

HEPATICA
HAWKS*BY
RACHEL
FIELD



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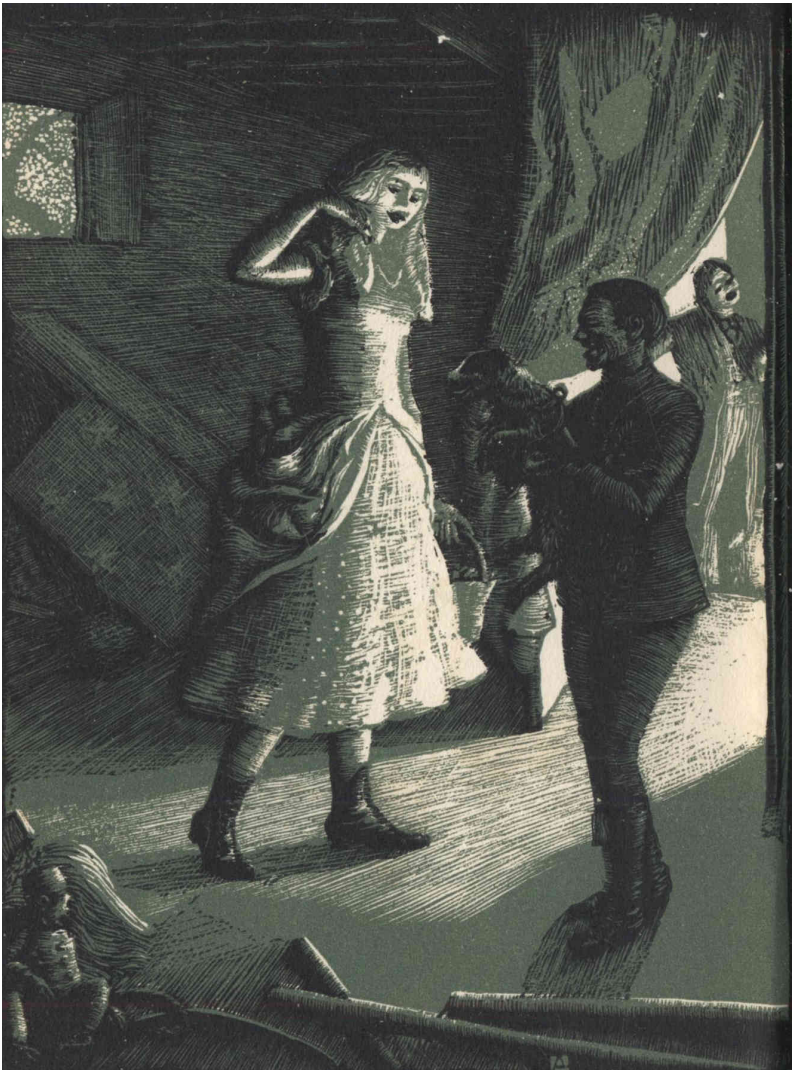
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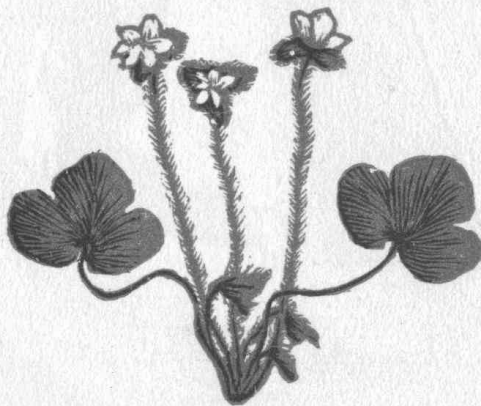
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HEPATICA HAWKS

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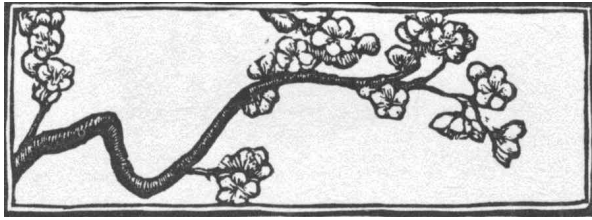
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FOR
L. S. B.
This Tale of Odd Sizes



PICTURES

[Hepatica with Josh and Molly](#)

Chi-Chi himself (this page)

[Molly performs](#)

[Hepatica helps Miss Titania Tripp, at the Dime Museum](#)

[“Listen to the mocking bird”](#)

Hepatica Hawks

CHAPTER

I

“Ladies and Gentlemen, our next number will prove conclusively that the gifts of reason and intelligence are not confined entirely to the human race. . . .”

Hepatica Hawks knew from this and from the tinkle of a bell and three short barks that followed Joshua Pollock’s announcement, that the performing dog and monkey act was about to begin. Molly and Chi-Chi were only just starting their round of tricks. There would still be time for her to take another look at the cherry tree before she must go out to the platform for her turn. She leaned as far out of the window as its narrowness and her tight-fitting blue silk waist would let her.

The small yard on which the window opened was green and quiet. Already the soft dusk of a spring evening had begun to gather there. By half closing her eyes Hepatica could make the trunk and branches of the one-sided cherry tree fade into the dimness. The pale bloom seemed to hang in air, like fountain spray caught in the moment of tossing. It was the crookedest tree she had ever seen, but somehow in spring these were prettier than straight ones. She decided that if Joshua Pollock had gone in for collecting trees instead of people for his “Freaks and Fandangos” this was exactly the sort he would have chosen.

She rested her bare arms on the sill and sniffed at the freshness that came to her from grass and white petals. Behind her the hall smelled of varnish and oil lamps. The space between the wall where she leaned and the painted canvas was cluttered with boxes and belongings. She could see her father’s old ulster hanging over the back of a chair, with T.T.’s garland of artificial flowers on the seat; Flossie’s ukulele and Hawaiian grass were spilling out of a battered portmanteau. All these things were familiar to her in every twist and fold, but the springing green outside the window only made them seem limp and inadequate in contrast.

Queer how spring could make you feel, Hepatica thought, her ears straining for the click of the castanets that would mean the act was nearing

its close—as if one also must put out green shoots. Too bad one couldn't. New straw hats, or old ones trimmed over, were far less satisfactory. But perhaps other people didn't feel that way. Perhaps it was only because she was an outsize, and hats always came so much too small, and it took such yards and yards for a new dress. She sighed, remembering she must begin to let down the hem of her sprigged challis to-morrow. Still, to-morrow was her birthday. She would wait till the day after. It was going to seem queer to be fifteen. But birthdays were like that. One day you were one age and the next another. She never got over the surprise of it. Then, too, a fifteenth birthday had an importance all its own, for there you were, right in the middle of your teens with being grown up just round the corner.

"I must remember to be very surprised about the blue poplin," Hepatica told herself, "and not let on I've seen Flossie and Mabel sewing on it, and I do hope I'll be pleased enough when T.T. gives me the gold beads. I mustn't act as if I'd guessed she was going to."

Sometimes it was quite a responsibility being pleased enough on birthdays and Christmas, especially when the troupe was traveling and quarters were cramped.

There! hands were clapping out beyond the platform. Molly was barking her acknowledgment, and Jerry tossed the paper hoop into a corner to let Hepatica know it was her turn. She moved away from the window, smoothing out the blue folds of her skirt. Mechanically she pulled a long fair curl over either shoulder before she took up the basket with the rose petals on top and the packet of her photographs underneath.

"And now, Ladies and Gentlemen," she heard Joshua Pollock's voice booming out with the words she knew so well, "we come to one of the most remarkable features of our entertainment. You have seen fire eating and sword swallowing. You have witnessed the astounding feats of Chi-Chi, the African monkey, and Molly, the performing dog. The mysteries of the future and necromancy have been revealed. Venomous snakes have twined their deadly coils about bare flesh. You have seen and heard Leta, the Hawaiian Belle reared beneath palms and flaming tropical volcanoes. You have stared in amazement while Hallelujah Hawks, the Human Pike's Peak, unfolded his eight feet four of living brawn and bone before you, tossing as feathers weights that would have confounded the efforts of Samson himself, but now, Ladies and Gentlemen, prepare yourselves for a still more astonishing phenomenon—Hepatica Hawks will appear in person to prove to you that she is indeed her father's daughter."

Hepatica picked her way carefully between boxes over to the side of the painted canvas tree. Jerry, in his red jersey tights crowded past her, holding Molly under his arm. He grinned at her and the little spotted dog put out a pink tongue in greeting as they went by.

“Unique of her kind,” the voice was going on, “an Amazonian wonder from birth. At the tender age of two years this child overtopped seven, eight and even ten-year-olds. A veritable mountain of childhood, Ladies and Gentlemen, and now . . . now at the threshold of her teens, or as a well-beloved bard has so fittingly expressed it, ‘standing with reluctant feet where the brook and river meet’ she measures six feet four and a quarter inches in her stockings. *In* her stockings, mind you, with proportions on an equally generous scale, and to prove that she is not lacking in the feminine graces she will dance for you and sing. Then, to further prove her genuineness she will step down and mingle with the audience. Do not miss the opportunity to measure yourself and your children alongside this youthful wonder. Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the honor of presenting to you the Giant’s Daughter, Miss Hepatica Hawks.”

Hepatica was used to the murmurs and startled “ohs” that greeted her when she stepped to the center of whatever platform they happened to be occupying. Even on pleasant afternoons like this when there were only a few stragglers in the front rows, she never failed to rouse interest and admiration, and she waited, as her father and Pollock had taught her, till they were quiet again before beginning the first steps of her polka.

“She’s real light on her feet considering her size,” a woman in the second row remarked to the little girl beside her in a voice Hepatica could hear above the tinkle of the music box.

“Is it *all* her, Ma? Honest?” The child’s mouth was fixed in a round O of amazement.

“Ain’t so bad looking, for a freak.” An old man with an ear trumpet confided in a shrill whisper to his companion, “Never saw one with yellow hair before. But she looks older’n he said.”

“Ssh,” the elderly woman next him spoke into the ear trumpet, “she’s going to sing now.”

Hepatica had made the polka as brief as she dared. The older she grew the less she liked going through the dancing part of her act, and this platform had the most creaking, uneven boards she had ever known. There were still a few more bars for the music box to play before it tinkled into “The Last

Rose of Summer,” but that would give her a chance to catch her breath. She had told Joshua Pollock only yesterday how hard it was to sing right on top of a polka, and he had said it didn’t matter what you sounded like as long as you made a noise. There, it was swinging into the next tune. Hepatica advanced to the edge of the platform and, holding her basket in both hands, waited for the first notes. The lamps in their tin sockets below her made her ankles uncomfortably warm. A woman halfway back was fanning herself vigorously, without the least regard for the music. Hepatica fixed her eyes on a distant point of light that came through a half-drawn shutter, and began:

“ ’Tis the last rose of summer
Left blooming alone,
All her lovely companions . . .”

People shifted and shuffled at first, but then they grew quiet. Hepatica heard her voice going up and down easily. She could feel the notes coming out of her, yet she never seemed to be doing it exactly, not even the high part where Flossie always went into a squeak.

Now she was nearly at the end. Her right hand burrowed into the basket and brought up a fistful of the paper petals. In a quick gesture she tossed them out into the front row. Some even fell as far as the second and third. The little girl beside her mother stood up to catch them and two other children held out their hands in eagerness. When there were more people she threw out another handful, but one was plenty this time. Hepatica had learned when to be saving.

The hands were clapping quite hard, and the old lady next to the deaf old gentleman was nodding her head approvingly.

“That’s a nice song,” she said into the ear trumpet, “and she sung it real pretty.”

Joshua Pollock had stepped out again, his silk hat under his arm. Hepatica gave him one of her hands and he led her down the rickety steps into the hall. Mechanically she took out one of her photographs from the bottom of the basket.

“Buy a picture of Hepatica Hawks,” Pollock was urging, “a little memento of this extraordinary child. Posed singly or with her famous parent. Ten cents, Ladies and Gentlemen, none sold elsewhere.”

The little girl wanted her mother to get one, but she wouldn’t. However, the woman who had fanned so hard did, and the old man with the ear trumpet seemed interested. Hepatica was sure he would have done so if he

had been alone. He peered at her closely with his little sharp eyes and pinched her arm when Pollock brought her over. She was used to pinches and pokes. It would have been a very poor day indeed without them.

“Genuine, I should say she is!” Pollock was explaining as they went about, his voice very loud to hide the noise they were making behind the curtain as they trundled out the little blue booth with the gilt stars scattered over it.

“All right, Patty,” Pollock whispered to her as the music box sounded again in signal that T.T.’s act was ready. “No more till the ‘grand finale.’”

She slipped through a curtain at the side while he took his place by the footlights once more and began his next introduction.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” she could hear him saying as she put down her basket and went to join Jerry and the animals on a trunk, “there are times when that nearly always regular dame, Mother Nature, plays fantastic tricks which astonish the learned world and confuse all mankind. I am about to introduce you to one of her most startling variations of the human pattern. It is not often that a public is privileged to see two giants and a pygmy for the price of a single admission. But Joshua Pollock is one who believes in good measure and spares no pains to secure the greatest variety in freaks for his patrons. It is therefore my pleasant privilege to present to you a midget whose miniature proportions would put to shame the famous Tom Thumb. I refer to Miss Titania Tripp, Ladies and Gentlemen, unrivaled for smallness in two hemispheres. She was born in the state of Rhode Island, a significant fact, since this is also the smallest state in the Union. Less than the height of an ordinary yardstick, measuring thirty-two and one-half inches from top to toe, tipping the scales at twenty-six pounds, and wearing slippers that her illustrious namesake might have envied, she will perform for you her impersonation of the Vanishing Circassian Dwarf. Miss Titania Tripp.”

“Dreadful hot back here, ain’t it?” whispered Jerry, moving over to make room for Hepatica beside him. “Wish’t we could have got that other hall, but Pollock says the Christian Endeavorers are having a May festival there. I expect that means slim business to-night.”

“I expect so,” she agreed. The small, spotted dog thrust a pointed nose into her hand, licking her fingers daintily and wagging that fraction of tail.

“Molly acts thirsty to me, Jerry,” she went on. “Can’t you get her a drink?”

“She’s had three already, but I suppose another wouldn’t hurt her.” Jerry rose good naturedly. “You hold Chi-Chi while I see if there’s any left in the dipper.”

The monkey made no protest at being transferred. He settled down quietly in Hepatica’s lap, one of his tiny hands fastening supple fingers about her thumb. Chi-Chi was a small, gentle monkey, his coat a soft grayish-brown except where it shaded into silver-white round his grave, puckered face. Hepatica took off his little green cap to scratch behind his ears. It was a favorite spot and he leaned against her with a contented sigh. At least Chi-Chi didn’t mind the heat. It was cold and wet weather that set him shivering and coughing. Hepatica remembered how sick he had been winter before last when they had all taken turns sitting up with him and giving the medicine in drops every fifteen minutes. He was such a good monkey, even the veterinary had said he was almost *too* human. One of the brass buttons on his little green cloth jacket was hanging by a thread. Hepatica pulled it tight and knotted it underneath. She must remember to sew it fast before the evening show. He blinked up at her, his small eyes bright under wrinkled lids.

Jerry came back with Molly, and the rest of the troupe began to gather for the last act. Flossie had changed into her pink gauze and she was hooking Mabel Pollock into the peacock-blue satin with the signs of the zodiac, while Mabel held her breath and shifted her two hundred and sixty-seven pounds from one foot to the other. Adam Crump, Flossie’s husband, stood near by in his toreador outfit, trying to read a newspaper in the dim light with his swords and fire bucket beside him. Over in a corner Hepatica could see her father slowly uncoiling himself, dusting off his green tights and shaking back the lock of hair that always fell into his eyes. Then he reached up to an overhanging beam, knocked the ashes out of his pipe and put it there beside his tobacco pouch for safe-keeping.

“I’m dreaming now of Hallie,
Sweet Hallie, in the valley . . .”

T.T. was singing while the music box carried the tune under her shrill pipings, and the tap-tap of her heels sounded on the floor of the little booth.

“She’s tired,” Hepatica thought as she listened critically, “she’s way behind the music and her breath’s going to give out before she gets to the mocking bird and the grave.”

“Listen to the mocking bird,
The mocking bird . . .”

It was barely a whisper now, but the little heels went on clicking. Flossie looked up from Mabel's blue satin back and signaled frantically. She might have spared herself the trouble. Hepatica had stepped over to the canvas wings again and taken up the refrain.

“And the mocking bird is singing o'er her grave.”

It wasn't the first time Hepatica had finished it for T.T. No one would notice out front. They would be too busy watching the tiny figure in canary yellow disappearing behind the curtains, the little feet in the high-heeled red slippers pointing and twinkling to the last.

Thump. Thump. The curtain was down now and Pollock making his final announcement.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. I thank you. Miss Titania Tripp, the Vanishing Circassian Dwarf, thanks you from the bottom of the smallest heart on record. We thank you, one and all. And now a last glimpse of Joshua Pollock's Famous Freaks and Fandangos. A tableau vivant to remember us by . . .”

