JEAN OF GREENACRES

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JEAN OF GREENACRES

BY

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CHAPTER I

A KNIGHT OF THE BUMPERS

It was Monday, just five days before Christmas. The little pink express card arrived in the noon mail. The girls knew there must be some deviation from the usual daily mail routine, when the mailman lingered at the white post.

Jean ran down the drive and he greeted her cheerily.

“Something for you folks at the express office, I reckon. If it’s anything hefty you’d better go down and get it today. Looks like we’d have a flurry of snow before nightfall.”

He waited while Jean glanced at the card.

“Know what it is?”

“Why, I don’t believe I do,” she answered, regretfully. “Maybe they’re books for Father.”

“Like enough,” responded Mr. Ricketts, musingly. “I didn’t know. I always feel a little mite interested, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” laughed Jean, as he gathered up his reins and jogged off down the bridge road. She hurried back to the house, her head sideways to the wind. The hall door banged as Kit let her in, her hands floury from baking.

“Why on earth do you stand talking all day to that old gossip? Is there any mail from the west?”

“He only wanted to know about an express bundle; whether it was hefty or light, and where it came from and if we expected it,” Jean replied, piling the mail on the dining-room table. “There is no mail from Saskatoon, sister fair.”

“Well, I only wanted to hear from Honey. He promised me a silver fox skin for Christmas if he could find one.”

Kit’s face was perfectly serious. Honey had asked her before he left Gilead

Center just what she would like best, and, truthful as always, Kit had told him a silver fox skin. The other girls had nicknamed it “The Quest of the Silver Fox,” and called Honey a new Jason, but Kit still held firmly to the idea that if there was any such animal floating around, Honey would get it for her.

Jean was engrossed in a five-page letter from one of the girl students at the Academy back in New York where she had studied the previous winter. The sunlight poured through the big semicircular bay window at the south end of the dining-room. Here Doris and Helen maintained the plant stand, a sort of half-moon pyramid, home-made, with rows of potted ferns, geraniums, and begonias on its steps. Helen had fashioned some window boxes too, covered with birchbark and lined with moss, trying to coax some adder’s tongue and trailing ground myrtle, with even some wild miniature pines, like Japanese dwarfs, to stay green.

“It has turned bleak and barren out of doors so suddenly,” said Helen. “One day it was all beautiful yellow and russet and even old rose, but the next, after that heavy frost, it was all dead. I’m glad pines don’t mind frost and cold.”

“Pines are the most optimistic, dearest trees of all,” Kit agreed, opening up an early spring catalogue. “If it wasn’t for the pines and these catalogues to encourage one, I’d want to hunt a woodchuck hole and hiberate.”

“Hibernate,” Jean corrected absently.

Now, one active principle in the Robbins family was interest in each other’s affairs. It was called by various names. Doris said it was “nosing.” Helen called it “petty curiosity.” But Kit came out flatly and said it was based primarily on inherent family affection; that necessarily every twig of a family tree must be intensely and vitally interested in every single thing that affected any sister twig. Accordingly, she deserted her catalogues with their enticing pictures of flowering bulbs, and, leaning over Jean’s chair, demanded to know the cause of her absorption.

“Bab Crane is taking up expression.” Jean turned back to the first page of the letter she had been reading. “She says she never fully realized before that art is only the highest form of expressing your ideals to the world at large.”

“Tell her she’s all wrong.” Kit shook her mop of boyish curls decidedly. “Cousin Roxy told me the other day she believes schools were first invented for the relief of distressed parents just to give them a breathing spell, and not for children at all.”

“Still, if Bab’s hit a new trail of interest, it will make her think she’s really working. Things have come to her so easily, she doesn’t appreciate them.

Perhaps she can express herself now."

"Express herself? For pity's sake, Jeanie. Tell her to come up here, and we'll let her express herself all over the place. Oh! Just smell my mince pies this minute. Isn't cooking an expression of individual art too?" said Kit teasingly as she made a bee line for the oven in time to rescue four mince pies.

"Who's going to drive down after the Christmas box?" Mrs. Robbins glanced in at the group in the sunlight. "I wish to send an order for groceries too and you'll want to be back before dark."

"I'm terribly sorry, Mother dear," called Kit from the kitchen, "but Sally and some of the girls are coming over and I promised them I'd go after evergreen and Princess pine. We're gathering it for wreaths and stars to decorate the church."

"And I promised Father if his magazines came, I'd read to him," Helen added. "And here they are, so I can't go."

"Dorrie and I'll go. I love the drive." Jean handed Bab's letter over to Kit to read, and gave just a bit of a sigh. Not a real one, only a bit of a one. Nobody could possibly have sustained any inward melancholy at Greenacres. There was too much to be done every minute of the day. Kit often said she felt exactly like "Twinkles," Billie's gray squirrel, whirling around in its cage.

Still, Bab's letter did bring back strongly the dear old times last winter at the Art Academy. Perhaps the girl students did take themselves and their aims too seriously, and had been like that prince in Tennyson's "Princess," who mistook the shadow for the substance. Yet it had all been wonderfully happy and interesting. Even in the hills of rest, she missed the companionship of girls her own age with the same tastes and interests as herself.

Shad harnessed up Princess and drove around to the side porch steps. It seemed as if he grew taller all the time. When the minister from the little white church had come to call, he had found Shad wrapping up the rose bushes in their winter coats of sacking. Shad stood up, six feet of lanky, overgrown, shy Yankee boy, and shook hands.

"Well, well, Shadrach, son, you're getting nearer heaven sooner than most of us, aren't you?" laughed Mr. Peck. And he was. Grew like a weed, Shad himself said, but Doris told him pines grew fast too, and she thought that some day he'd be a Norway spruce which is used for ship-masts.

Mrs. Robbins came out carrying her own warm fur cloak to wrap Doris in, and an extra lap robe.

“Better take the lantern along,” advised Shad, in his slow drawling way. “Looks like snow and it’ll fall dark kind of early.”

He went back to the barn and brought a lantern to tuck in under the seat. Princess, dancing and side stepping in her anxiety to be off, took the road with almost a scamper. Her winter coat was fairly long now, and Doris said she looked like a Shetland pony.

It was seven miles to Nantic, but the girls never tired of the ride. It was so still and dream-like with the early winter silence on the land. They passed only Jim Barlow, driving his yoke of silver gray oxen up from the lumber mill with a load of logs to be turned into railroad ties, and Sally’s father with a load of grain, waving his whipstock in salute to them.

Sally herself was at the “ell” door of the big mill house, scraping out warm cornmeal for her white turkeys. She saluted them too with the wooden spoon.

“I’m going after evergreen as soon as I get my dishes washed up,” she called happily. “Goodbye.”

Along the riverside meadows they saw the two little Peckham boys driving sheep with Shep, their black and white dog, barking madly at the foot of a tall hickory tree.

“Got a red squirrel up there,” called Benny, proudly.

“Sally says they’re making all their Christmas presents themselves,” said Doris, thinking of the large family the mill house nested. “They always do, every year. She says she thinks presents like that are ever so much more loving than those you just go into a store and buy. She’s got them all hidden away in her bureau drawer, and the key’s on a ribbon around her neck.”

“Didn’t we make a lot of things too, pigeon? Birchbark, hand-painted cards, and pine pillows, and sweet fern boxes. Mother says she never enjoyed getting ready for Christmas so much as this year. Wait a minute.” Jean spied some red berries in the thicket overhanging the rail fence.

She handed Doris the reins, and jumping from the carriage, climbed the fence to reach the berries. Down the road came the hum of an automobile, a most unusual sound on Gilead highways. Princess never minded them and Doris turned out easily for the machine to pass.

The driver was Hardy Philips, the store keeper’s son at Nantic. He swung off his cap at sight of Jean. She surely made an attractive picture with the background of white birches against red oak and deep green pine, and over one shoulder the branches of red berries. The two people on the back seat looked

back at her, slim and dark as some wood sprite, with her home crocheted red cap and scarf to match, with one end tossed over her shoulder.

"Somebody coming home for Christmas, I guess," she said, getting back into the carriage with her spoils. "Princess, you are the dearest horse about not minding automobiles. Some stand right up and paw the air when one goes by. You've got the real Robbins' poise and disposition."

Doris was snuggling down into the fur robe.

"My nose is cold. I wish I had a mitten for it. It's funny, Jeanie. I don't mind the cold a bit when I walk through the woods to school, but I do when we're driving."

"Snuggle under the rug. We'll be there pretty soon."

Jean drove with her chin up, eyes alert, cheeks rosy. There was a snap in the air that "perked you right up," as Cousin Roxy would say, and Princess covered the miles lightly, the click of her hoofs on the frozen road almost playing a dance *tempo*. When they stopped at the hitching post above the railroad tracks, Doris didn't want to wait in the carriage, so she followed Jean down the long flight of wooden steps that led to the station platform from the hill road above. And just as they opened the door of the little stuffy express office, they caught the voice of Mr. Briggs, the agent, not pleasant and sociable as when he spoke to them, but sharp and high pitched.

"Well, you can't loaf around here, son, I tell you that right now. The minute I spied you hiding behind that stack of ties down the track, I knew you'd run away from some place, and I'm going to find out all about you and let your folks know you're caught."

"I ain't got any folks," came back a boy's voice hopefully. "I'm my own boss and can go where I please."

"Did you hear that, Miss Robbins?" exclaimed Mr. Briggs, turning around at the opening of the door. "Just size him up, will you. He says he's his own boss, and he ain't any bigger than a pint of cider. Where did you come from?"

"Off a freight train."

Mr. Briggs leaned his hands on his knees and bent down to get his face on a level with the boy's.

"Ain't he slick, though? Can't get a bit of real information out of him except that he liked the looks of Nantic and dropped off the slow freight when she was shunting back and forth up yonder. What's your name?"

“Joe. Joe Blake.” He didn’t look at Mr. Briggs, but off at the hills, wind swept and bare except for their patches of living green pines. There was a curious expression in his eyes, Jean thought, not loneliness, but a dumb fatalism. As Cousin Roxy might have put it, it was as if all the waves and billows of trouble had passed over him, and he didn’t expect anything better.

“How old are you?”

“ ’Bout nine or ten.”

“What made you drop off that freight here?”

Joe was silent and seemed embarrassed. Doris caught a gleam of appeal in his glance and responded instantly.

“Because you liked it best, isn’t that why?” she suggested eagerly. Joe’s face brightened up at that.

“I liked the looks of the hills, but when I saw all them mills I—I thought I’d get some work maybe.”

“You’re too little.” Mr. Briggs cut short that hope in its upspringing. “I’m going to hand you right over to the proper authorities, and you’ll land up in the State Home for Boys if you haven’t got any folks of your own.”

Joe met the shrewd, twinkly grey eyes doubtfully. His own filled with tears reluctantly, big tears that rose slowly and dropped on his worn short coat. He put his hand up to his shirt collar and held on to it tightly as if he would have kept back the ache there, and Jean’s heart could stand it no longer.

“I think he belongs up at Greenacres, please, Mr. Briggs,” she said quickly. “I know Father and Mother will take him up there if he hasn’t any place to go, and we’ll look after him. I’m sure of it. He can drive back with us.”

“But you don’t know where he came from nor anything about him, Miss Robbins. I tell you he’s just a little tramp. You can see that, or he wouldn’t be hitching on to freight trains. That ain’t no way to do if you’re decent God-fearing folks, riding the bumpers and dodging train-men.”

“Let me take him home with me now, anyway,” pleaded Jean. “We can find out about him later. It’s Christmas Friday, you know, Mr. Briggs.”

There was no resisting the appeal that underlay her words and Mr. Briggs capitulated gracefully, albeit he opined the county school was the proper receptacle for all such human rubbish.

Jean laughed at him happily, as he stood warming himself by the big drum stove, his feet wide apart, his hands thrust into his blue coat pockets.

“It’s your own doings, Miss Robbins,” he returned dubiously. “I wouldn’t stand in your way so long as you see fit to take him along. But he’s just human rubbish. Want to go, Joe?”

And Joe, knight of the bumpers, rose, wiping his eyes with his coat sleeve, and glared resentfully back at Mr. Briggs. At Jean’s word, he shouldered the smaller package and carted it up to the waiting carriage while Mr. Briggs leisurely came behind with the wooden box.

“Guess you’ll have to sit on that box in the back, Joe,” Jean said. “We’re going down to the store, and then home. Sit tight.” She gathered up the reins. “Thank you ever and ever so much, Mr. Briggs.”

It was queer, Mr. Briggs said afterwards, but nobody could be expected to resist the smile of a Robbins. He swung off his cap in salute, watching the carriage spin down the hill, over the long mill bridge and into the village with the figure of Joe perched behind on the Christmas box.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTMAS GUESTS

Helen caught the sound of returning wheels on the drive about four o'clock. It was nearly dark. She stood on the front staircase, leaning over the balustrade to reach the big wrought iron hall lamp. When she opened the door widely, its rays shining through the leaded red glass, cast a path of welcome outside.

"Hello, there," Jean called. "We're all here."

Doris jumped to the ground and took Joe by the hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. He was shivering, but she hurried him around to the kitchen door and they burst in where Kit was getting supper. Over in a corner lay burlap sacks fairly oozing green woodsy things for the Christmas decoration at the church, and Kit had fastened up one long trailing length of ground evergreen over an old steel engraving of Daniel Webster that Cousin Roxy had given them.

"He ain't as pretty as he might be," she had said, pleasantly, "but I guess if George Washington was the father of his country, we'll have to call Daniel one of its uncles."

"Look, Kit," Doris cried, quite as if Joe had been some wonderful gift from the fairies instead of a dusty, tired, limp little derelict of fate and circumstance. "This is Joe, and he's come to stay with us. Where's Mother?"

One quick look at Joe's face checked all mirthfulness in Kit. There were times when silence was really golden. She was always intuitive, quick to catch moods in others and understand them. This case needed the Motherbird. Joe was fairly blue from the cold, and there was a pinched, hungry look around his mouth and nose that made Kit leave her currant biscuits.

"Upstairs with Father. Run along quick and call her, Dorrie." She knelt beside Joe and smiled that radiant, comradely smile that was Kit's special present from her fairy godmother. "We're so glad you've come home," she said, drawing him near the crackling wood fire. "You sit on the woodbox and just toast." She slipped back into the pantry and dipped out a mug of rich, creamy milk, then cut a wide slice of warm gingerbread. "There now. See how

that tastes. You know, it's the funniest thing how wishes come true. I was just longing for somebody to sample my cake and tell me if it was good. Is it?"

Joe drank nearly the whole glass of milk before he spoke, looking over the rim at her with very sleepy eyes.

"It's awful good," he said. "I ain't had anything to eat since yesterday morning."

"Oh, dear," cried Kit. This was beyond her. She turned with relief at Mrs. Robbins' quick light step in the hall.

"Yes, dear, I know. Jeanie told me." She put Kit to one side, and went straight over to the wood box. And she did just the one right thing. That was the marvel of the Motherbird. She seemed always to know naturally what a person needed most and gave it to them. Down she stooped and took Joe in her arms, his head on her shoulder, patting him while he began to cry chokingly.

"Never mind, laddie, now," she told him. "You're home." She lifted him to her lap and started to untie his worn sodden shoes. "Doris, get your slippers, dear, and a pair of stockings too, the heavy ones. Warm the milk, Kit, it's better that way. And you cuddle down on the old lounge by the sitting room fire, Joe, and rest. That's our very best name for the world up here, did you know it? We call it our hills of rest."

Shad came in breezily, bringing the Christmas boxes and a shower of light snow. He stared at the stranger with a broad grin of welcome.

"Those folks that went up in the automobile stopped off at Judge Ellis's. Folks from Boston, I understood Hardy to say. He just stopped a minute to ask what was in the boxes, so I thought I'd inquire too."

Nothing of interest ever got by the Greenacre gate posts if Shad could waylay it. Helen asked him to open the boxes right away, but no, Shad would not. And he showed her where it was written, plain as could be, in black lettering along one edge:

"Not to be opened till Christmas."

Mrs. Robbins had gone into the sitting room and found a gray woolen blanket in the wall closet off the little side hall. From the chest of drawers she took some of Doris's outgrown winter underwear. Supper was nearly ready, but Joe was to have a warm bath and be clad in clean fresh clothing. Tucking him under one wing, as Kit said, she left the kitchen and Jean told the rest how she had rescued him from Mr. Briggs's righteous indignation and charitable intentions.

“Got a good face and looks you square in the eye,” said Shad. “I’d take a chance on him any day, and he can help around the place a lot, splitting kindlings, and shifting stall bedding and what not.”

The telephone bell rang and Jean answered. Rambling up through the hills from Norwich was the party line, two lone wires stretching from home-hewn chestnut poles. Its tingling call was mighty welcome in a land where so little of interest or variation ever happened. This time it was Cousin Roxy at the other end. After her marriage to the Judge, they had taken the long deferred wedding trip up to Boston, visiting relatives there, and returning in time for a splendid old-fashioned Thanksgiving celebration at the Ellis homestead. Maple Lawn was closed for the winter but Hiram, the hired man, “elected” as he said, to stay on there indefinitely and work the farm on shares for Miss Roxy as he still called her.

“And like enough,” Cousin Roxy said comfortably, when she heard of his intentions, “he’s going to marry somebody himself. I wouldn’t put it past him a mite. I wish he’d choose Cindy Anson. There she is living alone down in that little bit of a house, running a home bakery when she’s born to fuss over a man. I told Hiram when I left, if I was him I’d buy all my pies and cake from Cindy, and then when I drove by Cindy’s I just dropped a passing word about how badly I felt at leaving such a fine man as Hiram to shift for himself up at the house, so she said she’d keep an eye on him.”

“But, Cousin Roxy,” Jean had objected, “that’s match-making.”

“Maybe ’tis so,” smiled Roxy placidly. “But I always did hold to it that Cupid and Providence both needed a sight of jogging along to keep them stirring.”

Over the telephone now came her voice, vibrant and cheery, and Jean answered the call.

“Hello, yes, this is Jean. Mother’s right in the sitting room. Who? Oh, wait till I tell the girls.” She turned her head; her brown eyes sparkling. “Boston cousins over at the Judge’s. Who did you say they are, Cousin Roxy? Yes? Cousin Beth and Elliott Newell. I’ll tell Father right away. Tomorrow morning early? That’s splendid. Goodbye.”

Before the girls could stop her, she was on her way upstairs. The largest sunniest chamber had been turned into the special retiring place of the king, as Helen called her father.

“All kings and emperors had some place where they could escape from formality and rest up,” she had declared. “And Plato loved to hide away in his

olive grove, so that is Dad's. Somebody else, I think it's Emerson, says we ought to keep an upper chamber in our souls, well swept and garnished, with windows wide."

"Not too wide this kind of weather, Helenita," Jean interrupted, for Helen's wings of poetry were apt to flutter while she forgot to shake her duster. Still, it was true, and one of the charms of the old Mansion House was its spaciousness. There were many rooms, but the pleasantest of all was the "king's thinking place."

The months of relaxation and rest up in the hills had worked wonders in Mr. Robbins' health. As old Dr. Gallup was apt to say when Kit rebelled at the slowness of recovery,

"Can't expect to do everything in a minute. Even the Lord took six days to fix things the way he liked them."

Instead of spending two-thirds of his time in bed or on the couch now, he would sit up for hours and walk around the wide porch, or even along the garden paths before the cold weather set in. But there still swept over him without warning the great fatigue and weakness, the dizziness and exhaustion which had followed as one of the lesser ills in his nervous breakdown.

He sat before the open fire now, reading from one of his favorite weeklies, with Gladness purring on his knees. Doris had found Gladness one day late in October, dancing along the barren stretch of road going over to Gayhead school, for all the world like a yellow leaf. She was a yellow kitten with white nose and paws. Also, she undoubtedly had the gladsome carefree disposition of the natural born vagabond, but Doris had tucked her up close in her arms and taken her home to shelter.

Some day, the family agreed, when all hopes and dreams had come true, Doris would erect all manner and kind of little houses all over the hundred and thirty odd acres around the Mansion House and call them Inns of Rest, so she would feel free to shelter any living creature that was fortunate enough to fall by the wayside near Greenacres' gate posts.

Cousin Roxy had looked at the yellow kitten with instant recognition.

"That's a Scarborough kitten. Sally Scarborough's raised yellow kittens with white paws ever since I can remember."

"Had I better take it back?" asked Doris anxiously.

"Land, no, child. It's a barn cat. You can tell that, it's so frisky. Ain't got a bit of repose or common sense. Like enough Mis' Scarborough'd be real glad

if it had a good home. Give it a happy name, and feed it well, and it'll slick right up."

So Gladness had remained, but not out in the barn. Somehow she had found her way up to the rest room and its peace must have appealed to her, for she would stay there hours, dozing with half closed jade green eyes and incurved paws. Kit said she had taken Miss Patterson's place as nurse, and was ever so much more dependable and sociable to have around.

"Father, dear," Jean exclaimed, entering the quiet room like an autumn flurry of wind. "What do you think? Cousin Roxy has just 'phoned, and she wants me to tell you two Boston cousins are there. Did you hear the machine go up this afternoon? Beth and Elliott Newell. Do you remember them?"

"Rather," smiled Mr. Robbins. "It must be little Cousin Beth and her boy. I used to visit at her old home in Weston when I was a little boy. She wanted to be an artist, I know."

Jean had knelt before the old gray rock fireplace, slipping some light sticks under the big back log. At his last words she turned with sudden interest and sat down cross legged on the rug just as if she had been a little girl.

"Oh, father, an artist? And did she study and succeed?"

"I think so. I remember she lived abroad for some time and married there. Her maiden name was Lowell, Beth Lowell."

"Did she marry an artist too?" Jean leaned forward, her eyes bright with romance, but Mr. Robbins laughed.

"No, indeed. She married Elliott's father, a schoolmate from Boston. He went after her, for I suppose he tired of waiting for Beth's career to come true. Listen a minute."

Up from the lower part of the house floated strains of music. Surely there had never issued such music from a mouth organ. It quickened one into action like a violin's call. It proclaimed all that a happy heart might say if it had a mouth organ to express itself with. And the tune was the old-fashioned favorite of the fife and drum corps, "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

"It must be Joe," Jean said, smiling mischievously up at her father, for Joe was still unknown to the master of the house. She ran out to the head of the stairs.

"Can Joe come up, Motherie?"

Up he came, fresh from a tubbing, wearing Doris's underwear, and an old

shirt of Mr. Robbins', very much too large for him, tucked into his worn corduroy knee pants. His straight blonde hair fairly glistened from its recent brushing and his face shone, but it was Joe's eyes that won him friends at the start. Mixed in color they were like a moss agate, with long dark lashes, and just now they were filled with contentment.

"They wanted me to play for them downstairs," he said gravely, stopping beside Mr. Robbins' chair. "I can play lots of tunes. My mother gave me this last Christmas."

This was the first time he had mentioned his mother and Jean followed up the clue gently.

"Where, Joe?"

He looked down at the burning logs, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Over in Providence. She got sick and they took her to the hospital and she never came back."

"Not at all?"

He shook his head.

"Then, afterwards,—" much was comprised in that one word and Joe's tone, "afterwards we started off together, my Dad and me. He said he'd try and get a job on some farm with me, but nobody wanted him this time of year, and with me too. And he said one morning he wished he didn't have me bothering around. When I woke up on the freight yesterday morning, he wasn't there. Guess he must have dropped off. Maybe he can get a job now."

So it slipped out, Joe's personal history, and the girls wondered at his soldierly acceptance of life's discipline. Only nine, but already he faced the world as his own master, fearless and optimistic. All through that first evening he sat in the kitchen on the cushioned wood box, playing tunes he had learned from his father. When Shad brought in his big armfuls of logs for the night, he executed a few dance figures on the kitchen floor and "allowed" before he got through Joe would be chief musician at the country dances roundabout.

After supper the girls drew up their chairs around the sitting room table as usual. Here every night the three younger ones prepared their lessons for the next day. Jean generally read or sat with her father awhile, but tonight she answered Bab Crane's letter. It was read over twice, the letter that blended in so curiously with the coming of the cousins from Boston.

Ever since Jean could remember she had drawn pictures. In her first

primer, treasured with other relics of that far off time when she was six instead of seventeen, she had put dancey legs on the alphabet and drawn very fat young pigs with curly tails chasing each other around the margins of spellers.

No one guessed how she loved certain paintings back at the old home in New York. They had seemed so real to her, the face of a Millet peasant lad crossing a stubble field at dawn; a Breton girl knitting as she walked homeward behind some straying sheep; one of Franz Hals' Flemish lads, his chin pressed close to his violin, his deep eyes looking at you from under the brim of his hat, and Touchstone and Audrey wandering through the Forest of Arden.

She had loved to read, as she grew older, of Giotto, the little Italian boy trying to mix colors from brick dust, or drawing with charcoal on the stones of the field where Cimabue the monk walked in meditation; of the world that was just full of romance, full of stories ages old and still full of vivid life.

Once she had read of Albrecht Durer, painting his masterpieces while he starved. How the people told in whispers after his death that he had used his heart's blood to mix with his wonderful pigments. Of course it was all only a story, but Jean remembered it. When she saw a picture that seemed to hold one and speak its message of beauty, she would say to herself,

"There is Durer's secret."

And some day, if she ever could put on canvas the dreams that came to her, she meant to use the same secret.

"I think," said Kit, yawning and stretching her arms out in a perfect ecstasy of relaxation after a bout with her Latin, "I do think Socrates was an old bore. Always mixing in and contradicting everybody and starting something. No wonder his wife was cranky."

"He died beautifully," Helen mused. "Something about a sunset and all his friends around him, and didn't he owe somebody a chicken and tell his friends to pay for it?"

"You're sleepy. Go to bed, both of you," Jean told them laughingly. "I'll put out the light and fasten the doors."

She finished her letter alone. It was not easy to write it. Bab wanted her to come down for the spring term. She could board with her if she liked. Expenses were very light.

Any expenses would be heavy if piled on the monthly budget of Greenacres. Jean knew that. So she wrote back with a heartache behind the

plucky refusal, and stepped out on the moonlit veranda for a minute. It was clear and cold after the light snowfall. The stars were very faint. From the river came the sound of the waterfall, and up in the big white barn, Princess giving her stall a goodnight kick or two before settling down.

"You stand steady, Jean Robbins," she said, between her teeth. "Don't you dare be a quitter. You stand steady and see this winter straight through."

CHAPTER III

EVERGREEN AND CANDLELIGHT

After her marriage to Judge Ellis, Cousin Roxy had taken Ella Lou from Maple Lawn over to the big white house behind its towering elms.

“I’ve been driving her ten years and never saw a horse like her for knowingness and perspicacity,” she would say, her head held a little bit high, her spectacles half way down her nose. “I told the Judge if he wanted me he’d have to take Ella Lou too.”

So it was Ella Lou’s familiar white nose that showed at the hitching post the following morning when the Boston cousins came over to get acquainted.

Jean never forgot her introduction to Beth Newell. She was about forty-seven then, with her son Elliott fully five inches taller than herself, but she looked about twenty-seven. Her fluffy brown hair, her wide gray eyes, and quick sweet laughter, endeared her to the girls right away.

“And she’s so slim and dear,” Doris added. “Her dress makes me think of an oak leaf in winter, and she’s a lady of the meads.”

Elliott was about fifteen, not one single bit like his mother, but broad-shouldered and blonde and sturdy. It was so much fun, Kit said, to watch him take care of his mother.

“Where’s your High School out here?” he asked. “I’m at Prep. specializing in mathematics.”

“And how any son of mine can adore mathematics is beyond me,” Cousin Beth laughed. “I suppose it’s reaction. Do you like them, Jean?” She put her arm around the slender figure nearest her.

“Indeed, I don’t,” Jean answered fervently, and then all at once, out popped her heart’s desire before she could check the words. Anybody’s heart’s desire would pop out with Beth’s eyes coaxing it. “I—I want to be an artist.”

“Keep on wishing and working then, dear, and as Roxy says, if it is to be it will be.”

While the others talked of turning New England farms into haunts of ancient peace and beauty, these two sat together on the davenport, Jean listening eagerly and wistfully while her cousin told of her own girlhood aims and how she carried them out.

“We didn’t have much money, so I knew I had to win out for myself. There were two little brothers to help bring up, and Mother was not strong, but I used to sketch every spare moment I could, and I read everything on art I could find, even articles from old magazines in the garret. But most of all I sketched anything and everything, studying form and composition. When I was eighteen, I taught school for two terms in the country. Father had said if I earned the money myself, I could go abroad, and how I worked to get that first nest egg.”

“How much did you get a week?”

“Twelve dollars, but my board was only three and a half in the country, and I saved all I could. During the summers I took lessons at Ellen Brainerd’s art classes in Boston and worked as a vacation substitute at the libraries. You know, Jean, if you really do want work and kind of hunt a groove you’re fitted for, you will always find something to do.”

Jean was leaning forward, her chin propped on her hands.

“Yes, I know,” she said. “Do go on, please.”

“Ellen Brainerd was one of New England’s glorious old maids with the far vision and cash enough to make a few of her dreams come true. Every year she used to lead a group of girl art students over Europe’s beauty spots, and with her encouragement I went the third year, helping her with a few of the younger ones, and paying part of my tuition that way. And, my dear,” Cousin Beth clasped both hands around her knees and rocked back and forth happily, “we set up our easels in the fountain square in Barcelona and hunted Dante types in Florence. We trailed through Flanders and Holland and lived delightfully on the outskirts of Paris in a little gray house with a high stone wall and many flowers.”

“And you painted all those places?” exclaimed Jean. “I’ve longed and longed to go there.”

“Well, I tried to,” Cousin Beth looked ruefully at the fire. “Yes, I tried to paint like all the old masters and new masters. One month we took up this school and the next we delved into something else, studying everything in the world but individual expression.”

“That’s just what a girl friend of mine in New York wrote and said she was

doing," cried Jean, much interested.

"Then she's struck the keynote. After your second cousin David came over and stopped my career by marrying me I came back home. We lived out near Weston and I began painting things of everyday life just as I saw them, the things I loved. It was our old apple tree out by the well steeped in full May bloom that brought me my first medal."

"Oh, after Paris and all the rest!"

"Yes, dear. And the next year they accepted our red barn in a snowstorm. I painted it from the kitchen window. Another was a water color of our Jersey calves standing knee deep in the brook in June, and another was Brenda, the hired girl, feeding turkeys out in the mulberry lane. That is the kind of picture I have succeeded with. I think because, as I say, they are part of the home life and scenes I love best and so I have put a part of myself into them."

"Durer's heart's blood," Jean said softly. "You've helped me so much, Cousin Beth. I was just hungry to go back to the art school right now, and throw up everything here that I ought to do."

"Keep on sketching every spare moment you can. Learn form and color and composition. Things are only beautiful according to the measure of our own minds. And the first of March I want you to visit me. I've got a studio right out in my apple orchard I'll tuck you away in."

"I'd love to come if Mother can spare me." Jean's eyes sparkled.

"Well, do so, child," Cousin Roxy's hands were laid on her shoulders from behind. "I'm going up too along that time, and I'll take you. It's a poor family that can't support one genius." She laughed in her full hearted, joyous way. "Now, listen, all of you. I've come to invite you to have Christmas dinner with us."

"But, Cousin Roxy," began Mrs. Robbins, "there are so many of us—"

"Not half enough to fill the big old house. Some day after all the girls and Billie are married and there are plenty of grandchildren, then we can talk about there being too many, though I doubt it. There's always as much house room as there is heart room, you know, if you only think so. They're going to have a little service for the children at the Center Church, Wednesday night, and Shad had better drive the girls over. Bring along the little lad too." She smiled over her shoulder at Joe, seated in his favorite corner on the woodbox reading one of Doris's books, and he gave a funny little onesided grin back in shy return. "Billie's going away to school after New Year's, did I tell you?"

“Oh, dear me,” cried Kit, so spontaneously that everyone laughed at her. “Doesn’t it seem as if boys get all of the adventures of life just naturally.”

“He’s had adventures enough, but he does need the companionship of boys his own size. Emerson says that the growing boy is the natural autocrat of creation, and I don’t want him to be tied down with a couple of old folks like the Judge and myself. You’re never young but once. Besides, I always did want to go to these football games at colleges and have a boy of mine in the mixup, bless his heart.”

“My goodness!” Kit exclaimed after the front door had closed on the last glimpse of Ella Lou’s white feet going down the drive. “Doesn’t it seem as if Cousin Roxy leaves behind her a big sort of glow? She can say more nice things in a few minutes than anybody I ever heard. Except about Billie’s going away. I wonder why he didn’t come down and tell me himself.”

“Well, you know, Kit,” Helen remarked, “you haven’t a mortgage on Billie.”

“Oh, I don’t care if he goes away. It isn’t that,” Kit answered comfortably. “I wouldn’t give a snap of my finger for a boy that couldn’t race with other fellows and win. Jean, fair sister, did you realize the full significance of Cousin Roxy’s invitation? No baking or brewing, no hustling our fingers and toes off for dinner on Christmas Day. I think she’s a gorgeous old darling.”

Jean laughed and slipped up the back stairs to her own room. It was too cold to stay there. A furnace was one of the luxuries planned for the following year, but during this first winter of campaigning, they had started out pluckily with the big steel range in the kitchen, the genial square wood heater in the sitting room and open fire places in the four large bedrooms and the parlor.

