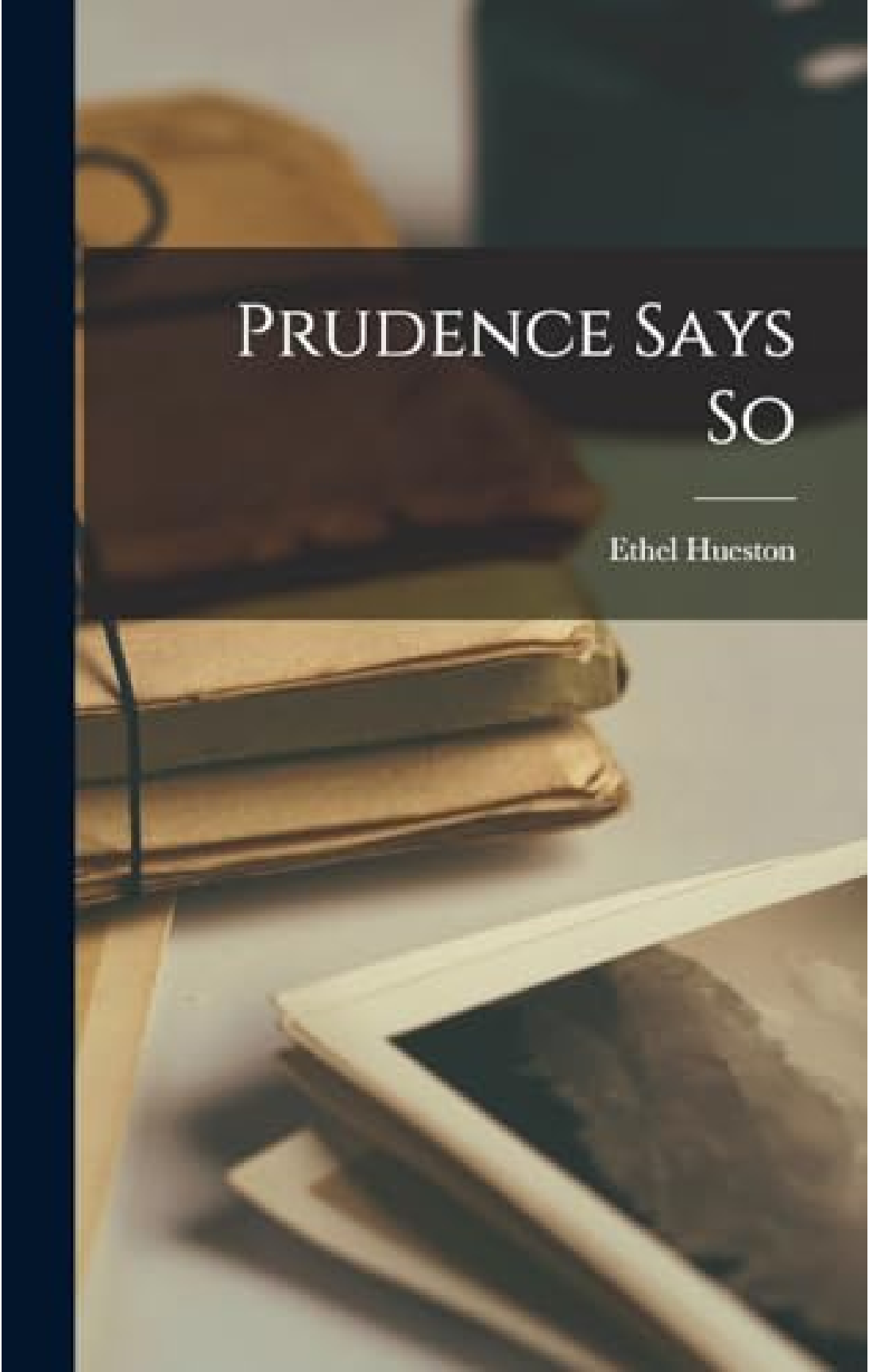

PRUDENCE SAYS SO
Ethel Hueston

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PRUDENCE SAYS SO



Come on. Let's beat it

PRUDENCE SAYS SO

BY

ETHEL HUESTON

AUTHOR OF
PRUDENCE OF THE PARSONAGE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN



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To
MY LITTLE DAUGHTER
ELIZABETH

MY COMRADE AND MY
INSPIRATION

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PRUDENCE SAYS SO

CHAPTER I

THE CHAPERON

"GIRLS,—come down! Quick!—I want to see how you look!"

Prudence stood at the foot of the stairs, deftly drawing on her black silk gloves,—gloves still good in Prudence's eyes, though Fairy had long since discarded them as unfit for service. There was open anxiety in Prudence's expression, and puckers of worry perpendicularly creased her white forehead.

"Girls!" she called again. "Come down! Father, you'd better hurry,—it's nearly train time. Girls, are you deaf!"

Her insistence finally brought response. A door opened in the hallway above, and Connie started down the stairs, fully dressed, except that she limped along in one stocking-foot, her shoe in her hand.

"It's so silly of you to get all dressed before you put on your shoes, Connie," Prudence reproved her as she came down. "It wrinkles you up so. But you do look nice. Wasn't it dear of the Ladies' Aid to give you that dress for your birthday? It's so dainty and sweet,—and goodness knows you needed one. They probably noticed that. Let me fix your bow a little. Do be careful, dear, and don't get mussed before we

come back. Aunt Grace will be so much gladder to live with us if we all look sweet and clean. And you'll be good, won't you, Connie, and—Twins, will you come!"

"They are sewing up the holes in each other's stockings," Connie vouchsafed. "They're all dressed."

The twins, evidently realizing that Prudence's patience was near the breaking point, started downstairs for approval, a curious procession. All dressed as Connie had said, and most charming, but they walked close together, Carol stepping gingerly on one foot and Lark stooping low, carrying a needle with great solicitude,—the thread reaching from the needle to a small hole on Carol's instep.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"I'm sewing up the holes in Carol's stocking," Lark explained. "If you had waited a minute I would have finished—Hold still, Carol,—don't walk so jerky or you'll break the thread. There were five holes in her left stocking, Prudence, and I'm—"

Prudence frowned disapprovingly. "It's a very bad habit to sew up holes in your stockings when you are wearing them. If you had darned them all yesterday as I told you, you'd have had plenty of—Mercy, Lark, you have too much powder on!"

"I know it,—Carol did it. She said she wanted me to be of an intellectual pallor." Lark mopped her face with one hand.

"You'd better not mention to papa that we powdered to-day," Carol suggested. "He's upset. It's very hard for a man to be reasonable when he's upset, you know."

"You look nice, twins." Prudence advanced a step, her eyes on Carol's hair, sniffing suspiciously. "Carol, did you curl your hair?"

Carol blushed. "Well, just a little," she confessed. "I thought Aunt Grace would appreciate me more with a crown of frizzy ringlets."

"You'll spoil your hair if you don't leave it alone, and it will serve you right, too. It's very pretty as it is naturally,—plenty curly enough and—Oh, Fairy, I know Aunt Grace will love you," she cried ecstatically. "You look like a dream, you—"

"Yes, —a nightmare," said Carol snippily. "If I saw Fairy coming at me on a dark night I'd—"

"Papa, we'll miss the train!" Then as he came slowly down the stairs, she said to her sisters again, anxiously: "Oh, girls, do keep nice and clean, won't you? And be very sweet to Aunt Grace! It's so—awfully good of her—to come—and take care of us, —" Prudence's voice broke a little. The admission of another to the parsonage mothering hurt her.

Mr. Starr stopped on the bottom step, and with one foot as a pivot, slowly revolved for his daughters' inspection.

"How do I look?" he demanded. "Do you think this suit will convince Grace that I am worth taking care of? Do I look twenty-five dollars better than I did yesterday?"

The girls gazed at him with most adoring and exclamatory approval.

"Father! You look perfectly grand!—Isn't it beautiful?—Of course, you looked nicer than

anybody else even in the old suit, but—it—well, it was—"

"Perfectly disgracefully shabby," put in Fairy quickly. "Entirely unworthy a minister of your—er—lovely family!"

"I hope none of you have let it out among the members how long I wore that old suit. I don't believe I could face my congregation on Sundays if I thought they were mentally calculating the wearing value of my various garments.—We'll have to go, Prudence.—You all look very fine—a credit to the parsonage—and I am sure Aunt Grace will think us well worth living with."

"And don't muss the house up," begged Prudence, as her father opened the door and pushed her gently out on the step.

The four sisters left behind looked at one another solemnly. It was a serious business,—most serious. Connie gravely put on her shoe, and buttoned it. Lark sewed up the last hole in Carol's stocking,—Carol balancing herself on one foot with nice precision for the purpose. Then, all ready, they looked at one another again,—even more solemnly.

"Well," said Fairy, "let's go in—and wait."

Silently the others followed her in, and they all sat about, irreproachably, on the well-dusted chairs, their hands folded Methodistically in their smooth and spotless laps.

The silence, and the solemnity, were very oppressive.

"We look all right," said Carol belligerently.

No one answered.

"I'm sure Aunt Grace is as sweet as anybody could be," she added presently.

Dreary silence!

"Don't we love her better than anybody on earth, —except ourselves?"

Then, when the silence continued, her courage waned. "Oh, girls," she whimpered, "isn't it awful? It's the beginning of the end of everything. Outsiders have to come in now to take care of us, and Prudence'll get married, and then Fairy will, and maybe us twins,—I mean, we twins. And then there'll only be father and Connie left, and Miss Greet, or some one, will get ahead of father after all,—and Connie'll have to live with a step-mother, and—it'll never seem like home any more, and—"

Connie burst into loud and mournful wails.

"You're very silly, Carol," Fairy said sternly. "Very silly, indeed. I don't see much chance of any of us getting married very soon. And Prudence will be here nearly a year yet. And—Aunt Grace is as sweet and dear a woman as ever lived—mother's own sister —and she loves us dearly and—"

"Yes," agreed Lark, "but it's not like having Prudence at the head of things."

"Prudence will be at the head of things for nearly a year, and—I think we're mighty lucky to get Aunt Grace. It's not many women would be willing to leave a fine stylish home, with a hundred dollars to spend on just herself, and with a maid to wait on her, and come to an ugly old house like this to take

care of a preacher and a riotous family like ours. It's very generous of Aunt Grace—very."

"Yes, it is," admitted Lark. "And as long as she was our aunt with her fine home, and her hundred dollars a month, and her maid, I loved her dearly. But—I don't want anybody coming in to manage us. We can manage ourselves. We—"

"We need a chaperon," put in Fairy deftly. "She isn't going to do the housework, or the managing, or anything. She's just our chaperon. It isn't proper for us to live without one, you know. We're too young. It isn't—conventional."

"And for goodness' sake, Connie," said Carol, "remember and call her our chaperon, and don't talk about a housekeeper. There's some style to a chaperon."

"Yes, indeed," said Fairy cheerfully. "And she wears such pretty clothes, and has such pretty manners that she will be a distinct acquisition to the parsonage. We can put on lots more style, of course. And then it was awfully nice of her to send so much of her good furniture,—the piano, for instance, to take the place of that old tin pan of ours."

Carol smiled a little. "If she had written, 'Dear John: I can't by any means live in a house with furniture like that of yours, so you'll have to let me bring some of my own,'—wouldn't we have been furious? That was what she meant all right, but she put it very neatly."

"Yes. 'I love some of my things so dearly,'" Lark quoted promptly, "'and have lived with them so long that I am too selfish to part with them. May I bring a

few pieces along?' Yes, it was pretty cute of her."

"And do remember, girls, that you mustn't ask her to darn your stockings, and wash your handkerchiefs, and do your tasks about the house. It would be disgraceful. And be careful not to hint for things you want, for, of course, Aunt Grace will trot off and buy them for you and papa will not like it. You twins'll have to be very careful to quit dreaming about silk stockings, for instance." There was a tinge of sarcasm in Fairy's voice as she said this.

"Fairy, we did dream about silk stockings—you don't need to believe it if you don't want to. But we did dream about them just the same!" Carol sighed. "I think I could be more reconciled to Aunt Grace if I thought she'd give me a pair of silk stockings. You know, Fairy, sometimes lately I almost—don't like Aunt Grace—any more."

"That's very foolish and very wicked," declared Fairy. "I love her dearly. I'm so glad she's come to live with us."

"Are you?" asked Connie innocently. "Then why did you go up in the attic and cry all morning when Prudence was fixing the room for her?"

Fairy blushed, and caught her under lip between her teeth for a minute. And then, in a changed voice she said, "I—I do love her, and—I am glad—but I keep thinking ahead to when Prudence gets married, and—and—oh, girls, Prudence was all settled in the parsonage when I was born, and she's been here ever since, and—when she is gone it—it won't be any home to me at all!"

Her voice rose on the last words in a way most

pitifully suggestive of tears.

For a moment there was a stricken silence.

"Oh, pooh!" Carol said at last, bravely. "You wouldn't want Prue to stick around and be an old maid, would you? I think she's mighty lucky to get a fellow as nice as Jerry Harmer myself. I'll bet you don't make out half as well, Fairy. I think she'd be awfully silly not to gobble him right up while she has a chance. For my own part, I don't believe in old maids. I think it is a religious duty for folks to get married, and—and—you know what I mean,—race suicide, you know." She nodded her head sagely, winking one eye in a most intelligent fashion.

"And Aunt Grace is so quiet she'll not be any bother at all," added Lark. "Don't you remember how she always sits around and smiles at us, and never says anything. She won't scold a bit.—Maybe Carol and I will get a chance to spend some of our spending money when she takes charge. Prudence confiscates it all for punishment. I think it's going to be lots of fun having Aunt Grace with us."

"I'm going to take my dime and buy her something," Connie announced suddenly.

The twins whirled on her sharply. "Your dime!" echoed Carol.

"I didn't know you had a dime," said Lark.

Connie flushed a little. "Yes,—Oh, yes,—" she said, "I've got a dime. I—I hid it. I've got a dime all right."

"It's nearly time," said Fairy restlessly. "Number Nine has been on time for two mornings now,—so she'll probably be here in time for dinner. It's only

ten o'clock now."

"You mean luncheon," suggested Carol.

"Yes, luncheon, to be sure, fair sister."

"Where'd you get that dime, Connie?"

"Oh, I've had it some time," Connie admitted reluctantly.

"When I asked you to lend me a dime you said—"

"You asked me if I had a dime I could lend you and I said, No, and I didn't, for I didn't have this dime to lend."

"But where have you had it?" inquired Lark. "I thought you acted suspicious some way, so I went around and looked for myself."

"Where did you look?"

The twins laughed gleefully. "Oh, on top of the windows and doors," said Carol.

"How did you know—" began Connie.

"You aren't slick enough for us, Connie. We knew you had some funny place to hide your money, so I gave you that penny and then I went up-stairs very noisily so you could hear me, and Lark sneaked around and watched, and saw where you put it. We've been able to keep pretty good track of your finances lately."

The twins laughed again.

"But I looked on the top ledge of all the windows and doors just yesterday," admitted Lark, "and there was nothing there. Did you put that dime in the

bank?"

"Oh, never mind," said Connie. "I don't need to tell you. You twins are too slick for me, you know."

The twins looked slightly fussed, especially when Fairy laughed with a merry, "Good for you, Connie."

Carol rose and looked at herself in the glass. "I'm going up-stairs," she said.

"What for?" inquired Lark, rising also.

"I need a little more powder. My nose is shiny."

So the twins went up-stairs, and Fairy, after calling out to them to be very careful and not get disheveled, went out into the yard and wandered dolefully about by herself.

Connie meantime decided to get her well-hidden dime and figure out what ten cents could buy for her fastidious and wealthy aunt. Connie was in many ways unique. Her system of money-hiding was born of nothing less than genius, prompted by necessity, for the twins were clever as well as grasping. She did not know they had discovered her plan of banking on the top ledge of the windows and doors, but having dealt with them long and bitterly, she knew that in money matters she must give them the benefit of all her ingenuity. For the last and precious dime, she had discovered a brand-new hiding-place.

The cook stove sat in the darkest and most remote corner of the kitchen, and where the chimney fitted into the wall, it was protected by a small zinc plate. This zinc plate protruded barely an inch, but that inch was quite sufficient for coins the size of Connie's, and there, high and secure in the shadowy

corner, lay Connie's dime. Now that she had decided to spend it, she wanted it before her eyes,—for ten cents in sight buys much more than ten cents in memory. She went into the kitchen cautiously, careful of her white canvas shoes, and put a chair beside the stove. She had discovered that the dishpan turned upside down on the chair, gave her sufficient height to reach her novel banking place. The preparation was soon accomplished, and neatly, for Connie was an orderly child, and loved cleanliness even on occasions less demanding than this.

But alas for Connie's calculations!—Carol was born for higher things than dish washing, and she had splashed soap-suds on the table. The pan had been set among them—and then, neatly wiped on the inside, it had been hung up behind the table,—with the suds on the bottom. And it was upon this same dishpan that Connie climbed so carefully in search of her darling dime.

The result was certain. As she slowly and breathlessly raised herself on tiptoe, steadying herself with the tips of her fingers lightly touching the stove-pipe, her foot moved treacherously into the soapy area, and slipped. Connie screamed, caught desperately at the pipe, and fell to the floor in a sickening jumble of stove-pipe, dishpan and soot beyond her wildest fancies! Her cries brought her sisters flying, and the sight of the blackened kitchen, and the unfortunate child in the midst of disaster, banished from their minds all memory of the coming chaperon, of Prudence's warning words:—Connie was in trouble. With sisterly affection they rescued her, and did not hear the ringing of the bell. They brushed her, they shook her, they kissed her, they all but wept over her. And when Prudence and her

father, with Aunt Grace in tow, despaired of gaining entrance at the hands of the girls, came in unannounced, it was a sorry scene that greeted them. Fairy and the twins were only less sooty than Connie and the kitchen. The stove-pipe lay about them with that insufferable insolence known only to fallen stove-pipe. And Connie wept loudly, her tears making hideous trails upon her blackened face.

"I might have known it," Prudence thought, with sorrow. But her motherly pride vanished before her motherly solicitude, and Connie was soon quieted by her tender ministrations.



We love you, but we can't kiss you

"We love you, Aunt Grace," cried Carol earnestly, "but we can't kiss you."

Mr. Starr anxiously scanned the surface of the kitchen table with an eye to future spots on the new

suit, and then sat down on the edge of it and laughed as only a man of young heart and old experience can laugh!

"Disgraced again," he said. "Prudence said we made a mistake in not taking you all to the station where we could watch you every minute. Grace, think well before you take the plunge. Do you dare cast in your fortunes with a parsonage bunch that revels in misfortune? Can you take the responsibility of rearing a family that knows trouble only? This is your last chance. Weigh well your words."

The twins squirmed uncomfortably. True, she was their aunt, and knew many things about them. But they did think it was almost bad form for their father to emphasize their failings in the presence of any one outside the family.

Fairy pursed up her lips, puffing vainly at the soot that had settled upon her face. Then she laughed. "Very true, Aunt Grace," she said. "We admit that we're a luckless family. But we're expecting, with you to help us, to do much better. You see, we've never had half a chance so far, with only father behind us."

The twins revived at this, and joined in the laughter their father led against himself.

Later in the day Prudence drew her aunt to one side and asked softly, "Was it much of a shock to you, Aunt Grace? The family drowned in soot to welcome you? I'm sure you expected to find everything trim and fresh and orderly. Was it a bitter disappointment?"

Aunt Grace smiled brightly. "Why, no, Prudence," she said in her slow even voice. "I really expected

something to be wrong! I'd have been disappointed if everything had gone just right!"

CHAPTER II

SCIENCE AND HEALTH

AFTER ALL, the advent of a chaperon made surprisingly little difference in the life of the parsonage family, but what change there was, was all to the good. Their aunt assumed no active directorate over household matters. She just slipped in, happily, unobtrusively, helpfully. She was a gentle woman, smiling much, saying little. Indeed, her untalkativeness soon became a matter of great merriment among the lively girls.

"A splendid deaf and dumb person was lost to the world in you, Aunt Grace," Carol assured her warmly. "I never saw a woman who could say so much in smiles, and be so expressive without words."

Fairy said, "She carries on a prolonged discussion, and argues and orates, without saying a word."

The members of the Ladies' Aid, who hastened to call, said, "She is perfectly charming—such a fine conversationalist!"

She was always attractively dressed, always self-possessed, always friendly, always good-natured, and the girls found her presence only pleasing. She relieved Prudence, admired Fairy, laughed at the

twins, adored Connie. Between her and Mr. Starr there was a frank camaraderie, charming, but seldom found between brothers- and sisters-in-law.

"Of course, Aunt Grace," Prudence told her sweetly, "we aren't going to be selfish with you. We don't expect you to bury yourself in the parsonage. Whenever you want to trip away for a while, you must feel free to go. We don't intend to monopolize you, however much we want to do so. Whenever you want to go, you must go."

"I shan't want to go," said Aunt Grace quickly.

"Not right away, of course," Prudence agreed. "But you'll find our liveliness tiring. Whenever you do want to go—"

"I don't think I shall want to go at all," she answered. "I like it here. I—I like liveliness."

Then Prudence kissed her gratefully.

For several weeks after her initiation in the parsonage, life rolled along sweetly and serenely. There were only the minor, unavoidable mishaps and disciplinary measures common to the life of any family. Of course, there were frequent, stirring verbal skirmishes between Fairy and the twins, and between the twins and Connie. But these did not disturb their aunt. She leaned back in her chair, or among the cushions, listening gravely, but with eyes that always smiled.

Then came a curious lull.

For ten entire and successive days the twins had lived blameless lives. Their voices rang out gladly and sweetly. They treated Connie with a sisterly

tenderness and gentleness quite out of accord with their usual drastic discipline. They obeyed the word of Prudence with a cheerful readiness that was startlingly cherubimic. The most distasteful of orders called forth nothing stronger than a bright, "Yes, Prudence." They no longer developed dangerous symptoms of physical disablement at times of unpleasant duties. Their devotion to the cause of health was beautiful. Not an ache disturbed them. Not a pain suggested a substitute.

Prudence watched them with painful solicitude. Her years of mothering had given her an almost supernatural intuition as to causes, and effects.

On Wednesday morning, Mr. Starr bade his family good-by and set out on a tour of Epworth League conventions. He was to be away from home until the end of the following week. A prospective Presbyterian theologian had been selected from the college to fill his pulpit on the Sabbath, and the girls, with their aunt, faced an unusually long period of running the parsonage to suit themselves.

At ten o'clock the train carried their father off in the direction of Burlington, and at eleven o'clock the twins returned to the parsonage. They had given him a daughterly send-off at the station, and then gone to the library for books. Prudence, Fairy and Aunt Grace sat sewing on the side porch as they cut across the parsonage lawn, their feet crinkling pleasantly through the drift of autumn leaves the wind had piled beneath the trees.

"We're out of potatoes, twins," said Prudence, as they drew near. "You'll have to dig some before dinner."

For one instant their complacent features clouded. Prudence looked up expectantly, sure of a break in their serene placidity.

One doubtful second, then—

"Certainly, Prudence," said Carol brightly.

And Lark added genially, "We'd better fill the box, I guess—so we'll have enough for the rest of the week."

And singing a light but unharmonic snatch of song, the twins went in search of basket and hoe.

The twins were not musical. They only sang from principle, to emphasize their light-heartedness when it needed special impressing.

Prudence's brows knitted in anxious frowns, and she sighed a few times.

"What is the matter, Prue? You look like a rainy Christmas," said Fairy.

"It's the twins," was the mournful answer.

"The twins!" ejaculated Fairy. "Why, they've acted like angels lately."

Even Aunt Grace lifted mildly inquiring eyebrows.

"That's it!—That's just it. When the twins act like angels I get uneasy right away. The better they act, the more suspicious I feel."

"What have they been doing?"

"Nothing! Not a thing! That's why I'm worried. It must be something terrible!"

Fairy laughed and returned to her embroidery. Aunt Grace smiled and began plying her needles once more. But Prudence still looked troubled, and sighed often.

There was no apparent ground for her alarm. The twins came back with the potatoes, peeled some for luncheon, and set the table, their faces still bright and smiling. Prudence's eyes, often fastened upon their angelic countenances, grew more and more troubled.

In the afternoon, they joined the little circle on the porch, but not to sew. They took a book, and lay down on a rug with the book before them, reading together. Evidently they were all absorbed. An hour passed, two hours, three. At times Carol pointed to a line, and said in a low voice, "That's good, isn't it?" And Lark would answer, "Dandy!—Have you read this?"

Prudence, in spite of her devotion to the embroidering of large S's on assorted pieces of linen, never forgot the twins for a moment.

"What are you reading?" she asked at last aimlessly, her only desire to be reassured by the sound of their voices.

There was an almost imperceptible pause. Then Carol answered,—her chin was in her palms which may have accounted for the mumbling of the words.

"*Scianceanelth.*"

"What?"

Another pause, a little more perceptible this time. "*Science and Health*," Carol said at last, quite

distinctly.

"*Science and Health*," Prudence repeated, in a puzzled tone. "Is it a doctor book?"

"Why—something of the sort,—yes," said Carol dubiously.

"*Science and Health*? *Science and Health*," mused Fairy. "You don't mean that Christian Science book, do you? You know what I mean, Prudence—Mary Baker Eddy's book—*Science and Health*,—that's the name of it. That's not what you twins are devouring so ravenously, is it?"

Carol answered with manifest reluctance, glancing nervously at Prudence, "Y-yes,—that's what it is."

Ominous silence greeted this admission. A slow red flush mantled the twins' cheeks. Aunt Grace's eyes twinkled a little, although her face was grave. Fairy looked surprised. Prudence looked dumfounded. When she spoke, her words gave no sign of the cataclysmic struggle through which she had passed.

"What are you reading that for?"

"Why—it's very interesting," explained Lark, coming to Carol's rescue. Carol was very good at meeting investigation, but when it came to prolonged explanation, Lark stood preeminent. "Of course, we don't believe it—yet. But there are some good things in it. Part of it is very beautiful. We don't just understand it,—it's very deep. But some of the ideas are very fine, and—er—uplifting, you know."

Prudence looked most miserable. "But—twins, do you think—minister's daughters ought to read—

things like that?"

"Why, Prudence, I think minister's daughters ought to be well-informed on every subject," declared Lark conscientiously. "How can we be an influence if we don't know anything about things?—And I tell you what it is, Prue, I don't think it's right for all of us church people to stand back and knock Christian Science when we don't know anything about it. It's narrow-minded, that's what it is. It's downright un-Christian. When you get into the book you will find it just full of fine inspiring thoughts—something like the Bible,—only—er—and very good, you know."

Prudence looked at Fairy and her aunt in helpless dismay. This was something entirely new in her experience of rearing a family.

"I—I don't think you ought to read it," she said slowly. "But at the same time—"

"Of course, if you command us not to read it, we won't," said Carol generously.

"Yes. We've already learned quite a lot about it," amended Lark, with something of warning in her tone.

"What do you think about it, Aunt Grace?"

"Why,—I don't know, Prudence. You know more about rearing twins than I do."

Prudence at that moment felt that she knew very little about it, indeed. She turned to Fairy. There was a strange intentness in Fairy's fine eyes as she studied the twins on the floor at her feet.

"You aren't thinking of turning Christian

Scientists, yourselves, are you?" asked Prudence rather humbly.

"Oh, of course, we aren't Scientists, Prudence," was the quick denial. "We don't know anything about it yet, really. But there are lots of very helpful things in it, and—people talk about it so much, and—they have made such wonderful cures, you know, and—we'd thought we'd just study up a little."

"You take the book and read it yourself, Prue," urged Carol hospitably. "You'll see what we mean."

Prudence drew back quickly as though the book would sear her fingers. She looked very forlorn. She realized that it would be bad policy to forbid the twins to read it. On the other hand, she realized equally strongly that it was certainly unwise to allow its doctrines to take root in the minds of parsonage daughters. If only her father were at home,—ten days between herself and the lifting of responsibility!

"When father comes home—" she began. And then suddenly Fairy spoke.

"I think the twins are right," she said emphatically, and the twins looked at her with a surprised anxiety that mated Prudence's own. "It would be very narrow-minded of us to refuse to look into a subject as important as this. Let them go on and study it; we can decide things later."

Prudence looked very doubtful, but a warning movement of Fairy's left eyelash—the side removed from the twins—comforted her.

"Well—" she said.

"Of course, Prudence, we know it would nearly

break father's heart for us to go back on our own church,—but don't you think if folks become truly convinced that Christian Science is the true and good religion, they ought to stand by it and suffer,—just like the martyrs of old?" suggested Lark,—and the suggestion brought the doubt-clouds thick about Prudence's head once more.

"We may not be convinced, of course," added Carol, "but there is something rather—assuring—about it."

"Oh, twins," Prudence cried earnestly, but stopped as she caught again the slight suggestive movement of Fairy's left eyelash.

"Well, let it go for this afternoon," she said, her eyes intent on Fairy's face. "I must think it over."

The twins, with apparent relish, returned to their perusal of the book.

Fairy rose almost immediately and went into the house, coming back a moment later with her hat and gloves.

"I'm going for a stroll, Prue," she said. "I'll be back in time for supper."

Prudence gazed yearningly after her departing back. She felt a great need of help in this crisis, and Fairy's nonchalance was sometimes very soothing. Aunt Grace was a darling, of course, but she had long ago disclaimed all responsibility for the rearing of the twins.

It was two hours later when Fairy came back. Prudence was alone on the porch.

"Where are the twins?" asked Fairy softly.

"Up-stairs," was the whispered reply. "Well?"

Then Fairy spoke more loudly, confident that the twins, in their up-stairs room, could hear every word she said. "Come up-stairs, Prue. I want to talk this over with you alone." And then she whispered, "Now, you just take your cue from me, and do as I say. The little sinners! We'll teach them to be so funny!"

In their own room she carefully closed the door and smiled, as she noted a creaking of the closet door on the twins' side of the wall. Eavesdropping was not included among the cardinal sins in the twins' private decalogue, when the conversation concerned themselves.

"Now, Prudence," Fairy began, speaking with an appearance of softness, though she took great pains to turn her face toward the twins' room, and enunciated very clearly indeed. "I know this will hurt you, as it does me, but we've got to face it fairly. If the twins are convinced that Christian Science is the right kind of religion, we can't stand in their way. It might turn them from all religion and make them infidels or atheists, or something worse. Any religion is better than none. I've been reading up a little myself this afternoon, and there are some good points in Christian Science. Of course, for our sakes and father's, the twins will be generous and deny that they are Scientists. But at heart, they are. I saw it this afternoon. And you and I, Prudence, must stand together and back them up. They'll have to leave the Methodist church. It may break our hearts, and father's, too, but we can't wrong our little sisters just for our personal pride and pleasure in them. I think we'll have them go before the official board next Sunday while father is gone—then he will be

spared the pain of it. I'll speak to Mr. Lauren about it to-morrow. We must make it as easy for them as we can. They'll probably dismiss them—I don't suppose they'll give them letters. But it must be all over before papa comes back."

Then she hissed in Prudence's ear, "Now cry."

Prudence obediently began sniffing and gulping, and Fairy rushed to her and threw her arms about her, sobbing in heart-broken accents, "There, there, Prue, I know—I felt just the same about it. But we can't stand between the twins and what they think is right. We daren't have that on our consciences."

The two wept together, encouraged by the death-like stillness in the closet on the other side of the wall.

Then Fairy said, more calmly, though still sobbing occasionally, "For our sakes, they'll try to deny it. But we can't let the little darlings sacrifice themselves. They've got to have a chance to try their new belief. We'll just be firm and insist that they stand on their rights. We won't mention it to them for a day or two —we'll fix it up with the official board first. And we must surely get it over by Sunday. Poor old father—and how he loves—" Fairy indulged in a clever and especially artistic bit of weeping. Then she regained control of her feelings by an audible effort. "But it has its good points, Prue. Haven't you noticed how sweet and sunny and dear the twins have been lately? It was Science and Health working in them. Oh, Prudence dear, don't cry so."

Prudence caught her cue again and began weeping afresh. They soothed and caressed and comforted each other for a while, and then went

down-stairs to finish getting supper.

In the meantime, the shocked and horrified twins in the closet of their own room, were clutching each other with passionate intensity. Little nervous chills set them aquiver, their hands were cold, their faces throbbing hot. When their sisters had gone down-stairs, they stared at each other in agony.

"They—they wo-won't p-p-put us out of the ch-ch-church," gasped Carol.

"They will," stammered Lark. "You know what Prudence is! She'd put the whole church out if she thought it would do us any good."

"Pa-p-pa'll—papa'll—" began Carol, her teeth chattering.

"They'll do it before he gets back." Then with sudden reproach she cried, "Oh, Carol, I told you it was wicked to joke about religion."

This unexpected reproach on the part of her twin brought Carol back to earth. "Christian Science isn't religion," she declared. "It's not even good sense, as far's I can make out. I didn't read a word of it, did you?—I—I just thought it would be such a good joke on Prudence—with father out of town."

The good joke was anything but funny now.

"They can't make us be Scientists if we don't want to," protested Lark. "They can't. Why, I wouldn't be anything but a Methodist for anything on earth. I'd die first."

"You can't die if you're a Scientist—anyhow, you oughtn't to. Millie Mains told me—"

"It's a punishment on us for even looking at the book—good Methodists like we are. I'll burn it. That's what I'll do."

