes when I told her about you and what you said. Then she was restless and unhappy until she decided that nothing would do but she must see you. At first she urged me to send for you or to come over and bring you back, but I could not leave her and I doubted if you would be allowed to come. When she realized that, for the first time in all these years, she expressed a desire to come back to America. She has come to see you, Nannie. You won't refuse to go to her, will you?"

Nannie's heart was beating fast. At last she was to see the beautiful grandmother whose eyes followed her about from the portrait over the mantel. "Oh, I want to see her," she said. "I can't ask mother, but I know she would say yes; I know she would. Where is she, Aunt Helen? And when can I see her?"

"She is coming home. She is coming here as soon as I can get the house ready. She is with friends in Washington and I have engaged Martha Jackson to come over to clean the house and with Henry Johnson's help we shall soon have everything in order."

"I wish I could help," exclaimed Nan.

"Would you really like to?"

"I certainly would."

"Then you may. We'll go right over now for I promised Martha I'd come back soon so she would know what to do next."

This prospect of helping at Uplands was one of sheer delight to Nan. It was what gave her the greatest pleasure, and this opportunity of becoming intimate with the furnishings of the house at Uplands was beyond anything she had ever hoped for.

Through the long weeds the two made their way to spend the day in uncovering furniture, unpacking boxes and setting things to rights generally. During the process, Nan became confidential and revealed more of her own character and of her home life than she could have done in days of ordinary intercourse, so that Miss Helen came to know them all through her: Jean's gentle sweetness, Jack's passionate outbursts and mischievous pranks, Mary Lee's fondness for sports and her little self-absorbed ways; even Aunt Sarah stood out on all the sharp outlines of her peculiarities. Her unselfishness and her generosity were made as visible as her sarcasms and tart speeches, so that Miss Helen often smiled covertly at Nan's innocent revelations.

There was uncovered, too, the lack of means, the make-shifts and goings without in some such speech as: "Dear me, I wonder if our old sofa ever looked like that when its cover was fresh and new. It's just no color now and mother has patched and darned it till it can't hold together much longer, and the springs make such a funny squeak and go way down when you sit on it. Jack has bounced all the spring out of it, I reckon;" or, "we had a pretty pitcher something like that but Jack broke it and now we have to use it in our room, for you know we couldn't let the boys use a pitcher with a broken nose."

There were moments, too, when Nan spoke of the ogre Impatience and the Poppy fairy, both of whom Miss Helen seemed to know all about, for she fell in so readily with all Nan's fanciful ideas that the child felt as if she had known her always, and often would fly at her impetuously and give her a violent hug, frequently to the peril of some delicate ornament or fragile dish which she might have in her hand.

As room after room was restored to its former condition, Nan breathed a soft: "Oh, how lovely," but when the drawing room was revealed and all the beautiful pictures were unveiled, she sat in the middle of the floor and gazed around. All this she had longed to see and now she was in the midst of it. "I have a right to be here, haven't I, Aunt Helen?" she asked. "I really have a right. You invited me."

"Why, of course, Nan."

"I shall tell Aunt Sarah I had. She will say I sneaked in or stood around till you had to ask me, but I didn't."

"Of course not, you silly little girl. Come now, I am half starved. Let us go see what Martha has ready for us."

"Oh, I forgot about eating. I wonder what Aunt Sarah will say to my not coming home."

"Will she be alarmed?"

"No, not that exactly, because sometimes I take my pocket full of biscuits and stay out all day on Saturdays. I play I'm all sorts of people and that I have all kinds of wonderful things to eat. Have I ever had a meal in this house?"

"Many a time you have sat in your father's high-chair, and have banged on the table with a spoon, and, later on, you had many a sly meal with us when you would run off and I would catch you coming here. You couldn't cross the brook but would stand on the other side and call to me, 'Nenny, Nenny,' for that was as near Helen as you could get."

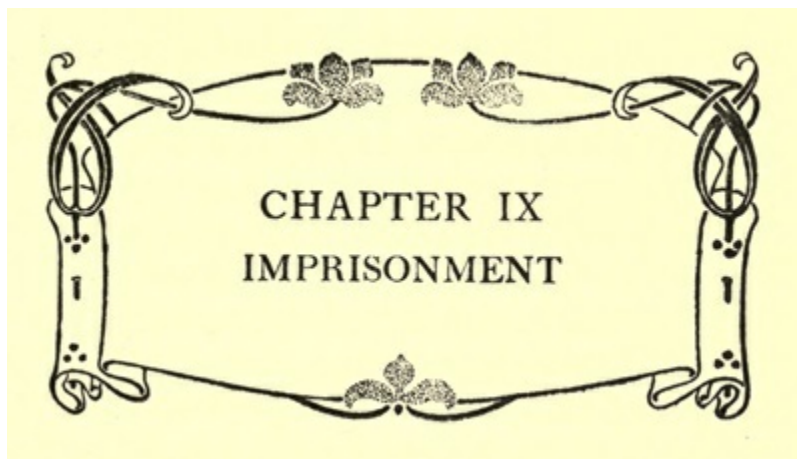
Nan sighed. "I really think I ought to go home. I could come back, I think."

"And leave me to eat my luncheon alone?"

Nan hesitated. It didn't seem very kind to do that, so she overcame her scruples and sat down to the meal Martha had prepared for them, wondering what Aunt Sarah would say when she heard about it. She felt a little startled when she stopped to consider possibilities. Aunt Sarah, though tart of speech, seldom resorted to active punishment unless she considered the limit had been overstepped, then she did not hesitate to mete out supperless solitary confinement to the aggressor. "I don't care," said Nan resolutely to herself, "I'm not going to be impolite to Aunt Helen even if Aunt Sarah doesn't approve. She can punish me if she wants to. I shall not mind going without my supper." In consequence she ate a hearty luncheon, being hungry from exertion and, moreover, wisely providing for future possible fasting.

It was a memorable day and when at last they left the house and Miss Helen locked the door behind them she told Nan that she would hang out from the second story window a red cloth as a signal when she had returned from Washington, and that Nan was to come over after that as soon as possible. She kissed the child good-bye and said, "I dreaded coming back, Nannie dear, but now I am glad to come since I have seen you."

So Nan went off with an exultant feeling in her heart. It was all like a fairy tale; Aunt Helen the fairy godmother, her grandmother the queen of the fairies. This was the enchanted castle and Nan was to be given entrance to it. She ran down the hill, stopped at the sunset-tree to look at the reddening sky, crossed the brook, and ran plump into Aunt Sarah.



CHAPTER IX IMPRISONMENT

"Nancy Weston Corner," exclaimed Aunt Sarah, "where have you been all day? Who was that you were talking to up there at the house? I saw you coming away."

"It was my Aunt Helen," replied Nan, stoutly.

"And have you been up there hobnobbing with her and that wicked old mother of hers?"

"I reckon I've a right to hobnob with my own aunt," retorted Nan, immediately up in arms, "and as for my grandmother, she isn't there and she'd not be wicked if she were."

"Much you know about it. If you did know, you'd have more pride than to insinuate yourself into a household where you are not wanted."

"I do know all about it, and I didn't insinuate myself; I was invited. Aunt Helen invited me."

"When did you see her? How did she find you out?"

"I saw her weeks ago and my mother knew all about it. She did not object in the least."

"That's a likely story."

Nan's eyes flashed. "I'll thank you to believe, Miss Sarah Elizabeth Dent, that I don't tell stories."

"Don't you speak to me in that way," returned Aunt Sarah angrily. "March yourself home. You know as well as you're alive that neither your mother nor I ever cross the brook and that you are not allowed to do it either."

Nan wrenched her shoulder from Aunt Sarah's grasp. "I don't care anything about what you do," she said, rebelliously; "my mother knows I go to my grandmother's house, so there."

"We'll see about this," said Aunt Sarah. "Not a step do you go from the house till I have word from your mother. I'd be ashamed to be beholden to them for so much as a crust of bread, and to let them have the chance to patronize you after all that is past is more than my family pride will allow. You knew perfectly well I would never give my consent to your going there and you sneaked off without so much as a word to any one and were gone all day so that I worried----"

"I don't see why you worried," Nan interrupted. "I am often gone all day."

"Don't contradict me," said Aunt Sarah severely. "There is one thing I will not stand from servants and children and that is impertinence. You can go to my room and stay there till I can inquire into this. I'll sleep with Mary Lee. You don't cross the threshold of that room till your mother says so."

Nan's indignation by this time had risen to its greatest height. If she were to be punished for one impertinence, why not for more? So she turned and said: "You needn't touch me; I'll go. But I'll tell you one thing; that I don't believe my grandmother is half as wicked as you are and she'd not treat me this way no matter what. If I do go to your room I shall ask the Lord to bless her in her down-sittings and her up-risings just the same. You can write to my mother if you want to, and ask her if I did wrong to go to see my Aunt Helen. I know what she will say and I'll ask her if I can't stay there altogether till she comes back. They wouldn't call me a story-teller and they'd treat me better than you do. They are nearer kin anyhow."

Having delivered herself of this indignant speech, Nan took to her heels, reached the house, ran to her aunt's room and slammed the door after her, then she burst into tears of rage. Never before had her temper brought her to the making of such remarks to Aunt Sarah. They had had their little tiffs but such anger on both sides had never been displayed.

If there was one subject above another upon which Miss Sarah was excitable, it was the Corner family. She resented to the very core of her being the elder Mrs. Corner's neglect of her son's family, and that Nan should deliberately make overtures aroused all her indignation. Nan could have said nothing to enrage her more than to compare her unfavorably with Mrs. Corner, senior. So there was open war between them and Nan might well feel that she had gone too far.

However, the girl was more aggrieved and angry than sorry, and was specially annoyed that she had been sent to her aunt's room; that seemed to her a needless severity, for what harm would there be in allowing her to occupy the room she shared with her sisters? But it was some satisfaction, Nan reflected, that her aunt was punishing herself likewise, for she disliked a bedfellow.

It was not long before Jack's pattering feet were heard upon the stair and presently she burst into the larger room calling: "Nannie, Nannie, where are you?"

"Here," answered Nan in a depressed voice.

Jack stuck her head in at the door. "What you in here for, Nan?" she asked.

"Aunt Sarah sent me," returned Nan, biting her lip and trying to keep the tears back.

"Why, what for?"

"Just because I went to Uplands without asking her. Mother did not object when she was here, and Aunt Helen was there and wanted me." It was a relief to pour out her grievances if only to Jack.

"A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind," and Jack's own experiences made her appreciate the situation. Moreover, it seemed the height of calamity to her that Nan should be punished; Nan, who was the eldest and who really had a right to read lectures to her younger sisters. That she should be in disgrace was something to awe and impress one. "She's a mean old thing," said Jack winding her arms around her sister's neck. "Who's Aunt Helen, Nannie?"

"Papa's own sister, and she has come back to Uplands. I saw her before mother went away, but I didn't tell any one but mother. It was a secret and I couldn't tell. She wants me to come over there as soon as she and grandmother get back from Washington, and now I can't go for Aunt Sarah says I must stay here till she hears from mother. She was just furious with me. They are not her kinsfolk; I don't see why she should meddle. Aunt Helen will expect me and will wonder why I don't come." And the tears again started to Nan's eyes.

"I'll go tell her and then she'll know why," said Jack generously.

"And get punished, too. No, ducky dear, I can't have that, but it is good of you to offer to go. I'll have to think out some way, for if I am to be shut up here till Aunt Sarah hears from mother, Aunt Helen must have some word. I don't think I did a thing wrong in going to see my own aunt, but Aunt Sarah says I have no pride, and that it is wicked to think of wanting to go over there, but that is just her way of thinking. It isn't mine at all, and it is horrid, horrid for her to shut me up as if I were a baby, and to shame me before--before the boys."

Jack gazed at her in silent sympathy. She understood all about it. Many and many a time had she passed through just such tribulations. Many and many a time had she been punished for something in which she could see no wrong. How many times had her motives been misunderstood, and how often had she been censured for what seemed to her a praiseworthy act? Oh, yes, she could readily sympathize with Nan, and because Nan had more than once helped her out of a difficulty, she would do her best for her sister. "I'll bring you something to eat," she promised. "You shan't be fed on bread and water, and I'll tell the boys that Aunt Sarah is an old witch and is just torturing you."

Nan at that moment felt like heartily endorsing that opinion but she suddenly remembered that it would never do to undermine Aunt Sarah's authority over Jack, so she replied rather weakly: "Oh, I suppose it is all right. She thinks she is doing the best thing because she doesn't know all about it. When she hears from mother, she will understand. I don't mind anything so much as disappointing Aunt Helen. I wish you would find Mary Lee and send her to me," she said with sudden resolution, feeling that Jack's championship might not serve her as well as Mary Lee's, for the latter being a calm and more dispassionate person was usually more convincing, and if Nan could persuade her that she was a martyr, the boys would be given a proper view of the situation.

"What do you want Mary Lee for?" asked Jack a little jealously and because she must always know the whys and wherefores.

"I want to see her before Aunt Sarah does," said Nan with a ghost of a smile, and Jack departed upon her errand.

It was not long before Mary Lee, all curiosity, made her appearance. That Aunt Sarah should have exercised her authority in such a decided manner, and that Nan should have fallen under her displeasure was a matter of no small moment to each of the four Corners, for who knew now where the blow might next fall? "Of course," commented Mary Lee, when Nan's story was told, "it was because you didn't ask Aunt Sarah's permission, and because you answered her so. And then, I really don't see, Nan, how you could have been willing to go over there, after all that has happened. You know how Aunt Sarah feels about it and mother, too."

"Mother isn't so dead set against our going there," Nan informed her. "She would like to make up with Aunt Helen, I know she would, and I know she will say I am to go if I choose."

"Well I shouldn't choose," returned Mary Lee, her head in air. "I don't see how you can feel so. I shouldn't want to make up with them when they have treated mother so mean."

"Aunt Helen hasn't. She's always loved us, but she had to stand by her mother and that was right," persisted Nan. Then in a little superior way--"You don't understand all the ins and outs of it as I do, Mary Lee."

"I don't care," returned Mary Lee, immediately on the defensive. "I think you are very mealy-mouthed and are not showing proper respect to the family."

"Pooh!" returned Nan. "Just you wait till you hear what mother has to say."

This confidence in her mother's opinion somewhat altered Mary Lee's point of view. "Well," she said, "I wouldn't have gone myself, still, I think Aunt Sarah has no right to punish big girls like us for something our mother would not scold us for. She ought to wait till she knows for sure before she ups and makes a prisoner of one of us."

"She'd think she had a right to shut mother up if she did anything Aunt Sarah disapproved of," said Nan, mournfully. "Tell me, Mary Lee, how are you going to explain it to the boys?"

"I'll tell them the truth."

"But you can't say there is a family quarrel and that we aren't allowed to visit our own nearest relations."

"Yes I can. Everybody knows it or suspects it, and we are not the only ones that have had a family quarrel. *We* can't help our grandmother's being a horrid old skinflint."

"Oh!" Nan was about to defend her grandmother vigorously but concluded to say only: "Maybe she didn't mean to be quite so horrid as she seemed. When people get mad they say lots of things they don't mean. I know I do."

"Oh, yes, I know you do," returned Mary Lee, "but a grown-up old woman ought to do better. I hope you will when you are her age." At which sisterly reproof Nan had nothing to say. "At all events," Mary Lee continued, "I'll stand by you, Nan, and I know the boys will, too."

After Mary Lee left her, Nan reviewed the situation. If her Aunt Sarah's ire cooled she would probably be liberated the next day and her Aunt Helen would not arrive from Washington till Monday anyhow. On the other hand, if her Aunt Sarah's anger, instead of cooling should wax stronger, Nan could not expect to be free till her mother should be heard from, and that would be in not less than three days; in all probability it would be four. Nan counted on her fingers: Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday; very likely Wednesday, for Aunt Sarah would hardly have her letter ready before the morning's mail. "I wish she'd send a telegram," sighed Nan, "but she'll just like to keep me here as long as she can; I've made her so hopping mad."

Nan's conscience told her that Aunt Sarah did have a right to be more than usually angry at her impertinence, but she chose to see only her own side of the case and would admit herself nothing but a martyr. True to her expectation, no supper was forthcoming and before that hour her door was securely locked on the other side. She was indeed a prisoner.

In spite of her hearty luncheon, Nan felt the pangs of hunger about the supper hour. She had a healthy appetite and, as the odor of hot biscuits stole upward from the kitchen, she realized that hers was no pleasant predicament. "Old witch aunt! Old witch aunt!" she murmured under her breath. "I don't love you one bit, so there! You are ungodly and I wish the ungodly would be overthrown, I do. I wish the peril that walketh at night would encompass you round about. I don't believe David had any more troubles than I have, when he wrote his psalms." She sat gloomily nursing her misery and feeling herself a much abused person when she was aroused by some one calling softly under her window: "Nannie, Nannie."

She looked out and there stood Jack. "I've saved my cake for you," she said. "How shall I get it up to you?"

"I'll let down a string," said Nan promptly. This was a pleasant diversion and she hunted around energetically till she found in Miss Sarah's work-basket a spool of strong thread. To the end of this she fastened an empty spool which she dropped out of the window. Jack fastened her cake to the string having first wrapped it in a piece of paper, and Nan drew it up. "You are a darling," she called down. "I'll do as much for you some time. Can't you get me some biscuits or something?"

"There aren't any biscuits left to-night. The boys were so hungry and Phil was here; there's only batter-bread left and that's too soft," returned Jack. But here the opening of a door sent her scudding away and Nan closed her window.

She devoured every crumb of the cake and longed for more. It seemed but to whet her appetite and she pondered long trying to devise some way by which she could undertake a foraging expedition. "As if I hadn't a right to my own mother's food," she said, complainingly. "I'm going to get it some way."

After a long time given to planning out different schemes Nan at last hit upon one which she determined to carry out. She would wait till after every one had gone to bed. She wondered if she could keep awake till then. She made up her mind that she would, and, after lighting the lamp, she took a magazine from her aunt's stock of papers and began to read. She grew very drowsy after awhile, but she did not give up to sleep. Instead she tried all sorts of steps, making such a noise that the other children came to see what she was doing.

"What are you up to?" called Mary Lee through the key-hole.

"I'm only amusing myself," returned Nan. "I'm just dancing to keep awake."

"Why don't you go to bed?" asked Mary Lee.

"Don't want to yet," replied Nan, smiling.

Her lively effort had the effect she wished and she was wide awake even when Aunt Sarah came up to bed. She waited till she was sure all was still in the house, putting out her light and watching till the crack of light coming from the room across the hall was no longer shining under the door. Then she lighted her own candle and cautiously unlocked a door leading from the room she was in to the unused wing of the house. She left the door open and stepped out into the dark empty hall. It appeared strange and uncanny. A sudden squeak and a scuttling sound suggested mice, and the whir of wings and the quick swoop of a bat's wing scared her so that she nearly dropped her candle. The peculiarly musty smell which comes from a house which has long been shut up greeted her as she stood for a moment irresolute. Was it worth while to continue the adventure?

"I just will have something to eat," she decided plucking up courage to cross the hallway and go down the stairs which led to the lower rooms. Her heart beat like a trip-hammer as she continued her way, and she was thankful when she reached the door leading to the occupied rooms. It was never locked, for the key was lost. Jack had disposed of it in some mysterious way. This Nan remembered when her eye fell on the key in the door up-stairs.

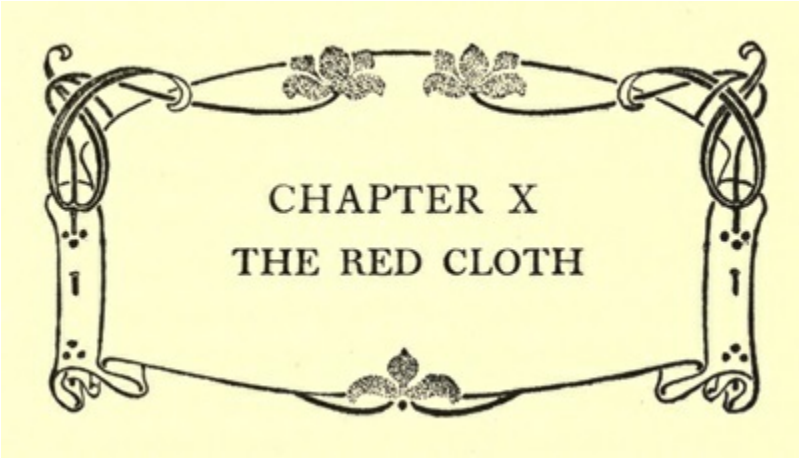
Once safe in the living-room, it was easy to find her way into the kitchen and to the cupboard where she knew she would find any remains of supper. To her satisfaction she discovered a small pitcher of milk, a few pieces of bread, a little dish of stewed peaches and a section of apple pie. These she carried over to the table and sat down to make a hearty supper. The lateness of the hour, for it was after eleven o'clock, put an extra edge upon her appetite and she ate heartily, stopping to wash the dishes and pile them up neatly on the table.

Lady Gray, who occupied the kitchen at night, that she might scare away any mice, arose from her box and came purring toward her. "I will take you back with me; you'll be lots of company," said Nan, "and you can sleep at the foot of my bed; you'll love to do that."



SHE GAVE A BOUND FROM NAN'S ARMS

She lifted the cat, who put her paws over the girl's shoulder contentedly. She had been used to this method of being carried about from the time she was a kitten and was quite satisfied. All went well till the door of the living-room was closed after them, and Nan was mounting the stairs on her way back to her room. She was more than half way up when the sudden appearance of a mouse darting across the hall was too much for Lady Gray's equanimity. She gave a bound from Nan's arms, the suddenness of the spring sending the candle to the ground, and causing Nan to miss her footing on the stair. There was a scream, a fall, and then all was still while Nan lay huddled up in an unconscious heap at the foot of the stairway.



CHAPTER X
THE RED CLOTH

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The sound of the fall startled Aunt Sarah from a sound sleep. She sat up in bed and listened. All was quiet. "I couldn't have been dreaming," she murmured. "Mary Lee, Mary Lee," she called, "did you hear anything?"

"Huh?" said Mary Lee sleepily.

"Did you hear something fall? I thought I heard a scream and a fall. Is Jean in bed with you?"

Mary Lee was now awake. "Yes, Aunt Sarah, she's here," she answered. "I don't know whether I heard anything or not, I was so sound asleep."

Miss Sarah lay down again, but her ears were open to the slightest noise and in a little while she heard a plaintive meow. Again she sat up. "I hear a cat," she said. "It's somewhere near-by, and I shut Lady Gray in the kitchen myself."

"Maybe it's on the porch roof," said Mary Lee, drowsily.

Miss Sarah arose and went to the window which overlooked the porch. "Scat!" she said, putting out her head. She waited a few moments but there was no sound from this quarter. When she drew in her head the meowing sounded more plainly than ever.

"It certainly is in the house," said Miss Sarah. She went to the door leading out into the hall and discovered that the sound seemed to come from one of the rooms opposite. In one of these slept the boys; the other was where she had turned the key upon Nan. Slipping on a dressing gown and slippers, and taking a candle, she went forth to investigate. She stopped first at the door where the Gordon boys slept; all was still. At Nan's door she listened. It was plain that the meowing came from there. Lady Gray having failed of catching the mouse had found her way into the room which Nan had left and was trying to make it known that she wished to be let out.

Miss Sarah opened the door and was met with every evidence of satisfaction by Lady Gray. "How in the world did you get up here?" asked Miss Sarah in surprise. But just then a curious damply smelling air arrested her attention and she perceived the door standing ajar. "Of all things!" she exclaimed and went on with her candle. "Nan," she called, "Nan, what prank is this? I wonder if that willful child really has run off to her grandmother's." She cautiously went on to the stairs, shading her candle with one hand and peering down into the dark hallway. A white heap at the foot of the stairs caught her eye. She hurried down to find Nan, pale and still, lying there.

"Oh, dear, dear, dear," cried Miss Sarah, "what has happened? Nan! Nan!" but Nan did not stir.

Unable to carry both Nan and the candle, Miss Sarah hastened back to her room. "Mary Lee, Mary Lee!" she called, "get up quick and bring a candle! Hurry!"

At this peremptory summons, Mary Lee leaped from her bed. "What is the matter? What is it?" she cried.

"Nan has fallen down the stairs. Come right along. Here, take both candles and I'll carry her."

Trembling, Mary Lee followed apprehensively, and lighted the way for her aunt to bear the helpless burden up-stairs to the room from which the girl had escaped. As Mary Lee caught sight of the white face and limp form, she burst into tears. "Oh, is she dead? Is she dead?" she cried.

"I don't know," said Miss Sarah, her lips quivering. "Run get me some camphor, or hartshorn or smelling salts, or, better yet, there is a little brandy in the medicine closet; bring that."

"I'll bring them all," answered Mary Lee, rushing away and coming back laden with bottles. "Oh, Aunt Sarah," she said, anxiously watching her aunt force the brandy between the shut lips, "suppose she is dead! Suppose she is, and I called her an angle-worm. Oh, my dear Nan! My poor Nan! What will mother say?"

"Hush up," cried Aunt Sarah, tortured beyond forbearance. "I reckon you're not the only one who is feeling distressed. She's coming around, Mary Lee," she said presently, "but I can't tell whether there are any bones broken or not. We'd better get the doctor at once. Her right arm looks queer to me. Call Randolph and send him for Dr. Woods."

Aroused by the confusion, Jack came pattering to the door. "What is the matter?" she called as she heard Mary Lee knocking on the boys' door.

"Nan's fallen down the stairs," said Mary Lee, concisely.

"Is she dreadfully hurt? Oh, Mary Lee, is she?"

"We don't know, but we are going to send for the doctor."