They were all busy now back of the curtain. In a single gesture Hallelujah Hawks lifted the midget from her place and shoved the blue booth out of the way. Hepatica reached out her arms to receive T.T. while her father and Jerry rolled the wooden stands deftly into position. Mabel made for her throne at the left. Adam seized his bucket and swords and took his place beside her. Flossie caught up the ukulele and knelt on one knee with her pink skirts in a gauzy circle about her. Jerry set Chi-Chi on his shoulder, took up a fresh paper hoop and stationed himself at the right with Molly waiting impatiently to do her jump. Hallelujah balanced his heaviest weight in the back center, and Hepatica advanced to the middle with T.T. perched doll-like in the crook of her arm.

“Whew!” the midget wheezed, screwing up her face into innumerable fine wrinkles where the powder and rouge had a way of settling. “I didn't count on my breath givin' out so soon. Thanks for comin' in on the tune, Patty.”

“That's all right,” Hepatica answered, smoothing the diminutive folds of the yellow taffeta skirt, “only I guess you need to take another asthma pill before to-night.”

“Mercy no, child, it's nothing but that stitch in my side again. Tell Hallelujah to wind the music box quick or it won't last through.”

There was just time for his long arm to follow her directions before the curtains parted once more. The platform was small and they had to be careful not to get in one another's way as they went through their parts. Hepatica always felt glad hers was a more or less passive rôle, merely holding T.T. carefully while the midget leaned out kissing her finger tips to the audience and waving a red paper rose and the music box ground out "Good Night, Ladies" with Molly jumping in and out of the hoop.

"And so, Ladies and Gentlemen, we bid you farewell till to-night's performance. . . ."

The green baize curtain rattled down again, thumping the wooden boards and showering them all with dust as they scampered to the wings.

"Whew!" Titania Tripp protested with a loud sniff. "Just look at that, will you? No wonder I get wheezin'. I don't believe this place has had a dusting, let alone a scrubbing, since Garfield was assassinated."

Hepatica set T.T. down carefully by the curtained space that did duty for ladies' dressing room. Flossie and Mabel were already there before them, struggling out of their costumes and trying to hide something blue spread on a chair. It looked suspiciously like the new poplin and Hepatica knew she must contrive not to see it. They must have been working on it while she was out doing her turn to have it ready for the party to-night. Hepatica's heart warmed at all the trouble they were taking.

Ever since she could remember, except when it came on a Sunday, they had celebrated her birthday by making a party of supper the night before. She knew exactly how it would be as well as she knew her act. First her father would invite her to go for a walk to get her out of the way while the others hurried to have everything set out and ready when they returned. There would be cold chicken and biscuits instead of the usual ham sandwiches and coffee between shows, and ice cream that Jerry had been out to get at the nearest confectioner's, and of course the cake, candles and all. Hepatica could remember clear back to the time when there had been four candles on a little round cake. Her father had asked why there were four and T.T. had explained that one was "to grow on." He hadn't seemed pleased about that extra one.

"I know too much about growing," he had protested.

Hepatica could understand better now what he had meant. Of course the candles hadn't really had anything to do with her size, but she had certainly more than fulfilled expectations.

“Come on, Patty,” she heard him calling to her. “Want to stretch your legs with me a bit before supper?”

“Yes, Pa,” she told him. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

She turned to a square of mirror hung up in one corner and began to get out of her blue silk. T.T. and Flossie were whispering in the other corner. She tried not to hear what they were saying as she wiped the make-up off and washed her hands and face at the tin basin. It wasn’t the thing forty-odd years ago to wear paint and powder on the street, and Joshua Pollock was very careful that his troupe observed the proprieties.

“You couldn’t find a more decent, first-class set of freaks anywhere,” he boasted on all occasions.

Hallelujah Hawks was waiting in his ulster and cap when his daughter met him at the side door. She had put on her old dark cashmere, and a knitted tam was pulled down over her long curls. She looked almost her real age now, though her cheeks were so round and very red from scrubbing.

“Well, Patty,” he smiled at her, his big mouth turning up in a slow pleasant way under the drooping ends of his fair mustache.

“Have you seen the cherry tree, Pa?” Hepatica asked him as they went down the steps together. “It’s an awful pretty one.”

They stopped a moment by the little yard to look at it, but neither of them said anything. Words never came easily to Hallelujah, though he could muster them on occasion. Hepatica was rather like him in that way, but perhaps it was because T.T. was talkative enough for all of them.

“Worse’n a canary, she is,” Joshua Pollock would complain sometimes. “Yes, it’s the little birds always make the most noise.”

It was still quite light on the streets though a man on a bicycle was going from lamp post to lamp post turning up jets of gas. As Hepatica and Hallelujah turned a corner they came full upon their own pictures with T.T. and the rest staring from a poster announcing that “Joshua Pollock’s World Famous Freaks and Fandangos” would be performing in Masonic Hall on the afternoon and evening of April 30, 189-. Rain had made the colors run, and the paste no longer held the lower corners to the board fence. It flapped in the spring air, as if their picture selves were waving a greeting. But neither of the two gave this more than a glance. They were used to meeting themselves on fences and billboards.

Children playing in front yards stopped to watch them go by, eyes and mouths round with wonder. Sometimes they pointed, or ran to call others from indoors.

“Looke!” shrilled a boy from his front steps to a playmate across the street. “Look at what’s goin’ by.”

A very small child swinging on a gate they passed looked up and burst into a terrified roar. In panic at their approach she lost hold and rolled almost under Hallelujah’s feet. He stooped down and picked her up with the same detached gentleness that circus elephants use toward their keepers, swinging her over the fence to the grassy lawn.

“There now, Sissy,” he said, “don’t you cry.”

But her roars followed them for a long way.

Presently they left stores and streets for more open country. The houses had bigger yards and more trees round them, till soon they sat in fields, with patches of wood and orchard between. A river, swift and noisy with spring rains, was going by green banks where willows grew, and at the foot of the road an old covered bridge loomed in a dark shape with an oblong of light at the other end.

“How about sitting here a spell before it’s time to turn back?” Hallelujah suggested.

They found a place on one of the wooden beams and sat together in the deepening dusk, watching lights spring up in houses along the way they had come.

“Well, Patty,” her father said, pulling at the pipe he had been busy lighting, “to-morrow’s the first of May.”

“I know, Pa.”

“Seem’s if it comes round faster every year,” he went on. “I couldn’t hardly believe it this morning when T.T. said you’d be fifteen. But she’s right. I counted it up to make sure.”

They were quiet again for a long while. Under the bridge the water rushed in a furious torrent of sound. A bat swooped where the rafters met in the dimness above them. Hepatica could barely make out her father’s face though his pipe glowed faintly. She liked to smell the spicy fragrance of his tobacco, all mixed up as it was with the cool freshness of running water and grass and leaves. Soon, she knew, he would begin to talk about her mother. He always did on the night before her birthday.

“Yes,” he was saying, “I expect it wouldn’t seem so queer to me if Myra had lived. Your getting born and her dying on the first of May gets me all mixed up in my feelings kind of.”

“I know, Pa.”

“I’m going to give you that ring she used to wear. I’ve brought it along in my pocket. Someway I didn’t want to give it to you with the rest looking on.” He felt for her hand. “I had a piece put in to make it bigger. She wasn’t like us, just regular size, Myra was.”

“I know, Pa.” Hepatica drew closer to him, her cheek was against the sleeve of his ulster. “But are you sure you’d ought to? Won’t you miss it from your watch chain?”

“No, I want you to have it now you’re getting so big. She didn’t have so many things of her own. I wish I’d got her more. I was going to . . .”

She felt him slip it on her finger and though it was too dark to see she knew just how blue the little turquoise in the middle of the two gold leaves looked.

“I’ll be real careful of it. Thank you, Pa.”

Hepatica seldom thought about her name, though she knew it was a queer one. It was part of her, and every spring her father reminded her of how she had come by it. She knew the story by heart, almost word for word, as she knew the printing on Joshua Pollock’s handbills and the way the red curls were ranged on either side the parting of T.T.’s wig. He was beginning to tell her now about that other spring hillside where he had waited fifteen years ago on the afternoon that she was born. That was farther north, in Massachusetts or Connecticut. He never could remember which, though the hillside and the houses below it stayed by him clearly. Even after all these years he could see again just how the trees grew on the higher ridges of the hills, how the windows in the town gave back the sun in little bright squares, and how the chimney of the particular house he watched sent up a wavering blue thread of smoke. He remembered how tired his eyes had grown staring for a sign from the doorway below. T.T. had promised to wave a towel when they wanted him. Sometimes he had had to look away they blurred so with watching. That was how he had come to notice the little clump of blue flowers in the grass beside him. Ordinarily he would have been too far away to see them, but then his face had been almost on a level with their hairy stems and faintly tinged petals. Their blueness had astonished him. It was not like the color of sky or water or even other blue flowers he had seen.

“They made me feel funny,” he was telling Hepatica. “I was most afraid to breathe for fear of hurting them.”

It had seemed as if they meant something. . . . Hepatica sat very still beside him, waiting for him to get to the part about the children. She knew he would tell her about them in a minute, because they came next. There had been three of them, a boy and two little girls with baskets of flowers. “May baskets,” they had told him after they had recovered from their fright at finding a giant stretched across their path. The boy and the older girl had been curious and friendly, peering at him with round eyes and asking a question or two. But the smallest girl had hung back, with both hands pressed to the front of her dress. Hallelujah had liked her best. He could see some of those same blue flowers between her fingers. He had pointed to them and asked her their name.

“Hepatica,” she had told him, her voice so small he had had to strain his ears to catch her whisper.

And then T.T. had waved her signal and he had gone crashing down through the underbrush with a little bunch of blue flowers that the child must have thrust in his hands.

“Yes, that’s how you come to be called Hepatica,” Hallelujah Hawks told his daughter for at least the tenth time that she could remember, and with as much wonder as if it were the first recital, “and it never seemed queer to me.”

From the town a clock struck the half-hour and they rose.

“We’d better be going back,” said Hepatica. “It’ll be nearly seven by the time we get in.” They could just make out the ruts of the road ahead though it seemed almost light to their eyes after the darkness of the covered bridge. “I hate to leave the river behind.” Hepatica sighed as they walked toward the clustered lights. “I expect there wouldn’t be time to come again before the train goes to-morrow.”

“No, I guess not.” Her father puffed at his pipe, his long legs moving, shadowy and enormous, beside her.

In nearly all the houses they passed people were eating supper. Hepatica liked to look in at windows where the curtains were up and people gathered round their tables. It was rather like the theater—these little lighted stages, only the people on them were playing at being themselves. They didn’t know they were actors, or that they had an audience out there in the dark.

Now they were back in the center of the town again, another corner to turn and they would find themselves by Masonic Hall. They passed by the other hall, the one Jerry had said they ought to have had. Inside the May Festival was going at full tilt. Through open doors and windows Hepatica could see the long tables spread with white cloths and people sitting or moving about. The smell of fried chicken and coffee came out to them, and the pleasant clatter of crockery and many voices talking together.

“Seem to be having quite a time of it in there,” her father said.

“Yes,” Hepatica answered, “it’s the Christian Endeavorers.”

Just as they went by a group of young people flocked out of the doorway. The light, full dresses of the girls showed plainly against the dark suits of the boys who followed them. They had brought plates of ice cream to eat there on the steps, and they made a gay commotion as they settled themselves. They laughed a great deal and elbowed and shuffled one another about with easy familiarity.

“Don’t you shove so, Dick,” a girl’s voice came shrilly. “No fair crowding in.”

Some of the girls sat close together, their skirts and sashes mingling in bright patches. More often though there were boys between, making a sort of pattern; a pattern Hepatica was beginning to notice more and more as she grew older. She found herself wondering what it would feel like to be part of a group like that, eating ice cream on just such steps, talking to some boy beside her. But, of course, she wouldn’t know what to say. She had never known anyone her own age, not even the winter they had stopped in Philadelphia for three whole months. No one in the show had ever expected her to. It was only lately that she had thought of it herself. Several of those girls looked even younger than she, but then they were regular size. She could hear one of them laughing as she and her father turned the corner. It was the kind of laugh she was sure she could never give, but she liked to hear it.

“Patty,” Hallelujah spoke suddenly as if he were with difficulty pulling some thought out of a far place in his mind, “you don’t mind being a freak, do you?”

He had never spoken so to her before, and she felt suddenly shy and embarrassed, as if he were looking at her in that way he had done sometimes of late.

“Goodness, no,” she answered, quickening her steps as they came in sight of their hall, “why should I?”

“I just wondered.” They were turning in at the door. “It’s different from when you were little, and I thought, maybe if you did . . .”

“But I don’t, Pa.”

“Well, if you did, I thought I’d ought to do something about it maybe.”

“Hey, there,” Jerry sang out from the window above them. “It’s about time you two showed up. Here they be.” They could hear him calling to the rest inside as they mounted the wooden steps.

CHAPTER

II

Every member of the troupe had given Hepatica a present, and with the exception of the birthday cake and candles she had them all on. The freaks went in for finery, and so besides the blue poplin dress from Flossie and Mabel, there were flowered hair ribbons from Adam, a silver locket in the shape of a heart from Joshua Pollock, and an Irish lace collar from Jerry. Then there were T.T.'s gold beads in the worn morocco leather case they had lived in for years and years. Hepatica had hardly been able to eat any supper for trying to concoct proper thank-yous beforehand. All the while she watched the others eating their chicken and biscuits and ice cream she turned over possible phrases in her mind. Then, when the beads had been brought out, to distract her while Mabel was fixing candles on the cake in the ladies' dressing room, she hadn't been able to say any of the things she had planned.

"Oh, T.T.," she had almost groaned as the midget stood on tiptoe beside her to present them, "not your gold beads? You hadn't ought to. I . . . I can't ___"

"Yes, you can too." T.T.'s tiny face quickened with pleasure under the make-up she had been too busy to remove between performances. "It's a lucky thing they were always long for me. Let's try 'em right on."

This was gone through with great ceremony. T.T. had to be lifted on a chair, while Hepatica bent forward on hers, and all the others gathered round to watch. The gold beads had belonged to Titania Tripp's grandmother and mother before her, and on the occasions when she had worn them they had hung halfway to her waist. But they fitted close to Hepatica's throat. "As if they had been made for her," the rest agreed, admiring the effect.

"Look out, T.T." Hepatica cried, catching at her just as she almost toppled off the chair, gathering her into her lap and kissing her small powdery face. She looked tired, Hepatica noticed, and her hands felt very hot. She hoped T.T. had remembered to take her pills so she wouldn't have a bad night with her asthma. But perhaps she only looked more tired than usual because she had taken off her wig and her grayish wisps of hair were drawn back so tight. "Oh, the beads are so beautiful." Hepatica sighed. "Had I better wear them for my turn to-night or only keep them for extra special?"

“You keep them on, Patty,” Joshua Pollock decided, “and I’ll see if they make you look any older from out front. Mustn’t have you getting too grown up, you know, or I can’t pull that part about the brook and river meeting. No, sir, you’ve got to stay twelve awhile longer even if you have got to be fifteen.”

“Seems just yesterday she was three, don’t it, Hallelujah?” the midget was saying, her eyes fond and shining under beaded lashes.

“Your ice cream’s most melted,” Jerry was saying on Hepatica’s other side, “ain’t you going to eat it?”

“Oh, yes, all the presents made me forget. It’s nice, Jerry, chocolate and vanilla, too.”

“I thought you’d like two kinds.” He was beaming as he fed some of the melted part to Chi-Chi. “I went clear over to the May Festival place to get it.”

Hepatica took up her spoon resolutely. She couldn’t help thinking how queer it was that she should be eating the same ice cream as those girls and boys on the steps they had passed. She wished Jerry hadn’t reminded her of them somehow.

“Glory Hallelujah!” she heard her father exclaim in the way that earned him his name. “Just look at that, Patty!”

Mabel Pollock was bringing the birthday cake from the dressing room. Its wavering candles lighted up her broad face, making her body appear more than ever clumsy and waddling in her old flowered wrapper. She set it down in triumph before Hepatica while the rest clustered round to watch her surprise over it. The candles were pink on white icing. They made a soft, clear light on the faces gathered about the table. All their eyes held little bright points that were reflections of the candle flames, even Chi-Chi’s and Molly’s were more shining than usual.

“It’s lovely,” Hepatica admired, “especially the candles.”

“They’d ought to be,” chuckled Flossie. “Adam most held up the show this afternoon he took so long finding ’em.”

“Yes, sir,” grinned Adam, “you come near having to do without your candles this year.”

“Sixteen of ’em, you see,” Titania Tripp tapped at Hallelujah’s knee to remind him, “we’ve never forgot that extra one, not once. Remember,

Hallelujah, how I'd tell her 'one to grow on,' and she'd say it after me? And how you always kind of shook your head, and—"

"Hey, now, T.T. quit gabbing," Joshua Pollock ordered good naturedly, "it's time to clear up here and get ready for the show."

"Come on, Patty, make your wish and cut it." Mabel Pollock was already gathering up things at her end of the table.