"You'll have to pay for it at the library if you do," cautioned frugal Carol.

"Well, we'll just go and tell Prudence it was a joke, —Prudence is always reasonable. She won't—"

"She'll punish us, and—it'll be such a joke on us, Larkie. Even Connie'll laugh."

They squirmed together, wretchedly, at that.

"We'll tell them we have decided it is false."

"They said we'd probably do that for their sakes."

"It—it was a good joke while it lasted," said Carol, with a very faint shadow of a smile. "Don't you remember how Prudence gasped? She kept her mouth open for five minutes!"

"It's still a joke," added Lark gloomily, "but it's on us."

"They can't put us out of the church!"

"I don't know. You know we Methodists are pretty set! Like as not they'll say we'd be a bad influence among the members."

"Twins!"

The call outside their door sounded like the trump of doom to the conscience-smitten twins, and they clutched each other, startled, crying out. Then, sheepishly, they stepped out of the closet to find Fairy regarding them quizzically from the doorway. She repressed a smile with difficulty, as she said

quietly:

"I was just talking to Mrs. Mains over the phone. She's going to a Christian Science lecture to-night, and she said she wished I wasn't a minister's daughter and she'd ask me to go along. I told her I didn't care to, but said you twins would enjoy it. She'll be here in the car for you at seven forty-five."

"I won't go," cried Carol. "I won't go near their old church."

"You won't go." Fairy was astonished. "Why—I told her you would be glad to go."

"I won't," repeated Carol, with nervous passion. "I will not. You can't make me."

Lark shook her head in corroborative denial.

"Well, that's queer." Fairy frowned, then she smiled.

Suddenly, to the tempest-tossed and troubled twins, the tall splendid Fairy seemed a haven of refuge. Her eyes were very kind. Her smile was sweet. And with a cry of relief, and shame, and fear, the twins plunged upon her and told their little tale.

"You punish us this time, Fairy," begged Carol. "We—we don't want the rest of the family to know. We'll take any kind of punishment, but keep it dark, won't you? Prudence will soon forget, she's so awfully full of Jerry these days."

"I'll talk it over with Prudence," said Fairy. "But—I think we'll have to tell the family."

Lark moved her feet restlessly. "Well, you needn't tell Connie," she said. "Having the laugh come back

on us is the very meanest kind of a punishment."

Fairy looked at them a moment, wondering if, indeed, their punishment had been sufficient.

"Well, little twins," she said, "I guess I will take charge of this myself. Here is your punishment." She stood up again, and looked down at them with sparkling eyes as they gazed at her expectantly.

"We caught on that it was a joke. We knew you were listening in the closet. And Prudence and I acted our little parts to give you one good scare. Who's the laugh on now? Are we square? Supper's ready." And Fairy ran down-stairs, laughing, followed by two entirely abashed and humbled twins.

CHAPTER III

A GIFT FROM HEAVEN

THE first of April in the Mount Mark parsonage was a time of trial and tribulation, frequently to the extent of weeping and gnashing of teeth. The twins were no respecters of persons, and feeling that the first of April rendered all things justifiable to all men, they made life as burdensome to their father as to Connie, and Fairy and Prudence lived in a state of perpetual anguish until the twins fell asleep at night well satisfied but worn out with the day's activities. The twins were bordering closely to the first stage of grown-up womanhood, but on the first of April they

swore they would always be young! The tricks were more dignified, more carefully planned and scientifically executed than in the days of their rollicking girlhood,—but they were all the more heart-breaking on that account.

The week before the first was spent by Connie in a vain effort to ferret out their plans in order that fore-knowledge might suggest a sufficient safe-guard. The twins, however, were too clever to permit this, and their bloody schemes were wrapped in mystery and buried in secrecy. On the thirty-first of March, Connie labored like a plumber would if working by the job. She painstakingly hid from sight all her cherished possessions. The twins were in the barn, presumably deep in plots. Aunt Grace was at the Ladies' Aid. So when Fairy came in, about four in the afternoon, there was only Prudence to note the vengeful glitter in her fine clear eyes. And Prudence was so intent upon feather-stitching the hems of pink-checked dish towels, that she did not observe it.

"Where's papa?" Fairy asked.

"Up-stairs."

"Where are the twins?"

"In the barn, getting ready for THE DAY."

Fairy smiled delightfully and skipped eagerly up the stairs. She was closeted with her father for some time, and came out of his room at last with a small coin carefully concealed in the corner of her handkerchief. She did not remove her hat, but set briskly out toward town again.

Prudence, startled out of her feather-stitching, followed her to the door. "Why, Fairy," she called.

"Are you going out again?"

Fairy threw out her hands. "So it seems. An errand for papa." She lifted her brows and pursed up her lips, and the wicked joy in her face pierced the mantle of Prudence's absorption again.

"What's up?" she questioned curiously, following her sister down the steps.

Fairy looked about hurriedly, and then whispered a few words of explanation. Prudence's look changed to one of unnaturally spiteful glee.

"Good! Fine! Serves 'em right! You'd better hurry."

"Tell Aunt Grace, will you? But don't let Connie in until morning. She'd give it away."

At supper-time Fairy returned, and the twins, their eyes bright with the unholy light of mischief, never looked at her. They sometimes looked heavenward with a sublime contentment that drove Connie nearly frantic. Occasionally they uttered cryptic words about the morrow,—and the older members of the family smiled pleasantly, but Connie shuddered. She remembered so many April Fool's Days.

The family usually clung together on occasions of this kind, feeling there was safety and sympathy in numbers—as so many cowards have felt for lo, these many years. And thus it happened that they were all in the dining-room when their father appeared at the door. He had his hands behind him suggestively.

"Twins," he said, without preamble, "what do you want more than anything else?"

"Silk stockings," was the prompt and unanimous answer.

He laughed. "Good guess, wasn't it?" And tossed into their eager hands two slender boxes, nicely wrapped. The others gathered about them with smiling eyes as the twins tremulously tore off the wrappings.

"A. Phoole's Pure Silk Thread Hose,—Guaranteed!" This they read from the box—neat golden lettering. It was enough for the twins. With cries of perfect bliss they flung themselves upon their father, kissing him rapturously wherever their lips might touch.

"Oh, papa!" "Oh, you darling!" And then, when they had some sort of control of their joy, Lark said solemnly, "Papa, it is a gift from Heaven!"

"Of course, we give you the credit, papa," Carol amended quickly, "but the thought was Heaven-prompted."

Fairy choked suddenly, and her fit of coughing interfered with the twins' gratitude to an all-suggesting Providence!

Carol twisted her box nervously. "You know, papa, it may seem very childish, and—silly to you, but—actually—we have—well, prayed for silk stockings. We didn't honestly expect to get them, though—not until we saved up money enough to get them ourselves. Heaven is kinder to us than we—"

"You can't understand such things, papa," said Lark. "Maybe you don't know exactly how—how they feel. When we go to Betty Hill's we wear her silk stockings and lie on the bed—and—she won't let us walk in them, for fear we may wear holes. Every girl in our class has at least one pair,—Betty has three, but one pair's holey, and—we felt so awfully poor!"

The smiles on the family faces were rather stereotyped by this time, but the exulting twins did not notice. Lark looked at Carol fondly. Carol sighed at Lark blissfully. Then, with one accord, they lifted the covers from the boxes and drew out the shimmering hose. Yes,—shimmering—but—they shook them out for inspection! Their faces paled a little.

"They—they are very—" began Carol courageously. Then she stopped.

The hose were a fine tissue-paper imitation of silk stockings! The "April Fool, little twins," on the toes was not necessary for their enlightenment. They looked at their father with sad but unresentful reproach in their swiftly shadowed eyes.

"It—it's a good joke," stammered Carol, moistening her dry lips with her tongue.

"It's—one on us," blurted Lark promptly.

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed Carol, slowly, dryly, very dully.

"Yes—ha, ha, ha," echoed Lark, placing the bitter fruit carefully back in its box. Her fingers actually trembled.

"It's a—swell joke, all right," Carol said, "we see that well enough,—we're not stupid, you know. But we did want some silk stockings so—awfully bad. But it's funny, ha, ha, ha!"

"A gift from Heaven!" muttered Lark, with clenched teeth. "Well, you got us that time."

"Come on, Lark, we must put them sacredly away —Silk stockings, you know, are mighty scarce in a

parsonage,—"

"Yes, ha, ha, ha," and the crushed and broken twins left the room, with dignity in spite of the blow.

The family did not enjoy the joke on the twins.

Mr. Starr looked at the others with all a man's confused incomprehension of a woman's notions! He spread out his hands—an orthodox, ministerial gesture!

"Now, will some one kindly tell me what there is in silk stockings, to—" He shook his head helplessly. "Silk stockings! A gift from Heaven!" He smiled, unmerrily. "The poor little kids!" Then he left the room.

Aunt Grace openly wiped her eyes, smiling at herself as she did so.

Fairy opened and closed her lips several times. Then she spoke. "Say, Prue, knock me down and sit on me, will you? Whatever made me think of such a stupid trick as that?"

"Why, bless their little hearts," whispered Prudence, sniffing. "Didn't they look sorry? But they were so determined to be game."

"Prudence, give me my eight cents," demanded Connie. "I want it right away."

"What do you want it for?"

"I'm going down to Morrow's and get some candy. I never saw a meaner trick in my life! I'm surprised at papa. The twins only play jokes for fun." And Connie stalked grimly out of the parsonage and off toward town.

A more abashed and downcast pair of twins probably never lived. They sat thoughtfully in their room, "A. Phoole's Silk Thread Hose" carefully hidden from their hurt eyes.

"It was a good joke," Lark said, now and then.

"Yes, very," assented Carol. "But silk stockings, Larkie!"

And Lark squirmed wretchedly. "A gift from Heaven," she mourned. "How they must be laughing!"

But they did not laugh.

Connie came back and shared her candy. They thanked her courteously and invited her to sit down. Then they all ate candy and grieved together silently. They did not speak of the morning's disaster, but the twins understood and appreciated the tender sympathy of her attitude, and although they said nothing, they looked at her very kindly and Connie was well content.

The morning passed drearily. The twins had lost all relish for their well-planned tricks, and the others, down-stairs, found the usually wild and hilarious day almost unbearably poky. Prudence's voice was gentle as she called them down to dinner, and the twins, determined not to show the white feather, went down at once and took their places. They bore their trouble bravely, but their eyes had the surprised and stricken look, and their faces were nearly old. Mr. Starr cut the blessing short, and the dinner was eaten in silence. The twins tried to start the conversation. They talked of the weather with passionate devotion. They discussed their studies with an almost

unbelievable enthusiasm. They even referred, with stiff smiles, to "papa's good joke," and then laughed their dreary "ha, ha, ha," until their father wanted to fall upon his knees and beg forgiveness.

Connie, still solicitous, helped them wash the dishes. The others disappeared. Fairy got her hat and went out without a word. Their father followed scarcely a block behind her. Aunt Grace sought all over the house for Prudence, and finally found her in the attic, comforting herself with a view of the lovely linens which filled her Hope Box.

"I'm going for a walk," announced Aunt Grace briefly.

"All right," assented Prudence. "If I'm not here when you get back, don't worry. I'm going for a walk myself."

Their work done irreproachably, the twins and Connie went to the haymow and lay on the hay, still silent. The twins, buoyant though they were, could not so quickly recover from a shock like this. So intent were they upon the shadows among the cobwebs that they heard no sound from below until their father's head appeared at the top of the ladder.

"Come up," they invited hospitably but seriously.

He did so at once, and stood before them, his face rather flushed, his manner a little constrained, but looking rather satisfied with himself on the whole.

"Twins," he said, "I didn't know you were so crazy about silk stockings. We just thought it would be a good joke—but it was a little too good. It was a boomerang. I don't know when I've felt so contemptible. So I went down and got you some real

silk stockings—a dollar and a half a pair,—and I'm glad to clear my conscience so easily."

The twins blushed. "It—it was a good joke, papa," Carol assured him shyly. "It was a dandy. But—all the girls at school have silk stockings for best, and—we've been wanting them—forever. And—honestly, father, I don't know when I've had such a—such a spell of indigestion as when I saw those stockings were April Fool."

"Indigestion," scoffed Connie, restored to normal by her father's handsome amends.

"Yes, indigestion," declared Lark. "You know, papa, that funny, hollow, hungry feeling—when you get a shock. That's nervous indigestion,—we read it in a medicine ad. They've got pills for it. But it was a good joke. We saw that right at the start."

"And we didn't expect anything like this. It—is very generous of you, papa. Very!"

But he noticed that they made no move to unwrap the box. It still lay between them on the hay, where he had tossed it. Evidently their confidence in him had been severely shattered.

He sat down and unwrapped it himself. "They are guaranteed," he explained, passing out the little pink slips gravely, "so when they wear holes you get another pair for nothing." The twins' faces had brightened wonderfully. "I will never play that kind of a trick again, twins, so you needn't be suspicious of me. And say! Whenever you want anything so badly it makes you feel like that, come and talk it over. We'll manage some way. Of course, we're always a little hard up, but we can generally scrape

up something extra from somewhere. And we will. You mustn't—feel like that—about things. Just tell me about it. Girls are so—kind of funny, you know."

The twins and Connie rushed to the house to try the "feel" of the first, adored silk stockings. They donned them, admired them, petted Connie, idolized their father, and then removing them, tied them carefully in clean white tissue-paper and deposited them in the safest corner of the bottom drawer of their dresser. Then they lay back on the bed, thinking happily of the next class party! Silk stockings! Ah!

"Can't you just imagine how we'll look in our new white dresses, Lark, and our patent leather pumps,—with silk stockings! I really feel there is nothing sets off a good complexion as well as real silk stockings!"

They were interrupted in this delightful occupation by the entrance of Fairy. The twins had quickly realized that the suggestion for their humiliating had come from her, and their hearts were sore, but being good losers—at least, as good losers as real live folks can be—they wouldn't have admitted it for the world.

"Come on in, Fairy," said Lark cordially. "Aren't we lazy to-day?"

"Twins," said Fairy, self-conscious for the first time in the twins' knowledge of her, "I suppose you know it was I who suggested that idiotic little stocking stunt. It was awfully hateful of me, and so I bought you some real silk stockings with my own spending money, and here they are, and you needn't thank me for I never could be fond of myself again until I squared things with you."

The twins had to admit that it was really splendid of Fairy, and they thanked her with unfeigned zeal.

"But papa already got us a pair, and so you can take these back and get your money again. It was just as sweet of you, Fairy, and we thank you, and it was perfectly dear and darling, but we have papa's now, and—"

"Good for papa!" Fairy cried, and burst out laughing at the joke that proved so expensive for the perpetrators. "But you shall have my burnt offering, too. It serves us both right, but especially me, for it was my idea."

And Fairy walked away feeling very gratified and generous.

Only girls who have wanted silk stockings for a "whole lifetime" can realize the blissful state of the parsonage twins. They lay on the bed planning the most impossible but magnificent things they would do to show their gratitude, and when Aunt Grace stopped at their door they leaped up to overwhelm her with caresses just because of their gladness.

She waved them away with a laugh. "April Fool, twins," she said, with a voice so soft that it took all the sting from the words. "I brought you some real silk stockings for a change." And she tossed them a package and started out of the room to escape their thanks. But she stopped in surprise when the girls burst into merry laughter.

"Oh, you silk stockings!" Carol cried. "Three pairs! You darling sweet old auntie! You would come up here to tease us, would you? But papa gave us a pair, and Fairy gave us a pair, and—"

"They did! Why, the silly things!" And the gentle woman looked as seriously vexed as she ever did look—she had so wanted to give them the first silk-stocking experience herself.

"Oh, here you are," cried Prudence, stepping quickly in, and speaking very brightly to counterbalance the gloom she had expected to encounter. She started back in some dismay when she saw the twins rolling and rocking with laughter, and Aunt Grace leaning against the dresser for support, with Connie on the floor, quite speechless.

"Good for you, twins,—that's the way to take hard knocks," she said. "It wasn't a very nice trick, though of course papa didn't understand how you felt about silk stockings. It wasn't his fault. But Fairy and I ought to be ashamed, and we are. I went out and got you some real genuine silk ones myself, so you needn't pray for them any more."

Prudence was shocked, a little hurt, at the outburst that followed her words.

"Well, such a family!" Aunt Grace exclaimed. And then Carol pulled her bodily down beside her on the bed and for a time they were all incapable of explanations.

"What is the joke?" Prudence asked, again and again, smiling,—but still feeling a little pique. She had counted on gladdening their sorry little hearts!

"Stockings, stockings—Oh, such a family!" shrieked Carol.

"There's no playing jokes on the twins," said Aunt Grace weakly. "It takes the whole family to square up. It's too expensive."

Then Lark explained, and Prudence sat down and joined the merriment, which waxed so noisy that Mr. Starr from the library and Fairy from the kitchen, ran in to investigate.

"April Fool, April Fool," cried Carol, "We never played a trick like this, Larkie—this is our masterpiece."

"You're the nicest old things that ever lived," said Lark, still laughing, but with great warmth and tenderness in her eyes and her voice. "But you can take the stockings back and save your money if you like—we love you just as much."

But this the happy donors stoutly refused to do. The twins had earned this wealth of hose, and finally, wiping their eyes, the twins began to smooth their hair and adjust their ribbons and belts.

"What's the matter?" "Where are you going?" "Will you buy the rest of us some silk stockings?" queried the family, comic-opera effect.

"Where are we going?" Carol repeated, surprised, seeming to feel that any one should know where they were going, though they had not spoken.

"We're going to call on our friends, of course," explained Lark.

"Of course," said Carol, jabbing her hair pins in with startling energy. "And we've got to hurry. We must go to Mattie's, and Jean's, and Betty's, and Fan's, and Birdie's, and Alice's, and—say, Lark, maybe we'd better divide up and each take half. It's kind of late,—and we mustn't miss any."

"Well, what on earth!" gasped Prudence, while the

others stared in speechless amazement.

"For goodness' sake, Carol, hurry. We have to get clear out to Minnie's to-night, if we miss our supper."

"But what's the idea? What for? What are you talking about?"

"Why, you silly thing," said Carol patiently, "we have to go and tell our friends that we've got four pairs of silk stockings, of course. I wouldn't miss this afternoon for the world. And we'll go the rounds together, Lark. I want to see how they take it," she smiled at them benignly. "I can imagine their excitement. And we owe it to the world to give it all the excitement we can. Prudence says so."

Prudence looked startled. "Did I say that?"

"Certainly. You said pleasure—but excitement's very pleasing, most of the time. Come on, Larkie, we'll have to walk fast."

And with a fond good-by to the generous family, the twins set out to spread the joyful tidings, Lark pausing at the door just long enough to explain gravely, "Of course, we won't tell them—er—just how it happened, you know. Lots of things in a parsonage need to be kept dark. Prudence says so herself."

CHAPTER IV

HOW CAROL SPOILED THE WEDDING

A DAY in June,—the kind of day that poets have rhymed and lovers have craved since time began. On the side porch of the parsonage, in a wide hammock, lay Aunt Grace, looking languidly through half-closed lids at the girls beneath her on the step. Prudence, although her face was all a-dream, bent conscientiously over the bit of linen in her hands. And Fairy, her piquantly bright features clouded with an unwonted frown, crumpled a letter in her hand.

"I do think men are the most aggravating things that ever lived," she declared, with annoyance in her voice.

The woman in the hammock smiled slightly, and did not speak. Prudence carefully counted ten threads, and solemnly drew one before she voiced her question.

"What is he saying now?"

"Why, he's still objecting to my having dates with the other boys." Fairy's voice was vibrant with grief. "He does make me wild! Aunt Grace, you can't imagine. Last fall I mentioned casually that I was sure he wouldn't object to my having lecture course dates—I was too hard up to buy a ticket for myself; they cost four dollars, and aren't worth it, either. And what did he do but send me eight dollars to buy two sets of tickets! Then this spring, when the baseball season opened, he sent me season tickets to all the games suggesting that my financial stringency could not be pleaded as an excuse. Ever since he went to Chicago last fall we've been fighting because the boys bring me home from parties. I suppose he had to go and learn to be a pharmacist, but—it's hard on me. He wants me to patter along by myself like a—

like—like a hen!" Fairy said "hen" very crossly!

"It's a shame," said Prudence sympathetically. "That's just what it is. You wouldn't say a word to his taking girls home from things, would you?"

"Hum,—that's a different matter," said Fairy more thoughtfully. "He hasn't wanted to yet. You see, he's a man and can go by himself without having it look as though nobody wanted to be seen with him. And he's a stranger over there, and doesn't need to get chummy with the girls. The boys here all know me, and ask me to go, and—a man, you see, can just be passive and nothing happens. But a girl's got to be downright negative, and it's no joke. One misses so many good times. You see the cases are different, Prue."

"Yes, that's so," Prudence assented absent-mindedly, counting off ten more threads.

"Then you would object if he had dates?" queried Aunt Grace smilingly.

"Oh, no, not at all,—if there was any occasion for it—but there isn't. And I think I would be justified in objecting if he deliberately made occasions for himself, don't you?"

"Yes, that would be different," Prudence chimed in, such "miles away" in her voice, that Fairy turned on her indignantly.

"Prudence Starr, you make me wild," she said. "Can't you drop that everlasting hemstitching, embroidering, tatting, crocheting, for ten minutes to talk to me? What in the world are you going to do with it all, anyhow? Are you intending to carpet your floors with it?"

"This is a napkin," Prudence explained good-naturedly. "The set cost me fifteen dollars." She sighed.

"Did the veil come?" The clouds vanished magically from Fairy's face, and she leaned forward with that joy of wedding anticipation that rules in woman-world.

"Yes, it's beautiful. Come and see it. Wait until I pull four more threads. It's gorgeous."

"I still think you're making a great mistake," declared Fairy earnestly. "I don't believe in big showy church weddings. You'd better change it yet. A little home affair with just the family,—that's the way to do it. All this satin-gown, orange-blossom elaboration with curious eyes staring up and down—ugh! It's all wrong."

Prudence dropped the precious fifteen-dollar-a-set napkin in her lap and gazed at Fairy anxiously. "I know you think so, Fairy," she said. "You've told me so several times." Fairy's eyes twinkled, but Prudence had no intention of sarcasm. "But I can't help it, can I? We had quite settled on the home wedding, but when the twins discovered that the members felt hurt at being left out, father thought we'd better change over."

"Well, I can't see that the members have any right to run our wedding. Besides, it wouldn't surprise me if the twins made it up because they wanted a big fuss."

"But some of the members spoke to father."

"Oh, just common members that don't count for much—and it was mighty poor manners of 'em, too,

if you'll excuse me for saying so."

"And you must admit, Fairy, that it is lovely of the Ladies' Aid to give that dinner at the hotel for us."

"Well, they'll get their money's worth of talk out of it afterward. It's a big mistake.—What on earth are the twins doing out there? Is that Jim Forrest with them? Listen how they are screaming with laughter! Would you ever believe those twins are past fifteen, and nearly through their junior year? They haven't as much sense put together as Connie has all alone."

"Come and see the veil," said Prudence, rising. But she dropped back on the step again as Carol came rushing toward them at full speed, with Lark and a tall young fellow trailing slowly, laughing, behind her.

"The mean things!" she gasped. "They cheated!" She dropped a handful of pennies in her aunt's lap as she lay in the hammock. "We'll take 'em to Sunday-school and give 'em to the heathen, that's what we'll do. They cheated!"

"Yes, infant, who cheated, and how, and why? And whence the startling array of pennies? And why this unwonted affection for the heathen?" mocked Fairy.

"Trying to be a blank verse, Fairy? Keep it up, you haven't far to go!—There they are! Look at them, Aunt Grace. They cheated. They tried to get all my hard-earned pennies by nefarious methods, and—"

"And so Carol stole them all, and ran! Sit down, Jim. My, it's hot. Give me back my pennies, Carol."

"The heathen! The heathen!" insisted Carol. "Not a

penny do you get. You see, Aunt Grace, we were matching pennies,—you'd better not mention it to father. We've turned over a new leaf now, and quit for good. But we were matching—and they made a bargain that whenever it was my turn, one of them would throw heads and one tails, and that way I never could win anything. And I didn't catch on until I saw Jim wink, and so of course I thought it was only right to give the pennies to the heathen."

"Mercy, Prudence," interrupted Lark. "Are you doing another napkin? This is the sixteenth dozen, isn't it? You'd better donate some of them to the parsonage, I think. I was so ashamed when Miss Marsden came to dinner. She opened her napkin out wide, and her finger went right through a hole. I was mortified to death—and Carol laughed. It seems to me with three grown women in the house we could have holeless napkins, one for company, anyhow."

"How is your mother, Jim?"

"Just fine, Miss Prudence, thank you. She said to tell you she would send a basket of red Junes to-morrow, if you want them. The twins can eat them, I know. Carol ate twenty-two when they were out Saturday."

"Yes, I did, and I'm glad of it," said Carol stoutly. "Such apples you never saw, Prudence. They're about as big as a thimble, and two-thirds core. They're good, they're fine, I'll say that,—but there's nothing to them. I could have eaten as many again if Jim hadn't been counting out loud, and I got kind of ashamed because every one was laughing. If I had a ranch as big as yours, Jim, I'll bet you a dollar I'd have apples bigger than a dime!"

"'Bet you a dollar,'" quoted Fairy.

"Well, I'll wager my soul, if that sounds more like Shakespeare. Don't go, Jim, we're not fighting. This is just the way Fairy and I make love to each other. You're perfectly welcome to stay, but be careful of your grammar, for now that Fairy's a senior—will be next year, if she lives—she even tries to teach father the approved method of doing a ministerial sneeze in the pulpit."

"Think I'd better go," decided the tall good-looking youth, laughing as he looked with frank boyish admiration into Carol's sparkling face. "With Fairy after my grammar, and you to criticize my manner and my morals, I see right now that a parsonage is no safe place for a farmer's son." And laughing again, he thrust his cap into his pocket, and walked quickly out the new cement parsonage walk. But at the gate he paused to call back, "Don't make a mistake, Carol, and use the heathen's pennies for candy."

The girls on the porch laughed, and five pairs of eyes gazed after the tall figure rapidly disappearing.

"He's nice," said Prudence.

"Yes," assented Carol. "I've got a notion to marry him after a little. That farm of his is worth about ten thousand."

"Are you going to wait until he asks you?"

"Certainly not! Anybody can marry a man after he asks her. The thing to do, if you want to be really original and interesting, is to marry him before he asks you and surprise him."

"Yes," agreed Lark, "if you wait until he asks you

he's likely to think it over once too often and not ask you at all."

"Doesn't that sound exactly like a book, now?" demanded Carol proudly. "Fairy couldn't have said that!"

"No," said Fairy, "I couldn't. Thank goodness!—I have what is commonly known as brains. Look it up in the dictionary, twins. It's something you ought to know about."

"Oh, Prudence," cried Lark dramatically, "I forgot to tell you. You can't get married after all."

For ten seconds Prudence, as well as Fairy and their aunt, stared in speechless amazement. Then Prudence smiled.

"Oh, can't I? What's the joke now?"

"Joke! It's no joke. Carol's sick, that's what's the joke. You can't be married without Carol, can you?"

A burst of gay laughter greeted this announcement.

"Carol sick! She acts sick!"

"She looks sick!"

"Where is she sick?"

Carol leaned limply back against the pillar, trying to compose her bright face into a semblance of illness. "In my tummy," she announced weakly.

This called forth more laughter. "It's her conscience," said Fairy.

"It's matching pennies. Maybe she swallowed one."

"It's probably those two pieces of pie she ate for dinner, and the one that vanished from the pantry shortly after," suggested Aunt Grace.

Carol sat up quickly. "Welcome home, Aunt Grace!" she cried. "Did you have a pleasant visit?"

"Carol," reproved Prudence.

"I didn't mean it for impudence, auntie," said Carol, getting up and bending affectionately over the hammock, gently caressing the brown hair just beginning to silver about her forehead. "But it does amuse me so to hear a lady of your age and dignity indulge in such lavish conversational exercises."

Lark swallowed with a forced effort. "Did it hurt, Carol? How did you get it all out in one breath?"

"Lark, I do wish you wouldn't gulp that way when folks use big words," said Fairy. "It looks—awful."

"Well, I won't when I get to be as old and crabbed as—father," said Lark. "Sit down, Carol, and remember you're sick."

Carol obediently sat down, and looked sicker than ever.

"You can laugh if you like," she said, "I am sick, at least, I was this afternoon. I've been feeling very queer for three or four days. I don't think I'm quite over it yet."

"Pie! You were right, Aunt Grace! That's the way pie works."

"It's not pie at all," declared Carol heatedly. "And I didn't take that piece out of the pantry, at least, not exactly. I caught Connie sneaking it, and I gave her a

good calling down, and she hung her head and slunk away in disgrace. But she had taken such big bites that it looked sort of unsanitary, so I thought I'd better finish it before it gathered any germs. But it's not pie. Now that I think of it, it was my head where I was sick. Don't you remember, Lark, I said my head ached?"

"Yes, and her eyes got red and bleary when she was reading. And—and there was something else, too, Carol, what—"

"Your eyes are bloodshot, Carol. They do look bad." Prudence examined them closely. "Now, Carol Starr, don't you touch another book or magazine until after the wedding. If you think I want a bloodshot bridesmaid, you're mistaken."

They all turned to look across the yard at Connie, just turning in. Connie always walked, as Carol said, "as if she mostly wasn't there." But she usually "arrived" by the time she got within speaking distance of her sister.

"Goodness, Prue, aren't you going to do anything but eat after you move to Des Moines? Carol and I were counting the napkins last night,—was it a hundred and seventy-six, Carol, or—some awful number I know. Carol piled them up in two piles and we kneeled on them to say our prayers, and—I can't say for sure, but I think Carol pushed me. Anyhow, I lost my balance, and usually I'm pretty well balanced. I toppled over right after 'God save,' and Carol screamed 'the napkins'—Prue's wedding napkins! It was an awful funny effect; I couldn't finish my prayers."

"Carol Starr! Fifteen years old and—"

"That's a very much exaggerated story, Prue. Connie blamed it on me as usual. She piled them up herself to see if there were two feet of them,—she put her stockings on the floor first so the dust wouldn't rub off. It was Lark's turn to sweep and you know how Lark sweeps, and Connie was very careful, indeed, and—"

"Come on, Fairy, and see the veil!"

"The veil! Did it come?"

With a joyous undignified whoop the parsonage girls scrambled to their feet and rushed indoors in a fine Kilkenny jumble. Aunt Grace looked after them, thoughtfully, smiling for a second, and then with a girlish shrug of her slender shoulders she slipped out and followed them inside.

The last thing that night, before she said her prayers, Prudence carried a big bottle of witch hazel into the twins' room. Both were sleeping, but she roused Carol, and Lark turned over to listen.

"You must bathe your eyes with this, Carol. I forgot to tell you. What would Jerry say if he had a bleary-eyed bridesmaid!"

And although the twins grumbled and mumbled about the idiotic nonsense of getting-married folks, Carol obediently bathed the bloodshot eyes. For in their heart of hearts, every one of the parsonage girls held this wedding to be the affair of prime importance, national and international, as well as just plain Methodist.

The twins were undeniably lazy, and slept as late of mornings as the parsonage law allowed. So it was that when Lark skipped into the dining-room, three

minutes late for breakfast, she found the whole family, with the exception of Carol, well in the midst of their meal.

"She was sick," she began quickly, then interrupting herself,—"Oh, good morning! Beg pardon for forgetting my manners. But Carol was sick, Prudence, and I hope you and Fairy are ashamed of yourselves—and auntie, too—for making fun of her. She couldn't sleep all night, and rolled and tossed, and her head hurt and she talked in her sleep, and—"

"I thought she didn't sleep."

"Well, she didn't sleep much, but when she did she mumbled and said things and—"

Then the dining-room door opened again, and Carol—her hair about her shoulders, her feet bare, enveloped in a soft and clinging kimono of faded blue—stalked majestically into the room. There was woe in her eyes, and her voice was tragic.

"It is gone," she said. "It is gone!"

Her appearance was uncanny to say the least, and the family gazed at her with some concern, despite the fact that Carol's vagaries were so common as usually to elicit small respect.

"Gone!" she cried, striking her palms together. "Gone!"

"If you do anything to spoil that wedding, papa'll whip you, if you are fifteen years old," said Fairy.

Lark sprang to her sister's side. "What's gone, Carrie?" she pleaded with sympathy, almost with tears. "What's gone? Are you out of your head?"

"No! Out of my complexion," was the dramatic answer.

Even Lark fell back, for the moment, stunned. "Y-your complexion," she faltered.

"Look! Look at me, Lark. Don't you see? My complexion is gone—my beautiful complexion that I loved. Look at me! Oh, I would gladly have sacrificed a leg, or an arm, a—rib or an eye, but not my dear complexion!"

Sure enough, now that they looked carefully, they could indeed perceive that the usual soft creaminess of Carol's skin was prickled and sparred with ugly red splotches. Her eyes were watery, shot with blood. For a time they gazed in silence, then they burst into laughter.

"Pie!" cried Fairy. "It's raspberry pie, coming out, Carol!"