Jack rushed across to where Nan was lying. "Go right back to bed," commanded Aunt Sarah. "I don't want a case of

croup. I've got about as much as I can manage right here."

"I want to see my Nan."

"Go to bed," ordered Miss Sarah, and Jack sobbingly obeyed.

Mary Lee returned with the report that Randolph would go instantly. She poured out some of the brandy and came close to the bed to see Nan opening her eyes.

"She was stunned," said Aunt Sarah. "No, she mustn't have any liquor; it will be bad for her now. She is gaining consciousness."

Nan gave a weak moan. "What's the matter?" she said faintly. "My arm hurts so. Where's mother?"

Aunt Sarah's chin quivered and her eyes filled as she answered, "You've had a fall, child. Keep quiet till the doctor comes."

Nan closed her eyes and lay still for a moment. Presently she said: "I was hungry and I went down to get something to eat." Then she fainted again and Aunt Sarah was busy with restoratives when the doctor came. He was a bluff, hearty, middle-aged man who had known Nan all her life.

"What's all this?" he said. "Tumbling down stairs in the dead of night? Walking like a ghost in shut up places? What does this mean, Miss Nan?"

Nan tried to smile but felt herself slipping off into an unreal world while the doctor looked her over. "Nothing worse than a broken arm," he decided, "only a simple fracture, fortunately." The bone was slipped into place, causing a moment of exquisite agony, and after leaving a soothing potion, the doctor said, "She will be feverish and possibly a little delirious after her fall. I will come again in the morning." He departed leaving Miss Sarah to a solitary vigil while Nan moaned and wandered off again into the world of unreality.

Toward morning she began to mutter about strange things of which Aunt Sarah had never heard: the Poppy Fairy and Giant Pumpkin-Head, the Place o' Pines and the red cloth. Then she tried to sing a little song beginning: "A little child goes wandering by." At this the tears started to Aunt Sarah's eyes and she busied herself in putting iced cloths on the burning head.

Sunday morning dawned softly bright, a dim haze over the purple mountains and a faint mist enveloping the valley. Mary Lee awoke with the realization that something distressful had happened. She told the twins to keep very quiet for Nan was very sick, and it was a sober little group which gathered around the breakfast table.

Randolph and Ashby tiptoed about cautiously. Jean took refuge with Unc' Landy and Jack established herself just outside the door of the room where Nan lay. Mary Lee rushed down to Cousin Mag's with the woeful tale and Cousin Mag hurried back with her offers of help. She insisted upon taking Aunt Sarah's place and allowing her to rest, but this Aunt Sarah would not permit.

"I reckon I am more responsible for this than any one else is, Margaret," she said. "I was in a perfect pepper-jig of a temper because Nan went over to Uplands, and when she answered me back pretty saucily I was madder at that than anything, so I made her go without her supper and locked her up into the bargain. We're both of us pretty well punished and I reckon it's going to be my only consolation to nurse her."

Cousin Mag then declared that the twins should stay at her house a few days and she would see to it that the housekeeping went on smoothly at the Corners'. "You'll have to take some rest," she declared, "and I will come over every day to see that you get it."

So began the long siege for Aunt Sarah and Nan, each of whom was receiving a punishment not anticipated. Because she felt herself partly to blame, Aunt Sarah was tenderness itself, and for the same reason Nan was a docile patient.

Jean was perfectly willing to spend a week at Cousin Mag's and rather liked the idea, but Jack at first rebelled, and only after receiving the promise that she should see Nan every day was she willing to go. So every afternoon a wistful little face appeared at Nan's door.

It was on the third day that Nan first noticed her. After her fever and delirium, she lay weak and exhausted, but she gave a faint smile of welcome to her little sister. Aunt Sarah had stepped from the room for a minute and Jack ventured inside. "Can't I do something for you? May I kiss you just once, Nannie?" she said softly.

"Yes indeed," said Nan, and Jack dropped a gentle kiss upon her cheek.

"Have you seen the red cloth?" asked Nan with as much anxiety in her voice as her weakness would allow.

"Oh, I haven't looked," said Jack, "but I will." Aunt Sarah's footsteps were heard in the hall and Jack slipped out. "I kissed her," she said facing Aunt Sarah at the door, "but I didn't make her worse." Aunt Sarah smiled but made no

reply.

Jack went out into the hall. She had found something to do for Nan. She tiptoed down-stairs and went out upon the porch softly closing the door behind her and looking toward Uplands. Yes, there hung the red cloth from the second story window. For a moment the child stood irresolute, then she started off, but with more than one backward look. She was doing the same thing as that for which Nan had been punished, but she didn't care. It was for Nan. Nan wanted her Aunt Helen to know that she could not come to her. She remembered that this had distressed her sister in their talk that evening before the imprisonment.

The little girl trudged on downhill, across the brook and uphill, on the other side. In a few minutes she had reached the house and was trying to make up her mind at which door she should knock. She decided upon that which opened upon the front porch and here she raised the brass knocker and let it fall twice. The door was opened by Miss Helen herself. Jack knew her at once from Nan's description, and it may be that Miss Helen guessed Jack's identity for she said: "Come in, dear."

"I can't come in," said Jack. "Nan's tumbled down-stairs and has broken her arm. She can't come to see you and she's dreadful sorry."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, how grieved I am to hear that!" said Miss Helen. "How did it happen?"

"Aunt Sarah shut her up and wouldn't give her any supper, so she got up in the night and Lady Gray saw a mouse and jumped so the candle went out and Nan fell nearly all the way from the top. It's a wonder she wasn't killed, Cousin Mag says."

Just what Lady Gray had to do with the accident Miss Helen could not clearly understand. "Oh, I am so sorry," she repeated. She hesitated before asking, "Why did Aunt Sarah shut her up?"

Jack did not reply at once. "I don't believe I ought to tell that," she said. Then after some consideration of the subject: "Maybe I can tell half; she shut her up for one thing and she made her go without her supper because Nan sassed her back."

Miss Helen smiled but immediately she said gravely, "Nan should not have done that."

"Maybe you would, too, if you were doing something your mother let you do and your mother's aunt said you shouldn't," returned Jack, feeling that in this rather mixed-up speech she had adequately excused Nan, and Miss Helen read the meaning sufficiently well to take in the fact that Miss Sarah had disapproved of Nan's coming to Uplands.

"Aunt Sarah has written to mother," said Jack, "and Mary Lee has written, too, so I reckon Aunt Sarah will feel awfully sorry when mother's letter comes and says Nan wasn't disobeying." Jack gave further enlightenment. "I see Nan every day," she added.

"I am sure that makes Nan happier," returned Miss Helen. "Which of the twins are you? Jack, I suppose."

"Yes, I am Jack. Jean is over to Cousin Mag's. We sleep there now while Nan is sick. Nan won't be able to write for ever so long, for her right arm is all wrapped up in something and she can't move it. It is funny that it is her right arm and her writing arm, too, isn't it? I must go now."

"I wish you could stay," said Miss Helen wistfully. "I will write to Nan, and you must give her my love. Can't you stay and see your grandmother? She is asleep now, for she is very tired, but she will waken soon."

"I'm afraid I can't stay," said Jack who had no great desire to see a grandmother of whom she had heard from Mary Lee and Unc' Landy only ill reports. "I saw the red cloth. Nan told me about it," Jack went on. "I came over to tell you about her. She doesn't know I came but she'll be glad."

"You love Nan very much, don't you?" said Miss Helen tenderly.

"Yes. I love Jean 'cause she's my twin, but Nan always takes up for me and helps me out of scrapes. I get into a great many," sighed Jack. "Maybe I'm in one now," she added thoughtfully.

"Oh, dear, I hope not," Miss Helen hastened to say. "I must not keep you if you ought not to stay. You must not be disobedient if any one has forbidden your coming here."

"Nobody did 'zackly, but--I reckon I'd better not stay."

Miss Helen stooped to kiss her. "I hope to see you soon again," she said, "and I am very much obliged to you for telling me about Nan."

Jack trudged back satisfied at having done her errand. If Aunt Sarah discovered it she said nothing and a day later came a letter from Mrs. Corner in reply to Miss Sarah's. In it she said: "I feel now, dear Aunt Sarah, that I did wrong in harboring any ill-will toward Helen. I am sure my dear husband would wish me to meet any advances from her with an

equally forgiving spirit and I do want my children to see and love their Aunt Helen, the only sister of their father. So Nan has my permission to go to Uplands when she receives an invitation. When one feels that the waves from the dark river may perhaps soon be touching her feet, quarrels and dissensions seem very petty things. I realized this when I first knew of the danger threatening me. Now that I feel that I am permitted a longer lease of life the bitterness of the past is something to be forgotten. I view life with a new understanding and I would encourage peace, forgiveness and forbearance."

Aunt Sarah read the letter thoughtfully, Nan watching her with big eyes looking from a very white little face. Aunt Sarah put her head back against the back of the big chair in which she was sitting and rocked silently for some moments.

"What does mother say?" asked Nan feebly.

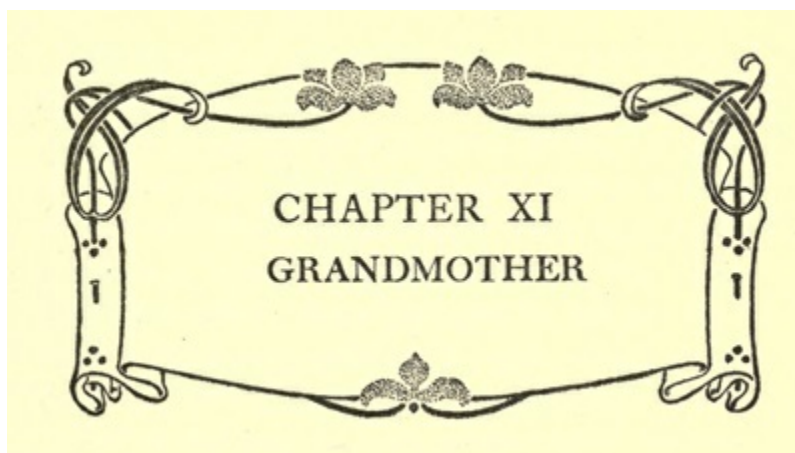
"She says you may go to Uplands. Would you like to start now, Nan?" Aunt Sarah spoke half sadly, half jestingly. "Well, Nan," she went on, "I reckon we are both punished pretty thoroughly, you for your sauciness and I for my hardness. Neither of us has any scores to pay that I see. Goodness, child, when I picked you up from the foot of those stairs I would have given my right hand to have taken back my conduct toward you."

"I was dreadfully saucy, Aunt Sarah," said Nan. "It was wicked for me to speak so to you, and I had no business, either, to sneak down into the kitchen in the middle of the night. I have given my right hand, for a little while," she added, "only it don't do away with what I said and did."

Aunt Sarah bent over and kissed the child's forehead. Two salt tears trickled down from her eyes and fell on Nan's cheek. Those drops washed out all ill feeling between them, for Nan understood that Aunt Sarah did really love her and that she, too, had suffered, if not bodily pain, at least bodily fatigue and much mental anguish on Nan's account.

There was another letter which came later to Nan. It was not exactly a lecture, and the reproof was slight, but after reading it Nan felt that in being impertinent to her aunt she had abused her mother's trust and had hurt her as well as Aunt Sarah, so she resolved that never, never again, no matter what, would she treat Aunt Sarah with disrespect.

Many were the attentions showered upon the little girl during her illness, but chief among them, and most pleasing to her, were those which came from Uplands. Not a day passed that she did not receive some token of her Aunt Helen's thought of her. Lovely flowers were never suffered to fade before they were replaced by others. Dainties to tempt her palate followed the flowers, and when she could sit up came packages of picture postal cards of different places in Europe or interesting photographs. To these were added once in a while a cheerful story-book or a magazine, so, in spite of pain and lack of freedom, Nan fared well and in due time was out again, her arm in a sling and herself a little pale, but otherwise no worse for her accident.



CHAPTER XI GRANDMOTHER

The November winds had swept the leaves from the maples and had sent them in hurrying gusts upon the waters of the little brook before Nan again visited Uplands. The oak trees still showed patches of dark red foliage and in Place o' Pines were heaps of shining brown brought there by that same November wind. Since Jack had braved her Aunt Sarah's displeasure with no ill results, Nan had felt there was hope that she would be permitted to make a visit to Uplands as soon as she should be well enough. Jack had not repeated her visit; she was not as ready to meet her grandmother as Nan was, nor were Mary Lee and Jean any more eager, so that the first interview was left to Nan.

It was one day in November that she said rather timidly to her Aunt Sarah: "Don't you think I might go over to Uplands? You know mother said I might."

"Assuredly," replied Miss Sarah. "Go by all means."

Nan looked at her critically to see if she meant this sarcastically, but there was no suspicion of any such intention, and she realized that the consent was readily given.

It was an important event to the girl. She had fallen in love with the lady of the portrait in the first place; her Aunt Helen had completely won her in the second, and she had learned to give at least pity and sympathy where her sisters felt, at the most, indifference, so she set out upon her walk with an eager anticipation.

She panted a little as she reached the top of the hill on the other side of the brook, for she had not gone so far since her accident, and, moreover, her heart was beating fast. She was to meet her grandmother. Would she be haughty and distant or kind and cordial? Would she come sweeping in all jewels and lace, or would she wear the plainer dress which her daughter adopted? Nan hoped that she would wear nothing more sombre than black satin with fine laces and that she would have more than one glittering ring upon her fingers.

There were no weeds now to wade through for the lawn was smoothly mown, though grass would have to be sown when the stubble was ploughed under. There were pretty curtains in all the rooms and flower-pots holding blossoming plants stood in a row in some of the windows. A bird-cage, too, hung in the library and as Nan stepped upon the porch she heard the joyous song of the canary. The place seemed so lived in; no longer a mysterious enchanted castle but the comfortable abode of human kind. A neat maid opened the door and ushered Nan into the library. An open fire was blazing in the grate, the canary was singing blithely above the blossoming geraniums and begonias. There were magazines and papers piled on the table and an open desk showed that some one lately had been writing there.

Presently there was a rustle of skirts on the stairs and Miss Helen came swiftly in. "My dear, my dear!" she exclaimed. "How glad I am to see you. What a siege you have had. It has seemed such a long time and mother has been hoping every day that you would be well enough to come. Do you still suffer, poor little lass?"

"Not now," was the answer, "but I gave my right hand, you see, and didn't get anything for it after all."

"You haven't given it altogether, I hope."

"No, but I can't even write, and if I had a piano I couldn't play on it."

"But you will soon be well," returned her aunt. "Come, let us go up to mother; she is very impatient to see you."

Nan followed to the softly carpeted, upper front room. No grand dame, magnificently attired came forward to meet her, but by the window sat a little old lady in sombre mourning; her face was lined with sorrow and her hands were worn and thin; only a plain gold ring adorned the left one.

"And this is Nancy," she said. "Excuse my rising, my dear, I am not very strong. Come here, won't you?"

Nan approached with a feeling of disappointment. How could any one fear sharp speeches from this mild-mannered old lady? Where was the flashing splendor of her eyes? Where was her proud mien? What had become of all those qualities which the portrait represented?

"Come closer, Nancy, child; I want to have a look at you," said her grandmother. And Nan knelt down before her. Mrs. Corner took the girl's face between her hands and looked at her long and earnestly. "She has Jack's eyes," she said to her daughter.

Nan smiled; it pleased her to be told this.

"And his smile," continued her grandmother. She took Nan's free hand and smoothed it softly. "She has the Corner fingers, too," she went on, "long and tapering with the filbert nails. She has sentiment, Helen, I am sure, and she is quick but sensitive; loving but impatient; honest and forgiving."

Nan felt rather embarrassed at this summarizing of her character, but as her grandmother leaned over and kissed her forehead a glad light leaped to the girl's eyes. This was not censure, but a tender interest.

"Your old grandmother is very glad to see you," Mrs. Corner went on. "I have longed for you, for one of my son's own children, and it is a great gratification to me to know you have no hard feelings."

"No, I haven't any hard feelings; neither has mother," returned Nan gravely.

A little expression of pain passed over Mrs. Corner's face and she sighed. "Never let yourself be a wicked old woman, Nancy, to want your own way. Be willing to share what you possess with others. Never be jealous and suspicious and envious. Try not to pity yourself too much and don't think your rights are superior to those of other persons. You will be very unhappy if you do not learn your lesson early. The book of life holds many hard pages and it will be handed back to you over and over again till you have learned by heart what is meant you should know."

"Now, mother," put in Miss Helen, "you are entirely too grave and preachy. Don't spoil Nan's first visit by giving her the impression that she is in a lecture-room."

"You are right, Helen; I should not allow myself to be carried away to the past from the present. Forgive me, Nancy, for being prosy and serious; your coming awakened so many memories of things I have tried to forget. Tell me about your mother while Helen gets out some things I brought you from Italy."

Nan's eyes sparkled. "Brought me? How good of you," she exclaimed. She wondered what the gifts could be and was quite overpowered when Miss Helen came in with her arms piled high with all sorts of packages. There were soft silks from Sorrento, corals from Naples, strings of beads from Venice, odd bits of jewelry from Florence, scarfs and sashes from Rome, a quaint little hat from Milan, embroideries, laces, knickknacks of all kinds.

Nan looked at them in delighted amazement. She had never seen so many pretty things together before. "They're not all for me," she said.

"All for you, my dear," said her grandmother with a pleased smile.

"But," Nan spoke earnestly, "it would be dreadfully selfish for me to be piggy and not give the others anything, my sisters, you know. They'd think I was the proud sister sure enough." Nan looked toward her aunt and back at her grandmother. Then she saw the mild expression disappear and the look of the portrait came over Mrs. Corner's face.

"I wish you to have them all," she said haughtily. "Not one of the others has thought it worth while to come to see me; but you, Nancy," her face softened, "you sent me a kiss before you saw me."

"Oh, but," Nan's eyes grew stary, "you know I am the eldest and I met Aunt Helen and they didn't; besides, they don't understand; the twins are too young and Mary Lee, well--she hadn't seen Aunt Helen, you know. I thank you a thousand times, grandmother, for being so lovely as to bring me these things, but indeed, I'll have to be honest and say I can't keep them all for my own self."

"Put them away, Helen," said Mrs. Corner wearily. "It is only one more disappointment. I hoped my granddaughter would be pleased."

The tears came to Nan's eyes. "I am pleased. I can't tell you how much. I never saw such lovely things, and I'm just crazy for them, but I should feel such a mean, meany, piggish thing to keep them all."

"Never mind," said Mrs. Corner with an air of resignation, "perhaps you will change your mind, Nancy, after you have thought it over."

Nan knew perfectly well that she never would, but she said nothing, and had the discomfort of seeing Miss Helen carry away the things as Mrs. Corner insisted that she should do. "She might have left out one little string of beads," thought Nan. But not so much as a tiny pin was allowed her and she began to realize something of the spirit which had antagonized her mother and which had given her father such distress. However, she was too proud to show her disappointment and did not leave at once; instead she chatted pleasantly and even kissed her grandmother good-bye.

Miss Helen followed her to the door. "You must not mind mother's ways too much, Nancy," she said. "She will think better of it yet, and you must consider that all she has brought you will be really yours to do with as you like after a while. Be patient with her, darling, if you love your Aunt Helen. Thank you so much for coming over and for being so dear and sweet to mother. She appreciates even when she does not confess it. You will come again soon, won't you?"

"Oh, yes," returned Nan, not quite so heartily as she would like to have spoken. She was disappointed, really bitterly disappointed, she confessed to herself. Her grandmother was no queen, but only a faulty woman. A sad and sorrowful one, it was true, and one willing to make an effort in many directions to compensate for her hardness and bitterness of former years, yet she still clung to her imperious ways and was not ready to give up her own way nor to allow any one to thwart her will.

Nan drew a long sigh as she went down-hill. It was not going to be as easy as she had hoped to love her grandmother. What a delight it would have been to display all those lovely things to the family, to give Mary Lee that string of beautiful blue beads and the striped Roman sash; to let Jean and Jack choose what they liked best, and to give even Aunt Sarah something from the splendid mass of things, while to her mother Nan would have sent the very best of whatever seemed suitable. It certainly was tantalizing to have things happen this way. However, there was still the possibility of future possession her Aunt Helen had promised her, and she would take comfort in that.

Jack was the only one who had curiosity enough to ask questions when Nan returned. No doubt but Miss Sarah would like to have had a full account of Nan's visit, but she scorned to show any interest and Mary Lee took her cue from her. "Well, you're back again," was the only remark she made as Nan passed through the room.

"Yes, here I am," returned Nan. She felt that she would rather not discuss her visit with either Mary Lee or Aunt Sarah. Jack waylaid her as she was on her way up-stairs. "Did you see our grandmother, Nan?" she asked, "and is she a horrid old witch?"

"No, she isn't that," replied Nan, "though she is different from what I expected. She was very kind at first, but she showed the iron hand in the velvet glove before I came away."

Jack looked as if she understood. She was always quick to take Nan's allusions.

"If you won't say anything to anybody, I'll tell you all about it," said Nan.

Jack nodded. She could be relied upon to keep a secret if she gave a promise, but was a very expansive person when there was no reason for silence. As Nan expatiated upon the glories of the gifts that were withheld Jack grew deeply interested.

"And you were going to give me some, weren't you?" she said.

"Of course," replied Nan.

"I think you were very proud and very good not to take them," remarked Jack, meditatively, all the while forming her own plans. "Was she so very cross, Nan?" she asked presently.

"Not exactly cross, only bound to have her own way, like some other people I know."

Jack laughed. "I don't suppose you listened to her if she did say things you didn't like. That's the way I do. I always think of something nice, like eating ice cream or having a new doll, when any one scolds me; it makes it lots easier," she said philosophically. She saw no reason now why she should not go to her grandmother's. She reasoned that it was because no one but Nan had been to see her that she refused gifts to the rest, and if there was any way, not too difficult, in which she could get a string of those beautiful beads which Nan had described, Jack meant to do it.

She spent much time that afternoon laboriously writing in her very best hand, her name upon a card. The next day, dressed in her best, she started to make a formal call at Uplands. She meant to be very polite and ingratiating, and, if all went well, she would induce Jean to go. She felt that at this first interview it would be best that no one but herself and her grandmother should be present, for Jean did not know things and might say something she should not. Although the beads were the largest object of her motive in going, there was besides a desire to gain for Nan those things which Jack felt she ought to have.

At the door, she handed the maid the card upon which was unevenly written: "Miss Jacqueline Corner." "I have come to call on Mrs. Corner," she said gravely, and walked into the drawing-room where she seated herself expectantly.

Curiosity, amusement and a real desire to see the child brought Mrs. Corner down. Miss Helen was not at home. Jacqueline arose to meet her grandmother with her best company manners. "I am very much pleased to meet you, Mrs. Corner," she said. "I hope you are very well."

"Not so very well, though better than yesterday," replied the lady, seating herself.

"You ought to take Junipy Tar," said Jack, solicitously; "that is what Unc' Landy takes when he isn't well." She supposed this a remedy specially fitted to the needs of the aged.

Mrs. Corner thanked her, smilingly, her amusement increasing.

"Did you have a pleasant journey?" asked Jack, racking her brain for a proper subject.

"You mean across the ocean? Only fairly so. I am not a very good sailor."

Jack looked at her in surprise. "Oh," she said, "I didn't know ladies ever were sailors, and I am sure they would never make good ones; their skirts must get so in the way when they climb the ropes. I suppose you never went up as far as the main-top-gallant mast."

"No, never," returned Mrs. Corner, laughing outright. Jack could not understand her amusement and changed the

subject.

"Do you like dogs?" she asked.

"Very much."

"We have one; his name is Trouble. We like him but Ran says he wouldn't take a prize at a bench show. I don't see why dogs should take prizes at bench shows; I should think it would be only benches, the biggest bench or the prettiest bench or the one made by the youngest child like they give prizes at the fair. Don't you love fairs? I do. I like the pink lemonade best of all and the prize packages of candy. Once I got a real sure enough diamond ring, but it was too big for me and I lost it. Jean likes the pop-corn and the gingerbread the best. What do you like?"

"I think," said Mrs. Corner, "that I like seeing the people as well as anything."

"I do sometimes, but I don't always. Once we all went to the circus and Jean dropped her hat between the benches. I crawled under to get it, and every time I tried to get out some one stepped on my head; I thought I'd have to stay there forever. It was awful."

"It must have been."

"Is it ten minutes yet? I don't suppose I ought to stay more than ten minutes at a first call, ought I? Cousin Polly says that is long enough."

"I think persons often do stay longer." Mrs. Corner was too greatly entertained to want to get rid of her guest. "I am sure I shall be delighted if you will stay," she went on as she rose to ring the bell. "Bring some cake and some of that currant shrub that Mrs. Southall sent me," she told the maid, and Jack was glad she had mentioned the pink lemonade. "I want to offer you some refreshment, Miss Jacqueline," said her grandmother.

"Thank you," said Jack, promptly sitting down again. "Nobody ever calls me Jacqueline; it's always Jack. When Nan and I are grown we are going to call ourselves Nannette and Jacqueline, not Nan and Jack, but mother says she wants me always to be called Jack after my father. He was your son, wasn't he?"

The amused look faded from Mrs. Corner's eyes. "He was my only son and no one can take his place. No one knows how terribly I miss him."

"Well," said Jack, forgetting to be propitiatory, and somehow resenting this speech, "I'm sure we couldn't ever get a new father any more than you could get a new son, and I reckon my mother misses him as much as you do."

Mrs. Corner looked startled. "I suppose so; I suppose so," she murmured. "It is true that others have claims."

Jack did not quite take this in but she followed up her speech by adding: "I suppose you missed your husband when he died, didn't you?"