Hepatica stared hard at the sixteen little flames before her. She had always taken the wishing part very seriously. Perhaps it was foolish, but she couldn't help half believing there was something in this ceremony. Several times before her wishes had come true, though of course lots of other times they hadn't. Still one must be careful not to wish the wrong thing, just in case. "Well, then," she thought, puckering her lips to be ready to blow, "I wish I had someone to be friends with—someone different. . . ."

"Hurry up, Patty!"

"Hey, just one wish, you must be making a whole string of 'em."

"All right, I've made it. Pfff." Hepatica puffed her cheeks out like balloons and with one breath the yellow tips changed to blackened ends of wick. The lovely light died from all the faces that had held it. There was only a faint bitter smell of smoke as Hepatica plunged a knife into the frosting.

The birthday party had taken so long that they had to hurry to be ready for their turns. Hepatica helped Flossie into her snake charmer's costume because she came first, and then struggled with the top buttons of Mabel's boots.

"I know I hadn't ought to have taken them off between shows," Mabel said as she added more make-up, "but this spring heat and hurrying so just played the mischief and all." Off flew a pearl button and Hepatica went crawling after it. "Isn't that the worst luck? Well, I'll just have to go on without it."

"No, I'll sew it, Mabel." Hepatica reached for a needle and thread from the bristling pin cushion. "There'll be time. I just heard Adam carrying out the swords and bucket."

"You're certainly a handy one." Mabel resigned herself to Hepatica, one leg extended, her body stiff as a Chinese idol in rolls of fat. "Be sure you fasten it tight, though, it's no joke when they go pop in the middle of the act and maybe hit someone in the front row."

After Mabel left she turned her attentions to T.T. She always helped her with the two back hooks her short arms could never reach. T.T.'s preparation for her part was a lengthy and elaborate process, but Hepatica knew every step of it as well as Titania. Her earliest memories were connected with these little jars and bottles and brushes ranged on the shelf under the mirror. It was a legend in the troupe that Hepatica had held the rabbit's foot in her fist before she was a week old.

A calico apron covered the midget's shoulders to keep the powder from where it wasn't supposed to be, and the smearing and patting and rouging and penciling had already begun. As well as she knew every motion of this Hepatica never lost her amazement at this queer sort of game which could so miraculously hide wrinkles and little lines and make eyes and cheeks so very bright.

For T.T.'s cheeks always emerged redder than the rose she wore pinned at the point of her fitted waist. Last of all came the wig. It was T.T.'s most cherished possession and when not in place, it lived in state in a flowered bandbox. Hepatica watched critically till she saw it safely on, the red fringes just touching the penciled eyebrows, and the curly part behind so firmly anchored down with pins that not a wisp of the grayish knot underneath showed.

"I'd never be able to get through my act and face the public without it," T.T. had confided to her once long ago when she was a child. "It's my fascination."

Hepatica had thought that was another name for the wig and had called it so for years. She knew better now, though she still clung to the name from force of habit.

"Your fascination's a little bit over one ear to-night," she told her now. "Here, I'll fix it."

"Don't sound's if there was many out front," the midget remarked as a faint pattering of applause came to them, followed by the boom of Joshua Pollock's voice.

"It's that May Festival, I guess."

"Yes, I guess so. Joshua's run into a lot of things like that lately. Well, maybe there'll more turn up for our acts. I wish it wasn't so hot back here. Seems like this first spring heat takes the gimp out of me more'n it used to."

Hepatica picked up a newspaper and began to fan her absently. Outside the green curtains she could hear the music box playing "My Old Kentucky

Home” and the creaks and thumps that meant her father was setting up Flossie’s throne for the snake charming. That wouldn’t take long, she knew, and Pollock never encouraged his audience to draw closer as he did for the other acts. There was good reason for this. Those smooth, dark snakes that Flossie twined so fearsomely about her arms and throat while onlookers shuddered or peered in fascinated dread, were cunningly fashioned of rubber, the only sham part of Pollock’s “Freaks and Fandangos.” He wasn’t proud of them, but where was the harm in one little trick in a whole two hours of acts by genuine freaks?

“You know, Patty,” T.T.’s voice was going on beside her as she fanned, “I think Joshua ought to do something to liven things up more. The music box is all right for you to sing and me to dance to, but it ain’t the novelty it was when he got it twelve years ago. Folks want more noise nowadays. I’ve told him so plenty of times, but you know how stubborn he is. Besides he grudges an extra penny.”

“I know. Did you take your asthma pills, T.T.?”

“What? Oh, them—well, maybe I did forget. I declare, Patty, you keep after me worse’n a mother hen with one chick. Nobody’d think it used to be the other way round and not so long ago either.”

She smiled fondly at Hepatica who had come back with a cup of water and was counting out the pills from a little bottle. There was a queer bond between the two that made them like to be alone together. Even when T.T. had scolded and punished Hepatica long ago, they had always felt close and sure of each other. Perhaps it was their very difference in size that made this so. Hepatica seldom gave it much thought, only she knew that next to Pa she mattered most to the midget. It was T.T. who had sat up nights with her through croup and whooping cough and measles and the time she had caught diphtheria and they had had to stay for three weeks in a ramshackle town in the prairies.

Once she had seen a painted target at a shooting gallery, with lots of different colored circles growing smaller and smaller till they reached the bull’s eye in the middle. She had thought then that her own feelings were something like that, with her father and T.T. in the closest ring. After them she placed the rest of the troupe in varying stages of nearness. Joshua Pollock went in the farthest one, not that she had anything special against him, only somehow she couldn’t help being fonder of Jerry and the trained animals.

“I believe I’ll rest me here for a bit,” Titania Tripp was telling her. “Flossie’ll be around to let me know when it’s time for my turn. I guess it’s the spring bothers me,” she added apologetically as Hepatica turned anxious eyes upon her. “No, I ain’t got that stitch in my side any more.”

“You’re sure?” Hepatica questioned, fixing a place for her on one of the trunks, rolling her jacket to make a pillow. “Watch out these buttons don’t catch your curls when you go to get up.”

She lingered a moment, her hands straightening T.T.’s costume, then reaching out to the little bit of forehead that showed between the midget’s eyebrows and the wig’s red fringes. With firm fingers she pressed the wrinkled skin, smoothing it toward the temples lightly. T.T. sighed and let her eyelids drop.

“I’m all right, Patty,” she said. “You go on out and stop fussin’ over me.”

Hepatica threaded another needle and went back to the wings. Molly’s stump of a tail began to thump on the trunk at sight of her, and the monkey blinked bright eyes from Jerry’s shoulder. She went to them, picking her way carefully over creaking boards and strewn paraphernalia.

“Give me Chi-Chi, Jerry,” she whispered. “I want to sew the top button on his coat.”

She carried the monkey to a place on the landing where the steps led down to the side door. It was cooler there and though the only light came from one long beam through a gap in the canvas trees, still, by holding the jacket and needle and thread directly in it she could manage. Chi-Chi nestled in the crook of her arm. She could feel his hot small body pressed close to her side, his tail lax across her lap. Sometimes he made little sighs, but oftener he sat quietly blinking his lids, his fingers in the curling ends of her hair.

“There,” breathed Hepatica to herself and the monkey, “that’s on to stay.”

She shook out the small green jacket, spread it on one knee, and ran the needle into the front of her dress. Below her, halfway up the stairs, a window had been opened. Cool night air blew in refreshingly, and the tinkle of the music box sounded pleasant and far away. Absently she began to rub Chi-Chi’s back in time to “My Old Kentucky Home.” Presently it stopped. Joshua Pollock was beginning his remarks before the necromancy act. Scraps of his speech came to her, but she hardly listened, knowing it already so well.

“And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, the curtains will presently part to reveal not merely Queen Juno herself—you have already seen her in the flesh *and* marveled, as well you may—but they will open upon the gates of the future. . . . The future, I say, Ladies and Gentlemen, and I say it not lightly but as one who knows. . . . The stars in their courses have whispered their secrets to this marvelous woman. Her eyes pierce easily the veils that hide the future from our sight. Who knows what fortune might be ours tomorrow if we but knew enough to seize it as we burrow blindly in the dark mazes of the present? You have but to ask—Queen Juno will do the rest. And lest there be any among you not wishing to give voice to the questionings that stir your minds *and* hearts, I may add, I will pass among you these slips of paper and will myself carry them to her majesty. Put on your thinking caps, Ladies and Gentlemen, and take advantage of the powers that possess this extraordinary woman who sits enthroned before you. Note the signs of the zodiac bordering her robe and a crystal ball, symbol of the ancients, in her right hand. Opportunity knocks but once, so have your questions ready. Coming, coming, Ladies and Gentlemen.”

Hepatica could hear the usual rustling and whispering that followed this announcement. She knew that Mabel was out there on the throne, her skirts carefully arranged to cover the places where the gilding was beginning to peel. It sounded as if there would be a good many questions to-night, but even if there shouldn't be there were always the old ones that Joshua Pollock kept in his pocket in case audiences were shy or slim. The act must always last at least ten minutes to fill out the evening and give Flossie time to change into her Hawaiian costume.

“Our first question,” Joshua Pollock's voice came again, “seems to be from the fair sex, to judge by handwriting and the sweet fragrance rising from the paper. Ah, I thought so, it is prompted by the ardor of a tender heart. To love or not to love, Ladies and Gentlemen. This lady would know whether a dark man or a fair shall bring her the greatest happiness. How fortunate she is here to-night, with Queen Juno and her crystal ball at her disposal—”

His voice dropped to a more intimate rumble. Hepatica only half listened. She knew Mabel was answering with the speech from the paper-covered book that began, “Beware of dark, swarthy men though they come with honeyed words and gold jingling in their pockets.” Maybe one of those very girls she had seen on the steps eating ice cream had asked that question. Hepatica found herself thinking of those figures at the May Festival. She wished she could put them out of her mind. Why couldn't she? Such lots of

ruffles on their skirts, clear up the waist, and big puffy sleeves that stood out like wings on their shoulders, and their hair in the most beautiful bangs and towering twists. She meant to try doing hers that way. Even if Pollock did make her keep the curls for her act and to look younger, there wouldn't be any harm in just trying some Sunday when there wasn't any show. T.T. would show her how maybe, only she felt the same way Pollock did about Hepatica's looking grown up, though for different reasons.

Something was moving below her on the stairs. She leaned forward, peering into the dimness. There couldn't be anyone at that door. It only opened from the inside. But the window. Yes, there was someone at it. A shadowy leg came over the sill. A hand gripped the frame, and then a head and body followed, stealthily, with scarcely more than a creak or two. Hepatica heard Chi-Chi stir uneasily and make a faint, apprehensive sound from her lap. Her own heart beat faster under her blue silk waist, but she did not move. Another minute of waiting and a dark head appeared on the steps below. Now it was directly in the shaft of light that came from behind her. She could see a boy's face distinctly, pale with high cheek bones, and eyes that seemed to be all black pupil, staring into hers. Still, she did not move nor make a sound.

"Hello," she heard the boy say in a voice that was husky and pleasant, his eyes screwing up at the corners, and his lips parting in a wide grin. "Hello," he repeated.

Suddenly Hepatica came to. She realized that he was speaking to her, and though she had not told herself to answer, she found her voice doing so.

"Hello," she said back to him, and all the time her eyes were on his face and her hands keeping their hold on Chi-Chi her thoughts were on her birthday-cake candles and the wish she had so lately made.

CHAPTER III

His name was Tony Quinn and he was going to belong to the show. Hepatica woke early on her birthday to remind herself of this remarkable fact. She lay very still, partly so as not to disturb T.T. who slept beside her on the other side of the bolster they had put down the middle of the lumpy hotel bed, partly to remember better all that had happened last night. Her heart beat fast now under her cotton nightgown with the Hamburg edging at wrists and neck, because she had been so fearful about asking Joshua to let Tony come. She couldn't remember how she had gone through her turn at all, thinking of him waiting on the stairs, and she the only one who knew he was there. But her voice had sounded just the same singing "The Last Rose of Summer." She hadn't missed a single note, and her hand had been steady as she tossed the rose petals. There had been a lot of pokes and pinches, and three of her photographs sold. All the time she followed Pollock up and down the spaces between the wooden seats, her mind was back on the landing, seeing Tony's eyes look at her out of the dimness, watching for his sudden, crooked smile, hearing him tell her all about himself and how important it was for him to be part of the Freaks and Fandangos.

"Buy a picture of Hepatica Hawks—a little memento of this extraordinary girl. . . ."

And under the boom of his words, others were pounding in her ears, a desperate echo from somewhere deep inside her.

"Oh, make Joshua take him. Make him. Oh, let me think of the right things to say so he will. He mustn't let him go back to that place where they beat him and make him kill the pigs. Oh, please, it's got to come out all right. It's got to."

Thinking about it now under the darned, dingy spread with its honeycomb pattern and most of the ball fringing off, she realized that she must have been praying. She hadn't called it that while she was doing it. She had gone on making her silent petitions all through T.T.'s act and the grand finale. It had seemed the show would never end. But it had.

"Patty, what's come over you?" the midget had asked as Hepatica set her down and made for the stairs.

She hadn't stopped to answer. Her cheeks were burning and her fingers felt cold as icicles. Just for a moment she stopped. Perhaps, she had told herself, she had made him up. But, no, there he was waiting, smiling at her halfway up the stairs.

And then they had gone to Joshua Pollock. They were standing there before him, with all the others coming out of the dressing rooms to see what was going on. Mabel had already changed into her flowered wrapper, T.T.'s wig was off, and Jerry hadn't got out of his tights so that all his beautiful tattoo marks had showed plainly, even the green and red mermaid across his chest. Hepatica remembered now how curious and puzzled her father had looked, and how Joshua Pollock had slammed the lid down on his tin cash box, so none of them could see how much money he had taken in. Maybe, she had thought, even as she had begun her eager petitions, it would be a good thing if the dimes and quarters had come in poorly. That might make a difference about his taking Tony on. It might make him see how much they needed him and the banjo he had brought along in its green cloth cover.

"I can beat a drum too," Tony had explained. "I used to do it in the boy's band over at the orphanage before I came to work for old man Hodge."

"We do need a drum," Hepatica had joined in, remembering T.T.'s words earlier in the evening and turning to her for help, "don't we, T.T.? It would save your voice a lot besides," she had added persuasively.

"Since when did you start worrying about me?" Pollock had answered with a short laugh. "I've got enough on my hands without taking on more trouble. Besides," he had pointed out practically, "this chap's no freak, and I've always made it my policy to deal in genuine, first-class freaks only. I have to be careful of my reputation, heading a show like this."

"But Jerry isn't a freak," Hepatica had reminded him. "At least only his tattoo marks and knowing how to train animals. Tony Quinn could learn tricks, too, and have another act playing the banjo and drum."

"Yes, sir," Tony had put in respectfully, his eyes darkening with enthusiasm. "I catch onto things real quick, they all say I do, and you need a sleight-of-hand act in your show. I said so to myself this afternoon when I was watching."

"Why not take the boy on and give him a try?" T.T. had ventured. "We could do with some young life besides Patty."

"Good little T.T.," Hepatica thought now in gratefulness, looking down at the tiny creature asleep beside her, her breath coming short and raspily

in spite of the asthma pills.

But Pollock had had other objections. It would be risky business if that farmer decided to get out a warrant and arrest him for luring his hired boy away. He might follow the troupe to the next town they played. Pollock couldn't afford to pay fines or get a bad name. No, he had explained, he was sorry, and of course in running away to join the Freaks and Fandangos Tony Quinn had paid them all a great compliment. Hepatica remembered that Pollock had put that part very prettily while she stood twisting her hands, trying desperately to think of something to make him change his mind.

"Tell them about the pigs," she had heard herself urging Tony as a last resort, "and how he took the strap to you day before yesterday."

So Tony Quinn had told them, and even Pollock had looked thoughtful and asked a question or two that made hope flare up in Hepatica's heart again.

"It ain't that I minded the chores," Tony had insisted, "though anybody round here'll tell you he puts 'em on so hard he can't get a hired man to stay. I wouldn't of minded the mush and sour milk so much an' never gettin' off or havin' a whole suit, but I won't slaughter no pig, not for nobody. It's awful when they run gruntin' and squeakin' into a corner of the pen an' you have to go after 'em with a knife. I done it once an' I won't ever again. I don't care if he did take the strap to me. You can see he did, if you don't believe me."

Hepatica closed her eyes again remembering how he had jerked off the cotton shirt he wore, and how ugly and purplish those welts had looked across his scrawny shoulders and back. She had stared at the marks in fascination, but Mabel and Flossie had made little shrieks and T.T. had turned away, clicking her teeth in sympathy. Well, they had done the trick better than words; better than Tony's eager eyes, or her own insistence. There had been more talk and a good many more objections, but she had known it would come out all right. And it had. When they had packed their things and straggled out to The Cooley House across the street, they had left him behind with Jerry and Chi-Chi and Molly who were going to sleep on benches in the men's dressing room and be up early to get the baggage to the station before the eight-nineteen train they were taking to Wilsonville.

"Good night," Tony had said as she had left with Titania, "see you in the morning." How easy it had been, not the way she had thought it would be talking to someone your own age and not a freak either!