The corners of Carol's lips twitched slightly, and it was with difficulty that she maintained her wounded regal bearing. But Lark, always quick to resent an indignity to this twin of her heart, turned upon them angrily.

"Fairy Starr! You are a wicked unfeeling thing! You sit there and laugh and talk about pie when Carol is sick and suffering—her lovely complexion all ruined, and it was the joy of my life, that complexion was. Papa,—why don't you do something?"

But he only laughed harder than ever. "If there's anything more preposterous than Carol's vanity because of her beauty, it's Lark's vanity for her," he said.

Aunt Grace drew Carol to her side, and examined the ruined complexion closely. Then she smiled, but there was regret in her eyes.

"Well, Carol, you've spoiled your part of the wedding sure enough. You've got the measles."

Then came the silence of utter horror.

"Not the measles," begged Carol, wounded afresh. "Give me diphtheria, or smallpox, or—or even leprosy, and I'll bear it bravely and with a smile, but it shall not be said that Carol's measles spoiled the wedding."

"Oh, Carol," wailed Prudence, "don't have the measles,—please don't. I've waited all my life for this wedding,—don't spoil it."

"Well, it's your own fault, Prue," interrupted Lark. "If you hadn't kept us all cooped up when we were little we'd have had measles long ago. Now, like as not the whole family'll have 'em, and serve you right. No self-respecting family has any business to grow up without having the measles."

"What shall we do now?" queried Constance practically.

"Well, I always said it was a mistake," said Fairy. "A big wedding—"

"Oh, Fairy, please don't tell me that again. I know it so well. Papa, whatever shall we do? Maybe Jerry hasn't had them either."

"Why, it's easily arranged," said Lark. "We'll just postpone the wedding until Carol's quite well again."

"Bad luck," said Connie.

"Too much work," said Fairy.

"Well, she can't get married without Carol, can she?" ejaculated Lark.

"Are you sure it's measles, Aunt Grace?"

"Yes, it's measles."

"Then," said Fairy, "we'll get Alice Bird or Katie Free to bridesmaid with Lark. They are the same size and either will do all right. She can wear Carol's dress. You won't mind that, will you, Carol?"

"No," said Carol moodily, "of course I won't. The only real embroidery dress I ever had in my life—and haven't got that yet! But go ahead and get anybody you like. I'm hoodooed, that's what it is. It's a punishment because you and Jim cheated yesterday, Lark."

"What did you do?" asked Connie. "You seem to be getting the punishment!"

"Shall we have Alice or Katie? Which do you prefer, Lark?"

"You'll have to get them both," was the stoic answer. "I won't bridesmaid without Carol."

"Don't be silly, Lark. You'll have to."

"Then wait for Carol."

"Papa, you must make her."

"No," said Prudence slowly, with a white face. "We'll postpone it. I won't get married without the whole family."

"I said right from the start—"

"Oh, yes, Fairy, we know what you said," interjected Carol. "We know how you'll get married. First man that gets moonshine enough into his head to propose to you, you'll trot him post haste to the justice before he thinks twice."

In the end, the wedding was postponed a couple of months,—for both Connie and Fairy took the measles. But when at last, the wedding party, marshalled by Connie with a huge white basket of flowers, trailed down the time-honored aisle of the Methodist church, it was without one dissenting voice pronounced the crowning achievement of Mr. Starr's whole pastorate.

"I was proud of us, Lark," Carol told her twin, after it was over, and Prudence had gone, and the girls had wept themselves weak on each other's shoulders. "We get so in the habit of doing things wrong that I half expected myself to pipe up ahead of father with the ceremony. It seems—awful—without Prudence, —but it's a satisfaction to know that she was the best married bride Mount Mark has ever seen."

"Jerry looked awfully handsome, didn't he? Did you notice how he glowed at Prudence? I wish you were artistic, Carol, so you could illustrate my books. Jerry'd make a fine illustration."

"We looked nice, too. We're not a bad-looking bunch when you come right down to facts. Of course, it is fine to be as smart as you are, Larkie, but I'm not jealous. We're mighty lucky to have both beauty and brains in our twin-ship,—and since one can't have both, I may say I'd just as lief be pretty. It's so much easier."

"Carol!"

"What?"

"We're nearly grown up now. We'll have to begin to settle down. Prudence says so."

For a few seconds Carol wavered, tremulous. Then she said pluckily, "All right. Just wait till I powder my nose, will you? It gets so shiny when I cry."

"Carol!"

"What?"

"Isn't the house still?"

"Yes—ghastly."

"I never thought Prudence was much of a chatter-box, but—listen! There isn't a sound."

Carol held out a hand, and Lark clutched it desperately.

"Let's—let's go find the folks. This is—awful! Little old Prudence is gone!"

CHAPTER V

THE SERENADE

A SUBJECT that never failed to arouse the sarcasm and the ire of Fairy was that of the Slaughter-house Quartette. This was composed of four young men—men quite outside the pale as far as the parsonage was concerned—the disreputable

characters of the community, familiar in the local jail for frequent bursts of intoxication. They slouched, they smoked, they lounged, they leered. The churches knew them not. They were the slum element, the Bowery of Mount Mark, Iowa.

Prudence, in her day, had passed them by with a shy slight nod and a glance of tender pity. Fairy and Lark, and even Connie, sailed by with high heads and scornful eyes,—haughty, proud, icily removed. But Carol, by some weird and inexplicable fancy, treated them with sweet and gracious solicitude, quite friendly. Her smile as she passed was as sweet as for her dearest friend. Her "Good morning,—isn't this glorious weather?" was as affably cordial as her, "Breakfast is ready, papa!"

This was the one subject of dispute between the twins.

"Oh, please don't, Carol, it does make me so ashamed," Lark entreated.

"You mustn't be narrow-minded, Larkie," Carol argued. "We're minister's girls, and we've got to be a good influence,—an encouragement to the—er, weak and erring, you know. Maybe my smiles will be an inspiration to them."

And on this point Carol stood firm even against the tears of her precious twin.

One evening at the dinner table Fairy said, with a mocking smile, "How are your Slaughter-house friends to-day, Carol? When I was at the dentist's I saw you coming along, beaming at them in your own inimitable way."

"Oh, they seemed all right," Carol answered, with

a deprecating glance toward her father and her aunt.

"I see by last night's paper that Guy Fleisher is just out after his last thirty days up," Fairy continued solicitously. "Did he find his incarceration trying?"

"I didn't discuss it with him," Carol said indignantly. "I never talk to them. I just say 'Good morning' in Christian charity."

Aunt Grace's eyes were smiling as always, but for the first time Carol felt that the smiles were at, instead of with, her.

"You would laugh to see her, Aunt Grace," Fairy explained. "They are generally half intoxicated, sometimes wholly. And Carol trips by, clean, white and shining. They are always lounging against the store windows or posts for support, bleary-eyed, dissipated, swaggery, staggery. Carol nods and smiles as only Carol can, 'Good morning, boys! Isn't it a lovely day? Are you feeling well?' And they grin at her and sway ingratiatingly against one another, and say, 'Mornin', Carol.' Carol is the only really decent person in town that has anything to do with them."

"Carol means all right," declared Lark angrily.

"Yes, indeed," assented Fairy, "They call them the Slaughter-house Quartette, auntie, because whenever they are sober enough to walk without police assistance, they wander through the streets slaughtering the peace and serenity of the quiet town with their rendition of all the late, disgraceful sentimental ditties. They are in many ways striking characters. I do not wholly misunderstand their attraction for romantic Carol. They are something like the troubadours of old—only more so."

Carol's face was crimson. "I don't like them," she cried, "but I'm sorry for them. I think maybe I can make them see the difference between us, me so nice and respectable you know, and them so—animalish! It may arouse their better natures—I suppose they have better natures. I want to show them that the decent element, we Christians, are sorry for them and want to make them better."

"Carol wants to be an influence," Fairy continued. "Of course, it is a little embarrassing for the rest of us to have her on such friendly terms with the most unmentionable characters in all Mount Mark. But Carol is like so many reformers,—in the presence of one great truth she has eyes for it only, ignoring a thousand other, greater truths."

"I am sorry for them," Carol repeated, more weakly, abashed by the presence of the united family. Fairy's dissertations on this subject had usually occurred in private.

Mr. Starr mentally resolved that he would talk this over with Carol when the others were not present, for he knew from her face and her voice that she was really sensitive on the subject. And he knew, too, that it is difficult to explain to the very young that the finest of ideas are not applicable to all cases by all people. But it happened that he was spared the necessity of dealing with Carol privately, for matters adjusted themselves without his assistance.

The second night following was an eventful one in the parsonage. One of the bishops of the church was in Mount Mark for a business conference with the religious leaders, and was to spend the night at the parsonage. The meeting was called for eight-thirty for the convenience of the business men concerned,

and was to be held in the church offices. The men left early, followed shortly by Fairy who designed to spend the evening at the Averys' home, testing their supply of winter apples. The twins and Connie, with the newest and most thrilling book Mr. Carnegie afforded the town, went up-stairs to lie on the bed and take turns reading aloud. And for a few hours the parsonage was as calm and peaceful as though it were not designed for the housing of merry minister's daughters.

Aunt Grace sat down-stairs darning stockings. The girls' intentions had been the best in the world, but in less than a year the family darning had fallen entirely into the capable and willing hands of the gentle chaperon.

It was half past ten. The girls had just seen their heroine rescued from a watery grave and married to her bold preserver by a minister who happened to be writing a sermon on the beach—no mention of how the license was secured extemporaneously—and with sighs of gratified sentiment they lay happily on the bed thinking it all over. And then, from beneath the peach trees clustered on the south side of the parsonage, a burst of melody arose.

"Good morning, Carrie, how are you this morning?"

The girls sat up abruptly, staring at one another, as the curious ugly song wafted in upon them. Conviction dawned slowly, sadly, but unquestionably.

The Slaughter-house Quartette was serenading Carol in return for her winsome smiles!

Carol herself was literally struck dumb. Her face grew crimson, then white. In her heart, she repeated psalms of thanksgiving that Fairy was away, and that her father and the bishop would not be in until this colossal disaster was over.

Connie was mortified. It seemed like a wholesale parsonage insult. Lark, after the first awful realization, lay back on the bed and rolled convulsively.

"You're an influence all right, Carol," she gurgled. "Will you listen to that?"

For *Rufus Rastus Johnson Brown* was the second choice of her cavaliers below in the darkness.

"Rufus Rastus," Lark cried, and then was choked with laughter. "Of course, it would be—proper if they sang hymns but—oh, listen!"

The rollicking strains of *Budweiser* were swung gaily out upon the night.

Carol writhed in anguish. The serenade was bad enough, but this unmerciful mocking derision of her adored twin was unendurable.

Then the quartette waxed sentimental. They sang, and not badly, a few old southern melodies, and started slowly around the corner of the house, still singing.

It has been said that Aunt Grace was always kind, always gentle, unsuspicious and without guile. She had heard the serenade, and promptly concluded that it was the work of some of the high-school boys who were unanimously devoted to Carol. She had a big box of chocolates up-stairs, for Connie's birthday

celebration. She could get them, and make lemonade, and—

She opened the door softly and stepped out, directly in the path of the startled youths. Full of her hospitable intent, she was not discerning as parsonage people need to be.

"Come in, boys," she said cordially, "the girls will be down in a minute."

The appearance of a guardian angel summoning them to Paradise could not have confounded them more utterly. They stumbled all over one another in trying to back away from her. She laughed softly.

"Don't be bashful. We enjoyed it very much. Yes, come right in."

Undoubtedly they would have declined if only they could have thought of the proper method of doing so. As it was, they only succeeded in shambling through the parsonage door, instinctively concealing their half-smoked cigarettes beneath their fingers.

Aunt Grace ushered them into the pleasant living-room, and ran up to summon her nieces.

Left alone, the boys looked at one another with amazement and with grief, and the leader, the touching tenor, said with true musical fervor, "Well, this is a go!"

In the meantime, the girls, with horror, had heard their aunt's invitation. What in the world did she mean? Was it a trick between her and Fairy? Had they hired the awful Slaughterers to bring this disgrace upon the parsonage? Sternly they faced her

when she opened their door.

"Come down, girls—I invited them in. I'm going to make lemonade and serve my nice chocolates. Hurry down."

"You invited them in!" echoed Connie.

"The Slaughter-house Quartette," hissed Lark.

Then Aunt Grace whirled about and stared at them. "Mercy!" she whispered, remembering for the first time Fairy's words. "Mercy! Is it—that? I thought it was high-school boys and—mercy!"

"Mercy is good," said Carol grimly.

"You'll have to put them out," suggested Connie.

"I can't! How can I?—How did I know?—What on earth,—Oh, Carol whatever made you smile at them?" she wailed helplessly. "You know how men are when they are smiled at! The bishop—"

"You'll have to get them out before the bishop comes back," said Carol. "You must. And if any of you ever give this away to father or Fairy I'll—"

"You'd better go down a minute, girls," urged their aunt. "That will be the easiest way. I'll just pass the candy and invite them to come again and then they'll go. Hurry now, and we'll get rid of them before the others come. Be as decent as you can, and it'll soon be over."

Thus adjured, with the dignity of the bishop and the laughter of Fairy ever in their thoughts, the girls arose and went down, proudly, calmly, loftily. Their inborn senses of humor came to their assistance when they entered the living-room. The Slaughter

boys looked far more slaughtered than slaughtering. They sat limply in their chairs, nervously twitching their yellowed slimy fingers, their dull eyes intent upon the worn spots in the carpet. It was funny! Even Carol smiled, not the serene sweet smile that melted hearts, but the grim hard smile of the joker when the tables are turned! She flattered herself that this wretched travesty on parsonage courtesy would be ended before there were any further witnesses to her downfall from her proud fine heights, but she was doomed to disappointment. Fairy, on the Averys' porch, had heard the serenade. After the first shock, and after the helpless laughter that followed, she bade her friends good night.

"Oh, I've just got to go," she said. "It's a joke on Carol. I wouldn't miss it for twenty-five bushels of apples,—even as good as these are."

Her eyes twinkling with delight, she ran home and waited behind the rose bushes until the moment for her appearance seemed at hand. Then she stepped into the room where her outraged sisters were stoically passing precious and luscious chocolates to tobacco-saturated youths.

"Good evening," she said. "The Averys and I enjoyed the concert, too. I do love to hear music outdoors on still nights like these. Carol, maybe your friends would like a drink. Are there any lemons, auntie? We might have a little lemonade."

Carol writhed helplessly. "I'll make it," she said, and rushed to the kitchen to vent her fury by shaking the very life out of the lemons. But she did not waste time. Her father's twinkles were nearly as bad as Fairy's own—and the bishop!

"I'd wish it would choke 'em if it wouldn't take so long," she muttered passionately, as she hurried in with the pitcher and glasses, ready to serve the "slums" with her own chaste hands.

She was just serving the melting tenor when she heard her father's voice in the hall.

"Too late," she said aloud, and with such despair in her voice that Fairy relented and mentally promised to "see her through."

Mr. Starr's eyes twinkled freely when he saw the guests in his home, and the gentle bishop's puzzled interest nearly sent them all off into laughter. Fairy had no idea of the young men's names, but she said, quickly, to spare Carol:

"We have been serenaded to-night, Doctor—you just missed it. These are the Mount Mark troubadours. You are lucky to get here in time for the lemonade."

But when she saw the bishop glance concernedly from the yellow fingers to the dull eyes and the brown-streaked mouth, her gravity nearly forsook her. The Slaughterers, already dashed to the ground by embarrassment, were entirely routed by the presence of the bishop. With incoherent apologies, they rose to their unsteady feet and in a cloud of breezy odors, made their escape.

Mr. Starr laughed a little, Aunt Grace put her arm protectingly about Carol's rigid shoulders, and the bishop said, "Well, well, well," with gentle inquiry.

"We call them the Slaughter-house Quartette," Fairy began cheerfully. "They are the lower strata of Mount Mark, and they make the nights hideous with

their choice selection of popular airs. The parsonage is divided about them. Some of us think we should treat them with proud and cold disdain. Some think we should regard them with a tender, gentle, er—smiling pity. And evidently they appreciated the smiles for they gave us a serenade in return for them. Aunt Grace did not know their history, so she invited them in, thinking they were just ordinary schoolboys. It is home mission work run aground."

The bishop nodded sympathetically. "One has to be so careful," he said. "So extremely careful with characters like those. No doubt they meant well by their serenade, but—girls especially have to be very careful. I think as a rule it is safer to let men show the tender pity and women the fine disdain. I don't imagine they would come serenading your father and me! You carried it off beautifully, girls. I am sure your father was proud of you. I was myself. I'm glad you are Methodists. Not many girls so young could handle a difficult matter as neatly as you did."

"Yes," said Mr. Starr, but his eyes twinkled toward Carol once more; "yes, indeed, I think we are well cleared of a disagreeable business."

But Carol looked at Fairy with such humble, passionate gratitude that tears came to Fairy's eyes and she turned quickly away.

"Carol is a sweet girl," she thought. "I wonder if things will work out for her just right—to make her as happy as she ought to be. She's so—lovely."

CHAPTER VI

SUBSTITUTION

THE twins came in at dinner-time wrapped in unwonted silence. Lark's face was darkened by an anxious shadow, while Carol wore an expression of heroic determination. They sat down to the table without a word, and helped themselves to fish balls with a surprising lack of interest.

"What's up?" Connie asked, when the rest of the family dismissed the matter with amused glances.

Lark sighed and looked at Carol, seeming to seek courage from that Spartan countenance.

Carol squared her shoulders.

"Well, go on," Connie urged. "Don't be silly. You know you're crazy to tell us about it, you only want to be coaxed."

Lark sighed again, and gazed appealingly at her stout-hearted twin. Carol never could resist the appeal of those pleading eyes.

"Larkie promised to speak a piece at the Sunday-school concert two weeks from to-morrow," she vouchsafed, as unconcernedly as possible.

"Mercy!" ejaculated Connie, with an astonishment that was not altogether complimentary.

"Careful, Larkie," cautioned Fairy. "You'll disgrace the parsonage if you don't watch out."

"Nonsense," declared their father, "Lark can speak as well as anybody if she just keeps a good grip on

herself and doesn't get stage fright."

Aunt Grace smiled gently.

Connie frowned. "It's a risky business," she said. "Lark can't speak any more than a rabbit, and—"

"I know it," was the humble admission.

"Don't be a goose, Con," interrupted Carol. "Of course Lark can speak a piece. She must learn it, learn it, learn it, so she can rattle it off backwards with her eyes shut. Then even if she gets scared, she can go right on and folks won't know the difference. It gets to be a habit if you know it well enough. That's the whole secret. Of course she can speak."

"How did it happen?" inquired Fairy.

"I don't know," Lark said sorrowfully. "Nothing was ever farther from my thoughts, I assure you. The first thing I knew, Mrs. Curtiss was thanking me for my promise, and Carol was marching me off like grim death."

Carol smiled, relieved now that the family commentary was over. "It was very natural. Mrs. Curtiss begged her to do it, and Lark refused. That always happens, every time the Sunday-school gives an entertainment. But Mrs. Curtiss went on to say how badly the Sunday-school needs the money, and how big a drawing card it would be for both of us twins to be on the program, one right after the other, and how well it would look for the parsonage, and it never occurred to me to warn Lark, for I never dreamed of her doing it. And all of a sudden she said, 'All right, then, I'll do it,' and Mrs. Curtiss gave her a piece and we came home. But I'm not worried about it. Lark can do anything if she only tries."

"I thought it wouldn't hurt me to try it once," Lark volunteered in her own defense.

Aunt Grace nodded, with a smile of interested approval.

"I'm proud of you, Lark, quite proud of you," her father said warmly. "It's a big thing for you to make such a plunge,—just fine."

"I'm proud of you now, too," Connie said darkly. "The question is, will we be proud of you after the concert?"

Lark sighed dolorously.

"Oh, pooh!" encouraged Carol. "Anybody can speak a silly little old piece like that. And it will look so nice to have our names right together on the program. It'll bring out all the high-school folks, sure."

"Yes, they'll come to hear Lark all right," Fairy smiled. "But she'll make it go, of course. And it will give Carol a chance to show her cleverness by telling her how to do it."

So as soon as supper was over, Carol said decidedly, "Now, Connie, you'll have to help me with the dishes the next two weeks, for Lark's got to practise on that piece. Lark, you must read it over, very thoughtfully first to get the meaning. Then just read it and read it and read it, a dozen times, a hundred times, over and over and over. And pretty soon you'll know it."

"I'll bet I don't," was the discouraging retort, as Lark, with pronounced distaste, took the slip of paper and sat down in the corner to read the "blooming

thing," as she muttered crossly to herself.

Connie and Carol did up the dishes in dreadful silence, and then Carol returned to the charge. "How many times did you read it?"

"Fourteen and a half," was the patient answer. "It's a silly thing, Carol. There's no sense to it. 'The wind went drifting o'er the lea.'"

"Oh, that's not so bad," Carol said helpfully. "I've had pieces with worse lines than that. 'The imprint of a dainty foot,' for instance. When you say, 'The wind went drifting o'er the lea,' you must kind of let your voice glide along, very rhythmically, very—"

"Windily," suggested Connie, who remained to witness the exhibition.

"You keep still, Constance Starr, or you can get out of here! It's no laughing matter I can tell you, and you have to keep out or I won't help and then—"

"I'll keep still. But it ought to be windily you know, since it's the wind. I meant it for a joke," she informed them. The twins had a very disheartening way of failing to recognize Connie's jokes—it took the life out of them.

"Now read it aloud, Lark, so I can see if you get the proper expression," Carol continued, when Connie was utterly subdued.

Lark obediently but unhappily read the quaint poem aloud and Carol said it was very good. "You must read it aloud often, very often. That'll give you a better idea of the accent. Now put it away, and don't look at it again to-night. If you keep it up too long you'll get so dead sick of it you can't speak it at

all."

For two entire weeks, the twins were changed creatures. Lark read the "blooming piece" avidly, repeatedly and with bitter hate. Carol stood grimly by, listening intently, offering curt apt criticisms. Finally, Lark "knew it," and the rest of the time was spent in practising before the mirror,—to see if she kept her face pleasant.

"For the face has a whole lot to do with it, my dear," said Carol sagely, "though the critics would never admit it."

By the evening of the Sunday-school concert—they were concerting for the sake of a hundred-dollar subscription to church repairs—Lark had mastered her recitation so perfectly that the minds of the parsonage were nearly at peace. She still felt a deep resentment toward the situation, but this was partially counterbalanced by the satisfaction of seeing her name in print, directly beneath Carol's on the program.

"Recitation_____Miss Carol Starr.
Recitation_____Miss Lark Starr."

It looked very well indeed, and the whole family took a proper interest in it. No one gave Carol's recitation a second thought. She always recited, and did it easily and well. It was quite a commonplace occurrence for her.

On the night of the concert she superintended Lark's dressing with maternal care. "You look all right," she said, "just fine. Now don't get scared, Lark. It's so silly. Remember that you know all those people by heart, you can talk a blue streak to any of

them. There's no use—"

"But I can't talk a blue streak to the whole houseful at once," Lark protested. "It makes me have such a—hollow feeling—to see so many white faces gazing up, and it's hot, and—"

"Stop that," came the stern command. "You don't want to get cold feet before you start. If you do accidentally forget once or twice, don't worry. I know the piece as well as you do, and I can prompt you from behind without any one noticing it. At first it made me awfully cross when they wanted us reciters to sit on the platform for every one to stare at. But now I'm glad of it. I'll be right beside you, and can prompt you without any trouble at all. But you won't forget." She kissed her. "You'll do fine, Larkie, just as fine as you look, and it couldn't be better than that."

Just then Connie ran in. "Fairy wants to know if you are getting stage fright, Lark? My, you do look nice! Now, for goodness' sake, Lark, remember the parsonage, and don't make a fizzle of it."

"Who says fizzle?" demanded their father from the doorway. "Never say die, my girl. Why, Lark, I never saw you look so sweet. You have your hair fixed a new way, haven't you?"

"Carol did it," was the shy reply. "It does look nice, doesn't it? I'm not scared, father, not a bit—yet! But there's a hollow feeling—"

"Get her an apple, Connie," said Carol. "It's because she didn't eat any supper. She's not scared."

"I don't want an apple. Come on, let's go down. Have the boys come?"

"No, but they'll be here in a minute. Jim's never late. I do get sore at Jim—I'd forty times rather go with him than Hartley—but he always puts off asking us until the last minute and then I have a date and you get him. I believe he does it on purpose. Come on down."

Aunt Grace looked at the pale sweet face with gratified delight, and kissed her warmly. Her father walked around her, nodding approval.

"You look like a dream," he said. "The wind a-drifting o'er the lea ne'er blew upon a fairer sight! You shall walk with me."

"Oh, father, you can't remember that you're obsolete," laughed Fairy. "The twins have attained to the dignity of boys, and aren't satisfied with the fond but sober arm of father any more. Our little twins have dates to-night, as usual nowadays."

"Aunt Grace," he said solemnly, "it's a wretched business, having a parsonage full of daughters. Just as soon as they reach the age of beauty, grace and charm, they turn their backs on their fathers and smile on fairer lads."

"You've got me, father," said Connie consolingly.

"And me,—when Babbie's in Chicago," added Fairy.

"Yes, that's some help. Connie, be an old maid. Do! I implore you."

"Oh, Connie's got a beau already," said Carol. "It's the fat Allen boy. They don't have dates yet, but they've got an awful case on. He's going to make their living by traveling with a show. You'll have to

put up with auntie—she's beyond the beauing stage!"

"Suits me," he said contentedly, "I am getting more than my deserts. Come on, Grace, we'll start."

"So will we, Connie," said Fairy.

But the boys came, both together, and the family group set out together. Carol and Hartley—one of her high-school admirers—led off by running a race down the parsonage walk. And Lark, old, worn and grave, brought up the rear with Jim Forrest. Jim was a favorite attendant of the twins. He had been graduated from high school the year previous, and was finishing off at the agricultural college in Ames. But Ames was not far from home, and he was still frequently on hand to squire the twins when squires were in demand. He was curiously generous and impartial in his attentions,—it was this which so endeared him to the twins. He made his dates by telephone, invariably. And the conversations might almost have been decreed by law.

"May I speak to one of the twins?"

The nearest twin was summoned, and then he asked:

"Have you twins got dates for the ball game?"—or the party, or the concert.

And the twin at the telephone would say, "Yes, we both have—hard luck, Jim." Or, "I have, but Carol hasn't." Sometimes it was, "No, we haven't, but we're just crazy to go." And in reply to the first Jim always answered, "That's a shame,—why didn't you remember me and hold off?" And to the second, "Well, ask her if I can come around for her." And to the third, "Good, let's all go together and have a

celebration."

For this broad-minded devotion the twins gave him a deep-seated gratitude and affection and he always stood high in their favor.

On this occasion Carol had answered the telephone, and in reply to his query she answered crossly, "Oh, Jim, you stupid thing, why didn't you phone yesterday? I would so much rather go with you than—But never mind. I have a date, but Lark hasn't. And you just called in time, too, for Harvey Lane told Hartley he was going to ask for a date."

And Jim had called back excitedly, "Bring her to the phone, quick; don't waste a minute." And Lark was called, and the date was duly scheduled.

"Are you scared, Lark?" he asked her as they walked slowly down the street toward the church.

"I'm not scared, Jim," she answered solemnly, "but I'm perfectly cavernous, if you know what that means."

"I sure do know," he said fervently, "didn't I have to do a speech at the commencement exercises? There never was a completer cavern than I was that night. But I can't figure out why folks agree to do such things when they don't have to. I had to. It was compulsory."

Lark gazed at him with limpid troubled eyes. "I can't figure out, either. I don't know why I did. It was a mistake, some way."

At the church, which was gratifyingly crowded with Sunday-school enthusiasts, the twins forsook their friends and slipped along the side aisle to the

"dressing-room,"—commonly utilized as the store room for worn-out song books, Bibles and lesson sheets. There they sat in throbbing, quivering silence with the rest of the "entertainers," until the first strains of the piano solo broke forth, when they walked sedately out and took their seats along the side of the platform—an antediluvian custom which has long been discarded by everything but Sunday-schools and graduating classes.

Printed programs had been distributed, but the superintendent called off the numbers also. Not because it was necessary, but because superintendents have to do something on such occasions and that is the only way to prevent superfluous speech-making.

The program went along smoothly, with no more stumbles than is customary at such affairs, and nicely punctuated with hand clappings. When the superintendent read, "Recitation—Miss Carol Starr," the applause was enthusiastic, for Carol was a prime favorite in church and school and town. With sweet and charming nonchalance she tripped to the front of the platform and gave a graceful inclination of her proud young head in response to the applause. Then her voice rang out, and the room was hushed. Nobody ever worried when Carol spoke a piece. Things always went all right. And back to her place she walked, her face flushed, her heart swelling high with the gratification of a good deed well done.

She sat down by Lark, glad she had done it, glad it was over, and praying that Lark would come off as well.

Lark was trembling.

"Carol," she whispered, "I—I'm scared."

Instantly the triumph left Carol's heart. "You're not," she whispered passionately, gripping her twin's hand closely, "you are not, you're all right."

Lark trembled more violently. Her head swayed a little. Bright flashes of light were blinding her eyes, and her ears were ringing. "I—can't," she muttered thickly. "I'm sick."

Carol leaned close to her and began a violent train of conversation, for the purpose of distracting her attention. Lark grew more pale.

"Recitation—Miss Lark Starr."

Again the applause rang out.

Lark did not move. "I can't," she whispered again. "I can't."

"Lark, Lark," begged Carol desperately. "You must go, you must. 'The wind went drifting o'er the lea,'—it's easy enough. Go on, Lark. You must."

Lark shook her head. "Mmmmm," she murmured indistinctly.

"Remember the parsonage," begged Carol. "Think of Prudence. Think of papa. Look, there he is, right down there. He's expecting you, Lark. You must!"

Lark tried to rise. She could not. She could not see her father's clear encouraging face for those queer flashes of light.

"You can," whispered Carol. "You can do anything if you try. Prudence says so."

People were craning their necks, and peering

curiously up to the second row where the twins sat side by side. The other performers nudged one another, smiling significantly. The superintendent creaked heavily across the platform and beckoned with one plump finger.

"I can't," Lark whispered, "I'm sick."

"Lark,—Lark," called the superintendent.

Carol sighed bitterly. Evidently it was up to her. With a grim face, she rose from her chair and started out on the platform. The superintendent stared at her, his lips parting. The people stared at her too, and smiled, and then laughed. Panic-stricken, her eyes sought her father's face. He nodded quickly, and his eyes approved.

"Good!" His lips formed the word, and Carol did not falter again. The applause was nearly drowned with laughter as Carol advanced for her second recitation.

"The wind went drifting o'er the lea," she began,—her voice drifting properly on the words,—and so on to the end of the piece.

Most of the audience, knowing Lark's temperament, had concluded that fear prevented her appearance, and understood that Carol had come to her twin's rescue for the reputation of the parsonage. The applause was deafening as she went back. It grew louder as she sat down with a comforting little grin at Lark. Then as the clapping continued, something of her natural impishness entered her heart.

"Lark," she whispered, "go out and make a bow."

"Mercy!" gasped Lark. "I didn't do anything."

"It was supposed to be you—go on, Lark! Hurry! You've got to! Think what a joke it will be."

Lark hesitated, but Carol's dominance was compelling.

"Do as I tell you," came the peremptory order, and Lark arose from her chair, stepped out before the astonished audience and made a slow and graceful bow.

This time the applause ran riot, for people of less experience than those of Mount Mark could tell that the twins were playing a game. As it continued, Carol caught Larkin's hand in hers, and together they stepped out once more, laughing and bowing right and left.

Lark was the last one in that night, for she and Jim celebrated her defeat with two ice-cream sodas a piece at the corner drug store.

"I disgraced the parsonage," she said meekly, as she stepped into the family circle, waiting to receive her.

"Indeed you didn't," said Fairy. "It was too bad, but Carol passed it off nicely, and then, turning it into a joke that way took all the embarrassment out of it. It was perfectly all right, and we weren't a bit ashamed."

"And you did look awfully sweet when you made your bow," Connie said warmly,—for when a member of the family was down, no one ventured a laugh, laugh-loving though they were.

Curious to say, the odd little freak of substitution

only endeared the twins to the people of Mount Mark the more.

"By ginger, you can't beat them bloomin' twins," said Harvey Reel, chuckling admiringly. And no one disagreed.

CHAPTER VII

MAKING MATCHES

AUNT GRACE sat in a low rocker with a bit of embroidery in her hands. And Fairy sat at the table, a formidable array of books before her. Aunt Grace was gazing idly at her sewing basket, a soft smile on her lips. And Fairy was staring thoughtfully into the twilight, a soft glow in her eyes. Aunt Grace was thinking of the jolly parsonage family, and how pleasant it was to live with them. And Fairy was thinking—ah, Fairy was twenty, and twenty-year-olds always stare into the twilight, with dreamy far-seeing eyes.

In upon this peaceful scene burst the twins, flushed, tempestuous, in spite of their seventeen years. Their hurry to speak had rendered them incapable of speech, so they stood in the doorway panting breathlessly for a moment, while Fairy and her aunt, withdrawn thus rudely from dreamland, looked at them interrogatively.