"Oh, child, child, what are you saying?" said her grandmother in a tremulous voice.

Jack regretted this remark seeing her grandmother's agitation. "I don't suppose I ought to have said that. Was it impolite?" she asked. "I wanted to be very polite."

"Why?"

"Oh, because I----" she hesitated. "I must go now. I have finished the party; it was very nice indeed."

Mrs. Corner looked at her with sudden suspicion. "Did Nancy send you over here?" she said.

"Nobody sent me. I didn't tell any one I was coming."

"Why did you come then?"

"Why to see you. Didn't the servant tell you? Didn't she give you my card?"

"Oh, yes." Mrs. Corner's face cleared. "I am glad you came of your own accord. I have enjoyed your call immensely."

"Thank you. Ought I to say Mrs. Corner or grandmother?"

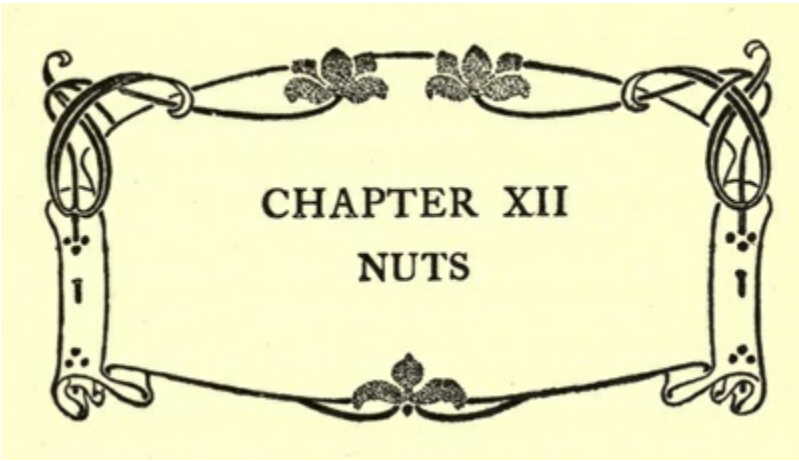
"Grandmother would please me best."

"Then, good-bye, grandmother. I've had a charming time."

"Then, please come again."

"I'd be delighted, I'm sure." Her company manners were in full swing, and she went out after a gracious smile and bow.

"The droll little creature!" exclaimed Mrs. Corner. "I must tell Helen about her. I want to know them all. They interest me." So Jack's call was not without effect.



CHAPTER XII NUTS

With her usual compliance, Jean consented to go to call upon her grandmother though Mary Lee obstinately refused to make any overtures. Children often have very strong prejudices and are even more determined in their refusal to give them up than are their elders. Mary Lee felt quite virtuous in her decision not to make friends with her relatives and often berated Nan for having no backbone and for influencing Jack. Jean, however, had been won over by her twin who descanted upon the deliciousness of the refreshments offered her and upon the pretty things their grandmother might give them.

"You see," said Jack to Jean in arguing the matter, "we must be polite to our elders, Aunt Sarah says, and I think we ought to be very, very nice to our grandmother because she is old. I shouldn't wonder if she were the oldest person we know."

"Not as old as Unc' Landy," said Jean.

"No, of course not; he is older than anybody, but he doesn't count," returned Jack.

"I think we might take grandmother one of the kittens," said Jean with sudden inspiration. Lady Gray had recently given them the surprise of a family of four lovely kittens. Aunt Sarah had said most positively that they could keep only one, although they had all insisted that one apiece would exactly agree to the number, but Aunt Sarah was firm and the two elder girls had given way to the younger ones who had each selected the one she preferred and now it was a matter of continual dispute as to which was to be finally kept. A third kitten was promised to Phil, and Mitty had declared that she knew of a good home for the fourth.

"You see," said Jean, "if the kitten lived at Uplands we could see it often. We could even borrow it sometimes to play with ours."

"We'll take them both over," decided Jack, "and let her choose one, then we won't have to quarrel any more over them, for that will settle it."

They started off each with a wee, mewling kitten, and were duly announced as Miss Jacqueline and Miss Jean Corner, though this time their Aunt Helen was at home and they were not ushered into the drawing-room but into the library, and from thence were conducted up-stairs to their grandmother's room.

"Well, young ladies," said Mrs. Corner, "I am glad to see you. So this is Jean. She looks more like the Lees than Nancy and Jack. What have you there, my dears?"

"We have brought you a kitten," spoke up Jack. "We brought two so you could take your choice, for it is really very hard to tell which of them all is the prettiest. We let Phil take his choice first and we left the ugliest for Mitty, though that one is really very pretty, but not quite so lovely as these."

"It is very kind of you to want me to have the best," said Mrs. Corner. "Which do you consider the prettier?"

"I like this one," said Jack, displaying a furry gray ball from which issued a protesting mew as Jack held it up.

"And I like this," said Jean, more discreetly holding her kitten in her lap. "It has white feet and a white shirt front. Jack's is all gray. Mine is named Rubaiyat; we call it Ruby."

"And mine," said Jack gravely, "is Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. It's a Bible name. Baz ought to be very good."

"What extraordinary names!" exclaimed Mrs. Corner.

"Ruby is named after the 'Rubaiyat of a Persian Kitten,' for Lady Gray is a Persian, you know. Ran named them and he said we could call Jean's, Ruby, and mine Baz. He says that Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz just suits a cat for he found out what it means and it means 'the spoil hastens; the prey speeds.'"

"Helen, did you ever know such droll children?" said Mrs. Corner laughing.

"Would you like to look at them closer?" said Jack. "Their claws are very briery like blackberry bushes, but they really don't scratch unless you don't know how to hold them. I'll put them in your lap and you can see how sweet and dear they are."

"They certainly are beauties," said Mrs. Corner, admiringly. "Don't you think we would enjoy having one, Helen?"

"Most decidedly," said Miss Helen, "and of the two I think Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz charms me the most. He is a darling."

Jack gave a long sigh. "I just knew you'd say that."

"Would you rather keep this one, then?" asked Miss Helen.

"Oh, yes," said Jack.

"Oh, no," said Jean.

The ladies laughed. "Then suppose you don't give either away," said Mrs. Corner.

"We can't keep but one, you know. Aunt Sarah said so," Jean told them. "And we'd rather you'd have one than anybody."

"Then we'll take the gray one gladly and are very much obliged to you for thinking of bringing us such a beautiful and valuable pet," Mrs. Corner told them. "Haven't we some cake or something for these little girls, Helen?" she asked.

Miss Helen thought so and they were presently regaled upon delicious cake and some sort of curious drink that tasted like currant jelly and mint. It was a beautiful red color and Jack thought it was better than the pink lemonade at the County Fair.

While they were eating and drinking, Miss Helen left them to bring back to each some odd little green dishes which she said she had found in Holland. The children were delighted with the curiously shaped pots and pans, the pitchers and tea-pots, and bore them off in triumph, Jack feeling less regret at leaving her kitten since in return she had these queer little dishes.

She displayed them in high glee to Nan who was surprised and pleased that such an interest had been shown in her little sisters. If only Mary Lee would not be so offish, all might be pleasant between the two households, she thought, and--though this she only secretly admitted--they might still share the delights of those beautiful withheld gifts.

Place o' Pines was too chilly a spot to be visited these November days, but the woods up the mountainside attracted both girls and boys one Saturday afternoon after the first frost, for Phil and Mary Lee knew a place where nuts were plentiful, so they all piled into the Lewis's carryall and went to where the road ended, fastening the horses there and going the rest of the way on foot. It was wildly beautiful in this mountain forest. The distant call of a bird, the rustle of leaves as some creature of the woods sped from sight, or the trickle of some little mountain brook was all that could be heard until the merry laughter of the young people rang out upon the air.

Nan sat down upon a log and was soon lost in a dream. The boys fell to gathering nuts; Jack and Jean ran here and there excited by the freedom and wildness of the spot; Phil and Mary Lee soon discovered a mutual interest in the lair of a Molly Cotton-Tail and her babies and next gave chase to a squirrel.

"We might find out where he lives," said Phil. "I'd like to get a young one and train him. There he goes, Mary Lee. Come on," and Mary Lee followed over fallen logs, through heaps of dead leaves and broken branches till finally Master Squirrel was lost from view and they were a long distance from where they started.

Meanwhile several bags of nuts were stowed away under the seat of the carryall and Randolph discovered that it was time to start back. "The days are so short," he said, "that we haven't time to more than get back before dark. Call them all in, Ashby."

Ashby gave a long mountain call. Jack and Jean came running and Nan appeared from where she had been picking up a last hoard of nuts. "Where are the others?" asked Ran.

"Don't know," returned Nan.

"I saw them go off that way." Jack waved her hand toward the west. Ran went a short distance and gave the call. Then he waited. There was utter silence save for the trickling of the little stream. Again he called but there was no response. "Where can they be?" he said impatiently. "They ought to know better than to act so. I suppose they think it is funny to pretend they don't hear." But in a little while, he feared that it was not pretense, and that they were really not only out of sight but out of hearing. He did not voice his alarm to the girls, however, but, after whistling softly for a few minutes, he walked away, calling to his brother.

"See here, Ashby," he said, "I'm afraid those two have strayed away and have lost their bearings. Because they have been up here a number of times, they think they can find their way anywhere. Now, don't express any surprise when I propose that you drive the others home. I'm going to stay here and you go back and tell Colonel Lewis what I fear. Get fresh horses and come back. I'll wait here in case Phil and Mary Lee find their way back. It will be all right."

Ashby agreed and the two came back to where the others were waiting. "Phil's playing us a nice trick," said Ran in assumed contempt, "and it's time you girls were starting home. I'm going to send you back with Ashby and I'll wait here for the others. I'll hide so they can't see me. Won't they be good and scared?"

"But how will you all get back?" asked Nan.

"Oh, Ashby's coming back for us. It isn't much of a drive and Miss Sarah will be worrying. As soon as it gets a little

darker, Phil and Mary Lee will hurry out to the road fast enough."

"You don't----" Nan glanced at the twins who had clambered into the carriage. "You don't think," she repeated in a low whisper, "that they could be lost."

"Nonsense," returned Ran. "They'll be here in a minute, only it isn't worth while to wait for them and they deserve a good scare."

Nan looked at him steadily. She was not quite sure that he was not alarmed for the safety of the missing two, but he smiled confidently.

"It's all right," he insisted.

"If you stay, I will," said Nan decidedly.

"No, you mustn't," returned Ran.

"Why not?"

"I don't want you," he answered bluntly.

"Oh, well then," said Nan, somewhat offended, "of course, I'll not stay, but I must say you're polite."

Ran turned away. He had gained his point at the risk of being rude, but that was of little moment just then. He could make his apologies later. And so the three girls drove off with Ashby as attendant and left Randolph to keep a lonely watch on the mountain.

Aunt Sarah was on the lookout for the nutting party. "Where are the others?" was her first question.

Nan explained. "Ran thought we'd better come on," she said. "He's waiting for Phil and Mary Lee. Ashby is going back for them."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Aunt Sarah and sought out Ashby.

When she returned Nan was quick to read the anxiety in her face. "You don't think they could really be lost," she said in alarm.

"We'll wait and see," returned Aunt Sarah in her most non-committal manner.

But as the hours wore on, she made no secret of her fears. Jean went to bed weeping. Jack's eyes had a scared look in them. Just suppose there should be bears and wildcats in the woods. She put her question to Nan. "Aren't there wild animals on the mountain?" she asked. "Landy says so."

"Of course, there are wild animals; foxes and rabbits and chipmunks," Nan answered lightly, trying to allay her fears.

"I don't mean those. I mean real tearing, scratching, eating animals," said Jack.

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know," returned Nan, ready to break down herself. "Don't think about it, Jack. Go to sleep and in the morning you will see Mary Lee safe and sound in bed asleep."

"Please stay with me then till I go to sleep," said Jack. "I see all sorts of things in the dark." And Nan stayed.

About nine o'clock Aunt Sarah put on her wraps. "I'm going over to Mag's," she said. "I can't stand this."

"Please let me go, too," pleaded Nan.

Aunt Sarah waited a moment before she consented, and the two set off together, leaving Mitty and Unc' Landy to keep a sleepy watch in the kitchen.

Meanwhile, night had descended upon the mountain. Feeling that danger actually threatened his little son, Colonel Lewis provided himself with lanterns, warm wraps, food and a bottle of spirits, and then started with Ashby to the spot where Ran waited.

It was dark by the time the carriage appeared and Ran called out: "That you, Ashby?"

"Colonel Lewis and I," replied Ashby. "Are you all there, Ran?"

"I'm all here, but nobody else," returned Ran not meaning to be jocular.

"They haven't come?" Colonel Lewis asked making his way quickly to the spot.

"No, sir. Don't you think it would be a good plan to build a fire? They might see it, or they might see the smoke."

"If there is no danger of the woods catching we can do it."

"There's a big rocky place further on where I think it would be safe," Ran told him. "I have kept up a constant calling, but haven't heard a sound except from an owl."

To build the fire was the first step and Ashby was left to watch it while the other two set out, lanterns in hand, taking the direction in which the wanderers had disappeared. "I always carry a small compass," said Colonel Lewis, "and I have hunted in these mountains since I was a boy. We'll keep an eye on the smoke and then if we can only find those children, I shall have no fears about our getting back to the fire. You're not afraid, Ashby?" he called back.

"No, sir," came the prompt reply.

"Keep up a good fire and a good heart," called Ran.

"All right, I will," and little Ashby had his turn of loneliness. It must be confessed that he did feel a sinking of heart as he saw the two disappear into the darkness of the forest.

Darker, more lonesome, more awful did that forest seem to the two children who, wearied at last from unsuccessful attempts to find their way back, sat down upon a log to rest. "It's no use trying any more," said Phil. "We're tuckered out and we can't see a yard ahead of us anyhow. It wasn't right for me to bring you way off here, Mary Lee, and I wish I hadn't done it."

"It wasn't your fault any more than mine," said she. "We both started to follow the squirrel."

"Yes, but I said I wanted to try to catch a young one, and so you went to accommodate me. If I hadn't said that you wouldn't have gone."

"We might have gone after something else just the same," said the girl. "It is awfully dark, isn't it, Phil?"

"Father always carries a compass." Phil was busy with his own thoughts. "I wish we knew the direction we came, then I could find the North star and go by that."

"But we can scarcely see the stars in here."

"Anyhow I ought to have noticed the direction. Father says that is what one ought always to do when he is in a strange place, especially in the woods."

"It's getting very cold," said Mary Lee, plaintively. "Do you suppose we could kindle a fire by rubbing two sticks together as the Indians do?"

"It wouldn't do to have a fire here if we had matches. We might set the woods on fire. We ought to get out into some open place to do that."

"Couldn't we find one?"

"It's warmer here, more sheltered, you know. Are you very cold, Mary Lee? Take my coat."

"I'll do no such thing," Mary Lee refused determinedly. "It's no colder for me than for you."

"Then let's sit close." So the two cousins snuggled together, each feeling comfort from the nearness of the other.

"I wish we had something to eat," sighed Mary Lee after a silence. "It will be a long time before morning. Shall you dare to go to sleep, Phil?"

"I--don't know."

"Do you suppose they will try to find us?"

"My father will, I know."

"What are you thinking about?" said Mary Lee after another long pause.

"I'm trying to puzzle out about directions. Of course, the mountain is west of the town, for the sun sets behind it, so we ought to go east to get back, and we must go down-hill instead of up."

"But we might go down-hill and go north or south."

"When the sun rises, we can see that and travel toward the east."

"We can do that unless----" Mary Lee's courage was beginning to ooze out and she gave a little frightened sob.

"What, Mary Lee?" Phil began to stroke her hand in boyish fashion.

"Unless the bears or wildcats get us before then," she sobbed outright.

Phil had thought of this, but had not mentioned it. "They shall not get us," he declared. "They are not going to. Father will find us before long."

"How can he?"

"He can, and he will," said Phil confidently. "Father can do anything he sets out to do."

This was somewhat comforting, though it did not keep out the cold which was growing more and more evident every moment and presently both children were shivering.

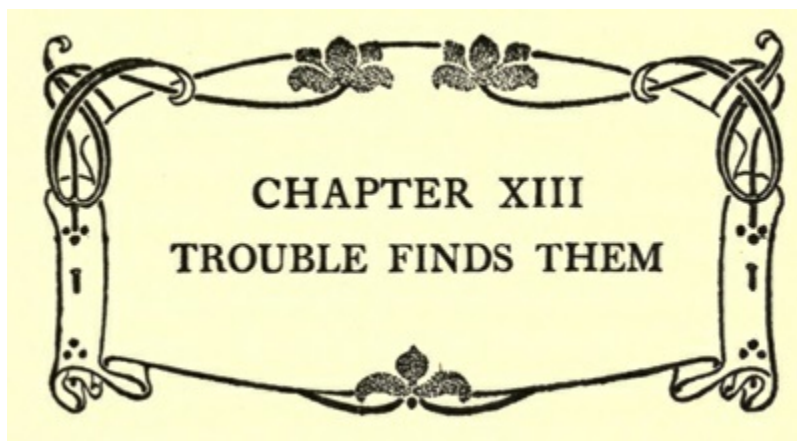
"Do you suppose," said Mary Lee, "that if we covered ourselves with leaves like the Babes in the Woods that we would be warmer?"

"We might try it," said Phil. "The leaves are good and dry and there are lots around us right here."

They began to feel around them and to scrape up the fallen leaves, the exercise helping them to keep warm. They kept close together, fearing lest one should be separated from the other and not be able to find the way back. They sat down in their nest of leaves and pulled them high around them.

"I know now how the woody things feel," said Mary Lee, cheered by the warmth. "They sleep under a blanket of leaves all winter and peep out again in the spring. I'm getting sleepy, Phil." She rested her head against the log and was soon asleep.

Phil piled the leaves over her till she was almost hidden by them, but for him there was no sleep, for afar off the wailing cry of a wildcat he heard and recognized. Presently, it sounded nearer and the boy in terror, crouched down in the leaves by his sleeping companion.



CHAPTER XIII TROUBLE FINDS THEM

After all, it was not Colonel Lewis nor Ran who first found the two lost ones, but that humble and frequently despised creature, Trouble. Trouble at whom Colonel Lewis always jeered, whom Phil often teased, and Mary Lee abused to his face, calling him mongrel cur while he wagged his tail in happy unconsciousness that she was not calling him a pet name. It was a favorite amusement of Mary Lee's to use all sorts of uncomplimentary words in a caressing voice when speaking to the dog, so that Trouble would believe he was being made much of and would respond in his best manner.

Nan suddenly remembered this after her return home and she called the dog, wrote a note and tied it around his neck, then bade him follow the carriage, which at that time was still in sight. He understood and obeyed gladly for he always delighted to be one of an outgoing party. That he did not follow them earlier in the afternoon was because Mary Lee had driven him back when he had tried to become one of their number. "He is always scaring up rabbits and frightening birds when Phil and I want to observe their habits," she said in excuse.

"Observe their habits," mocked Nan. "Do let him go; he can follow me all he likes."

"That's just what he will not do," Mary Lee returned. "He always comes with us."

"Because you go prowling around and I sit still," retorted Nan. "He's just as fond of me, I know."

But Mary Lee had her way and called Unc' Landy to keep Trouble at home.

Colonel Lewis and Ran had already started upon their search when Trouble sprang out of the darkness toward the fire in front of which Ashby sat. Greatly pleased at discovering one of the family, Trouble nearly wagged off the hind part of his body. That Ashby was glad to see him goes without the saying, and the boy was glad for more than one reason.

"Good boy, Trouble, come here," he said. "You've had a long tramp, haven't you? What's that around your neck?" He unfastened the note which was tied to his collar. It read: "Send Trouble after Mary Lee and Phil. He can get the scent from their coats that we put in the carriage. Oh, I hope he can find them. Nan."

Ashby ran to the carriage and dragged forth the wraps. Quickly selecting a coat of Mary Lee's and one of Phil's, he held them out. "Here, Trouble," he said, "seek them. Find Mary Lee, Trouble." The dog sniffed the coat, trotted off a few steps, looked back to see if he was doing what was expected of him, and then, with nose to the ground, took up the scent and disappeared.

At this very moment, Phil was cowering in the leaves in momentary fear of hearing the wildcat's scream closer at hand. An owl hooting mournfully near-by suddenly awakened Mary Lee who gave a little shriek of terror as she realized where she was. "I've been asleep in these dreadful lonely woods," she said. "How could I do it? Oh, Phil, what's that?" For again the cry of the wildcat sounded through the forest.

"Never mind, Mary Lee," said Phil. "Don't be scared. I'll take care of you."

"How can you," said Mary Lee, "a boy with not even a pistol? What can you do to a wildcat?"

"I'll fight it as long as I can," said Phil between set teeth, "and you could get away anyhow. Hark! What's that?" For there was a new sound in the woods that was neither cry of wildcat nor hoot of owl, but the honest and friendly bark of a dog.

Phil sprang to his feet.

"Is it--is it a wolf?" asked Mary Lee in trepidation.

"No sir-ee," cried Phil, excitedly. "It's a dog, a sure enough dog, and, if I am not much mistaken, it's old Trouble."

Mary Lee scrambled from her nest of leaves and joined Phil in calling. "Trouble, Trouble! Hyar! Hyar!"

There was a joyous yelp, a scampering over dead leaves and presently Trouble dashed out of the darkness toward them.

"Oh, Trouble, Trouble, you blessed old dear!" Mary Lee flung her arms around the dog who could not keep still in his joy and excitement.

"Listen! Look!" cried Phil. There was a faint call in the distance, then the twinkle of a light seen through the naked trees. Phil's mountain call was answered and the lights came nearer and nearer. Trouble dashed toward them barking, yelping. The owl was silent, though they heard the soft rush of wings overhead. The cry of the wildcat sounded faint and far, but close at hand came a glad "Hallo!" followed by the call of "Phil, Phil, are you safe, boy?" And in another minute the forms of Colonel Lewis and Ran appeared in the gleam of their lanterns which shot long beams aslant the darkness, and discovered Phil and Mary Lee standing in the pile of dry leaves.

It was a triumphant journey home and no one was more contented than Trouble who lay snuggled by Mary Lee's side, his head in her lap, while the slow way was made down the mountainside.

It was almost midnight before the horses drew up before the house, but a light shining from the living-room showed that some one was still up and watching. At the sound of the wheels Aunt Sarah came forth and peered out.

"All safe," cried Ran, climbing down. He was followed by Ashby, Mary Lee and Trouble last, though upon this occasion not least.

Colonel Lewis drove away saying there was too much anxiety at his own home for him to stop a moment to talk.

After hearing particulars, and learning that they had eaten on their way home, Aunt Sarah hustled every one to bed, saying that rest was the best for each one of them.

Nan had fallen asleep at last, but, as Mary Lee slipped into bed beside her, she was conscious of her presence and stretched out a hand to be sure, then threw an arm around her sister as if to keep her from slipping away again.

There was great rejoicing in the morning and Jack was so full of the adventures of Phil and Mary Lee that she could not keep her mind on her Sunday-school lesson and heard scarce a word her teacher said.

Trouble was made much of and was saved so many tid-bits from the breakfast plates that he was in danger of an attack of indigestion. "I'll never call him a mongrel cur again," said Mary Lee tenderly. "If it hadn't been for him, we might never have been found."

"You forget," said Randolph, with a look across the table at Nan, "that if it hadn't been for Nan, Trouble would never have gone in search of you," and then and there Nan forgave him for his rude speech of the day before.

"If I hadn't come home, I would never have thought of sending him," she acknowledged. "He ought to have a medal, bless him."

"So he shall have," said Ran, and he gravely provided a tin medal on which was scratched: "For Heroic Service." This was fastened to the dog's collar and it was worn proudly.

However much Nan may have felt that Ran had made amends, the boy himself did not consider that he had and came to his cousin as she was tidying up the living-room. "Are you going to church, Nan?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "I feel as if I had been drawn through a knot-hole this morning. Of course, Mary Lee won't go and maybe I'll stay at home to keep her company, though she's still asleep, poor child."

"I thought if you were going I'd wait for you," said Ran.

Nan threw him a mocking smile. "I thought you didn't care for my company," she said.

"That was yesterday," returned Ran. "Besides, I didn't say I didn't want your company; I said I didn't want you to stay up there on the mountain and so I didn't, for I was afraid then that those two were lost and I knew it would be harder for you there than at home. Then I knew if we set out on a search you couldn't go and it would not do to leave you all alone."

"I realized all that afterward," Nan told him frankly.

"Then we have made up," said Ran with boyish eagerness.

"Of course," returned Nan. "I was miffed only for a few minutes. I knew before we got home that you spoke as you did so I wouldn't insist upon staying. Still," she added, "it was hard to go off and leave one's sister to wildcats, though I must say Mary Lee isn't thinking much about them at this moment, and I hope she isn't dreaming about them. There comes Phil, so he is all right. Mary Lee says he was so brave and manly, little as he is."

Phil joined them. "Say, did any of you see my watch?" were his first words.

"Why, no," replied the two. "Have you lost it, Phil?" asked Nan.

"I'm afraid so. I must have caught the chain on something in the woods and snapped it so the watch fell out when I stooped over. The end of the chain was hanging from the buttonhole when I looked last night after I came home, but the watch was gone."

"Isn't that too bad?" said Nan, sympathetically. "You will have a hard time finding it, I am afraid."

"I'm afraid so. I wouldn't lose that watch for anything, and I'm going to hunt high and low for it."

"We'll all help," said Ran. "We'll organize a search party, Phil, and go up the mountain to-morrow afternoon."

"Say, that will be fine," said Phil, gratefully. His watch was one of his dearest possessions; he had not had it very long and was feeling very hopeless over its loss. "I don't suppose we shall find it," he went on, "but I'm glad to have your

help in looking for it. How's Mary Lee?"