Now it was morning—her birthday, and things would never be the same again. Someone was whistling on the street under their window, “Oh, dear, what can the matter be?” Hepatica smiled to hear the familiar notes coming so briskly from unseen lips, growing fainter every second till they were lost at last and only sparrows in the tree outside kept up their fragmentary conversations. She smiled at the shadows of leaves that patterned the window shade; at the sharp, bright patches of spring sunshine falling on the roses of the Brussels carpet; she smiled to see her scalloped petticoats and the blue poplin dress with its tating collar waiting for her across a chair, waiting to be part of this new-found friendship that had come so miraculously almost before the wish had left her.

“T.T.,” she cried, sitting bolt upright in bed with such suddenness that its ancient springs rattled none too reassuringly, “wake up! It’s most seven o’clock!”

“Goodness, Patty,” the midget blinked herself awake, “you scared me out of a year’s growth, and I was havin’ the nicest dream too—all about stayin’ at the Murray Hill Hotel, in New York, you know, the one we passed with the marble lobbies and gold furniture. Oh, dear, what a bed,” she thumped the mattress with one small clenched fist, “it’s stuffed with corn cobs I guess. Took me hours to get to sleep last night, and you dead to the world in a minute. But you shouldn’t have worn those beads to bed, dearie. It gives you rheumatism or something. Anyway they’ll tarnish, even real gold ones like these.”

But Hepatica was up and at the window, leaning out to the cool, sweet air.

“It is the first of May,
It is the first of May,
Heigh-ho, the cherry O,
It is the first of May,”

she sang, making up words to fit the tune of a game she had often watched other children playing, hanging as far over the sill as she dared to catch a glimpse of the cherry tree by Masonic Hall. Yes, there it was, a crooked drift of white between the buildings, sunny and shining, but not so eerily lovely as last night in the dusk.

“For pity’s sake, don’t hang out the window in your nightgown!” shrilled T.T. “Anybody’d be scandalized to see you.”

Bacon and eggs and coffee at the station counter with the high revolving stools; Tony Quinn grinning a sly greeting across the waiting room, because

Joshua Pollock was taking no chances on his being seen with the troupe.

“Not that I think that farmer’d come after him and make trouble,” he told the rest as they waited for the train, “but it’s just as well to have him get on board and sit by himself. We’ll be out of the state by noon and then it won’t matter. What do you think about his costume, T.T.? Mabel and I kind of thought something in the military line would look nice. Plenty of brass buttons when he beats the drum.”

“Well, you want to be sure it don’t look too much like Chi-Chi’s.” The midget snapped the clasp of her alligator-skin bag, and lifted her left eyebrow. “Wouldn’t do to have folks get ’em mixed up!”

“I guess she must feel pretty good to-day,” thought Hepatica hearing this. “She never talks back to Joshua unless she’s all right.”

The train was a slow local one. It stopped at every smallest wooden-soap-box of a station along the way. There was a wailing baby at one end of the car, and at the other a small boy who went plunging from his seat to the water cooler and back, spilling cups full as he passed. Still, Hepatica didn’t mind. She didn’t even mind about Tony’s not sitting with them, because he would be doing that soon. Now and then she would steal quick looks at him where he sat in a seat at the farther end, reading some papers he had picked up in the station. He looked different by daylight, as different as the cherry tree had, but still the same really. Only this morning his hair didn’t stand up about his thin, palish face in quite such dark disorder. His eyes looked less popping and scared, and it seemed to Hepatica that his shoulders were not hunched so high. Maybe that was because of those welts he had shown them. She shuddered, suddenly remembering how painful they had looked.

The conductor had been kindly disposed toward animals. He wasn’t the sort to make them keep the covers of Chi-Chi’s and Molly’s traveling baskets shut tight.

“Go ahead, take them out,” he had said when Jerry explained what was inside. “This is no weather to be cooped up, only don’t let them make free of the car and scare any old maids. I had that happen once on my route and I ain’t forgot the screechings—they didn’t come from the animals either!”

How they had laughed as he winked and passed up the aisle. Jerry had Molly on the seat beside him, but the monkey wanted to come to Hepatica. He liked the pleasant softness of her lap and the blue poplin. She held him close to the window, wishing it were possible to have it open a crack. But even her father hadn’t been able to budge it.

“Spring, Chi-Chi,” she said under the grinding rumble of the train, and the monkey scratched his ear in solemn approval.

They were rushing through the kind of country she liked best, with newly plowed fields striped in green and brown. Sudden brooks, foaming and tawny, appeared and disappeared in woods that were misty with spring leaves. Such tender, greenish tassels were hung out everywhere and the fiery tips of maples bright as October but much too small to belong to any month but May. Wild chokecherry trees rose now and again in delicate, cloudy white. There were bright green rolls of skunk cabbage wherever brooks flowed through wooded places, and when they came out into sunny clearings or open fields marsh marigolds followed the water in a fringe of living gold. Calves and mottle-coated colts on ridiculously long legs were in pasture; boys fished in flat-bottomed boats; and sometimes men plowing paused to wave as the train sped by. It seemed impossible to Hepatica that she could ever have felt about spring as she had last night.

Titania Tripp sat facing her on the turned-back plush seat. She looked smaller than usual because her feet, struck out straight before her, were still several inches from the edge, let alone dangling over. Sometimes she dozed, her head, in its fluted straw with the bunched violets, lolling to one side; sometimes she peered intently at the country beyond the windowpane, pointing things out to Hepatica that she had already noticed for herself.

“See, Patty, that orchard! My, my, but the trees are pretty. Always put me in mind of pop-corn balls when they’re so full of bloom.” Or again as the train pulled up at another way station, “Mercy, another stop? Call this a town? *La Fayette Ville*.” She spelled the name aloud scornfully. “I guess if that Frenchman had known what he was comin’ to he’d have stayed home. Still, it might be worse, and that’s a real sweet little house across the field there, just about my size.”

“It’s a smoke house, T.T., must be with that great chimney.”

“Well, I don’t care. I could fix it up with curtains at the window and a garden in front, and . . .”

Hepatica laughed.

“I could never come and visit you,” she pointed out, “at least I’d have to sit outside on the grass if I did. You know even if I doubled over I could never get through that door.”

T.T. was always seeing little houses she wanted and Hepatica was always having to explain their difficulties to her. She had begun doing so

when she was barely able to talk. “You’re so practical, you’d ought to go far,” the midget often told her with an affectionate tap of her twiglike fingers.

They had to change trains at noon, and there was half an hour’s wait at a place called Sodom Junction. T.T. made jokes about that name, too, but she pointed out that at least the junction part was something to count on.

“You can always be sure of junctions havin’ a lunch counter,” she remarked as Hallelujah swung her off the steep steps and set her down beside their piled-up baggage and the animals.

Faces pressed close to car windows to see their exodus, and the station stragglers all gathered round with curious interest.

“Say, Sissy,” sang out one of the men lounging on the platform, “what did they give you to grow on?”

He winked at Hepatica with sharp, small eyes, and a neighboring crony spat out tobacco juice and answered with a grin, “Shucks, Sam, can’t you see she swallowed gunpowder when she was a baby an’ it made her shoot right up!”

Hepatica joined in the shouts of laughter that greeted this sally, but she was glad when the train steamed away again and the lumbering mail wagon and station hack rattled off. Several small boys lingered, their snub noses already sprinkled with early freckles, their mouths gaping over the wonders of “Pollock’s Freaks and Fandangos,” their eyes round and blue as berries. The youngest one had a grimy lollypop. He wanted to offer it to Chi-Chi but he was afraid. Hepatica felt sorry for him and took pity on his shyness.

“Chi-Chi mustn’t have candy,” she explained kindly, bending down to the little boy. “It might make him sick. But he’s real tame if you want to pet him.”

But he couldn’t bring himself to come any nearer two such extraordinary creatures, and so Hepatica left him still staring and sucking while she rejoined the others at the lunch counter.

Now that they were over the state line Tony could sit with them. He and Titania Tripp had already begun a spirited conversation when Hepatica came in. She could tell this even before she made out any words by the way the violets were wagging on the midget’s hat. She slipped into the empty place between Tony and her father. It seemed to have been saved for her.

“I’ll put Chi-Chi in his basket while we eat,” Jerry said, his mouth already full of stew. “Afterwards we’ll take him an’ Molly over to that meadow across the tracks. There’ll be time to give ’em a sniff of green. The station agent says our train’s most always late.”

Tony Quinn hardly said a word to her all through the meal, but that was because T.T. kept him so busy answering questions. It was pleasant sitting next to him, though, watching the way he made doughnuts and coffee and pie disappear.

“Hey, young feller,” remonstrated Joshua Pollock from across the counter, “watch out you don’t burst that jacket of yours! Acts like he was aiming to rival you, Mabel, don’t he?”

“He’d better not try!” Mabel reached for her third cream puff and added more sugar to her coffee. “A fat lady’s one thing, but fat men freaks don’t have any kind of following.”

“Well, once I get him that show outfit he’ll have to stay the size to fit it,” Pollock announced. “I’m laying enough out on him now to eat up most a month’s profits.”

“You quit talkin’ profits an’ losses, Josh,” T.T. piped up with a grimace, “it’s enough to take away anybody’s appetite to hear you! What’s become of the cheese?”

“There, I guess maybe I ate the last piece,” apologized Hallelujah, sheepishly looking down at the plate he had just cleared. “I didn’t notice till it was all gone.”

“Sorry, m’am,” the lunch-counter man told her. “I’d have laid in more if I’d known you folks was goin’ to stop. Anything else I can get you?”

“Well, I suppose I can try a piece of the apple pie, though ’twon’t be the same.” The midget peered playfully up at him from the edge of the counter which was on a level with her sharp chin. “You know the saying:

‘Apple pie without the cheese,
Is like a kiss without the squeeze!’ ”

Hepatica laughed with the rest, though this wasn’t the first time she had heard T.T.’s little joke. But she wanted to laugh to-day. She wanted to skip and run, too, like Molly when Jerry let her off her leash on the grass across the tracks. She didn’t, of course, because it wouldn’t have been becoming in anyone fifteen years old and her size. But something in her wanted to all the same. She and Tony had gone over there with Jerry and the animals while

the rest lolled about on the hard seats of the station and Joshua Pollock sat in the ticket office and swapped stories with the agent. It was so much pleasanter outside Hepatica didn't see how he could.

They found a nice place half in shade under a willow tree that straddled a boulder. It wasn't such a big one, but by sitting close they could all get on it, and Hepatica said they must because the grass did seem to be just a trifle damp. Molly ran sniffing in circles, her pointed nose to the ground, her fraction of a tail tense with pleased importance. Chi-Chi wasn't allowed such complete liberty because of the damp grass and his sudden dashes up trees, but he had the run of the sunny rock and as far as his long chain would let him explore. Sometimes he brought things back to Hepatica—a dead twig, a dried seed pod, or a hastily pulled handful of new grass, all of which she accepted graciously.

“He likes you a lot, don't he?” said Tony, watching this pantomime with his one-sided smile.

“Well, he really likes Jerry best,” Hepatica admitted honestly, “but my lap's more comfortable.”

“He's mine,” Jerry told them between puffs of his pipe, “I give him his grub an' he knows it, but he makes for Patty every chance he gets. He's one that likes the women best, lots of monkeys are that way, an' I don't know's I blame 'em.”

“Wonder if it's true we all come from monkeys,” Tony went on, absently chewing grass shoots into a cud. “I read that in some papers they had at the place I worked in 'fore I went to Hodge's. I wouldn't wonder if there was something in it, the way their hands look, so pink and human. What do you think?”

“Well, maybe,” Hepatica thought. She wouldn't quite commit herself, it felt a little queer at first having opinions with somebody new and strange. “How old are you?”

“Most seventeen, but I can pass for eighteen any day. How old are you?”

“Fifteen. To-day. Too bad you didn't come in time for the party. We always have it the night before, a cake and everything.”

“You don't look that old, not in the face.”

Hepatica felt herself turning red under his sudden scrutiny—she who was so used to curious stares that she always took them as a matter of course.

“It’s my hair, I guess,” she said, pushing back one of the long fair curls that had strayed over her shoulder from the tying behind. “I can’t put it up on account of Pollock wanting me to keep looking twelve for the show.”

“Yellow hair’s nice—for a girl, I mean,” Tony wagged his own dark head approvingly, “but it makes a feller look like a Willy boy.”

“My father has it,” Hepatica pointed out, “and I guess he never looked like a Willy boy.”

“I guess not!” Jerry slapped his knee with a loud guffaw at the notion.

“Well, he’s a giant,” Tony reminded them. “That makes everything different.”

They made willow whistles from the new shoots. At least Tony made them, his fingers very deft and brown as he hollowed out the soft pith with an old jackknife. Hepatica watched in fascination as he cut and pushed and peeled the wood that smelled so keenly of fresh sap. She had never known about willow whistles before.

“Gee,” Tony exclaimed when she told him, “I thought everybody had ’em when they were little. ’Course I ain’t tried my hand at makin’ any for quite awhile. Had too many other things to do.”

He put the first finished one to his lips and worked his fingers along the little holes he had cut; and actually a thin, sweet pipe came out—not quite a tune, and yet there were notes like bubbles or the places in a brook where the water goes over stones with a quick gurgle. Hepatica was enchanted; Molly barked, and Chi-Chi stopped his exploring to listen with his head cocked on one side.

“Say now, that sounds great,” Jerry admired. “I ain’t heard one since I was a little shaver.”

“Oh, let *me* try.” Hepatica could hardly wait to put her lips to the freshly cut end of wood. But though she puffed her cheeks out and blew with all her breath, she couldn’t make it sound the way Tony had.

“It’s a trick,” he told her, “but you’ll get the hang of it. You blow too hard, and you don’t keep your tongue puckered right.”

He went on whittling another and Hepatica tried to follow his directions, resulting in uncertain squeaks and shrill blasts. All the time she felt happiness streaming over her in clear waves like sunlight and the moist spring air. Something deep inside her stirred. It was an inner screw of sharp, pleasant pain that made her feel light and shaken. She must try to remember

it always—this light on grass and gray-green willow leaves; the pale sprinkling of bluets a little way off; Chi-Chi, blinking in the sun, his tail curled like a brownish fern frond; a red-winged blackbird heading for that thicket, its flaming side toward her as the dark wing lifted, and Tony's quick fingers and puckered lips making a willow shoot give back the spring in a soft, sweet string of little notes.

If only it could last forever, or even just a whole afternoon! But already Hallelujah was sending out a hail from the station platform, and an engine snorted its distant warning.

CHAPTER IV

“It goes like this.” Tony picked the notes out with one finger on the dusty keys of the upright piano in the hall where Jerry and Hallelujah were already unpacking properties behind what passed for scenery. “Dum de, dum da, dum da, da, da . . .”

Hepatica, hanging over the rosewood instrument, frowned softly, trying to fit the printed words of the song to his drumming. She read them over slowly, painstakingly. The little black notes climbing up and down their lines of fencing confused her no matter how hard she tried to connect them with the sounds they stood for. Tony was so quick in everything he did. It made her feel extra slow and clumsy. She didn’t blame him for growing impatient. He was right, though, about making her learn new songs and discarding “The Last Rose of Summer” and the paper rose petals. He was right about everything. Even Joshua Pollock admitted he’d put new life into the Freaks and Fandangos.

“Now come on, let’s try it with the banjo.” His fingers were already tightening the strings. “I’ll play to here,” he tapped the sheet of music, “and when I nod my head you begin.”

The song was called “Annie Rooney” and the man in the music and stationery store had assured them it was the most popular hit in New York. That had decided Tony, though for herself Hepatica had preferred one called “Half Past Nine.” Tony finished his introductory pickings at the strings and she began. It had a nice, easy chorus part that she swung into with gusto, glad to reach it after the more intricate ups and downs of the explanatory verses:

“She’s my sweetheart, I’m her beau!
She’s my Annie, I’m her Joe!
Soon we’ll marry—never to part!
Little Annie Rooney is my sweetheart!”

It was hard at first for her to keep with the banjo. She had grown so used to the music-box accompaniment, and then often Tony put in extra bits on the spur of the moment. The way she went over and over the songs till she had them fixed forever in her mind annoyed him. He was impatient, quick to vary things. He couldn’t understand what made her so plodding.

“You’re slower’n cold molasses,” he said after they had gone through it for the seventh time. “If you make me play that through once more my thumb’ll crack open.”

“But that part in the middle where I have to go high—we kind of don’t keep together right.”

“Well, who cares, long’s we end up without gettin’ too far off key? It’s a pity you can’t pump a pipe organ, you’d never give out.”

“Yes, I got plenty of breath,” Hepatica admitted smiling.

“Wish’t you lend me a mite.” Titania Tripp spoke up from one of the wooden benches near by. She had dropped down there to listen and neither of them had noticed her. “How ’bout you two goin’ out and gettin’ me a bottle of root beer an’ some pretzels? That’s all I feel like before the afternoon show.”

“All right, T.T.” Tony was always ready to go anywhere, especially in a new town.