“We’ll freeze before the winter’s over,” Kit had prophesied. “Now I know why Cotton Mather and all the other precious old first settlers of the New England Commonwealth looked as if their noses had been frost bitten. Sally Peckham leaves her window wide open every night, and says she often finds snow on her pillow.”

But already the girls were adapting themselves to the many ways of keeping warm up in the hills. On the back of the range at night were soapstones heating through, waiting to be wrapped in strips of flannel and trotted up to bed as foot warmers.

Cousin Roxy had sent over several from her own store and told the girls if they ran short a flat iron or a good stick of hickory did almost as well. It was comical to watch their faces. If ever remembrance was written on a face it was

on Helen's the first time she took her soapstone to bed with her. Where were the hot water coils of yester year? Heat had seemed to come as if by magic at the big house at Shady Cove, but here it became a lazy giant you petted and cajoled and watched eternally to keep him from falling asleep. Kit had nicknamed the kitchen stove Matilda because it reminded her of a shiny black cook from Aiken, Georgia, whom the family had harbored once upon a time.

"And feeding Matilda has become one of the things that is turning my auburn tinted locks a soft, delicate gray," she told Helen. "I know if any catastrophe were to happen all at once, my passing words would be, 'Put a stick of wood in the stove.' "

Jean felt around in her desk until she found her folio of sketches. The sitting room was deserted excepting for Helen watering the rows of blooming geraniums on the little narrow shelves above the sash curtains. Cherilee, the canary, sang challengingly to the sunlight, and out in the dining-room Doris was outmatching him with "Nancy Lee."

Helen went upstairs to her father, and Kit appeared with a frown on her face, puzzling over a pattern for filet lace.

"I think the last days before Christmas are terrible," she exclaimed savagely. "What on earth can we concoct at this last minute for Cousin Beth? I think I'll crochet her a filet breakfast cap. It's always a race at the last minute to cover everybody, and you bite off more than you can chew and always forget someone you wouldn't have neglected for anything. What on earth can I give to Judge Ellis?"

"Something useful," Jean answered.

"I can't bear useful things for Christmas presents. Abby Tucker says she never gets any winter clothes till Christmas and then all the family unload useful things on her. I'm going to send her a bottle of violet extract in a green leather case. I've had it for months and never touched it and she'll adore it. I wish I could think of something for Billie too, something he's never had and always wanted."

"He's going away," Jean mused. "Why don't you fix up a book of snapshots taken all around here. We took some beauties this summer."

"A boy wouldn't like that."

"He will when he's homesick." Jean opened her folio and began turning over her art school studies. Mostly conventionalized designs they were. After her talk with Cousin Beth they only dissatisfied her. Suddenly she glanced up at the figure across the table, Kit with rumpled short curls and an utterly

relaxed posture, elbows on table, knees on a chair. There was a time for all things, Kit held, even formality, but, as she loved to remark sententiously when Helen or Jean called her up for her lax ways, “A little laxity is permissible in the privacy of one’s own home.”

Jean’s pencil began to move over the back of her drawing pad. Yes, she could catch it. It wasn’t so hard, the ruffled hair, the half averted face. Kit’s face was such an odd mixture of whimsicality and determination. The rough sketch grew and all at once Kit glanced up and caught what was going on.

“Oh, it’s me, isn’t it, Jean? I wish you’d conventionalized me and embellished me. I’d like to look like Mucha’s head of Bernhardt as Princess Lointaine. What shall we call this? ‘Beauty Unadorned.’ No. Call it ‘Christmas Fantasies.’ That’s lovely, specially with the nose screwed up that way and my noble brow wrinkled. I like that. It’s so subtle. Anyone getting one good look at the helpless frenzy in that downcast gaze, those anguished, rumpled locks —”

“Oh, Kit, be good,” laughed Jean. She held the sketch away from her critically. “Looks just like you.”

“All right. Hang it up as ‘Exhibit A’ of your new school of expression. I don’t mind. There’s a look of genius to it at that.”

“One must idealize some,” Jean replied teasingly. She hung it on the door of the wall closet with a pin, just as Mrs. Robbins came into the room.

“Mother dear, look what my elder sister has done to me,” Kit cried tragically. Jean said nothing, only the color rose slowly in her cheeks as her mother stood before the little sketch in silence, and slipped her hand into hers.

“It’s the first since I left school,” she said, half ashamed of the effort and all it implied. “Kit looked too appealing. I had to catch her.”

“Finish it up, girlie, and let me have it on the tree, may I?” There was a very tender note in the Motherbird’s voice, such an understanding note.

“Oh, would you like it, really, Mother?”

“Love it,” answered Mother promptly. “And don’t give up the ship, remember. Perhaps we may be able to squeeze in the spring term after all.”

CHAPTER IV

THE JUDGE'S SWEETHEART

It took both Ella Lou and Princess to transport the Christmas guests from Greenacres over to the Ellis place. Nobody ever called it anything but just that, the Ellis place, and sometimes, "over to the Judge's." Cousin Roxy said she couldn't bear to have a nameless home and just as soon as she could get around to it, she'd see that the Ellis place had a suitable name.

It was one of the few pretentious houses in all three of the Gileads, Gilead Green, Gilead Centre, and Gilead Post Office. For seven generations it had been in the Ellis family. The Judge had a ponderous volume bound in heavy red morocco, setting forth the history of Windham County, and the girls loved to pore over it. Seven men with their families, bound westward towards Hartford in the colonial days of seeking after home sites, had seen the fertile valley with its encircling hills, and had settled there. One was an Ellis and the Judge had his sword and periwig in his library. As for the rest, all one had to do was go over to the old family burial ground on the wood road and count them up.

During the fall, this had been a favorite tramp of the Greenacre hikers, and Jean loved to quote a bit from Stevenson, once they had come in sight of the old grass grown enclosure, cedar shaded, secluded and restful:

"There is a certain frame of mind to which a cemetery is if not an antidote, at least an alleviation. If you are in a fit of the blues, go nowhere else."

Here they found the last abiding place of old Captain Ephraim Ellis with his two wives, Lovina Mary and Hephzibah Waiting, one on each side of him. The Captain rested betwixt the two myrtle covered mounds and each old slate gravestone leaned towards his.

"Far be it from me," Cousin Roxy would say heartily, "to speak lightly of those gone before, but those two headstones tell their own story, and I'll bet a cookie the Captain could tell his if he got a chance."

Every Legislature convening at Hartford since the olden days, had known an Ellis from Gilead. Only two of the family had taken to wandering, Billie's

father and Gideon, one of the old Captain's sons. The girls wove many tales around Gideon. He must have had the real Argonaut spirit. Back in the first days of the Revolution he had run away from the valley home and ended up with Paul Jones on the "Bonhomme Richard."

Billie loved his memory, the same as he did his own father's, and the girls had straightened up his sunken slatestone record, and had planted some flowers, not white ones, but bravely tinted asters for late fall. Billie showed them an old silhouette he had found. Mounted on black silk, the old faded brown paper showed a boy with sensitive mouth and eager lifted chin, queer high choker collar and black stock. On the back of the wooden frame was written in a small, firm handwriting, "My beloved son Gideon, aged nineteen."

The old house sat far back from the road with a double drive curving like a big "U" around it. Huge elms upreared their great boughs protectingly before it, and behind lay a succession of all manner and kind of buildings from the old forge to the smoke house. One barn stood across the road and another at the top of the lane for hay. Since Cousin Roxy had married the Judge, it seemed as if the sunlight had flooded the old house. Its shuttered windows had faced the road for years, but now the green blinds were wide open, and it seemed as if the house almost smiled at the world again.

"I never could see a mite of sense in keeping blinds shut as if somebody were dead," Cousin Roxy would say. "Some folks won't even open the blinds in their hearts, let alone their houses, so I told the Judge if he wanted me for a companion, he'd have to take in God's sunshine too, 'cause I can't live without plenty of it."

Kit and Doris were the first to run up the steps and into the center hall, almost bumping into Billie as he ran to meet them. Behind him came Mrs. Ellis in a soft gray silk dress. A lace collar encircled her throat, fastened with an old pink cameo breast-pin. Helen had always coveted that pin. There was a young damsel on it holding up her full skirts daintily as she moved towards a sort of chapel, and it was set in fine, thin old gold.

"Come right in, folkses," she called happily. "Do stop capering," as Doris danced around her. "Merry Christmas, all of you."

Up the long colonial staircase she led the way into the big guest room. Down in the parlor Cousin Beth was playing softly on the old melodeon, "It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old." The air was filled with scent of pine and hemlock, and provocative odors of things cooking stole up the back stairs.

Kit and Billie retreated to a corner with the latter's book supply. It was

hard to realize that this was really Billie, Cousin Roxy's "Nature Boy" of the summer before. Love and encouragement had seemed to round out his character into a promise of fulfilment in manliness. All of the old self consciousness and shy abstraction had gone. Even the easy comradely manner in which he leaned over the Judge's arm chair showed the good understanding and sure confidence between the two.

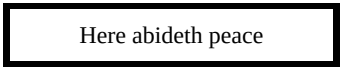
"Yes, he does show up real proud," Cousin Roxy agreed warmly with Mrs. Robbins when they were all downstairs before the glowing fire. "Of course I let him call me Grandma. Pity sakes, that's little enough to a love starved child. I'm proud of him too and so's the Judge. We're going to miss him when he goes away to school, but he's getting along splendidly. I want him to go where he'll have plenty of boy companionship. He's lived alone with the ants and bees and rabbits long enough."

Helen and Doris leaned over Cousin Beth's shoulders trying the old carols: "Good King Wencelas," "Carol, Brothers, Carol," and "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night." Jean played for them and just before dinner was announced, Doris sang all alone in her soft treble, very earnestly and tenderly, quite as if she saw past the walls of the quiet New England homestead to where "Calm Judea stretches far her silver mantled plains."

Cousin Roxy rocked back and forth softly, her hand shading her eyes as it did in prayer. When it was over, she said briskly, wiping off her spectacles,

"Land, I'm not a bit emotional, but that sort of sets my heart strings tingling. Let's go to dinner, folkses. The Judge takes Betty in, and Jerry takes Beth. Then Elliott can take in his old Cousin Roxy, and I guess Billie can manage all of the girls."

But the girls laughingly went their own way, Doris holding to the Judge's other arm and Helen to her father's, while Jean lingered behind a minute to glance about the cheery room. The fire crackled down in the deep old rock hearth. In each of the windows hung a mountain laurel wreath tied with red satin ribbon. Festoons of ground pine and evergreen draped each door and picture. It was all so homelike, Jean thought. Over the mantel hung a motto worked in colored worsteds on perforated silver board.



But Jean turned away, and pressed her face against the nearest window pane, looking down at the sombre, frost-touched garden. There wasn't one bit

of peace in her heart, even while she fairly ached with the longing to be like the others.

"You're a coward, Jean Robbins, a deliberate coward," she told herself. "You don't like the country one bit. You love the city where everybody's doing something, and it's just a big race for all. You're longing for everything you can't have, and you're afraid to face the winter up here. You might just as well tell yourself the truth. You hate to be poor."

There came a burst of laughter from the dining-room and Kit calling to her to hurry up. It appeared that Doris, the tender-hearted, had said pathetically when Mrs. Gorham, the "help," brought in the great roast turkey: "Poor old General Putnam!"

"That isn't the General," Billie called from his place. "The General ran away yesterday."

Now if Cousin Roxy prided herself on one thing more than another it was her flock of white turkeys led by the doughty General. All summer long the girls had looked upon him as a definite personality to be reckoned with. He was patriarchal in the way he managed his family. And it appeared that the General's astuteness and sagacity had not deserted him when Ben had started after him to turn him into a savory sacrifice.

"First off, he lit up in the apple trees," Ben explained. "Then as soon as he saw I was high enough, off he flopped and made for the corn-crib. Just as I caught up with him there, he chose the wagon sheds and perched on the rafters, and when I'd almost got hold of his tail feathers, if he didn't try the barn and all his wives and descendants after him, mind you. So I thought I'd let him roost till dark, and when I stole in after supper, the old codger had gone, bag and baggage. He'll come back as soon as he knows our minds ain't set on wishbones."

"Then who is this?" asked Kit interestedly, quite as if it were some personage who rested on the big willow pattern platter in state.

"That is some unnamed patriot who dies for his country's good," said the Judge, solemnly. "Who says whitemeat and who says dark?"

Jean was watching her father. Not since they had moved into the country had she seen him so cheerful and like himself. The Judge's geniality was like a radiating glow, anyway, that included all in its circle, and Cousin Roxy was in her element, dishing out plenteous platefuls of Christmas dainties to all those nearest and dearest to her. Way down at the end of the table sat Joe, wide eyed and silent tongued. Christmas had never been like this that he knew of. Billie

tried to engage him in conversation, boy fashion, a few times, but gave up the attempt. By the time he had finished his helping, Joe was far too full for utterance.

In the back of the carriage, driving over from Greenacres, Mrs. Robbins had placed a big bushel basket, and into this had gone the gifts to be hung on the tree. After dinner, while the Judge and Mr. Robbins smoked before the fire, and Kit led the merry-making out in the sitting room, there were mysterious "goings on" in the big front parlor. Finally Cousin Beth came softly out, and turned down all the lights.

Jean slipped over to the organ, and as the tall old doors were opened wide, she played softly,

"Gather around the Christmas tree."

Doris picked up the melody and led, sitting on a hassock near the doors, gazing with all her eyes up at the beautiful spreading hemlock, laden with lights and gifts.

"For pity's sake, child, what are you crying about?" exclaimed Cousin Roxy, almost stumbling over a little crumpled figure in a dark corner, and Joe sobbed sleepily:

"I—I don't know."

"Oh, it's just the heartache and the beauty of it all," said Helen fervently. "He's lonely for his own folks."

" 'Tain't neither," groaned Joe. "It's too much mince pie."

So under Cousin Roxy's directions, Billie took him up to his room, and administered "good hot water and sody."

"Too bad, 'cause he missed seeing all the things taken off the tree," said Cousin Roxy, laying aside Joe's presents for him, a long warm knit muffler from herself, a fine jack-knife from the Judge with a pocket chain on it, a package of Billie's boy books that he had outgrown, and ice skates from the Greenacre girls. After much figuring over the balance left from their Christmas money they had clubbed together on the skates for him, knowing he would have more fun and exercise out of them than anything, and he needed something to bring back the sparkle to his eyes and the color to his cheeks.

"Put them all up on the bed beside him, and he'll find them in the morning," Billie suggested. "If you'll let him stay, Mrs. Robbins, I'll bring him over."

“Isn’t it queer,” Doris said, with a sigh of deepest satisfaction, as she watched the others untying their packages. “It isn’t so much what you get yourself Christmas, it’s seeing everybody else get theirs.” And just then a wide, flat parcel landed squarely in her lap, and she gave a surprised gasp.

“The fur mitten isn’t there, but you can snuggle your nose on the muff,” Jean told her, and Doris held up just what she had been longing for, a squirrel muff and stole to throw around her neck. “They’re not neighborhood squirrels, are they, Billie?” she whispered anxiously, and Billie assured her they were Russian squirrels, and no families’ trees around Gilead were wearing mourning.

Nearly all of Billie’s presents were books. He had reached the age where books were like magical windows through which he gazed from Boyhood’s tower out over the whole wide world of romance and adventure. Up in his room were all of the things he had treasured in his lonesome days before the Judge had married Miss Robbins: his home-made fishing tackle, his collection of butterflies and insects, his first compass and magnifying glass, the flower calendar and leaf collection, where he had arranged so carefully every different leaf and blossom in its season.

But now, someway, with the library of books the Judge had given him, that had been his own father’s, Gilead borders had widened out, and he had found himself a knight errant on the world’s highway of literature. He sat on the couch now, burrowing into each new book until Kit sat down beside him, with a new kodak in one hand and a pair of pink knit bed slippers in the other.

“And mother’s given me the picture I like best, her Joan of Arc listening to the voices in the garden at Arles. I love that, Billie. I’m not artistic like Jean or romantic like Helen. You know that, don’t you?”

Billie nodded emphatically. Indeed he did know it after half a year of chumming with Kit.

“But I love the pluck of Joan,” Kit sighed, lips pursed, head up. “I’d have made a glorious martyr, do you know it? I know she must have enjoyed the whole thing immensely, even if it did end at the stake. I think it must be ever so much easier to be a martyr than look after the seventeen hundred horrid little everyday things that just have to be done. When it’s time to get up now at 6 A. M. and no fires going, I shall look up at Joan and register courage and valor.”

Helen sat close to her father, perfectly happy to listen and gaze at the flickering lights on the big tree. She had gift books too, mostly fairy tales and what Doris called “princess stories,” a pink tinted ivory manicure set in a little

velvet box, and two cut glass candlesticks with little pink silk shades. The candlesticks had been part of the "white hyacinths" saved from the sale at their Long Island home, and Jean had made the shades and painted them with sprays of forget-me-nots. Cousin Roxy had knit the prettiest skating caps for each of the girls, and scarfs to match, and Mrs. Newell gave them old silver spoons that had been part of their great great-grandmother Peabody's wedding outfit, and to each one two homespun linen sheets from the same precious store of treasures.

"When you come to Weston," she told Jean, "I'll show you many of her things. She was my great grandmother, you know, and I can just vaguely remember her sitting upstairs in her room in a deep-seated winged armchair that had pockets and receptacles all around it. I know I looked on her with a great deal of wonder and veneration, for I was just six. She wore gray alpaca, Jean, silver gray like her hair, and a little black silk apron with dried flag root in one pocket and pink and white peppermints in the other."

"And a cap," added Jean, just as if she too could recall the picture.

"A cap of fine black lace with lavender bows, and her name was Mary Lavinia Peabody."

"I'd love to be named Mary Lavinia," quoth Kit over her shoulder. "How can anybody be staid and faithful unto death with 'Kit' hurled at them all day. But if I had been rightly called Mary Lavinia, oh, Cousin Beth, I'd have been a darling."

"I don't doubt it one bit," laughed Cousin Beth merrily. "Go along with you, Kit. It just suits you."

Doris sat on her favorite hassock clasping a new baby doll in her arms with an expression of utter contentment on her face. Kit and Jean had dressed it in the evenings after she had gone to bed, and it had a complete layette. But Billie had given her his tame crow, Moki, and her responsibility was divided.

"Where'd you get the name from, Billie?" she asked.

Billie stroked the smooth glossy back of the crow as one might a pet chicken.

"I found him one day over in the pine woods on the hill. He was just a little fellow then. The nest was in a dead pine, and somebody'd shot it all to pieces. The rest of the family had gone, but I found him fluttering around on the ground, scared to death with a broken wing. Ben helped me fix it, and he told me to call him Moki. You know he's read everything, and he can talk some Indian, Pequod mostly, he says. He isn't sure but what there may be some

Pequod in him way back, he can talk it so well, and Moki means ‘Watch out’ in Pequod, Ben says. I call him that because I used to put him on my shoulder and he’d go anywhere with me through the woods, and call out when he thought I was in danger.”

“How do you know what he thought?”

“After you get acquainted with him, you’ll know what he thinks too,” answered Billie soberly. “Hush, grandfather’s going to say something.”

The Judge rose and stood on the hearth rug, his back to the fire. He was nearly six feet tall, soldierly, and rugged, his white curly hair standing out in three distinct tufts just like Pantaloon, Kit always declared, his eyes keen and bright under their thick brows. He had taken off his eyeglasses and held them in one hand, tapping them on the other to emphasize his words. Jean tiptoed around the tree, extinguishing the last sputtering candles, and sat down softly beside Cousin Roxy.

“I don’t think any of you, beloved children and dear ones, can quite understand what tonight means to me personally.” He cleared his throat and looked over at Billie. “I haven’t had a real Christmas here since Billie’s father was a little boy. I didn’t want a real Christmas either. Christmas meant no more to me than to some old owl up in the woods, maybe not as much. But tonight has warmed my heart, built up a good old fire in it just as you start one going in some old disused rock fireplace that has been stone cold for years.

“When I was a boy this old house used to be opened up as it is tonight, decorated with evergreen and hemlock and guests in every room at Christmas time. I didn’t live here then. My grandfather, old Judge Winthrop Ellis, was alive, and my father had married and moved over to the white house on the wood road between Maple Lawn and the old burial ground. You can still find the cellar of it and the old rock chimney standing. I used to trot along that wood road to school up at Gayhead where Doris and Helen have been going, and I had just one companion on that road, the perkiest, sassiest, most interesting female I ever met in all my life.” He stopped and chuckled, and Cousin Roxy rubbed her nose with her forefinger and smiled.

“We knew every spot along the way, where the fringed gentians grew in the late fall, and where to find arbutus in the spring. The best place to get black birch and where the checker-berries were thickest. Maybe just now, it won’t mean so much to you young folks, all these little landmarks of nature on these old home roads and fields of ours, but when the shadows begin to lengthen in life’s afternoon, you’ll be glad to remember them and maybe find them again, for the best part of it all is, they wait for you with love and welcome and you’ll

find the gentians and the checker-berries growing in just the same places they did fifty years ago."

Jean saw her father put out his hand and lay it over her mother's. His head was bent forward a trifle and there was a wonderful light in his eyes.

"And all I wanted to say, apart from the big welcome to you all, and the good wishes for a joyous season, was this, the greatest blessing life has brought me is that Roxana has come out of the past to sit right over there and show me how to have a good time at Christmas once again. God bless you all."

"Oh, wasn't he just a dear," Kit said, rapturously, when it was all over, and they were driving back home under the clear starlit sky. "I do hope when I'm as old as the Judge, I'll have a flower of romance to sniff at too. Cousin Roxy watched him just as if he were sixteen instead of sixty."

"You're just as sentimental as Helen and me," Jean told her, teasingly.

"Well, anybody who wouldn't get a thrill out of tonight would be a toad in a claybank. And Jean, did you see Father's face?"

Jean nodded. It was something not to be discussed, the light in her father's face as he had listened. It made her realize more than anything that had happened in the long months of trial in the country, how worth while it was, the sacrifice that had brought him back into his home country for healing and happiness.

CHAPTER V

JUST A CITY SPARROW

Christmas week had already passed when the surprise came. As Kit said the charm of the unexpected was always gripping you unawares when you lived on the edge of Nowhere. Mrs. Newell and Elliott had departed two days after Christmas for Weston. Somehow the girls could not get really acquainted with this new boy cousin. Billie, once won, was a friend for ever, but Elliott was a smiling, confident boy, quiet and resourceful, with little to say.

"He overlooks girls," Helen had said. "It isn't that he doesn't like us, but he doesn't see us. He's been going to a boys' school ever since he was seven years old, and all he can think about or talk about is boys. When I told him I didn't know anything about baseball, he looked at me through his eye glasses so curiously."

"I think he was embarrassed by such a galaxy of the fair cousins," Kit declared. "He's lived alone as the sole chick, and he just couldn't get the right angle on us. Billie says he got along with him all right. He was very polite, girls, anyway. You expect too much of him because Cousin Beth was so nice. If he'd been named Bob or Dave or Billie or Jack, he'd have felt different too. His full name's Elliott Peabody Newell. I'll bet a cookie when I have a large family, I'll never, never give them family names."

"You said you were going to be a bachelor maid forever just the other day."

"Did I? Well, you know about consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds," Kit retorted calmly. "Since we were over at the Judge's for Christmas, I've decided to marry my childhood love too."

"That's Billie."

"No, it is not, young lady. Billie is a kindred spirit, an entirely different person from your childhood love. I haven't got one yet, but after listening to the Judge say those tender things about Cousin Roxy, I'm going to find one or know the reason why."

By this time, Jean had settled down contentedly to the winter régime. She

was giving Doris piano lessons, and taking over the extra household duties with Kit back at school. School had been one of the problems to be solved that first year. Doris and Helen went over the hill road to Gayhead District Schoolhouse. It stood at the crossroads, a one story red frame building, with a "leanto" on one side, and a woodshed on the other. Helen had despised it thoroughly until she heard that her father had gone there in his boyhood, and she had found his old desk with his initials carved on it. Anything that Father or Mother had been associated with was forever hallowed in the eyes of the girls.

But Kit was in High School, and the nearest one was over the hills to Central Village, six miles away. As Kit said, it was so tantalizing to get to the top of the first hill and see the square white bell tower rising out of the green trees way off on another hill and not be able to fly across. But Piney was going and she rode horseback on Mollie, the brown mare.

"And if Piney Hancock can do it, I can," Kit said. "I shall ride Princess over and back. Piney says she'll meet me down at the bridge crossing every morning. It will be lots of fun, and she knows where we can put the horses up. All you do is take your own bag of grain with you, and it only costs ten cents to stable them."

"But, dear, in heavy winter weather what will you do?"

"Piney says if it's too rough to get home, she stays overnight with Mrs. Parmalee. You remember, Mother dear, Ma Parmalee from whom we bought the chickens. I could stay too. Cousin Roxy says you mustn't just make a virtue of Necessity, sometimes you have to take her into the bosom of the family."

Accordingly, Kit rode in good weather, a trim, lithe figure in her brown corduroy cross saddle skirt, pongee silk waist, and brown tie. After she reached Central Village, and Princess was stabled, she could button up her skirt and feel just as properly garbed as any of the girls. And the ride over the rounded hills in the late fall months was a wonderful tonic. Mrs. Robbins would often stand out on the wide porch of an early morning and watch the setting forth of her brood, Helen and Doris turning to wave back to her at the entrance gates, Kit swinging her last salute at the turn of the hill road, where Princess got her first wind after her starting gallop.

"I think they're wonderfully plucky," she said one morning to Jean. "If they had been country girls, born and bred, it would be different, but stepping right out of Long Island shore life into these hills, you have all managed splendidly."

“We’d have been a fine lot of quitters if we hadn’t,” Jean answered. “I think it’s been much harder for you than for us girls, Mother darling.”

And then the oddest, most unexpected thing had happened, something that had strengthened the bond between them and made Jean’s way easier. The Motherbird had turned, with a certain quick grace she had, seemingly as girlish and impulsive as any of her daughters, and had met Jean’s glance with a tell-tale flush on her cheeks and a certain whimsical glint in her eyes.

“Jean, do you never suspect me?” she had asked, half laughingly. “I know just exactly what a struggle you have gone through, and how you miss all that lies back yonder. I do too. If we could just divide up the time, and live part of the year here and the other part back at the Cove. I wouldn’t dare tell Cousin Roxy that I had ever ‘repined’ as she would say, but there are days when the silence and the loneliness up here seem to crush so strongly in on one.”

“Oh, Mother! I never thought that you minded it.” Jean’s arms were around her in a moment. “I’ve been horribly selfish, just thinking of myself. But now that Father’s getting strong again, you can go away, can’t you, for a little visit anyway?”

“Not without him,” she said decidedly. “Perhaps by next summer we can, I don’t know. I don’t want to suggest it until he feels the need of a change too. But I’ve been thinking about you, Jean, and if Babbie writes again for you to come, I want you to go for a week or two anyway. I’ll get Shad’s sister to help me with the housework, and you must go. Beth and I had a talk together before she left, and I felt proud of my first nestling’s ambitions after I heard her speak of your work. She says the greatest worry on her mind is that Elliott has no definite ambition, no aim. He has always had everything that they could give him, and she begins now to realize it was all wrong. He expects everything to come to him without any effort of his own.”

“But, Mother, how can I go and leave you—”

“I want you to, Jean. You have been a great help to me. Don’t think I haven’t noticed everything you have done to save me worry, because I have.”

“Well, you had Father to care for—”

“I know, and he’s so much better now that I haven’t any dread left. If Babbie writes again tell her you will come.”

Babbie wrote after receiving her Christmas box of woodland things. Jean had arranged it herself, not thinking it was bearing a message. It was lined with birch bark, and covered with the same. Inside, packed in moss, were hardy little winter ferns, sprays of red berries, a wind tossed bluebird’s nest, acorns

and rose seed pods, and twined around the edge wild blackberry vines that turn a deep ruby red in wintertime. Jean called it a winter garden and it was one of several she had sent out to city friends for whom she felt she could not afford expensive presents.

Babbie had caught the real spirit of it, and had written back urgently.

"You must run down if only for a few days, Jean. I've put your winter garden on the studio windowsill in the sunlight, and it just talks at me about you all the time. Never mind about new clothes. Come along."

It was these same new clothes that secretly worried Jean all the same, but with some fresh touches on two of last year's evening frocks, her winter suit sponged and pressed, and her mother's set of white fox furs, she felt she could make the trip.

"You can wear that art smock in the studio that Bab sent you for Christmas," Kit told her. "That funny dull mustard yellow with the Dutch blue embroidery just suits you. But do your hair differently, Jean. It's too stiff that way. Fluff it."

"Don't you do it, Jean," Helen advised. "Just because Kit has a flyaway mop, she doesn't want us to wear braids. I shall wear braids some day if my hair ever gets long enough. I love yours all around your head like that. It looks like a crown."

"Stuff!" laughed Kit, merrily. "Sit thee down, my sister, and let me turn thee into a radiant beauty."

Laughingly, Jean was taken away from her sewing and planted before the oval mirror. The smooth brown plaits were taken down and Kit deftly brushed her hair high on her head, rolled it, patted it, put in big shell pins, and fluffed out the sides around the ears.

"Now you look like Mary Lavinia Peabody and Dolly Madison and the Countess Potocka."

"Do I?" Jean surveyed herself dubiously. "Well, I like the braids best, and I'd never get it up like that by myself. I shall be individual and not a slave to any mode. You know what Hiram used to say about his plaid necktie, 'Them as don't like it can lump it for all of me.' "

The second week in January Shad drove Princess down to the station with Jean and her two suitcases tucked away on the back seat. Mr. Briggs glanced up in bold surprise when her face appeared at the ticket window.

"Ain't leaving us, be you?"

"Just for a week or two. New York, please."

"New York? Well, well." He turned and fished leisurely for a ticket from the little rack on the side wall. "Figuring on visiting friends or maybe relatives, I shouldn't wonder?"

"A girl friend." Jean couldn't bear to sidestep Mr. Briggs's friendly interest in the comings and goings of the Robbins family. "Miss Crane."

"Oh, yes, Miss Crane. Same one you sent down that box to by express before Christmas. Did she get it all right?"

"Yes, thanks."

"I kind of wondered what was in it. Nothing that rattled, and it didn't feel heavy." He looked out at her meditatively, but just then the train came along and Jean had to hurry away without appeasing Mr. Briggs's thirst for information.

It was strange, the sensation of adventure that came over her as the little two coach local train wound its way around the hills down towards New London. The unexpected, as she had said once, always brought the greatest thrill, and she had put from her absolutely any hope of a trip away from home so that now it came as a double pleasure.

It was late afternoon and the sunshine lay in a hazy glow of red and gold over the russet fields. There was no sign of snow yet. The land lay in a sort of sleepy stillness, without wind or sound of birds, waiting for the real winter. On the hillsides the laurel bushes kept their deep green lustre, the winter ferns reared brave fresh tinted fronds above the dry leaf mold. On withered goldenrod stalks tiny brown Phoebe birds clung, hunting for stray seed pods. Here and there rose leisurely from a pine grove a line of crows, flying low over the bare fields.

The train followed the river bank all the way down to New London. Jean loved to watch the scenery as it flashed around the bends, past the great water lily ponds below Jewett City, past the tumbling falls above the mills, over a bridge so narrow that it seemed made of pontoons, through beautiful old Norwich, sitting like Rome of old on her seven hills, the very "Rose of New England." Then down again to catch the broad sweep of the Thames River, ever widening until at last it spread out below the Navy Yard and slipped away to join the blue waters of the Sound.

It was all familiar and common enough through custom and long knowledge to the people born and bred there. Jean thought an outsider caught the perspective better. And how many of the old English names had been given

in loving remembrance of the Mother country, New London and Norwich, Hanover, Scotland, Canterbury, Windham, and oddly enough, wedged in among the little French Canadian settlements around Nantic was Versailles. How on earth, Jean wondered, among those staid Non-Conformist villages and towns, had Marie Antoinette's toy palace ever slipped in for remembrance.

At New London she had to change from the local train to the Boston express. It was eleven before she reached the Grand Central at New York and found Bab waiting for her. Jean saw her as she came up the Concourse, a slim figure in gray, her fluffy blonde hair curling from under her gray velvet Tam, just as Kit had coaxed Jean's to do. Beside her was Mrs. Crane, a little motherly woman, plump and cheerful, who always reminded Jean of a hen that had just hatched a duck's egg and was trying to make the best of it.

"What a wonderful color you have, child," she said, kissing Jean's rosy cheeks. "She looks a hundred per cent better, doesn't she, Bab, since she left Shady Cove."

"Fine," Babbie declared. "Give the porter your suitcases, Kit. We've got a taxi waiting over here."

It was very nearly a year since Jean had left the New York atmosphere. Now the rush and hurly burly of people and vehicles almost bewildered her. After months of the silent nights in the country, the noise and flashing lights rattled her, as Kit would have expressed it. She kept close to Mrs. Crane, and settled back finally in the taxi with relief, as they started uptown for the studio.

"Yet you can hardly call it a studio now, since Mother came and took possession," Bab said. "We girls had it all nice and messy, and she keeps it in order, I tell you. But you'll like it, and it's close to the Park so we can get out for some good hikes."

"Somebody was needed to keep it in order," Mrs. Crane put in. "You know, Jean, I had to stay over in Paris until things were a little bit settled. We had a lease on the apartment there, and of course, they held me to it, so I let Bab come back with the Setons as she had to be in time for her fall term at the Academy."