"She's asleep," Nan told him. "Aunt Sarah said we were not to disturb her. I think she is only worn out. You are all right, aren't you, Phil?"

"Yes, indeed, or I would be if I hadn't lost my watch. They are waiting for me; I must go or I will be late for church."

"I reckon I'll go," said Nan suddenly. Miss Sarah, the twins and Ashby had gone on, and soon Nan followed with Randolph. She was feeling very thankful for her sister's safety, and she was not the only one of that congregation who sent up a silent prayer of gratitude for the deliverance of two children from the "terror by night."

The next afternoon, the search party started forth though this time Miss Sarah declared the girls should not go, that they had not yet recovered from the effects of their last trip. However, since Colonel Lewis was to be their guide, and his daughter was going, too, consent was finally given to Mary Lee, though she was charged not to lose sight of the older members of the party.

"I really don't feel as if I ought to let you go," said Aunt Sarah, "but, since Polly and her father will be there, I can assume that you will be reasonably safe."

"When Phil was so good to me and would have fought the wildcat if it had attacked us, I ought to go," said Mary Lee. "I should feel downright mean not to help look for the watch. Besides, I know where we were better than any one."

"Well, go along," said Aunt Sarah, "but don't you lose sight for one minute of Polly and her father and don't go traipsing off with Phil alone."

Mary Lee promised, and they set out.

Nan had had enough of the mountain for one while, and besides her arm was scarce strong enough for her to indulge in horseback riding, for it was in this fashion that the party determined to go. The twins were in terror of the wildcat and it was not difficult to persuade them to remain behind.

A thin stream of smoke curled up above the purple-brown trees against the blue sky as the riders turned toward the mountain path.

"I wonder if that is our fire still burning," said Mary Lee to the colonel.

"Hardly," he answered. "It is some cabin in the mountain I suppose."

Mary Lee watched the smoke drift away across the blue and wondered how it would seem to live so far from neighbors. She decided that she would not like it. They were able to penetrate much further with their horses, and this time Colonel Lewis's compass was put to use. When the path became too intricate they fastened their horses and the colonel led the way on foot, and finally reached the very log where Phil and Mary Lee had rested the night of their wanderings.

To their surprise, a little further on was a clearing, and it was discovered that the path they had taken led them to a cabin, from which came the stream of curling smoke they had seen as they came up the mountain. After searching all along their way and at last scattering the leaves by the log they concluded that they must give up the watch as irretrievably lost, and were about to turn away when Mary Lee saw some one watching them curiously from a little distance off.

"There's somebody," she said to her Cousin Polly. "I am going to ask if anything has been seen of the watch."

"Where's anybody?" asked Polly.

"Over there; it is a little girl about as big as I am."

"It must be Wordsworth's cottage girl," said Polly, "for she has 'a rustic woodland air, and she is wildly clad.' I reckon she will run if you speak to her, Mary Lee. These mountain people are mighty scary."

"Then don't you come. Maybe she won't be afraid of a girl her own size. You stay here."

Polly agreed and Mary Lee went toward the girl who did indeed show signs of alarm and looked as if she were about to run away when Mary Lee called to her, "don't go, please. I want to ask you something."

The girl stood her ground though she backed away as Mary Lee came up. She was a pretty, dark-eyed little creature with masses of light curly hair tousled about her neck. She wore a ragged, faded calico frock and her feet were bare.

"My cousin and I got lost up here Saturday night," said Mary Lee, "and if we had known there was a house so near we wouldn't have been so scared. We heard a wildcat and it frightened us nearly out of our wits."

The girl looked interested. Mary Lee had chosen the proper way to approach her. "We-alls ain't skeered of 'em," she drawled. "Maw shot one las' week, an' she come nigh gittin' another yessaday."

"Maybe it was the very one that scared us. I wish she had killed it. I wonder why we didn't see a light in your house."

"That is your house, isn't it?"

"Yes, we-alls lives hyah. They wasn't no light, 'scusin' the fiah, an' that died down arter supper. We-alls goes to bed with the chickens."

"We didn't get home till nearly midnight," Mary Lee told her, "and my, but I was tired. My cousin and I got lost from the rest and they had a great time finding us. If we had only gone on a little further, we should have come to your house, shouldn't we?"

"We-alls don't come aroun' that-a-way from town; we comes up the other side; it's a little mite furdur but it ain't so steep."

"Oh, that's it. I wish we had known." Then feeling that she had established a sufficient acquaintance to put her important question she asked, "You didn't happen to find a little watch in the leaves, did you? My cousin lost it. He sets such store by it and we all came up the mountain this afternoon to help him find it."

For answer the girl put her hand down into the bosom of her frock and drew forth something which she held out in her palm. It was Phil's watch.

"Oh!" Mary Lee turned and called: "Polly, Polly, it's found! it's found!" She turned to the girl again. "Where did you find it? and please tell me your name."

"My name's Daniella Boggs," said the girl, taking a shy look at Polly Lewis who now came up.

Polly put out her hand and gently detained the girl who seemed about to flee. "We are so much obliged," she said. "My little brother was distressed at losing his watch. Where did you find it?"

The girl who had put one finger in her mouth, took it out and pointed to the heap of leaves by the log. It was evident that in stooping over to gather them Phil had dropped the watch.

Colonel Lewis moved toward them but Polly waved him off. She saw that the girl was too shy to stand more company, and she left her with Mary Lee, herself returning to her father. "Offer her a reward," he said. "Of course it was very honest of her. She could easily have said that she had seen nothing of the watch. Here," he took a bill from his pocketbook and handed it to Polly, "give her this and tell her we all thank her very much."

Polly carried the bill to the girl. "My father and all of us are very much obliged to you," she said, "and we want you to take this."

Daniella retreated, shaking her head and putting her hands behind her. "I don't want it," she said. "I ain't done nothin' to earn it. 'Twa'n't no work nor nothin'."

"Oh, but," Polly argued, "when people lose things, they expect to give a reward to whoever finds them."

Daniella still shook her head. "I ain't done nothin'," she repeated. "Maw wouldn't like me to take money."

"But you could spend it in town."

"Don't never go to town."

"But isn't there anything you would like? Your mother could buy it for you, you know."

Daniella looked at the red knitted jacket which Mary Lee wore. "I like that," she said, nodding her head toward it.

"Then you shall have one just like it," said Polly, heartily. "I will go right to work and knit it myself. Wouldn't you like a pair of shoes for winter? and can you read?"

"Maw kin. I kain't. I'd like the shoes when it snows, but I hates to put 'em on befo' that."

"Then you shall have a pair all ready for the first snow," Polly told her.

"I wish you would come to my home some day. Will you, if we come for you?" asked Mary Lee, with a missionary spirit of enlarging the girl's ideas.

"I'd be skeered," said Daniella.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't. I have three sisters and we don't live right in the town; it's like country. We have chickens and things."

"I've got some chickens," returned Daniella, "an' I've got a pig, too. Maw wouldn't let me go to town, I reckon, 'cause I ain't got clothes like you-uns. She ain't no time to make 'em. She too busy nussin' grandad. He right foolish-lak now, jest lak a baby."

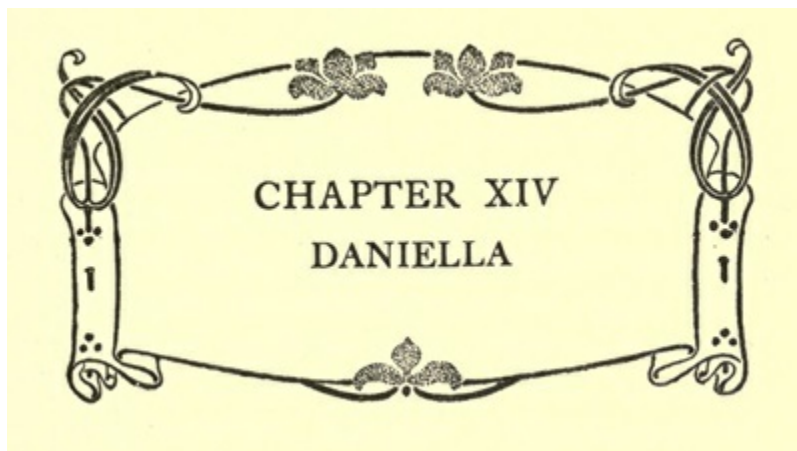
"Well, we'll come some day to see if your mother will let you come to town," said Mary Lee.

"And I will bring you a red jacket like this." Polly put her hand on Mary Lee's arm. "Good-bye, Daniella. We shall not

forget you."

Daniella smiled, but made no reply. She wondered if she would really ever have such a beautiful thing as that red jacket. About going to town she was not so keen, for she had never been there in all her short life, and, though she half longed to see its wonders, she feared to step beyond the confines of her own forest.

She watched the party ride off, but turned to run as Phil, who declared he must thank her personally, went toward her. Like a deer the girl fled, not stopping till she was safe in her own cabin-home. Her courage had stood all that one afternoon would allow.



CHAPTER XIV DANIELLA

Mary Lee came home full of her afternoon's experience and could talk of nothing but Daniella. Accordingly, when Nan discovered that not only Mary Lee, but her Cousin Polly, and even the boys, showed an interest in the little mountain maid, she felt that she was rather out of it and begged Polly to take her up to the cabin when she should go with the red jacket. Jack and Jean, too, were greatly interested. Said Jean: "My Sunday-school teacher said I must try to make something for the church basket and that it would be sold for the home missions, but I am going to make it for Daniella instead, for I am sure she is a home mission, and I would thrice as soon she would have it. It is dreadful for any one to go barefoot in winter. I've begun to crochet some lace and I will sell that and buy something for Daniella." So, thereafter, wherever Jean went, she carried her spool of thread and her crochet needle. Her length of rather soiled, somewhat uneven lace grew apace and she set her hopes upon selling it.

Jack took no such industrious means of showing her concern, unless one may consider her method an industrious one, for she called on various of the school children to come to a peep-show, one penny admission. Ten girls came, and with the proceeds Jack bought corn to pop. Nan helped her to turn it into delectable pop-corn balls which were so toothsome that Ran and Ashby bought most of them, and their boy friends were customers for the remainder, so with little labor Jack was fifty cents to the better and serenely watched her less quick-witted sister Jean patiently working her lace.

Nan and Mary Lee took a hint from Jack and conceived the plan of having a bazaar for the benefit of the little mountain girl. The boys fell in with the plan; some of the schoolgirls joined them and Cousin Polly Lewis herself offered to mother the scheme.

"It is very exciting," said Nan to Mary Lee when they had taken the first decided move. "I keep thinking of all sorts of things to do and of people to ask for contributions. Do you suppose, Mary Lee, it would do to ask grandmother? I shouldn't in the least mind asking Aunt Helen."

"I wouldn't ask them for the world," replied Mary Lee.

"But it isn't for ourselves."

"I don't care; it's asking just the same isn't it?"

"Yes, that's so, and I made up my mind never to ask them for the least thing."

"It's all very well to be friends with them, I suppose," said her sister. "I mean to be polite to them if I ever meet them, but I don't think we ought to place ourselves under obligations to them in the smallest way." Mary Lee evidently voiced her Aunt Sarah's opinions.

"Oh, well," sighed Nan, "then I won't, but I am going to tell them about Daniella. I was just thinking, Mary Lee, suppose Daniella won't take anything after we have had the bazaar for her benefit. What shall we do then?"

"Give the money for something else: home missions or traveling libraries or something. We shall have had the fun anyhow," a view of the matter which Nan regarded as very sensible. Mary Lee generally did have sensible advice to give.

"I'll make a lot of panuchee," Nan went on, "and I'll put black walnuts in some; nearly every one likes that kind best. I know the Academy boys will buy it, and that it will go off like hot cakes. Cousin Mag is going to send a fine cake and Miss Bouldin has promised one. Do you think it would be best to have a fancy table or just things to eat?"

Mary Lee considered the question. "It will be a little more trouble to have the fancy table, but if we find people want to give things of that kind we can have it. We'll ask Cousin Polly."

"And *where* shall we have it?" said Nan. This was the most frequently discussed question and they had not, as yet, come to any satisfactory answer to it.

Mary Lee looked out of the window thoughtfully. "I am sure I don't know," she replied. "No one wants to give up a room big enough."

"If mother were only here," sighed Nan, "she'd think of some place that would do; she always has ideas." Then suddenly the girl gave a little squeal and clutched Mary Lee's arm. "I know," she cried. "Why didn't we think of it before? We'll have nothing to pay for it and it will not put any one to inconvenience, and it will be as if we really had it ourselves as we wanted to do in the first place. We can use the old wing."

"Of course we can," said Mary Lee. "It will be just the place. There is plenty of room up-stairs or down. We can have the eatables in the library and the fancy things up-stairs in the room over it. Nan, that's splendid. Let's go straight to tell

Polly."

They dashed out of the house and down the street to the Lewis's where Polly met them at the door.

"We have an idea," said Nan, breathlessly.

"I thought you must have something the way you came tearing," said Polly. "I'm glad it isn't anything breakable."

Nan was too anxious to give her suggestion to notice the playful irony. "We're going to have the bazaar in the old wing of our house," she said. "It's empty and handy and----"

"Dirty," laughed Polly.

"It can be cleaned easily enough. Now, Cousin Polly, why will you laugh at it? Isn't it a fine idea?" Nan was aggrieved.

"It certainly is, Nan," returned her cousin. "I won't make fun, I really won't. What does Aunt Sarah say about it?"

"Oh, she won't care. We spoke of using our living-room first, you know, but she put her foot down, and when Aunt Sarah does put her foot down, she puts it down hard. You know there are four rooms in the wing beside the attic; we can use the two largest rooms for the tables and keep the supplies in the others."

Polly nodded. "We really could serve supper, or have a loan exhibit," she said reflectively, "and we might then be able to make quite a sum, but I reckon we'd better not attempt too much. Maybe some other time we can do that. Yes, Nan, the wing will be just the place. Now, let me see. You and Betty Selden can have the eatables and I will have Mary Lee with me at the fancy table. Jack and Jean can be flower girls and Ran can take the money at the door."

"Where can we get flowers at this time of year?" asked Mary Lee. "We don't want to buy them, do we?"

"Oh, everybody has a few house plants," returned Polly, "and there are still chrysanthemums in bloom out of doors. We can make up some very small bouquets and sell them for five cents apiece."

"What I want to know is exactly what we are going to do with the money," said Nan. "People ask me and I can't tell them."

"Why, it's for Daniella," said her cousin.

"Yes, I know; but she wouldn't take any when you offered it to her."

"Then we'll spend it for her in whatever way seems best. Where are you off to now?"

"We must tell Aunt Sarah what we have decided to do, and we have lots to do to get ready in time. I think I'll begin to clean the rooms at once," said Nan, eager for the fray.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Polly. "I'll come over to-morrow with old Achsah and get them in order. I'll have to see about tables. I suppose some long boards supported on boxes would do."

"There's the joggle-board," said Nan, "we could use that." The joggle-board was a useful possession; it had been put up for the children's amusement in the first place, and was a very long, very tough, very limber board, the two ends of which securely rested on uprights. It gave in the middle to the weight of the body and as younger children, the Corners delighted to joggle on it; even now Jack and Jean sometimes entertained themselves by its springing motion, though it was more often used as a repository for anything that came handy. The milk pans sunned there, pies were set upon it to cool, tomatoes were placed there for ripening, seeds were spread out for drying.

Polly thought rather favorably of the joggle-board. "We'll try it," she said, "if it isn't too long to go in those rooms. I'll ask father where we can get some other boards. We can cover them with table-cloths and they will do very well."

"There are no other boards at our house," remarked Mary Lee. "Unc' Landy uses up every bit and end to fix up the fences and roofs."

"We'll get some somewhere," said Polly.

The two girls ran home, eager to view the possibilities of the wing. They flung open the windows of the deserted rooms, discussed their size, advantages and disadvantages.

"It will be as cold as charity," declared Mary Lee.

"Then we'll have to have fires, open fires will be cheerful, and we'll make the place as pretty as possible."

"My, how dusty the windows are; it's going to be a sight of work," said Mary Lee.

However, this matter was taken off their hands by Polly who pressed her friends into service and by the last day of the month all was ready. Pine branches and autumn leaves decorated the mantel; curtains were hung at the windows; the long tables up-stairs presented articles pretty, useful and dainty, while down-stairs was shown such an array of goodies that every schoolboy dived into his pocket the moment he entered the door. Packages of panuchee tied up in

Japanese napkins were in great demand; caramels were scarcely less favored, and cakes disappeared bodily in no time. Jack and Jean disposed of every bunch of flowers, and up-stairs, though the fancy articles went less slowly, they met a steady sale and very few were left by the end of the evening. These were sold by auction. Colonel Lewis undertook the office of auctioneer, serving so successfully that while every buyer thought he or she had a bargain, the articles really brought a fair price.

When all was over, and the last visitor had departed, the money was counted, the three boys, Ran, Phil and Ashby willingly undertaking to do this. "Twenty-seven dollars and forty-five cents," they announced.

"My, haven't we done well!" exclaimed the girls.

"I thought if we made twenty or twenty-five it would be a lot," said Nan. "I almost wish I were a mountain girl myself to have a bazaar held for me."

Jean looked quite shocked at this remark, but Jack agreed with Nan that it would not be a bad thing for one.

Polly was appointed guardian of the fund and it was agreed that an expedition to the mountain cabin should be made that they might learn what Daniella required and to what use it were best to put the money.

During this time the little maid of the mountain never dreamed of what was going on in the valley below, where the town whose spires she could see, seemed a far, unknown and mysterious place. If she had imagined that she was the constant thought of a little group of girls, or if she had known that their keen sympathies and tender desires went out toward her, she would have been less desolate than she was, sitting in the cabin alone with her feeble old grandfather whose mind was like that of a little child.

For two days these two had been there alone, Daniella watching, waiting by the tiny window, watching and waiting for the return of her mother who had gone to town to get a few things that she felt they could no longer do without.

A long time old Daniel Boggs and his son's wife had lived on the mountain. Here little Daniella had been born a month after her father's death. Here the child had thriven like an early spring flower not afraid of chill winds and lack of sunshine. Old Daniel had his little patch of corn, his wood lot, a few rows of potatoes, and a couple of pigs. If his revenues were increased by any other means, his family did not know it. They had enough and were content till in course of time Daniel became more of a child than his little granddaughter, and of late had lapsed into almost a helpless state. He had to be constantly watched lest he do some mischief, and he had become unable to do any work so now though the corn had been gathered and the potatoes unearthed by Daniella and her mother, the wood-pile was low and the winter was coming which would find them wanting many things. To get these Daniella's mother had gone to town taking with her a dozen rabbits which they had trapped, and which she hoped to sell.

For two days, Daniella had kept up the fire, had fed her grandfather, had looked after her chickens and the pigs and now was anxiously wondering why her mother did not come. Did it take so long to sell a dozen rabbits? In the small square window her anxious little face was framed as a party of young people came up the road. Daniella recognized them at once. There was the young lady who had promised her the red jacket and with her were two younger girls one of whom she had seen before. Daniella stood watching them. They came straight to the cabin and knocked on the door. Daniella opened to them.

"May we come in?" said Polly. "I have brought your red jacket."

Daniella's dark eyes sparkled, and she stepped aside that her visitors might enter. "Maw done gone to town," she said. "Tain't nobody hyah 'scusin' me an' grandad sence day 'fo' yessaday maw'nin'!" She had been so long with only the doddering old man in the corner that she was ready to talk.

"When do you expect your mother?" asked Polly.

"I dunno. She say when she done sell her rabbits she come back. Hit take a pow'ful time to sell rabbits, don't it?"

"It ought not to," answered Polly a little uneasily. She was wondering if the woman had deserted her daughter or if any ill could have befallen her. "Aren't you afraid to stay here alone?" she asked.

"No'm. Grandad jest lak a baby an' I kin cook the wittles, but I wisht maw'd git back."

The old man in the chimney corner stirred and looked vacantly toward the visitors. "Fine day," he said, wagging his head, then he added in a confidential whisper, "but they won't find it."

"Now, grandad," chided Daniella, "jest you quit talkin'!"

The old man turned again to the fire and mumbled something about no one's ever finding out anything from him. Meanwhile the girls looked around the room. It was fairly clean, though dingy. A four post bedstead over which was a patchwork quilt, stood in one corner; in another was a sort of bunk over which was thrown a hairy robe of skins sewed together; two hickory chairs, a rude stool, a bench, a table made up the rest of the furniture. On a shelf was a pile of

dishes and against the wall hung a few cooking utensils. It was by far the simplest establishment the girls had ever been in.

Polly produced the red jacket, known in common parlance by the unpleasant name of "sweater," and Daniella gave an exclamation of pleasure. "Try it on," said Polly, holding it out, and Daniella thrust her arms into the sleeves. She gave no thanks, but her evident delight was sufficient.

"Ef I had a pair of shoes I'd go hunt up maw," she said. "Leastways, I'd go if I could leave the old man."

"The shoes are here, too," said Polly, as she drew from her bag both shoes and stockings.

Daniella straightway plumped down on the floor to try them on. "Shoes never feels good," she said, "but these is the nicest feelin' I ever had. Oh, I wisht maw would come. Do you reckon she could take all this time to sell rabbits? She had twelve of 'em. We trapped 'em, her an' me. She was goin' to take 'em to the sto' and git things fo' 'em, an' then she was comin' back."

"She ought to be here then," said Polly.

"I wisht I could go hunt her up," said Daniella, anxiously. "You don't reckon nothin' could have ketched her, do you?"

"No, I don't see why anything should," Polly tried to reassure her. She gave a glance at the others, a glance which Daniella read with alarm.

"Yuh-alls thinks somethin's went wrong with my maw," she cried. Daniella looked helplessly at the old man. "I dassent leave him, I dassent, an' I wants to fin' my maw."

Without a word to the others, Nan stepped forward. "I'll stay with your grandfather," she said. "You go to town with my cousin and my sister and hunt up your mother. I'll stay till you can come back."

"Oh, Nan!" Mary Lee gave a low ejaculation.

"Oh, Nan!" repeated Polly, "ought you?"

Nan nodded. "Yes, I think I ought."

"I won't forget you," said Daniella in a low tense voice. "You're good, you are, an' I'll work fo' you. I'll trap rabbits fo' you, I'll get nuts fo' you, I will. Grandad ain't no trouble, but you has to watch him lessen he sets hisse'f on fiah, an' he has to hev his supper airly. I'll come right back soon as I finds maw," she promised eagerly.

"I will stay till you come," said Nan, steadily.

"Thar's a pone o' braid on the shelf, un'er thet dish," said Daniella, "an' thar's rashers hangin' up thar, an' thar's long sweetenin' in thet jug. Thar am' no other kin'."

Nan was mystified but she said nothing.

"All grandad has to hev is a bowl of coffee an' some braid," Daniella went on. "I'm goin' away fur a little while, grandad," she said, turning to the old man. "Now you behave yo'se'f an' don't give no trouble."

"Nobody'll git anythin' outen me," said the old man with a chuckle. "I'll be as dumb as an oyster."

"He don't know what I'm talkin' about," Daniella explained. "You needn't min' him, jest keep up the fiah an' see that he doesn't fool with hit."

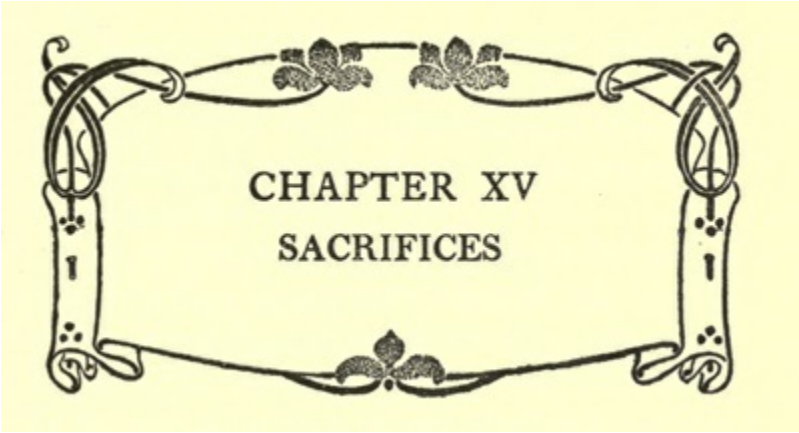
"If we're going, we must start at once," said Polly, "so you can get back to-night, Nan," to which remark Nan heartily agreed.

The glory of the red jacket and new shoes did not fill Daniella's thoughts, for now that her fears were aroused, she was more and more anxious about her mother, and she climbed up into the carriage with no just appreciation of the situation.

At the last moment, Polly came back. "It seems perfectly dreadful to leave you here with that silly old man, Nan," she said. "I shall not have an easy moment till I know you are safe at home."

"Oh, don't bother about me," Nan replied. "I shall do very well, but I do hope Daniella will get back before night."

So they drove off and the last thing that Nan saw of them was the gleam of the red jacket as the carriage disappeared behind the trees down the longer and less steep road by which it had come. She wondered what she would do with herself during the hours which must intervene before she could be released. But here her habit of dreaming came in well, and she was presently building air-castles while the old man dozed, or muttered to himself in the corner.



CHAPTER XV
SACRIFICES

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It was many an hour before Nan was relieved of her self-imposed task of keeping house for old Daniel Boggs, and in the meantime Daniella was going through such experiences as her wildest dreams had never suggested to her.

Polly drove directly home to consult her parents about the best way to set to work to look for Mrs. Boggs, but she found neither her father nor mother at the house, though her brother Tom happened to be in, and volunteered to go down-town to make inquiries.