“And you might get me a cake of Cashmere Bouquet soap and half a pound of gum drops,” Mabel poked her head round the curtains to add. “Here’s some silver, Patty.”

The street seemed glaring after the darkness of the hall, and the sidewalks were filled with workers from a near-by factory, going home for the noon hour. They were jostled by hurrying girls, most of them bare headed in cheap gay dresses with full skirts, small waists and sleeves that puffed at the shoulders.

“Eyetalians,” Hepatica told herself, noticing their dark eyes and hair. She noticed, too, how they swung their bodies as they walked, and the way they chattered and laughed together and looked at Tony out of the corners of their eyes. She didn’t wonder they did. Tony looked so nice in the suit Joshua Pollock had bought him. No one would have guessed it came out of a second-hand store, he wore it with such an air, and his checked cap, just a little to one side. They looked at her, too, of course, but in a different way, and sometimes they snickered behind their hands. They made her feel conscious of her size again and how she towered above Tony; of her shoes that needed blacking and new heels, and her childishly tied-back curls. “Let’s go in here,” she said aloud at the first ice-cream parlor they passed, “it looks all right and it’s dreadful hot in the sun.”

Tony followed her in, and they found a marble-topped table in the corner. It was cool and pleasant there after the street.

“Pa don’t like playing these mill towns,” Hepatica told him. “He says the girls are a bold lot, but Josh always makes for them, they’re such good spenders.”

“Oh, they ain’t so bad,” Tony replied, “some of ’em are real high steppers. I like dagos, anyhow. My mother was one.”

“Tony, honest?”

“Yeah, where’d you think I got my first name from?”

“Why, I didn’t know. I didn’t think much about it, I guess. People’s names just seem to belong to them.”

“Gee, yours is funny enough. Well, anyhow, my mother was a dago. She worked in a pickle factory till she run off with my father. He was Irish, and fight—they’d beat the blazes out of each other—”

“Oh, Tony.”

“Well, they did. He was a jockey, a real good one, too, I guess. And he was a good spender when he had it. He got his neck broke when his horse threw him, Crack! just like that!” Tony snapped his fingers expressively and turned to the soda-fountain boy who had come to take their orders. “I want a chocolate soda with plenty of fizz to it. Same for you, Patty?”

“No, please,” Hepatica called her mind back to the spotted card the boy was holding out to her, “it comes up in my nose so. I’ll take a plain dish of strawberry ice cream.”

She wished Tony would tell her more of his personal history, she liked this part better than the orphanage incidents he sometimes brought out or the unpleasant details of the various jobs he had tried. Still one couldn’t help being interested in whatever he said. He made things seem so important and exciting, like a play in which he was the hero winning against fearful odds, with villains in the shape of cruel schoolmasters or stingy, mean people like old man Hodge.

“Go on, tell me about what happened then, after the horse threw your father in the race,” she urged, taking very small spoonfuls of ice cream to make it last a long time.

But he didn’t seem interested any more. He had turned his attention to a music machine he had discovered at the back of the store. It was the kind that would play three pieces for a nickel dropped into the slot in its middle. Soon he had it filling the place with sound. Such gay, brassy janglings, and yet always underneath those rumbling smaller tunes that went by the name

of minor. Hepatica couldn't help listening for them, even when she didn't want to because they made her feel sad.

"Listen," Tony was saying in her ear, "here's the one I was tellin' you about this morning. 'After the Ball.'"

"But it sounds kind of different to me."

"Wait till the chorus—now." He began singing the words softly, beating time with his finger tips on the table.

"After the ball is over—
After the break of dawn,
After the dancers leaving,
After the stars are gone,
Many a heart is breaking
If we could read them all—
Many a heart is breaking—
After the ball."

"Got another nickel, Patty?"

"I'm sorry, Tony, I haven't. I just brought enough for our ice cream."

"You've got all that change of Mabel's. Come on, she won't care."

"But I don't like to take any of that. Honest, I don't, Tony."

"Oh, all right then, Miss High and Mighty!"

Hepatica flushed. He needn't have called her that, and he needn't have said it so loud those two girls and the boy at the other table could hear. They had heard, too, she could tell from the looks they exchanged. Her spoon clattered on the thick white saucer as she laid it down.

"High and mighty, I should say so!" giggled one of those girls as Hepatica rose to go.

It didn't help any when she bumped her head against a dangling Japanese lantern she had forgotten about, or when she saw Tony's reflection in the mirror winking back at the two girls as he followed her out.

But there was one thing about Tony, he never held grudges long. He might be drawing his black brows into a scowl one minute and the next his teeth would be flashing in his widest grin.

"A flash in the pan, he is," the midget had said after one of his sudden shifts of mood, "not much like you, Patty. But you always did hang on to

your feelings from the time you were old enough to have any!”

As they came out from the drug store with Mabel’s purchases, they found themselves in a crowd that had gathered about one of the newfangled bicycles and a man who was exhibiting it. Hepatica had seen them before, in Philadelphia and New York that winter, but Tony had never met one outside a newspaper advertisement. He couldn’t be dragged away from the carriage block and the shiny wheels, an enormous one in front and a smaller one behind, that leaned against it, waiting for volunteer riders.

“I wouldn’t risk my neck on a contraption like that for ten dollars,” an old man near them was saying, though the exhibitor of the bicycle insisted it was easier than a rocking chair and far more thrilling.

Just to prove his point he sprang quickly on the very inadequate leather triangle of a seat and pedaled to the corner and back, his legs in checked trousers, a blur of giddy motion.

“Gee,” Tony breathed admiringly, “it looks easy as rollin’ off a log.”

“An’ I guess it is, young feller, just as easy as that!” the doubting old spectator replied with a headshake.

Hepatica plucked at Tony’s sleeve. “Come on back,” she reminded him. “They’re waiting for the things and we haven’t much time before the show.” But she couldn’t budge him.

“You go on back then,” he said, his eyes on the pedaling figure now returning so jauntily. “Here’s the stuff, I’ll be along soon.”

“Oh, dear,” Hepatica thought, taking the packages he thrust at her. “Oh, dear, I just know he’s going to try it.”

He could hardly wait for the man to dismount before he offered himself.

“Well, now, here’s an up-and-coming young chap,” the bicycle man proclaimed in loud, pleased tones. “Step right up on the carriage block. I like your spirit, sir.”

“Oh, Tony, I wish you wouldn’t,” Hepatica groaned. “You know it can’t be as easy as it looks, and you never even saw one till to-day.”

But she might as well have talked to the striped barber’s pole beside her. He was already there and the man helping him to mount.

“Nothing to it, you see, nothing at all,” the bicycle man was explaining reassuringly as he kept it from toppling while Tony slung his leg over. “Steady there. Keep your head up and your eyes fixed on the more distant

landscape. Don't look down, and don't grip the handle bars too tight. Now . . . ready. I'll start you off."

"Hooray! Hooray!" shouted some little boys who had crowded to the front between grown-up skirts and legs. "There he goes!"

Hepatica watched him in fascinated horror. He looked so perilously high and teetery perched up there above the wheels. Now the man had taken away his hands and Tony was going it all alone. His feet seemed to be working the pedals right, but the machine appeared to have a fit of staggers. It zigzagged from one side of the street to the other as if bent upon doing a Virginia Reel. Twice it careened uncertainly, then somehow righted itself. Hepatica breathed more easily the second time. Maybe Tony was getting the hang of it after all, only how would he ever manage that turn that had looked so simple when the man made it?

"Look out! Hi, there! Look out!"

Even the bicycle man lifted up his voice in a shrill shout of warning as the butcher's wagon and two big bays bore down from the other street. It didn't seem possible they could miss each other, though Tony was making wild efforts now to swing aside and the driver yelled at his horses and strained on the reins. Hepatica shut her eyes against the sight. Then there came a horrid sound of splintering and she opened them in time to see water spurting up from the stone trough on the corner as Tony went into it head first.

They were pulling him out when she reached it, and the bicycle man was rescuing what was left of his machine, while the driver made sure no harm had come to his horses.

"Oh, Tony," Hepatica cried as two men held him up between them, his face streaming with blood and greenish slime. "Are you hurt bad?"

"N-no, I g-g-guess not," he managed to splutter rather uncertainly between gasps. "I'd of been all right if that darned team hadn't come down on me like that."

"I know. Oh, dear . . ."

They were mopping him with a bandanna someone in the crowd had handed over. His face looked pretty white after they had most of the slime and mud off and his nose and a cut over one eye kept on bleeding steadily. His hair was matted to his head in dark spikes and he was so wet his clothes dripped little pools into the dust. He kept one arm pressed to his side and he looked about him in a daze.

“I told you not to do it,” the old man kept repeating. “There’s an enterprising young fool for you.” He fairly smacked his lips with shrewd satisfaction.

“Can you walk, Tony?” Hepatica pressed forward, her arms still full of the bundles she had somehow managed to hold fast even when she had run so hard. He nodded, his eyes very black in the paleness of his streaked face. “Then we’d better get out of here quick.”

She glanced behind her to the wreck of the bicycle and the two men haranguing each other in the midst of an interested group. They were growing more angry every minute. It was no time to stay, especially with a near-by clock striking one.

They got back to the hall somehow. Hepatica was almost as wet as Tony by that time because he had dripped all over her when she tried to help him. He could walk, but not too steadily, and his nose and cut still bled. But it was his arm that troubled Hepatica most. She could see it hang limp under his coat sleeve, and once when he stumbled against her on that side he winced and turned white enough to faint.

“It’s broken,” she thought, “sure as anything. Oh, dear, Josh will be mad as blazes if he can’t play this afternoon. I hope that bicycle man won’t come around and make trouble. He looked as if he might and if there’s any fine to pay I don’t know what we’ll do. I wish he hadn’t seen us together. Tony could get away without their finding him again maybe, but they’ll be sure to know I belong to the troupe. Oh, dear . . .” But aloud she said, “We’re almost there now, Tony. See, just round this corner.”

Hallelujah Hawks was smoking on the steps by the side entrance, his eyes searching the street for them. Hepatica beckoned to him frantically. She had never been so glad to see her father’s great bulk in all her life it seemed.

“He’s hurt,” she said in a quick breath. “I don’t know’s he can get up the steps by himself. Tony, it’s all right, here’s Pa.”

But Tony had gone all of a heap between them.

Hallelujah gathered him up and carried him in to one of the wooden benches. Hepatica followed still clutching the packages, her eyes dazzled and blinking after the glare of the noonday streets, her head reeling with panic and explanations.

“It wasn’t his fault,” she was saying over and over as they worked over him with cold water and T.T.’s smelling salts. “That man put him up to riding the bicycle. He told him it was easy. I was right there and I heard him.

I thought he was killed when he and that wagon got all mixed up together. But it wasn't his fault, Josh, honest it wasn't."

CHAPTER

V

There was no banjo playing at the afternoon or evening show and Hepatica scattered paper petals and sang “The Last Rose of Summer” with her thoughts on Tony who lay limp and uncomfortable on a mattress in the men’s dressing room. The doctor Adam had brought from across the street had set his arm and taken two stitches in the cut on his forehead. Nothing serious, he had said, though it would be a month before he could use his arm. Joshua Pollock bit furiously on his black cigar when he heard it. But there wasn’t time to scold, the afternoon audience on the wooden seats out front had already been kept waiting ten minutes.

Hepatica hardly needed any red on her cheeks she was so flushed and worried. She determined to give the best performance she knew how, that might make Joshua Pollock forget the accident. He was rolling off his speech about her as usual, but his mouth was set in an expression she knew and dreaded. The eye he turned upon her when he led her out was cold. If only lots of people bought her picture that would help. Yes, that might put him in a better humor. Her eyes darkened with anxiety as she followed him up and down the aisles.

“I must make them want one,” she told herself, searching for children and indulgent old men because they were the most likely customers.

She had never cared particularly before whether her pictures sold or not. Now it mattered so much. She smiled at two little girls sitting on either side of a fat grandmother in black silk and held out the photograph temptingly. They were going to get one. That would make the children two seats away tease for one too, and across the aisle was a man with whiskers and a gold-headed cane who might be counted on for another. She smiled at him persuasively, sprinkling a handful of paper petals on his knee and veined old hands.

“Oh, please, do,” a voice deep inside her was pleading, “you would if you knew how important it is.”

He winked and handed over a dime. She scarcely felt the pinch he gave her arm as she turned away.

Five sold so far. Joshua Pollock’s shoulders relaxed their stiffness somewhat. Hepatica noticed this with relief. If she could just make it an

even half dozen. Smothered titterings came to her from farther back. She peered into the dimness and recognized those two girls and the boy from the ice-cream parlor, the ones Tony had winked at. Under her make-up she flushed and hastily looked away.

“All right, Patty.” Joshua Pollock was motioning her off.

She went back to the wings again, her hands shaking as they gripped the basket handle. Too bad she hadn’t managed to sell six pictures, but she knew the trick now. It wasn’t what you did or said so much as caring, caring so that you sent little feelers out to other people. She drew a long breath and pushed the hair back from her face. It made you tired and hot to put your mind on others like that, still it was somehow exciting.

“Don’t worry, Patty,” T.T. whispered to her later as they took their places for the grand finale, “ ’twasn’t your fault and he ain’t hurt bad, not really. The doctor gave Jerry some pills to give him so’s he can sleep to-night, an’ I guess Josh’ll get over his huff if we just ease him along.”

Hepatica nodded and shifted the midget to a more comfortable place in the crook of her arm. She wished she could feel more sure of Pollock, and there was still the evening show to be got through. She wasn’t surprised when she heard her father arguing with someone by the side door as soon as the curtain had rattled down.

“The bicycle man,” she told T.T. setting her on Flossie’s trunk and making for the door, “he’s come to make trouble.”

But the midget caught at her arm. “Don’t you go out there, Patty,” she said, “you leave him to Hallelujah an’ me.”

She scurried past, spry as some strange tropical grasshopper, her wig slightly askew and her yellow skirts ballooning. Hepatica watched her go with a flood of gratefulness. She knew Titania Tripp would be as good as her word. There was more determination in her scant three feet than in all the rest of them put together. “Spunk enough for fifty people, that’s what she’s got,” her father had often said, and it was true. The midget herself was the first to admit it. “Oh, yes,” she would say wagging her head in the queer birdlike way she had, “my folks always said the best things were put up in small parcels, meaning me, and no disrespect to Hallelujah or Patty. Giants have their place in this world, only there’s a difference in gifts.”

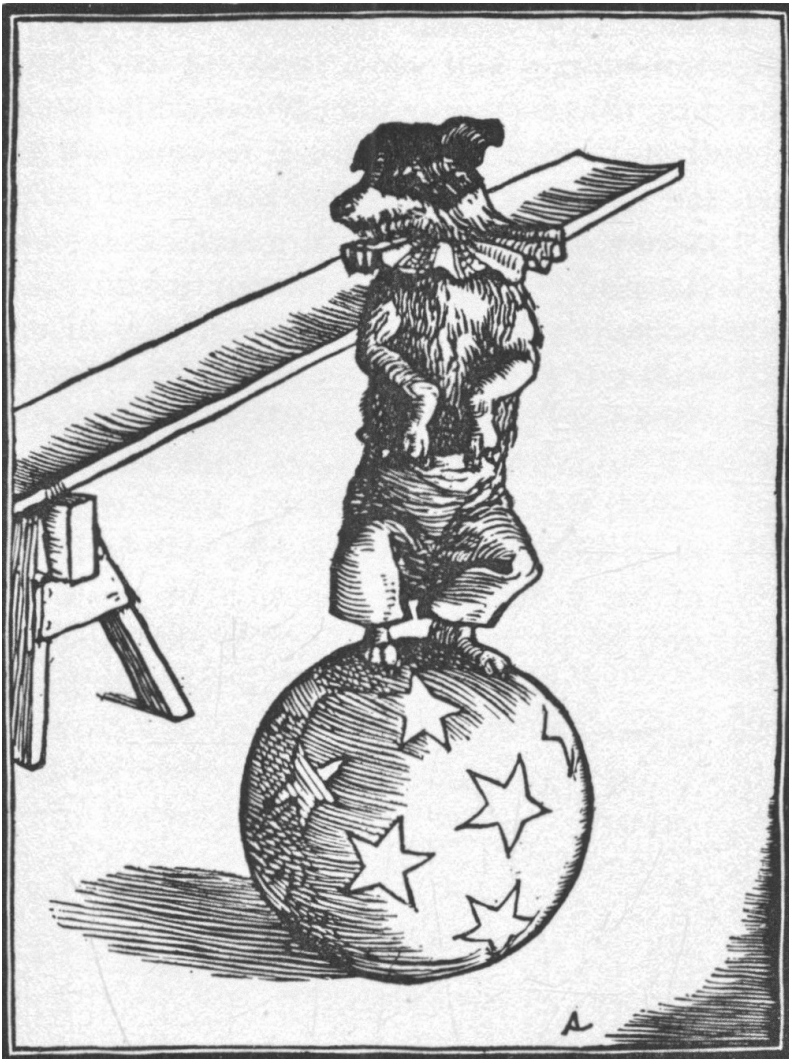
Hepatica strained her ears as the rumble of voices still went on outside, but she no longer felt apprehensive. The ache in her throat grew less; the band that had been buckling her heart ever since Tony had mounted the

bicycle suddenly loosened. Between them Hallelujah and Titania Tripp would manage. They didn't often join forces and when they did you could count on things coming out all right. She never knew how they got rid of him. It was enough for her that they had.