"Noodles and Justine and I kept house," Bab put in significantly. "And, my dear, talk about temperament! We had no regular meals at all, and Justine says if you show her crackers and pimento cheese again for a year, she'll just simply die in her tracks. Mother has fed us up beautifully since she came. Real substantial food, you know, fixed up differently, Mother fashion."

"Yes, and they didn't think they needed me at all, Jean. Somehow a mother

doesn't go with a studio equipment, but this one does, and now everyone in the building troops down to visit us. They all need mothering now."

It was one of the smaller brick buildings off Sixth Avenue on Fifty-Seventh Street. There had been a garage on the first floor, but Vatelli, the sculptor, had turned it into a work room with a wife and three little Vatellis to make it cosy. The second floor was the Cranes' apartment, one very large room and two small ones. The two floors above were divided into one- and two-room studios. It looked very unpretentious from the outside, but within everything was delightfully attractive. The ceiling was beamed in dark oak, and a wide fireplace with a crackling wood fire made Jean almost feel as if she were back home. There were wide Dutch shelves around the room and cushioned seats along the walls. An old fashioned three-cornered piano stood crosswise at one end, and there were several oak settees and cupboards. At the windows hung art scrim curtains next the panes, and within, heavy dark red ones that shut out the night.

Noodles came barking to meet them, a regular dowager of a Belgian griffon, plump and consequential, with big brown eyes and a snub nose. And smiling archly, with her eyes sparkling, Justine stood with arms akimbo. She had been Bab's nurse years before in France, and had watched over her ever since. Jean loved the tall, dark-browed Brittany woman. In her quick efficient way, she managed Bab as nobody else could. No one ever looked upon Justine as a servant. She was distinctly "family," and Jean was kissed soundly on both rosy cheeks and complimented volubly on her improved appearance.

"It's just the country air and plenty of exercise, Justine," she said.

"Ah, but yes, the happy heart too, gives that look," Justine answered shrewdly. "I know. I have it myself in Brittany. One minute, I have something warm to eat."

She was gone into the inner room humming to herself, with Noodles tagging at her high heels.

"Now take off your things and toast," Bab said. "There aren't any bedrooms excepting Mother's in yonder. She will have a practical bedroom to sleep in, but we'll curl up on the couches out here, and Justine has one. Oh, Jean, come and sing for me this minute."

Coat and hat off, she was at the piano, running over airs lightly, not the songs of Gilead, but bits that made Jean's heart beat faster; some from their campfire club out at the Cove, others from the old art class Bab and she had belonged to, and then the melody stole into one she had loved, the gay Chanson de Florian,

"Ah, have you seen a shepherd pass this way?"

Standing behind her, under the amber glow of the big silk shaded copper lamp, Jean sang softly, and all at once, her voice broke.

"What is it?" asked Bab, glancing up. "Tired?"

Jean's lashes were wet with tears.

"I was wishing Mother were here too," she answered. "She loves all this so—just as I do. It's awfully lonesome up there sometimes without any of this."

Bab reached up impulsively and threw her arms around her.

"I knew it," she whispered. "I told Mother just from your letters that you had Gileaditis and must come down."

"Gileaditis?" laughed Jean. "That's funny. Kit would love it. And it's what I have got too. I love the hills and the freedom, but, oh, it is so lonely. Why, I love even to hear the elevated whiz by, and the sound of the wheels on the paved streets again."

"Jean Robbins," Bab said solemnly. "You're not a country robin at all, you're a city sparrow."

CHAPTER VI

“ARROWS OF LONGING”

Jean slept late the next morning, late for a Greenacre girl at least. Kit’s alarm clock was warranted to disturb anybody’s most peaceful slumbers at 6 A. M. sharp, but here, with curtains drawn, and the studio as warm as toast, Jean slept along until eight when Justine came softly into the large room to pull back the heavy curtains, and say chocolate and toast were nearly ready.

“Did you close the big house at the Cove?” Jean asked, while they were dressing.

“Rented it furnished. With Brock away at college and me here at the Academy, Mother thought she’d let it go, and stay with me. She’s over at Aunt Win’s while I’m at classes. They’ve got an apartment for the winter around on Central Park South because Uncle Frank can’t bear commuting in the winter time. We’ll go over there before you go back home. Aunt Win’s up to her ears this year in American Red Cross work, and you’ll love to hear her talk.”

“Do you know, Bab,” Jean said suddenly, “I do believe that’s what ails Gilead. Nobody up there is doing anything different this winter from what they have every winter for the last fifty years. Down here there’s always something new and interesting going on.”

“Yes, but is that good? After a while you expect something new all the time, and you can’t settle down to any one thing steadily. Coming, Justine, right away.”

“Good morning, you lazy kittens,” said Mrs. Crane, laying aside her morning paper in the big, chintz-cushioned rattan chair by the south window. “I’ve had my breakfast. I’ve got two appointments this morning and must hurry.”

“Mother always mortgages tomorrow. I’ll bet anything she’s got her appointment book filled for a month ahead. What’s on for today, dear?”

“Dentist and shopping with your Aunt Win. I shall have lunch with her, so you girls will be alone. There are seats for a recital at Carnegie Hall if you’d enjoy it. I think Jean would. It’s Kolasky the ’cellist, and Mary Norman. An

American girl, Jean, from the Middle West, you'll be interested in her. She sings folk songs beautifully. Bab only likes orchestral concerts, but if you go to this, you might drop in later at Signa's for tea. It's right upstairs, you know, Bab, and not a bit out of your way. Aunt Win and I will join you there."

"Isn't she the dearest, bustling Mother," Bab said, placidly, when they were alone. "Sometimes I feel ages older than she is. She has as much fun trotting around to everything as if New York were a steady sideshow. Do you want to go?"

"I'd love to," Jean answered frankly. "I've been shut up away from everything for so long that I'm ready to have a good time anywhere. Who's Signa?"

"A girl Aunt Win's interested in. She's Italian, and plays the violin. Jean Robbins, do you know the world is just jammed full of people who can do things, I mean unusual things like painting and playing and singing, better than the average person, and yet there are only a few who are really great. It's such a tragedy because they all keep on working and hoping and thinking they're going to be great. Aunt Win has about a dozen tucked under her wing that she encourages, and I think it's perfectly deadly."

Bab planted both elbows on the little square willow table, holding her cup of chocolate aloft, her straight brows drawn together in a pucker of perplexity.

"Because they won't be great geniuses, you mean?"

"Surely. They're just half way. All they've got is the longing, the urge forward."

Jean smiled, looking past her at the view beyond the yellow curtains and box of winter greens outside. There was a little courtyard below with one lone sumac tree in it, and red brick walks. A black and white cat licked its paws on the side fence. From a clothes line fluttered three pairs of black stockings. The voices of the little Vatellis floated up as they played house in the sunshine.

"Somebody wrote a wonderful poem about that," she said. "I forget the name, but it's about those whose aims were greater than their ability, don't you know what I mean? It says that the work isn't the greatest thing, the purpose is, the dream, the vision, even if you fall short of it. I know up home there's one dear little old lady, Miss Weathersby. We've just got acquainted with her. She's the last of three sisters who were quite rich for the country. Doris found her, way over beyond the old burial ground, and she was directing some workmen. Doris said they were tearing down a long row of old sheds and chicken houses that shut off her view of the hills. She said she'd waited for

years to clear away those sheds, only her sisters had wanted them there because their grandfather had built them. I think she was awfully plucky to tear them down, so she could sit at her window and see the hills. Maybe it's the same way with Signa and the others. It's something if they have the eyes to see the hills."

"Maybe so," Bab said briskly. "Maybe I can't see them myself, and it's just a waste of money keeping me at the Academy. I'm not a genius, and I'll never paint great pictures, but I am going to be an illustrator, and while I'm learning I can imagine myself all the geniuses that ever lived. You know, Jean, we were told, not long ago, to paint a typical city scene. Well, the class went in for the regulation things, Washington Arch and Grant's Tomb, Madison Square and the opera crowd at the Met. Do you know what I did?" She pushed back her hair from her eager face, and smiled. "I went down on the East Side at Five Points, right in the Italian quarter, and you know how they're always digging up the streets here after the gas mains or something that's gone wrong? Well, I found some workmen resting, sitting on the edge of the trench eating lunch in the sunlight, and some kiddies playing in the dirt as if it were sand. Oh, it was dandy, Jean, the color and composition and I caught it all in lovely splashes. I just called it 'Noon.' Do you like it?"

"Splendid," said Jean.

Bab nodded happily.

"Miss Patmore said it was the best thing I had done, the best in the class. You can find beauty anywhere if you look for it."

"Oh, it's good to be down talking to you again," Jean exclaimed. "It spurs one along so to be where others are working and thinking."

"Think so?" Bab turned her head with her funny quizzical smile. "You ought to hear Daddy Higginson talk on that. He's head of the life class. And he runs away to a little slab-sided shack somewhere up on the Hudson when he wants to paint. He says Emerson or Thoreau wrote about the still places where you 'rest and invite your soul,' and about the world making a pathway to your door, too. Let's get dressed. It's after nine, and I have to be in class at ten."

It was now nearly a year since Jean herself had been a pupil at the art school. She had gone into the work enthusiastically when they had lived at the Cove on Long Island, making the trip back and forth every day on the train. Then had come her father's breakdown and the need of the Robbins' finding a new nest in the hills where expenses were light. As she turned the familiar street with Bab, and came in sight of the gray stone building, she couldn't help feeling just a little thrill of regret. It represented so much to her, all the aims

and ambitions of a year before.

As they passed upstairs to Bab's classroom, some of the girls recognized her and called out a greeting. Jean waved her hand to them, but did not stop. She was too busy looking at the sketches along the walls, listening to the familiar sounds through open doors, Daddy Higginson's deeply rounded laugh; Miss Patmore's clear voice calling to one of the girls; Valleé, the lame Frenchman, standing with his arm thrown about a lad's shoulders, pointing out to him mistakes in underlay of shadows. Even the familiar smell of turpentine and paint made her lift her nose as Princess did to her oats.

"Valleé's so brave," Bab found time to say, arranging her crayons and paper on her drawing board. "Do you remember the girl from the west who only wanted to paint marines, Marion Poole? Well, she joined Miss Patmore's Maine class last summer and Valleé went along too, as instructor. She's about twenty-four, you know, older than most of us, but Miss Patmore says she really has genius. Anyway, she was way out on the rocks painting and didn't go back with the class. And the tide came in. Valleé went after her, and they say he risked his life swimming out to save her when he was lame. They're married now. See her over there with the green apron on? They're giving a costume supper Saturday night and we'll go."

"I haven't anything to wear," Jean said hastily.

"Mother'll fix you up. She always can," Bab told her comfortably. "Let's speak to Miss Patmore before class. She's looking at you."

Margaret Patmore was the girls' favorite teacher. The daughter of an artist herself, she had been born in Florence, Italy, and brought up there, later living in London and then Boston. Jean remembered how delightful her noon talks with her girls had been of her father's intimate circle of friends back in Browning's sunland. It had seemed so interesting to link the past and present with one who could remember, as a little girl, visits to all the art shrines. Jean had always been a favorite with her. The quiet, imaginative girl had appealed to Margaret Patmore perhaps because she had the gift of visualizing the past and its great dreamers. She took both her hands now in a firm clasp, smiling down at her.

"Back again, Jean?"

"Only for a week or two, Miss Patmore," Jean smiled, a little wistfully. "I wish it were for longer. It seems awfully good to be here and see you all."

"Have you done any work at all in the country?"

Had she done any work? A swift memory of the real work of Greenacres

swept over Jean, and she could have laughed.

"Not much." She shook her head. "I sort of lost my way for a while, there was so much else that had to be done, but I'm going to study now."

"Sit with us and make believe you are back anyway. Barbara, please show her Frances's place. She will not be here for a week."

So just for one short week, Jean could make believe it was all true, that she was back as a "regular." Every morning she went with Bab, and joined the class, getting inspiration and courage even from the teamwork. Late afternoons there was always something different to take in. That first day they had gone up to the recital at Carnegie Hall. Jean loved the 'cello, and it seemed as if the musician chose all the themes that always stirred her. Chopin's Nocturne in E Flat; one of the Rhapsodies, she could not remember which, but it always brought to her mind firelight and gypsies; and a tender, little haunting melody called "Petit Valse." Up home she had played it often for her father at twilight and it always made her long for the unfulfilled hopes. And then the "Humoreske," whimsical, questioning, it seemed to wind itself around her heart and tease her about all her yearnings.

Miss Norman sang Russian folk songs and some Hebrides lullabies.

"I'm not one bit crazy over her," said Bab in her matter-of-fact way. "She looks too wholesome and solid to be singing that sort of music. I'd like to see her swing into Brunhilde's call or something like that. She'd wake all the babies up with those lullabies."

"You make me think of Kit," Jean laughed. "She always thinks out loud and says the first thing that comes to her lips."

"I know." Bab's face sobered momentarily as they came out of the main entrance and went around to the studio elevator. "Mother says I've never learned inhibition, and that made me curious. Of course, she meant it should. So I hunted up what inhibition meant in psychology and it did rather stagger me. You act on impulse, but if you'd only have sense enough to wait a minute, the nerves of inhibition beat the nerves of impulse, and reason sets in. I can't bear reason, not yet. The only thing I really enjoyed in Plato was the death of Socrates."

"That's funny. Kit said something about that a little while ago, the sunset, and his telling someone to pay for a chicken just as he took the poisoned cup."

"I'd like to paint it." Bab's gray eyes narrowed as if she saw the scene. "Why on earth haven't the great artists done things like that instead of spotted cows and windmills."

Before Jean could find an answer, they had reached Signa Patrona's studio. It seemed filled with groups of people. Jean had a confused sense of many introductions, and Signa herself, a tall, slender girl in black with a rose made of gold tissue fastened in her dusky, low coiled hair. She rarely spoke, but smiled delightfully. The girls found Mrs. Crane and her sister in a corner.

"Aunt Win," said Bab. "Here's your country girl. Isn't she blooming? Talk to her while I get some tea."

"My dear," Mrs. Everden surveyed her in a benevolent, critical sort of fashion, "you're improved. The last time I saw you, was out at Shady Cove. You and your sisters were in some play I think, given by the Junior Auxiliary of the Church. You live in the country now, Barbara tells me. I have friends in the Berkshires."

"Oh, but we're way over near the Rhode Island border," Jean said quickly. It seemed as if logically, all people who moved from Long Island must go to the Berkshires. "It's real country up there, Gilead Centre. We're near the old Post Road to Boston, from Hartford, but nobody hardly ever travels over it any more."

"We might motor over in the spring, Barbara would enjoy it. Are the roads good in the spring, my dear?"

Visions of Gilead roads along in March and April flitted through Jean's mind. They turned into quagmires of yellow mud, and where the frost did take a notion to steal away, the road usually caved in gracefully after the first spring rains. Along the end of April after everybody had complained, Tucker Hicks, the road committeeman, would bestir himself leisurely and patch up the worst places. No power in Gilead had ever been able to rouse Tucker to action before the worst was over.

"Mother'd dearly love to have you come," she said. "The only thing we miss up there is the friendship of the Cove neighbors. If you wouldn't mind the roads, I know you'd enjoy it, but they are awful in the spring. But nobody seems to mind a bit. One day down at the station in Nantic I heard two old farmers talking, and one said the mud up his way was clear up to the wheel hubs. 'Sho,' said the other. 'Up in Gilead, the wheels go all the way down in some places.' Just as if they were proud of it."

Mrs. Everden shook her head slowly, and looked at her sister.

"I can't even imagine Bess Robbins living in such a forsaken place."

"Oh, but it isn't forsaken," protested Jean loyally. "And Mother really enjoys it because it's made Father nearly well."

“And there’s no society at all up there?”

“Well, no, not exactly,” laughed Jean, shaking her head, “but there are lots of human beings.”

“I could never endure it in this world.”

Jean thought privately that there are many things one has to learn to endure whether or no, and someway, just that little talk made her feel a wonderful love and loyalty towards the Motherbird holding her home together up in the hills.

CHAPTER VII

THE CALL HOME

The second evening Aunt Win took them down to a Red Cross Bazaar at her club rooms. Jean enjoyed it in a way, although after the open air life and the quiet up home, overcrowded, steam-heated rooms oppressed her. She listened to a famous tenor sing something very fiery in French, and heard a blind Scotch soldier tell simply of the comfort the Red Cross supplies had brought to the little wayside makeshift hospital he had been taken to, an old mill inhabited only by owls and martins until the soldiers had come to it. Then a tiny little girl in pink had danced and the blind soldier put her on his shoulder afterwards while she held out his cap. It was filled with green bills, Jean saw, as they passed.

Then a young American artist, her face aglow with enthusiasm, stood on the platform with two little French orphans, a boy and girl. And she told of how the girl students had been the first to start the godmother movement, to mother these waifs of war.

“Wonderful, isn’t it, the work we’re doing?” said Aunt Win briskly, when it was over and they were in her limousine, bound uptown. “Doesn’t it inspire you, Jean?”

“Not one single bit,” Jean replied fervently. “I think war is awful, and I don’t believe in it. Up home we’ve made a truce not to argue about it, because none of us agree at all.”

“Well, child, I don’t believe in it either, but if the boys will get into these fights, it always has fallen to us women and always will, to bind up the wounds and patch them up the best we can. They’re a troublesome lot, but we couldn’t get along without them as I tell Mr. Everden.”

“That sounds just like Cousin Roxy,” Jean said, and then she had to tell all about who Cousin Roxy was, and her philosophy and good cheer that had spread out over Gilead land from Maple Lawn.

Better than the bazaar, she had liked the little supper at the Valleé’s studio. Mrs. Crane had found a costume for her to wear, a white silk mandarin coat

with an under petticoat of heavy peach blossom embroidery, and Bab had fixed her dark hair in quaint Manchu style with two big white chrysanthemums, one over each ear. Bab was a Breton fisher girl in a dark blue skirt and heavy linen smock, with a scarlet cap on her head, and her blonde hair in two long heavy plaits.

The studio was in the West Forties, over near Third Avenue. The lower floor had been a garage, but the Valleé's took possession of it, and it looked like some old Florentine hall in dark oak, with dull red velvet tapestry rugs and hangings. A tall, thin boy squatted comfortably on top of a chest across one corner, and played a Hawaiian ukulele. It was the first time Jean had heard such music, and it made her vaguely homesick.

"It always finds the place in your heart that hurts and wakes it up," Bab told her. "That's Piper Pearson playing. You remember the Pearsons at the Cove, Talbot and the rest? We call him Piper because he's always our maker of sounds when anything's doing."

Piper stopped twanging long enough to shake hands and smile.

"Coming down to the Cove?"

"I don't think so, not this time," Jean said, regretfully. She would have loved a visit back at the old home, and still it might only have made her dissatisfied. As Kit said, "Beware of the fleshpots of Egypt when one is living on corn bread and Indian pudding."

Marion Valleé remembered her at once, and had the girls help make sandwiches behind a tall screen. Rye bread sliced very thin, and buttered with sweet butter, then devilled crabmeat spread between. That was Bab's task. Jean found herself facing a Japanese bowl of cream cheese, bottle of pimentoes and some chopped walnuts.

Later there was dancing, Jean's first dance in a year, and Mrs. Crane smiled at her approvingly when she finished and came to her side.

"It's good to watch you enjoy yourself. Jean, I want you to meet the youngest of the boys here tonight. He's come all the way east from the Golden Gate to show us real enthusiasm."

Jean found herself shaking hands with a little white haired gentleman who beamed at her cheerfully, and proceeded to tell her all about his new picture, the Golden Gate at night.

"Just at moonrise, you know, with the reflections of the signal lights on ships in the water and the moon shimmer faintly rising. I have great hopes for

it. And I've always wanted to come to New York, always, ever since I was a boy."

"He's eighty-three," Mrs. Crane found a chance to whisper. "Think of him adventuring forth with his masterpiece and the fire of youth in his heart."

A young Indian princess from the Cherokee Nation stood in the firelight glow, dressed in ceremonial garb, and recited some strange folk poem of her people, about the "Trail of Tears," that path trod by the Cherokees when they were driven forth from their homes in Georgia to the new country in the Osage Mountains. Jean leaned forward, listening to the words, they came so beautifully from her grave young lips, and last of all the broken treaty, after the lands had been given in perpetuity, "while the grass grows and the waters flow."

"Isn't she a darling?" Bab said under her breath. "She's a college girl too. I love to watch her eyes glow when she recites that poem. You know, Jean, you can smother it under all you like, not you, of course, but we Americans, still the Indian is the real thing after all. Mother Columbia has spanked him and put him in a corner and told him to behave, but he's perfectly right."

Jean laughed contentedly. In her other ear somebody else was telling her the Princess was one fourth Cherokee and the rest Scotch. But it all stimulated and interested her. As Kit would have said, there was something new doing every minute down here. The long weeks of monotony in Gilead faded away. Nearly every day after class Mrs. Everden took the girls out for a spin through the Park in her car, and twice they went home with her for tea in her apartment on Central Park South. It was all done in soft browns and ivories, and Uncle Frank was in brown and ivory too, a slender soldierly gentleman with ivory complexion and brown hair just touched with gray. He said very little, Jean noticed, but listened contentedly to his wife chat on any subject in her vivacious way.

"I trust your father is surely recovering up there," he said once, as Jean happened to stand beside him near a window, looking down at the black swans preening themselves on a tiny island below. "I often think how much better it would be if we old chaps would take a playtime now and then instead of waiting until we're laid up for repairs. Jerry was like I am, always too busy for a vacation. But he had a family to work for, and Mrs. Everden and I are alone. I'd like mighty well to see him. What could I send him that he'd enjoy?"

"Oh, I don't know," Jean thought anxiously. "I think he loves to read now, more than anything, and he was saying just before I left he wished he had some new books, books that show the current thought of the day, you know

what I mean, Mr. Everden. I meant to take him up a few, but I wasn't sure which ones he would like."

"Let me send him up a box of them," Mr. Everden's eyes twinkled. "I'll wake him up. And tell him for me not to stagnate up there. Rest and get well, but come back where he belongs. There comes a point after a man breaks down from overwork, when he craves to get back to that same work, and it's the best tonic you can give him, to let him feel and know he's got his grip back and is standing firmly again. I'll send the books."

Sunday Bab planned for them to go to service down at the Church of the Ascension on lower Fifth Avenue, but Mrs. Crane thought Jean ought to hear the Cathedral music, and Aunt Win was to take them in the evening to the Russian Church for the wonderful singing there.

Jean felt amused and disturbed too, as she dressed. Up home Cousin Roxy said she didn't have a mite of respect for church tramps, those as were forever gadding hither and yon, seeking diversion in the houses of the Lord. Still, when she reached the Cathedral, and heard the familiar words resound in the great stone interior, she forgot everything in a sense of reverence and peace.

After service, Mrs. Crane said she must run into the children's ward across the street at St. Luke's to see how one of her settlement girls was getting along. Bab and Jean stayed down in the wide entrance hall, until the latter noticed the little silent chapel up the staircase at the back.

"Oh, Bab, could we go in, do you think?" she whispered.

Bab was certain they could, although service was over. They entered the chapel, and knelt quietly at the back. It was so different from the great cathedral over the way, so silent and shadowy, so filled with the message to the inner heart, born of the hospital, "In the midst of life ye are in death."

"That did me more good than the other," Jean said, as they went downstairs to rejoin Mrs. Crane. "I'm sure worship should be silent, without much noise at all. Up home the little church is so small and sort of holy. You just have that feeling when you go in, and still it's very plain and poorly furnished, and we haven't a vested choir. The girls sing, and Cousin Roxy plays the organ."

Bab sighed.

"Jean, you're getting acclimated up there. I can see the signs. Even now your heart's turning back home. Never mind. We'll listen to Aunt Win's Russian choir tonight, and that shall suffice."

In the afternoon, some friends came in for tea, and Jean found her old-time

favorite teacher, Daddy Higginson, as all the girls called him at the school. He was about seventy, but erect and quick of step as any of the boys; smooth shaven, with iron gray hair, close cut and curly, and keen, whimsical brown eyes. He was really splendid looking, she thought.

"You know, Jeanie," he began, slipping comfortably down a trifle in his easy chair, as Bab handed him a third cup of tea, "you're looking fine. How's the work coming along up there in your hill country? Doing anything?"

Jean flushed slightly.

"Nothing in earnest, Mr. Higginson. I rather gave up even the hope of going on with it, after we went away."

"You couldn't give it up if it is in you," he answered. "That's one of the charms and blessings of the divine fire. If it ever does start a blaze in your soul's shrine, it can never be put out. They can smother it down, and stamp on it, and cover it up with ashes of dead hopes, all that, but sure as anything, once the mind is relaxed and at peace with itself, the fire will burn again. You're going back, I hear from Bab."

Jean nodded.

"I'm the eldest, and the others are all in school. I'm needed."

He smiled, looking down at the fire Justine had prepared for them on the wide hearth.

"That's all right. Anything that tempers character while you're young, is good for the whole system. I was born out west in Kansas, way back in pioneer days. I used to ride cattle for my father when I was only about ten. And, Lord Almighty, those nights on the plains taught my heart the song of life. I wouldn't take back one single hour of them. We lived in a little dugout cabin, two rooms, that's all, and my mother came of a fine old colonial family out of Colebrook, in your state. She made the trip with my father and two of us boys, Ned and myself. I can just remember walking ahead of the big wagon with my father, chopping down underbrush and trees for us to get through."

"Wasn't it dangerous?" asked Jean, eagerly.

"Dangerous? No! The Indians we met hadn't learned yet that the white man was an enemy. We were treated well by them. I know after we got settled in the little house, baking day, two or three of them would stand outside the door, waiting while my mother baked bread, and cake and doughnuts and cookies, in New England style, just for all the world like a lot of hungry, curious boys, and she always gave them some."

“Did you draw and paint them?”

He laughed, a round, hearty laugh that made Mrs. Crane smile over at them.

“Never touched a brush until after I was thirty. I loved color and could see it. I knew that shadows were purple or blue, and I used to squint one eye to get the tint of the earth after we’d ploughed, dull rusty red like old wounds, it was. First sketch I ever drew was one of my sister Polly. She stood on the edge of a gully hunting some stray turkeys. I’ve got the painting I made later from that sketch. It was exhibited too, called ‘Sundown.’ ”

“Oh, I saw it,” Jean exclaimed. “The land is all in deep blues and hyacinth tones and the sky is amber and the queerest green, and her skirt is just a dash of red.”

“That’s what she always made me think of, a dash of red. The red that shows under an oriole’s wing when he flies. She was seventeen then. About your age, isn’t that, Jeanie?”

He glanced at her sideways. Jean nodded.

“I thought so, although she looked younger with her hair all down her back, and short dresses on.”

“I—I hope she didn’t die,” said Jean, anxiously.

“Die? Bless your heart,” he laughed again. “She’s living up in Colebrook. Went back over the old trail her mother had travelled, but in a Pullman car, and married in the old home town. Pioneer people live to be pretty old. Just think, girlie, in your autumn of life, there won’t be any of us old timers left who can remember what a dugout looked like or a pioneer ox cart.”

“It must have been wonderful,” Jean said. “Mother’s from the west too, you know, only way out west, from California. Her brother has the big ranch there now where she was born, but she never knew any hardships at all. Everything was comfortable and there was always plenty of money, she says, and it never seemed like the real west to us girls, when she’d tell of it.”

“Oh, but it is, the real west of the last forty years, as it is grown up to success and prosperity. Ned lives out there still, runs for the State Legislature now and then, keeps a couple of automobiles, and his girls can tell you all that’s going on in the world just as easily as they can bake and keep house if they have to. If I keep you here talking any longer to an old fellow like myself, the boys won’t be responsible for their action. You’re a novelty, you know, Piper’s glaring at me.”

He rose leisurely, and went over beside Aunt Win's chair, and Piper Pearson hurried to take his place.

"I thought he'd keep you talking here all night. And you sat there drinking it all in as if you liked it."

"I did," said Jean, flatly. "I loved it. I haven't been here at all. I've been way out on the Kansas prairie."

"Stuff," said Piper calmly. "Say, got any good dogs up at your place?"

"No, why?" Jean looked at him with sudden curiosity.

"Nothing, only you remember when you were moving from the Cove, Doris sold me her Boston bull pup Jiggers?"

"Oh, I know all about it." As if she could ever forget how they had all felt when Doris parted with her dearest treasure and brought the ten dollars in to add to the family fund.

"We've got some dandy puppies. I was wondering whether you'd take one home to Doris from me if I brought it in."

"I'd love to," said Jean, her face aglow. It was just like a boy to think of that, and how Doris would love it, one of Jiggers' own family. "I think we'll call it Piper, if you don't mind."

Piper didn't mind in the least. In fact, he felt it would be a sign of remembrance, he said. And he would bring in the puppy as soon as Jean was ready to go home.

"But you needn't hurry her," Bab warned, coming to sit with them. "She's only been down a week, and I'm hoping if I can just stretch it along rather unconsciously, she'll stay right through the term, the way she should."

Jean felt almost guilty, as her own heart echoed the wish. How she would study, if only it could happen. Yet there came the tug of homesickness too, along the end of the second week. Perhaps it was Kit's letter that did it, telling how the house was at sixes and sevens without her, and Mother had to be in fifty places at once.

Jean had to laugh over that part though, for Kit was noted for her ability to attend to exactly one thing at a time.

"Now, Shad, I can't attend to more than one thing at a time, you know."

"Can't you?" Shad had responded, meditatively. "Miss Roxy can tend to sixty-nine and a half things at the same time with her eyes shut and one hand tied."

Then suddenly, out of the blue sky came the bolt. It was a telegram signed “Mother.”

“Come at once. Am leaving for California.”

Jean never stopped to think twice. It was the call to duty, and she caught the noon train back to Gilead Center.

CHAPTER VIII

SEEKING HER GOAL

All the way up on the train Jean kept thinking about Daddy Higginson's last words when he had held her hand at parting.

"This isn't my thought, Jeanie, but it's a good one even if Nietzsche did write it. As I used to tell you in class about Pope and Socrates and all the other warped geniuses, think of a man's physical suffering before you condemn what he has written. Carlyle might have been our best optimist if he'd only discovered pepsin tablets, and lost his dyspepsia. Here it is, and I want you to remember it, for it goes with arrows of longing. The formula for happiness: 'A yea, a nay, a straight line, a goal.' "

It sounded simple enough. Jean felt all keyed up to new endeavor from it, with a long look ahead at her goal, and patience to wait for it. She felt she could undertake anything, even the care of the house during her mother's absence, and that was probably what lay behind the telegram.

When Kit met her at the station, she gave her an odd look after she had kissed her.

"Lordy, but you do look Joan of Arc-ish, Jean. You'd better not be lofty up home. Everything's at sixes and sevens."

"I'm not a bit Joan of Arc-ish," retorted Jean, with a flash of true Robbins spirit. "What's the trouble?"

Kit gathered up the reins from Princess's glossy back, and started her up the hill. Mr. Briggs had somehow been evaded this time. There was a good coating of snow on the ground and the pines looked weighed down by it, all silver white in the sunshine, and green beneath.

"Nothing much, except that—what on earth have you got in the bag, Jean?"

Jean had forgotten all about the puppy. Piper had kept his word and met her at the train with Jiggers' son, a sleepy, diminutive Boston bull pup all curled up comfortably in a wicker basket with little windows, and a cosy nest

inside. He had started to show signs of personal interest, scratching and whining as soon as Jean had set the bag down at her feet in the carriage.

"It's for Doris. Talbot Pearson sent it up to her to remember Jiggers by."

"Jiggers?"

"It's Jiggers' baby," said Jean solemnly. "Looks just like him, too. His name is Piper. Won't she love him, Kit?"

"I suppose so," said Kit somewhat ungraciously. "I haven't room for one bit of sentiment after the last few days. You've been having a round of joy and you're all rested up, but if you'd been here, well . . ." eloquently. "First of all there came a letter from Benita Ranch. Uncle Hal's not expected to live and they've sent for Mother. Seems to me as if everyone sends for Mother when anything's the matter."

"But Father isn't going way out there too, is he?"

"Yes. They've wired money for both of them to go, and stay for a month anyway, and Cousin Roxy says it's the right thing to do. She's going to send Mrs. Gorham, the Judge's housekeeper, to look after us. Now, Jean, don't put up any hurdles to jump over because it's bad enough as it is, and Mother feels terribly. She'd never have gone if Cousin Roxy hadn't bolstered up her courage, but they say the trip will do Father a world of good and he'll miss the worst part of the winter, and after all, we're not babies."

Jean was silent. It seemed as if the muscles in her throat had all tightened up and she could not say one word. They must do what was best, she knew that. It had been driven into her head for a year past, that always trying to do what was best, but still it did seem as if California were too far away for such a separation. The year before, when it had been necessary to take Mr. Robbins down to Florida, it had not seemed so hard, because at Shady Cove they were well acquainted, and surrounded by neighbors, but here—she looked out over the bleak, wintry landscape and shivered. It had been beautiful through the summer and fall, but now it was barren and cheerless. The memory of Bab's cosy studio apartment came back to her, and a quick sense of rebellion followed against the fate that had cast them all up there in the circle of those hills.

"You brace up now, Jean, and stop looking as if you could chew tacks," Kit exclaimed, encouragingly. "We all feel badly enough and we've got to make the best of it, and help Mother."

The next few days were filled with preparations for the journey. Cousin Roxy came down and took command, laughing them out of their gloom, and

making the Motherbird feel all would be well.