"If anything has happened to her in town, they will know at the police station or the hospital," he said. "I'll go to the station first, for it is right on my way. If I hear anything there, I'll follow it up."

Polly led Daniella, conscious of new shoes and jacket, into the house where she sat stiffly on the edge of a chair, refusing to move or to speak, lost in wonderment. Never before had she been in such a room as that into which Polly took her, although it was but the plainly furnished sitting-room of an ordinary house. Never before had Daniella seen pictures in gilt frames, books in colored bindings, carpeted floors or curtained windows. She sat as if in a dream, staring around in amazement. She was too proud to ask questions, too shy to leave her chair, too embarrassed to speak.

Within half an hour, Tom Lewis returned. He called to Polly, but Daniella heard him, and with a swift direct movement darted toward the entry where he was. She stood rigidly erect waiting for his first words. "Come out here, Polly," he said. "I want to speak to you." And he led his sister to the porch. "I couldn't tell you while that child's great eyes were upon me," he said. "I have found her mother. She is at the hospital badly hurt. She has been unconscious, or at least delirious, and they could not discover her name till this morning. Now, what's to be done?"

"Nan mustn't stay up there, and the old man is to be considered," said Polly thoughtfully. "Perhaps, Tom, I'd better go over and speak to Aunt Sarah. Mary Lee and Phil went over and have given her some idea of the state of things. Meanwhile, you hunt up father and see if he can advise anything to be done about that old man. We can't, for humanity's sake, allow Daniella to stay there in that lonely cabin while her mother is getting well."

"And we must get Nan home," said Tom. "I'll find father, Polly, and he'll know what's best. The woman is not likely to be out for some weeks, they told me."

"Dear, dear," exclaimed Polly.

"What woman? Where is she?" cried an excited voice at her side. Polly turned to put her arm around Daniella who was looking at her with big frightened eyes. "Your mother has been hurt, Daniella, dear. She was run over by a wagon on the street, but she is in good hands and-----"

"Where is she? Where?" interrupted Daniella, wrenching herself away. "I wants to see her. Take me to her."

"I cannot this minute, but you shall see her as soon as we can make arrangements. Be a good girl, Daniella, and don't make a fuss. We are going to do all we can for both you and your mother."

Daniella choked back a great sob, but sat down on a chair in the hall, her eyes like those of some patient, suffering animal.

Polly took a seat beside her. "We are not going to let you stay up on the mountain alone, so far from your mother," she went on gently. "My brother has gone to find out what can be done about your grandfather. Now, will you stay here, or will you come with me to Nan's home? Nan, you know, is the one who is staying with your grandfather."

Daniella nodded. "I know her name; I ain't goin' to fergit it neither. I'll go thar with you."

Polly took her to where Aunt Sarah was listening to Mary Lee's account of the afternoon's adventure. "What's this?" said Miss Dent, as Polly entered. "Why did you let Nan stay up there, Polly?"

"She wanted to stay," said Polly with a warning look. "This is Daniella Boggs, Aunt Sarah. We have just heard that her mother has met with an accident and is in the hospital. The nurses assured Tom that she was doing well, but we must make arrangements for Daniella." She followed Aunt Sarah into the next room where they talked in low tones together while Mary Lee, Phil and the twins put their heads together to make a plan of their own.

Daniella sat on the edge of the sofa, her hands clenched and her tears rolling down upon the red jacket. She could no longer keep them back. Presently the children left her there and she could hear them all talking in the adjoining room.

"Please, Aunt Sarah," begged Jack.

"Oh, do, auntie," pleaded Jean.

"I'll go without butter," put in Mary Lee.

"And I'll empty my savings bank," added Phil.

"Go 'long, go 'long, all of you," said Aunt Sarah. "Wait till your elders have talked this thing over and then we will see."

"One more couldn't make so very, very much difference," Mary Lee began again.

"And we could sleep three in a bed," Jean's voice came in.

"Or we could do something. There's a lot of room if we only had the furniture," Jack's argument followed.

"I'll bet mother has a bedstead to spare," Phil chimed in eagerly, "and we could rig up one of those dressing-table things out of boxes."

"Hush, hush," Aunt Sarah commanded. "You drive me wild. Not another word, Phil Lewis, till I see your father."

Then all of them trooped back into the room where Daniella was sitting. "Now, Daniella," said Polly, "you are to stay here with these little girls till we get everything arranged, and when I come back, I will take you to see your mother, if I can." And she went off with Miss Sarah, leaving Daniella feeling desolate and scared.

The children, however, could not avoid the subject which was so near to their hearts. All their young sympathies were aroused. They would have given Daniella any of their possessions, and were ready to make any sacrifices. "Did they not know what it meant to have a mother ill and away from them?"

"Our mother is ill, too," said Mary Lee, "and she is way off, too far for us ever to go and see her. She had to go there so as to get well."

Daniella felt the sympathy which this state of affairs must bring about, and she wiped her eyes upon the back of her hand, and tried to force back her tears.

"Wouldn't you like to stay with us till your mother gets well?" ventured Jack, eyeing the disconsolate Daniella.

Daniella blinked away her tears but made no reply.

"Hush, Jack," said Mary Lee in a half whisper. "You mustn't say that yet."

"I just wanted to know," said Jack, still gazing at Daniella.

"It isn't polite for you to stare so," whispered Mary Lee, and Jack turned away her eyes.

"What do you suppose they will do now with the money we made at the bazaar?" whispered Jean to Phil. But he shook his head reprovingly at her.

They found that they could not draw Daniella into conversation, but they did not think it polite to leave her. Jack brought her a picture-book to look at. She stared at the pictures uncomprehendingly.

Mary Lee produced a piece of needlework she was doing; it had no better effect.

Jean ran out and brought back Rubaiyat, whom she placed in Daniella's lap. Then the forlorn little stranger smiled and smoothed the soft fur.

Encouraged by this, and not to be outdone by her twin, Jack rushed to the kitchen and came back with a cake and an apple which she offered to the interesting visitor.

Daniella eyed the apple for a moment and then shook her head. She was not going to seem to need food in the presence of these more favored children. But she seemed to take comfort in cuddling Ruby and they felt that they had done all that they could.

In the course of an hour Colonel Lewis came in with his daughter and Miss Sarah. "Tom and I have arranged it," he told Phil in answer to the eager questions he put as he ran out to meet them. "We've found a place to take the grandfather. He must go to the County Asylum, as his mind is impaired. We must get Nan home right away, so Tom or I will drive up for her and bring the old man back. They'll keep him at the hospital to-night and to-morrow he can go to the place I spoke of. He will be well cared for."

"And what about Daniella?" asked Phil.

"That's not settled yet. She will stay here till we can determine what is best to be done. The main thing now is to get Nan home. I feel very loth to leave her there alone a moment longer than necessary. Mrs. Boggs is in good hands and is improving."

As Polly entered the room, she said, "Now, Daniella, you may go to see your mother." Down went Ruby, awakened rudely from the nap she was taking in Daniella's lap, and the little girl, without waiting for further invitation, darted out the door. She ran down to the gate so fast that Polly could not overtake her. "Wait, Daniella, wait," she called. "You don't know which way to go." Then Daniella paused and those watching saw them go swiftly down the street.

During the time that all this was going on, Nan was patiently keeping watch in the cabin. The short winter day was drawing to a close when she stirred the fire and tried to set a kettle of water to boil. Little as she was used to cooking, she was less used to an open fire, and found some difficulty in making the coffee. But she accomplished it at last, emptied some into a bowl and poured into it a liberal supply of "long sweetening" which she discovered to be molasses, then putting some of the corn bread upon a plate, she set it before the old man. He was able to feed himself which he did noisily, but with evident enjoyment. Nan could touch none of the food herself, though she was hungry after a picnic lunch taken on the drive up the mountain. The hours began to drag wearily. Once in a while, the old man would make some meaningless remark, supposing Nan to be his granddaughter. Two or three times he attempted to meddle with the fire, but Nan was able to stop him. He was simple and harmless, but, like a child, in danger of doing himself an injury by some sudden piece of mischief.

Nan wondered how Daniella could stand living in the little cooped up, bare cabin, how she could endure the privations and the lack of companionship. As the shadows deepened, she began to fear it might be possible that she would have to stay there all night, and was relieved to hear the sound of wheels, and then her Cousin Tom Lewis's voice.

"Heigho, Nan!" he cried, "Ran and I have come for you."

"Is Daniella with you?" asked Nan, peering out the door.

"No," answered Tom as he came up to the cabin.

"Oh, then I can't leave. I'll have to stay with the old man," returned Nan with a great feeling of disappointment. "I promised, you know."

Tom came forward. "No, you won't stay," he said. "We are going to take the old man, too. Where is he?"

"In there by the fire. Oh, Cousin Tom, who says he is to go, and where are you going to take him? What's become of Daniella, and has anything happened to her mother?"

"One question at a time, please. It is all right about the old gentleman, so don't you bother. The first thing to do is to get him ready, and then there'll be time to answer your questions on the way home. I've brought an old army overcoat to wrap him up in, for I didn't suppose we should find much here, from what Polly said."

The bewildered old man was soon bundled into the carriage. He whimpered like a child at being taken from the cabin, and kept saying over and over, "I'm innercent, I'm innercent. I never took no hand in the business."

"He probably imagines we are sheriffs after him for a moonshiner," said Tom. "Poor old chap!" He tried to reassure the old man but found it was no use, and after a while he lapsed into silence, seeming to find comfort alone in the supposed fact that his granddaughter was with him.

On the way down the mountain, Nan learned of all that had happened since morning, and kept up such a running fire of questions and comments as made Tom declare she must have been all day thinking them up.

She felt that she had been away for weeks when at last they stopped before her own door. Was it only that morning that they had started out to take the red jacket to Daniella?

Mary Lee and the twins rushed out to meet her, full of the day's happenings. "Daniella's here," cried Mary Lee.

"Yes, and she's been to see her mother at the hospital," said Jack.

"And her mother is crite ill," put in Jean. "Cousin Polly says she can't take any food except licrids because she has such a fever. She was hurt awfully, but she told Cousin Polly they couldn't have done more for her if she had been a creen."

"We want to keep Daniella here," Mary Lee went on, "and Aunt Sarah is thinking about it."

"Where is Daniella now?" asked Nan.

"She's at the hospital. Cousin Tom is going to bring her back when he takes her grandfather there. Isn't it a good thing that Cousin Philip is one of the directors? He had everything hurried up and settled so much sooner. Was it very awful staying up there all day, Nan? Were you scared?"

"It was lonesome, but I wasn't frightened. There wasn't anything to do but give the old man his supper and keep him from fooling with the fire. I couldn't eat their messes myself."

"Then you must be half starved," said Mary Lee. "You poor child. We waited supper for you all. Mitty is putting it on the table now."

Nan thought that never before in her life had batter bread and cold ham tasted so good. Never had biscuits and baked apples such a flavor.

After supper, Miss Sarah called the four girls to her. "Now, children," she said, "the little girl will be here presently, and

before she gets here we must understand whether she is to stay or not. They will take her in at the Children's Home or the St. Mary's Orphan Asylum, while her mother is ill, so we need not feel that she will not be looked after."

"Oh, but it would be dreadful to shut up that little wild thing in a strict place like the Home or the Asylum," said Nan, with keen appreciation of what Daniella would suffer.

"But you know, my dear, that every penny counts with us, and that all that can be spared must go for your mother's expenses. If we keep the child here, even for a couple of months, she will have to have clothing, her board will cost something, and it will mean sacrifices on the part of all of us. Now, the question is: What are you willing to give up?"

"I think I can get along without anything more in the way of clothes this winter," said Nan, visions of a new frock fading away.

"And I am sure I can if Nan can," said Mary Lee, readily.

"I'll wear hand-me-downs and not say a word," said Jack, "and I'll give Daniella all my rice pudding."

"Because you don't like it," Jean spoke with scorn.

"Well, never mind, if she likes it, what's the difference?" said Jack, argumentatively. "If I gave up something she didn't like and that I did, it wouldn't do her any good. You haven't said yet that you'd give up anything."

"Of course I'll give up something," declared Jean, offended. "I'll give up whatever Aunt Sarah says I ought."

"Good little girl," said Aunt Sarah, approvingly. "I hope you will not have to give up much. You younger ones can always take the clothes of the older ones, and as for food we shall not be able to set a very much plainer table on account of our boarders. I think there will be rice pudding enough for every one, but we'll have gingerbread instead of rich cake, and eat more oatmeal instead of so many hot griddle-cakes."

"I suppose they do take a quantity of butter," sighed Jean, who liked griddle-cakes above all things.

"We'll eat 'long sweetening' on them," said Nan, with a smile at the recollection of the Boggs's molasses jug. "By the way, I never thought of Daniella's chickens and her little pig. They killed the big pig, and there is quite a lot of meat up there. Some one will have to go up there after those things."

"They can be sold," said Aunt Sarah, "and that will help out their expenses."

"Oh, can't we keep the chickens and the little pig? Then Daniella won't cost us anything for eggs."

"But the chickens will cost us something for food," argued Miss Sarah.

"Oh, dear, I forgot that they must be fed. I always think of chickens just picking and scratching around for a living," said Nan. "Well, Aunt Sarah, is it settled? Do we keep Daniella here or don't we?"

"If you all are willing to make the sacrifices, we will keep her, but you must not murmur. I want you to realize what it means. Now, in the flush of your generous spirit, it seems easy, but after a while, when your coat looks shabby, Nan, and your best frock is too short, and when Mary Lee must wear her old hat and Jack must be satisfied with made-over clothing, and rice-pudding oftener, when Jean can't have griddle-cakes swimming in butter, and must have her shoes mended and remended, it may not seem so easy. My own inclination is always to fling wide a hospitable door, but we must think of what is due to your mother before anything else."

The four children were silent. They realized the truth of all this. At last Jack spoke up. "I don't care; I'd just as soon have the made-overs; you don't have to be near so careful of them."

"There is some comfort in that," agreed Nan. "Yes, Aunt Sarah, we'll do it, won't we, Mary Lee?"

"I will, if you will."

"Then it's settled," Nan declared. "Daniella is to be ours till further notice. Will she go to school, Aunt Sarah? She doesn't know even how to read."

"We can see about that later," Aunt Sarah told her.

Later, this question did come up, for when the chickens and pig were domiciled at the Corners' and Daniella had become used to her surroundings, she realized that if she would be like the rest she must know much more than she did. At first she was like some little wild animal, and could not be kept in the house, saying she could not breathe there. She was shy of every one but Nan and Mary Lee, and fled at the approach of strangers. She did not know how to wear the clothing provided for her, nor had she ever been inside a church. Shops were a marvel and a school was something that had to be elaborately explained, but in time she came to understand that she was unlike the rest of the world and that if she would be in it she must be of it. Then she told Nan she wanted to know what was inside books, and she would go to school. One day of the routine was enough for her. She escaped before the morning was half over to Nan's mortification.

"You ought at least to have stayed till noon," she said, chidingly.

"I couldn't, I couldn't," replied Daniella vehemently. "I felt like a wild creetur in a trap, and them gals starin' and snickerin' made me feel like a fool thing. I ain't goin' to set alongside o' babies, an' I ain't no right with gals my own size. I don't want to hev nothin' to do with none of 'em, 'scusin' you an' Mary Lee. If I never l'ams nothin', I ain't goin' to be cooped up lak a po' trapped rabbit or a bird in a cage. I don't keer if I don't know nothin'. Maw'll love me jest the same."

Nan was quite distressed. She had felt a real missionary spirit in rescuing Daniella from the depths of her ignorance. She dreamed of the day when she should be proud of her, when pretty little Daniella would appear as well as any girl, but now her hopes were blasted. She thought long upon the subject. She discussed it with her sisters, with her Aunt Sarah, with Cousin Polly and Cousin Mag but no one could seem to offer a solution to the problem. It was cruel, every one thought, to send a girl to school who felt so keenly about it. Why make her miserable for the short time she was living in a civilized community? After a while she would have to return to her wild life, then where would be the good of having made her unhappy?

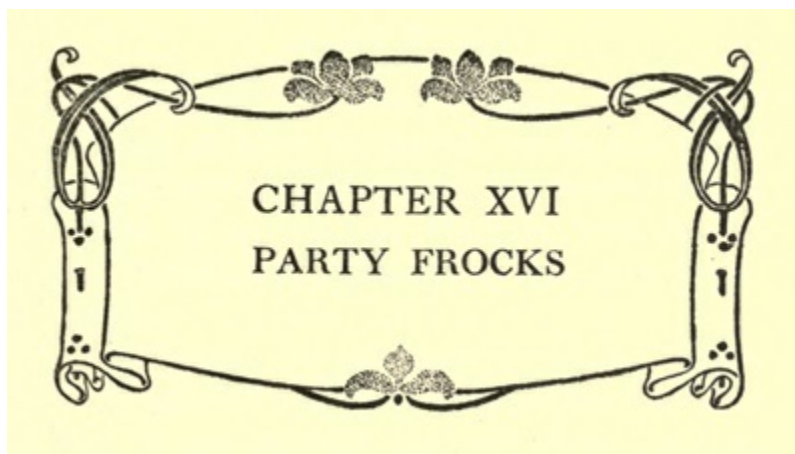
But Nan felt differently about it. She had a scheme of teaching Daniella herself, but the mountain girl spurned it, and said she wasn't goin' to hav no gal her own size l'arin' her, though if the truth were known, she really did not want to give Nan the task. So at last Nan took her difficulty to her Aunt Helen, and here she found a friend in need, for Miss Helen declared that nothing would interest her more than to teach Daniella for an hour or two a day.

"She is like a blank, unwritten page," she said. "And I'd like the experience of putting my mark upon her. I should like to try some of my own theories. You say she is bright, Nan?"

"Real bright. Not like schooly brightness, but in a queer way, that shows she thinks a lot more than you suppose."

"So much the better. I can try to bring out what is in her, by my own methods."

Then Nan, by coaxing and arguing induced Daniella to try the experiment of going to Uplands for an hour each day, and after her very first trial it seemed that Miss Helen had solved the problem, and that Daniella's education had fairly begun.



CHAPTER XVI PARTY FROCKS

Thanksgiving Day went by quietly; there was little made of it here in Virginia, and the girls would scarcely have remembered it if their mother had not written asking each one to tell her what she was most thankful for. The answers were very characteristic.

Jean wrote: "I am thankful that the wildcat didn't get Phil and Mary Lee, and that Daniella is here. I am thankful that her mother and my mother are both getting better."

Jack wrote: "I am thankful that I don't like rice pudding and that I do like molasses on my batter cakes. I am thankful that old clothes don't last as long as new ones, and that people don't make such a fuss when you get spots on them or tear them. I am thankful I don't get into quite so many scrapes in winter as I do in summer."

Mary Lee's thankfulness was expressed in these words: "I am thankful that little wild creatures have warm holes and nests to creep into. I am thankful that birds can fly south where it is warm. I am thankful we have enough to eat and to keep us comfortable, and I am thankful we do not have to live in a little cabin on the mountain, and dear mother, I am very thankful you are getting better."

Said Nan: "I am thankful, you dearest of mothers, for so many things I don't know how to choose, but first and foremost I am thankful for you. I might as well say, too, that I am thankful for all my kinsfolk, for I am even thankful now for Aunt Sarah, since I had to cook that supper for the boys and since she nursed me so patiently when I broke my arm. I certainly am thankful for Aunt Helen. She is such a dear. You know she is teaching Daniella, and, yes, I am thankful for grandmother, if she is cranky. I am thankful for the whole world, for music, for books, for pictures, for trees and flowers and sky, and even the snow on the ground. It looks so perfectly pure and clean and makes me think of white souls. I am thankful for all these things, but oh, mother, I shall be thankfuller, thankfullest when you get home."

Though the letters eased the mother's loneliness, they brought a rain of tears to her eyes, and filled her with longing to see her four girls. "They are so like them," she murmured. "Each one has written herself so plainly."

Daniella's becoming a part of the household made less of a change than the girls had expected, for Aunt Sarah managed well, and spread out her economies so that they covered all meals very slightly, and the extras were little missed. When one has rice pudding once a week instead of once in ten days, or when griddle-cakes are served only on Saturdays instead of Wednesdays and Saturdays, it really makes little difference.

However a time did come when the sacrifice loomed up more largely and for a time there were four rather unhappy little girls. It was just after a neat maid left at the door four small white envelopes which, when opened, were discovered to be invitations to a party given by Betty Wise, a little girl who was not an intimate acquaintance, but whom each of the four Corners admired greatly. Betty lived in such a beautiful old house, two hundred years old, and was considered to belong to one of the best families in the county. The grounds around the house were always in beautiful order; Betty herself was the most daintily clad of little maidens, and in church the four girls who sat in a row in the pew behind her gave many a thought to Betty Wise's pretty hats, handsome coats, and the delicate ribbons she always wore on her hair. To be invited to Judge Wise's house was an honor not to be underrated and the four Corners clutched their envelopes and looked at each other with shining eyes.

"Isn't it splendid?" said Nan. "A real sure enough party. I expect it will be perfectly beautiful. It was so perfectly lovely of Betty to invite all four of us."

"It certainly was lovely," sighed Mary Lee, "but, Nan, what are we going to wear?"

Nan's face fell. What indeed? She hastily made an inventory of her last summer's white frocks. Not one that would do. "We can manage something for Jack and Jean, I am sure," she said, "though there isn't one of us has a decent sash, and as for slippers, Jean is the only one who has a pair that will do."

Deep gloom fell upon the little group. The silence was broken by Mary Lee. "We can't ask Aunt Sarah, for we promised that we would not have a single thing new this winter if she would let us have Daniella. I almost wish we had never gone up that old mountain."

"Oh, don't say that, Mary Lee," said Nan. "Just think what would have become of Daniella if we hadn't gone. She might have perished by this time."

"Oh, of course, I don't exactly mean that, but I wish, I almost wish, we had not insisted upon keeping her here." It was so nearly the actual wish at that moment of the other three that no one said a word.

After a pause, Nan drew a long sigh. "Well," she said, "you and I can't possibly go, but perhaps we can fix up the twins. Jean is all right and there is a frock of yours that would do on a pinch for Jack if we can manage slippers. We can

look over the stock. She may have grown up to some of our castaways, and even if we should find a pair a little too large, we can stuff cotton in the toes. As for sashes we'll have to look over everything and see what we come across."

"I don't want to go if you don't, so there," said Jack.

"Neither do I," chimed in Jean.

"Oh, but some of us must go. We couldn't be so rude as to decline for all four of us," said Nan. "Besides, I shall want to hear all about it even if I can't go. It is ten days off so I am not going to decline till I have to."

"I suppose there is no use in saying anything to Aunt Sarah about it," said Mary Lee with a glimmer of hope.

Nan shook her head. "No, we must not act as if we were trying to slide out of our promise. I was just thinking that perhaps Cousin Polly could lend us one or two sashes, and perhaps a pair of slippers; she has such little feet, but she couldn't provide for all of us. She is generous enough but she hasn't enough to go around."

"She could let us have two pairs of slippers if she were a fraudruded," said Jean.

"You'd better tell her that," said Nan, laughing.

"Invitations came for Ran and Ashby, too," Mary Lee remarked, "and I suppose Phil has one." Deeper gloom fell upon the group especially when Nan said solemnly: "And the boys will have to know why we can't go."

For the next two or three days, the girls avoided the subject of the party when those of their schoolmates who had received invitations spoke of it. Neither was it mentioned in the presence of the boys. Once in a while one or the other of the four sisters made to the rest some tragic statement such as: "Flossy Garrett is going to wear white China silk." "Lizzie Carter has a new Roman sash," or "Nell Page's sister is going to lend her a lovely locket and chain." Deep sighs and mournful countenances always attended these statements.

With a feeling of proud reserve, Nan never referred to the party when talking to her Aunt Helen. Not for worlds would she so much as hint that she might go if properly costumed; not when that store of pretty things still lay untouched and unbestowed.

Jack, however, had no such scruples, and with a distinct purpose and a defiant front, she went one afternoon to Uplands. Seating herself directly in front of her grandmother she observed her solemnly and thoughtfully.

"You seem to be in a brown study this afternoon, Jack," said Mrs. Corner. "What are you thinking about?"

Jack gave a long sigh. "I was thinking how nice it would be if there were really fairies or if there were really enchanted lamps and things like Nan loves to talk about. Anyhow, I wish we could sometimes change places with people."

"And with whom would you change places?" asked her grandmother, ready to encourage her to talk.

"With you," returned Jack.

"With me?" Mrs. Corner looked perfectly astounded, then she sighed. "You'd soon want to change back again, little Jack."

"Oh, I know that. I shouldn't care to be a grandmother for more than an hour."

"But why wish to be a grandmother at all?" Mrs. Corner's curiosity was aroused. She wondered what the little girl's fancy could be. "Do listen to the child, Helen," she said. "She would like to be her own grandmother."

"Oh, I'd like to be Nan's and Mary Lee's and Jean's, too," Jack told her.

"But why?"

"If I were a grandmother and had four nice little girl grandchildren," Jack went on, "I'd do something or other so they could go to the party at Judge Wise's."

"And why can't they go? What's to prevent?" Mrs. Corner asked.

"No frocks, no sashes, no slippers, no money to buy them with," said Jack, and having delivered herself of this laconic confession, she faced her grandmother with a set expression of countenance. The worst was said.

Mrs. Corner's delicate fingers trembled in the wool she was crocheting.

"Who is giving the party?" said Miss Helen gently. "Tell me all about it, Jack."

"It's to be at Judge Wise's. Betty is going to have it and it certainly will be fine. Maybe Jean and I can go if Cousin Polly's slippers will fit and she will lend us two sashes, but Nan says she and Mary Lee are just obliged and compelled to stay at home because they wouldn't be seen in dowdy old frocks and old high shoes."