The days that followed were a pleasant haze to Hepatica. Tony wasn't a demanding invalid, but he had the faculty of making them all vie for his favor. Joshua Pollock refused to join in the general fuss they made over him, but he didn't scold when Mabel cooked special dishes and he only smiled indulgently at the way Jerry coddled him, with as much concern as if he had been Molly or Chi-Chi.

"That boy'll never want for comfort in this world," he remarked once. "It's a caution the way he has you all running."

"Well, why not?" Titania Tripp had answered him as she fished in her bag for the peppermints and lemon drops that she had always brought out for Hepatica in the old days. "It's our legs that do the trottin'."



Flossie taught him how to tell fortunes by cards and Hallelujah, Jerry, and Adam often let him play games of whist with them, dealing and shuffling for him and helping when he couldn't manage with his one good hand. As for Hepatica, she was always about, ready to run errands or go out in search of ice cream if the day was warm, or bring back papers and magazines to keep him amused. Tony was a great hand for reading. He could recite poetry by the yard and as the pain in his head and arm grew less he often read aloud to her as she sewed on her new dotted muslin or darned her father's socks.

It was a fortunate thing for them all that about this time Pollock heard of a seaside resort in New Jersey where it looked as if a show like his could do a thriving summer business.

“Folks that can’t afford Atlantic City or Asbury Park go there,” he told them, “not much doing nights, so’s we’d ought to be able to catch their money. It’s worth a try anyway. I guess none of you’ll mind letting off this junketing for a spell.”

So it was on a mid-June afternoon that they left the cindery heat and grinding rumble of the train for little streets of wooden houses straggling down to yellow sand and blue water. Tony, who had slumped limp and grouchy in his seat during the trip, revived almost at the first sniff of salty air, and Hepatica’s spirits rose with the suddenness of a balloon cut from its tether. Molly tugged so hard at her leash that Jerry could hardly keep up with her, and Chi-Chi wrinkled his small gray face and blinked contentedly into the strong sea sunshine.

“Nice, eh?” Hallelujah paused to beam at his daughter while he hoisted the heaviest valises to his shoulder.

“Oh, Pa, it does smell so good. I’d forgotten.” She gave his hand a little squeeze before she bent to help T.T. with the alligator-skin satchel that had got the best of her.

“Yes, this would put the breath of life in a fence post,” the midget agreed, trotting beside Hepatica as they followed the distant shapes of Joshua and Mabel along the rickety board walk, “I mean to have steamed clams for supper to-night if I have to go dig ’em myself. I declare I feel like all possessed!”

Tony laughed in the way that showed all his white teeth and Hepatica joined in.

“Oh, my hat! There it goes!”

Hepatica’s straw saucer with the bunches of daisies and plaid bows was rolling merrily down the street that ended in blue water as if bent upon becoming a little ship. She sped after it, her curls whipping about her face, sand spurting up under her quick steps. She laughed aloud in a burst of exuberance as she rescued it and waited for the other two to catch up with her. Who would have supposed just getting off a train at a station platform marked “Bright Sands” could so change the feelings of nine people, a fox-terrier dog, and a monkey?

Even the three boarding-house keepers who eyed them coldly and refused to give them rooms didn't matter, or the fact that the one who finally did agree to take them wasn't enthusiastic. Her name was Mrs. Pringle and she had been rather reluctant when Pollock approached her with his best manner. Still, her place needed painting so badly and had so little waterfront view it was plain she couldn't be too particular. She almost backed out of the bargain, though, when she saw the whole troupe together.

"It's not that I've got any objection to freaks," she had said, looking them over appraisingly from under her elaborately curled false front. "Goodness knows, I've seen about every kind in my time. It's the wear and tear." She fixed disapproving pale blue eyes upon Hallelujah and Hepatica. "I don't want to be personal, but I have to think of my furniture. It's bound to feel the strain," here she included Mabel in her glance, "even if I go to the trouble of getting new slats put in my biggest beds and the rocking chairs strengthened in the underpinnings. Take her now," she turned her eyes full upon Hepatica, "she'd be as hard on a room as if she was triplets."

"Well, but look here, there's me!" T.T. piped up brightly from Flossie's portmanteau where she had seated herself. "You forget I won't make no impression on your furniture at all. I may travel on a half-fare ticket, but I'm askin' no favors round here, and if I ate twice my size at every meal you'd still be in a pretty penny on my board."

"There's something in what you say of course." Mrs. Pringle cleared her throat, drew out the watch from a pocket at her belt, and then dismissed her objections with a gesture of her puffy hands. "I suppose I can make an exception this time. It's still a little early in the season. I don't expect my best people till August. But I can't have those animals upstairs. There's a little room off the kitchen ell I guess you can have, but you'll have to keep them tied up or the place'll get a bad name."

She led the way up the steep flights of matting-covered stairs, her flared skirts swishing importantly. Tony lingered below with Jerry and the animals. He winked and rolled his eyes in Mrs. Pringle's direction as Hepatica turned to join the procession.

"Come on out awhile," he suggested. "We'll have most an hour to walk around before it's supper time."

"All right," Hepatica told him over the scroll-work stair rail. "I won't be five minutes."

How foolish words like that sounded she thought as she went up. “All right” and “five minutes” when you felt like this—a queer glow deep inside you spreading out in little tingles to your very finger tips and toes.

The room Mrs. Pringle had allotted to Hepatica and T.T. was if anything more shabby than most they had shared. There were frayed places in the matting where the bed and bureau legs had worn it away, and the wall paper was peeling and stained all round the washstand in the corner. One chair looked as if even the midget’s weight would collapse the frail cane seat, and the other, though of sturdier stuff, sagged in the middle like a hammock. Over the bed hung a motto in red worsted work, “Rest for the Weary,” but moths had been at it, so from a distance it read “Rest or the ear.” A two-year-old calendar was the only other decoration. It showed a girl with the smallest possible waist and a towering topknot of black hair, bending over a bush loaded with incredibly fat pink roses. Underneath the picture was printed:

“Gather ye rose buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying.”

The roses and the girl’s pale blue dress were dotted with fly specks, and someone had drawn a curling mustache above her cupid’s-bow mouth. But she seemed to be above such trifles. Hepatica gave her a little nod as she turned to go downstairs. It was as if she and that girl on the calendar shared some secret between them—she didn’t know just what.

“Bye, Patty,” T.T. called after her from the scooped-out depths of the good chair. “Be sure you keep your hat anchored down. This sun plays the mischief with a skin like yours, so watch out for freckles.”

Pollock, Hallelujah, and Adam Crump were off in search of a place to give the show, and Jerry had taken Molly and Chi-Chi for an airing. Hepatica could see him far down the lengths of beach as she and Tony struck off from the board walk.

“Tide’s goin’ out,” Tony told her, “let’s go down where it’s left the sand hard. We can walk easier there.”

“My shoes are full already,” Hepatica laughed. “It gets in round the buttons.”

“Feels funny between your toes, don’t it?” He grinned.

Talking about sand and toes and shoe buttons to a boy like Tony! How foolish she had been to think it would be hard and different that night she had seen the girls and boys out on the steps of the May Festival. She could

tell him anything that came into her head—well, almost anything, just as if she had known him forever instead of barely six weeks. He liked her, too, even when he teased her, she knew he didn't mean it to hurt her feelings. If he did sometimes that was her fault for caring too much what he thought of her. She always tried not to let him see if she minded.

“Now don't get touchy,” he would say, screwing up his eyes into those dark slits that made his thin face so merry and tantalizing.

She almost wished his arm would stay broken for good and all he was so much nicer to her since it had happened.

The hard-packed sand was smooth to their feet now, the sun behind them warm to their backs. They walked between the moving white line of foam, where the nearest waves broke, and the wavy littering of seaweed and shells left by the farthest reach of tide. Sleek kelp and wet weed tufts were ruddy in the late afternoon light that made sand specks glitter, and turned the sea water left in scattered shells into little mirrors. Their two shadows, uncannily dark and long, wavered before them on the damp lengths of sand.

“Look, Tony,” Hepatica cried, “we're stepping right on our own shadows.”

“Sure thing!” he laughed back at her over his shoulder. “If 'twasn't for my arm I'd turn a handspring and catch up to mine!”

In a sudden spurt of gayety he began to prance and caper before her, waving his good arm and snapping his fingers like castanets. She stared, fascinated to see how his shadow mingled with her own, now broke away, now joined hers again. It made her feel queer to see them so. She couldn't say why, but it frightened her somehow. Shadows had no right to get in front of you like that.

“It's like walking backwards, into the past,” she found herself thinking, surprised that she should have such an idea, “and that part about Old Time in the rose-bud poem.”

But Tony was signaling her to walk faster. He was already catching up to Jerry and Molly who were the center of an admiring group of little girls and boys with pails and spades, and some men in bathing suits.

On and on they went till the last house was left behind for a low procession of dunes where the sand had been heaped in a natural wind-break. Coarse grass grew along them like fur on animals' backs, and here and there beach pea vines and wild roses had got a foothold. They were always losing Molly in such tangles from which she emerged, scratched and

excited, her tail stiffened, her barks shrill against the thud and thunder of breaking waves. Jerry made her leash fast to a wooden beam, half buried in the sand, and flung himself down beside it. Tony lay down, too, his head in the crook of his good arm. Chi-Chi curled up in a gray ball between them, quiet as some tiny, ancient idol except for occasional scratchings. Hepatica went farther back among the dunes to hunt roses to bring back to T.T. They were mostly past because it was so sunny and sheltered there. But she found a few of the sharp, tightly rolled buds, and loosely opened flowers. It was hard to break them from the tough, thorny stems. She pricked her fingers a good many times and lost some of the brightest petals trying to shake them free. There was a fierceness to the color that set her heart clamoring. She took off her hat and put those she had gathered into it, letting the sun beat warm on her head. Her feet sank ankle deep into the hot sand as she made her way back, though the air felt cool to her cheeks—cool and moist from blowing across that clear, tossing waste of blue.

Jerry was asleep when she rejoined them, but Tony rolled on his side and smiled at her out of half-shut eyes. She sank down near him with her back to the rise of the dune. He reached over and laid a dried starfish in her lap. She touched its faded frail points softly and returned his smile. She had never felt just like this before, with no need of words or even of thoughts. All that mattered was to stay perfectly quiet there in that hollow of warm sand; to give oneself up to being part of all that color and sound and shine. She knew with a sudden certainty that she did belong to it. They all did—Tony and Jerry, Molly, Chi-Chi, and that little starfish in her lap, the wild roses, and blowing dune grass. Maybe she would never be so sure of anything in her life again.

Jerry grunted and struggled into a sitting position, rubbing sand out of his mustard-colored hair and mustache.

“Most six o’clock,” he told them, consulting his old silver cartwheel of a watch, “time to make a straight wake back.”

Jerry had been to sea in his youth. He had got his muscles and tattooings there, but he seldom talked of it. Only now and then he spoke like that, with a nautical flavor creeping into his words. “Probably,” thought Hepatica, as she gathered Chi-Chi in one arm and her hat full of the wild roses in the other, “seeing the sea again made him do it.” She noticed that he squinted at the water in a knowing way, different from the looks other people gave it.

“I’ll race you from here to the first house,” Tony said as they started to retrace their steps.

But Hepatica shook her head. “Not with Chi-Chi and the roses,” she pointed out, “and besides,” she looked down at him, suddenly conscious of the height that separated them, “I can’t do things like that, Tony. You know Josh says we mustn’t ever give free shows.”

“That’s right,” Tony gave one of his quick shrugs, “I forgot about your being a freak.”

He was off like a streak with Molly at his heels.

Hepatica watched him go. She was happier than she had ever been in her life before. Tony’s last remark was all she had needed to complete her day. That, and the taste of salt on her lips.

CHAPTER VI

Bright Sands was making elaborate preparations for the Fourth of July. If only the good weather held there was no telling how many visitors might descend by train and the chunky white steamer with its tireless paddle wheel that arrived each noon and departed at six. Everywhere bunting was stacked in readiness to be put up the night before, and the little shops along the waterfront were suddenly gay with red packets of firecrackers, boxes of fat torpedoes, and mysterious rockets and pin wheels waiting to burst into fiery bloom from their sticks and cardboard tubes.

Hepatica, burrowing among a dusty pile of magazines in Mrs. Pringle's parlor, could hear Titania Tripp discussing the approaching holiday from the piazza beyond.

"My, but I dread all the pops and bangs," the midget sighed for the hundredth time. "Chi-Chi went off his head last year, and Molly had a fit, an' I felt worse'n the pair of 'em. Wish't I could get in a feather bed an' stay till the racket's over an' done with!"

"I don't blame you a mite," Mabel agreed from the rocking chair Mrs. Pringle had dedicated to her three hundred pounds. "What I dread is those little boys bringing torpedoes in their pockets and then throwing them so they go off right under your feet in the middle of your turn. I told Josh he's got to stay out front every minute and keep a sharp watch out for those little devils, but I expect he won't, and Tony's too busy now he can play again."

"I expect he and Patty are down practicing their part now?" Flossie asked. "Hope to goodness he don't do nothin' else to himself 'fore the summer's over."

"He'd better not!" Mabel spoke up quickly. "He ain't paying his way yet as it is, what with the doctor saying he wasn't to beat the drum for another month. Still, he's a smart boy—got ideas."

"Too many of 'em sometimes," T.T. put in. "Still, Patty likes havin' him round."

"I ain't seen her look so pretty in a long time," Flossie went on while Hepatica bent over the tattered copies of *Harper's* with flushed cheeks,

knowing she ought not to be listening. “She needed to know somebody her own age, I guess.”

“Bound to happen sooner or later.” The midget spoke in the voice that made Hepatica know, without seeing her, that she had tilted her head to one side in a way she had when she was about to give an opinion. “Only I’d feel easier if he was like us.”

“You mean if he was a freak?” Flossie asked. “Goodness, I can’t see it that way at all.”

“That’s because you ain’t one exactly, Flossie. You’n Adam have got your stunts, but it’s not like bein’ an outside same’s I am, same’s Hallelujah and Patty are. You’ll pass in a crowd an’ folks won’t take notice without you want ’em to, but we can’t ever do that. The sooner you quit tryin’, an’ begin to take some pride in bein’ different, the better. Am I right, Mabel?”

“Lord, I guess so.” The rocker creaked as she shifted her weight. “You talk me most out of my mind sometimes, T.T. I can’t stand it in all this heat. I’ll go down to the Hall if you don’t stop, though heaven knows that’s hotter’n an oven.”

Hepatica did not wait to hear any more. She gathered an armful of magazines, put on her hat and slipped out by the side door. It wasn’t likely that Tony was down helping her father and Jerry with the decorations; still, there was just a chance he might be.

“Hall” was hardly an appropriate name for the headquarters of Pollock’s Freaks and Fandangos, since it was only an unused boat house at the far end of the board walk. Still, it had the advantage of nearness to the water and two of the most popular hotels and the bathing pavilion. Tinkering by Adam, Jerry, and Hallelujah had worked wonders in the way of a platform, plank seats and curtained wings. Oil lamps hung on the walls and edged the makeshift stage. Bright new tin dish pans served as reflectors and the old blue curtain had been refurbished with gilt stars. It had taken the women members of the troupe two days to sew them on, but the effect was worth the effort. Indeed the old boat house had emerged resplendent, even Joshua Pollock was almost satisfied. So far business had been only fair, but everyone said the season never began till after the Fourth.

The day was turning out to be a scorcher and Hepatica picked her way along in the shade wherever there was any. All the little boxlike houses swam in the dazzling glare of sun on sand and sea, and the Surfside House and The Breakers had striped awnings that made sharp shadows of

themselves on the painted sides. She walked slowly, wishing she had not overheard what T.T. and Mabel and Flossie had said about her. She didn't want to be reminded of her size that morning, any more than she wanted to see the printed notice that flaunted its black letters at her from every fence and signboard. She turned her eyes away from it, but that didn't do any good because she knew what the letters said already.

FOURTH OF JULY DANCE. GALA BALL TO
BE HELD AT THE CASINO ON THE NIGHT
OF JULY 3D. CASEY'S BAND SPECIALLY
IMPORTED FROM NEW YORK. ELEGANT
REFRESHMENTS AND PRIZES. SOUVENIRS
FOR ALL. TICKETS:—

SINGLE 75 CENTS,
COUPLES ONE DOLLAR.

It had been up for a week now. She had seen Tony studying it at great length. She had also seen him strolling on the beach with the black-haired girl who took tickets at the bathing pavilion, and later with another just arrived on the *Claribel May*—a fair, pretty girl in flowered muslin and white leghorn. No words had passed between Tony and Hepatica about the dance, but she knew he was going. She even wouldn't be surprised if he took a girl from one of the cottages, though it was hard to scrape up acquaintances with them. Still, Tony had methods of his own. He was gifted that way. Pollock might complain that he could never lay hands on the boy between shows, but he knew as well as the rest of them that this helped bring in business.