"Laviny don't hustle pretty much," she said, speaking of old Mrs. Gorham, who had been the Judge's housekeeper for years. "But she's sure and steady and a good cook, and I'll drive over every few days to see things are going along as they should, and there's the telephone too. Bless my heart, if these big, healthy girls can't look after themselves for a month, they must be poor spindling specimens of womanhood. I tell you, Betty, it's trials that temper the soul and body. You trot right along and have a second honeymoon in the land of flowers. And if it's the Lord's will your brother should be taken, don't rebel and pine. I always wished we had the same outlook as Bunyan did from his prison cell when he wrote of the vision on Jordan's bank, when those left on this side sang and glorified God if one was taken home. Remember what Paul said, 'For ye are not as those who have no hope.' Jean, put in your mother's summer parasol. She's going to need it."

Shad drove them down to the station in a snowstorm. Jean stood in the doorway with Cousin Roxy and Mrs. Gorham, waving until they passed the turn of the road at the mill. The other girls were at school, and the house seemed fearfully lonely to her as she turned back and fastened the storm doors.

"Now," Cousin Roxy said briskly, drawing on her thick knit woolen driving gloves, "I'm going along myself, and do you stand up straight, Jean Robbins, and take your mother's place." She mitigated the seeming severity of the charge by a sound kiss and a pat on the shoulder. "I brought a ham down for you chicks, one of the Judge's prize hickory home smoked ones, and there's plenty in the cellar and the preserve closet. You'd better let Laviny go along her own gait. She always seems to make out better that way. Just you have an oversight on the girls and keep up the good cheer in the house. Pile on the logs and shut out the cold. While they're away, if I were you I'd close up the big front parlor, and move the piano out into the living-room where you'll get some good of it. Goodbye for now. Tell Laviny not to forget to set some sponge right away. I noticed you were out of bread."

Ella Lou took the wintry road with zest, the steam clouding her nostrils, as she shook her head with a snort, and breasted the hill road. Jean breathed a sigh as the familiar carriage disappeared over the brow of the hill. Out in the dining-room, Mrs. Gorham was moving placidly about as if she had always belonged there, humming to herself an old time song.

> "When the mists have rolled in splendor, from the beauty of the hills,
> And the sunshine warm and tender, falls in kisses on the rills,
> We may read love's shining letter, in the rainbow of the spray,
> We shall know each other better, when the mists have cleared away."

When Shad returned from the station, he came into the kitchen with a load of wood on his arm, stamping his feet, and whistling.

"Seen anything of Joe?" he asked. "I ain't laid eyes on the little creature since breakfast, and he was going to chop up my kindling for me. I'll bet a cookie he's took to his heels. He's been acting funny for several days ever since that peddler went along here."

"Oh, not really, Shad," said Jean, anxiously. She had overlooked Joe completely in the hurry of preparations for departure. "What could happen to him?"

"Nothing special," answered Shad dryly, " 'cepting an ingrowing dislike for work."

"You can't expect a little fellow only nine to work very hard, can you?"

"Well, he should earn his board and keep, I've been telling him. And he don't want to go to school, he says. He's got to do something. He keeps asking me when I'm going down to Nantic. Looks suspicious to me!"

"Nantic? Do you suppose—" Jean stopped short. Shad failed to notice her hesitancy, but went on out doors. Perhaps the boy was wondering if he could get any trace of his father down at Nantic, she thought. There was a great deal of the Motherbird's nature in her eldest robin's sympathy and swift, sure understanding of another's need. She kept an eye out for Joe all day, but the afternoon passed, the girls came home from school, and supper was on the table without any sign of their Christmas waif. And finally, when Shad came in from bedding down the cows and milking, he said he was pretty sure Joe had cut and run away.

"Do you think it's because he didn't want to stay with us while Mother and Father were away?" asked Helen.

"No, I don't," Shad replied. "I think he's just a little tramp, and he had to take to the road when the call came to him. He wasn't satisfied with a good warm bed and plenty to eat."

But Jean felt the responsibility of Joe's loss, and set a lamp burning all night in the sitting room window as a sign to light his way back home. It was such a long walk down through the snow to Nantic, and when he got there, Mr. Briggs would be sure to see him, and make trouble for him. And perhaps he had wandered out into the hills on a regular tramp and got lost. Just before she went up to bed Jean called up Cousin Roxy and asked her advice.

"Well, child, I'd go to bed tonight anyway. He couldn't have strayed away

far, and there are plenty of lights in the farmhouse windows to guide him. I saw him sitting on the edge of the woodpile just when your mother was getting ready to leave, and then he slipped away. I wouldn't worry over him. It isn't a cold night, and the snow fall is light. If he has run off, there's lots of barns where he can curl down under the hay and keep warm. When the Judge drives down to Nantic tomorrow I'll have him inquire."

But neither tomorrow, nor the day after, did any news come to them of Joe. Mr. Briggs was sure he hadn't been around the station or the freight trains. Saturday Kit and Doris drove around through the wood roads, looking for footprints or some other signs of him, and Jean telephoned to all the points she could think of, giving a description of him, and asking them to send the wanderer back if they found him. But the days passed, and it looked as if Joe had joined the army of the great departed, as Cousin Roxy said.

Before the first letter reached them from California, telling of the safe arrival at Benita Ranch of Mr. and Mrs. Robbins, winter decided to come and stay a while. There came a morning when Shad had hard work opening the storm door of the kitchen, banked as it was with snow. Inside, from the upper story windows, the girls looked out, and found even the stone walls and rail fences covered over with the great mantle that had fallen steadily and silently through the night. There was something majestically beautiful in the sweep of the valley and its encircling hills, seen in this garb.

"You'll never get to school today, girls," Mrs. Gorham declared. "Couldn't get through them drifts for love nor money. 'Twouldn't be human, nuther, to take any horse out in such weather. Like enough the mailman won't pull through. Looks real pretty, don't it?"

"And, just think, Mother and Father are in summerland," Helen said, standing with her arm around Jean at the south window. "I wish winter wouldn't come. I'm going to follow summer all around the world some time when I'm rich."

"Helenita always looks forward to that happy day when the princess shall come into her own," Kit sang out, gleefully. "Meantime, ladies, I want to be the first to tell the joyous tidings. The pump's frozen up."

"Shad'll have to take a bucket and go down to the spring then, and break through the ice," Mrs. Gorham said, comfortably. "After you've lived up here all your life, you don't mind such little things. It's natural for a pump to freeze up this sort of weather."

"You know," Kit said darkly to Jean, a few minutes later, in the safety of the sitting room, "I'm not sure whether I want to be an optimist or not. I think

sometimes they're perfectly deadly, don't you, Jean? I left my window open at the bottom last night instead of the top, and this morning, my dear child, there was snow on my pillow. Yes, ma'am, and when I told that to Mrs. Gorham, she told me it was good and healthy for me, and I ought to have rubbed some on my face. Let's pile in a lot of wood and get it nice and toasty if we do have to stay in today. Who's Shad calling to?"

Outside they heard Shad's full toned voice hailing somebody out in the drifts, and presently Piney came to the door stamping her feet. She wore a pair of Honey's old "felts," the high winter boots of the men folks of Gilead, and was muffled to her eyebrows.

"I walked over this far anyway," she said happily. "Couldn't get through with the horse. I wondered if we couldn't get down to the mill, and borrow Mr. Peckham's heavy wood sled, and try to go to school on that."

"We can't break through the roads," objected Doris.

"They're working on them now. Didn't you hear the hunters come up in the night? The barking of the dogs wakened us, and Mother said there were four big teams going up to the camp."

Just then the door opened and Shad came in with the morning's milk, his face aglow, his breath steaming.

"Well, it does beat all," he exclaimed, taking off his mittens and slapping his hands together. "What do you suppose? It was dark last night and snowing when I drove the cows up from the barnyard. They was all huddled together like, and I didn't notice them. Well, this morning I found a deer amongst 'em, fine and dandy as could be, and he ain't a bit scared, neither. Pert and frisky and lying cuddled down in the hay just as much at home as could be. Want to come see him? I've got a path shoveled."

Out they all trooped to the barn, through the walls of snow. The air was still and surprisingly mild. Some Phoebe birds fluttered about the hen houses where Shad had dropped some cracked corn, and Jim Dandy, the big Rhode Island Red rooster, stood nonchalantly on one foot eyeing the landscape as if he would have said,

"Huh, think this a snowfall? You ought to have seen one in my day."

The barn smelled of closely packed hay and dry clover. Inside it was dim and shadowy, and two or three barn cats scooted away from their pans of milk at the sight of intruders. Shad led the way back of the cow stall to the calf corner, and there, sure enough, shambling awkwardly but fearlessly to its feet, was a big brown deer, its wide brown eyes asking hospitality, its nose raised

inquiringly.

“You dear, you,” cried Doris, holding out her hand. “Oh, if we could only tame him; and maybe he’d bring a whole herd down to us.”

“Let’s keep him until the hunters have gone, anyway,” Jean said. “Will he stay, Shad?”

“Guess so, if he’s fed, and the storm keeps up. They often come down like this when feed’s short, and herd in with the cattle, but this one’s a dandy.”

“And the cows don’t seem to mind him one bit.” Doris looked around curiously at the three, Buttercup, Lady Goldtip and Brownie. They munched their breakfast serenely, just as if it were the most everyday occurrence in the world to have this wild brother of the woodland herd with them.

“Let’s call up Cousin Roxy and tell her about it,” said Kit. “She’ll enjoy it too.”

On the way back to the house they stopped short as the sharp crack of rifles sounded up through the silent hills.

“They’re out pretty early,” said Shad, shaking his head. “Them hunter fellows just love a morning like this, when every track shows in the snow.”

“They’d never come near here,” Doris exclaimed, indignantly. “I’d love to see a lot of giant rabbits and squirrels hunting them.”

“Would you, bless your old heart,” laughed Jean, putting her arm around the tender hearted youngest of the brood. “Never have any hunting at all, would you?”

Doris shook her head.

“Some day there won’t be any,” she said, firmly. “Don’t you know what it says in the Bible about, ‘the lion shall lie down with the lamb and there shall be no more bloodshed’?”

Shad looked at her with twinkling eyes as he drawled in his slow, Yankee fashion,

“Couldn’t we even kill a chicken?”

And Doris, who specially liked wishbones, subsided. Over the telephone Cousin Roxy cheered them all up, first telling them the road committeeman, Mr. Tucker Hicks, was working his way down with helpers, and would get the mailman through even if he was a couple of hours late.

“You folks have a nice hot cup of coffee ready for the men when they

come along, and I'll do the same up here, to hearten them up a bit. I'll be down later on; a week from Monday is Lincoln's birthday, and I thought we'd better have a little celebration in the town hall. It's high time we stirred Gilead up a bit. I never could see what good it was dozing like a lot of Rip van Winkles over the fires until the first bluebird woke you up. I want you girls to all help me out with the programme, so brush up your wits."

"Isn't that splendid?" exclaimed Kit, radiantly. "Cousin Roxy is really a brick, girls. She must have known we were ready to nip each other's heads off up here just from lack of occupation."

Piney joined in the general laugh, and sat by the table, eyeing the four girls rather wistfully.

"You don't half appreciate the fun of being a large family," she said. "Just think if you were the only girl, and the only boy was way out in Saskatoon."

Jean glanced up, a little slow tinge of color rising in her cheeks. She had not thought of Saskatoon or of Honey and Ralph for a long while.

"When do you expect him back, Piney?"

"Along in the summer, I think. Ralph says he is getting along first rate."

"Give him our love," chirped up Doris.

"Our very best wishes," corrected Helen in her particular way. But Kit said nothing, and Jean did not seem to notice, so the message to the West went unchallenged.

CHAPTER IX

JEAN MOTHERS THE BROOD

Cousin Roxy came down the following day and blocked out her plan for a celebration at the Town Hall on Lincoln's Birthday. The girls had pictured the Town Hall when they had first heard of it as a rather imposing edifice, imposing at least, for Gilead. But it was really only a long, old gray building, one story high, built like a Quaker meeting house with two doors in front, carriage houses behind, and huge century-old elms overshadowing the driveway leading up to it.

Two tall weather worn posts fronted the main road, whereon at intervals were posted notices of town meetings, taxes, and all sorts of "goings on and doings," as Cousin Roxy said. An adventurous woodpecker had pecked quite a good sized hole in the side of one post, and here a slip of paper would often be tucked with an order to the fishman to call at some out of the way farmhouse, or the tea and coffee man from way over near East Pomfret.

Next to the Town Hall stood the Methodist Church with its little rambling burial ground behind it, straying off down hill until it met a fringe of junipers and a cranberry bog. There were not many new tombstones, mostly old yellowed marble ones, somewhat one sided, with now and then a faded flag stuck in an urn where a Civil War soldier lay buried.

"Antietam took the flower of our youth," Cousin Roxy would say, with old tender memories softening the look in her gray eyes as she gazed out over the old square plots. "The boys didn't know what they were facing. My mother was left a young widow then. Land alive, do you suppose there'd ever be war if women went out to fight each other? I can't imagine any fun or excitement in shooting down my sisters, but men folks are different. Give them a cause and they'll leave plough, home, and harrow for a good fight with one another. And when Decoration Day comes around, I always want to hang my wreaths around the necks of the old fellows who are still with us, Ezry, and Philly Weaver, and old Mr. Peckham and the rest. And that reminds me," here her eyes twinkled. The girls always knew a story was coming when they looked that way, brimful of mirth. "I just met Philly Weaver hobbling along the road

after some stray cows, ninety-two years young, and scolding like forty because, as he said, ‘That boy, Ezry Hicks, who only carried a drum through the war, has dared ask for an increase in pension.’ Ezry must be seventy-four if he’s a day, but he’s still a giddy boy drummer to Philly.”

Jean helped plan out the programme. It seemed like old times back at the Cove where the girls were always getting up some kind of entertainment for the church or their own club. Billy Peckham, who was a big boy over at Gayhead school this year, would deliver the Gettysburg speech, and the Judge could be relied on to give a good one too. Then Jean hit on a plan. Shad was lanky and tall, awkward and overgrown as ever Abe Lincoln had been. Watching him out of the dining-room window as he split wood, she exclaimed suddenly,

“Why couldn’t we have a series of tableaux on his early life, Cousin Roxy. Just look out there at Shad. He’s the image of some of the early pictures, and he never gets his hair cut before spring, he says, just like the horses. Let’s try him.”

Once they had started, it seemed easy. The first scene could be the cabin in the clearing. Jean would be Nancy Lincoln, the young mother, seated by the fireplace, teaching her boy his letters from the book at her knee.

“Dug Moffat will be right for that,” said Jean happily. “He’s about six. Then we must show the boy Lincoln at school. Out in Illinois, that was, wasn’t it, Cousin Roxy, where he borrowed some books from the teacher, and the rain soaked the covers, so he split his first wood to earn them.”

Cousin Roxy promised to hunt up all the necessary historical data in the Judge’s library at home, and they went after it in earnest. Freddie Herrick, the groceryman’s boy over at the Center, was chosen for Abe at this stage, and Kit coaxed Mr. Ricketts, the mailcarrier, to be the teacher.

“Go long now,” he exclaimed jocularly, when she first proposed it. “I ain’t spoke a piece in public since I was knee high to a grasshopper. I used to spout, ‘Woodman, spare that tree.’ Yep. Say it right off smart as could be. Then they had me learn ‘Old Ironsides.’ Ever hear that one? Begins like this.” He waved one arm oracularly in the air. “ ‘Aye, tear her tattered ensign down, long has it waved on high.’ Once they got me started, they couldn’t stop me. No, sirree. Went right ahead and learned ’em, one after the other. ‘At midnight in his guarded tent, the Turk lay dreaming of the hour—’ That was a Jim dandy to roll out. And—and the second chapter of Matthew, and Patrick Henry’s speech, and all sorts of sech stuff, but I’d be shy as a rabbit if you put me up before everybody now.”

Still, he finally consented, when Kit promised him his schoolmaster desk could stand with its back half to the audience to spare him from embarrassment.

"Oh, it's coming on splendidly," she cried to Cousin Roxy, once she was sure of Mr. Ricketts. "We'll have Shad for the young soldier in the Black Hawk war, and three of the big boys for Indians. And then, let's see, the courting of Ann Rutledge. Let's have Piney for Ann. She has just that wide-eyed, old daguerreotype look. Give her a round white turned down collar and a cameo breast-pin, and she'll be ideal."

The preparations went on enthusiastically. Rehearsals were held partly at Greenacres, partly over at the Judge's, and always there were refreshments afterwards. Mrs. Gorham and Jean prepared coffee and cocoa, with cake, but Cousin Roxy would send Ben down cellar after apples and nuts, with a heaping dish of hermits and doughnuts, and tall pitchers of creamy milk.

Doris was very much excited over her part. She was to be the little sister of the young soldier condemned to death for falling asleep on sentinel duty. And she felt it all, too, just as if it was, as Shad said, 'for real.' Shad was the President in this too, but disguised in a long old-fashioned shawl of Cousin Roxy's and the Judge's tall hat, and a short beard. He stood beside his desk, ready to leave, when Doris came in and pleaded for the boy who was to be shot at dawn.

"I know I'm going to cry real tears," said Doris tragically. "I can't help but feel it all right in here," pressing her hand to her heart.

"Well, go ahead and cry for pity's sake," laughed Cousin Roxy. "All the better, child."

Kit had been chosen for a dialogue between the North and the South. Helen, fair haired and winsome, made a charming Southland girl, very haughty and indignant, and Kit was a tall, determined young Columbia, making peace between her and the North, Sally Peckham.

It was Sally's first appearance in public, and she was greatly perturbed over it. Life down at the mill had run in monotonous channels. It was curious to be suddenly taken from it into the limelight of publicity.

"All you have to do, Sally, is let down your glorious hair like Rapunzel," said Kit. "It's way down below your waist, and crinkles too, and it's like burnished gold."

"It's just plain everyday red," said Sally.

“No, it isn’t, and anyway, if you had read history, you’d know all of the great and interesting women had red hair. Cleopatra and Queen Elizabeth and Theodora and a lot more. You’re just right for the North because you look sturdy and purposeful.”

“You know, Cousin Roxy, I think you ought to be in this too,” said Jean, towards the last.

“I am,” responded Cousin Roxy, placidly. “I’m getting up the supper afterwards. Out here you always have to give them a supper, or the men folks don’t think they’re getting their money’s worth. Sometimes I have an oyster supper and sometimes a bean supper, but this time it’s going to be a chicken supper. And not all top crust, neither. Plenty of chicken and gravy. We’ll charge fifty cents admission. I wish your father were here. He’d enjoy it. Heard from them lately?”

Jean nodded, and reached for a letter out of her work-basket on the table.

“Uncle Hal’s better, and Mother says—wait, here it is.” She read the extract slowly.

“ ‘Next year Uncle Hal wants one of you girls to come out and visit the ranch. I think Kit will enjoy it most.’ ”

“So she would,” agreed Cousin Roxy. “Don’t say when they expect to start for home, does it? Or how your father is?”

“She only says she wishes she had us all out there until spring.”

“Don’t write her anything that’s doleful. Let her stay until she’s rested and got enough of the sunshine and flowers. It will do her good. We’ll let her stay until the first of March if she likes.” Here Cousin Roxy put her arm around Jean’s slender waist and drew her nearer. “And then I want you should go up to visit Beth for the spring. She’s expecting you. You’ve looked after things real well, child.”

“Oh, but I haven’t,” Jean said quickly. “You don’t know how impatient I get with the girls, especially Helen. It’s funny, Cousin Roxy, but Doris and I always agree and pal together, even do Helen’s share of the work for her, and I think that’s horrid. We’re all together, and Helen’s just as capable of helping along as little Doris is.”

“Well, what ails her?” Cousin Roxy’s voice was good natured and cheerful. “Found out how pretty she is?”

“She found that out long ago,” Jean answered. “She isn’t an ordinary person. She’s the Princess Melisande one day, and Elaine the next. It just

seems as if she can't get down to real earth, that's all, Cousin Roxy. She's always got her nose in a book, and she won't see things that just have to be done. And Kit tells me I'm always finding fault, when I know I'm right."

"Well, well, remember one thing. 'Speak the truth in love.' Coax her out of it instead of scolding. She's only thirteen, you know, Jeanie, and that's a trying age. Let her dream awhile. It passes soon enough, this 'standing with reluctant feet, where the brook and river meet.' Remember that? And it would be an awfully funny world if we were all cut out with the same cookie dip."

So Helen had a respite from admonishings, and Kit would eye her elder sister suspiciously, noticing Jean's sudden change of tactics. Two of Helen's daily duties were to feed the canary and water the plants in the sunny bay window. But half the time it was Kit who did it at the last minute before they hurried away to school. Then, too, Jean would notice Kit surreptitiously attack Helen's neglected pile of mending and wade though it in her quick, easy-going way, while Helen sat reading by the fire. But she said nothing, and Kit grew uneasy.

"I'd much rather you'd splutter and say something, Jean," she said one day. "But you know Helen helps me in her way. I can't bear to dust and she does all of my share on Saturday. She opened up that box of books for Father from Mr. Everden, and put them all away in his bookcase in just the right order, and she's been helping me with my French like sixty. You know back at the Cove she just simply ate up French from Mother's maid, Bettine, when she was so little she could hardly speak English. So it's give and take with us, and if I'm satisfied, I don't think you ought to mind."

"I don't, not any more," Jean replied, bending over a neglected box of oil pastels happily. "You do just as you want to, and I'm awfully sorry I was catty about it. I guess the weather up here's got on my nerves, although Cousin Roxy and Jean Robbins have cooked up something between them, and that's why she looks so serene and calm." She paused in the lower hall and looked out of the little top glass in the door. Around the bend of the road came Mr. Ricketts' little white mail cart and old white horse with all its daily promise of letters and papers. Kit was out of the house, bareheaded, in a minute, running to meet him.

"Got quite a lot this time," he called to her hopefully. "I couldn't make out all of them, but there's one right from Californy and I guess that's what you're looking for."

Kit laughed and took back the precious load. Magazines from Mrs. Crane, and newspapers from the West. Post-cards for Lincoln's birthday from girl

friends at the Cove, and one from Piper with a picture of a disconsolate Boston bull dog saying, “Nobody loves me.”

Jean opened the California letter first, with the others hanging over the back of her chair. It was not long, but Kit led in the cheer of thanksgiving over its message.

“We expect to leave here about the 18th, and should be in Gilead a week later.”

Doris climbed up on a chair to the calendar next the lamp shelf, and counted off the days, drawing a big circle around the day appointed. But when they had called up Cousin Roxy and told her, she squelched their hopes in the most matter-of-fact way possible.

“All nonsense they coming back here just at the winter break-up. I’ll write and tell them to make it the first of March, and even then it’s risky, coming right out of a warm climate. I guess you girls can stand it another week or two.”

“Well,” said Kit heroically, “what can’t be cured must be endured. Rub off that circle around the 18th, Doris, and make it the first of March. What’s that about the Ides of March? Wasn’t some old fellow afraid of them?”

“Julius Cæsar,” answered Jean.

“No such a thing,” said Kit stoutly. “It was Brutus or else Cassius. When they were having their little set-to in the tent. We had it at school last week. Girls, let’s immediately cast from us the cares of this mortal coil, and make fudge.”

Jean started for the pantry after butter and sugar, but in the passageway was a little window looking out at the back of the driveway, and she stopped short. Dodging out of sight behind a pile of wood that was waiting to be split, was a familiar figure. Without waiting to call the girls, she slipped quietly around the house and there, sure enough, backed up against the woodshed, his nose fairly blue from the cold, was Joe.

“Don’t—don’t let Shad know I’m here,” he said anxiously. “He’ll lick me fearfully if he catches me.”

“Oh, Joe,” Jean exclaimed happily. “Come here this minute. Nobody’s going to touch you, don’t you know that? Aren’t you hungry?”

Joe nodded mutely. He didn’t look one bit ashamed; just eager and glad to be back home. Jean put her arm around him, patting him as her mother would have done, and leading him to the kitchen. And down in the barn doorway

stood Shad, open mouthed and staring.

"Well, I'll be honswoggled if that little creetur ain't come back home to roost," he said to himself. In the kitchen Joe was getting thawed out and welcomed home. And finally the truth came out.

"I went hunting my dad down around Norwich," he confessed.

"Did you find him?" cried Doris.

Joe nodded happily.

"Braced him up too. He says he won't drink any more 'cause it'll disgrace me. He's gone to work up there in the lockshop steady. He wanted me to stay with him, but as soon as I got him braced up, I came back here. You didn't get my letter, did you? I left it stuck in the clock."

Stuck in the clock? Jean looked up at the old eight-day Seth Thomas on the kitchen mantel that they had bought from old Mr. Weaver. It was made of black walnut, with green vines painted on it and morning glories rambling in wreaths around its borders. She opened the little glass door and felt inside. Sure enough, tucked far back, there was Joe's farewell letter, put carefully where nobody would ever think of finding it. Written laboriously in pencil it was, and Jean read it aloud.

"Dere folks.

I hered from a pedlar my dad is sick up in norwich. goodby and thanks i am coming back sum day.

yurs with luv.

JOE."

Joe looked around at them with his old confident smile.

"See?" he said. "I told you I was coming back."

"And you're going to stay too," replied Jean, thankfully. "I'm so glad you're not under the snow, Joe. You'd better run down and get in that kindling for Shad."

This took real pluck, but Joe rose bravely, and went out, and Shad's heart must have thawed a little too, for he came in later whistling and said the little skeezicks was doing well.

Jean laughed and sank back in the big red rocker with happy weariness.

"And Bab said this country was monotonous," she exclaimed. "If anything

else happens for a day or so, I’m going to find a woodchuck hole and crawl into it to rest up.”

CHAPTER X

COUSIN ROXY'S "SOCIAL"

The night of the entertainment down at the Town Hall finally arrived. Doris said it was one of the specially nice things about Gilead, things really did happen if you just waited long enough. There was not room enough for all the family in the buggy or democrat with only one horse, so the Judge sent Ben down to drive Mrs. Gorham over and the two youngest. Shad took the rest with Princess. All along the road they met teams coming from various side roads, and the occupants sent out friendly hails as they passed. It was too dark to recognize faces, but Kit seemed to know the voices.

"That's Sally Peckham and her father," she said. "And Billy's on the back seat with the boys. I heard him laugh. There's Abby Tucker and her father. I hope her shoes won't pinch her the way they did at our lawn party last year. And Astrid and Ingeborg from the old Ames place on the hill. Hello, girls! And that last one is Mr. Ricketts and his family."

"Goodness, Kit," Jean cried. "You're getting to be just like Cousin Roxy on family history. I could never remember them all if I lived out here a thousand years."

" 'An I should live a thousand years, I ne'er should forget it,' " chanted Kit, gaily. "Oh, I do hope there'll be music tonight. Cousin Roxy says she's tried to hire some splendid old fellow, Cady Graves. Isn't that a queer name for a fiddler? He's very peculiar, she says, but he calls out wonderfully. He's got his own burial plot all picked out and his tombstone erected with his name and date of birth on it, and all the decorations he likes best. Cousin Roxy says it's square, and on one side he's got his pet cow sculptured with the record of milk it gave, and on the other is his own face in bas relief."

"It's original anyway," said Jean. "I suppose there is a lot of satisfaction in fixing up your own last resting place the way you want it to be."

"Yes, but after he'd sat for the bas relief, there it was with a full beard, and now he's clean shaven, and Cousin Roxy says if he didn't get the stone cutter over to give the bas relief a shave too."

Down Huckleberry Hill they drove with all its hollows and bumps and “thank-ye-ma’ams.” These were the curved rises where the road ran over a hidden culvert. Gilead Center lay in a valley, a scattered lot of white houses set back from the road in gardens with the little church, country store and Town Hall in the middle of it. The carriage sheds were already filled with teams, so the horses were blanketed and left hitched outside with a lot of others. Inside, the little hall was filled with people, the boys perched up on the windowsills where they could get a good view of the long curtained-off platform that was used as a stage.

Cousin Roxy was busy at her end of the room, preparing the supper behind a partition, with Mrs. Peckham and Mrs. Gorham to help. Around the two great drum stoves clustered the men and older boys, and the Judge seemed to loom quite naturally above these as leader. Savory odors came from the corner, and stray tuning up sounds from another corner, where Mr. Graves sat, the center of an admiring group of youngsters. Flags were draped and crossed over doorways and windows, and bunting festooned over the top of the stage.

Jean took charge behind the curtain, getting the children ready for their different parts in the tableaux. Then she went down to the old tinkling, yellow keyed piano and everybody stood up to sing “My Country, ’Tis of Thee.”

“Land alive, it does grip the heartstrings, doesn’t it?” Cousin Roxy exclaimed, once that was over. “I often wish I’d done something in my life to give folks a happy holiday every time my birthday came ’round.”

Then the Judge rose and took the platform, so tall that his head just missed the red, white and blue bunting overhead. And he spoke of Lincoln until it seemed as if even the smallest children in the front rows must have seen and known him too. Jean and Kit always enjoyed one of the Judge’s speeches, not so much for what he said, as for the pleasure of watching Cousin Roxy’s face. She sat on the end of a seat towards the back now, all in her favorite gray silk, her spectacles half way down her nose, her face upraised and smiling as she watched her sweetheart deliver his speech.

“When you look at her you know what it means in the Bible by people’s faces shining, don’t you?” whispered Kit, as the Judge finished in a pounding applause in which hands, feet and chair legs all played their part.

Next came the tableaux amid much excitement both before the curtain and behind. First of all the curtain was an erratic and whimsical affair, not to be relied on with a one-man power, so two of the older boys volunteered to stand at either end and assist it to rise and fall at the proper time in case it should fail to respond to the efforts of the official curtain raiser, Freddie Herrick. But

Fred's mind was on the next ten minutes when he was to portray the twelve-year-old schoolboy Abe, and the crank failed to work, so the curtain went up with the pulley lines instead, and showed the interior of the little cabin with Dug Moffat industriously learning to read at Jean's knee. And a very fair, young Nancy she made too, with her dark hair arranged by Cousin Roxy in puffs over her ears, and the plain stuff gown with its white kerchief crossed in front. On the wall were stretched 'possum and squirrel pelts, and an old spinning wheel stood beside the fireplace.

"You looked dear, Jean," Helen whispered when the curtain fell. "Your eyes were just like Mother's. Is my hair all right?"

Jean gave it a few last touches, and then hurried to help with the music that went in between the scenes. The school room scene was a great success. Benches and an old desk made a good showing, with some old maps hung around, and a resurrected ancient globe of the Judge's.

Mr. Ricketts appeared in all his glory, with stock, skirted coat, and tight trousers. And Fred, lean and lanky, his black forelock dangling over his eyes as he bent over his books, made a dandy schoolboy Lincoln. So they went on, each picture showing some phase in the life of the Liberator. But the hit of the evening was Doris pleading for the life of her sentinel brother. She had said she would surely cry real tears, and she did. Kneeling beside the tall figure of the President, her little old red fringed shawl around her, she did look so woe begone and pathetic that Cousin Roxy said softly,

"Land sakes, how the child does take it to heart."

Last of all came the tableau of the North and South being reunited by Columbia, and Kit looked very stern and judicial as she joined their reluctant hands, and gave the South back her red, white and blue banner.

It was all surprisingly good considering how few things they had had to do with in the way of properties and scenery, but Cousin Roxy sprang a last surprise before the dancing began. Up on the platform walked three old men, Philly Weaver first, in his veteran suit, old Grandpa Bide Tucker, Abby's grandfather, and Ezra Hicks, the "boy" of seventy. Solemn faced and self conscious they took their places, and there was the old Gilead fife and drum corps back again.

"Oh, bless their dear old hearts," cried Kit, her eyes filled with sudden tears as the old hands coaxed out "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

There was hardly a dry eye in the Town Hall by the time the trio had finished their medley of war tunes. Many were there who could remember far

back when the little village band of boys in blue had marched away with that same trio at its head, young Bide and Ezra at the drums, and Philly at the fife. When it was over and the stoop-shouldered old fellows went back to their benches, Cousin Roxy whispered to the Judge, and he rose.

"Just one word more, friends and neighbors," he said. "Mrs. Ellis reminds me. A chicken dinner will be served after the dancing."

The floor was cleared for dancing now, and Cady Graves took command. No words could quite do justice to Cady's manner at this point. He was about sixty-four, a short, slender, active little man, with a perpetual smile on his clean shaven face, and a rolling cadence to his voice that was really thrilling, Helen said.

It was the girls' first experience at a country dance. They sat around Cousin Roxy watching the preparations, but not for long. Even Doris found herself with Fred filling in to make up a set. When the floor was full Cady walked around like a ringmaster, critically surveying them, and finally, toe up, heel down hard ready to tap, fiddle and bow poised, he gave the word of command.

"Sa-lute your partners!"

Jean thought she knew how to dance a plain quadrille before that night, but by the time Cady had finished his last ringing call, she was reduced to a laughing automaton, swung at will by her partner, tall young Andy Gallup, the doctor's son. Cady never remained on the platform. He strolled back and forth among the couples, sometimes dancing himself where he found them slowing down, singing his "calling out" melodiously, quaintly, throwing in all manner of interpolated suggestions, smiling at them all like some old-time master of the revels.

"Cousin Roxy, do you know he's wonderful," said Kit, sitting down and fanning herself vigorously.