"Yes, I think so, too," began Fairy, and the twins endeavored to crush her with their lofty scorn. But it

is not easy to express lofty scorn when one is red in the face, perspirey and short of breath. So the twins decided of necessity to overlook the offense just this once.

Finally, recovering their vocal powers simultaneously, they cried in unison:

"Duckie!"

"Duck! In the yard! Do you mean a live one? Where did it come from?" ejaculated their aunt.

"They mean Professor Duck of their freshman year," explained Fairy complacently. "It's nothing. The twins always make a fuss over him. They feel grateful to him for showing them through freshman science—that's all."

"That's all," gasped Carol. "Why, Fairy Starr, do you know he's employed by the—Society of—a—a Scientific Research Organization—or something—in New York City, and gets four thousand dollars a year and has prospects—all kinds of prospects!"

"Yes, I know it. You haven't seen him, auntie. He's tall, and has wrinkles around his eyes, and a dictatorial nose, and steel gray eyes. He calls the twins song-birds, and they're so flattered they adore him. He sends them candy for Christmas. You know that Duckie they rave so much about. It's the very man. Is he here?"

The twins stared at each other in blank exasperation for a full minute. They knew that Fairy didn't deserve to hear their news, but at the same time they did not deserve such bitter punishment as having to refrain from talking about it,—so they swallowed again, sadly, and ignored her.

"He's in town," said Lark.

"Going to stay a week," added Carol.

"And he said he wanted to have lots of good times with us, and so—we—why, of course it was very sudden, and we didn't have time to ask—"

"But parsonage doors are always open—"

"And I don't know how he ever wormed it out of us, but—one of us—"

"I can't remember which one!"

"Invited him to come for dinner to-night, and he's coming."

"Goodness," said Aunt Grace. "We were going to have potato soup and toast."

"It'll keep," said Carol. "Of course we're sorry to inconvenience you at this late hour, but Larkie and I will tell Connie what to do, so you won't have much bother. Let's see, now, we must think up a pretty fair meal. Four thousand a year—and prospects!"

Aunt Grace turned questioning eyes toward the older sister.

"All right," said Fairy, smiling. "It's evidently settled. Think up your menu, twins, and put Connie to work."

"Is he nice?" Aunt Grace queried.

"Yes, I think he is. He used to go with our college bunch some. I know him pretty well. He brought me home from things a time or two."

Carol leaned forward and looked at her handsome

sister with sudden intentness. "He asked about you," she said, keen eyes on Fairy's. "He asked particularly about you."

"Did he? Thanks. Yes, he's not bad. He's pretty good in a crowd."

By the force of her magnetic gaze, Carol drew Lark out of the room, and the door closed behind them. A few minutes later they returned. There was about them an air of subdued excitement, suggestive of intrigue, that Fairy found disturbing.

"You needn't plan any nonsense, twins," she cautioned. "He's no beau of mine."

"Of course not," they assured her pleasantly. "We're too old for mischief. Seventeen, and sensible for our years! Say, Fairy, you'll be nice to Duckie, won't you? We're too young really to entertain him, and he's so nice we want him to have a good time. Can't you try to make it pleasant for him this week? He'll only be here a few days. Will you do that much for us?"

"Why, I would, twins, of course, to oblige you, but you know Gene's in town this week, and I've got to —"

"Oh, you leave Babbie—Gene, I mean—to us," said Carol airily. Fairy being a junior in college, and Eugene Babler a student of pharmacy in Chicago, she felt obliged to restore him to his Christian name, shortened to Gene. But the twins refused to accede to this propriety, except when they particularly wished to placate Fairy.

"You leave Gene to us," repeated Carol. "We'll amuse him. Is he coming to-night?"

"Yes, at seven-thirty."

"Let's call him up and invite him for dinner, too," suggested Lark. "And you'll do us a favor and be nice to Duckie, won't you? We'll keep Babb—er, Gene—out of the road. You phone to Gene, Carol, and—"

"I'll do my own phoning, thanks," said Fairy, rising quickly. "Yes, we'll have them both. And just as a favor to you, twins, I will help amuse your professor. You'll be good, and help, won't you?"

The twins glowed at Fairy with a warmth that seemed almost triumphant. She stopped and looked at them doubtfully. When she returned after telephoning, they were gone, and she said to her aunt:

"I'm not superstitious, but when the twins act like that, there's usually a cloud in the parsonage skylight. Prudence says so."

But the twins comported themselves most decorously. All during the week they worked like kitchen slaveys, doing chores, running errands. And they treated Fairy with a gentle consideration which almost drew tears to her eyes, though she still remembered Prudence's cloud in the parsonage skylight!

They certainly interfered with her own plans. They engineered her off on to their beloved professor at every conceivable turn. And Gene, who nearly haunted the house, had a savage gleam in his eyes quite out of accord with his usual chatty good humor. Fairy knew she was being adroitly managed, but she had promised to help the twins with "Duckie." At first she tried artistically and

unobtrusively to free herself from the complication in which her sisters had involved her. But the twins were both persistent and clever, and Fairy found herself no match for them when it came right down to business. She had no idea of their purpose,—she only knew that she and Gene were always on opposite sides of the room, the young man grinning savagely at the twins' merry prattle, and she and the professor trying to keep quiet enough to hear every word from the other corner. And if they walked, Gene was dragged off by the firm slender fingers of the friendly twins, and Fairy and the professor walked drearily along in the rear, talking inanely about the weather,—and wondering what the twins were talking about.

And the week passed. Gene finally fell off in his attendance, and the twins took a much needed rest. On Friday afternoon they flattered themselves that all was well. Gene was not coming, Fairy was in the hammock waiting for the professor. So the twins hugged each other gleefully and went to the haymow to discuss the strain and struggle of the week. And then—

"Why, the big mutt!" cried Carol, in her annoyance ignoring the Methodist grammatical boundaries, "here comes that bubbling Babler this minute. And he said he was going to New London for the day. Now we'll have to chase down there and shoo him off before Duckie comes." The twins, growling and grumbling, gathered themselves up and started. But they started too reluctantly, too leisurely. They were not in time.

Fairy sat up in the hammock with a cry of surprise, but not vexation, when Gene's angry

countenance appeared before her.

"Look here, Fairy," he began, "what's the joke? Are your fingers itching to get hold of that four thousand a year the twins are eternally bragging about? Are you trying to throw yourself into the old school-teacher's pocketbook, or what?"

"Don't be silly, Gene," she said, "come and sit down and—"

"Sit down, your grandmother!" he snapped still angrily. "Old Double D. D. will be bobbing up in a minute, and the twins'll drag me off to hear about a sick rooster, or something. He is coming, isn't he?"

"I—guess he is," she said confusedly.

"Let's cut and run, will you?" he suggested hopefully. "We can be out of sight before—Come on, Fairy, be good to me. I haven't had a glimpse or a touch of you the whole week. What do you reckon I came down here for? Come on. Let's beat it." He looked around with a worried air. "Hurry, or the twins'll get us."

Fairy hesitated, and was lost. Gene grabbed her hand, and the next instant, laughing, they were crawling under the fence at the south corner of the parsonage lawn just as the twins appeared at the barn door. They stopped. They gasped. They stared at each other in dismay.

"It was a put-up job," declared Carol.

"Now what'll we do? But Babbie's got more sense than I thought he had, I must confess. Do you suppose he was kidnaping her?"

Carol snorted derisively. "Kidnaping nothing! She

was ahead when I saw 'em. What'll we tell the professor?"

Two humbled gentle twins greeted the professor some fifteen minutes later.

"We're so sorry," Carol explained faintly. "Babbie came and he and Fairy—I guess they had an errand somewhere. We think they'll be back very soon. Fairy will be so sorry."

The professor smiled and looked quite bright.

"Are they gone?"

"Yes, but we're sure they'll be back,—that is, we're almost sure." Carol, remembering the mode of their departure, felt far less assurance on that point than she could have wished.

"Well, that's too bad," he said cheerfully. "But my loss is Babler's gain. I suppose we ought in Christian decency to give him the afternoon. Let's go out to the creek for a stroll ourselves, shall we? That'll leave him a clear field when they return. You think they'll be back soon, do you?"

He looked down the road hopefully, but whether hopeful they would return, or wouldn't, the twins could not have told. At any rate, he seemed quite impatient until they were ready to start, and then, very gaily, the three wended their way out the pretty country road toward the creek and Blackbird Lane. They had a good time, the twins always did insist that no one on earth was quite so entertaining as dear old Duckie, but in her heart Carol registered a solemn vow to have it out with Fairy when she got back. She had no opportunity that night. Fairy and Gene telephoned that they would not be home for

dinner, and the professor had gone, and the twins were sleeping soundly, when Fairy crept softly up the stairs.

But Carol did not forget her vow. Early the next morning she stalked grimly into Fairy's room, where Fairy was conscientiously bringing order out of the chaos in her bureau drawers, a thing Fairy always did after a perfectly happy day. Carol knew that, and it was with genuine reproach in her voice that she spoke at last, after standing for some two minutes watching Fairy as she deftly twirled long ribbons about her fingers and then laid them in methodical piles in separate corners of the drawers.

"Fairy," she said sadly, "you don't seem very appreciative some way. Here Larkie and I have tried so hard to give you a genuine opportunity—we've worked and schemed and kept ourselves in the background, and that's the way you serve us! It's disappointing. It's downright disheartening."

Fairy folded a blue veil and laid it on top of a white one. Then she turned. "Yes. What?" She inquired coolly.

"There are so few real chances for a woman in Mount Mark, and we felt that this was once in a lifetime. And you know how hard we worked. And then, when we relaxed our—our vigilance—just for a moment, you spoiled it all by—"

"Yes,—talk English, Carrie. What was it you tried to do for me?"

"Well, if you want plain English you can have it," said Carol heatedly. "You know what professor is, a swell position like his, and such prospects, and New

York City, and four thousand a year with a raise for next year, and we tried to give you a good fair chance to land him squarely, and—"

"To land him—"

"To get him, then! He hasn't any girl. You could have been engaged to him this minute—Professor David Arnold Duke—if you had wanted to."

"Oh, is that it?"

"Yes, that's it."

Fairy smiled. "Thank you, dear, it was sweet of you, but you're too late. I am engaged."

Carol's lips parted, closed, parted again. "You—you?"

"Exactly so."

Hope flashed into Carol's eyes. Fairy saw it, and answered swiftly.

"Certainly not. I'm not crazy about your little Prof. I am engaged to Eugene Babler." She said it with pride, not unmixed with defiance, knowing as she did that the twins considered Gene too undignified for a parsonage son-in-law. The twins were strong for parsonage dignity!

"You—are?"

"I am."

A long instant Carol stared at her. Then she turned toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to tell papa."

Fairy laughed. "Papa knows it."

Carol came slowly back and stood by the dresser again. After a short silence she moved away once more.

"Where now?"

"I'll tell Aunt Grace, then."

"Aunt Grace knows it, too."

"Does Prudence know it?"

"Yes."

Carol swallowed this bitter pill in silence.

"How long?" she inquired at last.

"About a year. Look here, Carol, I'll show you something. Really I'm glad you know about it. We're pretty young, and papa thought we ought to keep it dark a while to make sure. That's why we didn't tell you. Look at this." From her cedar chest—a Christmas gift from Gene—she drew out a small velvet jeweler's box, and displayed before the admiring eyes of Carol a plain gold ring with a modest diamond.

Carol kissed it. Then she kissed Fairy twice.

"I know you'll be awfully happy, Fairy," she said soberly. "And I'm glad of it. But—I can't honestly believe there's any man good enough for our girls. Babbie's nice, and dear, and all that, and he's so crazy about you, and—do you love him?" Her eyes were wide, rather wondering, as she put this question softly.

Fairy put her arm about her sister's shoulders, and her fine steady eyes met Carol's clearly.

"Yes," she said frankly, "I love him—with all my heart."

"Is that what makes you so—so shiny, and smiley, and starry all the time?"

"I guess it is. It is the most wonderful thing in the world, Carol. You can't even imagine it—beforehand. It is magical, it is heavenly."

"Yes, I suppose it is. Prudence says so, too. I can't imagine it, I kind of wish I could. Can't I go and tell Connie and Lark? I want to tell somebody!"

"Yes, tell them. We decided not to let you know just yet, but since—yes, tell them, and bring them up to see it."

Carol kissed her again, and went out, gently closing the door behind her. In the hallway she stopped and stared at the wall for an unseeing moment. Then she clenched and shook a stern white fist at the door.

"I don't care," she muttered, "they're not good enough for Prudence and Fairy! They're not! I just believe I despise men, all of 'em, unless it's daddy and Duck!" She smiled a little and then looked grim once more. "Eugene Babler, and a little queen like Fairy! I think that must be Heaven's notion of a joke." She sighed again. "Oh, well, it's something to have something to tell! I'm glad I found it out ahead of Lark!"

CHAPTER VIII

LARK'S LITERARY VENTURE

AS COMMENCEMENT drew near, and Fairy began planning momentous things for her graduation, a little soberness came into the parsonage life. The girls were certainly growing up. Prudence had been married a long, long time. Fairy was being graduated from college, her school-days were over, and life was just across the threshold—its big black door just slightly ajar waiting for her to press it back and catch a glimpse of what lay beyond, yes, there was a rosy tinge showing faintly through like the light of the early sun shining through the night-fog, but the door was only a little ajar! And Fairy was nearly ready to step through. It disturbed the parsonage family a great deal.

Even the twins were getting along. They were finishing high school, and beginning to prate of college and such things, but the twins were still, well, they were growing up, perhaps, but they kept jubilantly young along in the process, and their enthusiasm for diplomas and ice-cream sodas was so nearly identical that one couldn't feel seriously that the twins were tugging at their leashes.

And Connie was a freshman herself,—rather tall, a little awkward, with a sober earnest face, and with an incongruously humorous droop to the corners of her lips, and in the sparkle of her eyes.

Mr. Starr looked at them and sighed. "I tell you, Grace, it's a thankless job, rearing a family. Connie told me to-day that my collars should have straight

edges now instead of turned-back corners. And Lark reminded me that I got my points mixed up in last Sunday's lesson. I'm getting sick of this family business, I'm about ready to—"

And just then, as a clear "Father" came floating down the stairway, he turned his head alertly. "What do you want?"

"Everybody's out," came Carol's plaintive voice. "Will you come and button me up? I can't ask auntie to run clear up here, and I can't come down because I'm in my stocking feet. My new slippers pinch so I don't put them on until I have to. Oh, thanks, father, you're a dear."

After the excitement of the commencement, the commotion, the glamour, the gaiety, ordinary parsonage life seemed smooth and pleasant, and for ten days there was not a ruffle on the surface of their domestic waters. It was on the tenth day that the twins, strolling down Main Street, conversing earnestly together as was their custom, were accosted by a nicely-rounded, pompous man with a cordial, "Hello, twins."

In an instant they were bright with smiles, for this was Mr. Raider, editor and owner of the *Daily News*, the biggest and most popular of Mount Mark's three daily papers. Looking forward, as they did, to a literary career for Lark, they never failed to show a touching and unnatural deference to any one connected, even ever so remotely, with that profession. Indeed, Carol, with the charm of her smile, had bewitched the small carriers to the last lad, and in reply to her sister's teasing, only answered stoutly, "That's all right,—you don't know what they may turn into one of these days. We've got

to look ahead to Lark's Literary Career."

So when humble carriers, and some of them black at that, received such sweet attention, one can well imagine what the nicely rounded, pompous editor himself called forth.

They did not resent his nicely-rounded and therefore pointless jokes. They smiled at them. They did not call the *Daily News* the "Raider Family Organ," as they yearned to do. They did not admit that they urged their father to put Mr. Raider on all church committees to insure publicity. They swallowed hard, and told themselves that, after all, Mr. Raider was an editor, and perhaps he couldn't help editing his own family to the exclusion of the rest of Mount Mark.

When, on this occasion, he looked Lark up and down with his usual rotund complacency, Carol only gritted her teeth and reminded her heaving soul that he was an editor.

"What are you going to do this summer, Lark?" he asked, without preamble.

"Why,—just nothing, I suppose. As usual."

"Well," he said, frowning plumply, "we're running short of men. I've heard you're interested in our line, and I thought maybe you could help us out during vacation. How about it? The work'll be easy and it'll be fine experience for you. We'll pay you five dollars a week. This is a little town, and we're called a little publication, but our work and our aim and methods are identical with those of the big city papers." He swelled visibly, almost alarmingly. "How about it? You're the one with the literary longings, aren't you?"

Lark was utterly speechless. If the National Bank had opened its coffers to the always hard-pressed twins, she could not have been more completely confounded. Carol was in a condition nearly as serious, but grasping the gravity of the situation, she rushed into the breach headlong.

"Yes,—yes," she gasped. "She's literary. Oh, she's very literary."

Mr. Raider smiled. "Well, would you like to try your hand out with me?"

Again Carol sprang to her sister's relief.

"Yes, indeed, she would," she cried. "Yes, indeed." And then, determined to impress upon him that the *Daily News* was the one to profit chiefly from the innovation, she added, "And it's a lucky day for the *Daily News*, too, I tell you. There aren't many Larks in Mount Mark, in a literary way, I mean, and—the *Daily News* needs some—that is, I think—new blood, —anyhow, Lark will be just fine."

"All right. Come in, Monday morning at eight, Lark, and I'll set you to work. It won't be anything very important. You can write up the church news, and parties, and goings away, and things like that. It'll be good training. You can study our papers between now and then, to catch our style."

Carol lifted her head a little higher. If Mr. Raider thought her talented twin would be confined to the ordinary style of the *Daily News*, which Carol considered atrociously lacking in any style at all, he would be most gloriously mistaken, that's certain!

It is a significant fact that after Mr. Raider went back into the sanctum of the *Daily News*, the twins

walked along for one full block without speaking. Such a thing had never happened before in all the years of their twinship. At the end of the block, Carol turned her head restlessly. They were eight blocks from home. But the twins couldn't run on the street, it was so undignified. She looked longingly about for a buggy bound their way. Even a grocery cart would have been a welcome though humbling conveyance.

Lark's starry eyes were lifted to the skies, and her rapt face was glowing. Carol looked behind her, looked ahead. Then she thought again of the eight blocks.

"Lark," she said, "I'm afraid we'll be late for dinner. And auntie told us to hurry back. Maybe we'd better run."

Running is a good expression for emotion, and Lark promptly struck out at a pace that did full credit to her lithe young limbs. Down the street they raced, little tendrils of hair flying about their flushed and shining faces, faster, faster, breathless, panting, their gladness fairly overflowing. And many people turned to look, wondering what in the world possessed the leisurely, dignified parsonage twins.

The last block was traversed at a really alarming rate. The passion for "telling things" had seized them both, and they whirled around the corner and across the lawn at a rate that brought Connie out into the yard to meet them, with a childish, "What's the matter? What happened? Did something bite you?"

Aunt Grace sat up in her hammock to look, Fairy ran out to the porch, and Mr. Starr laid down his book. Had the long and dearly desired war been declared at last?

But when the twins reached the porch, they paused sheepishly, shyly.

"What's the matter?" chorused the family.

"Are—are we late for dinner?" Carol demanded earnestly, as though their lives depended on the answer.

The family stared in concerted amazement. When before this had the twins shown anxiety about their lateness for meals—unless a favorite dessert or salad was all consumed in their absence. And it was only half past four!

Carol gently shoved Connie off the cushion upon which she had dropped, and arranged it tenderly in a chair.

"Sit down and rest, Larkie," she said in a soft and loving voice. "Are you nearly tired to death?"

Lark sank, panting, into the chair, and gazed about the circle with brilliant eyes.

"Get her a drink, can't you, Connie?" said Carol indignantly. "Can't you see the poor thing is just tired to death? She ran the whole way home!"

Still the family stared. The twins' devotion to each other was never failing, but this attentiveness on the part of Carol was extremely odd. Now she sat down on the step beside her sister, and gazed up into the flushed face with adoring, but somewhat patronizing, pride. After all, she had had a whole lot to do with training Larkie!

"What in the world?" began their father curiously.

"Had a sunstroke?" queried Fairy, smiling.

"You're both crazy," declared Connie, coming back with the water. "You're trying to fool us. I won't ask any questions. You don't catch me this time."

"Why don't you lie down and let Lark use you for a footstool, Carol?" suggested their father, with twinkling eyes.

"I would if she wanted a footstool," said Carol positively. "I'd love to do it. I'd be proud to do it. I'd consider it an honor."

Lark blushed and lowered her eyes modestly.

"What happened?" urged their father, still more curiously.

"Did she get you out of a scrape?" mocked Fairy.

"Oh, just let 'em alone," said Connie. "They think it's smart to be mysterious. Nothing happened at all. That's what they call being funny."

"Tell it, Lark." Carol's voice was so intense that it impressed even skeptical Connie and derisive Fairy.

Lark raised the glowing eyes once more, leaned forward and said thrillingly:

"It's the Literary Career."

The silence that followed this bold announcement was sufficiently dramatic to satisfy even Carol, and she patted Lark's knee approvingly.

"Well, go on," urged Connie, at last, when the twins continued silent.

"That's all."

"She's going to run the *Daily News*."

"Oh, I'll only be a cub reporter, I guess that's what you call them."

"Reporter nothing," contradicted Carol. "There's nothing literary about that. You must take the whole paper in hand, and color it up a bit. And for goodness' sake, polish up Mr. Raider's editorials. I could write editorials like his myself."

"And you might tone down the family notes for him," suggested Fairy. "We don't really care to know when Mrs. Kelly borrows eggs of the editor's wife and how many dolls Betty got for Christmas and Jack's grades in high school. We can get along without those personal touches."

"Maybe you can give us a little church write-up now and then, without necessitating Mr. Raider as chairman of every committee," interposed their father, and then retracted quickly. "I was only joking, of course, I didn't mean—"

"No, of course, you didn't, father," said Carol kindly. "We'll consider that you didn't say it. But just bear it in mind, Larkie."

Fairy solemnly rose and crossed the porch, and with a hand on Lark's shoulder gave her a solemn shake. "Now, Lark Starr, you begin at the beginning and tell us. Do you think we're all wooden Indians? We can't wait until you make a newspaper out of the *Daily News*! We want to know. Talk."

Thus adjured, Lark did talk, and the little story with many striking embellishments from Carol was given into the hearing of the family.

"Five dollars a week," echoed Connie faintly.

"Of course, I'll divide that with Carol," was the generous offer.

"No, I won't have it. I haven't any literary brains, and I can't take any of your salary. Thanks just the same." Then she added happily: "But I know you'll be very generous when I need to borrow, and I do borrow pretty often, Larkie."

For the rest of the week Lark's literary career was the one topic of conversation in the Starr family. The *Daily News* became a sort of literary center piece, and the whole parsonage revolved enthusiastically around it. Lark's clothes were put in the most immaculate condition, and her wardrobe greatly enriched by donations pressed upon her by her admiring sisters. Every evening the younger girls watched impatiently for the carrier of the *Daily News*, and then rushed to meet him. The paper was read with avid interest, criticized, commended. They all admitted that Lark would be an acquisition to the editorial force, indeed, one sorely needed. They begged her to give Mount Mark the news while it was news, without waiting to find what the other Republican papers of the state thought about it. Why, the instructions and sisterly advice and editorial improvements poured into the ears of patient Lark would have made an archangel giddy with confusion!

During those days, Carol followed Lark about with a hungry devotion that would have been observed by her sister on a less momentous occasion. But now she was so full of the darling Career that she overlooked the once most-darling Carol. On Monday morning, Carol did not remain up-stairs with Lark as she donned her most businesslike dress for her initiation

into the world of literature. Instead, she sulked grouchily in the dining-room, and when Lark, radiant, star-eyed, danced into the room for the family's approval, she almost glowered upon her.

"Am I all right? Do I look literary? Oh, oh," gurgled Lark, with music in her voice.

Carol sniffed.

"Oh, isn't it a glorious morning?" sang Lark again. "Isn't everything wonderful, father?"

"Lark Starr," cried Carol passionately, "I should think you'd be ashamed of yourself. It's bad enough to turn your back on your—your life-long twin, and raise barriers between us, but for you to be so wildly happy about it is—perfectly wicked."

Lark wheeled about abruptly and stared at her sister, the fire slowly dying out of her eyes.

"Why, Carol," she began slowly, in a low voice, without music.

"Oh, that's all right. You needn't try to talk me over. A body'd think there was nothing in the world but ugly old newspapers. I don't like 'em, anyhow. I think they're downright nosey! And we'll never be the same any more, Larkie, and you're the only twin I've got, and—"

Carol's defiance ended in a poorly suppressed sob and a rush of tears.

Lark threw her gloves on the table.

"I won't go at all," she said. "I won't go a step. If—if you think for a minute, Carol, that any silly old Career is going to be any dearer to me than you are,

and if we aren't going to be just as we've always been, I won't go a step."

Carol wiped her eyes. "Well," she said very affectionately, "if you feel like that, it's all right. I just wanted you to say you liked me better than anything else. Of course you must go, Lark. I really take all the credit for you and your talent to myself, and it's as much an honor for me as it is for you, and I want you to go. But don't you ever go to liking the crazy old stories any better than you do me."

Then she picked up Lark's gloves, and the two went out with an arm around each other's waist.

It was a dreary morning for Carol, but none of her sisters knew that most of it was spent in the closet of her room, sobbing bitterly. "It's just the way of the world," she mourned, in the tone of one who has lived many years and suffered untold anguish, "we spend our lives bringing them up, and loving them, and finding all our joy and happiness in them, and then they go, and we are left alone."

Lark's morning at the office was quiet, but none the less thrilling on that account. Mr. Raider received her cordially, and with a great deal of unctuous fatherly advice. He took her into his office, which was one corner of the press room glassed in by itself, and talked over her duties, which, as far as Lark could gather from his discourse, appeared to consist in doing as she was told.

"Now, remember," he said, in part, "that running a newspaper is business. Pure business. We've got to give folks what they want to hear, and they want to hear everything that happens. Of course, it will hurt some people, it is not pleasant to have private affairs

aired in public papers, but that's the newspaper job. Folks want to hear about the private affairs of other folks. They pay us to find out, and tell them, and it's our duty to do it. So don't ever be squeamish about coming right out blunt with the plain facts; that's what we are paid for."

This did not seriously impress Lark. Theoretically, she realized that he was right. And he talked so impressively of THE PRESS, and its mission in the world, and its rights and its pride and its power, that Lark, looking away with hope-filled eyes, saw a high and mighty figure, immense, all-powerful, standing free, majestic, beckoning her to come. It was her first view of the world's PRESS.

But on the fourth morning, when she entered the office, Mr. Raider met her with more excitement in his manner than she had ever seen before. As a rule, excitement does not sit well on nicely-rounded, pink-skinned men.

"Lark," he began hurriedly, "do you know the Dalys? On Elm Street?"

"Yes, they are members of our church. I know them."

He leaned forward. "Big piece of news down that way. This morning at breakfast, Daly shot his daughter Maisie and the little boy. They are both dead. Daly got away, and we can't get at the bottom of it. The family is shut off alone, and won't see any one."

Lark's face had gone white, and she clasped her slender hands together, swaying, quivering, bright lights before her eyes.

"Oh, oh!" she murmured brokenly. "Oh, how awful!"

Mr. Raider did not observe the white horror in Lark's face. "Yes, isn't it?" he said. "I want you to go right down there."

"Yes, indeed," said Lark, though she shivered at the thought. "Of course, I will." Lark was a minister's daughter. If people were in trouble, she must go, of course. "Isn't it—awful? I never knew of—such a thing—before. Maisie was in my class at school. I never liked her very well. I'm so sorry I didn't,—oh, I'm so sorry. Yes, I'll go right away. You'd better call papa up and tell him to come, too."

"I will, but you run along. Being the minister's daughter, they'll let you right up. They'll tell you all about it, of course. Don't talk to any one on the way back. Come right to the office. Don't stay any longer than you can help, but get everything they will say about it, and—er—comfort them as much as you can."

"Yes,—yes." Lark's face was frightened, but firm. "I—I've never gone to the houses much when—there was trouble. Prudence and Fairy have always done that. But of course it's right, and I'm going. Oh, I do wish I had been fonder of Maisie. I'll go right away."

And she hurried away, still quivering, a cold chill upon her. Three hours later she returned to the office, her eyes dark circled, and red with weeping. Mr. Raider met her at the door.

"Did you see them?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "They—they took me up-stairs, and—" She paused pitifully, the

memory strong upon her, for the woman, the mother of five children, two of whom had been struck down, had lain in Lark's strong tender arms, and sobbed out the ugly story.

"Did they tell you all about it?"

"Yes, they told me. They told me."

"Come on into my office," he said. "You must write it up while it is fresh in your mind. You'll do it better while the feeling is on you."

Lark gazed at him stupidly, not comprehending.

"Write it up?" she repeated confusedly.

"Yes, for the paper. How they looked, what they said, how it happened,—everything. We want to scoop on it."

"But I don't think they—would want it told," Lark gasped.

"Oh, probably not, but people want to know about it. Don't you remember what I told you? The PRESS is a powerful task master. He asks hard duties of us, but we must obey. We've got to give the people what they want. There's a reporter down from Burlington already, but he couldn't get anything out of them. We've got a clear scoop on it."

Lark glanced fearfully over her shoulder. A huge menacing shadow lowered black behind her. THE PRESS! She shuddered again.

"I can't write it up," she faltered. "Mrs. Daly—she—Oh, I held her in my arms, Mr. Raider, and kissed her, and we cried all morning, and I can't write it up. I—I am the minister's daughter, you know. I can't."

"Nonsense, now, Lark," he said, "be sensible. You needn't give all the sob part. I'll touch it up for you. Just write out what you saw, and what they said, and I'll do the rest. Run along now. Be sensible."

Lark glanced over her shoulder again. The PRESS seemed tremendously big, leering at her, threatening her. Lark gasped, sobbingly.

Then she sat down at Mr. Raider's desk, and drew a pad of paper toward her. For five minutes she sat immovable, body tense, face stern, breathless, rigid. Mr. Raider after one curious, satisfied glance, slipped out and closed the door softly after him. He felt he could trust to the newspaper instinct to get that story out of her.

Finally Lark, despairingly, clutched a pencil and wrote

"Terrible Tragedy of the Early Morning. Daly Family Crushed with Sorrow." Her mind passed rapidly back over the story she had heard, the father's occasional wild bursts of temper, the pitiful efforts of the family to keep his weakness hidden, the insignificant altercation at the breakfast table, the cry of the startled baby, and then the sudden ungovernable fury that lashed him, the two children —! Lark shuddered! She glanced over her shoulder again. The fearful dark shadow was very close, very terrible, ready to envelope her in its smothering depths. She sprang to her feet and rushed out of the office. Mr. Raider was in the doorway. She flung herself upon him, crushing the paper in his hand.

"I can't," she cried, looking in terror over her shoulder as she spoke, "I can't. I don't want to be a newspaper woman. I don't want any literary career. I

am a minister's daughter, Mr. Raider, I can't talk about people's troubles. I want to go home."

Mr. Raider looked searchingly into the white face, and noted the frightened eyes. "There now," he said soothingly, "never mind the Daly story. I'll cover it myself. I guess it was too hard an assignment to begin with, and you a friend of the family, and all. Let it go. You stay at home this afternoon. Come back to-morrow and I'll start you again. Maybe I was too hard on you to-day."

"I don't want to," she cried, looking back at the shadow, which seemed somehow to have receded a little. "I don't want to be a newspaper woman. I think I'll be the other kind of writer,—not newspapers, you know, just plain writing. I'm sure I shall like it better. I wasn't cut out for this line, I know. I want to go now."

"Run along," he said. "I'll see you later on. You go to bed. You're nearly sick."

Dignity? Lark did not remember that she had ever dreamed of dignity. She just started for home, for her father, Aunt Grace and the girls! The shabby old parsonage seemed suddenly very bright, very sunny, very safe. The dreadful dark shadow was not pressing so close to her shoulders, did not feel so smotheringly near.

A startled group sprang up from the porch to greet her. She flung one arm around Carol's shoulder, and drew her twin with her close to her aunt's side. "I don't want to be a newspaper woman," she cried, in a high excited voice. "I don't like it. I am awfully afraid of—THE PRESS—" She looked over her shoulder. The shadow was fading away in the distance. "I couldn't

do it. I—" And then, crouching, with Carol, close against her aunt's side, clutching one of the soft hands in her own, she told the story.

"I couldn't, Fairy," she declared, looking beseechingly into the strong kind face of her sister. "I—couldn't. Mrs. Daly—sobbed so, and her hands were so brown and hard, Fairy, she kept rubbing my shoulder, and saying, 'Oh, Lark, oh, Lark, my little children.' I couldn't. I don't like newspapers, Fairy. Really, I don't."

Fairy looked greatly troubled. "I wish father were at home," she said very quietly. "Mr. Raider meant all right, of course, but it was wrong to send a young girl like you. Father is there now. It's very terrible. You did just exactly right, Larkie. Father will say so. I guess maybe it's not the job for a minister's girl. Of course, the story will come out, but we're not the ones to tell it."

"But—the Career," suggested Carol.

"Why," said Lark, "I'll wait a little and then have a real literary career, you know, stories, and books, and poems, the kind that don't harrow people's feelings. I really don't think it is right. Don't you remember Prudence says the parsonage is a place to hide sorrows, not to hang them on the clothesline for every one to see." She looked for a last time over her shoulder. Dimly she saw a small dark cloud,—all that was left of the shadow which had seemed so eager to devour her. Her arms clasped Carol with renewed intensity.