A little pink flush burned on Mrs. Corner's cheeks. "Mary Lee has never been near her grandmother," she said. "You could hardly expect me to forget that."

"I wasn't saying anything about your doing things," said Jack ingenuously. "I was only saying what I would do if I were a grandmother and had lovely things put away, and had granddaughters just crazy to go to a party. I shouldn't mind when three of them had been polite if one wouldn't be, and I don't see why they all would have to be done mean on account of one."

Jack sat thoughtfully considering the matter. "I reckon," she said, "Mary Lee is something like you. She wouldn't come here unless you specially asked her, and you wouldn't go to see her unless she specially asked you. If mother were at home she would do something, 'cause mother can do anything; she is as near a fairy that way as any one can be, but you know mother isn't here, and we can't do things ourselves and Aunt Sarah won't. You know," she added, "it's all on account of Daniella. We promised Aunt Sarah if she let us keep Daniella at our house, we wouldn't ask for anything new this winter, and we would wear our old clothes. So, of course, when we promised, we can't change our minds."

"Why did your aunt exact such a promise from you?" asked Mrs. Corner, a little haughtily.

"Oh, because she couldn't afford to have her unless we did. Mother needs all the boys' board money, and Aunt Sarah does as well as she can, Nan says. We have rice pudding only once a week and that really isn't very often."

"Miss Dent is a wonderfully self-sacrificing woman," said Miss Helen in a low voice. "It is entirely due to her willingness to take charge of six children that Mary is able to stay at Saranac."

Mrs. Corner's fingers shook even more as she fingered the wool. Presently she burst out passionately: "I suppose I am an obdurate old woman to let one little child's indifference prevent me from giving happiness to my other grandchildren, but I am made so, Helen; I can't help it. I have yielded in many directions. I have accepted the other three when I said I never would, and I shall meet their mother half way if she ever allows me." She burst into a fit of nervous sobbing, and Jack, scared and awed, slipped away, feeling that she had made matters even worse.

She made no mention to her sisters of her visit to Uplands that day, but it had its effect, as was shown the next morning when a man left at the house a small trunk addressed to Nan. When the girls came home from school, it stood in the big room they occupied. They gathered around it in astonishment. "Where did it come from? Who brought it? What's in it? Who sent it?" The questions came thick and fast. A key hung by a string to the handle. Nan jerked it off fumbling at the lock in her eagerness. "Do hurry, Nan," cried Jack, impatiently.

"I am hurrying," returned Nan, "and that is just what's the matter." The lock at last yielded and Nan raised the lid amid breathless silence. Over the tray lay a white cloth; upon this a note was pinned. Nan opened it and read it aloud. It was from her Aunt Helen.

"Dear Nan," it read, "mother sends you the gifts which she regrets having withheld from you so long. She really meant to send them at Christmas, but you will not mind if they come earlier. She wishes you to use your own judgment in disposing of them and makes but one proviso, and that is that you will *all* come over to Uplands and show yourselves in your party costumes."

The *all* was underscored. Nan looked at Mary Lee. "I'll go," said Mary Lee shortly.

It was a small concession to make, she considered, when the contents of the trunk were displayed and all the dainty fabrics were examined. Such an oh-ing and ah-ing as came from the four delighted girls brought Aunt Sarah from her room, and to her the whole story was told. She made but few remarks but it was evident that she was pleased, and she took almost as great an interest in the pretty things as the girls themselves. At the very bottom of the trunk were two boxes, one marked Nan, the other Jack. One slip of paper read: "To my granddaughter Nancy Weston in recognition of her sweet spirit of forgiveness." The other read: "To brave little Jack who reminded her grandmother of her duty."

"What have you been doing, Jack?" asked Nan, before she removed the lid of her box.

"Nothing," replied Jack in an injured tone, "except to tell her what I would do if I were a grandmother to four nice little girls."

"Oh, Jack, Jack," laughed Nan, shaking her head while her fingers eagerly removed the soft cotton which lay on the top of the box. Then she breathed a delighted "Oh!" as she held up to view a long delicate chain of exquisite pink corals. A squeal from Jack revealed the fact that she had reached her gift which proved to be a slender gold chain with a pendant heart of gold set with turquoises.



SUCH AN OH-ING AND AH-ING AS CAME FROM THE FOUR DELIGHTED GIRLS

Jack speedily clasped it around her neck. The chain was just long enough for her to be able to see the little heart as it lay against her breast. "I never, never believed I should ever have anything so dear," she exclaimed. Then she turned and caught her twin sister's hand. "But I won't wear it," she said, "unless you have something, too."

This something, too, was settled upon later when among the strands of Venetian beads was found a string of glistening, opalescent ones which won Jean's heart. Mary Lee's desires went out toward a similar string of blue and silver. As was natural with children, the ornaments were the first things they decided upon, and then they picked out their frocks, Aunt Sarah helping them. Nan chose a soft, silky, creamy fabric daintily embroidered. Mary Lee selected a blue of similar material. For the twins it was decided that pure white would be best. There were ribbons and sashes enough for all, and, to cap the climax, there were several pairs of silk stockings.

Nan rocked back and forth in ecstasy as she sat on the floor surrounded by the stuffs. "It's like a dream," she said. "I can't believe I am awake. Oh, I want to tell mother right away. I feel just like a fairy, I am so light."

"How are we to get the things made?" said Mary Lee, bringing her sister suddenly down to earth.

"Oh, dear, I hadn't thought of that. Cousin Polly will help us, I know, and so will Aunt Sarah, and we can do a lot ourselves, like pulling out bastings, and I can stitch on the machine as well as the next."

"We must go right over to Cousin Polly's, then. There isn't a minute to lose."

"You go," said Nan, "and bring her over here. She will be ever so much more interested if she sees everything and I'll leave them all out till she comes."

Not only did Cousin Polly come, but Cousin Mag thought she must see the glories of the trunkful of pretty things. Their enthusiasm was all that the girls could wish, and after ribbons and laces, trinkets and treasures were thoroughly examined, there was grave discussion as to the best way to make up the stuffs, Aunt Sarah entering into it as heartily as any one. Cousin Polly volunteered to make Nan's frock; Cousin Mag said she would undertake Mary Lee's. Aunt Sarah thought she could accomplish one of the others.

"And I am sure Belle Brockenborough will love to do the other," said Polly. "She hasn't a thing on earth to do. I'll ask her to come and stay a week with me and we can sew and chatter and have a good time. Anybody would love to work on such beautiful goods as these."

"Oh, you dear," cried Nan. "I just knew if anybody could help us, it would be Cousin Polly. Aren't we beautifully supplied with everything?"

"All but slippers," came from Mary Lee.

"Oh, I forgot slippers. I wish we could go in our stocking feet and show off our silk stockings."

"We'll manage slippers somehow," said Polly. "I am sure you can wear mine."

"But you have such little feet," said Nan.

"So have you, and I have one pair a little too large for me, that you are quite welcome to if the others are too small."

In due course of time, all were provided for. The "little too large" pair of slippers exactly fitted Nan. Jean's would do very well as they were. A pair of Mary Lee's which she had grown out of it was found Jack had grown into, and for Mary Lee, Nan's ingenuity at last came to the rescue, for a pair of discolored white kid slippers which had once been

her mother's, Nan suggested should be painted blue to match her sister's frock.

The boys wondered at the sudden interest taken in Betty Wise's party, for nothing else was talked of for a week. "You didn't say a word about it at first," said Ran. "What makes you all so wild about it all of a sudden?"

"Oh, we didn't know what we were going to wear," Nan remarked nonchalantly, and the others giggled.

However, they could not keep the presents a secret, as Phil knew about them, and finally Nan told Ran the whole story, ending with: "We're just like girls in a book, aren't we?"

"You're the nicest girl in a book or out of it," returned Ran, gallantly. "I'm going to the party with you, Nan, and I want you to dance with me a lot."

"All right," said Nan, delighted at the compliment and pleased at the thought that she and her sisters would not be outdone by any of the girls in matters of dress or attention.

The last stitch was set the day before the party, and in full regalia the four sisters went to display themselves to their grandmother. There was a little embarrassment as Mary Lee came forward and Nan said: "This is Mary Lee, grandmother."

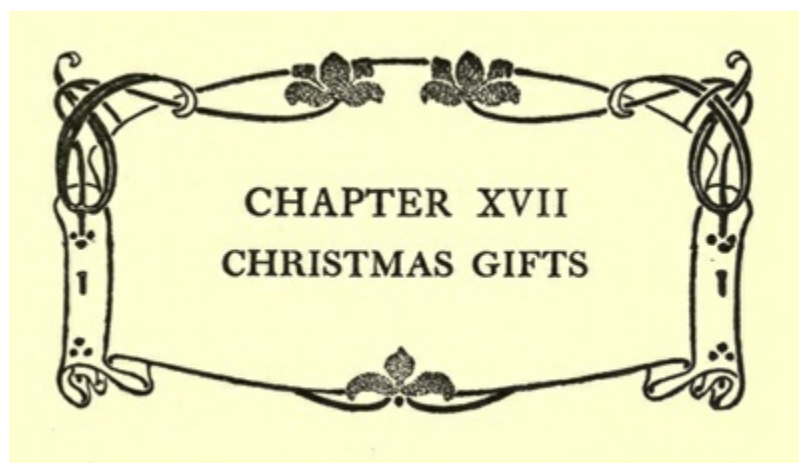
But Mary Lee, full of a realizing sense of her grandmother's generosity and completely happy in her pretty clothes, smiled sweetly and said: "I am very glad to see you, grandmother. You were very kind to send us all those lovely things."

Mrs. Comer responded quite graciously. She was proud and pleased when she viewed the four "nice little girls" who certainly did her credit and whose delight in her gifts was so very obvious. Their appreciation and pleasure gave her a warm glow of satisfaction, and she was never more delightfully entertaining. To add to the success of their visit, Miss Helen took a photograph of each one, promising them prints to send to their mother.

The party was all that their fancy had painted. Not any one was better dressed than the Corners. No one had a better time. Betty made a charming hostess; the great old house was a bower of beauty; the music was inspiring, the refreshments delicious and prettily served.

"It was the very grandest party I ever dreamed of," said Nan at breakfast, and all agreed with her, even Ran who had been to more parties than the rest and was supposed to know.

Although the girls, in after years, went to many more sumptuous and brilliant entertainments, all their lives long they looked back upon Betty Wise's party as the one which stood out from all the rest. "There was just one thing wanting," sighed Nan to her Aunt Helen. "If only mother could have seen us, I should have been perfectly happy. What in the world shall we do without her at Christmas?"



CHAPTER XVII CHRISTMAS GIFTS

A new world had opened to Daniella Boggs. Every day of her stay with the Corners some strange and surprising fact became known to her. The girls were a revelation in themselves, and their appearance when they were dressed for the party gave her a glimpse into scenes of which she had never even dreamed. She was taught more than words and figures by Miss Helen, and her young mind was daily expanding, so that she became more and more interesting to her teacher as well as her friends. Mrs. Boggs was slowly recovering from her hurts, and the doctor thought in a few weeks she would be able to leave the hospital. Old Daniel Boggs, however, failed visibly. Just what his daughter-in-law would do in the event of his death gave every one concern. It was learned that Mrs. Boggs had a brother in Texas and to him Colonel Lewis had written. All Daniella's friends were interested to know what answer would be made to this letter.

"Christmas is very near," said Nan the Saturday after the party. "We shall have to make everything this year, but fortunately there are plenty of materials yet in grandmother's trunk."

"And there are the photographs," said Mary Lee.

"Yes, and I mean to frame those," Nan told her. "That can be my Christmas gift to mother. You sew so nicely, Mary Lee, you can make her a set of collars and cuffs."

"And what shall I make?" asked Jean.

"Why, kitty, let me see. You can make a pretty little work-bag. It will be easy to make and there's a lovely piece of silk in the trunk."

Jack was sitting with folded hands thinking deeply. After a while she drew a long breath of relief. "I'm going to give her my locket and chain," she announced.

"Why, ducky dear," said Nan. "She couldn't wear it for it would be too small for her, and, besides, one shouldn't give away a particular present like that."

"But it's the prettiest thing I've got," persisted Jack, "and she can look at it, anyhow."

"But mother wouldn't want you to give it to her," Nan went on. "She'd much rather you'd make something for her. Let me see--suppose you make a----"

"I don't think I'll make anything," interrupted Jack. "If I can't send her the chain I'll send her my silk stockings."

"You ridiculous child! What on earth could mother do with them?"

"She could look at them."

"You're a goosey goose," said Nan, affectionately, drawing Jack to her. "You must give her something appropriate, not anything like that. Oh, I know what you can do. It will be fine. I almost wish I had thought of it for myself. You can give her one of those calendars like Aunt Helen has. It will be just the thing. All you have to do is to get three hundred and sixty-five sheets of paper and take a certain number to each person whom you select; then the person writes a verse, or a selection or a--a--thought and signs her name. You tie them all together and put a cover on and it makes the nicest thing in the world for any one away from her friends."

"Where shall I get the paper?" said Jack.

Nan had not thought of this part. "Why, I think maybe there is some in one of the boxes in the attic," she said reflectively; "I will look."

The idea of a calendar pleased Jack. The taking around of the slips was just what she would like to do. "What shall we have on the cover?" she asked presently.

Nan's ingenuity again came to fill the breach. "A photograph of this house would be fine. Ran took a real good one, and I know he'd be glad to give a print for the calendar. Now we have got to plan for everybody else; there are so many this year."

"There is Aunt Sarah," said Jean.

"And Daniella," put in Mary Lee.

"And Mrs. Boggs," Jack reminded them.

"And the boys." Jean mentioned these.

"And Cousin Polly," added Nan. "She was so lovely about the party frocks that we ought to give her something very nice."

"Miss Belle Brockenborough was, too," said Jean.

"Of course, we must remember her and Cousin Mag. Do you suppose we'd better make something for grandmother and Aunt Helen?" Nan asked with an air of gravity.

"Not from the things they sent," said Mary Lee.

"No, but we could make some little things; we must do it. Then there is Unc' Landy and Mitty besides the Sunday-school teachers and----"

"Miss Lawrence," put in Jean.

Jack made a face at this last suggestion.

"Now, Jack," Nan reproved her.

"If she hadn't such big ears, I wouldn't mind so much," said Jack, "but they stick out so and she has a way with her mouth that always makes me mad."

"Never mind; she is very good to you and has stood much more than most teachers would. I'll tell you what, Mary Lee, we'll make a lot of panuchee and take a box to each of the teachers. Every one says our black walnut panuchee is the best they ever ate."

"Miss Lawrence asked me for the recipe," said Mary Lee; "I hope I got it just right: a pound and a half of brown sugar, three quarters of a cup of milk, about a quarter of a pound of butter, and a lot of chopped nuts. Melt the sugar and milk; let it boil twenty minutes, add the butter and nuts, beat for about five minutes till it gets real sugary and then pour in pans or make it into little cakes by dropping from a spoon. Is that right?"

"That is it," Nan told her. "We might make two or three kinds. I like peanut myself."

"Now have we thought of everybody?" asked Mary Lee.

"We haven't thought of each other," said Jack.

Nan laughed. "That makes three more apiece. How they do count up. We can leave one another till the last minute because we are right in the house. What shall you give Daniella, Mary Lee?"

"I thought maybe we could find a hair ribbon in the trunk. She has never had one and thinks they are so fine. They cost too much when you have to buy them."

Nan approved of this. "I want to give her something real frivolous that no one else would give her," she said. "I know lots of people will think of her and will send her useful things. Let's look over what's in the trunk and pick out what we will use. Maybe I can find something there, too."

This suggestion was met with universal approval, and the four clattered up-stairs. This was the time of day when Daniella went to see her mother at the hospital and when Aunt Sarah was busy in the kitchen. The four sisters gathered around the little trunk which still held many pretty odds and ends as yet unused. Nan did the rummaging.

"There, Jean," she said, tossing out a piece of flowered silk; "that will do for mother's bag."

"Isn't it a lovely craulity?" said Jean, smoothing out the silk.

"Here are some ends of ribbon that will do for the strings," said Nan, dragging out some lengths of lavender. "Oh, oh, this is exactly what I will give to Daniella; these red beads. She will love them, and we have plenty. There are more here. We can give a string to Cousin Polly, these queer-looking ones will just do for her; she loves easterny looking things. And oh, Mary Lee, we can use some of this Florentine orris and make a sachet for Miss Belle. Here is some perfectly lovely lace. What shall we do with it?"

"Make some sort of stock or something for Aunt Sarah, and if there is enough, one for Cousin Mag."

"Just the ticket," cried Nan; "you're a dabster, Mary Lee. Suppose you get a paper and pencil and put down the things and the person's names as we make up our minds about them; then we won't forget what is for each."

Mary Lee liked to make lists and she was quick to follow out this plan. "Three boxes of panuchee for the three teachers," she read off. "Stocks of lace for Aunt Sarah and Cousin Mag; beads, Polly; beads, Daniella; sachet, Miss Belle. I think mother ought to have a lace collar and cuffs, Nan; she ought to have the best."

"Of course. Well, here's this narrower lace; we could sew it on some thin stuff and make the collars for the others and give mother the handsome lace. Oh, dear, every one's present to mother will be better than mine. Maybe I can think of something else for her. I think each of us should give Aunt Sarah something, and I believe I will make a work-bag out of this." She spread out a piece of silk on her lap. "Now, what next? Here are several hat-pins, six of them; we could give this amethyst looking one to Aunt Sarah, Jean can give that and Jack can give her--can give her----" Nan went on

rummaging, "this dear little box. I'd like it myself but I'll give it up to Aunt Sarah. It has Sorrento on it, so it must have come from there. This trunk is like somebody's bag--who was it that had a purse or a bag or whatever it was, that never failed?"

"Fortunatus, you mean." Mary Lee gave the information.

"Yes, he is the person. Who is left on the list, Mary Lee?"

"Let me see. Mrs. Boggs, the boys, Mitty and Unc' Landy, ourselves, Aunt Helen and grandmother, if you say so."

Nan swept something from the trunk and hid it behind her. "I've something for you," she sang out.

"That's not fair," said Mary Lee, in an aggrieved tone. "You are right there and can pick out anything."

"Well," spoke up Jack, "grandmother sent it all to her."

"That's so, I forgot that," said Mary Lee, abashed.

"You know perfectly well that I wouldn't take anything unless the rest of you had share and share alike," said Nan, "and I'll tell you what we'll do; each one shall have a pick in turn: three grabs apiece and if we can't find anything we like we shall have to make something. How will that do?"

All agreed that this was not only fair but generous and one after another was sent out of the room while the choice for her was being made, and at last Nan shut the trunk and shoved it under the bed. "Hasn't it been fun?" she said. "I do feel so grateful to grandmother for sending over that trunk. Think what has come out of it. We never in the world could have given half the Christmas gifts nor nearly such nice ones. What shall we give the boys, Mary Lee?"

"I suppose they'd as soon have panuchee as anything."

"We can't all give them panuchee; they'll be ill if we do."

"Then we'll have to think up something; we've done enough planning for one day."

"I'm more bothered about Aunt Helen and grandmother than any one just now, to tell you the truth."

"One of them can have panuchee."

"Oh, Mary Lee, we aren't going to set up a candy factory."

"I know, but two or three goes of it will make enough to give a lot of people and everybody likes it."

"Well, as you say, we have done enough planning for one day. I am going over to see Aunt Helen now. I want to tell her what fun we had over the trunk and besides I know she will have some ideas for Christmas."

Each girl carried off her treasures and Nan set out for Uplands, but, before she had gone far, she came rushing back, rummaged for paper and pencil and started forth again wearing what was called the family cloak. This was a dark red golf cape which was worn indiscriminately by all the members of the family from Aunt Sarah down. The pointed hood upon it could be taken off, by unbuttoning it, and made a convenient pouch for the wearer who wished to bring home any chance spoils gathered by the way, so the cloak was always in demand.

It was a brisk winter's day, but too cold for a stop at Place o' Pines, though Nan turned aside to peep into her old shelter. As she turned from the spot, she gave a gleeful skip. "Joy, joy," she cried, "I have an idea!"

"So glad," said some one near her. "Where are you going, West Corner?" This was Ran's favorite name for her and it was he as she well knew.

"I am going to Uplands, but I came around this way to look for some little wee pine cones."

Ran appeared from behind a tree where he had been in hiding. "What are you going to do with little pine cones?" he asked.

"I want to use them on a picture frame for mother's Christmas gift. I have seen real pretty frames made of them. We shall have to get mother's Christmas box ready first and we have none too much time. We have been having lots of fun, Ran, planning out the presents we shall give. It will be rather a forlorn Christmas, I am afraid, with all we can do, for there will be no mother and you boys will not be here."

"That's where you are mistaken," said Ran soberly. "We shall be here. We are not going home after all."

"You're not? Oh, dear, I'm so sorry for you, though I am glad we shall be able to keep you; the more the merrier, you know. What is the matter at home, Ran?"

"My little sister, Leila, has scarlet fever, and, as soon as she is well enough, they are going to take her to Florida. That lets us out of any holiday at home either way. Father and mother wouldn't want us to be exposed to the danger of taking the fever, and, if Leila gets well before Christmas, they will leave anyhow."

"Isn't it just too bad? Well, we must try to have as jolly a time as we can. We are in something the same box, for we must do without our mother, too. There will be all sorts of parties and things going on in town, so maybe you will enjoy yourselves more than you think; still I am very sorry for you. Christmas anywhere except in one's own home and with one's own family can't help being sort of dreary."

Such sweet sympathy was consoling and Ran helped her to look for the pine cones which she put in the hood of her cloak to carry away. He promised to help her with the wooden framework upon which she was to glue the cones, and suggested a quadruple frame which would look more important than four small ones.

"But the glass will be harder to get," said Nan. "I have some old photograph plates that I was going to clean off and use for the small frames. Ammonia cleans them beautifully."

"I'll attend to getting the glass for you," promised Ran. "I know where there is a piece of glass that will just do." The glass was at the one frame-maker's in town and Ran meant to buy it, but he did not tell Nan so, knowing she would object. Nan told him about Jack's calendar and he offered not only to furnish the photograph they wanted but to take several more of interiors which could be scattered through the pages to give comfort and pleasure to the absent mother.

Never before had Ran been so kind and interested and when he left her at her grandmother's door Nan said: "I always wanted an older brother, Ran, to do just the things for me that you are going to do. It is a real comfort to know you are going to be here all through the holidays."

Her Aunt Helen gave her the warm greeting with which she always met this niece for whom she daily felt a deeper affection. Nan was so graciously appreciative, so winsomely enthusiastic, so spontaneously affectionate, that her aunt felt that of all her nieces she must always love her best. Nan first told of the pleasure they had been having in looking over and dividing the remaining articles of the trunk, and then she said, "There are two or three things I want to consult you about, Aunt Helen. We ought and want to give something to the boys, but boys are so hard to get things for, and when one has no money----" She stopped short with a blush. Never, except by accident, did she refer to this fact in the presence of her aunt and grandmother. "I mean," she went on, "it is much nicer to make something unless you can really buy something worth while, as mother says. There are four of us and there are two boys; that makes eight presents, you see."

"Truly that is quite a number to think of," said her aunt.

"Yes, it is. Mary Lee is going to give each of them a box of panuchee--I don't know what we should do this year if we didn't know how to make it--so that leaves six."

"We shall have to put on our thinking-caps," said Miss Helen, meditatively. "You could make a twine ball, for one thing; that is cheap and easy and boys always are glad of string."

"But it takes a ball of twine."

"I have several and shall be pleased to present you with a couple."

"But----"

"No buts, please, dear; it is such a very little thing."

"Oh, very well," Nan replied weakly, seeing it would hurt her aunt to refuse.

"Then I am sure there must be a silk handkerchief in that trunk."

"Of course there is. I never thought of that, and I saw it only to-day. Why that is half the eight already."

"Then--let me see--did you ever see a devil penwiper made from a wishbone? I'll show you how to make one. It costs nothing and that makes five, you see. I think a blotter always does very well to give a schoolboy."

Nan sighed. There would be blotting paper to be bought. Her aunt read her thought and did not insist upon this. "A burnt match-receiver can be easily made," she went on, "and it is nice to give things for a boy's room when he is away from home. There is a kind that is made by crocheting a cover over a goblet from which the stem has been broken."

"I am sure we can get that easily enough," laughed Nan. "I suppose worsted will do for the crocheted part, and I have some of that."

"Worsted is the proper thing. It will make a nice, useful present."

"There are only two more and they can be something very simple for the twins to give."

"Then a couple of little calendars will do. Two or three have come to us from advertising houses. We'll take off the advertisement and put the calendars on pretty cards. There are some in the trunk, aren't there? So now you have every one supplied."

"I knew you would help us out, you dearest Aunt Helen. Now, there is one thing more, and this is my own secret. I am going to give mother the photographs in a frame that I am going to make myself, though Ran will help me, but the others have so much nicer things and I would like to send her something that comes right from myself, from my inside heart, so"--she hesitated a moment. "You know," she went on shyly, "you said long ago you thought my little tune wasn't so bad and I thought I'd try to write some words that would go with the tune. Would you mind very much helping me a little to get it all right?"

"Why, darling girl, of course I shall be delighted to give you any help within my power, and it is a lovely thought, one I am sure your mother will appreciate."

"I thought of the beginning while I was coming over here, and I went back to get a paper and pencil, but Ran came along and I didn't have a chance to write it down."

"Should you like to do it now? You can come right up into my room, if you like. Not a soul will disturb you, and, unless you would rather be alone, I will sit there and you can consult me or not as you like."

"Oh, I'd like to consult you; that is what I really want to do; and I'm sure to be able to write what I want when I am in your lovely room."