"Who? Cady?" Cousin Roxy laughed heartily. She had stepped off with the Judge just as lightly as the girls. "Well, he has got a way with him, hasn't he? Cady's more than a person up here. He's an institution. I like to think when he passes over the Lord will find a pleasant place for him, he has given so much real happiness to everyone."

Last of all came the chicken supper, served at long tables around the sides of the hall. All of the girls were pressed into service as waitresses, with Cousin Roxy presiding over the feast like a beaming spirit of plenty.

"Land, do have some more, Mis' Ricketts," she would say, bustling around

behind the guests. “Just a mite of white meat, plenty of it. Mr. Weaver, do have some more gravy. I shall think I missed making it right if you don’t. There’s a nice drumstick, Dug.”

“Had two already, Mis’ Ellis,” Dug piped up honestly.

“Well, they’re good for you. Eat two more and maybe you’ll run like a squirrel, who knows,” laughed Cousin Roxy.

“Kit,” Helen said once, as they rested a moment near the little kitchen corner, “what a good time we’re having, and think of the difference between this and an entertainment at home. Why is it?”

“Cousin Roxy,” answered Kit promptly. “Put her down there and she’d bring people together and make them have a good time just as she does here. Doesn’t Jean look pretty tonight? I don’t believe in praising the family, of course, far be it from me,” she laughed, her eyes watching Jean. “But I think my elder sister in her Nancy get-up looks perfectly dear. She’s growing up, Helenita.”

Helen nodded her head in the old wise fashion she had, studying Jean’s appearance judicially.

“Well, I don’t think she’ll ever be really beautiful,” she said, gently, “but she’s got a wonderful way with her like Mother. I heard Cousin Beth tell Father she had charm. What is charm, Kit?”

“Charm?” repeated Kit, thoughtfully. “I don’t know exactly. But Jean and Mother and Doris have it, and you and I, Helenita, have only our looks.”

CHAPTER XI

CYNTHY'S NEIGHBORS

After the entertainment there followed a siege of cold weather that pretty well "froze up everybody," as Shad said. A still coldness without wind settled over the hills. No horses could stand up on the icy roads. Mr. Ricketts was held up with the mail cart for three days, and when the road committee started out to remedy matters, they got as far as Judge Ellis's and turned back. None of the girls could get to school, so they made the best of it. Even the telephone refused to respond to calls. On the fourth day Mr. Peckham managed to break through the roads with his big wood sled, and riding on it was Sally muffled to the eyebrows.

"Unwind before you try to talk," Kit exclaimed, taking one end of the long knit muffler. "How on earth did you get through?"

"It isn't so bad," Sally replied in her matter-of-fact way, warming her hands over the kitchen fire. "And our hill is fine for coasting. The boys have been using it. Father's going to break the road through for the mail cart, and on his way back we can all get on and ride back. You don't need any sleds. We've got a big bob."

Jean and Helen hesitated. Winter at the Cove had never meant this, but Doris pleaded for them all to go, and Kit was frankly rebellious against this spirit in the family.

"Jean Robbins," she said, "do you really think it is beneath your dignity to slide down hill on a bobsled? You won't meet one of Bab Crane's crowd. Come along."

"It's so cold," Helen demurred, from her seat by the sitting-room fire with a book to read as usual.

"Cold? You're a couple of cats, curled up by the fire. Bundle up and let's have some fun."

"Do you all a pile of good," Mrs. Gorham said placidly. "You just sit around and toast yourselves 'stid of getting used to the cold. Get out and stir around. Look at Sally's red cheeks."

So laughing together, they all wrapped up warmly and went out to get on the wood sled when it came back. The hill over by the sawmill was not so steep, but it swept in long, undulating sections, as it were, clear from the top of Woodchuck Hill down to the bridge at Little River. The Peckham boys had been sliding for a couple of days, and had worn a fair sized track over the snow and ice.

"There'll be fine skating when the snow clears off a bit," Billy called out. "We've got a skating club, and you'll have to join. Piney's the best girl skater. Jiminy, you ought to see her spin ahead. We skate on the river when it's like this and you can keep on going for miles."

"Do you know, girls," Jean said on the way back, "I think we stay in the house too much and coddle ourselves just as Mrs. Gorham says. I feel simply dandy now. Who's for the skating club?"

Even Helen joined in. It seemed to take the edge off the loneliness, this co-operation of outdoor fun and sport. The end of the week found the river clear and ready for skating. Jean never forgot her first experience there. It was not a straight river. It slipped unexpectedly around bends and dipping hillsides, curving in and out as if it played hide-and-seek with itself, Doris said, like the sea serpent that met its own tail half way around the seven seas.

Up near the Greenacre bridge Astrid and Ingeborg met them with Hedda. Helen, the fanciful, whispered to Jean how splendid it was to have real daughters of the northland with them, but Jean laughed at her.

"Cousin Roxy would say 'fiddlesticks' to that. I'm sure they were all born right on this side of the briny deep, you little romancer."

"It doesn't matter where they were born," answered Helen, loftily. "They are the daughters of vikings somewhere back. Just look at their hair and eyes."

It really was a good argument, Jean thought. They had the bluest eyes and the most golden hair she had ever seen. Sally skated up close to her and began to talk.

"Father says when his father was a boy, there were gray wolves used to come down in wintertime from Massachusetts, and they've been chased by them on this river when they were skating."

"My father tells of wolves too," Astrid said in her slow, wide-eyed way. "Back in Sweden. He says he was in a camp in the forest on the side of a great mountain, and the men told him to watch the fires while they were hunting. While he was there alone there came a pack of wolves after the freshly killed game. He stood with his back to the fire and threw blazing pine knots at them

to keep them back. While the fire kept up they were afraid to come close, but he could see the gleam of their eyes in the darkness all around him, and hear them snap and snarl to get at him. Then the men and dogs returned and fought them. He was only thirteen."

"Oh, and his name should have been Eric the Bold, son of Sigfried, son of Leofric." Kit skated in circles around them, her muff up to her face as she talked. "You've got such a dandy name, Astrid, know it?"

"It is my grandmother's name," Astrid answered in her grave unsmiling way.

"But it means a star, the same as Stella or Estelle or Astarte or Ishtar. We've been studying the meanings of proper names at school, and it's so fascinating. I wish I had been named something like Astrid. I'd love to be Brunhilde."

Jean watched them amusedly. Kit and Helen had always been the two who had loved to make believe they were "somebody else," as Helen called it. "Let's play we're somebody else," had been their unfailing slogan for diversion and variety, but Jean lived in the world of reality. She was Jean Robbins, living today, not Melisande in an enchanted forest, nor Berengaria, not even Kit's favorite warrior maid, Jeanne D'Arc. Helen could do up the supper dishes all by herself, and forget the sordid details entirely making believe she was the Lady of Tripoli waiting for Rudel's barque to appear, but Jean experienced all of the deadly sameness in everyday life. She could not sweep and dust a room and make believe she was at the spring exhibitions. She could not face a basket of inevitable mending, and imagine herself in a castle garden clad in clinging green velvet with stag hounds pacing at her heels.

When they had first come to the country to live, it had been comical, this difference in the girls' temperaments. Mrs. Robbins had wanted a certain book in her room upstairs, after dark, and had asked Helen to run up after it. And Helen had hesitated, plainly distressed.

"For pity's sake, Helenita, run along," Jean had said laughingly. "You're not afraid of the dark, are you?"

"I don't know," Helen had answered, doubtfully. "Maybe I am. I'm the only one in the family with imagination."

Sometimes Jean almost envied the two their complete self-absorption. She was never satisfied with herself or her relation to her environment. Seeing so many needs, she felt a certain lack in herself when she shrank from the little duties that crowded on her, and stole away her time. She had brought up from

New York a fair supply of material for study, and had laid out work ahead for the winter evenings, but the days were slipping by, and time was short. Her pads of drawing paper lay untouched in her desk drawer. Not a single new pencil had been used, not a stick of crayon touched. The memory of Daddy Higginson driving his herd of cattle cheered her more than anything when she felt discouraged. And after all, when she thought of the California trip and what a benefit it would be to her father, that thought alone made her put every regret from her, and face tomorrow pluckily.

"I'm half frozen," Doris said suddenly, just as they swung around a bend of the river, and faced long levels of snow-covered meadows. "Oh, girls, look there." She stopped short, the rest halting too. Crossing over the frozen land daintily, following a big antlered leader, were five deer. Straight down to the river edge they came, only three fields from the girls.

"They've got a path to their drinking place," said Sally. "Don't move, any of you."

"Oh, I wonder if ours is there," Doris whispered. "He hasn't been with the cows since the storm passed, but I know I could tell him from the rest. He had a dark patch of brown on his shoulder."

"There's only one with antlers," Sally answered. "I hope the hunters won't find them. I never could bear hunters. Maybe if we had to depend on them for food it would be different, but when they just come up here and kill for fun, well, my mother says she just hopes some day it'll all come back to them good and plenty."

"Yes, and who eats squirrel pie with the rest of us," her brother teased. "And partridge too. She's only talking."

"Don't fight," Helen told them softly. "Isn't that a house over there where the smoke is?"

"It's Cynthy Allan's house," Ingeborg looked around warningly as she spoke the name. "I'm not allowed to go there. She's queer."

"Isn't that interesting," Kit cried. "I love queer people. Let's all go over and call on Cynthy. How old is she, Ingeborg?"

"Oh, very old, over seventy. But she thinks she is only about seventeen, and she's always doing flighty things. She's lived out in the woods all summer, and she ran away from her family."

"She won't hurt you, I suppose," Sally explained. "Mother says she just worked herself crazy. Once she started to make doughnuts and they found her

hanging them on nails all over her kitchen, the round doughnuts, I mean. Lots of them. So folks have been afraid of her ever since."

"Just because she made a lot of doughnuts and hung them around her kitchen? I think that's lovely," Kit cried. "What fun she must have had. Maybe she just did it to nonplus people."

"I don't know," Sally said doubtfully. "She took to the woods after that, and now she lives in the house along with about fourteen cats."

"I shall call on Cynthy today, won't you, Jean?"

"I'd like to get warmed up before we skate back," Jean agreed. "I don't suppose she'd mind. If you don't want to, Ingeborg, you could wait for us."

Ingeborg thought waiting the wiser plan, but the rest of them took off their skates, and started up over the fields towards the little grey house in the snow. There were bare rose bushes around the front door and lilacs at the back. Several cats scudded away at their approach and took refuge in the woodshed, and at the side window there appeared a face, a long, haggard, old face, supported on one old, thin hand that incessantly moved to hide the trembling of the lips. Kit, on the impulse of the moment, waved to her, and smiled.

"Gee, I hope she's been cooking some of those doughnuts today," said one of the Peckham boys.

Jean tapped at the door. It was several minutes before it opened. Cynthy looked them over first from the window before she took any chances, and even when she did deign to lift her latch, the door only opened a few inches.

"Could we please come in and get warm?" asked Jean in her friendliest way.

"What did you stick out in the cold and get all froze up for?" asked Cynthy tartly. But the door opened wider, and they all trooped into the kitchen. Out of every rush bottomed chair there leaped a startled cat. The kitchen was poorly furnished, only an old-fashioned painted dresser, a wood stove, a maple table, and some chairs, but the braided rugs on the floor made little oases of comfort, and the fire crackled cheerfully, throwing sparkles from the copper tea kettle.

"Ain't had nobody to draw me no well water today," Cynthy remarked apologetically. "Else I wouldn't mind making you a cup of tea, such as it is. Warm you up a mite anyhow."

Steve Peckham grabbed the water pail and hustled out to the well, and his brother made for the woodshed to add to the scanty supply in the woodbox.

“Ain’t had nobody to cut me no wood for a spell nuther,” Cynthy acknowledged. “You won’t find much out there ’ceptin’ birch and chips. Sit right down close to the fire, girls.” She looked them all over in a dazed but interested sort of way. “Don’t suppose—” she hesitated, and Kit flashed a telepathic glance at Jean. It wasn’t possible Cynthy was still in the doughnut making business, she thought. But the old lady went on, “Don’t suppose you’d all like some of my doughnuts, would ye? They’re real good and tasty.”

Would they? They drew up around the old maple table while Cynthy spread a red tablecloth over it, and set out a big milkpan filled with golden brown doughnuts. Jean found a chance to say softly, she hoped Miss Allan would come up to Greenacres soon, and sample some of their cooking too.

“Ain’t got any hat to wear,” Cynthy answered briefly. “Never go anywheres at all, never see anybody. Might just as well be dead and buried. Anyhow, it’s over two and a half miles to your place, ain’t it? Used to be the old Trowbridge place, only you put a fancy name on it, I heard from the fishman. Don’t know what I’d do if it wasn’t for him coming ’round once a week. I never buy anything, but he likes to have a few doughnuts, and I like to hear all the news. I’d like to see how you’ve fixed up the old house. When nobody lived there, I used to go down and pick red raspberries. Fearful good ones over in that side lot by the barn.”

“We made jam of them last year,” Kit exclaimed, eagerly. “I’ll bring some down to you, sure.”

“Wish I did have a hat to wear,” went on Cynthy, irrelevantly. “Wish I had a hat with a red rose on it. I had one once when I was a girl, and it was so becoming to me. Wish I had another just like it.”

“There’s a red silk rose at home among some of Mother’s things. I know she’d love you to have it. She’ll be home soon, and I’ll bring it down to you when I find the rose.”

The very last thing that Cynthy called from the door as they all trooped down the path, was the injunction to Kit not to forget the rose.

“Isn’t it wonderful,” she said enthusiastically to Jean, as they skated home. “She must be seventy or eighty, Jean, but she longs for a red rose. I don’t believe age amounts to a thing, really and truly, except for wrinkles and rheumatism. I’ll bet two cents when I’m as old as Cynthy is, I’ll be hankering after pink satin slippers and a breakfast cap with rosebuds.”

Jean laughed happily. The outing had brought the bright color to her cheeks, and it seemed as if she felt a premonition of good tidings even before

they reached the house up on the pine-crowned hill. She was singing with Doris as they turned in at the gateway and went up the winding drive, but Kit's eagle eye discovered signs of fresh tracks in the snow.

"There's been a team or a sleigh in here since we went out," she called back to them, and all at once Doris gave an excited little squeal of joy, and dashed ahead, waving to somebody who stood at the side window, the big, sunny bay window where the plant stand stood. Then Kit ran, and after her Helen, and Jean too, all speeding along the drive to the wide front steps and into the spacious doors, where the Motherbird stood waiting to clasp them in her arms.

CHAPTER XII

FIRST AID TO PROVIDENCE

It was after supper that night when the younger ones were in bed that Jean had a chance to talk alone with her mother, one of those intimate heart to heart talks she dearly loved. Mr. Robbins was so much improved in health that it really seemed as if he were his old self once more. The girls had hung around him all the evening, delighted at the change for the better.

“It’s worth everything to see him looking so well,” Helen had said in her grave, grown-up way. “All the winter of trials and Mrs. Gorham, and the pump breaking.”

“Yes, and to think,” Jean said to her mother, as the girls made ready for the procession upstairs to bed, “to think that Uncle Hal got well too.”

“I think it was half an excuse to coax us west, his illness,” laughed Mrs. Robbins, “and I told him so. But, oh, my chicks, if you could only see the ranch and live out there for a while. It took me back so to my girlhood, the freedom and sweep of it all. There is something about the west and its mountains you never get out of your system once you have known and loved them. I want you all to go out there some day.”

“Isn’t it a pity that one of us isn’t a boy,” said Kit meditatively. “Just because we are all girls, we can’t go in for that sort of a life, and I’d love it. At least for a little while. I’d like my life to be a whole lot of experiences, one after the other.”

“Piney says she’s going to live in the wilds anyway, whether she’s a girl or not,” Helen put in, leaning her chin on her palms on the edge of the table, her feet up in the big old red rocker. “She’s going to study forestry and be a government expert, and maybe take up a big claim herself. She says she’s bound she’ll live on a mountain top.”

“Well, she can if she likes,” Jean said. “I like Mother Nature’s cosy corners, don’t you, Motherie? When you get up as high as you can on any old mountain top, what’s the use? You only realize how much you need wings.”

“Go on to bed, all of you,” ordered Kit, briskly. “Jean, don’t you dare talk

Mother to death now."

"Let me brush your hair," coaxed Jean after it was all quiet. So they sat downstairs together in the quiet living-room, the fire burning low, Mrs. Robbins in the low willow rocker, her long brown hair unbound, falling in heavy ripples below her waist. She looked almost girlish sitting there in the half light, the folds of her pretty grey crepe kimono close about her like a twilight cloud, Jean thought, and the glow of the fire on her face. Jean remembered that hour often in the weeks that followed. After she had brushed out her hair and braided it in soft, wide plaits, she sat on the hassock at her feet and talked of the trip west and all the things that had happened at Greenacres during that time.

"One thing I really have learned, Mother dear," she finished. "Nothing is nearly as bad as you expect it to be. It was very discouraging when the pump was frozen, and Mrs. Gorham got lonesome, but Cousin Roxy came down and I declare, she seemed to thaw out everything. We got a plumber up from Nantic, and Cousin Roxy took Mrs. Gorham over to a meeting of the Ladies' Aid Society, and it was over in no time."

"Remember the old king who offered half of his kingdom to whoever would give him a saying that would always banish fear and care? And the one that he chose was this, 'This too shall pass away.' "

"It's comforting, isn't it," agreed Jean. "But another thing, Mother, you know I've never been very patient. I mean with little things. You'll never know how I longed to stay down in New York with Bab this winter and go to art school. I can tell you now, because it's all over, and the winter has done me good. But I was honestly rebellious."

Mrs. Robbins' hand rested tenderly on the smooth dark head beside her knee. Kit always said that Jean's head make her think of a nice, sleek brown partridge's crest, it was so smooth and glossy.

"I know what you mean," she said, this Motherbird who somehow never failed to understand the trials of her brood. "Responsibility is one of the best gifts that life brings to us. I've always evaded it myself, Jean, so I know the fight you have had. You know how easy everything was made for me before we came here to live in these blessed old hills. There was always plenty of money, plenty of servants. I never worried one particle over the realities of life until that day when Cousin Roxy taught me what it meant to be a helpmate as well as a wife. So you see, it was only this last year that I learned the lesson which has come to you girls early in life."

"Oh, I know," as Jean glanced up quickly to object, "you're not a child, but

you seem just a kiddie to me, Jean. It was fearfully hard for me to give up our home at the Cove, and all the little luxuries I had been accustomed to. Most of all I dreaded the change for you girls, but now, I know, it was the very best thing that could have happened to us. Do you remember what Cousin Roxy says she always puts into her prayers? 'Give me an understanding heart, O Lord.' I guess that is what we all lacked, and me especially, an understanding heart."

"Doesn't Cousin Roxy seem awfully well acquainted with God, Motherie," said Jean thoughtfully. "I don't mean that irreverently, but it really is true. Why, I've been going to our church for years and hearing the service over and over until I know it all by heart, but when she gets up at prayer meeting at the little white church, it seems as if really and truly, He is there in the midst of them."

"She's an angel in a gingham apron," laughed Mrs. Robbins. "Now, you must go to bed, dear. It's getting chilly. Did you see how glad Joe was to have us back? Dear little fellow. I'm glad he had the courage to come back to us. I called up Roxy as soon as we arrived at the station, and she will be over in the morning early to plan about your trip to Weston."

"Oh, but—you can't spare me yet, can you?" exclaimed Jean. "It's still so cold, and I wouldn't be one bit happy thinking of you managing alone here."

"I'll keep Mrs. Gorham until you get back. It's only twelve a month for her, and that can come out of my own little income, so we shall manage all right. I want you to go, Jean." She held the slender figure close in her arms, her cheek pressed to Jean's, and added softly, "The first to fly from the nest."

Jean felt curiously uplifted and comforted after that talk. It was cold in her own room upstairs. She raised the curtain and looked out at Greenacres flooded with winter moonlight. They were surely Whiteacres tonight. It was the very end of February and no sign of spring yet. She knew over in Long Island the pussy willow buds would be out and the air growing mild from the salt sea breezes, but here in the hills it was still bleak and frost bound.

What would it be like at Weston? Elliott was away at a boys' school. She felt as if Fate were lending her to a fairy godmother for a while, and she had liked Cousin Beth. There was something about her,—a curious, indefinable, intimate charm of personality that attracted one to her. Cousin Roxy was breezy and courageous, a very tower of strength, a Flying Victory standing on one of Connecticut's bare old hills and defying fate or circumstance to ruffle her feathers, but Cousin Beth was full of little happy chuckles and confidences. Her merry eyes, with lids that drooped at the outer corners, fairly invited you

to tell her anything you longed to, and in spite of her forty odd years, she still seemed like a girl.

Snuggled down under the big soft home-made comforters, Jean fell asleep, still "cogitating" as Cousin Roxy would have called it, on the immediate future, wondering how she could turn this visit into ultimate good for the whole family. There was one disadvantage in being born a Robbins. Your sympathies and destiny were linked so indissolubly to all the other Robbinses that you felt personally responsible for their happiness and welfare. So Jean dozed away thinking how with Cousin Beth's help she would find a way of making money so as to lighten the load at home and give Kit a chance as the next one to fly.

The winter sunshine had barely clambered to the crests of the hills the following morning when Cousin Roxy drove up, with Ella Lou's black coat sparkling with frost.

"Thought I'd get an early start so I could sit awhile with you," she called breezily. "The Judge had to go to court at Putnam. Real sad case, too. Some of our home boys in trouble. I told him not to dare send them up to any State homes or reformatories, but to put them on probation and make their families pay the fines."

Kit was just getting into her school rig, ready for her long drive down to catch the trolley car to High School.

"Oh, what is it, Cousin Roxy?" she called from the side entry. "Do tell us some exciting news."

"Well, I guess it is pretty exciting for the poor mothers." Mrs. Ellis got out of the carriage and hitched Ella Lou deftly, then came into the house. "There's been considerable things stolen lately, just odds and ends of harness and bicycle supplies from the store, and three hams from Miss Bugbee's cellar, and so on; a little here and a little there, hardly no more'n a real smart magpie could make away with. But the men folks set out to catch whoever it might be, and if they didn't land three of our own home boys. It makes every mother in town shiver."

"None that we know, are there?" asked Helen, with wide eyes.

"I guess not, unless it may be Abby Tucker's brother Martin. There his poor mother scrimped and saved for weeks to buy him a wheel out of her butter and egg money, and it just landed him in mischief. Off he kited, first here and then there with the two Lonergan boys from North Center, and they had a camp up towards Cynthy Allan's place, where they played they were

cave robbers or something, just boy fashion. I had the Judge up and promise he'd let them off on probation. There isn't one of them over fifteen, and Gilead can't afford to let her boys go to prison. And I shall drive over this afternoon and give their mothers some good advice."

"Why not the fathers too?" asked Jean. "Seems as if mothers get all the blame when boys go wrong."

"No, it isn't that exactly." Cousin Roxy put her feet up on the nickel fender of the big wood stove, and took off her wool lined Arctics, loosened the wide brown veil she always wore tied around her crocheted gray winter bonnet, and let Doris take off her heavy shawl and gray and red knit "hug-me-tight." It was quite a task to get her out of her winter cocoon. "I knew the two fathers when they were youngsters too. Fred Lonergan was as nice and obliging a lad as ever you did see, but he always liked cider too well, and that made him lax. I used to tell him when he couldn't get it any other way, he'd squeeze the dried winter apples hanging still on the wild trees. He'll have to pay the money damage, but the real sorrow of the heart will fall on Emily, his wife. She used to be our minister's daughter, and she knows what's right. And the Tucker boy never did have any sense or his father before him, but his mother's the best quilter we've got. If I'd been in her shoes I'd have put Philemon Tucker right straight out of my house just as soon as he began to squander and hang around the grocery store swapping horse stories with men folks just like him. It's her house from her father, and I shall put her right up to making Philemon walk a chalk line after this, and do his duty as a father."

"Oh, you glorious peacemaker," exclaimed Mrs. Robbins, laughingly. "You ought to be the selectwoman out here, Roxy."

"Well," smiled Cousin Roxy comfortably, "The Judge is selectman, and that's next best thing. He always takes my advice. If the boys don't behave themselves now, I shall see that they are squitched good and proper."

"What's 'squitched,' Cousin Roxy?" asked Doris, anxiously.

"A good stiff birch laid on by a man's hand. I stand for moral persuasion up to a certain point, but there does come a time when human nature fairly begs to be straightened out, and there's nothing like a birch squitching to make a boy mind his p's and q's."

"Hurry, girls, you'll be late for school," called the Motherbird, as she hurriedly put the last touches to three dainty lunches. Then she followed them out to the side door where Shad waited with the team, and watched them out of sight.

“Lovely morning,” said Cousin Roxy, fervently. “Ice just beginning to melt a bit in the road puddles, and little patches of brown showing in the hollows under the hills. We’ll have arbutus in six weeks.”

“And here I’ve been shivering ever since I got out of bed,” Jean cried, laughingly. “It seemed so bleak and cheerless. You find something beautiful in everything, Cousin Roxy.”

“Well, Happiness is a sort of habit, I guess, Jeanie. Come tell me, now, how are you fixed about going away? That’s why I came down.”

“You mean—”

“I mean in clothes. Don’t mind my speaking right out, because I know that Bethiah will want to trot you around, and you must look right. And don’t you say one word against it, Elizabeth,” as Mrs. Robbins started to speak. “Your trip out west has been an expense, and the child must have her chance. Makes me think, Jean, of my first silk dress. Nobody knew how much I wanted one, and I was about fourteen, skinny and overgrown, with pigtails down my back. Cousin Beth’s mother, our well-to-do aunt in Boston, sent a silk dress to my little sister Susan who died. I can see it now, just as plain as can be, a sort of dark bottle green with a little spray of violets here and there. Susan was sort of pining anyway, and green made her look too pale, so the dress was set aside for me. Mother said she’d let the hem down and face it when she had time but there was a picnic, and my heart hungered for that silk dress to wear. I managed somehow to squeeze into it, and slip away with the other girls before Mother noticed me.”

“But did it fit you?” asked Jean.

“Fit me?” Cousin Roxy laughed heartily. “Fit me like an acorn cap would a bullfrog. I let the hem down as far as I could, but didn’t stop to hem it or face it, and there it hung, six inches below my petticoats, with the sun shining through as nice as could be. My Sunday School teacher took me to one side and said severely, ‘Roxana Letitia Robbins, does your mother know that you’ve let that hem down six ways for Sunday?’ Well, it did take away my hankering for a silk dress. Now, run along upstairs and get out all your wardrobe so we can look it over.”

Jean obeyed. Somehow Cousin Roxy had a way of sweeping objections away before her airily. And the wardrobe was at a low ebb, when it came to recent styles. In Gilead Center, anything later than the time of the mutton leg sleeve was regarded as just a bit too previous, as Deacon Farley’s wife said when Cousin Roxy laid away her great aunt’s Paisley shawl after she married the Judge.

She dragged her rocking chair over beside the sofa now, and took inventory of the pile of clothing Jean laid there.

"You'll want a good knockabout sport coat like the other girls are wearing, and a pretty mid-season hat to match. Then a real girlish sort of a silk sweater for the warm spring days that are coming, and a good skirt for mornings. Bethiah likes to play tennis, and she'll have you out at daybreak. Better get a pleated blue serge. Now, what about party gowns?"

Here Jean felt quite proud as she laid out her assortment. The girls had always gone out a good deal at the Cove, and she had a number of well chosen, expensive dresses.

"They look all right to me, but I guess Bethiah'll know what to do to them, with a touch here and there. Real lace on them, oh, Elizabeth!" She shook her head reprovingly at Mrs. Robbins, just sitting down with a pan of apples to pare.

"I'd rather go without than not have the real," Jean said quickly, trying to spare the Motherbird's feelings, but Gilead had indeed been a balm to pride. She laughed happily.

"I know, Roxy, it was foolish. But see how handy it comes in now. We've hardly had to buy any new clothes since we moved out here, and the girls have done wonderfully well making over their old dresses."

"Especially Helen," Jean put in. "Helen would garb us all in faded velvets and silks, princesses wearing out their old court robes in exile."

"Well, if I were you, I'd just bundle all I wanted to take along in the way of pretty things into the trunk and let Bethiah tell you what to do with them. She knows just what's what in the latest styles, and you'll be like a lily of the field. I'll get you the coat and sweater and serge skirt, and all the shoes and stockings you'll need to match. Go long, child, you'll squeeze the breath out of me," as Jean gave her a royal hug. "I must be trotting along." She rose, and started to bundle up, but gave an exclamation as she glanced out of the window. "For pity's sake, what's Cynthy Allan doing way off up here?"

Sure enough, hobbling along from the garden gate was Cynthy herself, one hand holding fast to an old cane, the other drawing around her frail figure an old-fashioned black silk dolman, its knotted fringe fluttering in the breeze.

Straight up the walk she came, determined and self possessed, with a certain air of dignity which neither poverty nor years of isolation could take from her.

Cousin Roxy watched her with reminiscent eyes, quoting softly:

> "You may break, you may shatter the vase if you will,
> But the scent of the roses will hang round it still."

"Cynthy used to be the best dancer of all the girls when I was young, and I'll never forget how the rest of us envied her beautiful hands. She was an old maid even then, in the thirties, but slim and pretty as could be."

Jean hurried to the side door, opening it wide to greet her.

"I didn't think you'd mind my coming so early," she said apologetically, "but I've had that rose on my mind ever since you were all over to see me."

"Oh, do come right in, Miss Allan," Jean exclaimed warmly. "What a long, long walk you've had."

" 'Tain't but two miles and a half by the road," Cynthy answered as sprightly as could be. "I don't mind it much when I've got something ahead of me. You see, I've been wanting to ride up to Moosup this long while to get some rags woven into carpets and I need that rose for my hat something fearful."

Jean led her through the long side entry way and into the cheery warm sitting room before she hardly realized where she was going, until she found herself facing Cousin Roxy and Mrs. Robbins.

"Land alive, Cynthy," exclaimed the former, happily. "I haven't seen you in mercy knows when. Where are you keeping yourself?"

"Take the low willow rocker, Miss Allan," urged Mrs. Robbins after the introduction was over, and she had helped lift the ancient dolman from Cynthy's worn shoulders. Jean was hovering over the rocker delightedly. As she told the girls afterwards, Mother was just as dear and charming as if Cynthy had been the president of the Social Study Club back home.

"Thank ye kindly," said Cynthy with a little sigh of relief. She stretched out her hands to the fire, looking from one to the other of them with a mingling of pride and appeal. Those scrawny hands with their knotted knuckles and large veins. Jean thought of what Cousin Roxy had said, that Cynthy's hands had been so beautiful. She ran upstairs to find the rose. It was in a big cretonne covered "catch-all" box, tucked away with odds and ends of silks and laces, a large hand-made French rose of silk and velvet, its petals shaded delicately from palest pink at the heart to deep crimson at the outer rim. There was a black lace veil in the box too that seemed to go with it, so Jean took them both back downstairs, and Cynthy's face was a study as she looked at them. She

rocked to and fro gently, a smile of perfect content on her face, her head a bit on one side.

"Ain't it sightly, Roxy?" she said. "And those shades always did become me so. I suppose it's foolish of me, but I just needed that rose to hearten me up for the trip to Moosup. I had a letter from the town clerk." She fumbled in the folds of her skirt for it. "He says I haven't paid my taxes in over two years, and the town can't let them go on any longer, and anyhow, he thinks it would be better for me to let the house and six acres be sold for the taxes, and for me to go down to the town farm. My heart's nigh broken over it."

Cousin Roxy was sitting very straight in her chair, her shoulders squared in fighting trim, her eyes bright as a squirrel's behind her spectacles.

"What do you calculate to do about it, Cynthy?"

"Well, I had a lot of good rag rugs saved up, and I thought mebbe I could sell them for something, and some more rags ready for weaving, and there's some real fine old china that belonged to old Aunt Deborah Bristow, willow pattern and Rose Windsor, and the two creamer sets in copper glaze and silver gilt. I'll have to sell the whole lot, most likely. It's twenty-four dollars."

Jean was busily sewing the rose in place on the old black bonnet and draping the lace veil over it. Mrs. Robbins' eyes flashed a signal to Cousin Roxy and the latter caught it.

"Cynthy," she said briskly, "you get all warmed up and rested here, and I'll drive down and see Fred Bennet. He's the other selectman with the Judge, and I guess between them, we can stop any such goings on. It isn't going to cost the town any for your board and keep, anybody that's been as good a neighbor as you have in your day, helping folks right and left. I shan't have it. Which would you rather do, stay on at your own place, or come over to me for a spell? I'll keep you busy sewing on my carpet rags, and we'll talk over old times. I was just telling Mrs. Robbins and Jean what a lovely dancer you used to be, and what pretty hands you had."

Cynthy's faded hazel eyes blinked wistfully behind her steel rimmed "specs." Her hand went up to hide the trembling of her lips, but before she could answer, the tears came freely, and she rocked herself to and fro, with Jean kneeling beside her petting her, and Mrs. Robbins hurrying for a hot cup of tea.

"I'd rather stay at my own place, Roxy," she said finally, when she could speak. "It's home, and there's all the cats to keep me company. If I could stay on down there, and see some of you now and then, I'd rather, only," she

looked up pleadingly, “could I just drive over with you today, so as to have a chance to wear the red rose?”

Could she? The very desire appealed instantly to Cousin Roxy’s sense of the fitness of things, and she drove away finally with Cynthy. It was hard to say which looked the proudest.

“Mother darling,” Jean said solemnly, watching them from the window. “Isn’t that a wonderful thing?”