"Oh," she breathed, "oh, isn't the parsonage lovely, Carol? I wish father would come. You all look so sweet, and kind, and—oh, I love to be at home."

CHAPTER IX

A CLEAR CALL

THE tinkle of the telephone disturbed the family as they were at dinner, and Connie, who sat nearest, rose to answer the summons, while Carol, at her corner of the table struck a tragic attitude.

"If Joe Graves has broken anything, he's broken our friendship for good and all. These fellows that break themselves—"

"Break themselves?" asked her father gravely.

"Yes,—any of his members, you know, his leg, or his arm, or,—If he has, I must say frankly that I hope it is his neck. These boys that break themselves at the last minute, thereby breaking dates, are—"

"Well," Connie said calmly, "if you're through, I'll begin."

"Oh, goodness, Connie, deafen one ear and listen with the other. You've got to learn to hear in a hubbub. Go on then, I'm through. But I haven't forgotten that I missed the Thanksgiving banquet last year because Phil broke his ankle that very afternoon on the ice. What business had he on the ice when he had a date—"

"Ready?" asked Connie, as the phone rang again, insistently.

"Go on, then. Don't wait until I get started. Answer

it."

Connie removed the receiver and called the customary "Hello." Then, "Yes, just a minute. It's for you, Carol."

Carol rose darkly. "It's Joe," she said in a dungeon-dark voice. "He's broken, I foresee it. If there's anything I despise and abominate it's a breaker of dates. I think it ought to be included among the condemnations in the decalogue. Men have no business being broken, except their hearts, when girls are mixed up in it.—Hello?—Oh; oh-h-h! Yes,—it's professor! How are you?—Yes, indeed,—oh, yes, I'm going to be home. Yes, indeed. Come about eight. Of course I'll be here,—nothing important,—it didn't amount to anything at all,—just a little old every-day affair.—Yes, I can arrange it nicely.—We're so anxious to see you.—All right,—Good-by."

She turned back to the table, her face flushed, eyes shining. "It's professor! He's in town just overnight, and he's coming out. I'll have to phone Joe —"

"Anything I despise and abominate it's a breaker of dates," chanted Connie; "ought to be condemned in the decalogue."

"Oh, that's different," explained Carol. "This is professor! Besides, this will sort of even up for the Thanksgiving banquet last year."

"But that was Phil and this is Joe!"

"Oh, that's all right. It's just the principle, you know, nothing personal about it. Seven-six-two, please. Yes. Seven-six-two? Is Joe there? Oh, hello, Joe. Oh, Joe, I'm so sorry to go back on you the last

minute like this, but one of my old school-teachers is in town just for to-night and is coming here, and of course I can't leave. I'm so sorry. I've been looking forward to it for so long, but—oh, that is nice of you. You'll forgive me this once, won't you? Oh, thanks, Joe, you're so kind."

"Hurry up and phone Roy, Larkie. You'll have to break yours, too."

Lark immediately did so, while Carol stood thoughtfully beside the table, her brows puckered unbecomingly.

"I think," she said at last slowly, with wary eyes on her father's quiet face, "I think I'll let the tuck out of my old rose dress. It's too short."

"Too short! Why, Carol—" interrupted her aunt.

"Too short for the occasion, I mean. I'll put it back to-morrow." Once more her eyes turned cautiously father-ward. "You see, professor still has the 'little twinnie' idea in his brain, and I'm going to get it out. It isn't consistent with our five feet seven. We're grown up. Professor has got to see it. You skoot up-stairs, Connie, won't you, there's a dear, and bring it down, both of them, Lark's too. Lark,—where did you put that ripping knife? Aunt Grace, will you put the iron on for me? It's perfectly right that professor should see we're growing up. We'll have to emphasize it something extra, or he might overlook it. It makes him feel Methuselish because he's so awfully smart. But I'll soon change his mind for him."

Lark stoutly refused to be "grown up for the occasion," as Carol put it. She said it was too much bother to let out the tuck, and then put it right back

in, just for nonsense. At first this disappointed Carol, but finally she accepted it gracefully.

"All right," she said, "I guess I can grow up enough for both of us. Professor is not stupid; if he sees I'm a young lady, he'll naturally know that you are, too, since we are twins. You can help me rip then if you like,—you begin around on that side."

In less than two minutes the whole family was engaged in growing Carol up for the occasion. They didn't see any sense in it, but Carol seemed so unalterably convinced that it was necessary that they hated to question her motives. And, as was both habitual and comfortable, they proceeded to do as she directed.

If her idea had been utterly to dumfound the unsuspecting professor, she succeeded admirably. Carefully she planned her appearance, giving him just the proper interval of patient waiting in the presence of her aunt and sisters. Then, a slow parting of the curtains and Carol stood out, brightly, gladly, her slender hands held out in welcome, Carol, with long skirts swishing around her white-slippered feet, her slender throat rising cream-white above the soft fold of old rose lace, her graceful head with its royal crown of bronze-gold hair, tilted most charmingly.

The professor sprang to his feet and stared at her. "Why, Carol," he exclaimed soberly, almost sadly, as he crossed the room and took her hand. "Why, Carol! Whatever have you been doing to yourself overnight?"

Of course, it was far more "overnight" than the professor knew, but Carol saw to it that there was nothing to arouse his suspicion on that score. He

lifted her hand high, and looked frankly down the long lines of her skirt, with the white toes of her slippers showing beneath. He shook his head. And though he smiled again, his voice was sober.

"I'm beginning to feel my age," he said.

This was not what Carol wanted, and she resumed her old childish manner with a gleeful laugh.

"What on earth are you doing in Mount Mark again, P'fessor!" When Carol wished to be particularly coy, she said "p'fessor." It didn't sound exactly cultured, but spoken in Carol's voice was really irresistible.

"Why, I came to see you before your hair turned gray, and wrinkles marred you—"

"Wrinkles won't mar mine," cried Carol emphatically. "Not ever! I use up a whole jar of cold cream every three weeks! I won't have 'em. Wrinkles! P'fessor, you don't know what a time I have keeping myself young."

She joined in the peal of laughter that rang out as this age-wise statement fell from her lips.

"You'll be surprised," he said, "what does bring me to Mount Mark. I have given up my position in New York, and am going to school again in Chicago this winter. I shall be here only to-night. To-morrow I begin to study again."

"Going to school again!" ejaculated Carol, and all the others looked at him astonished. "Going to school again. Why, you know enough, now!"

"Think so? Thanks. But I don't know what I'm going to need from this on. I am changing my line of

work. The fact is, I'm going to enter the ministry myself, and will have a couple of years in a theological seminary first."

Utter stupefaction greeted this explanation. Not one word was spoken.

"I've been going into these things rather deeply the last two years. I've attended a good many special meetings, and taken some studies along with my regular work. For a year I've felt it would finally come to this, but I preferred my own job, and I thought I would stick it out, as Carol says. But I've decided to quit balking, and answer the call."

Aunt Grace nodded, with a warmly approving smile.

"I think it's perfectly grand, Professor," said Fairy earnestly. "Perfectly splendid. You will do it wonderfully well, I know, and be a big help—in our business."

"But, Professor," said Carol faintly and falteringly, "didn't you tell me you were to get five thousand dollars a year with the institute from this on?"

"Yes. I was."

Carol gazed at her family despairingly. "It would take an awfully loud call to drown the chink of five thousand gold dollars in my ears, I am afraid."

"It was a loud call," he said. And he looked at her curiously, for of all the family she alone seemed distrait and unenthusiastic.

"Professor," she continued anxiously, "I heard one of the bishops say that sometimes young men thought they were called to the ministry when it was

too much mince pie for dinner."

"I did not have mince pie for dinner," he answered, smiling, but conscious of keen disappointment in his friend.

"But, Professor," she argued, "can't people do good without preaching? Think of all the lovely things you could do with five thousand dollars! Think of the influence a prominent educator has! Think of—"

"I have thought of it, all of it. But haven't I got to answer the call?"

"It takes nerve to do it, too," said Connie approvingly. "I know just how it is from my own experience. Of course, I haven't been called to enter the ministry, but—it works out the same in other things."

"Indeed, Professor," said Lark, "we always said you were too nice for any ordinary job. And the ministry is about the only extraordinary job there is!"

"Tell us all about it," said Fairy cordially. "We are so interested in it. Of course, we think it is the finest work in the world." She looked reproachfully at Carol, but Carol made no response.

He told them, then, something of his plan, which was very simple. He had arranged for a special course at the seminary in Chicago, and then would enter the ministry like any other young man starting upon his life-work. "I'm a Presbyterian, you know," he said. "I'll have to go around and preach until I find a church willing to put up with me. I won't have a presiding elder to make a niche for me."

He talked frankly, even with enthusiasm, but

always he felt the curious disappointment that Carol sat there silent, her eyes upon the hands in her lap. Once or twice she lifted them swiftly to his face, and lowered them instantly again. Only he noticed when they were raised, that they were unusually deep, and that something lay within shining brightly, like the reflection of a star in a clear dark pool of water.

"I must go now," he said, "I must have a little visit with my uncle, I just wanted to see you, and tell you about it. I knew you would like it."

Carol's hand was the first placed in his, and she murmured an inaudible word of farewell, her eyes downcast, and turned quickly away. "Don't let them wait for me," she whispered to Lark, and then she disappeared.

The professor turned away from the hospitable door very much depressed. He shook his head impatiently and thrust his hands deep into his pockets like a troubled boy. Half-way down the board walk he stopped, and smiled. Carol was standing among the rose bushes, tall and slim in the cloudy moonlight, waiting for him. She held out her hand with a friendly smile.

"I came to take you a piece if you want me," she said. "It's so hard to talk when there's a roomful, isn't it? I thought maybe you wouldn't mind."

"Mind? It was dear of you to think of it," he said gratefully, drawing her hand into the curve of his arm. "I was wishing I could talk with you alone. You won't be cold?"

"Oh, no, I like to be out in the night air. Oh," she protested, when he turned north from the parsonage

instead of south, as he should have gone, "I only came for a piece, you know. And you want to visit with your uncle." The long lashes hid the twinkle the professor knew was there, though he could not see it.

"Yes, all right. But we'll walk a little way first. I'll visit him later on. Or I can write him a letter if necessary." He felt at peace with all the world. His resentment toward Carol had vanished at the first glimpse of her friendly smile.

"I want to talk to you about being a preacher, you know. I think it is the most wonderful thing in the world, I certainly do." Her eyes were upon his face now seriously. "I didn't say much, I was surprised, and I was ashamed, too, Professor, for I never could do it in the world. Never! It always makes me feel cheap and exasperated when I see how much nicer other folks are than I. But I do think it is wonderful. Really sometimes, I have thought you ought to be a preacher, because you're so nice. So many preachers aren't, and that's the kind we need."

The professor put his other hand over Carol's, which was restlessly fingering the crease in his sleeve. He did not speak. Her girlish, impulsive words touched him very deeply.

"I wouldn't want the girls to know it, they'd think it was so funny, but—" She paused uncertainly, and looked questioningly into his face. "Maybe you won't understand what I mean, but sometimes I'd like to be good myself. Awfully good, I mean." She smiled whimsically. "Wouldn't Connie scream if she could hear that? Now you won't give me away, will you? But I mean it. I don't think of it very often, but sometimes, why, Professor, honestly, I wouldn't care if I were as good as Prudence!" She paused

dramatically, and the professor pressed the slender hand more closely in his.

"Oh, I don't worry about it. I suppose one hasn't any business to expect a good complexion and just natural goodness, both at once, but—" She smiled again. "Five thousand dollars," she added dreamily. "Five thousand dollars! What shall I call you now? P'fesser is not appropriate any more, is it?"

"Call me David, won't you, Carol? Or Dave."

Carol gasped. "Oh, mercy! What would Prudence say?" She giggled merrily. "Oh, mercy!" She was silent a moment then. "I'll have to be contented with plain Mr. Duke, I suppose, until you get a D.D. Duckie, D.D.," she added laughingly. But in an instant she was sober again. "I do love our job. If I were a man I'd be a minister myself. Reverend Carol Starr," she said loftily, then laughed. Carol's laughter always followed fast upon her earnest words. "Reverend Carol Starr. Wouldn't I be a peach?"

He laughed, too, recovering his equanimity as her customary buoyant brightness returned to her.

"You are," he said, and Carol answered:

"Thanks," very dryly. "We must go back now," she added presently. And they turned at once, walking slowly back toward the parsonage.

"Can't you write to me a little oftener, Carol? I hate to be a bother, but my uncle never writes letters, and I like to know how my friends here are getting along, marriages, and deaths, and just plain gossip. I'll like it very much if you can. I do enjoy a good correspondence with—"

"Do you?" she asked sweetly. "How you have changed! When I was a freshman I remember you told me you received nothing but business letters, because you didn't want to take time to write letters, and—"

"Did I?" For a second he seemed a little confused. "Well, I'm not crazy about writing letters, as such. But I'll be so glad to get yours that I know I'll even enjoy answering them."

Inside the parsonage gate they stood a moment among the rose bushes. Once again she offered her hand, and he took it gravely, looking with sober intentness into her face, a little pale in the moonlight. He noted again the royal little head with its grown-up crown of hair, and the slender figure with its grown-up length of skirt.

Then he put his arms around her, and kissed her warmly upon the childish unexpecting lips.

A swift red flooded her face, and receding as swiftly, left her pale. Her lips quivered a little, and she caught her hands together. Then sturdily, and only slightly tremulous, she looked into his eyes and laughed. The professor was in nowise deceived by her attempt at light-heartedness, remembering as he did the quick quivering of the lips beneath his, and the unconscious yielding of the supple body in his arms. He condemned himself mentally in no uncertain terms for having yielded to the temptation of her young loveliness. Carol still laughed, determined by her merriment to set the seal of insignificance upon the act.

"Come and walk a little farther, Carol," he said in a low voice. "I want to say something else." Then

after a few minutes of silence, he began rather awkwardly, and David Arnold Duke was not usually awkward:

"Carol, you'll think I'm a cad to say what I'm going to, after doing what I have just done, but I'll have to risk that. You shouldn't let men kiss you. It isn't right. You're too pretty and sweet and fine for it. I know you don't allow it commonly, but don't at all. I hate to think of any one even touching a girl like you."

Carol leaned forward, tilting back her head, and looking up at him roguishly, her face a-sparkle.

He blushed more deeply. "Oh, I know it," he said. "I'm ashamed of myself. But I can't help what you think of me. I do think you shouldn't let them, and I hope you won't. They're sure to want to."

"Yes," she said quietly, very grown-up indeed just then, "yes, they do. Aren't men funny? They always want to. Sometimes we hear old women say, 'Men are all alike.' I never believe it. I hate old women who say it. But—are they all alike, Professor?"

"No," he said grimly, "they are not. But I suppose any man would like to kiss a girl as sweet as you are. But men are not all alike. Don't you believe it. You won't then, will you?"

"Won't believe it? No."

"I mean," he said, almost stammering in his confusion, "I mean you won't let them touch you."

Carol smiled teasingly, but in a moment she spoke, and very quietly. "P'fessor, I'll tell you a blood-red secret if you swear up and down you'll

never tell anybody. I've never told even Lark—Well, one night, when I was a sophomore,—do you remember Bud Garvin?"

"Yes, tall fellow with black hair and eyes, wasn't he? In the freshman zoology class."

"Yes. Well, he took me home from a party. Hartley took Lark, and they got in first. And Bud, well—he put his arm around me, and—maybe you don't know it, Professor, but there's a big difference in girls, too. Now some girls are naturally good. Prudence is, and so's Lark. But Fairy and I—well, we've got a lot of the original Adam in us. Most girls, especially in books—nice girls, I mean, and you know I'm nice—they can't bear to have boys touch them.—P'fessor, I like it, honestly I do, if I like the boy. Bud's rather nice, and I let him—oh, just a little, but it made me nervous and excited. But I liked it. Prudence was away, and I hated to talk to Lark that night so I sneaked in Fairy's room and asked if I might sleep with her. She said I could, and told me to turn on the light, it wouldn't disturb her. But I was so hot I didn't want any light, so I undressed as fast as I could and crept in. Somehow, from the way I snuggled up to Fairy, she caught on. I was out of breath, really I was ashamed of myself, but I wasn't just sure then whether I'd ever let him put his arm around me again or not. But Fairy turned over, and began to talk. Professor," she said solemnly, "Fairy and I always pretend to be snippy and sarcastic and sneer at each other, but in my heart, I think Fairy is very nearly as good as Prudence, yes, sir, I do. Why, Fairy's fine, she's just awfully fine."

"Yes, I'm sure she is."

"She said that once, when she was fifteen, one of

the boys at Exminster kissed her good night. And she didn't mind it a bit. But father was putting the horses in the barn, and he came out just in time to see it; it was a moonlight night. After the boys had gone, father hurried in and took Fairy outdoors for a little talk, just the two of them alone. He said that in all the years he and my mother were married, every time he kissed her he remembered that no man but he had ever touched her lips, and it made him happy. He said he was always sort of thanking God inside, whenever he held her in his arms. He said nothing else in the world made a man so proud, and glad and grateful, as to know his wife was all his own, and that even her lips had been reserved for him like a sacred treasure that no one else could share. He said it would take the meanest man on earth, and father thinks there aren't many as mean as that, to go back on a woman like that. Fairy said she burst out crying because her husband wouldn't ever be able to feel that way when he kissed her. But father said since she was so young, and innocent, and it being the first time, it wouldn't really count. Fairy swore off that minute,—never again! Of course, when I knew how father felt about mother, I wanted my husband to have as much pleasure in me as father did in her, and Fairy and I made a solemn resolve that we would never, even 'hold hands,' and that's very simple, until we got crazy enough about a man to think we'd like to marry him if we got a chance. And I never have since then, not once."

"Carol," he said in a low voice, "I wish I had known it. I wouldn't have kissed you for anything. God knows I wouldn't. I—I think I am man enough not to have done it anyhow if I had only thought a minute, but God knows I wouldn't have done it if I had known about this. You don't know how—

contemptible—I feel."

"Oh, that's all right," she said comfortingly, her eyes glowing. "That's all right. We just meant beaux, you know. We didn't include uncles, and fathers, and old school-teachers, and things like that. You don't count. That isn't breaking my pledge."

The professor smiled, but he remembered the quivering lips, and the relaxing of the lithe body, and the forced laughter, and was not deceived.

"You're such a strange girl, Carol. You're so honest, usually, so kind-hearted, so generous. But you always seem trying to make yourself look bad, not physically, that isn't what I mean." Carol smiled, and her loving fingers caressed her soft cheek. "But you try to make folks think you are vain and selfish, when you are not. Why do you do it? Every one knows what you really are. All over Mount Mark they say you are the best little kid in town."

"They do!" she said indignantly. "Well, they'd better not. Here I've spent years building up my reputation to suit myself, and then they go and shatter me like that. They'd better leave me alone."

"But what's the object?"

"Why, you know, P'fessor," she said, carefully choosing her words, "you know, it's a pretty hard job living up to a good reputation. Look at Prudence, and Fairy, and Lark. Every one just naturally expects them to be angelically and dishearteningly good. And if they aren't, folks talk. But take me now. No one expects anything of me, and if once in a while, I do happen to turn out all right by accident, it's a sort of joyful surprise to the whole community. It's lots more

fun surprising folks by being better than they expect, than shocking them by turning out worse than they think you will."

"But it doesn't do you any good," he assured her. "You can't fool them. Mount Mark knows its Carol."

"You're not going?" she said, as he released her hand and straightened the collar of his coat.

"Yes, your father will chase me off if I don't go now. How about the letters, Carol? Think you can manage a little oftener?"

"I'd love to. It's so inspiring to get a letter from a five-thousand-dollars-a-year scientist, I mean, a was-once. Do my letters sound all right? I don't want to get too chummy, you know."

"Get as chummy as you can," he urged her. "I enjoy it."

"I'll have to be more dignified if you're going to McCormick. Presbyterian! The Presbyterians are very dignified. I'll have to be formal from this on. Dear Sir: Respectfully yours. Is that proper?"

He took her hands in his. "Good-by, little pal. Thank you for coming out, and for telling me the things you have. You have done me good. You are a breath of fresh sweet air."

"It's my powder," she said complacently. "It does smell good, doesn't it? It cost a dollar a box. I borrowed the dollar from Aunt Grace. Don't let on before father. He thinks we use Mennen's baby—twenty-five cents a box. We didn't tell him so, but he just naturally thinks it. It was the breath of that dollar powder you were talking about."

She moved her fingers slightly in his hand, and he looked down at them. Then he lifted them and looked again, admiring the slender fingers and the pink nails.

"Don't look," she entreated. "They're teaching me things. I can't help it. This spot on my thumb is fried egg, here are three doughnuts on my arm,—see them? And here's a regular pancake." She pointed out the pancake in her palm, sorrowfully.

"Teaching you things, are they?"

"Yes. I have to darn. Look at the tips of my fingers, that's where the needle rusted off on me. Here's where I cut a slice of bread out of my thumb! Isn't life serious?"

"Yes, very serious." He looked thoughtfully down at her hands again as they lay curled up in his own. "Very, very serious."

"Good-by."

"Good-by." He held her hand a moment longer, and then turned suddenly away. She watched until he was out of sight, and then slipped up-stairs, undressed in the dark and crept in between the covers. Lark apparently was sound asleep. Carol giggled softly to herself a few times, and Lark opened one eye, asking, "What's amatter?"

"Oh, such a good joke on p'fessor," whispered Carol, squeezing her twin with rapture. "He doesn't know it yet, but he'll be so disgusted with himself when he finds it out."

"What in the world is it?" Lark was more coherent now.

"I can't tell, Lark, but it's a dandy. My, he'll feel cheap when he finds out."

"Maybe he won't find it out."

"Oh, yes, he will," was the confident answer, "I'll see that he does." She began laughing again.

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you, but you'll certainly scream if you ever do know it."

"You can't tell me?" Lark was wide awake, and quite aghast.

"No, I can't, I truly can't."

Lark drew away from the encircling arm with as much dignity as could be expressed in the dark and in bed, and sent out a series of deep breaths, as if to indicate that snores were close at hand.

Carol laughed to herself for a while, until Lark really slept, then she buried her head in the pillow and her throat swelled with sobs that were heavy but soundless.

The next morning was Lark's turn for making the bed. And when she shook up Carol's pillow she found it was very damp.

"Why, the little goose," she said to herself, smiling, "she laughed until she cried, all by herself. And then she turned the pillow over thinking I wouldn't see it. The little goose! And what on earth was she laughing at?"

CHAPTER X

JERRY JUNIOR

FOR some time the twins ignored the atmosphere of solemn mystery which pervaded their once so cheerful home. But when it finally reached the limit of their endurance they marched in upon their aunt and Fairy with an admirable admixture of dignity and indignation in their attitude.

"Who's haunted?" inquired Carol abruptly.

"Where's the criminal?" demanded Lark.

"Yes, little twins, talk English and maybe you'll learn something." And for the moment the anxious light in Fairy's eyes gave way to a twinkle. Sad indeed was the day when Fairy could not laugh at the twins.

"Then, in common vernacular, though it is really beneath us, what's up?"

Fairy turned innocently inquiring eyes toward the ceiling. "What indeed?"

"Oh, don't try to be dramatic, Fairy," counseled Lark. "You're too fat for a star-Starr."

The twins beamed at each other approvingly at this, and Fairy smiled. But Carol returned promptly to the charge. "Are Jerry and Prudence having domestic difficulties? There's something going on, and we want to know. Father looks like a fallen Samson, and—"

"A fallen Samson, Carol! Mercy! Where did you

get it?"

"Yes, kind of sheepish, and ashamed, and yet hopeful of returning strength. That's art, a simile like that is.—Prudence writes every day, and you hide the letters. And Aunt Grace sneaks around like a convict with her hand under her apron. And you look as heavy-laden as if you were carrying Connie's conscience around with you."

Aunt Grace looked at Fairy, Fairy looked at Aunt Grace. Aunt Grace raised her eyebrows. Fairy hesitated, nodded, smiled. Slowly then Aunt Grace drew one hand from beneath her apron and showed to the eagerly watching twins, a tiny, hand embroidered dress. They stared at it, fascinated, half frightened, and then looked into the serious faces of their aunt and sister.

"I—I don't believe it," whispered Carol. "She's not old enough."

Aunt Grace smiled.

"She's older than mother was," said Fairy.

Lark took the little dress and examined it critically. "The neck's too small," she announced decidedly. "Nothing could wear that."

"We're using this for a pattern," said Fairy, lifting a yellowed, much worn garment from the sewing basket. "I wore this, and so did you and so did Connie,—my lovely child."

Carol rubbed her hand about her throat in a puzzled way. "I can't seem to realize that we ever grew out of that," she said slowly. "Is Prudence all right?"

"Yes, just fine."

The twins looked at each other bashfully. Then, "I'll bet there'll be no living with Jerry after this," said Lark.

"Oh, papa," lisped Carol, in a high-pitched voice supposed to represent the tone of a little child. They both giggled, and blinked hard to crowd back the tears that wouldn't stay choked down. Prudence! And that!

"And see here, twins, Prudence has a crazy notion that she wants to come home for it. She says she'll be scared in a hospital, and Jerry's willing to come here with her. What do you think about it?"

The twins looked doubtful. "They say it ought to be done in a hospital," announced Carol gravely. "Jerry can afford it."

"Yes, he wanted to. But Prudence has set her heart on coming home. She says she'll never feel that Jerry Junior got the proper start if it happens any place else. They'll have a trained nurse."

"Jerry—what?" gasped the twins, after a short silence due to amazement.

"Jerry Junior,—that's what they call it."

"But how on earth do they know?"

"They don't know. But they have to call it something, haven't they? And they want a Jerry Junior. So of course they'll get it. For Prudence is good enough to get whatever she wants."

"Hum, that's no sign," sniffed Carol. "I don't get everything I want, do I?"

The girls laughed, from habit not from genuine interest, at Carol's subtle insinuation.

"Well, shall we have her come?"

"Yes," said Carol, "but you tell Prue she needn't expect me to hold it until it gets too big to wiggle. I call them nasty, treacherous little things. Mrs. Miller made me hold hers, and it squirmed right off my knee. I wanted to spank it."

"And tell Prudence to uphold the parsonage and have a white one," added Lark. "These little Indian effects don't make a hit with me."

"Are you going to tell Connie?"

"I don't think so—yet. Connie's only fourteen."

"You tell her." Carol's voice was emphatic. "There's nothing mysterious about it. Everybody does it. And Connie may have a few suggestions of her own to offer. You tell Prue I'm thinking out a lot of good advice for her, and—"

"You must write her yourselves. She wanted us to tell you long before." Fairy picked up the little embroidered dress and kissed it, but her fond eyes were anxious.

So a few weeks later, weeks crowded full of tumult and anxiety, yes, and laughter, too, Prudence and Jerry came to Mount Mark and settled down to quiet life in the parsonage. The girls kissed Prudence very often, leaped quickly to do her errands, and touched her with nervous fingers. But mostly they sat across the room and regarded her curiously, shyly, quite maternally.

"Carol and Lark Starr," Prudence cried crossly one

day, when she intercepted one of these surreptitious glances, "you march right up-stairs and shut yourselves up for thirty minutes. And if you ever sit around and stare at me like a stranger again, I'll spank you both. I'm no outsider. I belong here just as much as ever I did. And I'm still the head of things around here, too!"

The twins obediently marched, and after that Prudence was more like Prudence, and the twins were much more twinnish, so that life was very nearly normal in the old parsonage. Prudence said she couldn't feel quite satisfied because the twins were too old to be punished, but she often scolded them in her gentle teasing way, and the twins enjoyed it more than anything else that happened during those days of quiet.

Then came a night when the four sisters huddled breathlessly in the kitchen, and Aunt Grace and the trained nurse stayed with Prudence behind the closed door of the front room up-stairs. And the doctor went in, too, after he had inflicted a few light-hearted remarks upon the two men in the little library.

After that—silence, an immense hushing silence, —settled down over the parsonage. Jerry and Mr. Starr, alone in the library, where a faint odor of drugs, anesthetics, something that smelled like hospitals lingered, stared away from each other with persistent determination. Now and then Jerry walked across the room, but Mr. Starr stood motionless by the window looking down at the cherry tree beneath him, wondering vaguely how it dared to be so full of snowy blooms!

"Where are the girls?" Jerry asked, picking up a

roll of cotton which had been left on the library table, and flinging it from him as though it scorched his fingers.

"I—think I'll go and see," said Mr. Starr, turning heavily.

Jerry hesitated a minute. "I—think I'll go along," he said.

For an instant their eyes met, sympathetically, and did not smile though their lips curved.

Down in the kitchen, meanwhile, Fairy sat somberly beside the table with a pile of darning which she jabbed at viciously with the needle. Lark was perched on the ice chest, but Carol, true to her childish instincts, hunched on the floor with her feet curled beneath her. Connie leaned against the table within reach of Fairy's hand.

"They're awfully slow," she complained once.

Nobody answered. The deadly silence clutched them.

"Oh, talk," Carol blurted out desperately. "You make me sick! It isn't anything to be so awfully scared about. Everybody does it."

A little mumble greeted this, and then, silence again. Whenever it grew too painful, Carol said reproachfully, "Everybody does it." And no one ever answered.

They looked up expectantly when the men entered. It seemed cozier somehow when they were all together in the little kitchen.

"Is she all right?"

"Sure, she's all right," came the bright response from their father. And then silence.

"Oh, you make me sick," cried Carol. "Everybody does it."

"Carol Starr, if you say 'everybody does it' again I'll send you to bed," snapped Fairy. "Don't we know everybody does it? But Prudence isn't everybody."

"Maybe we'd better have a lunch," suggested their father hopefully, knowing the thought of food often aroused his family when all other means had failed. But his suggestion met with dark reproach.

"Father, if you're hungry, take a piece of bread out into the woodshed," begged Connie. "If anybody eats anything before me I shall jump up and down and scream."

Their father smiled faintly and gave it up. After that the silence was unbroken save once when Carol began encouragingly:

"Every—"

"Sure they do," interrupted Fairy uncompromisingly.

And then—the hush.

Long, long after that, when the girls' eyes were heavy, not with want of sleep, but just with unspeakable weariness of spirit,—they heard a step on the stair.

"Come on up, Harmer," the doctor called. And then, "Sure, she's all right. She's fine and dandy,—both of them are."

Jerry was gone in an instant, and Mr. Starr looked after him with inscrutable eyes. "Fathers are—only fathers," he said enigmatically.

"Yes," agreed Carol.

"Yes. In a crisis, the other man goes first."

His daughters turned to him then, tenderly, sympathetically.

"You had your turn, father," Connie consoled him. And felt repaid for the effort when he smiled at her.

"They are both fine, you know," said Carol. "The doctor said so."

"We heard him," Fairy assured her.

"Yes, I said all the time you were all awfully silly about it. I knew it was all right. Everybody does it."

"Jerry Junior," Lark mused. "He's here.—'Aunt Lark, may I have a cooky?'"

A few minutes later the door was carefully shoved open by means of a cautious foot, and Jerry stood before them, holding in his arms a big bundle of delicately tinted flannel.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, beaming at them, his face flushed, his eyes bright, embarrassed, but thoroughly satisfied. Of course, Prudence was the dearest girl in the world, and he adored her, and—but this was different, this was Fatherhood!



Let me introduce to you my little daughter

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said again in the tender, half-laughing voice that Prudence loved, "let me introduce to you my little daughter, Fairy Harmer."

"Not—not Fairy!" cried Fairy, Senior, tearfully. "Oh, Jerry, I don't believe it. Not Fairy! You are joking."

"Of course it is Fairy," he said. "Look out, Connie, do you want to break part of my daughter off the first thing? Oh, I see. It was just the flannel, was it?

Well, you must be careful of the flannel, for when ladies are the size of this one, you can't tell which is flannel and which is foot. Fairy Harmer! Here, grandpa, what do you think of this? And Prudence said to send you right up-stairs, and hurry. And the girls must go to bed immediately or they'll be sick to-morrow. Prudence says so."

"Oh, that's enough. That's Prudence all over! You needn't tell us any more. Here, Fairy Harmer, let us look at you. Hold her down, Jerry. Mercy! Mercy!"

"Isn't she a beauty?" boasted the young father proudly.

"A beauty? A beauty! That!" Carol rubbed her slender fingers over her own velvety cheek. "They talk about the matchless skin of a new-born infant. Thanks. I'd just as lief have my own."

"Oh, she isn't acclimated yet, that's all. Do you think she looks like me?"

"No, Jerry, I don't," said Lark candidly. "I never considered you a dream of loveliness by any means, but in due honesty I must admit that you don't look like that."

"Why, it hasn't any hair!" Connie protested.

"Well, give it time," urged the baby's father. "Be reasonable, Connie. What can you expect in fifteen minutes."

"But they always have a little hair," she insisted.

"No, indeed they don't, Miss Connie," he said flatly. "For if they always did, ours would have. Now, don't try to let on there's anything the matter with her, for there isn't.—Look at her nose, if you don't

like her hair.—What do you think of a nose like that now? Just look at it."

"Yes, we're looking at it," was the grim reply.