"I do wish he'd just ask me to go to-night," Hepatica thought as she went on. "Of course I wouldn't go, so he needn't be so scared to."

Tony could dance beautifully, with the same easy grace that he did everything else. Once when there had been music near by and they were in the Hall together, he had tried to show Hepatica about waltzes and two-steps. She had tried so hard to follow his directions. She was conscientious about the steps and everyone said she was light on her feet, but though a small, secret hammer inside her seemed to pound in time to the music she could never quite give up all of herself to the swing and beat of it. Not as Tony could, his thin legs weaving in effortless patterns, his shoulders moving ever so little in time to the rhythm. Hepatica knew what her feet ought to do. She could even make them go through the motions when she was alone. But somehow trying to fit oneself to another pair of legs and feet was so different.

“Guess you’d better stick to solo work,” Tony had laughed. “You’n me must look about like a circus pony leading an elephant through a waltz. Come to think of it, elephants are real good dancers by themselves!”

“Well, I did feel kind of like one!” Hepatica had mopped her hot face and smiled. She hadn’t quite been able to manage a laugh. That was the last time he had mentioned dancing to her. She felt relieved, but hurt and anxious, too, whenever she heard waltzes or two-steps being played.

She found her father busy in the Hall, nailing festoons of red, white, and blue to the low rafters his head nearly brushed. Adam Crump and Jerry were also at work, decorating the sides and benches with crêpe paper, yards upon yards of it. Adam insisted that swallowing swords was twice as easy as getting the pesky stuff on straight, and Jerry grumbled because he would be sure to set himself and the place on fire if he lighted his pipe. He was always cross without tobacco smoke curling up from between his lips, besides he had lost his last week’s pay in Mike’s Pool Room by the station the last couple of nights.

“Glory Hallelujah, but it’s warming up a’ready!” her father greeted her, pausing to wipe his streaming face and rest a moment from the hammering.

“I should say it was, Pa. Feels like a hundred and ten in the shade.”

“I’ve a good mind to take a dip myself this morning,” Hallelujah said as he drove the last nail into a bow of bunting. “It’s nice over in that salt-water inlet the other side of the Light, and nobody round to bother. Want to come along?”

“I guess not. It’s pretty hot to walk that far, and besides they haven’t any suits at the pavilion big enough to fit me. I’ll just stay here with the animals till it’s time to go back and eat.”

She didn’t add that maybe Tony might be coming back after the *Claribel May* docked. His banjo was there in its green cloth case on one of the beams back stage. That meant he’d been down and left it for he always took it back to Mrs. Pringle’s every night. There wasn’t any harm in being there in case he should return to practice. She settled down with Molly and Chi-Chi under a square of canvas Jerry had rigged over some boards to make a little side porch. She had to fold herself double to get under it, but the shade was pleasant and a light wind came over the water. The sea was a flat, polished floor of bright blue. Only the nearer, irregular rows of white surf breaking gave a sense of motion. The curving lengths of sand were a glare in the noon sun. Here and there umbrellas dotted it like toadstools, making round pools

of shade for nurses and mothers to watch small diggers or splashers in bathing suits. Presently Hepatica could see her father going toward Lighthouse Point. In that dazzling light he looked enormous and solitary, as if he were some freak of the sea's fashioning, some battered beam or bulkhead cast above the tide line. He walked slowly, setting his feet down one after the other as if even there he must be careful not to hurt anything. His shoulders stooped, and he looked so patient and plodding she felt one of those sudden stirrings of affection that come upon one at sight of a familiar person or object, changed by distance and time into something altogether new and strange.

"I guess maybe I'd ought to have gone along with him," she thought.

But it was too late. He was almost out of sight now. She made a soft place for Chi-Chi in the folds of her gingham skirt and turned to the copies of *Harper's Magazine* she had brought. Hepatica wasn't much given to reading. She had picked it up in haphazard fashion from the letters on signboards and railway stations. She still read painstakingly. Tony could gobble three pages of print before she reached the last word of a paragraph, but if once a story caught her fancy she would read it with absorption to the end. She opened the copy nearest her, studying the pictures with half-hearted interest.

Afterwards Hepatica always felt sure that some special act of Providence had left those particular numbers for her in Mrs. Pringle's parlor. It must have been meant that she should read *Peter Ibbetson* then and there. She was never to think of it without the thudding of surf in her ears, the glitter of sun on sand and blue water whenever her eyes left the printed page, and the keen, bitter smell of salty air and drying seaweed. The pictures held her first. They were done with such vigorous, black lines that the people seemed to be moving across the paper with elegance and ease. Then the ladies were so beautiful and tall—tall as she had never seen anyone before except on circus and freak-show posters. There was one especially, the tallest lady of all, whose picture appeared again and again. She must be the heroine, and Hepatica felt instantly drawn to her.

"She's six feet if she's an inch," she told herself with delight, her eyes catching eagerly at the sentences below: " 'In the midst of the applause that followed that heavenly duet,' " she read in a soft whisper, " 'a lady and gentleman came into the room, and at the sight of the lady a new interest came. . . . ' "

On and on she read while the sea boomed its steady thunder and the sun climbed higher into the cloudless blue. People passed and repassed on the near-by board walk; children called shrilly at their splashing; decorous bathers bobbed between breaking waves, and the *Claribel May* discharged her load of visitors at the wooden pier, but Hepatica knew nothing of all this. She was in Passy with a little boy and girl who played in a flowering garden. Queer, foreign words stared at her from the pages, but they didn't matter. The pages were alive with something she had never known. She cried that Gogo must leave his sunny garden and go to a dismal London.

Tears rolled down her cheeks and made dark places on the front breadths of her dress. Several fell on Chi-Chi who looked up at her out of curious, small eyes, and still she read on, trance-like and happy. She could hear the music of that London ballroom. Her heart beat sympathetically at Gogo's meeting with the tall and lovely Duchess of Towers after all those years. She kindled to the romance of those two, so hopelessly separated from each other, yet whose love was great enough to transcend time and space and even prison walls. "Dreaming true"—you crossed the one foot over the other, so; you fixed your hands, and closed your eyes. Then all that was denied by day was yours for the taking, night after night. How simple it sounded as one read the magic words!

"Hepatica Hawks!" The midget's voice roused her at last. "Where under the canopy have you been keepin' yourself? It's most two o'clock an' dinner over an' done with an hour ago."

"Dinner?" Hepatica echoed the words in a daze. "I forgot all about it. I was reading."

"Well, I should say you must have been," T.T. went on. "Jerry said you didn't take no notice of him when he carried the animals back though he told you three times to come along."

Hepatica struggled to her feet, so cramped from sitting in one position she could scarcely stand. She gathered up the magazines and touched the tattered covers affectionately, taking one more look at the picture that made the Duchess of Towers look tallest.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, shaking the sand out of her skirts and turning to go to the ladies' dressing room, "it says 'to be continued,' and there aren't any more copies at Mrs. Pringle's."

Tony poked his dark head out from behind the curtains as she went by.

“Don’t you forget to come in for all you’re worth on the chorus of ‘After the Ball,’ ” he reminded her. “It’s hard pickin’ in there and my arm gets to achin’ after I’ve been at it awhile.”

“Maybe you’d ought not to try it again so soon, Tony.” Hepatica eyed him anxiously, trying to make him look as much as possible like the pictures in *Peter Ibbetson*. “You know what the doctor said about not overdoing it at the start, and it won’t be six weeks till day after to-morrow.”

“Oh, I’ll make out.” Tony waved his good arm with a grandiloquent gesture. “We’ve got to give ’em their money’s worth on the Fourth, and anyways I’m so sick of hearin’ you do ‘The Last Rose of Summer’ I’d have a pain in my head instead of my arm!”

Hepatica laughed good naturedly and went in to dress. She couldn’t get the story and those people in the drawings out of her mind, though she went through her part as well as she ever had. Better, in fact, her father said, listening from the wings to her singing of “After the Ball.” The new act was a great success. They had to repeat the chorus of that and “Little Annie Rooney” three times each. Hepatica’s voice took the high notes easily, and Titania Tripp, waiting for her turn by the door that gave on the makeshift porch, nudged Flossie who had come out to cool herself after her Hawaiian Belle act.

“Just listen to her, Flossie,” she whispered, “I declare she makes me want to cry though I don’t think so much of those songs. Yes, her voice is growin’ right along with her an’ you don’t have to worry about her not makin’ the high notes!”

Tony was in special good humor after the afternoon show. Joshua Pollock was so pleased with the way he had played that he had let him have four dollars on account without reminding him of the expense of his outfit, the six weeks lost through his bicycle accident, or the way he had been staying out till all hours of late.

“There’s a tintype man just opened a tent by the pier,” he told Hepatica, “let’s go down and have our pictures taken.”

Hepatica had no particular wish to have hers done. She did, however, want to go along with Tony, so she got her hat and fifty cents from the old wallet she shared with her father. She found him hammering away at a pile of new brass rings he was pressing into shape for the evening show. These were the souvenirs he sold at the end of his act and he had done exceptionally well with them of late.

“Sold eight this afternoon,” he told Hepatica proudly. “They say they make good napkin rings if you ain’t got too big a square to go in.”

He pounded a flat place on one side and scratched H.H. carefully there with a gimlet. They were extra-size curtain rings, bought by the gross, so profits were large on every sale. One of Hepatica’s earliest memories was of learning to count by them as they jingled in readiness along her father’s belt. He always wore a sample one on his middle finger. It was as much a part of him as the lock of hair that fell over his forehead, or the brown freckles across the back of his hands.

The beach and board walk were thronged with holiday crowds as she and Tony came out into the late afternoon light. So many children stood stock still in Hepatica’s path to stare up at her that she made poor progress, though the photographer’s tent was only a little way off.

“See, Papa—great big girl!” shrilled a child who looked like a doll, all bangs and bows and Hamburg lace. “Her name Liberty, too?”

Everybody within hearing laughed.

“Thinks you’re the Statue of Liberty, she does,” the little girl’s father announced proudly with a wink. “Now that’s what I call a compliment.”

Tony grinned when Hepatica caught up with him. “Lucky for you Josh didn’t hear that,” he said, “or he’d rig you up to-night in red, white and blue with a torch in one hand.”

“Not if I had anything to say about it,” she answered.

“Well, you wouldn’t,” he pointed out, “but I won’t tell on you, not this time.”

Hepatica had to stoop to clear the tent flap. Even so she struck her head on a support so smartly it made tears start in her eyes. She never felt very comfortable in tents. They seemed insecure and she always had an uneasy feeling that she might poke her head through the top. This one was especially cluttered and hot. It seemed to draw all the heat of the sand and to keep out any freshness of sea air. A queer, acid smell came from behind the curtain from which a tired little man in shirt sleeves emerged, wiping hands that were already dyed a deep yellow. His face was yellowish, too, but not from the developing chemicals. Hepatica kept wishing he didn’t have to cough every so often. Tony seemed all absorbed in the samples of groups and single poses hung about on screens, but Hepatica couldn’t help waiting to hear that rasping sound every time the man made it. She felt so sorry when he did. It made her seem so big and strong by contrast she felt

ashamed, especially when he was so anxious to please them and took such pains arranging the painted back drop and the bench and vase of paper flowers. When people looked tired and yet kept right on being kind and eager Hepatica always wanted to do something about it, so she let him take the four-for-thirty-cents kind of her, though she had only planned to buy two.

Tony was lavish enough for them both. He was taken standing and sitting, leaning on a rustic arbor, with his banjo, and wearing a wide-brimmed sombrero and spurs. Hepatica watched him across the stifling tent. She marveled at the easy way he draped himself about chairs and screens. But then he didn't have to think about his size as she did. He didn't suddenly find his head crashing against an upper beam, or have to draw back to avoid bearing down on a child underfoot.

"Now how about one together?" the little man suggested in his brightest, most professional manner. "You've got one more pose left."

Hepatica felt the red creeping over her face, and there was a long, painful pause before Tony answered.

"Well," he said at last without much enthusiasm, "all right. It seems like an awful lot to get on one plate."

But the photographer was explaining politely that he could get them both in by moving his camera farther away. Hepatica heard him hazily, above the dull buzzing in her head. He had them side by side now, against the gray-and-white screen with cat-tails and an old mill painted on it. Tony had taken off the sombrero and his dark, tousled hair touched the sleeve of her dress, just above the elbow. Towering there above him in the stuffy little tent, with the photograph man flitting about them like a worried bee, Hepatica felt a sudden overwhelming sense of her own size. She seemed to spread out in all directions from her own quickly beating heart. Tony wasn't small by any means, and yet here he was, as he had said himself, "like a circus pony and an elephant." At the memory of his words another flood of color swept over her. It took all the strength she had, to speak casually.

"Never mind," she said, and her voice sounded remote and high pitched because she was trying so hard to keep it steady, "I . . . I guess I don't want one of us together after all."

It was a relief to get the words out, though the tent kept on being a blur as she moved away to the other side of it. She was almost glad when she ran

into another one of the wooden supports. It hurt where she banged her forehead, and the pain helped somehow.

“Hey,” she heard Tony saying, “watch out or you’ll have the whole place comin’ down on our heads. Wait till I slick my hair ’fore you take this one,” he added to the photographer.

“If only he’d asked me to sit on the bench,” Hepatica thought as she went outside. “I could have tucked my feet under and anyhow he’d have been standing so it would have looked nearly all right.”

Of course she might have suggested it herself. But she couldn’t, not even when she wanted to be taken with Tony as much as she did.

As she waited for him to come out she noticed a woman rocking in an old chair on the other side of the tent. A baby was asleep in her arms and a wispy child of two or so dug in the sand near by. The little girl’s hair hung limp about a small face that was so exactly like the photograph man’s it gave Hepatica a pang. These three must belong to him and the sight of them made her feel troubled and afraid. It was all wrong somehow for people to look tired and beaten in a holiday crowd at the seashore.

“Ready to-morrow morning,” the little man was assuring Tony at the door, “thank you for your kind patronage.”

They walked on some distance together before Hepatica spoke.

“Tony,” she said at last, “I don’t see why people have to be like that.” She pressed closer to him as they turned the corner to go back to Mrs. Pringle’s.

“Like what?” He began to whistle “After the Ball.”

“Why, like that photograph man and his family. They looked so worried, kind of, and he coughed so, and yet you could see he was kind and pleasant, too. It don’t seem fair.”

“Well, it takes all kinds to make a world,” Tony assured her carelessly. “You can’t bother about other people’s troubles or you never get anywhere yourself.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I know I’m right. Hurry up or we’ll come out the small end of supper. Old Lady Pringle’s got six new boarders and that means there won’t be enough dessert to go round.”

Tony managed to sneak off before the grand finale much to Joshua Pollock's annoyance. Hepatica guessed only too well the direction his feet had taken him. Already dance music was sounding from the Casino with its strings of Japanese lanterns like bright beads.

"No, Josh, he didn't say a thing to me about going to the dance," she answered Pollock's questionings.

But she knew he was there. The lanterns were colored blurs before her eyes as she walked by with T.T. and her father on the way back. The music followed her long after they had turned the corner. She could hear the beat and swing of those waltzes and two-steps even after she had climbed the matting-covered stairs to her room. She tried not to listen as she lay in bed, but it was impossible not to hear snatches though she pressed her head deep into Mrs. Pringle's hard pillows. She lay as still as she could, for she mustn't let T.T. know she was awake. Her body ached with holding herself so quiet and her head throbbed in time to the distant music.

"Oh, I wish I'd had the picture taken with him!" she cried to herself in a wave of regret. "I'd of had that anyway, and now it's too late. I'm a fool and that's worse'n being a freak."

She cried silently, the tears oozing between her closed eyelids till the pillow was damp under her cheek. Sometimes she pictured Tony dancing with the dark-eyed girl from the bathing pavilion and sometimes she saw him going round and round with the fair one from the *Claribel May*. Sometimes she mixed it all up with those pictures from *Harper's Magazine*. She kept seeing the tall, beautiful Duchess of Towers in her tiara. She heard the laughter and talk of that London drawing-room almost as clearly as the Casino band. Then the photograph man and his tired wife and baby and little child with limp hair would keep coming into her mind too. She wished they wouldn't, but there they were. She wondered if they slept in the back of the tent, and if he coughed as often in the night. It was like having a merry-go-round of people in her mind, and they wouldn't stop moving to the music.

It was almost a relief when she heard the midget stirring on the other side of the bolster, gasping for breath in the grip of one of her asthma attacks.

"I'm awake, T.T.," she said, sitting up and reaching for the matches. "Want me to light your vapor lamp?"