“What, dear? Roxy’s everlasting helping of Providence? I’ve grown so accustomed to it now that nothing she undertakes surprises me.”

“No, I don’t mean that.” Jean’s eyes sparkled as if she had discovered the jewel of philosophy. “I mean that poor old woman over seventy being able to take happiness and pride out of that red rose, when life looked all hopeless to her. That’s eternal youth, Mother mine, isn’t it? To think that old rose could bring such a look to her eyes.”

“It wasn’t so much the rose that drew her here,” said the Motherbird, gazing out of the window at the winding hill road Ella Lou had just travelled. “It was the lure of human companionship and neighborliness. We’ll let Doris and Helen take her some preserves tomorrow, and try and cheer her up with little visits down there. How Cousin Roxy will enjoy facing the town clerk and showing him the right way to settle things without breaking people’s hearts. There comes the mail, dear. Have you any to send out?”

Jean caught up a box of lichens and ferns she had gathered for Bab, and hurried out to the box. It stood down at the entrance gates, quite a good walk on a cold day, and her cheeks were glowing when she met Mr. Ricketts.

“Two letters for you, Miss Robbins,” he called out cheerfully. “One from New York, and one,” he turned it over to be sure, “from Boston. Didn’t know you had any folks up Boston way. Got another one here for your father looks interesting and unusual. From Canady. I suppose, come to think of it, that might be from Ralph McRae or maybe Honey Hancock, eh?”

Jean took the letters, and tried to divert him from an examination of the mail, his daily pastime.

“It looks as if we might have a thaw, doesn’t it?”

“Does so,” he replied, reassuringly, “but we’ll get a hard spell of weather along in March, as usual. Tell your Pa if he don’t want to save them New York Sunday papers, I’d like to have a good look at them. Couldn’t see anything but some of the headlines, they was done up so tight. Go ’long there, Alexander.”

Alexander, the old white horse, picked up his hoofs and trotted leisurely down the hill to the little bridge, with his usual air of resigned nonchalance, while Jean ran back with the unusual and interesting mail, laughing as she went. Still, as Cousin Roxy said, it was something to feel you were adding to local history by being a part and parcel of Mr. Ricketts' mail route.

CHAPTER XIII

MOUNTED ON PEGASUS

It was one of the habits and customs of Greenacres to open the daily mail up in Mr. Robbins' own special room, the big sunny study overlooking the outer world so widely.

When they had first planned the rooms, it had been decided that the large south chamber should be Father's own special corner. From its four windows he could look down on the little bridge and brown rock dam above with its plunging waterfall, and beyond that the widespread lake, dotted with islands, reed and alder fringed, that narrowed again into Little River farther on.

"It's queer," Doris said once, when winter was half over. "Nothing ever really looks dead up here. Even with the grass and leaves all dried up, the trees and earth look kind of reddish, you know what I mean, Mother, warm like."

And they did too, whether it was from the rich russets of the oaks that refused to leave their twigs until spring, or the green laurel underneath, or the rich pines above, or the sorrel tinted earth itself, the land never seemed to lose its ruddy glow except when mantled with snow.

Mr. Robbins stood at a window now, his hands behind his back, looking out at the valley as they came upstairs.

"Do you know, dear," he remarked. "I think I just saw some wild geese over on that first island, probably resting for the trip north overnight. That means an early spring. And there was a woodpecker on the maple tree this morning too. That is all my news. What have you brought?"

Everyone settled down to personal enjoyment of the mail. There was always plenty of it, letters, papers, new catalogues, and magazines, and it furnished the main diversion of the day.

Jean read hers over, seated in the wide window nook. Bab's letter was full of the usual studio gossip, and begging her to come for a visit at Easter. But Cousin Beth's letter was brimful of the coming trip. She wrote she would meet Jean in Boston, and they would motor over if the roads were good.

“Plan on staying at least two months, for it will be work as well as play. I was afraid you might be lonely with just us, so I have invited Carlota to spend her week ends here. You will like her, I am sure. She is a young girl we met last year in Sorrento. Her father is an American sculptor and married a really lovely Contessa. They are deep in the war relief work now, and have sent Carlota over here to study and learn the ways of her father’s country. She is staying with her aunt, the Contessa di Tambolini, the oddest, dearest, little old grande dame you can imagine. You want to call her the Countess Tambourine all the time, she tinkles so. It just suits her, she is so gay and whimsical and brilliant. Come soon, and don’t bother about buying a lot of new clothes. I warn you that you will be in a paint smock most of the time.”

“I wonder what her other name is,” Jean said, folding up the letter. “One of our teachers at the Art Class in New York was telling us her memories of Italy, and she mentioned some American sculptor who had married an Italian countess and lived in a wonderful old villa, at Sorrento, of a dull warm tan color, with terraces and rose gardens and fountains, and nice crumbly stone seats. She went to several of his receptions. Wouldn’t it be odd if he turned out to be Carlota’s father. It’s such a little world, isn’t it, Father?”

“We live in circles, dear,” Mr. Robbins smiled over the wide library table at her flushed eager face. “Little eddies of congeniality where we are constantly finding others with the same tastes and ways of living. Here’s a letter from Ralph, saying they will start east in May, and stay along through the summer, taking Mrs. Hancock and Piney back with them.”

“Piney’ll simply adore the trip way out west,” exclaimed Jean. “She’s hardly talked of anything else all winter but his promise to take them there, and Mrs. Hancock’s just the opposite. She declares her heart is buried right up in the little grave yard behind the church in the Hancock and Trowbridge plot.”

“She’ll go as long as both children are happy,” Mrs. Robbins said. “She has an odd little vein of sentiment in her that makes her cling to the land she knows best and to shrink from the unknown and untried, but I’m sure she’ll go. She’s such a quiet, retiring little country mother to have two wild swans like Honey and Piney, who are regular adventurers. I’ll drive over and have a talk with her as soon as my own bird of passage is on her way.”

Wednesday of the following week was set for Jean’s flitting. This gave nearly a week for preparations, and Kit plunged into them with a zest and vigor that made Jean laugh.

“Well, so little ever happens up here we just have to make the most of goings and comings,” said Kit, warmly. “And besides, I’m rather fond of you,

you blessed, skinny old dear, you."

"Of course, we're all glad for you," Helen put in in her serious way. "It's an opportunity, Mother says, and I suppose we'll all get one in time."

Jean glanced up as they sat around the table the last evening, planning and talking. Out in the side entry stood her trunk, packed, locked, and strapped, ready for the early trip in the morning. Doris was trying her best to nurse a frost bitten chicken back to life out by the kitchen stove, where Joe mended her skates for her, but Kit and Helen were freely bestowing advice on the departing one.

"Enjoy yourself all you can, but think of us left at home and don't stay too long," advised Helen. "I feel like the second mermaid."

"What on earth do you mean by the second mermaid?" asked Kit.

"Don't you see? I'm not the youngest, so I'm second from the youngest, and in 'The Little Mermaid' there were sixteen sisters and each had to wait her turn till her fifteenth birthday before she could go up to the surface of the sea, and sit on a rock in the moonlight."

"Pretty chilly this kind of weather," Jean laughed. "Can't I wear a sealskin wrapped around me, please, Helenita?"

"No, she only had seaweed draperies and necklaces of pearls," Helen answered, thoughtfully.

"I shall remember," Jean declared. "I'd love to use that idea as a basis for a gown some time, seaweed green trailing silk, and long strands of pearls. If I fail as an artist, I shall devote myself to designing wonderful personality gowns for people, not everyday people, but exceptional ones. Think, Kit, of having some great singer come to your studio, and you listen to her warble for hours, while you lie on a stately divan and try to catch her personality note for a gown."

"I don't want to make things for people," Kit said, emphatically. "I want to soar alone. I'm going with Piney to live in the dreary wood, like the Robber Baron. I'll wear leather clothes. I love them. I've always wanted a whole dress of softest suede in dull hunter's green. No fringe or beads, just a dress. It could lace up one side, and be so handy."

"Specially if a grasshopper got down your neck," Doris added sagely. "I can just see Kit all alone in the woods then."

They laughed at the voice from the kitchen, and Kit dropped the narrow silk sport tie she was putting the finishing stitches to.

“Oh, dear, I do envy you, Jean, after all. You must write and tell us every blessed thing that happens, for we’ll love to hear it all. Don’t be afraid it won’t be interesting. I wish you’d even keep a diary. Shad says his grandmother did, every day from the time she was fourteen, and she was eighty-six when she died. They had an awful time burning them all up, just barrels of diaries, Shad says. All the history of Gilead.”

Kit’s tone held a note of pathos that was delicious.

“Who cares about what’s happened in Gilead every day for seventy years?” Helen’s query was scoffing, but Jean said,

“Listen. Somebody, I forget who, that Father was telling about, said if the poorest, commonest human being who ever lived could write a perfect account of his daily life, it would be the most wonderful and interesting human document ever written.”

Helen’s expression showed plainly that she did not believe one bit in “sech sentiments,” as Shad himself might have put it. Life was an undiscovered country of enchantment to her where the sunlight of romance made everything rose and gold. She had always been the most detached one in the family. Only Kit with her straightforward, uncompromising tactics ever seemed to really get by the thicket of thorns around the inner palace of the sleeping beauty. Kit had been blessed with so much of her father’s New England directness and sense of humor, that no thorns could hold her out, while Doris and Jean were more like their mother, tender-hearted and keenly responsive to every influence around them.

“I don’t see,” Kit would say sometimes, “which side of the family Helen gets her ways from. I suppose if we could only trace back far enough, we’d find some princess ancestress who trailed her velvet gowns lightsomely over the morning dew and rode a snow white palfrey down forest glades for heavy exercise. Fair Yoland with the Golden Hair.”

“Anyway,” Helen said now, hanging over Jean’s chair, “be sure and write us all about Carlota and the Contessa, because they sound like a story.”

Doris came out of the kitchen with her finger to her lips.

“I’ve just this minute got that chicken to sleep. They’re such light sleepers, but I think it will get well. It only had its poor toes frost bitten. Joe found it on the ground this morning, crowded off the perch. Chickens look so civilized, and they’re not a bit. They’re regular savages.”

She sat down on the arm of Jean’s chair, and hugged the other side, with Helen opposite. And there flashed across Jean’s mind the picture of the

evenings ahead without the home circle, without the familiar living-room, and the other room upstairs where at this time the Motherbird would be brushing out her long, soft hair, and listening to some choice bit of reading Mr. Robbins had run across during the day and saved for her.

"I just wish I had a chance to go west like Piney," Kit said suddenly. "When I'm old enough, I'm going to take up a homestead claim and live on it with a wonderful horse and some dogs, wolf dogs, I think. I wish Piney'd wait till we were both old enough, and had finished school. She could be a forest ranger and I'd raise—"

"Ginseng," Jean suggested, mischievously. "Goose. It takes far more courage than that just to stick it out on one of these old barren farms, all run down and fairly begging for somebody to take them in hand and love them back to beauty. What do you want to hunt a western claim for?"

"Space," Kit answered grandly. "I don't want to see my neighbors' chimney pots sticking up all around me through the trees. I want to gaze off at a hundred hill tops, and not see somebody's scarecrow waggling empty sleeves at me. Piney and I have the spirits of eagles."

"Isn't that nice," said Helen, pleasantly. "It'll make such a good place to spend our vacations, girls. While Piney and Kit are out soaring, we can fish and tramp and have really pleasant times."

"Come on, girls," Jean whispered, as Kit's ire started to rise. "It's getting late now, truly, and I have to rise while it is yet night, you know. Good night all."

She held the lamp at the foot of the stairs to light the procession up to their rooms, then went out into the kitchen. Shad sat over the kitchen stove, humming softly under his breath an old camp meeting hymn,

"Swing low, sweet chariot,
Bound for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Tell them I'll surely come."

"Good night, Shad," she said. "And do be sure and remember what I told you. Joe's such a little fellow. Don't you scold him and make him run away again, will you, even if he is aggravating."

"I'll be good to him, I promise, Miss Jean," Shad promised solemnly. "I let my temper run away from me that day, but I've joined the church since then, and being a professor of religion I've got to walk softly all the days of my life, Mis' Ellis says. Don't you worry. Joe and me's as thick as two peas in a pod.

I'll be a second grand uncle to him before I get through."

So it rested. Joe was still inclined to be a little perverse where Shad was concerned, and would sulk when scolded. Only Jean had been able to make him see the error of his ways. He would tell the others he guessed he'd run away. But Jean had promptly talked to him, and said if he wanted to run away, to run along any time he felt like it. Joe had looked at her in surprise and relief when she had said it, and had seemed completely satisfied about staying thereafter. It was Cousin Roxy who had given her the idea.

"I had a colt once that was possessed to jump fences and go rambling, so one day after we'd been on the run hunting for it nearly every day, I told Hiram to let all the bars down, and never mind the pesky thing. And it was so nonplussed and surprised that it gave right up and stayed to home. It may be fun jumping fences, but there's no real excitement in stepping over open bars."

So Joe had faced open bars for some time, and if he could only get along with Shad, Jean knew he would be safe while she was away. He was an odd child, undemonstrative and shy, but there was something appealing and sympathetic about him, and Jean always felt he was her special charge since she had coaxed him away from Mr. Briggs.

The start next morning was made at seven, before the sun was up. Princess was breathing frostily, and side stepping restlessly. The tears were wet on Jean's cheeks as she climbed into the seat beside Shad, and turned to wave goodbye to the group on the veranda. She had not felt at all this way when she had left for New York to visit Bab, but someway this did seem, as the Motherbird had said, like her first real flight from the home nest.

"Write us everything," called Kit, waving both hands to her.

"Come back soon," wailed Doris, and Helen, running as Kit would have put it, true to form, added her last message,

"Let us know if you meet the Contessa."

But the Motherbird went back into the house in silence, away from the sitting-room into a little room at the side where Jean had kept her own bookcase, desk, and a few choice pictures. A volume of Browning selections, bound in soft limp tan, lay beside Jean's old driving gloves on the table. Mrs. Robbins picked up both, laid her cheek against the gloves and closed her eyes. The years were racing by so fast, so fast, she thought, and mothers must be wide eyed and generous and fearless, when the children suddenly began to top heads with one, and feel their wings. She opened the little leather book to a marked passage of Jean's,

Ready for the flight, she thought. If it had been Kit now, she would not have felt this curious little pang. Kit was self sufficient and full of buoyancy that was bound to carry her over obstacles, but Jean was sensitive and dependent on her environment for spur and stimulation. She heard a step behind her and turned eagerly as Mr. Robbins came into the room, seeking her. He saw the book and the gloves in her hand, and the look in her eyes uplifted to his own. Very gently he folded his arms around her, his cheek pressed close to her brown hair.

“She’s only seventeen,” whispered the Motherbird.

“Eighteen in April,” he answered. “And dear, she isn’t trusting to her own strength for the flight. Don’t you know this quiet little girl of ours is mounted on Pegasus, and riding him handily in her upward trend?”

But there was no winged horse or genius in view to Jean’s blurred sight as she watched the road unroll before her, and looking back, saw only the curling smoke from Greenacres’ white chimneys.

CHAPTER XIV

CARLOTA

“I thought you lived in a farmhouse too, Cousin Beth,” Jean said, in breathless admiration, as she laid aside her outer wraps, and stood in the big living-room at Twin Oaks. The beautiful country house had been a revelation to her. It seemed to combine all of the home comfort and good cheer of Greenacres with the modern air and improvements of the homes at the Cove. Sitting far back from the broad road in its stately grounds, it was like some reserved but gracious old colonial dame bidding you welcome.

The center hall had a blazing fire in the high old rock fireplace, and Queen Bess, a prize winning Angora, opened her wide blue eyes at the newcomer, but did not stir. In the living-room was another open fire, even while the house was heated with hot air. There were flowering plants at the windows, and freshly cut roses on the tables in tall jars.

“You know, or maybe you don’t know,” said Cousin Beth, “that we have one hobby here, raising flowers, and specially roses. We exhibit every year, and you’ll grow to know them and love the special varieties just as I do. You have no idea, Jean, of the thrill when you find a new bloom different from all the rest.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised to find out anything new and wonderful about this place,” Jean laughed, leaning back in a deep-seated armchair. Like the rest of the room’s furniture it wore a gown of chintz, deep cream, cross barred in dull apple green, with lovely, splashy pink roses scattered here and there. Two large white Polar rugs lay on the polished floor.

“If those were not members of the Peabody family, old and venerated, they never would be allowed to bask before my fire,” Cousin Beth said. “But way back there was an Abner Peabody who sailed the Polar seas, and used to bring back trophies and bestow them on members of his family as future heirlooms. Consequently, we fall over these bears in the dark, and bless great-grandfather Abner’s precious memory.”

After she was thoroughly toasted and had drunk a cup of Russian tea, Jean

found her way up to the room that was to be hers during her visit. It was the sunniest kind of a retreat in daffodil yellow and oak brown. The furniture was all in warm deep toned ivory, and there were rows of blossoming daffodils and jonquils along the windowsills.

"Oh, I think this is just darling," Jean gasped, standing in the middle of the floor and gazing around happily. "It's as if spring were already here."

"I put a drawing board and easel here for you too," Cousin Beth told her. "Of course you'll use my studio any time you like, but it's handy to have a corner all your own at odd times. Carlota will be here tomorrow and her room is right across the hall. She has inherited all of her father's talent, so I know how congenial you will be. And you'll do each other a world of good."

"How?"

"Well, you're thoroughly an American girl, Jean, and Carlota is half Italian. You'll understand what I mean when you see her. She is high strung and temperamental, and you are so steady nerved and well balanced."

Jean thought over this last when she was alone, and smiled to herself. Why on earth did one have to give outward and visible signs of temperament, she wondered, before people believed one had sensitive feelings or responsive emotions? Must one wear one's heart on one's sleeve, so to speak, for a sort of personal barometer? Bab was high strung and temperamental too; so was Kit. They both indulged now and then in mental fireworks, but nobody took them seriously, or considered it a mark of genius. She felt just a shade of half amused tolerance towards this Carlota person who was to get any balance or poise out of her own nature.

"If Cousin Beth knew for one minute," she told the face in the round mirror of the dresser, "what kind of a person you really are, she'd never, never trust you to balance anybody's temperament."

But the following day brought a trim, closed car to the door, and out stepped Carlota and her maid, a middle-aged Florentine woman who rarely smiled excepting at her charge.

And Jean coming down the wide center flight of stairs saw Cousin Beth before the fire with a tall, girlish figure, very slender, and all in black, even to the wide velvet ribbon on her long dark braid of hair.

"This is my cousin Jean," said Mrs. Newell, in her pleasant way. She laid Carlota's slim, soft hand in Jean's. "I want you two girls to be very good friends."

“But I know, surely, we shall be,” Carlota exclaimed. And at the sound of her voice Jean’s prejudices melted. She had very dark eyes with lids that drooped at the outer corners, a rather thin face and little eager pointed chin. Jean tried and tried to think who it was she made her think of, and then remembered. It was the little statuette of Le Brun, piquant and curious.

“Now, you will not be treated one bit as guests, girls,” Cousin Beth told them. “You must come and go as you like, and have the full freedom of the house. I keep my own study hours and like to be alone then. Do as you like and be happy. Run along, both of you.”

“She is wonderful, isn’t she?” Carlota said as they went upstairs together. “She makes me feel always as if I were a ship waiting with loose sails, and all at once—a breeze—and I am on my way again. You have not been to Sorrento, have you? You can see the little fisher boats from our terraces. It is all so beautiful, but now the villa is turned into a hospital. Pippa’s brothers and father are all at the front. Her father is old, but he would go. She’s glad she’s an old maid, she says, for she has no husband to grieve over. Don’t you like her? She was my nurse when I was born.”

“Her face reminds one of a Sybil. There’s one—I forget which—who was middle-aged instead of being old and wrinkled.”

“My father has used Pippa’s head often. One I like best is ‘The Melon Vendor.’ That was exhibited in Paris and won the Salon medal. And it was so odd. Pippa did not feel at all proud. She said it was only the magic of his fingers that had made the statue a success, and father said it was the inspiration from Pippa’s face.”

“I wonder if you ever knew Bab Crane. She’s a Long Island girl from the Cove where we used to live, and she’s lived abroad every year for two or three months with her mother. She is an artist.”

“I don’t know her,” Carlota shook her head doubtfully. “You see over there, while we entertained a great deal, I was in a convent and scarcely met anyone excepting in the summertime, and then we went to my aunt’s villa up on Lake Maggiore. Oh, but that is the most beautiful spot of all. There is one island there called Isola Bella. I wish I could carry it right over here with me and set it down for you to see. It is all terraces and splendid old statuary, and when you see it at sunrise it is like a jewel, it glows so with color.”

Jean curled her slippered feet under her as she sat on the window seat, listening. There was always a lingering love in her heart for the “haunts of ancient peace” in Europe’s beauty spots, and especially for Italy. Somewhere she had read, it was called the “sweetheart of the nations.”

“I’d love to go there,” she said now, with a little sigh.

“And that is what I was always saying when I was there, and my father told me of this country. I wanted to see it so. He would tell me of the great gray hills that climb to the north, and the craggy broken shoreline up through Maine, and the little handful of amethyst isles that lie all along it. He was born in New Hampshire, at Portsmouth. We are going up to see the house some day, but I know just what it looks like. It stands close down by the water’s edge in the old part of the town, and there is a big rambling garden with flagged walks. His grandfather was a ship builder and sent them out, oh, like argosies I think, all over the world, until the steamboats came, and his trade was gone. And he had just one daughter, Petunia. Isn’t that a beautiful name, Petunia Pomeroy. It is all one romance, I think, but I coax him to tell it to me over and over. There was an artist who came up from the south in one of his ships, and he was taken very ill. So they took him in as a guest, and Petunia cared for him. And when he was well, what do you think?” She clasped her hands around her knees and rocked back and forth, sitting on the floor before her untouched suitcases.

“They married.”

“But more than that,” warmly. “He carved the most wonderful figureheads for my great grandfather’s ships. All over the world they were famous. His son was my father.”

It was indescribable, the tone in which she said the last. It told more than anything else how dearly she loved this sculptor father of hers. That night Jean wrote to Kit. The letter on her arrival had been to the Motherbird, but this was a chat with the circle she knew would read it over around the sitting room lamp.

Dear Kit:

I know you’ll all be hungry for news. We motored out from Boston, and child, when I saw the quaint old New England homestead we had imagined, I had to blink my eyes. It looks as if it belonged right out on the North Shore at the Cove. It is a little like Longfellow’s home, only glorified—not by fame as yet, though that will come—by Greek wings. I don’t mean Nike wings. There are sweeping porticos on each side where the drive winds around. And inside it is summertime even now. They have flowers everywhere, and raise roses. Kit, if you could get one whiff of their conservatory, you would become a Persian rose worshipper. When I come back, we’re going to start a sunken rose garden, not with a few old worn out bushes, but new slips and cuttings.

Carlota arrived the day after I did. She looks like the little statuette of Le Brun on Mother's bookcase, only her hair hangs in two long braids. She is more Italian than American in her looks, but seems to be very proud of her American father. Helen would love her ways. She has a maid, Pippa, from Florence, middle-aged, who used to be her nurse. Isn't that medieval and Juliet-like? But she wears black and white continually, no gorgeous raiment at all, black in the daytime, white for evening. I feel like Pierrette beside her, but Cousin Beth says the girls of our age dress very simply abroad.

The Contessa is coming out to spend the week end with us, and will take Carlota and me back with her for a few days. I'll tell you all about her next time. We go for a long trip in the car every day, but it is awfully cold and bleak still. I feel exactly like Queen Bess, the Angora cat, I want to hug the fires all the time, and Carlota says she can't bear our New England winters. At this time of the year, she says spring has come in Tuscany and all along the southern coast. She has inherited her father's gift for modelling, and gave me a little figurine of a fisher boy standing on his palms, for a paper weight. It is perfect. I wish I could have it cast in bronze. You know, I think I'd rather be a sculptor than a painter. Someway the figures seem so full of life, but then, Cousin Beth says, they lack color.

I mustn't start talking shop to you when your head is full of forestry. Let me know how Piney takes to the idea of going west, and be sure and remember to feed Cherilee. Dorrie will think of her chickens and neglect the canary sure. And help Mother all you can.

With love to all,

JEAN.

"Humph," said Kit, loftily, when the letter arrived and was duly digested by the circle. "I suppose Jean feels as if the whole weight of this household rested on her anxious young shoulders."

"Well, we do miss her awfully," Doris hurried to say. "But the canary is all right."

"Yes, and so is everything else. Wait till I write to my elder sister and relieve her mind. Let her cavort gaily in motor cars, and live side by each with Angora cats in the lap of luxury. Who cares? The really great ones of the earth have dwelt in penury and loneliness on the solitary heights."

"You look so funny brandishing that dish towel, and spouting, Kit," Helen

said, placidly. “I’m sure I can understand how Jean feels and I like it. It is odd about Carlota wearing black and white, isn’t it? I wish Jean had told more about her. I shall always imagine her in a little straight gown of dull violet velvet, with a cap of pearls.”

“Isn’t that nice? How do you imagine me, Helenita darling?” Kit struck a casual attitude while she wiped the pudding dish.

“You’d make a nice Atalanta, the girl who raced for the golden apples, or some pioneer girl.”

“There’s a stretch of fancy for you, from ancient Greece to Indian powwow times. Run tell Shad to take up more logs to Father’s room, or the astral spirit of our sweet sister will perch on our bedposts tonight and rail at us right lustily.”

“What’s that?” asked Doris, inquisitively. “What’s an astral spirit?”

Kit screwed her face up till it looked like Cynthy Allan’s, and prowled towards the youngest of the family with portentous gestures.

“ ’Tain’t a ghost, and ’tain’t a spook, and ’tain’t a banshee. It’s the shadow of your self when you’re sound asleep, and it goeth questing forth on mischief bent. Yours hovers over the chicken coops all night long, Dorrie, and mine flits out to the eagles’ nests on mountain tops, and Helenita’s digs into old chests of romance, and hauls out caskets of jewels and scented gowns by ye hundreds.”

“There’s the milk,” called Shad’s voice from the entry way. “Better strain it right off and get it into the pans. Mrs. Gorham’s gone to bed with her neuralgy.”

Dorrie giggled outright at the interruption, but Kit hurried to the rescue with the linen straining cloth. It took more than neuralgia to shake the mettle of a Robbins these days.

CHAPTER XV

AT MOREL'S STUDIO

"I've just had a telephone message from the Contessa," Cousin Beth said at breakfast Saturday morning. "She sends an invitation to us for this afternoon, a private view of paintings and sculpture at Henri Morel's studio. She knew him in Italy and France, and he leaves for New York on Monday. There will be a little reception and tea, nothing too formal for you girls, so dress well, hold up your chins and turn out your toes, and behave with credit to your chaperon. It is your debut."

Carlota looked at her quite seriously, thinking she was in earnest, but Jean always caught the flutter of fun in her eyes, and knew it would not be as ceremonious as it sounded. When she was ready that afternoon she slipped into Cousin Beth's own little den at the south end of the house. Here were three rooms, all so different, and each showing a distinct phase of character. One was her winter studio. The summer one was built out in the orchard. This was a large sunny room, panelled in soft toned oak, with a wood brown rug on the floor, and all the treasures accumulated abroad during her years there of study and travel. In this room Jean used to find the girl Beth, who had ventured forth after the laurels of genius, and found success waiting her with love, back in little Weston.

The second room was a private sitting-room, all willow furniture, and dainty chintz coverings, with Dutch tile window boxes filled with blooming hyacinths, and feminine knick-knacks scattered about helterskelter. Here were framed photographs of loved ones and friends, a portrait of Elliott over the desk, his class colors on the wall, and intimate little kodak snapshots he had sent her. This was the mother's and wife's room. And the last was her bedroom. Here Jean found her dressing. All in deep smoke gray velvet, with a bunch of single petaled violets on her coat. She turned and looked at Jean critically.

"I only had this new serge suit," said Jean. "I thought with a sort of fluffy waist it would be right to wear."

The waist was a soft crinkly crepe silk in dull old gold, with a low collar of

rose point, and just a touch of Byzantine embroidery down the front. Above it, Jean's eager face framed in her brown hair, her brown eyes, small imperative chin with its deep cleft, and look of interest that Kit called "questioning curiosity," all seemed accentuated.

"It's just right, dear," said Cousin Beth. "Go get a yellow jonquil to wear. Carlota will have violets, I think. She loves them best."

There was a scent of coming spring in the air as they motored along the country roads, just a delicate reddening of the maple twigs, and a mist above the lush marshes down in the lower meadows. Once Carlota called out joyously. A pair of nesting bluebirds teetered on a fence rail, talking to each other of spring housekeeping.

"Ah, there they are," she cried. "And in Italy now there will be spring everywhere. My father told me of the bluebirds here. He said they were bits of heaven's own blue with wings on."

"How queer it is," Jean said, "I mean the way one remembers and loves all the little things about one's own country."

"Not so much all the country. Just the spot of earth you spring from. He loves this New England."

"And I love Long Island. I was born there, not at the Cove, but farther down the coast near Montauk Point, and the smell of salt water and the marshes always stirs me. I love the long green rolling stretches, and the little low hills in the background like you see in paintings of the Channel Islands and some of the ones along the Scotch coast. Just a few straggly scrub pines, you know, and the willows and wild cherry trees and beach plums."

"Somewhere I've read about that, girls; the old earth's hold upon her children. I'm afraid I only respond to gray rocks and all of this sort of thing. I've been so homesick abroad just to look at a crooked apple tree in bloom that I didn't know what to do. Each man to his 'ain acre.' Where were you born, Carlota?"

"At the Villa Marina. Ah, but you should see it." Carlota's dark face glowed with love and pride. "It is dull terra cotta color, and then dull green too, the mold of ages, I think, like the under side of an olive leaf, and flowers everywhere, and poplars in long avenues. My father laughs at our love for it, and says it is just a mouldy old ruin, but every summer we spend there. Some day perhaps you could come to see us, Jean. Would they lend her to us for a while, do you think, Mrs. Newell?"

"After the sick soldiers have all been sent home well," said Jean. "I should

love to. Isn't it fun building air castles?"

"They are very substantial things," Cousin Beth returned, whimsically. "Hopes to me are so tangible. We just set ahead of us the big hope, and the very thought gives us incentive and endeavor and what Elliott calls in his boy fashion, 'punch.' Plan from now on, Jean, for one spring in Italy. I'm scheming deeply, you know, or perhaps you haven't even guessed yet, to get you a couple of years' study here, then at least one abroad, and after that, you shall try your own strength."

"Wouldn't it be awful if I turned out just ordinary!" Jean said with her characteristic truthfulness. "I remember one girl down at the Cove, Len Marden. We went through school together, and her people said she was a musical genius. She studied all the time, really and truly. She was just a martyr, and she liked it. They had plenty of means to give her every chance, and she studied harmony in one city abroad, and then something in another city, and something else in another. We always used to wonder where Len was trying her scales. Her name was Leonora, and she used to dread it. Why, her father even retired from business, just to give his time up to watching over Len, and her mother was like a Plymouth Rock hen, brooding over her. Well, she came back last fall, and just ran away and married one of the boys from the Cove, and she says she doesn't give a rap for a career."

Cousin Beth and Carlota both laughed heartily at Jean's seriousness.

"She has all of my sympathy," the former declared. "I don't think a woman is able to give her greatest powers to the world if she is gifted unusually, until she has known love and motherhood. I hope Leonora finds her way back to the temple of genius with twins clinging to her wing tips."

It was just a little bit late when they arrived at the Morel studio. Jean had expected it to be more of the usual workshop, like Daddy Higginson's for instance, where canvases heaped against the walls seemed to have collected the dust of ages, and a broom would have been a desecration. Here, you ascended in an elevator, from an entrance hall that Cousin Beth declared always made her think of the tomb of the Pharoahs in "Aida."

"All it needs is a nice view of the Nile by moonlight, and some tall lilies in full bloom, and someone singing 'Celeste Aida,' " she told the girls when they alighted at the ninth floor, and found themselves in the long vestibule of the Morel studio. Jean had rather a confused idea of what followed. There was the meeting with Morel himself. Stoop shouldered and thin, with his vivid foreign face, half closed eyes, and odd moustache like a mandarin's. And near him Madame Morel, with a wealth of auburn hair and big dark eyes. She heard

Carlota say just before they were separated,

"He loves to paint red hair, and Aunt Signa says she has the most wonderful hair you ever saw, like Melisande."

Cousin Beth had been taken possession of by a stout smiling young man with eyeglasses and was already the center of a little group. Jean heard his name, and recognized it as that of a famous illustrator. Carlota introduced her to a tall girl in brown whom she had met in Italy, and then somehow, Jean could not have told how it happened, they drifted apart. Not but what she was glad of a breathing spell, just a chance as Shad would have said, to get her bearings. Morel was showing some recent canvases, still unframed, at the end of the studio, and everyone seemed to gravitate that way.

Jean found a quiet corner near a tall Chinese screen. Somebody handed her fragrant tea in a little red and gold cup, and she was free to look around her. A beautiful woman had just arrived. She was tall and past first youth, but Jean leaned forward expectantly. This must be the Contessa. Her gown seemed as indefinite and elusive in detail as a cloud. It was dull violet color, with a gleam of gold here and there as she moved slowly towards Morel's group. Under a wide brimmed hat of violet, you saw the lifted face, with tired lovely eyes, and close waves of pale golden hair. And this was not all. Oh, if only Helen could have seen her, thought Jean, with a funny little reversion to the home circle. She had wanted a princess from real life, or a contessa, anything that was tangibly romantic and noble, and here was the very pattern of a princess, even to a splendid white stag hound which followed her with docile eyes and drooping long nose.