"And—and chin,—look at her chin. See here, do you mean to say you are making fun of Fairy Harmer? Come on, tootsie, we'll go back up-stairs. They're crazy about us up there."

"Oh, see the cunning little footies," crowed Connie.

"Here, cover 'em up," said Jerry anxiously. "You mustn't let their feet stick out. Prudence says so. It's considered very—er, bad form, I believe."

"Fairy! Honestly, Jerry, is it Fairy? When did you decide?"

"Oh, a long time ago," he said, "years ago, I guess. You see, we always wanted a girl. Prue didn't think she had enough experience with the stronger sex yet, and of course I'm strong for the ladies. But it seems that what you want is what you don't get. So we decided to call her Fairy when she came, and then we wanted a boy, and talked boy, and got the girl! I guess it always works just that way, if you manage it cleverly. Come now, Fairy, you needn't wrinkle up that smudge of a nose at me.—Let go, Connie, it is my daughter's bedtime. There now, there now, baby, was she her daddy's little girl?"

Flushed and laughing, Jerry broke away from the admiring, giggling, nearly tearful girls, and hurried up-stairs with Jerry Junior.

But Fairy stood motionless by the door. "Prudence's baby," she whispered. "Little Fairy

Harmer!—Mmmmmmm!"

CHAPTER XI

THE END OF FAIRY

NOW that the twins had attained to the dignity of eighteen years, and were respectable students at the thoroughly respectable Presbyterian college, they had dates very frequently. And it was along about this time that Mr. Starr developed a sudden interest in the evening callers at his home. He bobbed up unannounced in most unexpected places and at most unexpected hours. He walked about the house with a sharp sly look in his eyes, in a way that could only be described as Carol said, by "downright nosiness." The girls discussed this new phase of his character when they were alone, but decided not to mention it to him, for fear of hurting his feelings. "Maybe he's got a new kind of a sermon up his brain," said Carol. "Maybe he's beginning to realize that his clothes are wearing out again," suggested Lark. "He's too young for second childhood," Connie thought. So they watched him curiously.

Aunt Grace, too, observed this queer devotion on the part of the minister, and finally her curiosity overcame her habit of keeping silent.

"William," she said gently, "what's the matter with you lately? Is there anything on your mind?"

Mr. Starr started nervously. "My mind? Of course

not. Why?"

"You seem to be looking for something. You watch the girls so closely, you're always hanging around, and—"

He smiled broadly. "Thanks for that. 'Hanging around,' in my own parsonage. That is the gratitude of a loving family!"

Aunt Grace smiled. "Well, I see there's nothing much the matter with you. I was seriously worried. I thought there was something wrong, and—"

"Sort of mentally unbalanced, is that it? Oh, no, I'm just watching my family."

She looked up quickly. "Watching the family! You mean—"

"Carol," he said briefly.

"Carol! You're watching—"

"Oh, only in the most honorable way, of course. You see," he gave his explanation with an air of relief, "Prudence always says I must keep an eye on Carol. She's so pretty, and the boys get stuck on her, and—that's what Prudence says. I forgot all about it for a while. But lately I have begun to notice that the boys are older, and—we don't want Carol falling in love with the wrong man. I got uneasy. I decided to watch out. I'm the head of this family, you know."

"Such an idea!" scoffed Aunt Grace, who was not at all of a scoffing nature.

"Carol was born for lovers, Prudence says so. And these men's girls have to be watched, or the wrong fellow will get ahead, and—"

"Carol doesn't need watching—not any more at least."

"I'm not really watching her, you know. I'm just keeping my eyes open."

"But Carol's all right. That's one time Prudence was away off." She smiled as she recognized a bit of Carol's slang upon her lips. "Don't worry about her. You needn't keep an eye on her any more. She's coming, all right."

"You don't think there's any danger of her falling in love with the wrong man?"

"No."

"There aren't many worth-having fellows in Mount Mark, you know."

"Carol won't fall in love with a Mount Mark fellow."

"You seem very positive."

"Yes, I'm positive."

He looked thoughtful for a while. "Well, Prudence always told me to watch Carol, so I could help her if she needed it."

"Girls always need their fathers," came the quick reply. "But Carol does not need you particularly. There's only one of them who will require especial attention."

"That's what Prudence says."

"Yes, just one—not Carol."

"Not Carol!" He looked at her in astonishment.

"Why, Fairy and Lark are—different. They're all right. They don't need attention."

"No. It's the other one."

"The other one! That's all."

"There's Connie."

"Connie?"

"Yes."

"Connie?"

"Yes."

"You don't mean Connie."

Aunt Grace smiled.

"Why, Grace, you're—you're off. Excuse me for saying it, but—you're crazy. Connie—why, Connie has never been any trouble in her life. Connie!"

"You've never had any friction with Connie, she's always been right so far. One of these days she's pretty likely to be wrong, and Connie doesn't yield very easily."

"But Connie's so sober and straight, and—"

"That's the kind."

"She's so conscientious."

"Yes, conscientious."

"She's—look here, Grace, there's nothing the matter with Connie."

"Of course not, William. That isn't what I mean. But you ought to be getting very, very close to

Connie right now, for one of these days she's going to need a lot of that extra companionship Prudence told you about. Connie wants to know everything. She wants to see everything. None of the other girls ever yearned for city life. Connie does. She says when she is through school she's going to the city."

"What city?"

"Any city."

"What for?"

"For experience."

Mr. Starr looked about him helplessly. "There's experience right here," he protested feebly. "Lots of it. Entirely too much of it."

"Well, that's Connie. She wants to know, to see, to feel. She wants to live. Get close to her, get chummy. She may not need it, and then again she may. She's very young yet."

"All right, I will. It is well I have some one to steer me along the proper road." He looked regretfully out of the window. "I ought to be able to see these things for myself, but the girls seem perfectly all right to me. They always have. I suppose it's because they're mine."

Aunt Grace looked at him affectionately. "It's because they're the finest girls on earth," she declared. "That's why. But we want to be ready to help them if they need it, just because they are so fine. They will every one be splendid, if we give them the right kind of a chance."

He sat silent a moment. "I've always wanted one of them to marry a preacher," he said, laughing

apologetically. "It is very narrow-minded, of course, but a man does make a hobby of his own profession. I always hoped Prudence would. I thought she was born for it. Then I looked to Fairy, and she turned me down. I guess I'll have to give up the notion now."

She looked at him queerly. "Maybe not."

"Connie might, I suppose."

"Connie," she contradicted promptly, "will probably marry a genius, or a rascal, or a millionaire."

He looked dazed at that.

She leaned forward a little. "Carol might."

"Carol—"

"She might." She watched him narrowly, a smile in her eyes.

"Carol's too worldly."

"You don't believe that."

"No, not really. Carol—she—why, you know when I think of it, Carol wouldn't be half bad for a minister's wife. She has a sense of humor, that is very important. She's generous, she's patient, she's unselfish, a good mixer,—some of the ladies might think her complexion wasn't real, but—Grace, Carol wouldn't be half bad!"

"Oh, William," she sighed, "can't you remember that you are a Methodist minister, and a grandfather, and—grow up a little?"

After that Mr. Starr returned to normal again, only

many times he and Connie had little outings together, and talked a great deal. And Aunt Grace, seeing it, smiled with satisfaction. But the twins and Fairy settled it in their own minds by saying, "Father was just a little jealous of all the beaux. He was looking for a pal, and he's found Connie."

But in spite of his new devotion to Connie, Mr. Starr also spent a great deal of time with Fairy. "We must get fast chums, Fairy," he often said to her. "This is our last chance. We have to get cemented for a lifetime, you know."

And Fairy, when he said so, caught his hand and laughed a little tremulously.

Indeed, he was right when he said it was his last chance with Fairy in the parsonage. Two weeks before her commencement she had slipped into the library and closed the door cautiously behind her.

"Father," she said, "would you be very sorry if I didn't teach school after all?"

"Not a bit," came the ready answer.

"I mean if I—you see, father, since you sent me to college I feel as if I ought to work and—help out."

"That's nonsense," he said, drawing the tall girl down to his knees. "I can take care of my own family, thanks. Are you trying to run me out of my job? If you want to work, all right, do it, but for yourself, and not for us. Or if you want to do anything else," he did not meet her eyes, "if you want to stay at home a year or so before you get married, it would please us better than anything else. And when you want to marry Gene, we're expecting it, you know."

"Yes, I know," she fingered the lapel of his coat uneasily. "Do you care how soon I get married?"

"Are you still sure it is Gene?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Then I think you should choose your own time. I am in no hurry. But any time,—it's for you, and Gene, to decide."

"Then you haven't set your heart on my teaching?"

"I set my heart on giving you the best chance possible. And I have done it. For the rest, it depends on you. You may work, or you may stay at home a while. I only want you to be happy, Fairy."

"But doesn't it seem foolish to go clear through college, and spend the money, and then—marry without using the education?"

"I do not think so. They've been fine years, and you are finer because of them. There's just as much opportunity to use your fineness in a home of your own as in a public school. That's the way I look at it."

"You don't think I'm too young?"

"You're pretty young," he said slowly. "I can hardly say, Fairy. You've always been capable and self-possessed. When you and Gene get so crazy about each other you can't bear to be apart any longer, it's all right here."

She put her arm around his neck and rubbed her fingers over his cheek lovingly.

"You understand, don't you, father, that I'm just going to be plain married when the time comes? Not

a wedding like Prudence's. Gene, and the girls, and Prue and Jerry, and you, father, that is all."

"Yes, all right. It's your day, you know."

"And we won't talk much about it beforehand. We all know how we feel about things. It would be silly for me to try to tell you what a grand sweet father you've been to us. I can't tell you,—if I tried I'd only cry. You know what I think."

His face was against hers, and his eyes were away from her, so Fairy did not see the moisture in his eyes when he said in a low voice:

"Yes, I know Fairy. And I don't need to say what fine girls you are, and how proud I am of you. You know it already. But sometimes," he added slowly, "I wonder that I haven't been a bigger man, and haven't done finer work, with a houseful of girls like mine."

Her arm pressed more closely about his neck. "Father," she whispered, "don't say that. We think you are wonderfully splendid, just as you are. It isn't what you've said, not what you've done for us, it's just because you have always made us so sure of you. We never had to wonder about father, or ask ourselves—we were sure. We've always had you." She leaned over and kissed him again. "There never was such a father, they all say so, Prudence and Connie, and the twins, too! There couldn't be another like you! Now we understand each other, don't we?"

"I guess so. Anyhow, I understand that there'll only be three daughters in the parsonage pretty soon. All right, Fairy. I know you will be happy." He paused a moment. "So will I."

But the months passed, and Fairy seemed content

to stay quietly at home, embroidering as Prudence had done, laughing at the twins as they tripped gaily, riotously through college. And then in the early spring, she sent an urgent note to Prudence.

"You must come home for a few days, Prue, you and Jerry. It's just because I want you and I need you, and I know you won't go back on me. I want you to get here on the early afternoon train Tuesday, and stay till the last of the week. Just wire that you are coming—the three of you. I know you'll be here, since it is I who ask it."

It followed naturally that Prudence's answer was satisfactory. "Of course we'll come."

Fairy's plans were very simple. "We'll have a nice family dinner Tuesday evening,—we'll get Mrs. Green to come and cook and have her niece to serve it,—that'll leave us free to visit every minute. I'll plan the dinner. Then we'll all be together, nice and quiet, just our own little bunch. Don't have dates, twins,—of course Gene will be here, but he's part of the family, and we don't want outsiders this time. His parents will be in town, and I've asked them to come up. I want a real family reunion just for once, and it's my party, for I started it. So you must let me have it my own way."

Fairy was generally willing to leave the initiative to the eager twins, but when she made a plan it was generally worth adopting, and the other members of the family agreed to her arrangements without demur.

After the first confusion of welcoming Prudence home, and making fun of "daddy Jerry," and testing the weight and length of little Fairy, they all settled

down to a parsonage home-gathering. Just a few minutes before the dinner hour, Fairy took her father's hand.

"Come into the lime-light," she said softly, "I want you." He passed little Fairy over to the outstretched arms of the nearest auntie, and allowed himself to be led into the center of the room.

"Gene," said Fairy, and he came to her quickly, holding out a slender roll of paper. "It's our license," said Fairy. "We think we'd like to be married now, father, if you will."

He looked at her questioningly, but understandingly. The girls clustered about them with eager outcries, half protest, half encouragement.

"It's my day, you know," cried Fairy, "and this is my way."

She held out her hand, and Gene took it very tenderly in his. Mr. Starr looked at them gravely for a moment, and then in the gentle voice that the parsonage girls insisted was his most valuable ministerial asset, he gave his second girl in marriage.

It surely was Fairy's way, plain and sweet, without formality. And the dinner that followed was just a happy family dinner. Fairy's face was so glowing with content, and Gene's attitude was so tender, and so ludicrously proud, that the twins at last were convinced that this was right, and all was well.

But that evening, when Gene's parents had gone away, and after Fairy and Gene themselves had taken the carriage to the station for their little vacation together, and Jerry and Prudence were putting little Fairy to bed, the three girls left in the home sat

drearily in their bedroom and talked it over.

"We're thinning out," said Connie. "Who next?"

"We'll stick around as long as we like, Miss Connie, you needn't try to shuffle us off," said Lark indignantly.

"Prudence, and Fairy,—it was pretty cute of Fairy, wasn't it?"

"Let's go to bed," said Carol, rising. "I suppose we'll feel better in the morning. A good sleep is almost as filling as a big meal after a blow like this. Well, that's the end of Fairy. We have to make the best of us. Come on, Larkie. You've still got us to boss you, Con, so you needn't feel too forlorn. My, but the house is still! In some ways I think this family is positively sickening. Good night, Connie. And, after this, when you want to eat candy in bed, please use your own. I got chocolate all over my foot last night. Good night, Connie. Well, it's the end of Fairy. The family is going to pieces, sure enough."

CHAPTER XII

SOWING SEEDS

"HAVE you seen Mrs. Harbert lately, Carol?"

"Yes, she's better, father. I was there a few minutes yesterday."

"Yesterday? You were there Tuesday, weren't

you?"

Carol looked uncomfortable. "Why, yes, I was, just for a second."

"She tells me you've been running in nearly every day since she took sick."

Carol bent sharply inquiring eyes upon her father. "What else did she tell you?"

"She said you were an angel."

"Y-yes,—she seems somehow to think I do it for kindness."

"And don't you?"

"Why, no, father, of course I don't. It's only two blocks out of my way and it's such fun to pop in on sick folks and show them how disgustingly strong and well I am."

"Where did you get the money for that basket of fruit?"

"I borrowed it from Aunt Grace." Carol's face was crimson with mortification. "But it'll be a sweet time before Mrs. Harbert gets anything else from me. She promised she wouldn't tell."

"Did any of the others know about the fruit?"

"Why—not—exactly."

"But she thinks it was from the whole family. She thanked me for it."

"I—I made her think that," Carol explained. "I want her to think we're the nicest parsonage bunch they've ever had in Mount Mark. Besides, it really

was from the family. Aunt Grace loaned me the money and I'll have to borrow it from you to pay her. And Lark did my dusting so I could go on the errand, though she did not know what it was. And I—er—accidentally took one of Connie's ribbons to tie it with. Isn't that a family gift?"

"Mr. Scott tells me you are the prime mover in the Junior League now," he continued.

"Well, goodness knows our Junior League needs a mover of some sort."

"And Mrs. Davies says you are a whole Mercy and Help Department all by yourself."

"What I can't understand," said Carol mournfully, "is why folks don't keep their mouths shut. I know that sounds very inelegant, but it expresses my idea perfectly. Can't I have a good time in my own way without the whole church pedaling me from door to door?"

The twinkle in her father's eyes deepened. "What do you call it, Carol, 'sowing seeds of kindness'?"

"I should say not," came the emphatic retort. "I call it sowing seeds of fun. It's a circus to go around and gloat over folks when they are sick or sorry, or —"

"But they tell me you don't gloat. Mrs. Marling says you cried with Jeanie half a day when her dog died."

"Oh, that's my way of gloating," said Carol, nothing daunted, but plainly glad to get away without further interrogation.

It was a strange thing that of all the parsonage

girls, Carol, light-hearted, whimsical, mischievous Carol, was the one most dear to the hearts of her father's people. Not the gentle Prudence, nor charming Fairy, not clever Lark nor conscientious Connie, could rival the "naughty twin" in Mount Mark's affections. And in spite of her odd curt speeches, and her openly-vaunted vanity, Mount Mark insisted she was "good." Certainly she was willing! "Get Carol Starr,—she'll do it," was the commonest phrase in Mount Mark's vocabulary. Whatever was wanted, whatever the sacrifice involved, Carol stood ready to fill the bill. Not for kindness,—oh, dear no,—Carol staunchly disclaimed any such niceness as that. She did it for fun, pure and simple. She said she liked to show off. She insisted that she liked to feel that she was the pivot on which little old Mount Mark turned. But this was only when she was found out. As far as she could she kept her little "seeds of fun" carefully up her sleeve, and it was only when the indiscreet adoration of her friends brought the budding plants to light, that she laughingly declared "it was a circus to go and gloat over folks."

Once in the early dusk of a summer evening, she discovered old Ben Peters, half intoxicated, slumbering noisily on a pile of sacks in a corner of the parsonage barn. Carol was sorry, but not at all frightened. The poor, kindly, weak, old man was as familiar to her as any figure in Mount Mark. He was always in a more or less helpless state of intoxication, but also he was always harmless, kind-hearted and generous. She prodded him vigorously with the handle of the pitch-fork until he was aroused to consciousness, and then guided him into the woodshed with the buggy whip. When he was seated on a chunk of wood she faced him sternly.

"Well, you are a dandy," she said. "Going into a parsonage barn, of all places in the world, to sleep off an odor like yours! Why didn't you go down to Fred Greer's harness shop, that's where you got it. We're such an awfully temperance town, you know! But the parsonage! Why, if the trustees had happened into the barn and caught a whiff of that smell, father'd have lost his job. Now you just take warning from me, and keep away from this parsonage until you can develop a good Methodist odor. Oh, don't cry about it! Your very tears smell rummy. Just you hang on to that chunk of wood, and I'll bring you some coffee."

Like a thief in the night she sneaked into the house, and presently returned with a huge tin of coffee, steaming hot. He drank it eagerly, but kept a wary eye on the haughty twin, who stood above him with the whip in her hand.

"That's better. Now, sit down and listen to me. If you would come to the parsonage, you have to take your medicine. Silver and gold have we none, but such as we have we give to you. And religion's all we've got. You're here, and I'm here. We haven't any choir or any Bible, but parsonage folks have to be adaptable. Now then, Ben Peters, you've got to get converted."

The poor doddering old fellow, sobered by this awful announcement, looked helplessly at the window. It was too small. And slender active Carol, with the buggy whip, stood between him and the door.

"No, you can't escape. You're done for this time,—it's the straight and narrow from this on. Now listen,—it's really very simple. And you need it pretty

badly, Ben. Of course you don't realize it when you're drunk, you can't see how terribly disgusting you are, but honestly, Ben, a pig is a ray of sunshine compared to a drunk man. You're a blot on the landscape. You're a—you're a—" She fished vainly for words, longing for Lark's literary flow of language.

"I'm not drunk," he stammered.

"No, you're not, thanks to the buggy whip and that strong coffee, but you're no beauty even yet. Well now, to come down to religion again. You can't stop drinking—"

"I could," he blustered feebly, "I could if I wanted to."

"Oh, no, you couldn't. You haven't backbone enough. You couldn't stop to save your life. But," Carol's voice lowered a little, and she grew shy, but very earnest, "but God can stop you, because He has enough backbone for a hundred thousand—er, jellyfishes. And—you see, it's like this. God made the world, and put the people in it. Now listen carefully, Ben, and I'll make it just as simple as possible so it can sink through the smell and get at you. God made the world, and put the people in it. And the people sinned, worshiped idols and went back on God, and —did a lot of other mean things. So God was in honor bound to punish them, for that's the law, and God's the judge that can't be bought. He had to inflict punishment. But God and Jesus talked it over, and they felt awfully bad about it, for they kind of liked the people anyhow." She stared at the disreputable figure slouching on the chunk of wood. "It's very hard to understand, very. I should think they would despise us,—some of us," she added significantly. "I'm sure I should. But anyhow they didn't. Are you

getting me?"

The bleary eyes were really fastened intently on the girl's bright face, and he hung upon her words.

"Well, they decided that Jesus should come down here and live, and be perfectly good, so He would not deserve any punishment, and then God would allow Him to receive the punishment anyhow, and the rest of us could go free. That would cover the law. See? Punishing Him when He deserved no punishment. Then they could forgive us heathens that didn't deserve it. Do you get that?" She looked at him anxiously. "It all hinges on that, you know. I'm not a preacher myself, but that's the idea. So Jesus was crucified, and then God said, 'There He is! Look on Him, believe in Him, worship Him, and in His name you stand O. K.' See? That means, if we give Him the chance, God'll let Jesus take our share of the punishment. So we've just got to let go, and say, 'All right, here I am. I believe it, I give up, I know I don't amount to a hill of beans—and you can say it very honestly—but if you want me, and will call it square, God knows I'm willing.' And there you are."

"Won't I drink any more?"

"No, not if you let go hard enough. I mean," she caught herself up quickly, "I mean if you let clear go and turn the job over to God. But you're not to think you can keep decent by yourself, for you can't—it's not born in you, and something else is—just let go, and stay let go. After that, it's God's job, and unless you stick in and try to manage yourself, He'll see you through."

"All right, I'll do it."

Carol gasped. She opened her lips a few times, and swallowed hard. She didn't know what to do next. Wildly she racked her brain for the next step in this vital performance.

"I—think we ought to pray," she said feebly.

"All right, we'll pray." He rolled curiously off the stick of wood, and fell, as if by instinct, into the attitude of prayer.

Carol gazed about her helplessly. But true to her training, she knelt beside him. Then came silence.

"I—well, I'll pray," she said with grim determination. "Dear Father in Heaven," she began weakly, and then she forgot her timidity and her fear, and realized only that this was a crisis in the life of the drunken man.

"Oh, God, he'll do it. He'll let go, and turn it over to you. He isn't worth anything, God, none of us are, but You can handle him, for You've had worse jobs than this, though it doesn't seem possible. You'll help him, God, and love him, and show him how, for he hasn't the faintest idea what to do next, and neither have I. But You brought him into our barn to-night, and You'll see him through. Oh, God, for Jesus' sake, help Ben Peters. Amen.

"Now, what shall I do?" she wondered.

"What's your father for?" She looked quickly at Ben Peters. He had not spoken, but something certainly had asked, "What's your father for?"

"You stay here, Ben, and pray for yourself, and I'll send father out. I'm not just sure what to say next, and father'll finish you up. You pray for all you're

worth."

She was gone in a flash, through the kitchen, through the hall, up the stairs two at a time, and her arm thrown closely about her father's shoulder.

"Oh, father, I got stuck," she wailed. "I'm so ashamed of myself. But you can finish him off, can't you? I honestly believe he's started."

He took her firmly by the arms and squared her around on his lap. "One, two, three, ready, go. Now, what?"

"Ben Peters. He was drunk in the barn and I took him into the woodshed and gave him some hot coffee,—and some religion, but not enough to hurt him. I told him he had to get converted, and he said he would. So I told him about it, but you'd better tell him again, for I'm afraid I made quite a mess of it. And then we prayed, and I was stuck for fair, father, for I couldn't think what to do next. But I do believe it was God who said, 'What's your father for?' And so I left him praying for himself, and—you'd better hurry, or he may get cold feet and run away. Be easy with him, father, but don't let him off. This is the first chance we've ever had at Ben Peters, and God'll never forgive us if we let him slip through our fingers."

Carol was dumped off on to the floor and her father was half-way down the stairs before she caught her breath. Then she smiled. Then she blushed.

"That was one bad job," she said to herself sadly. "I'm a disgrace to the Methodist church. Thank goodness the trustees'll never hear of it. I'll bribe Ben

Peters to eternal silence if I have to do it with kisses." Then her face grew very soft. "Poor old man! Oh, the poor old man!" A quick rush of tears blinded her eyes, and her throat throbbed. "Oh, why do they,—what makes men like that? Can't they see, can't they know, how awful they are, how—" She shuddered. "I can't see for the life of me what makes God treat us decently at all." Her face brightened again. "I was a bad job, all right, but I feel kind of pleased about it. I hope father won't mention it to the girls."

And Ben Peters truly had a start, incredible as it seemed. Yes, as Carol had warned him, he forgot sometimes and tried to steer for himself, and always crashed into the rocks. Then Carol, with angry eyes and scornful voice, berated him for trying to get hold of God's job, and cautioned him anew about "sticking in when it was not his affair any more." It took time, a long time, and hard work, and many, many prayers went up from Carol's bedside, and from the library at the head of the stairs, but there came a time when Ben Peters let go for good and all, and turned to Carol, standing beside the bed with sorry frightened eyes, and said quietly:

"It's all right, Carol. I've let go. You're a mighty nice little girl. I've let go for good this time. I'm just slipping along where He sends me,—it's all right," he finished drowsily. And fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CONNIE PROBLEM

MR. STARR was getting ready to go to conference, and the girls hovered about him with anxious eyes. This was their fifth conference since coming to Mount Mark,—the time limit for Methodist ministers was five years. The Starrs, therefore, would be transferred, and where? Small wonder that the girls followed him around the house and spoke in soft voices and looked with tender eyes at the old parsonage and the wide lawn. They would be leaving it next week. Already the curtains were down, and laundered, and packed. The trunks were filled, the books were boxed. Yes, they were leaving, but whither were they bound?

"Get your ecclesiastical dander up, father," Carol urged, "don't let them give us a church fight, or a twenty-thousand-dollar debt on a thousand-dollar congregation."

"We don't care for a big salary or a stylish congregation," Lark added, "but we don't want to go back to washpans and kerosene lamps again."

"If you have to choose between a bath tub, with a church quarrel, and a wash basin with peace and harmony, we'll take the tub and settle the scrap!"

The conference was held in Fairfield, and he informed the girls casually that he would be home on the first train after the assignments were made. He said it casually, for he did not wish them to know how perturbed he was over the coming change. During the conference he tried in many and devious ways to learn the will of the authorities regarding his future, but he found no clue. And at home the girls were discussing the matter very little, but thinking of nothing else. They were determined to be pleased about it.

"It really doesn't make any difference," Lark said. "We've had one year in college, we can get along without any more. Or maybe father would let us borrow the money and stay at the dorm. And Connie's so far along now that she's all right. Any good high school will do for her. It doesn't make any difference at all."

"No, we're so nearly grown up that one place will do just as well as another," agreed Carol unconcernedly.

"I'm rather anxious to move, myself," said Connie. "I'm afraid some of the ladies might carry out their designs on father. They've had five years of practise now, you know."

"Don't be silly, Con. Isn't Aunt Grace here on purpose to chaperon him and keep the ladies off? I'd hate to go to New London, or Mediapolis, or—but after all it doesn't make a bit of difference."

Just the same, on Wednesday evening, the girls sat silent, with intensely flushed faces and painfully shining eyes, watching the clock, listening for the footstep. They had deliberately remained away from the station. They thought they could face it better within the friendly walls of the parsonage. It was all settled now, father knew where they were going. Oh, why hadn't he wired? It must be terribly bad then, he evidently wanted to break it to them gently.

Maybe it was a circuit! There was the whistle now! Only a few minutes now. Suppose his salary were cut down,—good-by to silk stockings and kid gloves,—cheap, but kid, just the same! Suppose the parsonage would be old-fashioned! Suppose there wasn't any parsonage at all, and they would have to

pay rent! Sup—Then the door slammed.

Carol and Lark picked up their darning, and Connie bent earnestly over her magazine. Aunt Grace covered a yawn with her slender fingers and looked out of the window.

"Hello!"

"Why, hello, papa! Back already?"

They dropped darning and magazine and flew to welcome him home.

"Come and sit down!" "My, it seemed a long time!" "We had lots of fun, father." "Was it a nice conference?" "Mr. James sent us two bushels of potatoes!" "We're going to have chicken to-morrow—the Ladies' Aiders sent it with their farewell love." "Wasn't it a dandy day?"

"Well, it's all settled."

"Yes, we supposed it would be. Was the conference good? We read accounts of it every day, and acted stuck-up when it said nice things about you."

"We are to—"

"Ju-just a minute, father," interrupted Connie anxiously. "We don't care a snap where it is, honestly we don't. We're just crazy about it, wherever it is. We've got it all settled. You needn't be afraid to tell us."

"Afraid to tell us!" mocked the twins indignantly. "What kind of slave-drivers do you think we are?"

"Of course we don't care where we go," explained

Lark. "Haven't we been a parsonage bunch long enough to be tickled to death to be sent any place?"

"Father knows we're all right. Go on, daddy, who's to be our next flock?"

"We haven't any, we—"

The girls' faces paled. "Haven't any? You mean—"

"I mean we're to stay in Mount Mark."

"Stay in—What?"

"Mount Mark. They—"

"They extended the limit," cried Connie, springing up.

"No," he denied, laughing. "They made me a presiding elder, and we're—"

"A presiding elder! Father! Honestly? They—"

"They ought to have made you a bishop," cried Carol loyally. "I've been expecting it all my life. That's where the next jump'll land you. Presiding elder! Now we can snub the Ladies' Aid if we want to."

"Do you want to?"

"No, of course not, but it's lots of fun to know we could if we did want to."

"I pity the next parsonage bunch," said Connie sympathetically.

"Why? There's nothing the matter with our church!"

"Oh, no, that isn't what I mean. But the next

minister's family can't possibly come up to us, and so —"

The others broke her sentence with their laughter.

"Talk about me and my complexion!" gasped Carol, wiping her eyes. "I'm nothing to Connie and her family pride. Where will we live now, father?"

"We'll rent a house—any house we like—and live like white folks."

"Rent! Mercy, father, doesn't the conference furnish the elders with houses? We can never afford to pay rent! Never!"

"Oh, we have a salary of twenty-five hundred a year now," he said, with apparent complacence, but careful to watch closely for the effect of this statement. It gratified him, too, much as he had expected. The girls stood stock-still and gazed at him, and then, with a violent struggle for self-composure Carol asked:

"Did you get any of it in advance? I need some new slippers."

So the packing was finished, a suitable house was found—modern, with reasonable rent—on Maple Avenue where the oaks were most magnificent, and the parsonage family became just ordinary "folks," a parsonage household no longer.

"You must be very patient with us if we still try to run things," Carol said apologetically to the president of the Ladies' Aid. "We've been a parsonage bunch all our lives, you know, and it's got to be a habit. But we'll be as easy on you as we can. We know what it would mean to leave two ministers' families down on

you at once."

Mr. Starr's new position necessitated long and frequent absences from home, and that was a drawback to the family comradeship. But the girls' pride in his advancement was so colossal, and their determination to live up to the dignity of the eldership was so deep-seated, that affairs ran on quite serenely in the new home.

"Aren't we getting sensible?" Carol frequently asked her sisters, and they agreed enthusiastically that they certainly were.

"I don't think we ever were so bad as we thought we were," Lark said. "Even Prudence says now that we were always pretty good. Prudence ought to think so. She got most of our spending money for a good many years, didn't she?"

"Prudence didn't get it. She gave it to the heathen."

"Well, she got credit for it on the Lord's accounts, I suppose. But she deserved it. It was no joke collecting allowances from us."

One day this beautiful serenity was broken in upon in a most unpleasant way. Carol looked up from *De Senectute* and flung out her arms in an all-relieving yawn. Then she looked at her aunt, asleep on the couch. She looked at Lark, who was aimlessly drawing feathers on the skeletons of birds in her biology text. She looked at Connie, sitting upright in her chair, a small book close to her face, alert, absorbed, oblivious to the world. Connie was wide awake, and Carol resented it.

"What are you reading, Con?" she asked

reproachfully.

Connie looked up, startled, and colored a little. "Oh,—poetry," she stammered.

Carol was surprised. "Poetry," she echoed. "Poetry? What kind of poetry? There are many poetries in this world of ours. 'Life is real, life is earnest.' 'There was a young lady from Bangor.' 'A man and a maiden decided to wed.' 'Sunset and, evening star,'—oh, there are lots of poetries. What's yours?" Her senseless dissertation had put her in good humor again.

Connie answered evasively. "It is by an old Oriental writer. I don't suppose you've ever read it. Khayyam is his name."

"Some name," said Carol suspiciously. "What's the poem?" Her eyes had narrowed and darkened. By this time Carol had firmly convinced herself that she was bringing Connie up,—a belief which afforded lively amusement to self-conducting Connie.

"Why, it's *The Rubaiyat.* It's—"

"*The Rubaiyat!*" Carol frowned. Lark looked up from the skeletons with sudden interest. "*The Rubaiyat?* By Khayyam? Isn't that the old fellow who didn't believe in God, and Heaven, and such things—you know what I mean,—the man who didn't believe anything, and wrote about it? Let me see it. I've never read it myself, but I've heard about it." Carol turned the pages with critical disapproving eyes. "Hum, yes, I know about this." She faced Connie sternly. "I suppose you think, Connie, that since we're out of a parsonage we can do anything we like. Haven't we any standards? Haven't we any ideals?

Are we—are we—well, anyhow, what business has a minister's daughter reading trash like this?"