"Let us go up then."

For some time Nan scribbled away while Miss Helen busied herself with some embroidery. Once or twice the writer asked a question. "Does *azure* rhyme with *to her*, Aunt Helen?"

"Scarcely," was the reply.

"Then I won't try to make it." And Nan went on, "Do you spell scanned with one *n* or two?" she asked after a while.

"With two, dear."

Nan set to work again. After a time she looked up anxiously. "Does *cheap* sound very badly in a poem?"

"It depends. I can tell better when I see."

"I'll have to leave it," said Nan. "There isn't any other word that will rhyme and make sense. There, that's the very best I can do." She brought her paper to her aunt who read the following:

"I thought, what can I send to her
Who is so very dear to me?
Shall I search the skies above,
Or the sea?
Shall I travel east and west?
Shall I look from south to north?
Where's a gift to give my best,
Dearest mother?"

"But the skies are very far,
And the sea is much too deep,
While to travel all the earth
Is not cheap.
So, when I had scanned the blue,
Looked around, below, above,
All that I could find for you
Was my love, mother."

Nan watched her aunt anxiously. "Will it do?" she asked, wistfully.

Her aunt read it over again. "You have caught the metre quite well," she said, "and----" She knew it could be improved, but she did not want to take the childishness from it so she said: "Yes, Nan, on the whole, I think it will do."

"And may I put words and music by Nannette Weston Comer?" the composer asked eagerly.

"I think I wouldn't use the Nannette. Let us always have the dear, homely Nancy. I have some music-paper and you can make a copy. I will help you."

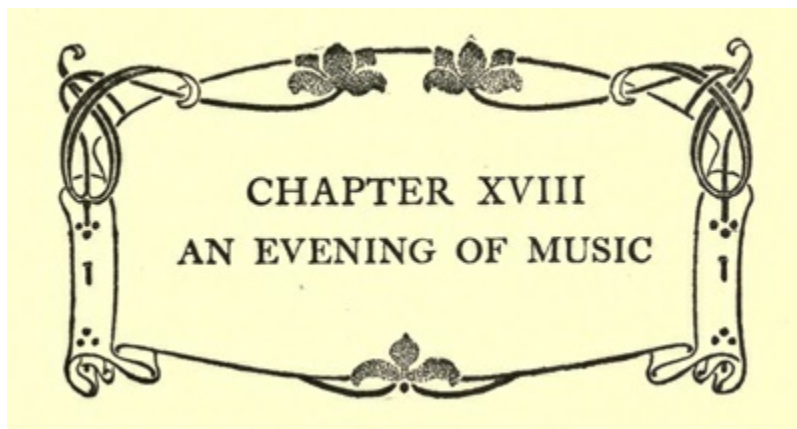
Nan's starlike eyes expressed her joy. "It is almost like having it really published," she said, "and I know mother will like it because I did it and it is really a part of me."

"She would be a very cold-hearted mother not to appreciate it," returned Miss Helen, "and that Mary Lee is not. It is so

dark, Nan, I think I'd better send Martha home with you. Come over as soon as you can and we'll get all these Christmas gifts finished up."

Nan hugged her closely. "How in the world did I ever get along without you?" she said.

"And how did I ever get along without you?" returned Miss Helen with as warm a hug. And the two parted.



CHAPTER XVIII AN EVENING OF MUSIC

The Christmas preparations went on famously under Aunt Helen's directions by which all of the girls profited, and though they worked very hard, at last they viewed their array of gifts with much complacency. Nan had kept the making of her song a secret, yet probably nothing gave her such complete pleasure, and when it was all ready, words and music neatly written with Aunt Helen's skilful help, Nan would like to have gazed a dozen times a day at the page. At the top was "A Song" done in ornamental letters. Under this was "To my Mother," and then came "Words and Music by Nancy Weston Corner." Miss Helen kept the precious sheet in her charge lest some one should discover it.

"You won't mind your grandmother's seeing it, will you?" she asked Nan. "She will be so pleased and proud." And Nan, remembering the little trunk, could not refuse. If she had known then and there the result she would have had no misgivings.

"I wish you could see what Nan has done," said Miss Helen, knowing well how to arouse her mother's interest. "She is making a secret of what she is going to give her mother at Christmas, but she has given me leave to show it to you. I am keeping it safe for her."

"Let me see it, Helen," said Mrs. Corner with real eagerness. And Miss Helen produced the sheet of music. Mrs. Corner scanned it interestedly. "It seems to me the child has real talent," she remarked.

"Yes, I think she has. I hadn't the heart to suggest any alterations, and I know her mother would rather the whole thing should come to her without. You have not heard Nan at the piano, mother, for that disabled arm has prevented her attempts. She has a pretty touch and plays really delightfully by ear. I wish you could hear her. I think now that her arm seems quite well again, I shall lure her up here to play for us some time soon."

"Mr. Harmer said he would be coming this way about Christmas time," said Mrs. Corner, thoughtfully. "He will surely stop to see us."

"He will be here this week, I am sure. I am expecting a telegram any time."

"I'd like him to meet Nancy. Such an old friend as he is can be relied upon to tell us whether the child really has talent or not. Does she take music lessons, Helen?"

"They have no piano, you know, and I don't think Mary's means allow of Nan's having lessons. I'd like to teach her myself, and shall propose to after Christmas, for my little Daniella will be going then and I shall miss my occupation."

"They have heard from her uncle then?"

"Yes, Mrs. Boggs had a letter yesterday. He has a ranch in Texas and offers to give them a home with him. His wife is dead and he seems greatly pleased at discovering his sister. So they will go out to him as soon as the money can be raised. Miss Polly Lewis is collecting contributions to pay their expenses and has already quite a little fund. Old Daniel Boggs cannot live the week out, the doctor says."

"You may offer Miss Lewis five dollars from me, toward the fund," said Mrs. Corner.

"She will be glad to have it," said Miss Helen, simply. She was pleased to see her mother taking more interest in the things around her, in extending her sympathies and in being willing to get in touch with her old acquaintances.

A telegram the next day from Mr. Harmer announced that he would arrive that same evening. "We must have Nancy over," said Mrs. Corner. "Send for her, Helen."

So a note was dispatched which caused great excitement when Nan read it. She flew to her Aunt Sarah. "Just think," she cried, "there is going to be a real musician, a really great one, over at grandmother's and they have invited me over to hear him play this evening. I may go, mayn't I? You know I never did hear any one like that."

"And you do love music so," added Miss Sarah with a twinkle.

"You know I do."

"To-night, did you say? How will you get home?"

"They will send some one with me or I could stay all night, I suppose."

"You'd better come home. I'll send Ran over about half-past nine. Go 'long, then."

Nan arrayed herself in her best, which, after all, was not so very fine, and she bewailed the fact that it was not a real party for which she had all the necessary outfit. However, the dark blue serge was becoming, and the corals were an addition. Nan decided that her grandmother would be pleased if she wore them and would overlook the shabbiness of her frock. Few, though, would have seen beyond the expressive face and starry eyes, and it is certain that Mr. Harmer

gave no thought to her frock.

He was a gentle looking man, with iron-gray hair, rather an unseeing expression, and an absent manner; but, when he was talking of music, his face lighted up, and his eyes lost their dreamy look. He greeted Nan kindly, holding her hand a moment and patting it. Then he went to the piano, and for an hour Nan sat spellbound.

Into what regions of delight was she plunged. She followed marching armies, she danced with fairies; she wept over lost lovers; she watched fleeting shadows; she trod a land of spring-time and flowers. Mrs. Corner had purposely placed her where she could watch her, and within the musician's line of vision. Once in a while he gave a glance at the rapt countenance and nodded significantly at Miss Helen. Finally when the last note of the "Moonlight Sonata" had ceased to vibrate, Mr. Harmer turned to Nan. "Now," he said, "I want to hear this little girl play."

Nan almost jumped from her seat in surprise. "Me?" she exclaimed, with a startled look from one to another.

"Yes, you, my dear," said her grandmother. "I am very anxious that Mr. Harmer should hear what you can do. You are able to use your arm freely now. I'd like you, too, to show Mr. Harmer the little song you have written."

There was something in Mrs. Corner's manner that admitted no denial of her wishes, though Nan faltered out that she had never taken lessons, that she knew only a very, very little about notes and time.

"We all know that," said Mrs. Corner. "We do not expect wonders, Nancy."

So Nan got up. As she passed her Aunt Helen, she detained her, whispering, "Play that little air you were trying that day I first heard you."

Nan nodded. Her hands were cold, her face flushed, never had she gone through such an ordeal. Yet she knew she must do her best and somehow the mere pleasure of making music took from her all fear after the first few weak notes. She played through the little air her aunt had heard, with taste and expression. A soft clapping of hands rewarded her.

Mr. Harmer nodded approvingly at Mrs. Corner. "Come here, my dear," he said to Nan. He took her hand and looked at the long, slim fingers. "Do you love music well enough to work very hard, to give up play when you ought to practice dull exercises, to study patiently and long?"

"I think so. I know so," said Nan, earnestly. "I'd do anything to be able to play as you do."

Mr. Harmer smiled. "I think you needn't hesitate, Mrs. Corner," he said. "Now, where's that song you were telling me of?" Nan reluctantly brought it. Mr. Harmer looked it over without a comment. "Do you make many tunes?" he said.

"Oh, yes," returned Nan. "I make them all the time. Sometimes I forget them very soon, and sometimes they stay in my head and come back again and again."

Mr. Harmer nodded. "Thank you, my dear. It is a pleasure to meet such a little music lover."

He went back to the piano and was playing a wonderful nocturne when Ran called to take Nan home. Her grandmother kissed her good-night with unusual warmth, her Aunt Helen hugged her and Mr. Harmer shook hands cordially, saying he hoped to live to see her a fine pianist. So Nan went home with a glow in her heart and a faint little hope that her grandmother would let her come there sometimes to play.

The question of presents for her grandmother and Aunt Helen remained unsettled till the very day before Christmas, but as the children had been very industrious with their other presents and the box to their mother had been sent, there was little left for them to do but to trim the tree, which the boys had cut the day before, and which was standing in its spicy greenness in the corner of the living-room. "If we only had the things, we could make a fine cake," said Nan. "We have eggs enough, but Aunt Sarah says we can't afford the butter; it is so high this time of year. I have decided to take Aunt Helen my palm. It is looking fine."

"Oh, but Nan, you are so fond of it, and Mrs. Wise sent it to you," said Jack.

"I know, but I must give her something I am very fond of, for she has been so perfectly dear to me." It was quite true that the palm was dear to Nan. It represented a sort of tropical luxuriance in which she delighted. She loved the outline of its shadows, the tracery of the pointed leaves against the window curtain, and its general aspect as it stood in one of the front windows of the living-room. To give it up was really a sacrifice, but one she made willingly.

At this moment Mary Lee came in. "Cousin Polly wants to know if you have time to come over there for a few minutes," she said to Nan.

"Of course I have," was the reply. "I'm so glad we were not lazy over making our things for Christmas, for now they are all done and even tied up, so it makes me feel so free and ready to get excited wondering what I will get myself." She ran singing down the walk, the red golf cape around her. "Heigho, Polly!" she cried as she went in. "Busy?"

"Oh, my dear, I'm up to my eyes, and I did so want to make some panuchee for father; he simply loves the kind with

peanuts in it, but I haven't time to make it; I don't suppose you have either."

"Why yes, I have. We've really nothing to do but trim the tree, and that we are going to do to-night, we older ones, though I should like mighty well to make a cake for grandmother. It would be mighty nice if we four girls could do each a part, but alas, butter is high. We went without for a week so as to have some for our panuchee, we had the nuts and Aunt Sarah gave us the sugar, but cake is a little beyond our means. One day's going without butter wouldn't make even one cupful."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Polly stopping her work for a moment. "If you will make my panuchee, I'll give you all the materials for your cake."

"Done!" cried Nan. "It's a bargain. Shall I make it here or at home?"

"I don't care so long as it is done."

"Then I'll do it at home, for I am more used to our own pots and pans. I suppose," she added, "you won't mind if I use the scrapings for wages, that's what we generally do."

"What do you mean, Nan Corner?"

"Why, we get the twins to shell the peanuts and pay them for it with the scrapings and the raggedy pieces when the stuff is done."

"You are quite welcome to that and a good fat piece for each of you besides. Tell me what you want for your cake, and I'll send Phil over with your materials and mine."

"I'd like to make a lady cake; grandmother is such a lady, and then, too, the egg yolks can be used for something else, so it will be more economical."

"You are a regular old woman with your economical ways," said Polly, going to the pantry. "I'll send everything, Nan, even the flavoring extract and mother's recipe which can't be beat. It's the baking that is the most important part, remember."

"Oh, Aunt Sarah will help with that even if it is for grandmother. She would never be happy to see good materials spoiled." And Nan went off well pleased with her bargain.

The candy was first made and then they set to work on the cake. Mary Lee beat the eggs, Jack and Jean creamed the butter and sugar together, Nan added the other ingredients and all gave a final stir, and, in spite of the saying that "too many cooks spoil the broth," the cake turned out beautifully. Aunt Sarah showed them how to ice it and to stick walnut meats on top, so that it was a most delectable piece of cookery when it was done, and Daniella, who took a great interest in the performance, looked at it with great admiration.

All these Christmas preparations were a novelty to the little mountain girl, but they celebrated but one event in her mind and that was the recovery of her mother, for Mrs. Boggs was to leave the hospital the next day and take dinner with the Corners.

"I know what we can take Aunt Helen," said Jack, as they were hanging wreaths in the living-room; "we'll make some wreaths to take to her; we've such a lot of greens and she'll like them."

The rest agreed that this was a very good suggestion, and they set to work on them, Daniella helping them, so that a half dozen pretty wreaths with cheerful red holly berries set in them, were soon ready and the big tree in the corner alone needed the attention of their busy fingers.

"Daniella has never seen a Christmas tree," said Mary Lee, "and she mustn't help. Wait till to-morrow morning, Daniella, and you will see how pretty we've made it. You don't mind waiting, do you? Jack and Jean aren't going to help either."

"I don't mind nothin'--anythin', I mean," said Daniella, who was improving under association and direction. "I'm real happy even if po' ole grandad ain't hyah. He's havin' a better time'n we could give him, maw says, an' he got so foolish an' helpless, maw says he lef us long ago."

"I reckon that's true," said Nan, soberly, "and you can't help being thankful and glad when you have your mother. I only wish our dear blessed mother was here. I can't bear to think of Christmas without her, and I just plunge along into whatever comes without stopping to think."

"I'm glad there's going to be one mother here," remarked Jack.

If upon Christmas morning, something was missed by the four Corners, it was a time of wonder and delight to Daniella. Never in all her after life did she forget the odor of the burning candles mixed with the fragrance of the fir tree and the sweet, appetizing, spicy smell of the gingerbread man, the nutty candies and the orange she found in her stocking. Never did she forget how they all stood around the tree in the semi-darkened room whose only light came from the

candles, and sang, "Hark the herald angels sing." Never did she forget the wonder and pleasure on her mother's pale face that day at dinner. She surprised her friends with gifts. To Nan was given the little pig, to each of the others a hen and to Miss Sarah's share fell the one rooster. "I want you-alls to hev somethin' to remember me by," she said a little shamefacedly.

"We'll never forget you," said the girls in chorus. "And you'd better not forget us," added Jack.

Daniella gave her one look. "I ain't likely," she said.

If Daniella was made happy, Nan's Christmas joy exceeded that of any one else, for shortly after breakfast a wagon stopped at the gate.

"Here comes the expressman," sang out Jean, "and the wagon's coming in the gate. They hardly ever do that. Oh, Nan, what a great big box."

Nan came to the window daintily nibbling a chocolate from the box Ran had given her. He had supplied each of the girls with delicious candies. "It is a big box," she said. "I wonder what is in it, and where it is going. I'll go to the door and take the package."

"So'll I go," declared Jean who was anxious to see.

"It isn't express after all," said Nan; "it's the wagon that brings freight."

"Miss Nancy Corner?" said the man. "Here's your way-bill."

Nan took the paper the man held out. "Where's the package?" she asked.

"Where is it? You'd better ask. You've got the biggest present in town this day. It takes four of us to handle it. Where'll you have it?"

A half suspicion was forming in Nan's brain. She began to tremble. "I--I--don't know," she faltered.

"Better have it here in the hall," said the man, "and when it's unpacked you can move it where you like." And the huge box was brought in and set near the door of the living-room.

The men went out and Nan stood gazing helplessly at the box while Jean ran calling: "Aunt Sarah, Mary Lee, Jack, come see what Nan's got. Ran, Ashby, come see."

Presently the man came back. "I forgot this here was to go with it," he said, taking a note from his cap.

Nan received it mechanically. She still stood gazing at the box.

Ran was the first to arrive on the scene. "Ho!" he exclaimed. "I reckon I know what that is."

Nan clutched him excitedly. "What!" she whispered, hoarsely.

"A piano, of course."

"I don't believe it, I don't. It couldn't be."

"Of course, that is just what it is. Ours looked exactly that way when it came, and if you'll come here and look on this side of the box you will see the name of the manufacturer stamped on it."

Nan sank down on the floor and covered her face with her hands. "I won't believe it, I won't, I won't," she said. "Nobody would do such a thing for me. Nobody would."

"Here, let me get a hatchet and I'll soon show you," said Ran, going toward the kitchen.

"What is the matter, Nan? Have you hurt yourself?" asked Miss Sarah, coming out into the hall.

"I'm so excited it hurts," she replied, looking up with the unopened note clasped close to her breast.

Ran returned with the hatchet and they all gathered around. One by one the boards fell away, then the packing was revealed, and then, indeed, the shining surface of a dear little upright piano came to view.

At sight of it Nan sobbed hysterically, as she looked from one to another. "Is it mine? Are you sure it is mine?" she asked.

"Why don't you read what's in that note and find out?" said Aunt Sarah.

Nan opened the note and read: "A merry Christmas to you, my dear granddaughter. May you enjoy the piano as much as I enjoy giving it. We have some little presents for you all, so come over, every one of you, and get them."

"Your loving grandmother,

"GRACE HELENA CORNER."

"It is! It is!" cried Nan ecstatically. "Grandmother has sent it to me, and she wants us all to come over and get more presents."

"Where's the cake?" cried Jack.

"Get the wreaths," said Jean.

"Here, here," said Aunt Sarah, "get this stuff cleared away first. Come, all of you. We must get this piano out of the hall." So they tarried long enough to see the piano in place and then with the cake in a basket, the wreaths on their arms and the palm carefully protected from the too sharp winds, they trooped forth to Uplands.

Nan was the first to rush into the house. She fell on her knees before her grandmother and buried her head in her lap. "How could you, how could you do such a lovely thing?" she gasped out. "I don't deserve it. Oh, grandmother, if you had searched the world over, you couldn't have given me anything I wanted more."

"That's what I thought," said Mrs. Corner.

"I can't thank you," said Nan. "There aren't enough words in the Century Dictionary to do it."

Her grandmother laughed. "Take this excitable, grateful creature into the other room, Helen," she said. "You'll have to chain her down, I'm afraid, or she'll take wings. She is ready to fly now." Nan followed her aunt to where the other children had been already summoned. For each, except Nan, her Aunt Helen had a pretty book such as she knew would most appeal to the various tastes. For each, except Nan their grandmother had stuff for a new frock. The material for Nan's came instead of a book from her Aunt Helen.

Then the cake was presented receiving all the praise it deserved. "It was a sweet, thoughtful thing for you to do," said Mrs. Corner evidently gratified. "And it is my favorite cake. Did you know that?"

"Jack found out that it was," Nan told her.

The wreaths then were hung up and the palm given to Aunt Helen.

"But, Nan, darling," said her aunt, "I know you have given me your own palm, and that you are very fond of it, for you have often spoken of it to me."

"Do you think I would give you something I didn't like when I love you so much?" said Nan, indignantly, and Aunt Helen said not another word of protest.

After the children had gone, Mrs. Corner sat looking thoughtfully into the fire, a smile upon her face. "Next year," she said, "I shall have all my grandchildren here to dinner. Mary will come too. She will, won't she, Helen?"

"I am sure she will," said Miss Helen.

"It will be a great pleasure to have all Jack's family at Uplands," continued Mrs. Corner sighing. "I am glad we came back, Helen."



CHAPTER XIX FIRE!

A little after the first of the year Daniella and her mother were on their way to Texas. Daniella's departure was not made without tears and vows of eternal friendship. "If I can't write very well yet," she said, "I'll try, and somebody kin tell me how to spell the words."

"We'll all write," the four girls promised, "and some day we shall expect to see you again."

"Where?" asked Daniella eagerly.

"We don't know just where," returned Nan, "but one never knows what will happen in this world, Aunt Sarah says, and so I am going to say we will meet again." It always pleased Nan to anticipate the improbable.

They all went to the station to see the Boggs's off, and, as the train moved out, they saw a pair of tearful eyes at the car window, and that was the last of Daniella for many a day. Both she and her mother had been comfortably provided for through many contributions of clothing and money, so they did not go away empty-handed.

"Well," said Nan with a long sigh as they watched the smoke from the train drift toward the mountains, "I am glad we can think of them somewhere else than in that lonely little cabin up there."

"It is a comfort," said Mary Lee, "but I really shall miss Daniella very much, and hasn't she learned a lot since that time we found her, a wild, little scary thing in the mountains?"

"Aunt Helen says there are all sort of possibilities in Daniella, if she ever gets any sort of a chance."

"She won't get much on a ranch," returned Mary Lee.

"Who knows?" said Nan thoughtfully.

Nan's music lessons commenced before the holidays were over. She went three times a week to her Aunt Helen, and, although there were days when instead of wrist movements, five finger exercises, and close legato, she gave more time to playing tunes by ear, on the whole, she was conscientious in her practicing, and it took very few words to fire her ambition or to make her appreciate the necessity of patient striving.

"All musicians must go through just this uninteresting drudgery," her aunt would tell her. "Think, Nan, even Beethoven and Chopin and Wagner had to train their fingers by these exercises and scales, so you must not expect to do less." Then Nan would try her utmost and the next time would show the improvement naturally following diligent, painstaking study. It was fortunate for her that Miss Helen knew how to appeal to her imagination and that she varied her talks, upon the dry details, with little anecdotes of the great masters, and with snatches of their best compositions to illustrate what she was saying, so that Nan, with her knowledge of the rudiments of music, gained also a knowledge of musical history which made her work much more interesting.

At this time Nan and Mary Lee, too, were fired with an ambition to further improve their minds, this following certain talks with their Aunt Helen, and they determined upon a course of reading.

"We'll take Macaulay's History of England," said Mary Lee; "it will be the most useful."

The two girls were on their knees before the old bookcase which held mostly old standard works, and few modern books.

"We must have some maps and dictionaries and things," said Nan, clapping the covers of a volume together to beat out the dust. So with maps and books of reference, they established themselves in a quiet corner upon two or three consecutive Saturdays, but at the end of the third Saturday, they found themselves always starting with a sentence which read: "The king had no standing army." Beyond this, they never seemed able to go, mainly because the book to girls of their age meant simply a very dry record, and they found it more interesting to read some anecdote from one of the books of reference, and to talk about what their aunt had told them of England of the present day. Therefore, at last Macaulay was laid aside, and the only fact they remembered reading from the book was that the king had no standing army.

Although Miss Sarah had never set foot across the brook, she tacitly permitted the intercourse between the two families, and even admitted that Miss Helen was not to be included in the censure which she so sweepingly bestowed upon her mother. Of the children's grandmother, she would never speak, and only by a toss of the head and a sarcastic smile did they know that she had not altered her opinion of the elder Mrs. Corner. Every attention or gift the girls received was attributed to the influence of Miss Helen, and Miss Sarah honestly believed that in her opinion she was right.

As for Miss Helen, she never came to her sister-in-law's house. "I am biding my time," she told her mother. "When

Mary comes back, I think we shall have matters on a different footing."

"I'm afraid I can never bring myself to going there," sighed Mrs. Corner. "I'm too old to give up all my prejudices, Helen, but I shall try to meet my son's wife half way."

"If I know Mary Gordon Lee," said Helen, "you will not have to go even half way."

And indeed there was no going half way for anybody, as an occurrence soon changed everything for those who lived at Uplands. It took place one night when the winds of March were sweeping through the mountain forests, sighing through the pines in Nan's summer retreat, and uncovering the young pushing blades, already started from the ground down by the brook.

Nan, who was a light sleeper, was startled from her slumbers by the dashing by of engines, and by hearing cries of "Fire!" She slipped out of bed and drew aside the curtains to look out, wondering if the barn on their own place could have caught, but it was beyond the brook that the sky was red and the flames were mounting high. In an instant, she realized where the danger was. She rushed to the boys' door. "Ran, Ran," she cried, banging on the door, "Uplands is on fire!" She stopped to pound on her Aunt Sarah's door. "Uplands is on fire!" she cried. Then she ran back to her own room and slipped on her clothes.

In a few minutes the bolt rattled at Ran's door and he went flying down-stairs, two steps at a time. Then Aunt Sarah appeared in her dressing gown. "What was it you were saying, Nan?" she asked.

Nan was at the window. "Just come here and see," she said, and Aunt Sarah joined her. "Goodness!" she exclaimed. The fire was burning more fiercely now, fanned by the high winds. They could hear the "Chug, Chug" of the engines, the crackle of the burning, the hoarse cries of the men.

A sob arose in Nan's throat. "I can't bear to look at it, and yet it fascinates me," she said. "Oh, Aunt Sarah, do you suppose they are safe? I wish I could go and see."

"Not a step do you go," decided Aunt Sarah. "I'm going down to put some water to boil and be on hand if I'm wanted. You'd better go back to bed. The others are all fast asleep and that's what you ought to be."