"My dear, would you mind coaxing that absent-minded girl at the tea table to part with some lemon for my tea? And the Roquefort sandwiches are excellent too."

Jean turned at the sound of the new voice beside her. There on the same settee sat a robust, middle-aged late comer. Her satin coat was worn and frayed, her hat altogether too youthful with its pink and mauve butterflies veiled in net. It did make one think of poor Cynthy and her yearnings towards roses. Jean saw, too, that there was a button missing from her gown, and her collar was pinned at a wrong angle, but the collar was real lace and the pin was of old pearls. It was her face that charmed. Framed in an indistinct mass of fluffy hair, gray and blonde mixed, with a turned up, winning mouth, and delightfully expressive eyes, it was impossible not to feel immediately interested and acquainted.

Before they had sat there long, Jean found herself indulging in all sorts of

confidences. They seemed united by a common feeling of, not isolation exactly, but newness to this circle.

"I enjoy it so much more sitting over here and looking on," Jean said. "Cousin Beth knows everyone, of course, but it is like a painting. You close one eye, and get the group effect. And I must remember everything to write it home to the girls."

"Tell me about these girls. Who are they that you love them so?" asked her new friend. "I, too, like the bird's eye view best. I told Morel I did not come to see anything but his pictures, and now I am ready for tea and talk."

So Jean told all about Greenacres and the girls there and before she knew it, she had disclosed too, her own hopes and ambitions, and perhaps a glimpse of what it might mean to the others still in the nest if she, the first to fly, could only make good. And her companion told her, in return, of how sure one must be that the spark of inspiration is really a divine one and worthy of sacrifice, before one gives up all to it.

"Yonder in France, and in Italy too, but mostly in France," she said, "I have found girls like you, my child, from your splendid homeland, living on little but hopes, wasting their time and what money could be spared them from some home over here, following false hopes, and sometimes starving. It is but a will-o'-the-wisp, this success in art, a sort of pitiful madness that takes possession of our brains and hearts and makes us forget the daily road of gold that lies before us."

"But how can you tell for sure?" asked Jean, leaning forward anxiously.

"Who can answer that? I have only pitied the ones who could not see they had no genius. Ah, my dear, when you meet real genius, then you know the difference instantly. It is like the real gems and the paste. There is consecration and no thought of gain. The work is done irresistibly, spontaneously, because they cannot help it. They do not think of so called success, it is only the fulfilment of their own visions that they love. You like to draw and paint, you say, and you have studied some in New York. What then?"

Jean pushed back her hair impulsively.

"Do you know, I think you are a little bit wrong. You won't mind my saying that, will you, please? It is only this. Suppose we are not geniuses, we who see pictures in our minds and long to paint them. I think that is the gift too, quite as much as the other, as the power to execute. Think how many go through life with eyes blind to all beauty and color! Surely it must be something to have the power of seeing it all, and of knowing what you want to

paint. My Cousin Roxy says it's better to aim at the stars and hit the bar post, than to aim at the bar post and hit the ground."

"Ah, so. And one of your English poets says too, 'A man's aim should outreach his grasp, or what's a heaven for?' Maybe, you are quite right. The vision is the gift." She turned and laid her hand on Jean's shoulder, her eyes beaming with enjoyment of their talk. "I shall remember you, Brown Eyes."

And just at this point Cousin Beth and Carlota came towards them, the former smiling at Jean.

"Don't you think you've monopolized the Contessa long enough, young woman?" she asked. Jean could not answer. The Contessa, this whimsical, oddly gowned woman, who had sat and talked with her over their tea in the friendliest sort of way, all the time that Jean had thought the Contessa was the tall lady in the temperamental gown with the stag hound at her heels.

"But this is delightful," exclaimed the Contessa, happily. "We have met incognito. I thought she was some demure little art student who knew no one here, and she has been so kind to me, who also seemed lonely. Come now, we will meet with the celebrities."

With her arm around Jean's waist, she led her over to the group around Morel, and told them in her charming way of how they had discovered each other.

"And she has taught me a lesson that you, Morel, with all your art, do not know, I am sure. It is not the execution that is the crown of ambition and aspiration, it is the vision itself. For the vision is divine inspiration, but the execution is the groping of the human hand."

"Oh, but I never could say it so beautifully," exclaimed Jean, pink cheeked and embarrassed, as Morel laid his hand over hers.

"Nevertheless," he said, gently, "success to thy finger-tips, Mademoiselle."

CHAPTER XVI

GREENACRE LETTERS

Jean confessed her mistake to Cousin Beth after they had returned home. There were just a few moments to spare before bedtime, after wishing Carlota and her aunt good night, and she sat on a little stool before the fire in the sitting-room.

“I hadn’t the least idea she was the Contessa. You know that tall woman with the stag hound, Cousin Beth—”

Mrs. Newell laughed softly, braiding her hair down into regular schoolgirl pigtails.

“That was Betty Goodwin. Betty loves to dress up. She plays little parts for herself all the time. I think today she was a Russian princess perhaps. The next time she will be a tailor-made English girl. Betty’s people have money enough to indulge her whims, and she has just had her portrait done by Morel as a sort of dream maiden, I believe. I caught a glimpse of it on exhibition last week. Looks as little like Betty as I do. Jean, child, paint if you must, but paint the thing as you see it, and do choose apple trees and red barns rather than dream maidens who aren’t real.”

“I don’t know what I shall paint,” Jean answered, with a little quick sigh. “She rather frightened me, I mean the Contessa. She thinks only real geniuses should paint.”

“Nonsense. Paint all you like. You’re seventeen, aren’t you, Jean?”

Jean nodded. “Eighteen in April.”

“You seem younger than that. If I could, I’d swamp you in paint and study for the next two years. By that time you would have either found out that you were tired to death of it, and wanted real life, or you would be doing something worth while in the art line. But in any event you would have no regrets. I mean you could trot along life’s highway contentedly, without feeling there was something you had missed. It was odd your meeting the Contessa as you did. She likes you very much. I wish it could be arranged for you to go over to Italy in a year, and be under her wing. It’s such a broadening experience for you,

Jeanie. Perhaps I'll be going myself by then and could take you. You would love it as I did, I know. There's a charm and restfulness about old world spots that all the war clamour and devastation cannot kill. Now run along to bed. Tomorrow will be a quiet day. The Contessa likes it here because she can relax and as she says 'invite her soul to peace.' Good night, dear."

When Jean reached her own room, she found a surprise. On the desk lay a letter from home that Minory had laid there. Minory was Cousin Beth's standby, as she said. She was middle-aged, and had been "help" to the Peabodys ever since she was a girl. Matrimony had never attracted Minory. She had never been known to have a sweetheart. She was tall and spare, with a broad serene face, and sandy-red hair worn parted in the middle and combed smoothly back over her ears in old-fashioned style. Her eyes were as placid and contented as a cat's, and rather greenish, too, in tint.

"Minory has reached Nirvana," Cousin Beth would say, laughingly. "She always has a little smile on her lips, and says nothing. I've never seen her angry or discontented. She's saved her earnings and bought property, and supports several indigent relatives who have no earthly right to her help. Her favorite flower, she says, is live forever, as we call it here in New England, or the Swiss edelweiss. She's a faithful Unitarian, and her favorite charity is orphan asylums. All my life I have looked up to Minory and loved her. There's a poem called 'The Washer of the Ford,' I think it is, and she has made me think of it often, for over and over at the passing out of dear ones in the family, it has been Minory's hand on my shoulder that has steadied me, and her hand that has closed their eyes. She stands and holds the candle for the rest of us."

It was just like her, Jean thought, to lay the home letter where it would catch her eye and make her happy before she went to sleep. One joy of a letter from home was that it turned out to be a budget as soon as you got it out of the envelope. The one on top was from the Motherbird, written just before the mail wagon came up the hill.

DEAR PRINCESS ROYAL:

You have been much on my mind, but I haven't time for a long letter, as Mr. Ricketts may bob up over the hill any minute, and he is like time and tide that wait for no man, you know. I am ever so glad your visit has proved a happy one. Stay as long as Cousin Beth wants you. Father is really quite himself these days, and I have kept Mrs. Gorham, so the work has been very easy for me, even without my first lieutenant.

It looks like an early spring, and we expect Ralph and Honey

from the west in about a week, instead of in May. Ralph will probably be our guest for awhile, as Father will enjoy his company. The crocuses are up all along the garden wall, and the daffodils and narcissus have started to send up little green lances through the earth. I have never enjoyed the coming of a spring so much as now. Perhaps one needs a long bleak winter in order to appreciate spring.

Have you everything you need? Let me know otherwise. You know, I always find some way out. A letter came for you from Bab which I enclose. Write often to us, my eldest fledgling. I feel very near you these days in love and thought. The petals are unfolding so fast in your character. I want to watch each one, and you know this, dear. There is always a curious bond between a firstborn and a mother, to the mother specially, for you taught me motherhood, all the dear, first motherlore, my Jean. Some day you will understand what I mean, when you look down into the face of your own. I must stop, for I am getting altogether homesick for you.

Tenderly,

MOTHER.

Jean sat for a few minutes after reading this, without unfolding the girls' letters. Mothers were wonderful persons, she thought. Their brooding wings stretched so far over one, and gave forth a love and protectiveness such as nothing else in the world could do.

The next was from Helen, quite like her too. Brief and beautifully penned on her very own violet tinted note paper.

DEAR JEANIE:

I do hope you have met the wonderful Contessa. I can picture her in my mind. You know Father's picture of Marie Stuart with the pearl cap? Well, I've been wondering if she looked like that. I know they wore pearl caps in Italy because Juliet wore one. I'd love a pearl cap. Tell me what Carlota talks about, and what color are her eyes!

School is very uninteresting just now, and it is cold driving over to the car. But I have one teacher I love, Miss Simmons. Jean, she has the face of Priscilla exactly, and she is descended from Miles Standish, really and truly. She told me so, and Kit said if all of his descendants could be bunched together, they would fill a state. You know Kit. Miss Simmons wears a low lace collar with a small cameo pin, and her voice is beautiful. I can't bear people with loud voices.

When I see her in the morning, it just wipes out all the cold drive and everything that's gone wrong. Well, Kit says it's time to go to bed. I forgot to tell you, unless Mother has already in her letter, that Mr. McRae is coming from Saskatoon with Honey, and he will stay here. Doris hopes he will bring her a tame bear cub.

Your loving sister,
HELEN BEATRICE ROBBINS.

"Oh, Helenita, you little goose," Jean laughed, shaking her head. The letter was so entirely typical of Helen and her vagaries. A mental flash of the dear old Contessa in a pearl cap came to her. She must remember to tell Cousin Beth about that tomorrow.

Doris's letter was hurried and full of maternal cares.

DEAR SISTER:

We miss you awfully. Shad got hurt yesterday. His foot was jammed when a tree fell on it, but Joe is helping him, and I think they like each other better.

We are setting all the hens that want to set. The minute I notice one clucking I tell Mother, and we fix a nest for her. Father has the incubator going, but it may go out if we forget to put in oil, Shad says, and the hens don't forget to keep on the nests. Bless Mother Nature, Mrs. Gorham says. She made caramel filling today the way you do, and it all ran out in the oven, and she said the funniest thing. "Thunder and lightning." Just like that. And when I laughed, she told me not to because she ought not to say such things, but when cooking things went contrariwise, she just lost her head entirely. Isn't that fun? Send me a pressed pink rose. I'd love it.

Lovingly yours,
DORRIE.

Last of all was Kit's, six sheets of pencilled scribbling, crowded together on both sides.

I'm writing this the last thing at night, dear sister mine, when my brain is getting calm. Any old time the poet starts singing blithesomely of ye joys of springtide I hope he lands on this waste spot the first weeks in March. Jean, the frost is thawing in the roads, and that means the roads are simply falling in. You drive over one in

the morning, and at night it isn't there at all. There's just a slump, understand. I'm so afraid that Princess will break her legs falling into a Gilead quagmire, I hardly dare drive her.

I suppose Mother has written that we have a guest coming from Saskatoon. I feel very philosophical about it. It will do Dad good, and I'll be glad to see Honey again. Billie's coming home for Easter, thank goodness. He's human. Do you suppose you will be here then? What do you do all day? Gallivant lightsomely around the adjacent landscape with Cousin Beth, or languish with the Contessa and Carlota in some luxurious spot, making believe you're nobility too. Remember, Jean Robbins, the rank is but the guinea's stamp, "a man's a man for a' that." Whatever would you do without your next sister to keep you balanced along strict republican lines? Don't mind me. We've been studying comparisons between forms of government at school, and I'm completely jumbled on it all. I can't make up my mind what sort of a government I want to rule over. This kingship business seems to be so uncertain. Poor old King Charles and Louis, and the rest. I'm to be Charlotte Corday at the prison window in one of our monthly tableaux. Like the picture?

If you do see any of the spring styles, don't be afraid to send them home. Even while we cannot indulge, it's something to look at them. I don't want any more middies. They are just a subterfuge. I want robes and garments. And how are the girls wearing their hair in quaint old Boston town? Mine's getting too long to do anything with, and I feel Quakerish with it. It's an awful nuisance trying to look like everybody else. I'll be glad when I can live under a greenwood tree some place, with a stunning cutty sark on of dull green doeskin. Do you know what a cutty sark is? Read Bobby Burns, my child. I opine it's a cross between a squaw's afternoon frock and a witch's kirtle. But it is graceful and comfortable, and I shall always wear one when I take to the forest to stay.

I have a new chum, a dog. Shad says he's just as much of a stray as Joe was, but he isn't. He's a shepherd dog, and very intelligent. I've called him Mac. He fights like sixty with Shad, but you just ought to see him father that puppy of Doris's you brought up from New York. He trots him off to the woods with him, and teaches him all sorts of dog tricks. Doris had him cuddled and muffled up until he was a perfect little molly-coddle. I do think she would take the natural independence out of a kangaroo just by petting it.

I miss you in the evenings a whole lot. Helen goes around in a sort of moon ring of romance nowadays, so it's no fun talking to her, and Dorrie is all fussed up over her setting hens and the incubator natural born orphans, so I am left to my own devices. Did you ever wish we had some boys in the family? I do now and then. I'd like one about sixteen, just between us two, that I could chum with. Billie comes the nearest to being a kid brother that I've ever had. That boy really had a dandy sense of fairness, Jean, do you know it? I hope being away at school hasn't spoilt him. And that makes me think. The Judge and Cousin Roxy were down to dinner Sunday, and the flower of romance still blooms for them. It's just splendid to see the way he eyes her, not adoringly, but with so much appreciation, Jean, and he chuckles every time she springs one of her delicious sayings. I don't see how he ever let her travel her own path so many years.

Well, my dear, artistic close relative and beloved sister, it is almost ten P. M., and Shad has wound the clock, and locked the doors, and put wood on the fire, so it's time for Kathleen to turn into her lonely cot. Give my love to Cousin Beth, and write to me personally. We can't bear your inclusive family letters.

Fare ye well, great heart. We're taking up Hamlet too, in English. Wasn't Ophelia a quitter?

Yours,

KIT.

If it had not been too late, Jean felt she could have sat down then and there, and answered every one of them. They took her straight back to Greenacres and all the daily round of fun there. In the morning she read them all to Carlota, sitting on their favorite old Roman seat out in the big central greenhouse. Here were only ferns and plants like orchids, begonias, and delicate cyclamen. There was a little fountain in the center, and several frogs and gold fish down among the lily pads.

"Ah, but you are lucky," Carlota cried in her quick way. "I am just myself, and it's so monotonous. I wish I could go back with you, even for just a few days, and know them all. Kit must be so funny and clever."

"Why couldn't you? Mother'd love to have you, and the girls are longing to know what you look like. I'd love to capture you and carry you into our old hills. Perhaps by Easter you could go. Would the Contessa let you, do you think?"

Carlota laughed merrily, and laid her arm around Jean's shoulder.

"I think she would let me do anything you wished. Let us go now and ask her."

The Contessa had not joined them at breakfast. She preferred her tray in Continental fashion, brought up by Minory, and they found her lying in the flood of sunshine from the south window, on the big comfy chintz covered couch drawn up before the open fireplace. Over a faded old rose silk dressing gown she wore a little filmy lace shawl the tint of old ivory that matched her skin exactly. Jean never saw her then or in after years without marvelling at the perpetual youth of her eyes and smile. She held out both hands to her with an exclamation of pleasure, and kissed her on her cheeks.

"Ah, Giovanna mia," she cried. "Good morning. Carlota has already visited me, and see, the flowers, so beautiful and dear, which your cousin sent up—roses and roses. They are my favorites. Other flowers we hold sentiment for, not for their own sakes, but because there are associations or memories connected with them, but roses bring forth homage. At my little villa in Tuscany which you must see some time, it is very old, very poor in many ways, but we have roses everywhere. Now, tell me, what is it you two have thought up. I see it in your eyes."

"Could I take Carlota home with me for a little visit when I go?" asked Jean. "It isn't so very far from here, just over in the corner of Connecticut where Rhode Island and Massachusetts meet, and by Easter it will be beautiful in the hills. And it's perfectly safe for her up there. Nothing ever happens."

The Contessa laughed at her earnestness.

"We must consult with your cousin first," she said. "If we can have you with us in Italy then we must let Carlota go with you surely. We sail in June. I have word from my sister. Would you like to go, child?"

Jean sat down on the chair by the bedside and clasped her hands.

"Oh, it just couldn't happen," she said in almost a hushed tone. "I'm sure it couldn't, Contessa. Perhaps in another year, Cousin Beth said she might be going over, and then I could be with her. But not yet."

The Contessa lifted her eyebrows and smiled whimsically.

"But what if there is a conspiracy of happiness afoot? Then you have nothing to say, and I have talked with your cousin, and she has written to another cousin, Roxy, I think she calls her. Ah, you have such wonderful women cousins, Giovanna, they are all fairy godmothers I think."

Jean liked to be called Giovanna. It gave her a curious feeling of belonging to that life Carlota told her of, in the terra cotta colored villa among the old terraces and rose gardens overlooking the sea. She remembered some of Browning's short poems that she had always liked, the little fragment beginning,

"Your ghost should walk, you lover of trees,
In a wind swept gap of the Pyrenees."

"If you keep on day dreaming over possibilities, Jean Robbins," she told herself in her mirror, "you'll be quite as bad as Helen. You keep your two feet on the ground, and stop fluttering wings."

Whereupon for the remainder of the stay at Cousin Beth's, she bent to study with a will, until Easter week loomed near, and it was time to think of starting for the hills once more. Carlota was going with her, and so excited and expectant over the trip that the Contessa declared she almost felt like accompanying them, just to discover this marvelous charm that seemed to enfold Greenacres and its girls.

CHAPTER XVII

BILLIE'S FIGHTING CHANCE

It was the Friday before Easter when they arrived. Jean looked around eagerly as she jumped to the platform, wondering which of the family would drive down to meet them, but instead of Kit or Shad, Ralph McRae stepped up to her with outstretched hand. All the way from Saskatoon, she thought, and just the same as he was a year before. As Kit had said then, in describing him:

"He doesn't look as if he could be the hero, but he'd always be the hero's best friend, like Mercutio was to Romeo, or Gratiano to Benvolio. If he couldn't be Robin Hood, he'd be Will Scarlet, not Alan a Dale. I couldn't imagine him ever singing serenades."

Jean introduced him to Carlota, who greeted him in her pretty, half foreign way, and Mr. Briggs waved a welcome as he trundled the express truck past them down the platform.

"Looks a bit like rain. Good for the planters," he called.

Princess took the long curved hill from the station splendidly, and Jean lifted her head to it all, the long overlapping hill range that unfolded as they came to the first stretch of level road, the rich green of the pines gracing their slopes, and most of all the beautiful haze of young green that lay like a veil over the land from the first bursting leaf buds.

"Oh, it's good to be home," she exclaimed. "Over at Cousin Beth's the land seems so level, and I like hills."

"They were having some sort of Easter exercises at school, and the girls could not drive down," Ralph said. "Honey and I arrived two days ago, and I asked for the privilege of coming down. Shad's busy planting out his first lettuce and radishes in the hotbeds, and Mrs. Robbins is up at the Judge's today. Billie's pretty sick, I believe."

"Billie?" cried Jean. "Not Billie?"

Even to think of Billie's being ill was absurd. It was like saying a raindrop had the measles, or the wind seemed to have an attack of whooping cough. He

had never been sick all the years he had lived up there, bare headed winter and summer, free as the birds and animals he loved. All the long drive home she felt subdued in a way.

"He came back from school Monday and they are afraid of typhoid. I believe conditions at the school were not very good this spring, and several of the boys came down with it. But I'm sure if anybody could pull him through it would be Mrs. Ellis," said Ralph.

But even with the best nursing and care, things looked bad for Billie. It was supper time before Mrs. Robbins returned. Carlota had formed an immediate friendship with Mr. Robbins, and they talked of her father, whom he had known before his departure for Italy. For anyone to have known and appreciated her father, was a sure passport to Carlota's favor. It raised them immensely in her estimation, and she was delighted to find, as she said, "somebody whose eyes have really looked at him."

Kit was indignant and stunned at the blow that had fallen on her chum, Billie. She never could take the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in the proper humble spirit anyway.

"The idea that Billie should have to be sick," she cried. "How long will he be in bed, Mother?"

"I don't know, dear," Mrs. Robbins said. "He's sturdy and strong, but the fever usually has to run its course. Dr. Gallup came right over."

"Bless him," Kit put in fervently. "He'll get him well in no time. I don't think there ever was a doctor so set on making people well. I'd rather see him come in the door, no matter what ailed me, sit down and tell me I had just a little distemper, open his cute little black case, and mix me up that everlasting mess that tastes like cinnamon and sugar, than have a whole line up of city specialists tapping me."

Helen and Doris clung closely to Jean, taking her and Carlota around the place to show her all the new chicks, orphans and otherwise. Greenacres really was showing signs of full return this year for the care and love spent on its rehabilitation. The fruit trees, after Shad's pruning and fertilizing, and general treatment that made them look like swaddled babies, were blossoming profusely, and on the south slope of the field along the river, rows and rows of young peach trees had been set out. The garden too, had come in for its share of attention. Helen loved flowers, and had worked there more diligently than she usually could be coaxed to on any sort of real labor. Shad had cleared away the old dead canes first, and had plowed up the central plot, taking care to save all the perennials.

“You know what I wish, Mother dear,” said Helen, standing with earth stained fingers in the midst of the tangle of old vines and bushes. “I wish we could lay out paths and put stones down on them, flat stones, I mean, like flags. And have flower beds with borders. Could we, do you think? And maybe a sun dial. I’d love to have a sun dial in our family.”

Her earnestness made Mrs. Robbins smile, but she agreed to the plan, and Cousin Roxy helped out with slips from her flower store, so that the prospect for a garden was very good. And later Honey Hancock came up with Piney to advise and help too. The year out west had turned the bashful country boy into a stalwart, independent individual whom even Piney regarded with some respect. He was taller than her now, broad shouldered, and sure of himself.

“I think Ralph has done wonders with him,” Piney said. “Mother thinks so too. He can pick her right up in his arms now, and walk around with her. She doesn’t seem to mind going west any more, after seeing what it’s made of Honey, and hearing him tell of it. And Ralph says we’ll always keep the home here so that when we want to come back, we can. I think he likes Gilead someway. He says it never seems just like home way out west. You need to walk on the earth where your fathers and grandfathers have trod, and even to breathe the same air. Mother says the only place she hates to leave behind is our little family burial plot over in the woods.”

In the days following Easter, while Mrs. Robbins was over at the Ellis place helping care for Billie, Helen, Piney and Carlota formed a fast friendship, much to Jean and Kit’s wonderment. It was natural for Helen and Carlota to be chums, but Carlota was enthusiastic over Piney, her girl of the hills, as she called her.

“Oh, but she is glorious,” she cried, the first day, as she stood at the gate posts watching Piney dash down the hill road on Mollie. “My father would love to model her head. She is so fearless. And I am afraid of lots and lots of things. She is like the mountain girls at home. And her real name—Proserpine. It is so good to have a name that is altogether different. My closest girl friend at the convent was Signa Palmieri and she has a little sister named Assunta. I like them both, and I like yours, Jean. What does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” Jean answered, musingly, as she bent to lift up a convolvulus vine that was trying to lay its tendrils on the old stone wall. “It is the feminine of John, isn’t it?”

“Then it means beloved. That suits you.” Carlota regarded her seriously. “My aunt says you have the gift of charm and sympathy.”

Jean colored a little. She was not quite used to the utter frankness of

Carlota's Italian nature. While she and the other girls never hesitated to tell just what they thought of each other, certainly, as Kit would have said, nobody tossed over these little bouquets of compliment. It was entirely against the New England temperament.

Just as Carlota started to say more there came a long hail from the hill, and coming down they saw Kit and Sally Peckham, with long wooden staffs. Sally dawned on Carlota with quite as much force as Piney had. Her heavy red gold hair hung today in two long plaits down her back. She wore a home-made blue cloth skirt and a loose blouse of dark red, with the neck turned in, and one of her brothers' hats, a grey felt affair that she had stuck a quail's wing in.

"Hello," called Kit, "we've been for a hike, clear over to the village. Mother 'phoned she needed some things from the drug store, so we thought we'd walk over and get them. Billie's just the same. He don't know a soul, and all he talks about is making his math. exams. I think it's perfectly shameful to take a boy like that who loves reading and nature and natural things, and grind him down to regular stuff."

She reached the stone gateway, and sat down on a rock to rest, while Jean introduced Sally, who bowed shyly to the slim strange girl in black.

"I didn't know you had company, excepting Mr. McRae," she said. "Kit wanted me to walk over with her."

"I love a good long hike," interrupted Kit. "Specially when I feel bothered or indignant. We've kept up the hike club ever since the roads opened up, Jean. It's more fun than anything out here, I never realized there was so much to know about just woods and fields until Sally taught me where to hunt for things. Do you like to hike, Carlota?"

"Hike?" repeated Carlota, puzzled. "What is it?"

"A hike is a long walk."

Carlota laughed in her easy-going way.

"I don't know. Not too long. I think I'd rather ride."

"I also," Helen said flatly. "I don't see a bit of fun dragging around like Kit does, through the woods and over swamps, climbing hills, and always wanting to get to the top of the next one."

"Oh, but I love to," Kit chanted. "Maybe I'll be a mountain climber yet. Children, you don't grasp that it is something strange and interesting in my own special temperament. The longing to attain, the—the insatiable desire to seize adventure and follow her fleeing footsteps, the longing to tap the stars on

their foreheads and let them know I'm here."

"Kit's often like this," said Helen, confidentially to Carlota. "You mustn't mind her a bit. You see, she believes she is the genius of the family, and sometimes, I do too, almost."

"There may be a spark in each of us," Kit said generously. "I'll not claim it all. Let's get back to the house. I'm famished, and I've coaxed Sally to stay and lunch with us."

"What good times many can have," Carlota slipped her arm in Jean's on the walk back through the garden. "Sometimes I wish I had been many too, I mean with brothers and sisters. You feel so oddly when you are all the family in yourself."

"Well," laughed Jean, "it surely has some disadvantages, for every single one wants something different at the same identical moment, and that is comical now and then, but we like being a tribe ourselves. I think the more one has to divide their interests and sympathies, the more it comes back to them in strength. Cousin Roxy said that to me once, and I liked it. She said no human beings should have all their eggs in one nest, but make a beautiful omelet of them for the feeding of the multitude. Isn't that good?"

Carlota had not seen Cousin Roxy yet. With Billie down seriously ill, the Judge's wife had shut out the world at large, and instituted herself his nurse in her own sense of the word, which meant not only caring for him, but enfolding him in such a mantle of love and inward power of courage that it would have taken a cordon of angels to get him away from her.

Still, those were long anxious days through the remainder of April. Mrs. Gorham and Jean managed the other house, while Mrs. Robbins helped out at the sick room. There was a trained nurse on hand too, but her duties were largely to wait on Cousin Roxy, and as Mrs. Robbins said laughingly, it was the only time in her life when she had seen a trained nurse browbeaten.

Kit was restless and uneasy over her chum's plight. She would saddle Princess and ride over on her twice a day to see what the bulletins were, and sometimes sit out in the old fashioned garden watching the windows of the room where Cousin Roxy kept vigil. She almost resented the joyous activity of the bees and birds in their spring delirium when she thought of their comrade Billie, lying there fighting the fever.

And oddly enough, the old Judge would join her, he who had lived so many years ignoring Billie's existence, sit and hold her hand in his, gazing out at the sunlight and the growing things of the old garden, and now and then

giving vent to a heavy sigh. He, too, missed his boy, and realized what it might mean if the birds and bees and ants and all the rest of Billie's small brotherhood, were to lose their friend.

Jean never forget the final night. She had a call over the telephone from her mother about nine, to leave Mrs. Gorham in charge, and come to her.

"Dear, I want you here. It's the crisis, and we can't be sure what may happen. Billie's in a heavy sleep now, and the old Doctor says we can just wait. Cousin Roxy is with him."

Jean laid off her outer cloak and hat, and went in where old Dr. Gallup sat. It always seemed foolish to call him old although his years bordered on three score. His hair was gray and straggled boyishly as some football hero's, his eyes were brown and bright, and his smile something so much better than medicine that one just naturally revived at the sight of him, Cousin Roxy used to say. He sat by the table, looking out the window, one hand tapping the edge, the other deep in his pocket. One could not have said whether he was taking counsel of Mother Nature, brooding out there in the shadowy spring night, or lifting up his heart to a higher throne.

"Hello, Jeanie, child," he said, cheerily. "Going to keep me company, aren't you? Did you come up alone?"

"Shad drove me over. Doctor, Billie is all right, isn't he?"

"We hope so," answered the old doctor. "But what is it to be all right? If the little lad's race is run, it has been a good one, Jeanie, and he goes out fearlessly, and if not, then he is all right too, and we hope to hold him with us. But when this time comes and it's the last sleep before dawn, there's nothing to do but watch and wait."

"But do you think—"

Jean hesitated. She could not help feeling he must know what the hope was.

"He's got a fine fighting chance," said the doctor. "Now, I'm going in with Mrs. Ellis, and you comfort the Judge and brace him up. He's in the study there."

It was dark in the study. Jean opened the door gently, and looked in. The old Judge sat in his deep, old arm chair by the desk, and his head was bent forward. She did not say a word, but tiptoed over, and knelt beside him, her cheek against his sleeve. And the Judge laid his arm around her shoulders in silence, patting her absent-mindedly. So they sat until out of the windows the

garden took on a lighter aspect, and there came the faint twittering of birds wakening in their nests.

Jean, watching the beautiful miracle of the dawn, marvelled. The dew lent a silvery radiance to every blade of grass, every leaf and twig. There was an unearthly, mystic beauty to the whole landscape and the garden. She thought of a verse the girls had found once, when they had traced Piney's name in poesy for Kit's benefit, one from "The Garden of Proserpine." Something about the pale green garden, and these lines,

"From too much love of living,
From joy and care set free."

And just then the old doctor put his head in the door and sang out cheerily,

"It's all right. Billie's awake."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PATH OF THE FIRE

Carlota's stay was lengthened from one week to three at Jean's personal solicitation. The Contessa wrote that so long as the beloved child was enjoying herself and benefiting in health among "the hills of rest," she would not dream of taking her back to the city, while spring trod lightly through the valleys.

"Isn't she poetical, though?" Kit said, thoughtfully, as she knelt to make some soft meal for a new batch of Doris's chicks. Carlota had read the letter aloud to the family at the breakfast table, and they could hear her now playing the piano and singing with Jean and Helen, "Pippa's" song:

"The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn."

"No wonder Carlota is posted on all the romance and poetry of the old world. All Helen has done since she came is moon around and imagine herself Rosamunda in her garden. It makes me tired with all the spring work hanging over to be done. How many broods does this make, Dorrie?"

"Eight," said Dorrie, "and more coming. Shad said he understood we were going to sell off all the incubated ones at ten cents apiece, and keep the real brooders for the family."

"Oh, dear!" Kit leaned back against the side of the barn, and looked lazily off at the widening valley vista before her. "I am so afraid that Dad will get too much interested in chicken raising and crops and soils and things, so that we'll stay on here forever. Somehow I didn't mind it half as much all through the winter time, but now that spring is here, it is just simply awful to have to pitch in and work from the rising of the sun even unto its going down. I want to be a 'lily of the field.' "

Overhead the great fleecy, white clouds sailed up from the south in a squadron of splendor. A new family of bluebirds lately hatched was calling hungrily from a nest in the old cherry tree nearby, and being scolded lustily by a catbird for lack of patience. There was a delicate haze lingering still over the

woods and distant fields. The new foliage was out, but hardly enough to make any difference in the landscape's coloring. After two weeks of almost daily showers there had come a spell of close warm weather that dried up the fields and woods, and left them as Cousin Roxy said "dry as tinder and twice as dangerous."

"How's Billie?" asked Doris, suddenly. "I'll be awfully glad when he's out again."

"They've got him on the veranda bundled up like a mummy. He's so topply that you can push him over with one finger-tip and Cousin Roxy treats him as if she had him wadded up in pink cotton. I think if they just stopped treating him like a half-sick person, and just let him do as he pleased he'd get well twice as fast."