"I don't believe it, you know," Connie said coolly. "I'm only reading it. How can I know whether it's trash or not, unless I read it? I—"

"Ministers' daughters are supposed to keep their fingers clear of the burning ends of matches," said Carol neatly. "We can't handle them without getting scorched, or blackened, at least. We have to steer clear of things folks aren't sure about. Prudence says so."

"Prudence," said Connie gravely, "is a dear sweet thing, but she's awfully old-fashioned, Carol; you know that."

Carol and Lark were speechless. They would as soon have dreamed of questioning the catechism as Prudence's perfection.

"She's narrow. She's a darling, of course, but she isn't up-to-date. I want to know what folks are talking about. I don't believe this poem. I'm a Christian. But I want to know what other folks think about me and what I believe. That's all. Prudence is fine, but I know a good deal more about some things than Prudence will know when she's a thousand years old."

The twins still sat silent.

"Of course, some folks wouldn't approve of parsonage girls reading things like this. But I approve of it. I want to know why I disagree with this poetry, and I can't until I know where we disagree. It's beautiful, Carol, really. It's kind of sad. It makes me want to cry. It's—"

"I've a big notion to tell papa on you," said Carol soberly and sadly.

Connie rose at once.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm going to tell papa myself."

Carol moved uneasily in her chair. "Oh, let it go this time. I—I just mentioned it to relieve my feelings. I won't tell him yet. I'll talk it over with you again. I'll have to think it over first."

"I think I'd rather tell him," insisted Connie.

Carol looked worried, but she knew Connie would do as she said. So she got up nervously and went with her. She would have to see it through now, of course. Connie walked silently up the stairs, with Carol following meekly behind, and rapped at her father's door. Then she entered, and Carol, in a hushed sort of way, closed the door behind them.

"I'm reading this, father. Any objections?" Connie faced him calmly, and handed him the little book.

He examined it gravely, his brows contracting, a sudden wrinkling at the corners of his lips that might have meant laughter, or disapproval, or anything.

"I thought a parsonage girl should not read it," Carol said bravely. "I've never read it myself, but I've heard about it, and parsonage girls ought to read parsonage things. Prudence says so. But—"

"But I want to know what other folks think about what I believe," said Connie. "So I'm reading it."

"What do you think of, it?" he asked quietly, and

he looked very strangely at his baby daughter. It was suddenly borne in on him that this was one crisis in her growth to womanhood, and he felt a great yearning tenderness for her, in her innocence, in her dauntless courage, in her reaching ahead, always ahead! It was a crisis, and he must be very careful.

"I think it is beautiful," Connie said softly, and her lips drooped a little, and a wistful pathos crept into her voice. "It seems so sad. I keep wishing I could cry about it. There's nothing really sad in it, I think it is supposed to be rather jovial, but—it seems terrible to me, even when it is the most beautiful. Part of it I don't understand very well."

He held out a hand to Connie, and she put her own in it confidently. Carol, too, came and stood close beside him.

"Yes," he said, "it is beautiful, Connie, and it is very terrible. We can't understand it fully because we can't feel what he felt. It is a groping poem, a struggling for light when one is stumbling in darkness." He looked thoughtfully at the girls. "He was a marvelous man, that Khayyam,—years ahead of his people, and his time. He was big enough to see the idiocy of the heathen ideas of God, he was beyond them, he spurned them. But he was not quite big enough to reach out, alone, and get hold of our kind of a God. He was reaching out, he was struggling, but he couldn't quite catch hold. It is a wonderful poem. It shows the weakness, the helplessness of a gifted man who has nothing to cling to. I think it will do you good to read it, Connie. Read it again and again, and thank God, my child, that though you are only a girl, you have the very thing this man, this genius, was craving. We admire

his talent, but we pity his weakness. You will feel sorry for him. You read it, too, Carol. You'll like it. We can't understand it, as I say, because we are so sure of our God, that we can't feel what he felt, having nothing. But we can feel the heart-break, the fear, the shrinking back from the Providence that he called Fate,—of course it makes you want to cry, Connie. It is the saddest poem in the world."

Connie's eyes were very bright. She winked hard a few times, choking back the rush of tears. Then with an impulsiveness she did not often show, she lifted her father's hand and kissed it passionately.

"Oh, father," she whispered, "I was so afraid—you wouldn't quite see." She kissed his hand again.

Carol looked at her sister respectfully. "Connie," she said, "I certainly beg your pardon. I just wanted to be clever, and didn't know what I was talking about. When you have finished it, give it to me, will you? I want to read it, too; I think it must be wonderful."

She held out a slender shapely hand and Connie took it quickly, chummily, and the two girls turned toward the door.

"The danger in reading things," said Mr. Starr, and they paused to listen, "the danger is that we may find arguments we can not answer; we may feel that we have been in the wrong, that what we read is right. There's the danger. Whenever you find anything like that, Connie, will you bring it to me? I think I can find the answer for you. If I don't know it, I will look until I come upon it. For we have been given an answer to every argument. You'll come to me, won't you?"

"Yes, father, I will—I know you'll find the answers."

After the door had closed behind them, Mr. Starr sat for a long time staring straight before him into space.

"The Connie problem," he said at last. And then, "I'll have to be better pals with her. Connie's going to be pretty fine, I believe."

CHAPTER XIV

BOOSTING CONNIE

CONNIE was past fifteen when she announced gravely one day, "I've changed my mind. I'm going to be an author."

"An author," scoffed Carol. "You! I thought you were going to get married and have eleven children." Even with the dignity of nineteen years, the nimble wits of Carol and Lark still struggled with the irreproachable gravity of Connie.

"I was," was the cool retort. "I thought you were going to be a Red Cross nurse and go to war."

Carol blushed a little. "I was," she assented, "but there isn't any war."

"Well," even in triumph, Connie was imperturbable, "there isn't any father for my eleven children either."

The twins had to admit that this was an obstacle, and they yielded gracefully.

"But an author, Connie," said Lark. "It's very hard. I gave it up long ago."

"I know you did. But I don't give up very easily."

"You gave up your eleven children."

"Oh, I've plenty of time for them yet, when I find a father for them. Yes, I'm going to be an author."

"Can you write?"

"Of course I can write."

"Well, you have conceit enough to be anything," said Carol frankly. "Maybe you'll make it go, after all. I should like to have an author in the family and since Lark's lost interest, I suppose it will have to be you. I couldn't think of risking my complexion at such a precarious livelihood. But if you get stuck, I'll be glad to help you out a little. I really have an imagination myself, though perhaps you wouldn't think it."

"What makes you think you can write, Con?" inquired Lark, with genuine interest.

"I have already done it."

"Was it any good?"

"It was fine."

Carol and Lark smiled at each other.

"Yes," said Carol, "she has the long-haired instinct. I see it now. They always say it is fine. Was it a masterpiece, Connie?" And when Connie hesitated,

she urged, "Come on, confess it. Then we shall be convinced that you have found your field. They are always masterpieces. Was yours?"

"Well, considering my youth and inexperience, it was," Connie admitted, her eyes sparkling appreciatively. Carol's wit was no longer lost upon her, at any rate.

"Bring it out. Let's see it. I've never met a masterpiece yet,—except a dead one," said Lark.

"No—no," Connie backed up quickly. "You can't see it, and—don't ask any more about it. Has father gone out?"

The twins stared at her again. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, but it's my story and you can't see it. That settles it. Was there any mail to-day?"

Afterward the twins talked it over together.

"What made her back down like that?" Carol wondered. "Just when we had her going."

"Why, didn't you catch on to that? She has sent it off to a magazine, of course, and she doesn't want us to know about it. I saw through it right away."

Carol looked at her twin with new interest. "Did you ever send 'em off?"

Lark flushed a little. "Yes, I did, and always got 'em back, too—worse luck. That's why I gave it up."

"What did you do with them when they came back?"

"Burned them. They always burn them. Connie'll

get hers back, and she'll burn it, too," was the laconic answer.

"An author," mused Carol. "Do you think she'll ever make it?"

"Well, honestly, I shouldn't be surprised if she did. Connie's smart, and she never gives up. Then she has a way of saying things that—well, it takes. I really believe she'll make it, if she doesn't get off on suffrage or some other queer thing before she gets to it."

"I'll have to keep an eye on her," said Carol.

"You wait until she can't eat a meal, and then you'll know she's got it back. Many's the time Prudence made me take medicine, just because I got a story back. Prudence thought it was tummy-ache. The symptoms are a good bit the same."

So Carol watched, and sure enough, there came a day when the bright light of hope in Connie's eyes gave way to the sober sadness of certainty. Her light had failed. And she couldn't eat her dinner.

Lark kicked Carol's foot under the table, and the two exchanged amused glances.

"Connie's not well," said Lark with a worried air. "She isn't eating a thing. You'd better give her a dose of that tonic, Aunt Grace. Prudence says the first sign of decay is the time for a tonic. Give her a dose."

Lark solemnly rose and fetched the bottle. Aunt Grace looked at Connie inquiringly. Connie's face was certainly pale, and her eyes were weary. And she was not eating her dinner.

"I'm not sick," the crushed young author protested.

"I'm just not hungry. You trot that bottle back to the cupboard, Lark, and don't get gay."

"You can see for yourself," insisted Lark. "Look at her. Isn't she sick? Many's the long illness Prudence staved off for me by a dose of this magic tonic. You'd better make her take it, father. You can see she's sick." The lust of a sweeping family revenge showed in Lark's clear eyes.

"You'd better take a little, Connie," her father decided. "You don't look very well to-day."

"But, father," pleaded Connie.

"A dose in time saves a doctor bill," quoted Carol sententiously. "Prudence says so."

And the aspiring young genius was obliged to swallow the bitter dose. Then, with the air of one who has rendered a boon to mankind, Lark returned to her chair.

After the meal was over, Carol shadowed Connie closely. Sure enough, she headed straight for her own room, and Carol, close outside, heard a crumpling of paper. She opened the door quickly and went in. Connie turned, startled, a guilty red staining her pale face. Carol sat down sociably on the side of the bed, politely ignoring Connie's feeble attempt to keep the crumpled manuscript from her sight. She engaged her sister in a broad-minded and sweeping conversation, adroitly leading it up to the subject of literature. But Connie would not be inveigled into a confession. Then Carol took a wide leap.

"Did you get the story back?"

Connie gazed at her with an awe that was almost

superstitious. Then, in relief at having the confidence forced from her, tears brightened her eyes, but being Connie, she winked them stubbornly back.

"I sure did," she said.

"Hard luck," said Carol, in a matter-of-fact voice. "Let's see it."

Connie hesitated, but finally passed it over.

"I'll take it to my own room and read it if you don't mind. What are you going to do with it now?"

"Burn it."

"Let me have it, won't you? I'll hide it and keep it for a souvenir."

"Will you keep it hidden? You won't pass it around for the family to laugh at, will you?"

Carol gazed at her reproachfully, rose from the bed in wounded dignity and moved away with the story in her hand. Connie followed her to the door and said humbly:

"Excuse me, Carol, I know you wouldn't do such a thing. But a person does feel so ashamed of a story—when it comes back."

"That's all right," was the kind answer. "I know just how it is. I have the same feeling when I get a pimple on my face. I'll keep it dark."

More eagerly than she would have liked Connie to know, she curled herself upon the bed to read Connie's masterpiece. It was a simple story, but Connie did have a way of saying things, and—Carol laid it down in her lap and stared at it thoughtfully.

Then she called Lark.

"Look here," she said abruptly. "Read this. It's the masterpiece."

She maintained a perfect silence while Lark perused the crumpled manuscript.

"How is it?"

"Why, it's not bad," declared Lark in a surprised voice. "It's not half bad. It's Connie all right, isn't it? Well, what do you know about that?"

"Is it any good?" pursued Carol.

"Why, yes, I think it is. It's just like folks you know. They talk as we do, and—I'm surprised they didn't keep it. I've read 'em a whole lot worse!"

"Connie's disappointed," Carol said. "I think she needs a little boost. I believe she'll really get there if we kind of crowd her along for a while. She told me to keep this dark, and so I will. We'll just copy it over, and send it out again."

"And if it comes back?"

"We'll send it again. We'll get the name of every magazine in the library, and give 'em all a chance to start the newest author on the rosy way."

"It'll take a lot of stamps."

"That's so. Do you have to enclose enough to bring them back? I don't like that. Seems to me it's just tempting Providence. If they want to send them back, they ought to pay for doing it. I say we just enclose a note taking it for granted they'll keep it, and tell them where to send the money. And never

put a stamp in sight for them to think of using up."

"We can't do that. It's bad manners."

"Well, I have half a dollar," admitted Carol reluctantly.

After that the weeks passed by. The twins saw finally the shadow of disappointment leaving Connie's face, and another expression of absorption take its place.

"She's started another one," Lark said, wise in her personal experience.

And when there came the starry rapt gaze once more, they knew that this one, too, had gone to meet its fate. But before the second blow fell, the twins gained their victory. They embraced each other feverishly, and kissed the precious check a hundred times, and insisted that Connie was the cleverest little darling that ever lived on earth. Then, when Connie, with their father and aunt, was sitting in unsuspecting quiet, they tripped in upon her.



We enclose our check for forty-five doll

"We have something to read to you," said Carol beaming paternally at Connie. "Listen attentively. Put down your paper, father. It's important. Go on, Larkie."

> "My dear Miss Starr," read Lark. "We are very much pleased with your story,"—Connie sprang suddenly from her chair—"your story, 'When the Rule worked Backwards.' We are placing it in one of our early numbers, and shall be glad at any time to have the pleasure of examining more of your work. We enclose our check for forty-five dollars. Thanking you, and assuring you of the satisfaction with which we have read your story, I am,
>
> "Very cordially yours,"—

"Tra, lalalalala!" sang the twins, dancing around the room, waving, one the letter, the other the check.

Connie's face was pale, and she caught her head with both hands, laughingly nervously. "I'm going round," she gasped. "Stop me."

Carol promptly pushed her down in a chair and sat upon her lap.

"Pretty good,—eh, what?"

"Oh, Carol, don't say that, it sounds awful," cautioned Lark.

"What do you think about it, Connie? Pretty fair boost for a struggling young author, don't you think? Family, arise! The Chautauqua salute! We have arrived. Connie is an author. Forty-five dollars!"

"But however did you do it?" wondered Connie breathlessly.

"Why, we sent it out, and—"

"Just once?"

"Alas, no,—we sent it seven times."

"Oh, girls, how could you! Think of the stamps! I'm surprised you had the money."

"Remember that last quarter we borrowed of you? Well!"

Connie laughed excitedly. "Oh, oh!—forty-five dollars! Think of it. Oh, father!"

"Where's the story," he asked, a little jealously. "Why didn't you let me look it over, Connie?"

"Oh, father, I—couldn't. I—I—I felt shy about it. You don't know how it is father, but—we want to keep them hidden. We don't get proud of them until

they've been accepted."

"Forty-five dollars." Aunt Grace kissed her warmly. "And the letter is worth a hundred times more to us than that. And when we see the story—"

"We'll go thirds on the money, twins," said Connie.

The twins looked eager, but conscientious. "No," they said, "it's just a boost, you know. We can't take the money."

"Oh, you've got to go thirds. You ought to have it all. I would have burned it."

"No, Connie," said Carol, "we know you aren't worth devotion like ours, but we donate it just the same—it's gratis."

"All right," smiled Connie. "I know what you want, anyhow. Come on, auntie, let's go down town. I'm afraid that silver silk mull will be sold before we get there."

The twins fell upon her ecstatically. "Oh, Connie, you mustn't. We can't allow it. Oh, of course if you insist, dearest, only—" And then they rushed to find hats and gloves for their generous sister and devoted aunt.

The second story came back in due time, but with the boost still strong in her memory, and with the fifteen dollars in the bank, Connie bore it bravely and started it traveling once more. Most of the stories never did find a permanent lodging place, and Connie carried an old box to the attic for a repository for her mental fruits that couldn't make friends away from home. But she never despaired again.

And the twins, after their own manner, calmly

took to themselves full credit for the career which they believed lay not far before her. They even boasted of the way they had raised her and told fatuous and exaggerated stories of their pride in her, and their gentle sisterly solicitude for her from the time of her early babyhood. And Connie gave assent to every word. In her heart she admitted that the twins' discipline of her, though exceedingly drastic at times, had been splendid literary experience.

CHAPTER XV

A MILLIONAIRE'S SON

"IF Jim doesn't ask for a date for the concert next week, Lark, let's snub him good."

"But we both have dates," protested Lark.

"What difference does that make? We mustn't let him get independent. He always has asked one of us, and he needn't think we shall let him off now."

"Oh, don't worry," interrupted Connie. "He always asks. You have that same discussion every time there's anything going on. It's just a waste of time."

Mr. Starr looked up from his mail. "Soup of boys, and salad of boys,—they're beginning to pall on my palate."

"Very classy expression father," approved Carol. "Maybe you can work it into a sermon."

"Complexion and boys with Carol, books and boys with Lark, Connie, if you begin that nonsense you'll get spanked. One member of my family shall rise above it if I have to do it with force."

Connie blushed.

The twins broke into open derision. "Connie! Oh, yes, Connie's above that nonsense."

"Connie's the worst in the family, father, only she's one of these reserved, supercilious souls who doesn't tell everything she knows."

"'Nonsense.' I wish father could have heard Lee Hanson last night. It would have been a revelation to him. 'Aw, go on, Connie, give us a kiss.'"

Connie caught her lips between her teeth. Her face was scarlet.

"Twins!"

"It's a fact, father. He kept us awake. 'Aw, go on, Connie, be good to a fellow.'"

"That's what makes us so pale to-day,—he kept us awake hours!"

"Carol!"

"Well, quite a while anyhow."

"I—I—" began Connie defensively.

"Well, we know it. Don't interrupt when we're telling things. You always spoil a good story by cutting in. 'Aw, go on, Connie, go on now!' And Connie said—" The twins rocked off in a paroxysm of laughter, and Connie flashed a murderous look at them.

"Prudence says listening is—"

"Sure she does, and she's right about it, too. But what can a body do when folks plant themselves right beneath your window to pull off their little Romeo concerto. We can't smother on nights like these. 'Aw, go on, Connie.'"

"I wanted to drop a pillow on his head, but Carol was afraid he'd run off with the pillow, so we just sacrificed ourselves and let it proceed."

"Well, I—"

"Give us time, Connie. We're coming to that. And Connie said, 'I'm going in now, I'm sleepy.'"

"I didn't—father, I didn't!"

"Well, you might have said a worse thing than that," he told her sadly.

"I mean—I—"

"She did say it," cried the twins. "'I'm sleepy.' Just like that."

"Oh, Connie's the girl for sentiment," exclaimed Lark. "Sleepy is not a romantic word and it's not a sentimental feeling, but it can be drawled out so it sounds a little mushy at least. 'I sleep, my love, to dream of thee,'—for instance. But Connie didn't do it that way. Nix. Just plain sleep, and it sounded like 'Get out, and have a little sense.'"

"Well, it would make you sick," declared Connie, wrinkling up her nose to express her disgust. "Are boys always like that father?"

"Don't ask me," he hedged promptly. "How should

I know?"

"Oh, Connie, how can you! There's father—now, he never cared to kiss the girls even in his bad and balmy days, did you, daddy? Oh, no, father was all for the strictly orthodox even in his youth!"

Mr. Starr returned precipitately to his mail, and the twins calmly resumed the discussion where it had been interrupted.

A little later a quick exclamation from their father made them turn to him inquiringly.

"It's a shame," he said, and again: "What a shame!"

The girls waited expectantly. When he only continued frowning at the letter in his hand, Carol spoke up brightly, "Yes, isn't it?"

Even then he did not look up, and real concern settled over their expressive faces. "Father! Can't you see we're listening?"

He looked up, vaguely at first, then smiling. "Ah, roused your curiosity, did I? Well, it's just another phase of this eternal boy question."

Carol leaned forward ingratiatingly. "Now indeed, we are all absorption."

"Why, it's a letter from Andrew Hedges,—an old college chum of mine. His son is going west and Andy is sending him around this way to see me and meet my family. He'll be here this afternoon. Isn't it a shame?"

"Isn't it lovely?" exclaimed Carol. "We can use him to make Jim Forrest jealous if he doesn't ask for that date?" And she rose up and kissed her father.

"Will you kindly get back to your seat, young lady, and not interfere with my thoughts?" he reproved her sternly but with twinkling eyes. "The trouble is I have to go to Fort Madison on the noon train for that Epworth League convention. I'd like to see that boy. Andy's done well, I guess. I've always heard so. He's a millionaire, they say."

For a long second his daughters gazed at him speechlessly.

Then, "A millionaire's son," Lark faltered feebly.

"Yes."

"Why on earth didn't you say so in the first place?" demanded Carol.

"What difference does that make?"

"It makes all the difference in the world! Ah! A millionaire's son." She looked at Lark with keen speculative eyes. "Good-looking, I suppose, young, of course, and impressionable. A millionaire's son."

"But I have to go to Fort Madison. I am on the program to-night. There's the puzzle."

"Oh, father, you can leave him to us," volunteered Lark.

"I'm afraid you mightn't carry it off well. You're so likely to run by fits and jumps, you know. I should hate it if things went badly."

"Oh, father, things couldn't go badly," protested Carol. "We'll be lovely, just lovely. A millionaire's son! Oh, yes, daddy, you can trust him to us all right."

At last he caught the drift of their enthusiasm. "Ah! I see! That fatal charm. You're sure you'll treat him nicely?"

"Oh, yes, father, so sure. A millionaire's son. We've never even seen one yet."

"Now look here, girls, fix the house up and carry it off the best you can. I have a lot of old friends in Cleveland, and I want them to think I've got the dandiest little family on earth."

"'Dandiest'! Father, you will forget yourself in the pulpit some day,—you surely will. And when we take such pains with you, too, I can't understand where you get it! The people you associate with, I suppose."

"Do your best, girls. I'm hoping for a good report. I'll be gone until the end of the week, since I'm on for the last night, too. Will you do your best?"

After his departure, Carol gathered the family forces about her without a moment's delay.

"A millionaire's son," she prefaced her remarks, and as she had expected, was rewarded with immediate attention. "Now, for darling father's sake, we've got to manage this thing the very best we can. We have to make this Andy Hedges, Millionaire's Son, think we're just about all right, for father's sake. We must have a gorgeous dinner, to start with. We'll plan that a little later. Now I think, Aunt Grace, lovely, it would be nice for you to wear your lavender lace gown, and look delicate, don't you? A chaperoning auntie in poor health is so aristocratic. You must wear the lavender satin slippers and have a bottle of cologne to lift frequently to your sensitive nostrils."

"Why, Carol, William wouldn't like it!"

"Wouldn't like it!" ejaculated the schemer in surprise. "Wouldn't like it! Why wouldn't he like it? Didn't he tell us to create a good impression? Well, this is it. You'll make a lovely semi-invalid auntie. You must have a faintly perfumed handkerchief to press to your eyes now and then. It isn't hot enough for you slowly to wield a graceful fan, but we can get along without it."

"But, Carol—"

"Think how pleased dear father will be if his old college chum's son is properly impressed," interrupted Carol hurriedly, and proceeded at once with her plans.

"Connie must be a precocious younger sister, all in white,—she must come in late with a tennis racquet, as though she had just returned from a game. That will be stagey, won't it? Lark must be the sweet young daughter of the home. She must wear her silver mull, her gray slippers, and—"

"I can't," said Lark. "I spilt grape juice on it. And I kicked the toe out of one of my slippers."

"You'll have to wear mine then. Fortunately that silver mull was always too tight for me and I never comported myself in it with freedom and destructive ease. As a consequence, it is fresh and charming. You must arrange your hair in the most *Ladies' Home Journal* style, and—"

"What are you going to wear?"

"Who, me? Oh, I have other plans for myself." Carol looked rather uneasily at her aunt. "I'll come to

me a little later."

"Yes, indeed," said Connie. "Carol has something extra up her sleeve. She's had the millionaire's son in her mind's eye ever since father introduced his pocketbook into the conversation."

Carol was unabashed. "My interest is solely from a family view-point. I have no ulterior motive."

Her eyes sparkled eagerly. "You know, auntie darling—"

"Now, Carol, don't you suggest anything—"

"Oh, no indeed, dearest, how could you think of such a thing?" disclaimed Carol instantly. "It's such a very tiny thing, but it will mean a whole lot on the general impression of a millionaire's son. We've simply got to have a maid! To open the door, and curtesy, and take his hat, and serve the dinner, and—He's used to it, you know, and if we haven't one, he'll go back to Cleveland and say, 'Ah, bah Jove, I had to hang up my own hat, don't you know?'"

"That's supposed to be English, but I don't believe it. Anyhow, it isn't Cleveland," said Connie flatly.

"Well, he'd think we were awfully cheap and hard up, and Andy Hedges, Senior, would pity father, and maybe send him ten dollars, and—no, we've got to have a maid!"

"We might get Mamie Sickey," suggested Lark.

"She's so ugly."

"Or Fay Greer," interposed Aunt Grace.

"She'd spill the soup."

"Then there's nobody but Ada Lone," decided Connie.

"She hasn't anything fit to wear," objected Carol.

"Of whom were you thinking, Carol?" asked her aunt, moving uneasily in her chair.

Carol flung herself at her aunt's knees. "Me!" she cried.

"As usual?" Connie ejaculated dryly.

"Oh, Carol," wailed Lark, "we can't think of things to talk about when you aren't there to keep us stirred up."

"I'm beginning to see daylight," said Connie. She looked speculatively at Lark. "Well, it's not half bad, Carol, and I apologize."

"Don't you think it is a glorious idea, Connie?" cried Carol rapturously.

"Yes, I think it is."

Carol caught her sister's hand. Here was an ally worth having. "You know how sensible Connie is, auntie. She sees how utterly preposterous it would be to think of entertaining a millionaire's son without a maid."

"You're too pretty," protested Lark. "He'd try to kiss you."

"'Oh, no, sir, oh, please, sir,'" simpered Carol, with an adorable curtesy, "'you'd better wait for the ladies, sir.'"

"Oh, Carol, I think you're awful," said their aunt unhappily. "I know your father won't like it."

"Like it? He'll love it. Won't he, Connie?"

"Well, I'm not sure he'll be crazy about it, but it'll be all over when he gets home," said Connie.

"And you're very much in favor of it, aren't you, Connie precious?"

"Yes, I am." Connie looked at Lark critically again. "We must get Lark some bright flowers to wear with the silver dress—sweet peas would be good. But I won't pay for them, and you can put that down right now."

"But what's the idea?" mourned Lark. "What's the sense in it? Father said to be good to him, and you know I can't think of things to say to a millionaire's son. Oh, Carol, don't be so mean."

"You must practise up. You must be girlish, and light-hearted, and ingenuous, you know. That'll be very effective."

"You do it, Carol. Let me be the maid. You're lots more effective than I am."

But Carol stood firm, and the others yielded to her persuasions. They didn't approve, they didn't sanction, but they did get enthusiastic, and a merrier houseful of masqueraders was never found than that. Even Aunt Grace allowed her qualms to be quieted and entered into her part as semi-invalid auntie with genuine zest.

At three they were all arrayed, ready for the presentation. They assembled socially in the parlor, the dainty maid ready to fly to her post at a second's warning. At four o'clock, they were a little fagged and near the point of exasperation, but they still held

their characters admirably. At half past four a telegraph message was phoned out from the station.

"Delayed in coming. Will write you later. Very sorry. Andy Hedges, Jr."

Only the absolute ludicrousness of it saved Carol from a rage. She looked from the girlish tennis girl to the semi-invalid auntie, and then to the sweet young daughter of the home, and burst out laughing. The others, though tired, nervous and disappointed, joined her merrily, and the vexation was swept away.

The next morning, Aunt Grace went as usual to the all-day meeting of the Ladies' Aid in the church parlors. Carol and Lark, with a light lunch, went out for a few hours of spring-time happiness beside the creek two miles from town.

"We'll come back right after luncheon," Carol promised, "so if Andy the Second should come, we'll be on hand."

"Oh, he won't come to-day."

"Well, he just better get here before father comes home. I know father will like our plan after it's over, but I also know he'll veto it if he gets home in time. Wish you could go with us, Connie."

"Thanks. But I've got to sew on forty buttons. And —if I pick the cherries on the little tree, will you make a pie for dinner?"

"Yes. If I'm too tired Larkie will. Do pick them, Con, the birds have had more than their share now."

After her sisters had disappeared, Connie considered the day's program.

"I'll pick the cherries while it's cool. Then I'll sew on the buttons. Then I'll call on the Piersons, and they'll probably invite me to stay for luncheon." And she went up-stairs to don a garment suitable for cherry-tree service. For cherry trees, though lovely to behold when laden with bright red clusters showing among the bright green leaves, are not at all lovely to climb into. Connie knew that by experience. Belonging to a family that wore its clothes as long as they possessed any wearing virtue, she found nothing in her immediate wardrobe fitted for the venture. But from a rag-bag in the closet at the head of the stairs, she resurrected some remains of last summer's apparel. First she put on a blue calico, but the skirt was so badly torn in places that it proved insufficiently protecting. Further search brought to light another skirt, pink, in a still worse state of delapidation. However, since the holes did not occur simultaneously in the two garments, by wearing both she was amply covered. For a waist she wore a red crape dressing sacque, and about her hair she tied a broad, ragged ribbon of red to protect the soft waves from the ruthless twigs. She looked at herself in the mirror. Nothing daunted by the sight of her own unsightliness, she took a bucket and went into the back yard.

Gingerly she climbed into the tree, gingerly because Connie was not fond of scratches on her anatomy, and then began her task. It was a glorious morning. The birds, frightened away by the living scare-crow in the tree, perched in other, cherry-less trees around her and burst into derisive song. And Connie, light-hearted, free from care, in love with the whole wide world, sang, too, pausing only now and then to thrust a ripe cherry between her teeth.

She did not hear the prolonged ringing of the front-door bell. She did not observe the young man in the most immaculate of white spring suits who came inquiringly around the house. But when the chattering of a saucy robin became annoying, she flung a cherry at him crossly.

"Oh, chase yourself!" she cried. And nearly fell from her perch in dismay when a low voice from beneath said pleasantly:

"I beg your pardon! Miss Starr?"

Connie swallowed hard, to get the last cherry and the mortification out of her throat.

"Yes," she said, noting the immaculate white spring suit, and the handsome shoes, and the costly Panama held so lightly in his hand. She knew the Panama was costly because they had wanted to buy one for her father's birthday, but decided not to.

"I am Andrew Hedges," he explained, smiling sociably.

Connie wilted completely at that. "Good night," she muttered with a vanishing mental picture of their lovely preparations the day previous. "I—mean good morning. I'm so glad to meet you. You—you're late, aren't you? I mean, aren't you ahead of yourself? At least, you didn't write, did you?"

"No, I was not detained so long as I had anticipated, so I came right on. But I'm afraid I'm inconveniencing you."

"Oh, not a bit, I'm quite comfortable," she assured him. "Auntie is gone just now, and the twins are away, too, but they'll all be back presently." She

looked longingly at the house. "I'll have to come down, I suppose."

"Let me help you," he offered eagerly. Connie in the incongruous clothes, with the little curls straying beneath the ragged ribbon, and with stains of cherry on her lips, looked more presentable than Connie knew.

"Oh, I—" she hesitated, flushing. "Mr. Hedges," she cried imploringly, "will you just go around the corner until I get down. I look fearful."

"Not a bit of it," he said. "Let me take the cherries."

Connie helplessly passed them down to him, and saw him carefully depositing them on the ground. "Just give me your hand."

And what could Connie do? She couldn't sternly order a millionaire's son to mosy around the house and mind his own business until she got some decent clothes on, though that was what she yearned to do. Instead she held out a slender hand, grimy and red, with a few ugly scratches here and there, and allowed herself to be helped ignominiously out from the sheltering branches into the garish light of day.

She looked at him reproachfully. He never so much as smiled.

"Laugh if you like," she said bitterly. "I looked in the mirror. I know all about it."

"Run along," he said, "but don't be gone long, will you? Can you trust me with the cherries?"

Connie walked into the house with great decorum, afraid the ragged skirts might swing revealingly, but

the young man bent over the cherries while she made her escape.

It was another Connie who appeared a little later, a typical tennis girl, all in white from the velvet band in her hair to the canvas shoes on her dainty feet. She held out the slender hand, no longer grimy and stained, but its whiteness still marred with sorry scratches.

"I am glad to see you," she said gracefully, "though I can only pray you won't carry a mental picture of me very long."

"I'm afraid I will though," he said teasingly.

"Then please don't paint me verbally for my sisters' ears; they are always so clever where I am concerned. It is too bad they are out. You'll stay for luncheon with me, won't you? I'm all alone,—we'll have it in the yard."

"It sounds very tempting, but—perhaps I had better come again later in the afternoon."

"You may do that, too," said Connie. "But since you are here, I'm afraid I must insist that you help amuse me." And she added ruefully, "Since I have done so well amusing you this morning."

"Why, he's just like anybody else," she was thinking with relief. "It's no trouble to talk to him, at all. He's nice in spite of the millions. Prudence says millionaires aren't half so dollar-marked as they are cartooned, anyhow."

He stayed for luncheon, he even helped carry the folding table out beneath the cherry tree, and trotted docilely back and forth with plates and glasses, as

Connie decreed.