"As if I could sleep," said Nan. "Please let me come down-stairs."

"Come along, then," said Aunt Sarah. And Nan followed.

In a short time there was a sound of voices outside and a knock at the door, then Ran came rushing in. "They are bringing Mrs. Corner and Miss Helen here," he said. "I told them to. That was right, wasn't it? This is the nearest house."

"It was quite right," returned Miss Sarah, stiffening herself, but going to the living-room to make a light, and then to the front door, candle in hand. "Bring them right in," she said, speaking to the forms moving about in the darkness.

"It took a little while to get a carriage," spoke up one of the men, "and the ladies had to stand outside for a time. They'd better have something warm."

Miss Sarah opened the door to admit first Mrs. Corner, helped along slowly by two men, and then Miss Helen. Both had blankets thrown around them over their night-dresses, and both were in their bare feet. "Right in here," repeated Miss Sarah.

The men established Mrs. Corner upon the old threadbare sofa, and Miss Helen sank into a rocking-chair. Nan had immediately gone back to the kitchen and presently appeared with two cups of steaming coffee. She went over at once to the sofa. "Won't you drink this, grandmother?" she said. "It will do you good."

"I am very cold, very cold," returned Mrs. Corner weakly. "Where am I?" she asked as the sense of warmth pervaded her.

"At our house grandmother," Nan answered.

"Where's Helen?" she asked with a bewildered look.

Miss Helen came to her. "Here I am, mother dear, perfectly safe. Drink this hot coffee and you will feel better."

Mrs. Corner took the coffee obediently and then lay back with closed eyes. Nan threw her arms around her Aunt Helen. "Darling," she said, "please drink your coffee, too, before it gets cold, and come over here by the stove."

"I'll sit by mother," returned Miss Helen. "Never mind about me."

"But I do mind about you," said Miss Sarah, standing over her with the coffee. "Drink this right down, Miss Helen." And Miss Helen, with a forlorn little smile, obeyed.

"We must get your mother straight to bed," Miss Sarah continued. "I'll go up and get ready for her. Do you think you

could help me carry her up, Ran?" she asked the boy, who was standing by.

"Indeed I can!" he answered. And in a few minutes both Mrs. Corner and her daughter were in Miss Sarah's own bed, and that capable person was grimly seeing to their comfort.

Little was said on either side, but after Miss Sarah had placed hot bricks to Miss Helen's icy feet, she leaned over her and said: "Now, go to sleep and don't worry."

"But we are giving you so much trouble, Miss Dent," said Miss Helen, "and besides----"

"What are we in this world for?" said Miss Sarah. "And as for the rest of it, you're where you ought to be. I know what Mary would want. All you have to do is to get warm and go to sleep." But as she crossed the hall, Miss Sarah drew a long sigh. "I wonder what next," she said. "I suppose the Lord thought He'd teach me and that proud old woman a lesson, and we're learning it here side by side."

Nan laid her cheek against her Aunt Sarah's hand. She had a very good idea of what a bitter lesson it was, and of how hard it was to Aunt Sarah Dent to offer hospitality to Mrs. Corner.

"You're very good to do all this," she said, "and to give up your own room, Aunt Sarah."

"I'll slip into your place by Mary Lee," said Aunt Sarah, "and you can get in with the twins; theirs is a mighty wide old bed. I wouldn't turn a dog out under such circumstances, and if Grace Corner can stand it, I can."

They were all at breakfast when Miss Helen came down the next morning. Nan had laid out some of her mother's clothing for her, which sat strangely upon Miss Helen's little figure. "Mother is sleeping," she said, "and I would not disturb her. I am afraid she is a little feverish." She turned to Ran. "Was anything saved, do you know?" she asked.

"Quite a lot of furniture and some of the pictures, I believe," he told her.

"Grandmother's portrait, I hope," spoke up Nan.

"Yes, that was saved, I am sure. It is a little hard to know just what is safe, for everything is so soaked with water in the rooms that were not actually burned, that we can't tell just yet. Half the house is burned out entirely, only the walls stand on that side."

Miss Helen drew a long sigh. "We were to have been very happy there for the rest of our lives," she said plaintively.

"What's become of Baz?" asked Jack anxiously. The children were much excited over the strange news that had met them when they awoke that morning.

"I found Baz in a fence corner," Ran told Jack. "He was scared to death at first but I managed to catch him, and bring him over here. Lady Gray seemed to recognize him at once and they are snuggled up in the box with Ruby."

Jack looked greatly pleased. Her own had come to her again.

Miss Helen said little. There were great circles around her eyes and she was very pale. After breakfast she went to Miss Sarah.

"I know it is hard for you to have us here," she said, "and I cannot consent to giving you extra care. I know how you must feel."

"My dear," said Miss Sarah, "I have no right to feel. It is Mary's house, and I am simply doing as I know she would wish to do. I am not to be considered at all in the matter."

Miss Helen looked at her wistfully and Miss Sarah's face softened. "Please don't give yourself any anxiety," she went on. "When I saw your mother, feeble and dependent; when I saw your white hair, Helen Corner, and realized what the years had done for you, and that you were homeless by the power of the Almighty's elements, do you think I did not understand that He meant to teach me, too, not to set up my puny little will against His? We are all children of one Father and you are one of my sisters."

"Thank you," said Miss Helen gently. "I understand, too, and I thank you. Now, please, may I tell you of a little project of mine?"

Miss Sarah drew up her chair and the two sat down. "I have been thinking," began Miss Helen, "that we could be very comfortable in the wing of this house. There are the two rooms up-stairs besides the attic and the three rooms down-stairs, including the office which we could use as a kitchen. Couldn't we move over such of our things as are saved from the fire and settle there, for the present, at least? Do you think Mary would object?"

"I think Mary would say it was the very thing to do, if it suited you."

"I think it would be better for mother to have a place she could call home. This is where she lived when she was first married, before my grandparents died and she went to Uplands. It is familiar to her. She could be near the children and

yet could have the quiet which she is accustomed to. We can have Martha to do our work and I do not see that we could do better. Then, too," she paused in some embarrassment, "mother would want to pay a generous rent."

Miss Sarah raised her hand. "That must be settled by you and Mary," she said. "As for the rest, I know she will consent."

"Then will you send for Martha? And I am sure we shall be able to get settled very soon."

The result of this planning was that within a week Miss Helen and her mother were established in the old wing. During the time of preparation, Mrs. Corner did not leave her room, and seemed still dazed and shattered, but was quiet and docile, seldom showing any evidence of her old spirit. The furniture saved was supplemented by such new pieces as were needed and it really was a cozy little home into which Miss Helen took her mother. There was no lack of helpers. Friends, neighbors and kinsfolk were only too ready to lend their aid, though by far the most eager were the boys and girls of the house, who were willing runners of errands and did much toward making the rooms pretty and cozy.

Still, from the moment of her removal from Uplands, Mrs. Corner failed visibly. She rallied a little after going into the rooms prepared for her, and took a passing interest in them, but it was only a short time after that she grew weaker and at last could not even leave her bed. "It is the shock and the exposure," said Dr. Ward, looking grave when Miss Sarah questioned him. "I doubt if she gets over this, but we must try to keep Miss Helen in good heart." And with the knowledge that a broken, feeble old woman was nearing the brink of the dark river, the last vestige of ill-will left Miss Sarah, and she was a tower of strength to Miss Helen in her hour of trial.

The wind-swept, blackened rooms of the house at Uplands gave the children an awed feeling whenever they looked that way. From those of the rooms which were not completely burned out, the water-soaked furniture had been removed, except where, here and there, a scorched piece of drapery flapped from some broken window, or a charred article of furniture was visible through the gaps in the walls. The fire had started in a defective flue and one side of the house was in complete ruins.

It was a desolate sight to those who had known and loved its inmates, and of these perhaps the chief mourner was old Unc' Landy who, in spite of his railings at the former mistress of the mansion, now felt for her only pity. "Hit sho is hard fo' a proud uprighteous pusson lak ole miss ter give up all dese yer flesh-pots ob Egypt," he said to Nan, "de quails an' de manna an' de go'len calf what she been a hankerin' arter in de days ob huh youf. Yas, Lord, yuh done lay yo' han' mighty heaby on huh, an' I suttinly does groan in spi't when I sees how de mighty fallen. I sholy does wrastle wid de Lord in de night season implorin' Him to hab mercy on huh po' soul."

Such talk was awe-inspiring to the children, not one of whom thought of anything but the favors their grandmother had shown them, and all of whom were ready and eager to do the least thing they could to add to her comfort or to their Aunt Helen's.

"It means so much to have you dear children so near," said Miss Helen many times a day. "I don't know what I should do without you."

The March winds were still and the April rains were falling gently when the end at last came to Grandmother Corner's days on earth. In the early evening of a spring Sabbath she called clearly: "Mary Lee, Mary Lee!"

Nan ran for her sister. "Grandmother wants you," she said, and Mary Lee wondering, hurried in to receive no look of recognition. She was as a stranger to her grandmother.

"Here is Mary Lee," said Nan bending over her.

Mrs. Corner shook her head. "Mary Lee, Mary Lee," she whispered.

"It is your mother whom she is calling," said Aunt Sarah as the patient dozed again.

Presently there came a second call: "Helen, Helen!"

"I am here, mother!" said her daughter.

The mother opened her eyes and looked at the little figure by her side. "You will be just, Helen," she said. "Jack was my child as well as you, and his children must have what is right."

"They shall have it," said Miss Helen, laying her cheek against her mother's frail-looking hand.

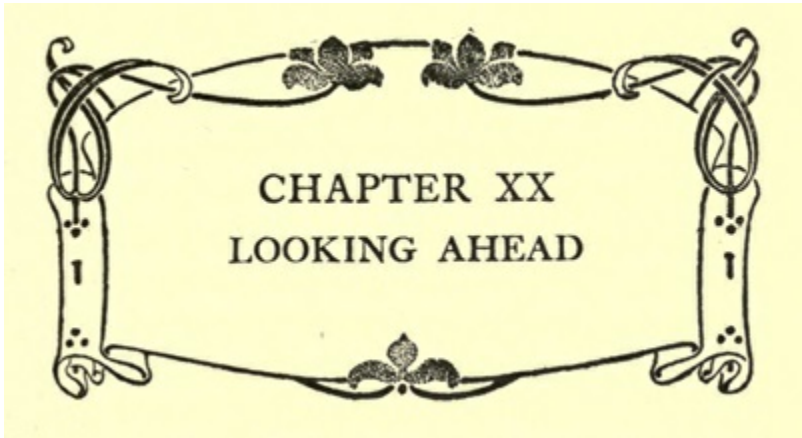
"There was a will--I forget," and again she dozed.

Aunt Sarah spoke to Nan. "You and Mary Lee go now into the next room. I will stay here, and if Miss Helen wants you, I will call you."

The dusk was settling down on the earth, the mountains were dimly seen through a mist of rain. "There are shadows everywhere," said Nan, as she stood looking out of the window. Jack and Jean were staying with their Cousin Mag, but

the two elder girls had kept close together all day.

The dusk had faded into twilight when there was a slight movement in the next room, then the girls heard a footstep on the stair and some one hurried along the hallway. They went to the door. "Where is she?" they heard some one say, and they looked to see their Aunt Helen clasped in the arms of their own mother and heard her say: "Oh, Mary, Mary, you are all I have left me now, you and the children."



CHAPTER XX LOOKING AHEAD

It was one lovely day in June that Nan hied her to Place o' Pines. She gazed with a half smile at the old log of wood on which the music rack was still fastened. No need now to pretend a piano she remembered with pride and pleasure. She began softly to sing the old tune but this time Little Jamie was not the refrain, but that other one: Dearest Mother.

"The very nicest thing in all the world is a mother," she said to herself. "I believe just as Dr. Woods said to Aunt Helen the other day; she made me say it over so I wouldn't forget it: 'The Being who could conceive and create a good mother must Himself be perfect love.'"

"Nan, Nan," came the voice of some one calling from afar.

Nan started up and listened, then she crept out of the opening in the pines and ran around to the fence, giving the peculiar call which the Corner children always used in answering one another. "Where are you?" Mary Lee's voice came nearer. There was an excited and triumphant ring in it. Evidently, she had something important to tell.

"Here I am," said Nan, squeezing herself through the fence and meeting her sister on the other side. "What do you want me for, Mary Lee?"

"You ought just to hear what mother and Aunt Helen and Aunt Sarah have been talking about; the most exciting things. Come over here and I'll tell you." Mary Lee spoke importantly. It was generally Nan who was the dispenser of news, and Mary Lee seldom had the chance of taking the role of herald, in consequence she carried herself with the little air of superiority which Nan generally assumed upon such occasions.

Nan followed her to a patch of grass by the side of the fence, and they sat down together. This summer the two were more frequently companions, for Phil had suddenly discovered a preference for the company of boys, and was generally with Ashby and Ran pursuing more masculine sports than Mary Lee cared to join.

"We're not likely to be here six months from now," Mary Lee began with a view to making a sensation.

"What do you mean?" said Nan, startled out of a pretended indifference.

"Just what I say. Of course, Aunt Sarah and the boys will be here but we shall not."

"Oh, Mary Lee, we are not to be sent away to boarding-school, are we?" asked Nan in a horror-stricken voice.

Mary Lee hugged her knees and rocked back and forth in enjoyment of the situation. "No, we're not going to boarding-school. Oh, Nan, it will be perfectly splendid, and you've always longed to travel, you know. It will be so fine to see oranges growing, and all sorts of things, olives and lemons and such oceans of flowers. You used to make such a fuss over that one little palm, and how you will revel in the things we shall see."

"I think you might tell me what you are talking about," said Nan impatiently.

But Mary Lee was enjoying her unwonted pleasure of news-giving too much to let out all her information at once and she went on, "Of course we shall not travel so very much after we once get there for it will be better that mother should settle down in some one place where it will agree with her. Aunt Helen says we must not give up our studies, and that you especially must keep up your music, so we shall probably take some little cottage where we can have a piano. It would be fun to have a Chinese servant, wouldn't it?"

Nan was too quick-witted to let this hint pass. "I know now!" she cried exultantly. "It's California. Now, Mary Lee, don't fool about it any more, but just begin at the beginning and tell me."

Seeing that there was no use in further holding off, Mary Lee smoothed down her frock and began. "Well, I just happened to be on the porch outside the living-room when it all started, and I went in and listened; they let me. It began by mother's saying that the doctor told her it would be perfectly safe to stay here during the summer, but that when November came she must go away again. He said that if she would do that for two or three years he was sure that she could get over all her symptoms. 'It makes my heart sink when I think of being separated for even one more winter from my children, but it must be done,' said mother, 'and it is fortunate that the boys want to come back and that I shall be able to cover my expenses.'

"Then Aunt Helen spoke up. 'Don't say anything about expenses, Mary,' she said; 'you know it was mother's wish that the estate should be divided, and though she did not sign that last will, I consider it just as binding as if she had done it.' Oh, Nan, she said she meant to have grandmother's first will set aside so we could have our share lawfully."

"That is just like Aunt Helen," said Nan. "Go on."

"Then they talked about that for a little while and said a lot about lawyers and trustees and things I didn't understand,

then Aunt Helen said, 'What do you think of California for a winter, Mary?'

"'But it is so far,' said mother, 'and it is such an expensive trip. I should like it better than the Adirondacks, but for the distance. But I couldn't be so far from my children. Of course,' she said, 'you and Aunt Sarah would be here, and that would be a great comfort.'

"'I didn't mean for you to go alone,' Aunt Helen said; 'I meant that the children and I would go, too.'

"Mother turned right around and put her hand on Aunt Sarah's. 'But what would my dear auntie do?' she asked.

"'Don't mind me,' Aunt Sarah said. 'I'll manage. If you want to close the house, I'll go to Henry Dent's or somewhere, but if you'd rather keep it open I should like mighty well to stay right here and look after those boys, and perhaps I could get a couple more to come in, so it would keep me interested and occupied.'

"Then I spoke right up, Nan."

"What did you say?" asked Nan, eagerly.

"I said, 'Oh, do let Aunt Sarah stay, mother, for who would take care of old Pete, and what would Lady Gray and Baz and Ruby do without any family, and then there's Unc' Landy and the pig and the chickens.' Then they all laughed, though I don't know why and mother said: 'That settles it, Mary Lee. If Aunt Sarah wants to take such a large family under her wing, I am sure I have no objection.'

"Then Aunt Helen said: 'I've only one thing to say, Mary. If Miss Sarah is to undertake all this, I hope you will feel that you have enough to let her have all she can make out of her-her-'"

"Her experiment," suggested Nan who had a more ready vocabulary than Mary Lee.

"I think she said 'undertaking,'" said Mary Lee, not to be corrected. "Then I said: 'Are we really going to California, Aunt Helen?' And she said, 'I should like to think so. It all rests with your mother. I have always wanted to go there and I can't bear to be parted from you all, so why can't we go together?' Then she asked mother what she thought about it."

"She said yes, of course," put in Nan.

Mary Lee nodded. "Uhm-hm. She did indeed, and I got up and just yelled, and then I told them I was going hot-foot to find you, and I left them there still talking about it."

"Oh, do let's go back and hear the particulars," said Nan. "Isn't it perfectly wildly exciting? Did you ever believe such a thing could happen to us? To think we are all going. I wonder when we shall start, and where we shall go, I mean the exact place. To think of living, really living there. Come, let's find out more."

They went racing toward the house and burst in upon the three ladies still absorbed in making plans. "Are we really going to California?" asked Nan, excitedly. "When shall we start? What place is our cottage to be in? May I take some of my books? What trunk shall I use?"

All three smiled. "Gently, Nan, gently," said her mother. "We are not going to-morrow, and there will be plenty of time to decide on trunks before October."

Nan drew a long sigh, and went to sit down by her Aunt Helen. "Fairy godmother," she said, "the Poppy fairy never brought me this dream. Just wave your wand, please, and make me see it all."

"We shall go to Southern California," said Miss Helen, drawing Nan close to her, "probably to San Diego or Pasadena. We shall travel a little at first and decide upon the best place for your mother, then we will take a little cottage, hire a piano, have some books, engage a teacher for you girls, and settle down to enjoy our winter."

"Do let's have a Chinese servant."

"Perhaps we can try one."

"And we can have a garden?"

"If we can find a house with one attached. I think it is extremely probable that we will have one. A little cottage of about six or eight rooms will be large enough, I think, and, if we can, we will have a garden where the geraniums will grow so high that they will shade our second story windows, and where roses will bloom in January. We will not be too far from orange groves and olive orchards nor too distant from the city, and we must be near enough to slip over into Mexico and to have the Pacific ocean for a neighbor. We shall hear Spanish spoken, and the ancient missions will give an old world air to our surroundings. We shall be where your mother will gain strength and health, and where you will have the opportunity of learning all sorts of new things, where I shall try to forget many sad things of my old life, and shall feel that I have a sister and her children to make me content and give me a new peace. Do you like the picture, West Corner?"

"It is beautiful. Now it all seems real. I can see everything, dearest, it's lovely. Just one thing more: How do we go?"

"I think we shall take the southern route and come back by some other."

"You mean---- Just which way is the southern route?"

"Down through New Orleans, Texas, and a bit of Mexico, then up through Southern California. Coming back, we will go through upper California and perhaps come home through the Canadian Rockies, but we will decide that when the time comes."

Nan drew a long sigh of satisfaction. "It is just too lovely for words. I may tell it, may I? It's all going to really happen?"

"So far as any one can say a thing will really happen. Of course, if any one should go prowling around at night in strange places and break an arm or leg and so detain us, we all could not go."

Nan fell upon her aunt with playful beatings of her fist in punishment of this speech. "It won't be me, at any rate," she declared. "I'm going to hunt up the kiddies now before Mary Lee gets hold of them to tell them."

Mary Lee had already flown to Cousin Mag's with the news and Nan was free to be first dispenser of it to the twins. She was but a little way from the house when Jean met her, running, and wiping away tears with two grimy fists. "Whither away, my little maid?" cried Nan, catching her. "Where's Jack?"

"Oh, Nan," said Jean, "come, come crick; Jack is in the pig-pen and the pig is screaling awfully."

"Why in the world did Jack want to get into the pig-pen with the pig?" asked Nan. "Did she want to make piggy 'screal'?"

"No, she fell in. Come, get her out, please, Nan."

Nan followed Jean to the scene of the disaster, but, by the time they reached there, Jack had managed to get out by her own efforts, though she was a sight to behold. "Goodness, child!" exclaimed Nan, "you are a mess. What have you been doing? Here, come along with me. Don't touch me. Unclean! Unclean! Fee-ugh! how does the pig stand that kind of satchet? Go on ahead---- No, keep behind. I don't notice it so much, then. Follow, follow." She ran on ahead until she reached the brook, whose waters were warmed by the June sunshine. "Off with your shoes and jump right in," she cried to Jack; "into that nice little smooth pool where the sun is shining. You are the pilgrim in 'Pilgrim's Progress,'" she went on, "and I see that the dirt of the Slough of Despond is upon thee, but that slough is the beginning of the sorrows that do attend those that go on in that way. Hear me, I am older than thou; thou art like to meet within the way that thou goest, Wearisomeness, Pain, Hunger, Perils, Nakedness, Sword, Lions, Dragons, Darkness----"

"Oh, Nan," wailed Jack, "don't scare me any more than I was scared. The pig's little wicked eyes looked at me so fierce and he grunted and grunted and tossed up his nose."

"Like Tiny in the song Aunt Sarah sings. Never mind, dear, I was only quoting 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and you mustn't be scared. Piggy Wee shan't eat little Jack Corner. Jump, jump, jump, froggy. There you go. Splash about and I'll run home for some dry things while you are soaking off the worst."

It was pleasant and warm in the sun and Jack splashed about manfully, rather enjoying it, until Nan returned with the dry clothes in which she was invested after being stripped of the foul garments and washing herself well in the pool into which Nan poured a quantity of ammonia.

"Now you are clothed in the King's robes," said Nan, continuing her simile of the pilgrim. "I think you'll do. We'll leave these earth-stained garments to sweeten in the sun and you can tell me how it all happened."

"I wanted to help Piggy Wee to get some parings that had fallen outside. I was climbing up and throwing them over when I slipped and fell in and he didn't like it," said Jack, mournfully. "It was real ungrateful of him, too, for I was doing it for his sake and he squealed and did his ears funny and looked like he wanted to gobble me up."

"Somebody will gobble him up some day," said Nan, comfortingly, "for he will have to be killed in the fall and made into sausage meat for ground-hog day. Now let me tell you something perfectly lovely that will make you forget all about pigs. Come, Jean! Ah, Jean!" for this one of the twins had wandered further up the brookside.

With one of the little girls each side of her, Nan poured forth her news as they sat by the purling little stream. She had two absorbed listeners who at first thought she was telling them a make-believe story, but she ended by assuring them that it was every word true and concluded by saying: "So now, my sweet pilgrims, we shall soon be going to the Delectable Land where there will be no pig-pen to fall in and where we can sit under orange trees and eat oranges all day."

For a time, the children gave themselves up to pleasant dreams. Overhead the leaves softly whispered, at their feet sang the little brook; in the distance Unc' Landy was crooning an old camp-meeting hymn. "I'm sure, after all, it's pleasant enough here," said Jack, breaking the silence.

Nan raised her eyes to the charred ruins of Uplands' house rearing themselves upon the hill opposite. She drew a long

breath. "If as much happens next year as has happened this," she said, "I don't know what I shall do. I feel as if I had grown three feet and that all the little shelves in my brain where I store away things were piling up so fast that it will be necessary to build an extra room pretty soon."

Jack laughed. "You do say such funny things, Nan."

"So do you," returned Nan. "There come Mary Lee and the boys. Let's go meet them."

They passed by the little gardens where the boys had lent a hand in spading and hoeing. The young green of shoots appeared above the brown earth; green peas were filling in their pods, beans were climbing their poles; even the asparagus bed was started, and on the currant bushes hung bunches of green currants. Giant Pumpkin Head had begun to stretch his lusty limbs outside Place o' Pines. To Nan's fancy, he was guardian of the place.

"I am glad we aren't going away in summer," she said, observing all the familiar things. "I'm glad, too," she went on, "that the boys have to be here several years longer, so it isn't as if we shouldn't come back to just the same things."

"We shan't come back to the old fence," said Jean; "that's gone."

"And a good riddance that was. Aunt Helen says next thing the house must be painted, but I don't know that I want it to be," said Nan half regretfully; "it won't seem like our own old dingy dear home. I don't like spick and span things always."

"I am sure the sofa looks fine in its new cover," said Jean.

"Yes, but you have to keep your feet off it," said Jack, resentfully.

There was a sober look on Ran's face as he came up with the other two boys and Mary Lee.

"What do you think of our good news?" said Nan.

"I don't think it is very good news," he replied.

"You don't? Why not?" asked Nan, opening wide her eyes.

"Because we shall miss you all so awfully when we come back next year, and the house is going to be painted, too, so it won't seem a bit the same."

"That's just what I've been saying," Nan told him. "Oh, well," she added, philosophically, "I suppose we shall get used to it, and will forget that the house ever was no color. You'll get used to doing without us, too, and think what a lot we shall have to tell when we get back."

Ran still looked gloomy. It did not add to the pleasure of his thoughts to feel that the girls would outdo him in experiences. "I mean to go to Europe when I finish college," he said.

"But first," said Nan, "you're going home, so I don't see but that we are the first ones to be left behind, Mr. Longface. Cheer up, cheer up, we've a whole week yet before the holidays begin. Let's all go for a ride up the mountain; it's just the day for it."

An hour later the seven had turned their faces toward the steadfast mountains upon which no changes were ever wrought.