Doris had been gazing up at the sky dreamily. All at once she said,

"What a funny cloud that is over there, Kit."

It hung over a big patch of woods towards the village, a low motionless, pearl colored cloud, very peculiar looking, and very suspicious, and the odd part about it was that it seemed balanced on a base of cloud, like a huge mushroom or a waterspout in shape.

"What on earth is that?" exclaimed Kit, springing to her feet. "That's never a cloud, and it is right over the old Ames place. Do you suppose they're out burning brush with the woods so dry?"

"There's nobody home today. Don't you know it's Saturday, and Astrid said they were all going to the auction at Woodchuck hill."

Kit did not wait to hear any more. She sped to the house like a young deer and, with eyes quite as startled, she burst into the kitchen and called up the back stairs.

"Mother, do you see that smoke over the Ames's woods?"

"Smoke," echoed Mrs. Robbins' voice. "Why, no, dear, I haven't noticed any. Wait a minute, and I'll see."

But Kit was by nature a joyous alarmist. She loved a new thrill, and in the daily monotony that smothered one in Gilead anything that promised an adventure came as a heaven sent relief. She flew up the stairs, stopping to call in at Helen's door, and send a hail over the front banister to Jean and Carlota. Her father and mother were standing at the open window when she entered their room, and Mr. Robbins had his field glasses.

“It is a fire, isn’t it, Dad?” Kit asked, eagerly, and even as she spoke there came the long, shrill blast of alarm on the Peckham mill whistle. There was no fire department of any kind for fourteen miles around. Nothing seemed to unite the little outlying communities of the hill country so much as the fire peril, but on this Saturday it happened that nearly all the available men had leisurely jaunted over to the Woodchuck Hill auction. This was one of the characteristics of Gilead, shunting its daily tasks when any diversion offered.

“Oh, listen,” exclaimed Helen, who had hurried in also. “There’s the alarm bell ringing up at the church too. It must be a big one.”

Even as she spoke the telephone bell rang downstairs, while Shad called from the front garden:

“Fearful big fire just broke out between here and Ames’s. I’m going over with the mill boys to help fight it.”

“Can I go too, Shad?” cried Joe eagerly. “I won’t be in the way, honest, I won’t.”

“Go ’long, you stay here, an’ if you see that wing of smoke spreadin’ over this way, you hitch up, quick as you can, an’ drive the folks out of its reach.” Shad started off up the road with a shovel over one shoulder and a heavy mop over the other. Jean was at the telephone. It was Judge Ellis calling.

“He’s worried over Cousin Roxy, Mother,” Jean called up the stairs. “Cynthy wanted her to come over to her place today to get some carpet rags, and Cousin Roxy drove over there about an hour ago. He says her place lies right in the path of the fire. Mrs. Gorham has gone away for the day to the auction with Ben, and the Judge will have to stay with Billie. He’s terribly anxious.”

“Oh, Dad,” exclaimed Kit, “couldn’t I please, please, go over and stay with Billie, and let the Judge come up to the fire, if he wants to. I’m sure he’s just dying to. Not but what I’m sure Cousin Roxy can take care of herself. May I? Oh, you dear. Tell him I’m coming, Jean.”

“Yes, you’re going,” said Helen, aggrievedly, “and you’ll ride Princess over there, and how on earth are the rest of us going to be rescued if the fire comes this way.”

“My dear child, and beloved sister, if you see yon flames sweeping down upon you, get hence to Little River, and stand in it midstream. I’m sure there isn’t one particle of danger. Just think of Astrid and Ingeborg coming back from the auction, and maybe finding their house just a pile of ashes.”

Carlota stood apart from the rest, her dark eyes wide with surprise and apprehension. A forest fire to her meant a great devastating, irresistible force which swept over miles of acreage. Her father had told her, back in the old villa, of camping days in the Adirondacks, when he had been caught in the danger zone, and had fought fires side by side with the government rangers. She did not realize that down here in the little Quinnibaug Hills, a wood fire in the spring of the year was looked upon as a natural visitation, rather calculated to provide amusement and occupation to the boys and men, as well as twenty cents an hour to each and every one who fought it.

Jean had left the telephone and was putting on her coat and hat.

"Mother," she asked, "do you mind if Carlota and I just walk up the wood road a little way? We won't go near the fighting line where the men are at all, and I'd love to see it. Besides I thought perhaps we might work our way around through that big back wood lot to Cynthy's place and see if Cousin Roxy is there. Then, we could drive back with them."

"Oh, can't I go too?" asked Doris, eagerly. "I won't be one bit in the way. Please say yes, Mother, please?"

"I can't, dear," Mrs. Robbins patted her youngest, hurriedly. "Why, yes, Jean, I think it's safe for you to both go. Don't you, Jerry?"

Mr. Robbins smiled at Jean's flushed, excited face. It was so seldom the eldest robin lost her presence of mind, and really became excited.

"I don't think it will hurt them a bit," he said. "Dorrie and Helen had better stay here though. They will probably be starting back fires, and you two girls will have all you can do, to take to your own heels, without looking out for the younger ones."

With a couple of golf capes thrown over their shoulders, the two girls started up the hill road for about three quarters of a mile. The church bell over at the Plains kept ringing steadily. At the top of the hill they came to the old wood road that formed a short cut over to the old Ames place. Here where the trees met overhead in an arcade the road was heavy with black mud, and they had to keep to the side up near the old rock walls. As they advanced farther there came a sound of driving wheels, and all at once Hedda's mother appeared in her rickety wagon. She sat far forward on the seat, a man's old felt hat jammed down over her heavy, flaxen hair, and an old overcoat with the collar upturned, thrown about her. Leaning forward with eager eyes, the reins slack on the horse's back, giving him full leeway, she seemed to be thoroughly enthusiastic over this new excitement in Gilead.

“Looks like it’s going to be some fire, girls. I’m givin’ the alarm along the road. Giddap!” She slapped the old horse madly with the reins, and shook back the wind blown wisps of hair from her face like a Valkyrie scenting battle.

“Did you see?” asked Carlota, wonderingly. “She wore men’s boots too.”

“Yes, and she runs a ninety acre farm with the help of Hedda, thirteen years old, and two hired men. She gets right out into the fields with them and manages everything herself. I think she’s wonderful. They are Icelanders.”

Another team coming the opposite way held Mr. Rudemeir and his son August. An array of mops, axes, and shovels hung out over the back seat. Mr. Rudemeir was smoking his clay pipe, placidly, and merely waved one hand at the girls in salutation, but August called,

“It has broken out on the other side of the road, farther down.”

“Is it going towards the old Allan place?” asked Jean, anxiously. “Mrs. Ellis is down there with Cynthy, and the Judge telephoned over he’s anxious about them. That’s where we are going.”

“Better keep out,” called back old Rudemeir over his shoulder. “Like enough she’ll drive right across the river, if she sees the fire comin’. Can’t git through this way nohow.”

The rickety old farm wagon disappeared ahead of them up the road. Jean hesitated, anxiously. The smoke was thickening in the air, but they penetrated farther into the woods. Up on the hill to one side, she saw the Ames place, half obscured already by the blue haze. It lay directly in the path of the fire, unless the wind happened to change, and if it should change it would surely catch Carlota and herself if they tried to reach Cynthy’s house down near the river bank. Still she felt that she must take the chance. There was an old wood road used by the lumber men, and she knew every step of the way.

“Come on,” she said to Carlota. “I’m sure we can make it.”

They turned now from the main road into an old overgrown byway. Along its sides rambled ground pine, and wintergreen grew thickly in the shade of the old oaks. Jean took the lead, hurrying on ahead, and calling to Carlota that it was just a little way, and they were absolutely safe. When they came out on the river road, the little mouse colored house was in sight, and sure enough, Ella Lou stood by the hitching post.

Jean never stopped to rap at the door. It stood wide open, and the girls went through the entry into the kitchen. It was empty.

“Cousin Roxy,” called Jean, loudly. “Cousin Roxy, are you here?”

From somewhere upstairs there came an answering hail.

“Pity’s sakes, child!” exclaimed Cousin Roxy, appearing at the top of the stairs with her arms full of carpet rags. “What are you doing down here? Cynthy and I are just sorting out some things she wanted to take over to my place.”

“Haven’t you seen the smoke? All the woods are on fire up around the Ames place. The Judge was worried, and telephoned for us to warn you.”

“Land!” laughed Mrs. Ellis. “Won’t he ever learn that I’m big enough and old enough to take care of myself. I never saw a Gilead wood fire yet that put me in any danger.”

She stepped out of the doorway, pushed her spectacles up on her forehead and sniffed the air.

“ ’Tis kind of smoky, ain’t it,” she said. “And the wind’s beginning to shift.” She looked up over the rise of the hill in front of the house. Above it poured great belching masses of lurid smoke. Even as she looked the huge wing-like mass veered and swayed in the sky like some vast shapes of genii. Jean caught her breath as she gazed, but Carlota said anxiously,

“We must look out for the mare, she is frightened.”

Ella Lou, for the first time since Jean had known her, showed signs of being really frightened. She was tugging back at the rope halter that held her to the post, her eyes showing the whites around them, and her nostrils wide with fear. Cousin Roxy went straight down to her, unhitched her deftly, and held her by the bridle, soothing her and talking as one would to a human being.

“Jean, you go and get Cynthy quick as you can!” she called.

Jean ran to the house and met Cynthy groping her way nervously downstairs.

“What on earth is it?” she faltered. “Land, I ain’t had such a set-to with my heart in years. Is the fire comin’ this way? Where’s Roxy?”

“She says for you to come right away. Please, please hurry up, Miss Allan.”

But Cynthy sat down in a forlorn heap on the step, rocking her arms, and crying, piteously.

“Oh, I never, never can leave them, my poor, precious darlings. Can’t you get them for me, Jean? There’s General Washington and Ethan Allen, Betsy Ross and Pocahontas, and there’s three new kittens in my yarn basket in the

old garret over the ‘L.’ ”

Jean realized that she meant her pet cats, dearer to her probably than any human being in the world. Supporting her gently, she got her out of the house, promising her she would find the cats. For the next five minutes, just at the most crucial moment, she hunted for the cats, and finally succeeded in coaxing all of them into meal bags. Every scurrying breeze brought down fluttering wisps of half burned leaves from the burning woods. The shouts of the men could be plainly heard calling to each other as they worked to keep the fire back from the valuable timber along the river front.

“I think we’ve just about time to get by before the fire breaks through,” said Mrs. Ellis, calmly. Jean was on the back seat, one arm supporting old Cynthy, her other hand pacifying the rebellious captives in the bag. Carlota was on the front seat. She was very quiet and smiling a little. Jean thought how much she must resemble her mother, the young Contessa Bianca, who had been in full charge of the Red Cross Hospital, across the sea, for months.

Not a word was said as Cousin Roxy turned Ella Lou’s white nose towards home, but they had not gone far before the mare stopped short of her own free will, snorting and backing. The wind had changed suddenly, and the full force of the smoke from the fire-swept area poured over them suffocatingly. Cynthy rose to her feet in terror, Jean’s arm around her waist, trying to hold her down, as she screamed.

“For land’s sakes, Cynthy, keep your head,” called Mrs. Ellis. “If it’s the Lord’s will that we should all go up in a chariot of fire, don’t squeal out like a stuck pig. Hold her close, Jean. I’m going to drive into the river.”

CHAPTER XIX

RALPH'S HOMELAND

At the bend of the road the land sloped suddenly straight for the river brink. A quarter of a mile below was the dam, above Mr. Rudemeir's red saw mill. Little River widened at this point, and swept in curves around a little island. There were no buildings on it, only broad low lush meadows that provided a home for muskrats and waterfowl. Late in the fall fat otters could be seen circling around the still waters, and wild geese and ducks made it a port of call in their flights north and south.

As Ella Lou started into the water, Carlota asked just one question.

"How deep is it?"

"Oh, it varies in spots," answered Cousin Roxy, cheerfully; her chin was up, her firm lips set in an unswerving smile, holding the reins in a steady grasp that steadied Ella Lou's footing. To Jean she had never seemed more resourceful or fearless. "There's some pretty deep holes, here and there, but we'll trust to Ella Lou's common sense, and the workings of divine Providence. Go 'long there, girl, and mind your step."

Ella Lou seemed to take the challenge personally. She felt her way along the sandy bottom, daintily, and the wheels of the two seated democrat sank to the hubs. Out in midstream they met the double current, sweeping around both sides of the island; and here for a minute or two, danger seemed imminent. Cousin Roxy gave a quick look back over her shoulder.

"Can you swim, Jean?" Jean nodded, and held on to the cats and Cynthy, grimly. It was hard saying which of the two were proving the more difficult to manage. The wagon swayed perilously, but Ella Lou held to her course, and suddenly they felt the rise of the shore line again. Overhead, there had flown a vanguard of frightened birds, flying ahead of the smothering clouds of smoke that poured now in blinding masses down from the burning woods. The cries and calls of the men working along the back fire line reached the little group on the far shore, faintly.

As the mare climbed up the bank, dripping wet and snorting, Cousin Roxy

glanced back over her shoulder at the way they had come. Cynthy gave one look too, and covered her face with her hands. The flames had swept straight down over her little home, and she cried out in anguish.

"Pity's sakes, Cynthy, praise God that the two of us aren't burning up this minute with those old shingles and rafters," cried Mrs. Ellis, joyfully. "I could rise and sing the Doxology, water soaked as I am, and mean it more than I ever have in all of my life."

"Oh, and Miss Allan, not one of the cats got wet even," Jean exclaimed, laughing, almost hysterically. "You don't know what a time I had holding that bag up out of the water. Do turn around and look at the wonderful sight. See, Carlota!"

But Carlota had jumped out of the wagon with Cousin Roxy, and the two of them were petting and tending Ella Lou, who stood trembling in every limb, her eyes still wide with fear.

"You wonderful old heroine, you," said Carlota, softly. "I think we all owe our lives to your courage."

"She's a fine mare, if I do say so, God bless her." Cousin Roxy unwound her old brown veil and used it to wipe off Ella Lou's dripping neck and back. If her own cloak had been dry she would have laid it over her for a cover.

The flames had reached the opposite shore, but while the smoke billowed across, Little River left them high and dry in the safety zone.

"I guess we'd better be making for home as quick as we can," said Cousin Roxy. Except for a little pallor around her lips, and an extra brightness to her eyes, no one could have told that she had just caught a glimpse of the Dark Angel's pinions beside that river brink. She pushed back her wisps of wavy hair, climbed back into the wagon, and turned Ella Lou's nose towards home.

The Judge was watching anxiously, pacing up and down the long veranda with Billie sitting in his reed chair bolstered up with pillows beside him. He had telephoned repeatedly down to Greenacres, but they were all quite as anxious now as himself. It was Billie who first caught a sight of the team and its occupants.

Kit had gone out into the kitchen to start dinner going. She had refused to believe that any harm could come to Cousin Roxy or anyone under her care, and at the sound of Billie's voice, she glanced from the window, and caught sight of Jean's familiar red cap.

"Land alive, don't hug me to death, all of you," exclaimed Cousin Roxy.

“Jean, you go and telephone to your mother right away, and relieve her anxiety. Like enough, she thinks we’re all burned to cinders by this time, and tell her she’d better have plenty of coffee and sandwiches made up to send over to the men in the woods. All us women will have our night’s work cut out for us.”

It was the girls’ first experience of a country forest fire. All through the afternoon the fresh relays of men kept arriving from the nearby villages, and outlying farms, ready to relieve those who had been working through the morning. Up at the little white church, the old bell rope parted and Sally Peckham’s two little brothers distinguished themselves forever by climbing to the belfry, lying on their backs on the old beams, and taking their turns kicking the bell.

There was but little sleep for any members of the family that night. Jean never forgot the thrill of watching the fire from the cupola windows, and with the other girls she spent most of the time up there until daybreak. There was a fascination in seeing that battle from afar, and realizing how the little puny efforts of a handful of men could hold in check such a devastating force. Only country dwellers could appreciate the peril of having all one owned in the world, all that was dear and precious, and comprised in the word “home,” swept away in the path of the flames.

“Poor old Cynthy,” said Jean. “I’m so glad she has her cats. I shall never forget her face when she looked back. Just think of losing all the little keepsakes of a lifetime.”

It was nearly five o’clock when Shad returned. He was grimy and smoky, but exuberant.

“By jiminitty, we’ve got her under control,” he cried, executing a little jig on the side steps. “Got some hot coffee and doughnuts for a fellow? Who do you suppose worked better than anybody? Gave us all cards and spades on how to manage a fire. He says this is just a little flea bite compared with the ones he has up home. He says he’s seen a forest fire twenty miles wide, sweeping over the mountains up yonder.”

“Who do you mean, Shad,” asked Jean. “For goodness’ sake tell us who it is, and stop spouting.”

“Who do you suppose I mean?” asked Shad, reproachfully. “Honey Hancock’s cousin, Ralph McRae, from Saskatoon.”

Jean blushed prettily, as she always did when Ralph’s name was mentioned. She had hardly seen him since his arrival, owing to Billie’s illness,

and Carlota's visit with her. Still, oddly enough, even Shad's high praise of him, made her feel shyly happy.

The fire burned fitfully for three days, breaking out unexpectedly in new spots, and keeping everyone excited and busy. The old Ames barn went up in smoke, and Mr. Rudemeir's saw mill caught fire three times.

"By gum!" he said, jubilantly, "I guess I sit out on that roof all night long, slapping sparks with a wet mop, but it didn't get ahead of me."

Sally and Kit ran a sort of pony express, riding horseback from house to house, carrying food and coffee over to the men who were scattered nearly four miles around the fire-swept area. Ralph and Piney ran their own rescue work at the north end of town. Honey had been put on the mail team with Mr. Ricketts' eldest boy, while the former gave his services on the volunteer fire corps. The end of the third day Jean was driving back from Nantic station, after she had taken Carlota down to catch the local train to Providence. The Contessa had sent her maid to meet her there, and take her on to Boston. It had been a wonderful visit, Carlota said, and already she was planning for Jean's promised trip to the home villa in Italy.

Visions of that visit were flitting through Jean's mind as she drove along the old river road, and she hardly noticed the beat of hoofs behind her, until Ralph drew rein on Mollie beside her. They had hardly seen each other to talk to, since her return from Boston.

"The fire's all out," he said. "We have left some of the boys on guard yet, in case it may be smouldering in the underbrush. I have just been telling Rudemeir and the other men, if they'd learn to pile their brush the way we do up home, they would be able to control these little fires in no time. You girls must be awfully tired out. You did splendid work."

"Kit and Sally did, you mean," answered Jean. "All I did was to help cook." She laughed. "I never dreamt that men and boys could eat so many doughnuts and cup cakes. Cousin Roxy says she sent over twenty-two loaves of gingerbread, not counting all the other stuff. Was any one hurt, at all?"

"You mean eating too much?" asked Ralph, teasingly. Then more seriously, he added, "A few of the men were burnt a little bit, but nothing to speak of. How beautiful your springtime is down here in New England. It makes me want to take off my coat and go to work right here, reclaiming some of these old worked out acres, and making them show the good that still lies in them if they are plowed deep enough."

Jean sighed, quickly.

“Do you really think one could ever make any money here?” she asked. “Sometimes I get awfully discouraged, Mr. McRae. Of course, we didn’t come up here with the idea of being farmers. It was Dad’s health that brought us, but once we were here, we couldn’t help but see the chance of making Greenacres pay our way a little. Cousin Roxy has told us we’re in mighty good luck to even get our vegetables and fruit out of it this last year, and it isn’t the past year I am thinking of; it’s the next year, and the next one and the next. One of the most appalling things about Gilead is, that you get absolutely contented up here, and you go around singing blissfully, ‘I’ve reached the land of corn and wine, and all its blessings freely mine.’ Old Daddy Higginson who taught our art class down in New York always said that contentment was fatal to progress, and I believe it. Father is really a brilliant man, and he’s getting his full strength back. And while I have a full sense of gratitude towards the healing powers of these old green hills, still I have a horror of Dad stagnating here.”

Ralph turned his head to watch her face, giving Mollie her own way, with slack rein.

“Has he said anything himself about wanting to go back to his work?” he asked.

“Not yet. I suppose that is what we really must wait for. His own confidence returning. You see, what I’m afraid of is this: Dad was born and brought up right here, and the granite of these old hills is in his system. He loves every square foot of land around here. Just supposing he should be contented to settle down, like old Judge Ellis, and turn into a sort of Connecticut country squire.”

“There are worse things than that in the world,” Ralph replied. “Too many of our best men forget the land that gave them birth, and pour the full strength of their mature powers and capabilities into the city mart. You speak of Judge Ellis. Look at what that old fellow’s mind has done for his home community. He has literally brought modern improvements into Gilead. He has represented her up at Hartford off and on for years, when he was not sitting in judgment here.”

“You mean, that you think Dad ought not to go back?” asked Jean almost resentfully. “That just because he happened to have been born here, he owes it to Gilead to stay here now, and give it the best he has?”

Ralph laughed, good naturedly.

“We’re getting into rather deep water, Miss Jean,” he answered. “I can see that you don’t like the country, and I do. I love it down east here where all of my folks came from originally, and I’m mighty fond of the west.”

“Oh, I’m sure I’d like that too,” broke in Jean, eagerly. “Mother’s from the west, you know. From California, and I’d love to go out there. I would love the wide scope and freedom I am sure. What bothers me here, are those rock walls, for instance.” She pointed at the old one along the road, uneven, half tumbling down, and overgrown with gray moss; the standing symbol of the infinite patience and labor of a bygone generation. “Just think of all the people who spent their lives carrying those stones, and cutting up all this beautiful land into these little shut-in pastures.”

“Yes, but those rocks represent the clearing of fields for tillage. If they hadn’t dug them out of the ground, they wouldn’t have had any cause for Thanksgiving dinners. I’m mighty proud of my New England blood, and I want to tell you right now, if it wasn’t for the New England blood that went out to conquer the West, where would the West be today?”

“That’s all right,” said Jean, a bit crossly for her, “but if they had pioneered a little bit right around here, there wouldn’t be so many run down farms. What I would like to do, now that Dad is getting well, is make Greenacres our playground in summertime, and go back home in the winter.”

“Home,” he repeated, curiously.

“Yes, we were all born down in New York,” answered Jean, looking south over the country landscape, as though she could see Manhattan’s panoramic skyline rising like a mirage of beckoning promises. “I am afraid that is home to me.”

CHAPTER XX

OPEN WINDOWS

“It always seems to me,” said Cousin Roxy, the first time she drove down with Billie to spend the day, “as if Maytime is a sort of fulfilled promise to us, after the winter and spring. When I was a girl, spring up here behaved itself. It was sweet and balmy and gentle, and now it’s turned into an uncertain young tomboy. The weather doesn’t really begin to settle until the middle of May, but when it does—” She drew in a deep breath, and smiled. “Just look around you at the beauty it gives us.”

She sat out on the tree seat in the big old-fashioned garden that sloped from the south side of the house to what Jean called “the close.” The terraces were a riot of spring bloom; tall gold and purple flag lilies grew side by side with dainty columbine and poet’s narcissus. Along the stone walls white and purple lilacs flung their delicious perfume to every passing breeze. The old apple trees that straggled in uneven rows up through the hill pasture behind the barn, had been transformed into gorgeous splashy masses of pink bloom against the tender green of young foliage.

“What’s Jean doing over there in the orchard?” Kit rose from her knees, her fingers grimy with the soil, her face flushed and warm from her labors, and answered her own query.

“She’s wooing the muse of Art. What was her name? Euterpe or Merope? Well, anyway that’s who she’s wooing, while we, her humble sisters, who toil and delve after cut worms—Cousin Roxy, why are there any cut worms? Why are there fretful midges? Or any of those things?”

“Land, child, just as home exercises for our patience,” laughed Mrs. Ellis, happily.

Jean was out of their hearing. Frowning slightly, with compressed lips, she bent over her work. With Shad’s help she had rigged up a home-made easel of birchwood, and a little three legged camp stool. As Shad himself would have said, she was going to it with a will. The week before she had sent off five studies to Cousin Beth, and two of her very best ones, down to Mr. Higginson.

Answers had come back from both, full of criticism, but with plenty of encouragement, too. Mrs. Robbins had read the two letters and given her eldest the quick impulsive embrace which ever since her babyhood had been to Jean her highest reward of merit. But it was from her father, perhaps, that she derived the greatest happiness. He laid one arm around her shoulders, smiling at her with a certain whimsical speculation, in his keen, hazel eyes.

"Well, girlie, if you will persist in developing such talent, we can't afford to hide this candle light under a bushel. Bethiah has written also, insisting that you are given your chance to go abroad with her later on."

"What does Mother say?" asked Jean, quickly. She knew that the only thing that might possibly hold her back from the trip abroad would be her mother's solicitude and loving fears for her welfare.

"She's perfectly willing to let you go as long as Cousin Beth goes with you. It would only be for three months."

"But when?" interrupted Jean. "It isn't that I want to know for my own pleasure, but you don't know how fearfully precious these last years in the 'teens seem to me. There's such a terrible lot of things to learn before I can really say I've finished."

"And one of the first things you have to learn is just that you never stop learning. That you never really start to learn until you attain the humility of knowing your own limitations. So don't you worry, Jeanie, you can't possibly go over to Europe and swallow its Art Galleries in three months. By the way, if you are really going, you had better start in learning some of the guide posts."

He crossed over to one of his book cases, and picked out an old well-worn Baedeker bound in red morocco, "Northern Italy." He opened it lovingly, and its passages were well underlined and marked in pencil all the way through. There were tiny sprays of pressed flowers and four leaved clovers, a five pointed fig leaf, and some pale silver gray olive ones. "Leaves from Vallambrosa," he quoted, softly. "Your mother and I followed those old world trails all through our honeymoon, my dear."

Jean leaned over his shoulder, eagerly, her arms clasped around his neck, her cheek pressed to his.

"You dear," she said, fervently. "Do you know what I'm going to do with the very first five thousand dollars I receive for a masterpiece? I shall send you and the Motherbird flying back to visit every single one of those places. Won't you love it, though?"

"I'd rather take all you kiddies with us. You gain so much more when you

share your knowledge with others. Do you know what this west window makes me think of, Jean?" He pointed one hand to the small side window that looked far down the valley. "Somewhere over yonder lies New York. Often times through the past year, I have stood there, and felt like Dante at his tower window, in old Guido Di Rimini's castle at Ravenna. Joe's pigeons circling around down there make me think of the doves which he called 'Hope's messengers' bringing him memories in his exile from his beloved Florence."

Jean slipped down on her knees beside him, her face alight with gladness.

"Oh, Dad, Dad, you do want to go back," she cried. "You don't know how afraid I've been that you'd take root up here and stay forever. I know it's perfectly splendid, and it has been a place of refuge for us all, but now that you are getting to be just like your old self—"

Her father's hand checked her.

"Steady, girlie, steady," he warned. "Not quite so fast. I am still a little bit uncertain when I try to speed up. We've got to be patient a little while longer."

Jean pressed his hand in hers, and understood. If it had been hard for them to be patient, it had been doubly so for him, groping his way back slowly, the past year, on the upgrade to health.

Softly she repeated a poem that was a favorite of Cousin Roxy's, and which he had liked to hear.

THE HILLS OF REST

Beyond the last horizon's rim,
  Beyond adventure's farthest quest,
Somewhere they rise, serene and dim,
  The happy, happy Hills of Rest.

Upon their sunlit slopes uplift
  The castles we have built in Spain—
While fair amid the summer drift
  Our faded gardens flower again.

Sweet hours we did not live go by
  To soothing note on scented wing;
In golden lettered volume lie
  The songs we tried in vain to sing.

They all are there: the days of dream
  That built the inner lives of men!
The silent, sacred years we deem
  The might be and the might have been.

Some evening when the sky is gold,
  I'll follow day into the west;
Nor pause, nor heed, till I behold
  The happy, happy Hills of Rest.

Jean was thinking of their talk as she sat out in the orchard today, trying to catch some of the fleeting beauty of its blossom laden trees. It was an accepted fact now, her trip abroad with Mrs. Newell, and they planned to sail the first week in September, so as to catch the Fall Academy and Exhibitions, all the way from London south to Rome. A letter from Bab had told her of the Phelps boy's success; after fighting for it a year he had taken the *Prix de Rome*. This would give him a residence abroad, three years with all expenses paid, full art tuition and one thousand dollars in cash. Babbie had written:

"I am teasing Mother to trot over there once again, and am pretty sure she will have to give in. The poor old dear, if only she would be contented to let me ramble around with Hedda, we would be absolutely safe, but she always acts as if she were the goose who had not only laid a golden egg, but had

hatched it. And behold me as the resultant genius. Anyway we'll all hope to meet you down at Campodino. I hear the Contessa's villa there is perfectly wonderful. Mother says it's just exactly like the one that Browning rented during his honeymoon. He tells about it in 'DeGustibus.' I believe most of the rooms have been Americanized since the Contessa married Carlota's father, and you don't have to go down to the seashore when you want to take a bath. But the walls are lovely and crumbly with plenty of old lizards running in and out of the mold. I envy you like sixty. I wish I had a Contessa to tuck me under her wing like that."

"How are you getting along, girlie?" asked a well known voice behind her.

"I don't know, Dad," said Jean, leaning back with her head on one side, looking for all the world, as Kit would have said, like a meditative brown thrush. "I can't seem to get that queer silver gray effect. You take a day like this, just before a rain, and it seems to underlie everything. I've tried dark green and gray and sienna, and it doesn't do a bit of good."

"Mix a little Chinese black with every color you use," said her father, closing one eye to look at her painting. "It is the old masters' trick. You'll find it in the Flemish school, and the Veronese. It gives you the atmospheric gray quality in everything. Hello, here come Ralph and Piney."

Piney waved her hand in salutation, but joined Kit and Helen in the lower garden at their grubbing for cut worms.

"If you put plenty of salt in the water when you sprinkle those, it'll help a lot," she told them.

"Oh, we've salted them. Shad told us that. We each took a bag of salt and went out sprinkling one night, and then it rained, and I honestly believe it was a tonic to the cut worm colony. The only thing to do, is go after them and annihilate them."

Ralph lifted his cap in greeting to the group on the terrace, but went on up to the orchard. Kit watched him with speculative eyes and spoke in her usual impulsive fashion.

"Do you suppose for one moment that the prince of Saskatoon is coming wooing my fair sister? Because if he has any such notions at all, I'd like to tell him she's not for him," she said, emphatically. "Now I believe that I'm a genius, but I have resources. I can do housework, and be the castle maid of all work, and smile and be a genius still, but Jean needs nourishing. If he thinks for one moment he's going to throw her across his saddle bow and carry her

off to Saskatoon, he's very much mistaken."

Piney glanced up at the figures in the orchard, before she answered in her slow, deliberate fashion,

"I'm sure, I don't know, but Ralph said he was coming back here every spring, so he can't expect to take her away this year."

Up in the orchard Mr. Robbins talked of apple culture, of the comparative virtues of Peck's Pleasants and Shepherd Sweetings, and whether peaches would grow in Gilead's climate. From the birch woods across the road there came the clinking of a cow bell where Buttercup led some young stock in search of good pasturage. Shad was busy mending the cultivator that had balked that morning, as he was weeding out the rows of June peas. He called over to Mr. Robbins for some advice, and the latter joined him.

Ralph threw himself down in the grass beside the little birch easel. Jean bent over her canvas, touching in some shadows on the trunks of the trees, absently. Her thoughts had wandered from the old orchard, as they did so often these days. It was the future that seemed more real to her, with its hopes and ambitions, than the present. Gilead was not one half so tangible as Campodino perched on the Campagna hills with the blue of the Mediterranean lapping at its feet.

"Aren't you afraid you'll miss it all?" asked Ralph, suddenly.

"Perhaps," she glanced down at him in Jean's own peculiar, impersonal way. To Ralph, she had always been the little princess royal, ever since he had first met her, that night a year ago, in the spring gloaming. Dorrie and Kit had met the stranger more than half way, and even Helen, the fastidious, had liked him at first sight, but with Jean, there had always been a certain amount of reserve, her absorption in her work always had hedged her around with thorns of aloofness and apparent shyness. "But you see after all, no matter how far one goes, one always comes back, if there are those you love best waiting for you."

"You'll only be gone three months, won't you?"

Jean shook her head.

"It depends on how I'm getting on. Cousin Beth says I can find out in that time whether I am just a plain barnyard chicken, or a real wild swan. Did you ever hear of how the islanders around Nantucket catch the young wild geese, and clip their wings? They keep them then as decoys, until there comes a day when the wings are full grown again, and the geese escape. Wouldn't it be awful to imagine one were a captive wild goose, and then try to fly and

discover you were just a nice little home bred White Leghorn pullet."

"Oh, Jean," called Kit. "Cousin Roxy's going, now."

Ralph rose, and extended his hand.

"I hope your wings carry you far, Jean," he said earnestly. "We're leaving for Saskatoon Monday morning and I'll hardly get over again as Honey and I are doing all the packing and crating, but you'll see me again next spring, won't you?"

Jean laid her hand in his, frankly.

"Why, I didn't know you were going so soon," she said. "Of course, I'll see you if you come back east."

"I'll come," Ralph promised, and he stood where she left him, under the blossoming apple trees, watching the princess royal of Greenacres join her family circle.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Where multiple versions of hyphenation occurred, majority use has been employed.

[The end of *Jean of Greenacres* by Izola L. Forrester]