"Oh, father," she chuckled to herself, as she stood at the kitchen window, twinkling at the sight of the millionaire's son spreading sandwiches according to her instructions. "Oh, father, the boy question is complicated, sure enough."

It was not until they were at luncheon that the grand idea visited Connie. Carol would have offered it harborage long before. Carol's mind worked best along that very line. It came to Connie slowly, but she gave it royal welcome. Back to her remembrance flashed the thousand witty sallies of Carol and Lark, the hundreds of times she had suffered at their hands. And for the first time in her life, she saw a clear way of getting even. And a millionaire's son! Never was such a revenge fairly crying to be perpetrated.

"Will you do something for me, Mr. Hedges?" she asked. Connie was only sixteen, but something that is born in woman told her to lower her eyes shyly, and then look up at him quickly beneath her lashes. She was no flirt, but she believed in utilizing her resources. And she saw in a flash that the ruse worked.

Then she told him softly, very prettily.

"But won't she dislike me if I do?" he asked.

"No, she won't," said Connie. "We're a family of good laughers. We enjoy a joke nearly as much when it's on us, as when we are on top."

So it was arranged, and shortly after luncheon the young man in the immaculate spring suit took his departure. Then Connie summoned her aunt by

phone, and told her she must hasten home to help "get ready for the millionaire's son." It was after two when the twins arrived, and Connie and their aunt hurried them so violently that they hadn't time to ask how Connie got her information.

"But I hope I'm slick enough to get out of it without lying if they do ask," she told herself. "Prudence says it's not really wicked to get out of telling things if we can manage it."

He had arrived! A millionaire's son! Instantly their enthusiasm returned to them. The cushions on the couch were carefully arranged for the reclining of the semi-invalid aunt, who, with the sweet young daughter of the home, was up-stairs waiting to be summoned. Connie, with the tennis racquet, was in the shed, waiting to arrive theatrically. Carol, in her trim black gown with a white cap and apron, was a dream.

And when he came she ushered him in, curtesying in a way known only on the stage, and took his hat and stick, and said softly:

"Yes, sir,—please come in, sir,—I'll call the ladies."

She knew she was bewitching, of course, since she had done it on purpose, and she lifted her eyes just far enough beneath the lashes to give the properly coquettish effect. He caught her hand, and drew her slowly toward him, admiration in his eyes, but trepidation in his heart, as he followed Connie's coaching. But Carol was panic-seized, she broke away from him roughly and ran up-stairs, forgetting her carefully rehearsed. "Oh, no, sir,—oh, please, sir, —you'd better wait for the ladies."

But once out of reach she regained her composure. The semi-invalid aunt trailed down the stairs, closely followed by the attentive maid to arrange her chair and adjust the silken shawl. Mr. Hedges introduced himself, feeling horribly foolish in the presence of the lovely serving girl, and wishing she would take herself off. But she lingered effectively, whisperingly softly:

"Shall I lower the window, madame? Is it too cool? Your bottle, madame!"

And the guest rubbed his hand swiftly across his face to hide the slight twitching of his lips.

Then the model maid disappeared, and presently the sweet daughter of the house, charming in the gray silk mull and satin slippers, appeared, smiling, talking, full of vivacity and life. And after a while the dashing tennis girl strolled in, smiling inscrutably into the eyes that turned so quizzically toward her. For a time all went well. The chaperoning aunt occasionally lifted a dainty cologne bottle to her sensitive nostrils, and the daughter of the house carried out her girlish vivacity to the point of utter weariness. Connie said little, but her soul expanded with the foretaste of triumph.

"Dinner is served, madame," said the soft voice at the door, and they all walked out sedately. Carol adjusted the invalid auntie's shawl once more, and was ready to go to the kitchen when a quiet:

"Won't Miss Carol sit down with us?" made her stop dead in her tracks.

He had pulled a chair from the corner up to the table for her, and she dropped into it. She put her

elbows on the table, and leaning her dainty chin in her hands, gazed thoughtfully at Connie, whose eyes were bright with the fires of victory.

"Ah, Connie, I have hopes of you yet,—you are improving," she said gently. "Will you run out to the kitchen and bring me a bowl of soup, my child?"

And then came laughter, full and free,—and in the midst of it Carol looked up, wiping her eyes, and said:

"I'm sorry now I didn't let you kiss me, just to shock father!"

But the visit was a great success. Even Mr. Starr realized that. The millionaire's son remained in Mount Mark four days, the cynosure of all eyes, for as Carol said, "What's the use of bothering with a millionaire's son if you can't brag about him."

And his devotion to his father's college chum was such that he wrote to him regularly for a long time after, and came westward now and again to renew the friendship so auspiciously begun.

"But you can't call him a problem, father," said Carol keenly. "They aren't problematic until they discriminate. And he doesn't. He's as fond of Connie's conscience as he is of my complexion, as far as I can see." She rubbed her velvet skin regretfully. She had two pimples yesterday and he never even noticed them. Then she leaned forward and smiled. "Father, you keep an eye on Connie. There's something in there that we aren't on to yet." And with this cryptic remark, Carol turned her attention to a small jar of cold cream the druggist had given her to sample.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TWINS HAVE A PROPOSAL

IT was half past three on a delightful summer afternoon. The twins stood at the gate with two hatless youths, performing what seemed to be the serious operation of separating their various tennis racquets and shoes from the conglomerate jumble. Finally, laughing and calling back over their shoulders, they sauntered lazily up the walk toward the house, and the young men set off in the direction from which they had come. They were hardly out of hearing distance when the front door opened, and Aunt Grace beckoned hurriedly to the twins.

"Come on, quick," she said. "Where in the world have you been all day? Did you have any luncheon? Mrs. Forrest and Jim were here, and they invited you to go home with them for a week in the country. I said I knew you'd want to go, and they promised to come for you at four, but I couldn't find you any place. I suppose it is too late now. It's—"

"A week!"

"At Forrests'?"

"Come on, Lark, sure we have time enough. We'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Come on up, auntie, we'll tell you where we've been."

The twins flew up the stairs, their aunt as close behind as she deemed safe. Inside their own room

they promptly, and ungracefully, kicked off their loose pumps, tossed their tennis shoes and racquets on the bed, and began tugging at the cords of their middy blouses.

"You go and wash, Carol," said Lark, "while I comb. Then I can have the bathroom to myself. And hurry up! You haven't any time to primp."

"Pack the suit-case and the bag, will you, auntie, and—"

"I already have," she answered, laughing at their frantic energy. "And I put out these white dresses for you to wear, and—"

"Gracious, auntie! They button in the back and have sixty buttons apiece. We'll never have time to fasten them," expostulated Carol, without diminishing her speed.

"I'll button while you powder, that'll be time enough."

"I won't have time to powder," called back Carol from the bathroom, where she was splashing the water at a reckless rate. "I'll wear a veil and powder when I get there. Did you pack any clean handkerchiefs, auntie? I'm clear out. If you didn't put any in, you'd better go and borrow Connie's. Lucky thing she's not here."

Shining with zeal and soap, Carol dashed out, and Lark dashed in.

"Are there any holes in these stockings?" Carol turned around, lifting her skirts for inspection. "Well, I'm sorry, I won't have time to change them.—Did they come in the auto? Good!" She was brushing her

hair as she talked. "Yes, we had a luncheon, all pie, though. We played tennis this morning; we were intending to come home right along, or we'd have phoned you. We were playing with George Castle and Fritzie Zale.—Is it sticking out any place?" She lowered her head backward for her aunt to see. "Stick a pin in it, will you? Thanks. They dared us to go to the pie counter and see which couple could eat the most pieces of lemon pie, the couple which lost paying for all the pie. It's not like betting, you know, it's a kind of reward of merit, like a Sunday-school prize. No, I won't put on my slippers till the last thing, my heel's sore, my tennis shoe rubbed the skin off. My feet seem to be getting tender. Think it's old age?"

Lark now emerged from the bathroom, and both twins performed a flying exchange of dresses.

"Who won?"

"Lark and George ate eleven pieces, and Fritzie and I only nine. So Fritzie paid. Then we went on the campus and played mumble-te-peg, or whatever you call it. It is French, auntie."

"Did they ask us to stay a whole week, auntie?" inquired Lark.

"Yes. Jim was wearing his new gray suit and looked very nice. I've never been out to their home. Is it very nice?"

"Um, swell!" This was from Carol, Lark being less slangily inclined. "They have about sixteen rooms, and two maids—they call them 'girls'—and electric lights, and a private water supply, and—and—horses, and cows—oh, it's great! We've always been

awfully fond of Jim. The nicest thing about him is that he always takes a girl home when he goes to class things and socials. I can't endure a fellow who walks home by himself. Jim always asks Larkie and me first, and if we are taken he gets some one else. Most boys, if they can't get first choice, pike off alone."

"Here, Carol, you have my petticoat. This is yours. You broke the drawstring, and forgot—"

"Oh, mercy, so I did. Here, auntie, pin it over for me, will you? I'll take the string along and put it in to-night."

"Now, Carol," said Aunt Grace, smiling. "Be easy on him. He's so nice it would be a shame to—"

Carol threw up her eyes in horror. "I am shocked," she cried. Then she dimpled. "But I wouldn't hurt Jim for anything. I'm very fond of him. Do you really think there are any—er—indications—"

"Oh, I don't know anything about it. I'm just judging by the rest of the community."

Lark was performing the really difficult feat of putting on and buttoning her slippers standing on one foot for the purpose and stooping low. Her face was flushed from the exertion.

"Do you think he's crazy about you, Carol?" she inquired, rather seriously, and without looking up from the shoe she was so laboriously buttoning.

"Oh, I don't know. There are a few circumstances which seem to point that way. Take that new gray suit for instance. Now you know yourself, Lark, he didn't need a new gray suit, and when a man gets a

brand-new suit for no apparent reason, you can generally put it down that he's waxing romantic. Then there's his mother—she's begun telling me all his good points, and how cute he was when he was born, and she showed me one of his curls and a lot of his baby pictures—it made Jim wild when he came in and caught her at it, and she tells me how good he is and how much money he's got. That's pointed, very. But I must confess," she concluded candidly, "that Jim himself doesn't act very loverly."

"He thinks lots of you, I know," said Lark, still seriously. "Whenever he's alone with me he praises you every minute of the time."

"That's nothing. When he's alone with me he praises you all the time, too. Where's my hat, Lark? I'll bet Connie wore it, the little sinner! Now what shall I do?"

"You left it in the barn yesterday,—don't you remember you hung it on the harness hook when we went out for eggs, and—"

"Oh, so I did. There comes Connie now." Carol thrust her head out of the window. "Connie, run out to the barn and bring my hat, will you? It's on the harness hook. And hurry! Don't stop to ask questions, just trot along and do as you're told."

Carol returned again to her toilet. "Well, I guess I have time to powder after all. I don't suppose we'll need to take any money, auntie, do you? We won't be able to spend it in the country."

"I think you'd better take a little. They might drive to town, or go to a social, or something."

"Can't do it. Haven't a cent."

"Well, I guess I can lend you a little," was the smiling reply. It was a standing joke in the family that Carol had been financially hard pressed ever since she began using powder several years previous.

"Are you fond of Jim, Carol?" Lark jumped away backward in the conversation, asking the question gravely, her eyes upon her sister's face.

"Hum! Yes, I am," was the light retort. "Didn't Prudence teach us to love everybody?"

"Don't be silly. I mean if he proposes to you, are you going to turn him down, or not?"

"What would you advise, Lark?" Carol's brows were painfully knitted. "He's got five hundred acres of land, worth at least a hundred an acre, and a lot of money in the bank,—his mother didn't say how much, but I imagine several thousand anyhow. And he has that nice big house, and an auto, and—oh, everything nice! Think of the fruit trees, Larkie! And he's good-looking, too. And his mother says he is always good natured even before breakfast, and that's very exceptional, you know! Very! I don't know that I could do much better, do you, auntie? I'm sure I'd look cute in a sun-bonnet and apron, milking the cows! So, boss, so, there, now! So, boss!"

"Why, Carol!"

"But there are objections, too. They have pigs. I can't bear pigs! Pooooey, pooooey! The filthy little things! I don't know,—Jim and the gray suit and the auto and the cows are very nice, but when I think of Jim and overalls and pigs and onions and freckles I have goose flesh. Here they come! Where's that other slipper? Oh, it's clear under the bed!" She wriggled

after it, coming out again breathless. "Did I rub the powder all off?" she asked anxiously.

The low honk of the car sounded outside, and the twins dumped a miscellaneous assortment of toilet articles into the battered suit-case and the tattered hand-bag. Carol grabbed her hat from Connie, leisurely strolling through the hall with it, and sent her flying after her gloves. "If you can't find mine, bring your own," she called after her.

Aunt Grace and Connie escorted them triumphantly down the walk to the waiting car where the young man in the new sentimental gray suit stood beside the open door. His face was boyishly eager, and his eyes were full of a satisfaction that had a sort of excitement in it, too. Aunt Grace looked at him and sighed. "Poor boy," she thought. "He is nice! Carol is a mean little thing!"

He smiled at the twins impartially. "Shall we flip a coin to see who I get in front?" he asked them, laughing.

His mother leaned out from the back seat, and smiled at the girls very cordially. "Hurry, twinnies," she said, "we must start, or we'll be late for supper. Come in with me, won't you, Larkie?"

"What a greasy schemer she is," thought Carol, climbing into her place without delay.

Jim placed the battered suit-case and the tattered bag beneath the seat, and drew the rug over his mother's knees. Then he went to Lark's side, and tucked it carefully about her feet.

"It's awfully dusty," he said. "You shouldn't have dolled up so. Shall I put your purse in my pocket?

Don't forget you promised to feed the chickens—I'm counting on you to do it for me."

Then he stepped in beside Carol, laughing into her bright face, and the good-bys rang back and forth as the car rolled away beneath the heavy arch of oak leaves that roofed in Maple Avenue.

The twins fairly reveled in the glories of the country through the golden days that followed, and enjoyed every minute of every day, and begrudged the hours they spent in sleep. The time slipped by "like banana skins," declared Carol crossly, and refused to explain her comparison. And the last day of their visit came. Supper was over at seven o'clock, and Lark said, with something of wistfulness in her voice, "I'm going out to the orchard for a farewell weep all by myself. And don't any of you disturb me, —I'm so ugly when I cry."

So she set out alone, and Jim, a little awkwardly, suggested that Carol take a turn or so up and down the lane with him. Mrs. Forrest stood at the window and watched them, tearful-eyed, but with tenderness.

"My little boy," she said to herself, "my little boy. But she's a dear, sweet, pretty girl."

In the meantime, Jim was acquitting himself badly. His face was pale. He was nervous, ill at ease. He stammered when he spoke. Self-consciousness was not habitual to this young man of the Iowa farm. He was not the awkward, ignorant, gangling farm-hand we meet in books and see on stages. He had attended the high school in Mount Mark, and had been graduated from the state agricultural college with high honors. He was a farmer, as his father had been before him, but he was a farmer of the new era,

one of those men who takes plain farming and makes it a profession, almost a fine art. Usually he was self-possessed, assertive, confident, but, in the presence of this sparkling twin, for once he was abashed.

Carol was in an ecstasy of delight. She was not a man-eater, perhaps, but she was nearly romance-mad. She thought only of the wild excitement of having a sure-enough lover, the hurt of it was yet a little beyond her grasp. "Oh, Carol, don't be so sweet," Lark had begged her once. "How can the boys help being crazy about you, and it hurts them." "It doesn't hurt anything but their pride when they get snubbed," had been the laughing answer. "Do you want to break men's hearts?" "Well,—it's not at all bad for a man to have a broken heart," the irrepressible Carol had insisted. "They never amount to anything until they have a real good disappointment. Then they brace up and amount to something. See? I really think it's a kindness to give them a heart-break, and get them started."

The callow youths of Mount Mark, of the Epworth League, and the college, were almost unanimous in laying their adoration at Carol's feet. But Carol saw the elasticity, the buoyancy, of loves like these, and she couldn't really count them. She felt that she was ripe for a bit of solid experience now, and there was nothing callow about Jim—he was solid enough. And now, although she could see that his feelings stirred, she felt nothing but excitement and curiosity. A proposal, a real one! It was imminent, she felt it.

"Carol," he began abruptly, "I am in love."

"A-are you?" Carol had not expected him to begin in just that way.

"Yes,—I have been for a long time, with the sweetest and dearest girl in the world. I know I am not half good enough for her, but—I love her so much that—I believe I could make her happy."

"D-do you?" Carol was frightened. She reflected that it wasn't so much fun as she had expected. There was something wonderful in his eyes, and in his voice. Maybe Lark was right,—maybe it did hurt! Oh, she really shouldn't have been quite so nice to him!

"She is young—so am I—but I know what I want, and if I can only have her, I'll do anything I—" His voice broke a little. He looked very handsome, very grown-up, very manly. Carol quivered. She wanted to run away and cry. She wanted to put her arms around him and tell him she was very, very sorry and she would never do it again as long as she lived and breathed.

"Of course," he went on, "I am not a fool. I know there isn't a girl like her in ten thousand, but—she's the one I want, and—Carol, do you reckon there is any chance for me? You ought to know. Lark doesn't have secrets from you, does she? Do you think she'll have me?"

Certainly this was the surprise of Carol's life. If it was romance she wanted, here it was in plenty. She stopped short in the daisy-bright lane and stared at him.

"Jim Forrest," she demanded, "is it Lark you want to marry, or me?"

"Lark, of course!"

Carol opened her lips and closed them. She did it

again. Finally she spoke. "Well, of all the idiots! If you want to marry Lark, what in the world are you out here proposing to me for?"

"I'm not proposing to you," he objected. "I'm just telling you about it."

"But what for? What's the object? Why don't you go and rave to her?"

He smiled a little. "Well, I guess I thought telling you first was one way of breaking it to her gently."

"I'm perfectly disgusted with you," Carol went on, "perfectly. Here I've been expecting you to propose to me all week, and—"

"Propose to you! My stars!"

"Don't interrupt me," Carol snapped. "Last night I lay awake for hours,—look at the rings beneath my eyes—"

"I don't see 'em," he interrupted again, smiling more broadly.

"Just thinking out a good flowery rejection for you, and then you trot me out here and propose to Lark! Well, if that isn't nerve!"

Jim laughed loudly at this. He was used to Carol, and enjoyed her little outbursts. "I can't think what on earth made you imagine I'd want to propose to you," he said, shaking his head as though appalled at the idea.

Carol's eyes twinkled at that, but she did not permit him to see it. "Why shouldn't I think so? Didn't you get a new gray suit? And haven't I the best complexion in Mount Mark? Don't all the men want

to propose to a complexion like mine?"

"Shows their bum taste," he muttered.

Carol twinkled again. "Of course," she agreed, "all men have bum taste, if it comes to that."

He laughed again, then he sobered. "Do you think Lark will—"

"I think Lark will turn you down," said Carol promptly, "and I hope she does. You aren't good enough for her. No one in the world is good enough for Lark except myself. If she should accept you—I don't think she will, but if she has a mental aberration and does—I'll give you my blessing, and come and live with you six months in the year, and Lark shall come and live with me the other six months, and you can run the farm and send us an allowance. But I don't think she'll have you; I'll be disappointed in her if she does."

Carol was silent a moment then. She was remembering many things,—Lark's grave face that day in the parsonage when they had discussed the love of Jim, her unwonted gentleness and her quiet manners during this visit, and one night when Carol, suddenly awakening, had found her weeping bitterly into her pillow. Lark had said it was a headache, and was better now, and Carol had gone to sleep again, but she remembered now that Lark never had headaches! And she remembered how very often lately Lark had put her arms around her shoulders and looked searchingly into her face, and Lark was always wistful, too, of late! She sighed. Yes, she caught on at last, "had been pushed on to it," she thought angrily. She had been a wicked, blind, hateful little simpleton or she would have seen it

long ago. But she said nothing of this to Jim.

"You'd better run along then, and switch your proposal over to her, or I'm likely to accept you on my own account, just for a joke. And be sure and tell her I'm good and sore that I didn't get a chance to use my flowery rejection. But I'm almost sure she'll turn you down."

Then Carol stood in the path, and watched Jim as he leaped lightly over fences and ran through the sweet meadow. She saw Lark spring to her feet and step out from the shade of an apple tree, and then Jim took her in his arms.

After that, Carol rushed into the house and up the stairs. She flung herself on her knees beside her bed and buried her face in the white spread.

"Lark," she whispered, "Lark!" She clenched her hands, and her shoulders shook. "My little twin," she cried again, "my nice old Lark." Then she got up and walked back and forth across the floor. Sometimes she shook her fist. Sometimes a little crooked smile softened her lips. Once she stamped her foot, and then laughed at herself. For an hour she paced up and down. Then she turned on the light, and went to the mirror, where she smoothed her hair and powdered her face as carefully as ever.

"It's a good joke on me," she said, smiling, "but it's just as good a one on Mrs. Forrest. I think I'll go and have a laugh at her. And I'll pretend I knew it all along."

She found the woman lying in a hammock on the broad piazza where a broad shaft of light from the open door fell upon her. Carol stood beside her,

smiling brightly.

"Mrs. Forrest," she said, "I know a perfectly delicious secret. Shall I tell you?"

The woman sat up, holding out her arms. Carol dropped on her knees beside her, smiling mischievously at the expression on her face.

"Cupid has been at work," she said softly, "and your own son has fallen a victim."

Mrs. Forrest sniffed slightly, but she looked lovingly at the fair sweet face. "I am sure I can not wonder," she answered in a gentle voice. "Is it all settled?"

"I suppose so. At any rate, he is proposing to her in the orchard, and I am pretty sure she's going to accept him."

Mrs. Forrest's arms fell away from Carol's shoulders. "Lark!" she ejaculated.

"Yes,—didn't you know it?" Carol's voice was mildly and innocently surprised.

"Lark!" Mrs. Forrest was plainly dumfounded. "I—I thought it was you!"

"Me!" Carol was intensely astonished. "Me? Oh, dear Mrs. Forrest, whatever in the world made you think that?"

"Why—I don't know," she faltered weakly, "I just naturally supposed it was you. I asked him once where he left his heart, and he said, 'At the parsonage,' and so of course I thought it was you."

Carol laughed gaily. "What a joke," she cried. "But

you are more fortunate than you expected, for it is my precious old Larkie. But don't be too glad about it, or you may hurt my feelings."

"Well, I am surprised, I confess, but I believe I like Lark as well as I do you, and of course Jim's the one to decide. People say Lark is more sensible than you are, but it takes a good bit of a man to get beyond a face as pretty as yours. I'm kind o' proud of Jim!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE GIRL WHO WOULDN'T PROPOSE

IT took a long time for Carol to recover from the effect of Lark's disloyalty, as she persisted in calling it. For several weeks she didn't twinkle at all. But when at last the smiles came easy again, she wrote to Mr. Duke, her p'fessor no longer, but now a full-fledged young minister. She apologized sweetly for her long delay.

"But you will forgive me when you have read this," she wrote. "Cupid is working havoc in our family. Of course, no one outside the home circle knows yet, but I insisted on telling you because you have been such a grand good friend to us for so long. We may seem young to you, because you can't forget when we were freshmen, but we are really very grown up. We act quite mature now, and never think of playing jokes. But I didn't finish my news, did I?

"It is Jim Forrest—he was in high school when we were. Remember him? Larkie and I were out to spend a week, and—but I needn't go into particulars. I knew you would be interested. The whole family is very happy about it, he is a great favorite with every one. But how our family is going to pieces! Still, since it is Jim—! He *is* nice, isn't he? But you wouldn't dare say no."

Carol's eyes glittered wickedly as she sealed this letter, which she had penned with greatest care. And a few days later, when the answer came, she danced gleefully up the stairs,—not at all "mature" in manner, and locked the door behind her while she read:

"Dear Carol:

"Indeed I am very interested, and I wish you all the joy in the world. Tell Jim for me how very much I think he is to be congratulated. He seems a fine fellow, and I know you will be happy. It was a surprise, I admit—I knew he was doing the very

devoted—but you have seemed so young to me, always. I can't imagine you too grown up for jokes, though you do sound more 'mature' in this letter than you have before. Lark will be lonely, I am afraid.

"I am very busy with my work, so you will understand if my letters come less frequently, won't you? And you will be too busy with your own happiness to bother with an old professor any more anyhow. I have enjoyed our friendship very much,—more than you will ever know,—and I want once more to hope you may be the happiest woman in the world. You deserve to be.

"Very sincerely your friend,

"DAVID A. DUKE."

Carol lay down on the bed and crushed the letter ecstatically between her hands. Then she burst out laughing. Then she cried a little, nervously, and laughed again. Then she smoothed the letter affectionately, and curled up on the bed with a pad of paper and her father's fountain-pen to answer the letter.

"My dear Mr. Duke: However in the world could you make such a mistake. I've been laughing ever since I got your letter, but I'm vexed too. He's nice, all right; he's just fine, but I don't want him! And think how annoyed Lark would be if she could see it. I am not engaged to Jim Forrest,—nor to any one. It's Lark. I certainly didn't say it was I, did I? We're all so fond of Jim that it really is a pleasure to the whole family to count him

one of us, and Lark grows more deliriously joyful all the time. But I! I know you're awfully busy, of course, and I hate to intrude, but you must write one little postal card to apologize for your error, and I'll understand how hard you are working when you do not write again.

"Hastily, but always sincerely,

"CAROL."

Carol jumped up and caught up her hat and rushed all the way down-town to the post-office to get that letter started for Danville, Illinois, where the Reverend Mr. Duke was located. Her face was so radiant, and her eyes were so heavenly blue, and so sparkling bright, that people on the street turned to look after her admiringly.

She was feverishly impatient until the answer arrived, and was not at all surprised that it came under special delivery stamp, though Lark lifted her eyebrows quizzically, and Aunt Grace smiled suggestively, and her father looked up with sudden questioning in his face. Carol made no comment, only ran up to her room and locked the door once more.

"Carol, you awful little scamp, you did that on purpose, and you know it. You never mentioned Lark's name. Well, if you wanted to give me the scare of my life, you certainly succeeded. I didn't want to lose my little chum, and I knew very well that no man in his proper senses would allow his sweetheart to be as good a comrade to another man as I want you to be to me. Of course I was

disappointed. Of course I expected to be busy for a while. Of course I failed to see the sterling worth of Jim Forrest. I see it now, though. I think he's a prince, and as near worth being in your family as anybody could be. I'm sure we'll be great friends, and tell Lark for me that I am waxing enthusiastic over his good qualities even to the point of being inarticulate. Tell her how happy I am over it, a good deal happier than I've been for the past several days, and I am wishing them both a world of joy. I'm having one myself, and I find it well worth having. I could shake you, Carol, for playing such a trick on me. I can just see you crouch down and giggle when you read this. You wait, my lady. My turn is coming. I think I'll run down to Mount Mark next week to see my uncle—he's not very well. Don't have any dates.

"Sincerely, D. D."

And Carol laughed again, and wiped her eyes.

The Reverend Mr. Duke's devotion to his elderly uncle in Mount Mark was a most beautiful thing to see. Every few weeks he "ran down for a few days," and if he spent most of his time recounting his uncle's symptoms before the sympathetic Starrs, no one could be surprised at that. He and Mr. Starr naturally had much in common, both ministers, and both—at any rate, he was very devoted to his uncle, and Carol grew up very, very fast, and smiled a great deal, but laughed much less frequently than in other days. There was a shy sweetness about her that made her father watch her anxiously.

"Is Carol sick, Grace?" he asked one day, turning

suddenly to his sister-in-law.

She smiled curiously. "N-no, I think not. Why?"

"She seems very—sweet."

"Yes. She feels very—sweet," was the enigmatical response. And Mr. Starr muttered something about women and geometry and went away, shaking his head. And Aunt Grace smiled again.

But the months passed away. Lark, not too absorbed in her own happiness to find room for her twin's affairs, at last grew troubled. She and Aunt Grace often held little conferences together when Carol was safely out of the way.

"Whatever do you suppose is the matter?" Lark would wonder anxiously. To which her aunt always answered patiently, "Oh, just wait. He isn't sure she's grown-up enough yet."

Then there came a quiet night when Carol and Mr. Duke sat in the living-room, idly discussing the weather, and looking at Connie who was deeply immersed in a book on the other side of the big reading lamp. Conversation between them lagged so noticeably that they sighed with relief when she finally laid down her book, and twisted around in her chair until she had them both in full view.

"Books are funny," she began brightly. "I don't believe half the written stuff ever did happen—I don't believe it could. Do girls ever propose, Mr. Duke?"

"No one ever proposed to me," he answered, laughing.

"No?" she queried politely. "Maybe no one wanted

you badly enough. But I wonder if they ever do? Writers say so. I can't believe it somehow. It seems so —well—unnecessary, someway. Carol and I were talking about it this afternoon."

Carol looked up startled.

"What does Carol think about it?" he queried.

"Well, she said she thought in ordinary cases girls were clever enough to get what they wanted without asking for it."

Carol moved restlessly in her chair, her face drooping a little, and Mr. Duke laughed.

"Of course, I know none of our girls would do such a thing," said Connie, serene in her family pride. "But Carol says she must admit she'd like to find some way to make a man say what anybody could see with half an eye he wanted to say anyhow, only —"

Connie stopped abruptly. Mr. Duke had turned to Carol, his keen eyes searching her face, but Carol sank in the big chair and turned her face away from him against the leather cushion.

"Connie," she said, "of course no girl would propose, no girl would want to—I was only joking—"

Mr. Duke laughed openly then. "Let's go and take a walk, shan't we, Carol? It's a grand night."

"You needn't go to get rid of me," said Connie, rising. "I was just going anyhow."

"Oh, don't go," said Mr. Duke politely.

"Don't go," echoed Carol pleadingly.

Connie stepped to the doorway, then paused and looked back at them. Sudden illumination came to her as she scanned their faces, the man's clear-cut, determined, eager—Carol's shy, and scared, and—hopeful. She turned quickly back toward her sister, pain darkening her eyes. Carol was the last of all the girls,—it would leave her alone,—and he was too old for her. Her lips quivered a little, and her face shadowed more darkly. But they did not see it. The man's eyes were intent on Carol's lovely features, and Carol was studying her slender fingers. Connie drew a long breath, and looked down upon her sister with a great protecting tenderness in her heart. She wanted to catch her up in her strong young arms and carry her wildly out of the room—away from the man who sat there—waiting for her.

Carol lifted her face at that moment, and turned slowly toward Mr. Duke. Connie saw her eyes. They were luminous.

Connie's tense figure relaxed then, and she turned at once toward the door. "I am going," she said in a low voice. But she looked back again before she closed the door after her. "Carol," she said in a whisper, "you—you're a darling. I—I've always thought so."

Carol did not hear her,—she did not hear the door closing behind her—she had forgotten Connie was there.

Mr. Duke stood up and walked quickly across the room and Carol rose to meet him. He put his arms about her, strongly, without hesitating.

"Carol," he said, "my little song-bird,"—and he laughed, but very tenderly, "would you like to know

how to make me say what you know I want to say?"

"I—I—" she began tremulously, clasping her hands against his breast, and looking intently, as if fascinated, at his square firm chin so very near her eyes. She had never observed it so near at hand before. She thought it was a lovely chin,—in another man she would have called it distinctly "bossy."

"You *would* try to make me, when you know I've been gritting my teeth for years, waiting for you to get grown up. You've been awfully slow about it, Carol, and I've been in such a hurry for you."

She rested limply in his arms now, breathing in little broken sighs, not trying to speak.

"You have known it a long time, haven't you? And I thought I was hiding it so cleverly." He drew her closer in his arms. "You are too young for me, Carol," he said regretfully. "I am very old."

"I—I like 'em old," she whispered shyly.

With one hand he drew her head to his shoulder, where he could feel the warm fragrant breath against the "lovely chin."

"You like 'them' old," he repeated, smiling. "You are very generous. One old one is all I want you to like." But when he leaned toward her lips, Carol drew away swiftly. "Don't be afraid of me, Carol. You didn't mind once when I kissed you." He laid his hand softly on her round cheek. "I am too old, dearest, but I've been loving you for years I guess. I've been waiting for you since you were a little freshman, only I didn't know it for a while. Say something, Carol—I don't want you to feel timid with me. You love me, don't you? Tell me, if you do."

"I—I." She looked up at him desperately. "I—well, I made you say it, didn't I?"

"Did you want me to say it, dearest? Have you been waiting, too? How long have you—"

"Oh, a long time; since that night among the rose bushes at the parsonage."

"Since then?"

"Yes; that was why it didn't break my pledge when you kissed me. Because I—was waiting then."

"Do you love me?"

"Oh, P'fessor, don't make me say it right out in plain English—not to-night. I'm pretty nearly going to cry now, and—" she twinkled a little then, like herself, "you know what crying does to my complexion."

But he did not smile. "Don't cry," he said. "We want to be happy to-night. You will tell me to-morrow. To-night—"

"To-night," she said sweetly, turning in his arms so that her face was toward him again, "to-night—" She lifted her arms, and put them softly about his neck, the laces falling back and showing her pink dimpled elbows. "To-night, my dearest,—" She lifted her lips to him, smiling.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes

Obvious punctuation errors corrected.

One instance each of "twinship" and "twin-ship" was retained.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

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