CHAPTER VII

No one in Pollock's troupe was in very good spirits the next morning. It was a scorching hot day to begin with, and the pops and bangs and cannonadings had begun before sunrise, making sleep impossible. Jerry was glum as a result of Mike's Pool Room; Adam and Flossie had had words over something and kept an injured silence toward each other; and Mabel had one of her headaches. The midget looked worn and gray from her night of asthma, old and little as if she had been pulled through the eye of a needle. Hepatica couldn't bear to see her tiny, pinched face bent over the food set out on Mrs. Pringle's breakfast table. She felt listless and spent herself. She hoped no one would notice her swollen eyelids.

"You look kind of beat out, Patty," Hallelujah said, studying her with concern over his fourth cup of coffee. "Ain't you feeling good to-day?"

"It's my fault," T.T. spoke up, "she was up with me half the night an' then just's I got my breath back an' could settle down to sleep that racket commenced."

"Well, in heaven's name, get your starch back before the show," Joshua Pollock reminded them. "Sleep or no sleep we've got to do ourselves proud to-day."

"The Glorious Fourth, ha-ha!" croaked the midget setting down her spoon with a hand that shook.

"Hello." Tony sauntered in and took his place with a nod to everyone at the table. His eyes were bright as if he had had hours of sleep and he helped himself liberally from the milk pitcher and sugar bowl. His youth and carelessness only deepened the general gloom.

"Well, young man," Pollock began, lighting his cigar and frowning at him across the sticky breakfast plates where flies were already swarming, "it's about time you showed up, just about time. I don't know where you got the idea you can walk out in the middle of the show same's you did last night, but I'll tell you right now if it happens again I'm through. I've had just about enough of you and your goings on. You've cost me now more'n you can make up in six months' pay."

Hepatica's heart began to pound and she pushed her plate away with a clatter. She had seen Tony's eyes darken in a way she knew so well.

"Oh, dear," she thought, clenching her hands nervously under the tablecloth, "if only he won't talk back to Josh now it'll be all right. He'll get over it before the show."

She looked pleadingly across the table to Tony, giving him a quick, half-amused look. He caught it and winked back at her slyly. The moment passed and Joshua Pollock rose to go.

"Now, then," he told them all, "I expect everyone down early and made up. Too big a crowd out to have you going along the board walk an' giving a free show of yourselves beforehand. I don't care when or what you eat, but you be on hand by twelve-thirty and no coming back here between shows. Not to-day—understand?"

The afternoon performance of the Freaks and Fandangos began as others before it had begun. But it did not end so.

"They're packed in tight as sardines," Tony reported to Hepatica as they waited to catch any breeze they could by the side door. "Josh had to turn away so many he's sellin' tickets for a second show between this and to-night's."

A terrific bang and crash sounded near by and torpedoes crackled outside on the board walk.

"Going to be hard going against all this racket," Hepatica told him, "but I guess nobody'll mind whether they hear us or not. Tony—"

She was just getting up courage to ask him about the dance, when Jerry joined them with an animal tucked under either arm.

"Dad blast these bangs," he said crossly, "they've got Chi-Chi most crazy, an' Molly's like to break her leash an' make for the open every time a firecracker goes off."

Hepatica took the monkey into her arms and tried to keep him from trembling so. But it was hard to quiet him. Little ripples of fright ran constantly under his grayish-brown coat and his eyes were desperately bright slits. He made the faintest of chatterings with his teeth and kept his fingers curled tightly about her thumb.

"It's all right, Chi-Chi," Hepatica tried to soothe him, "we won't let anything hurt you."

“I don’t blame him for mindin’,” said Jerry. “Josh says he’ll put us in between Flossie and Mabel. ’Tain’t so good, but I told him how skittish the animals were actin’. I’m goin’ to slip out and get a piece of ice an’ some beer an’ pop for us all soon’s I get through. Don’t let on to Josh, you know how he is if we leave while the show’s on. I’ll take Molly along, but I’ll just tie Chi-Chi over there in the corner. You might keep an eye on him.”

“I will, Jerry,” Hepatica promised. “I’ve got to go and help T.T. into her things now, but I’ll watch out for him.”

The ladies’ dressing room had never seemed so stifling. Mabel fanned her streaming face, trying in vain to make the powder stay on. Flossie was stretched out on one of the trunks, while the midget wielded a palm-leaf fan and gasped before the mirror.

“How they expect you to breathe without a breath of air to draw, is beyond me,” she told Hepatica. “Well, thank heaven, there’s an end to everything and there will be to this day.”

“If it don’t finish us off first,” put in Flossie from the trunk. “Adam’s been mean as the devil ever since he woke up and I expect Jerry’ll have too many drinks to celebrate.”

Hepatica felt uneasy at her words. She hadn’t liked the idea of Jerry’s going out for refreshments. Sometimes Hallelujah did have to get him home and to bed, but it hadn’t happened for a long while.

“Be sure you stay round to help me out on the high notes,” T.T. was saying. “I’ve got a notion I’m goin’ to want you.”

And Hepatica promised, but as it turned out she was not needed for the midget’s act. By that time no one was thinking of high notes or vanishing Circassian dwarfs.

It happened with the suddenness of heat lightning. She and Tony were part way through their act. They had sung “Little Annie Rooney” and a good half of the packed house had joined in the chorus, with Hepatica’s voice to keep them from getting off the tune. Joshua Pollock stood at one side of the footlights, mopping his face and beaming, while he made mental figurings about the probable net proceeds of two more such full houses. Hepatica had just got through the first verse of “After the Ball” and started the chorus, when someone threw a lighted firecracker from the back. It was not the first that had come their way since the show started, though Pollock had done his best to stop such disturbances. But this one flew high of its mark and went

off with a bang in a great knot of crêpe paper. Instantly there came a crackle and a flash of orange flame in the midst of the red, white and blue.

For a second or so no one moved or cried out. It didn't seem real—not till someone screamed "Fire," and the flame grew into a blaze that spread along the festoons and began to wrap itself about the side of the stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Pollock was bellowing, but no one listened to him in the scramble of bodies and the crash of overturned benches.

Hepatica never knew what happened next or how long she stood there in her place with the fire running along the bunting in terrifying brightness. Streamers of flame licked down and caught at the flimsy folds of the curtain and imitation palm trees. She could make out Pollock beyond them, waving his arms and shouting at the jumbled masses of people who fought and trampled one another trying to reach the doors. Her mouth was still open where she had stopped in the middle of a note. She wondered if she ought to go on singing because that was what people always did on the stage in fires. But if she did who could possibly hear her now above the noise they were making and the roar of the fire?

"Tony!" she cried, and turned to find him gone.

At that, panic seized her. She didn't want to be all alone there with the fire creeping closer. She could feel a great wave of heat coming from it now and a kerosene lamp in the footlights caught and exploded. She sprang back just in time to escape a fiery shower.

"Patty!" she heard someone calling as she ran toward the wings on the other side and into her father's arms.

She was sure of nothing after that till they were all together on the sand. Their faces looked strange in the bright afternoon sunlight, still made up in paint and powder as they were. The midget's red wig waggled over one eye and she was clutching her bandbox firmly. Hallelujah was streaked with sweat and one of his knees had come through his tights. Tony had his banjo, and Flossie, though she wore her Hawaiian grass skirt, had her arms full of clothes. Petticoats and waists and ruffled skirts spilled over her and she had her patent-leather boots on either hand.

"I ain't got a thing to my back," wailed Mabel, wringing her fat hands one moment and trying to pull her flowered wrapper closer about her the next, "can't anybody do something? Where's Joshua?"

"He's startin' a bucket brigade," Tony volunteered. "See, they've made a line down to the water. Come on everybody an' help!"

He thrust his banjo at Hepatica and was off with Adam following.

“I knew it would happen,” Mabel continued to moan. “What’s buckets of water when a place like that gets a-going?”

It was terrible to see the waves curling on the beach and all that tossing water so near and to know the flames were gaining headway every minute. Hepatica could hear them roaring plainly now even above the thud of breaking surf and the noise of the crowd that swarmed all about.

“Where’s Jerry, Patty, an’ the animals. I ain’t seen ’em anywheres?”

The midget’s voice coming from far below suddenly broke into Hepatica’s consciousness. She grew suddenly numb all over. Everything began to spin before her eyes as she remembered.

Jerry! he must have gone for the drinks just the way he said. Molly was with him, but Chi-Chi—She had promised to keep an eye on him. She’d promised, and there he was, tied in the corner.

She threw down Tony’s banjo and began to run, pushing her way through curious people, slipping and stumbling in loose sand, catching her foot in the hem of her skirt, and plunging on in desperate haste.

“Patty! Patty! what ails you? Come back here this minute!” she heard T.T. panting small and cricket-shrill behind her as she sped along.

“Oh, God,” she kept praying at every step, “let me get there in time! Don’t let the fire get to him, don’t, don’t!”

She had to stop for breath, but she struggled on through the sand.

A blast of heat poured out of the side door. She had to throw her arm across her face to shut it out and the smoke and glare that met her.

“Chi-Chi!” she called with what breath she could summon. “Chi-Chi, I’m coming!”

They were holding her fast, her father and two other men, beating at her hair and dress as she struggled to get herself free.

“In God’s name, Patty,” her father was saying, “do you want to be killed?”

“Chi-Chi . . . I’ve got to get him . . .”

But they were rolling her over and over in the sand. It got in her mouth and eyes and nose. She couldn’t breathe for it. She couldn’t even struggle against them anymore.

Somehow she was back at Mrs. Pringle's. She could tell by the torn place in the lace curtains and the calendar with the girl gathering rose buds. She was in bed, but the midget wasn't the other side of the bolster. T.T. was bending over her, which seemed queer because usually it was the other way round. They had pulled a chair over, that was how she had managed it. A strange man with a pointed beard and a black leather bag was looking down at her, as he tied her hands up in bandages.

"Why, they hurt," she heard herself saying in a dazed voice that didn't sound like hers at all.

"I expect they do," the man told her kindly, "but this'll help and I've given you something to make you sleep to-night."

She felt queer and far away from herself, and the man's voice and T.T.'s talking by the door seemed more distant than the pounding of the sea beyond the window sill.

She closed her eyes only to open them again when something wet fell on her face. It was T.T. and she was crying. Hepatica had never seen her do that before. She felt she ought to do something to stop her, but she couldn't.

"Oh, Patty," the midget was saying, "if Hallelujah hadn't got to you when he did, I don't know—"

"It was Chi-Chi, T.T."

"I know, Patty, don't try to talk about it."

"He was in there, tied up. He couldn't do a thing."

"'Twasn't your fault. Jerry had no business to go an' leave him like that. You were doin' your part an' the wonder is you got out yourself."

Hepatica felt tears starting in her eyes. They smarted so she couldn't think of anything except the pain for a minute.

"But I promised, T.T., I told Chi-Chi I wouldn't let anything hurt him. He understood every word I said. You know he did."

"I know. I know, only you mustn't go on this way."

"I don't care if he was a monkey. It makes it worse. You know it does, and I'll never forgive myself—never."

CHAPTER VIII

They left Bright Sands a week later. Even T.T. hadn't the heart to joke about their leave taking. It was so different from their arrival. The bags and boxes, what were left of their belongings after the fire, were strapped and ready. Hallelujah, Jerry, and Adam were carrying them down to the pier, for they were going by the *Claribel May* on her return trip that afternoon.

Hepatica lingered on in the room she had shared with T.T. after the midget had gone down to join the others.

"I'll be along in a minute," she told her. "I want to make sure we haven't left anything behind."

But when she was alone she did not look in the bureau drawers or the closet. She stood perfectly still by the window and stared about her. Everything was as it had been that other afternoon when she had sped up the stairs so happily. She and T.T. had worn this room like a shell for four whole weeks. It had been part of them and yet here it was the same as the day they had taken possession. No visible mark of themselves had been left upon it. Other people would come and sleep in that bed. They would splash water in the washstand in the corner, rock in the sagging chair by the window, and look at themselves in the mirror over the bureau. The calendar girl with her penciled mustache and smile, gathering those rose buds, would be there for the next comer to see. But no one would ever look at that picture just as she had. Surely no one would have just the thoughts she had had in this room, for she had been happier and sadder here than anywhere in all her life before.

By the sudden silence that met her as she joined the little group on the piazza, Hepatica knew they must have been talking of her. They had done so rather often since the fire, though the burns on her hands were less painful now, and as T.T. said you wouldn't have guessed how much of her front hair had been singed after Flossie gave her bangs. They never mentioned Chi-Chi by name, not even Jerry whose shoulders had grown more stooped and who seldom could bring himself to look Hepatica in the eye. But she guessed they were all scheming together to make her forget. She couldn't, of course, still she was grateful to them for trying. She mustn't let them see she knew what they were up to.

“Tony was lookin’ for you just a minute ago, Patty,” T.T. told her. “He’s helpin’ tote the things. Well,” she shrugged and puckered her lips into a smile, “it don’t take near so long’s it did to get our belongin’s carried down. Hallelujah said he could have done it in a couple of trips single handed.”

“Going downhill, that’s us, all right,” Mabel chimed in from the rocker. “Joshua’s nearly at his wit’s end to raise enough for our fares and a new booth for T.T. and they charged him six dollars to repair the music box after Hallelujah dragged it out in all that sand.”

“Josh ought to have taken out insurance, Mabel,” Flossie reminded her.

“Yes, I can see him having a cent left for that.” Mabel was emphatic as she rose to go down to the pier. “Maybe you think it’s easy running a freak show like this without any capital to start with.”

“I never said it was,” Flossie maintained, “but I wish’t he’d had the show insured for even fifty dollars.”

“Oh, quit wishin’ for things to be different,” sighed the midget. “We’re nothin’ but a lot of second-rate freaks anyhow no matter what the handbills say about us.”

The usual crowd was on hand to see the *Claribel May* off. From a sheltered place under the shade of the upper deck, Hepatica and T.T. watched the leave takings as fellow passengers trundled themselves and their belongings up the steep gangplank. Children, clinging doggedly to pails and baskets that spilled shells and stones and sea treasures, waved solemnly back at their playmates of the beach. Sunburned cottagers shouted last-minute messages and admonitions to departing guests. Visitors of the day hurried back, panting and disheveled, eagerly comparing notes on shore dinners and how long it had taken to walk from the pier to the Light. The captain appeared, a fat man with hair and side burns like the fillings of mattresses and a uniform that was shabby in spite of its gold trimmings. Bell hops from the two hotels carried on more important luggage and went off again jingling their tips. “Ice-cold lemonade and pop corn,” droned the cross-eyed boy peddling his wares round and round the deck. “Buy your lemonade and pop corn here!”

“Clang-clang! Hoot-hoot!” went the warning bell and whistle, then sudden scufflings and cries of “Hurry up” and “All ashore” and “Watch out for the ropes.”

“There’s the engines startin’,” the midget said. “Always makes me feel funny in the pit of my stomach.”

“Oh, my goodness, look, there’s Tony! He’s going to get left!”

“No, he isn’t, they’re holdin’ the gangplank for him. Trust Tony for that. He’s the kind folks’ll always look out for.”

“Good-by! Good-by-y-y-y!” the voices shrilled across the widening strip of water churned into whiteness as the steamer backed out.

“Hey, there, Tony,” piped the midget as he came by. “You most give me heart failure just now. We thought you’d be left for sure, didn’t we, Patty?”

“Well, I’m right here now, ain’t I?” he laughed.

“Yes, I expect you’ll get yourself into heaven by some such lolly-gag. I wouldn’t wonder a mite if they hauled you in just’s the gates were closin’!”

“Look,” said Hepatica, “we’re rounding the point. There’s the flag on the Surfside House showing over the top of the sand dunes.”

Together the three watched the familiar lengths of beach come into sight. It was strange to see Bright Sands from the other side of these white lines of breaking surf. The setting sun made windows twinkle all along the rows of wooden houses that looked suddenly tiny and scattered as some toy village that children had left carelessly just above the water. But all the well-known shapes and gaps were there. Hepatica could make out the blackened place where the fire had been; there was the stretch of windy dune grass where she and Tony and Jerry had taken that first walk. The sand and houses ran together in a blur as she thought of that afternoon. When she could see clearly again the *Claribel May* had carried them far out. Bright Sands had retreated into the shore line and only the lighthouse showed on its green headland like a solitary candle on a birthday cake.

“I’m starved,” Tony was saying in her ear, “let’s go get some lemonade and stuff from the counter.”

Mechanically she found herself following him into the hot saloon, bending her head to clear the low door and picking her way between heaped bags and groups of children. All her life she had been leaving places, but never before had it made her feel like this. She seemed ten years older than the girl who had come there such a little while ago.

With the sun setting in a welter of pink and gold and the *Claribel May* chugging them steadily over shimmering water, the spirits of Pollock’s little troupe all rose amazingly. After all, they were going somewhere. Who knew what good fortune might be waiting for them when they set up next? Whether they found it or not, now at least they need make no effort. The

boat would do that. At present the only realities were sea and sky and fellow passengers, the throb of the engines and the slapping of waves on wooden beams. It was as if time stood still for a brief interval. The *Claribel May* was a complete small world of its own cut adrift from the familiar one that lay behind and before. For the moment that other one seemed not to matter. People's faces softened, relaxed from the strain of exerting themselves. Voices grew quieter, children less noisy in their play.

"My, but it's nice goin' places by water!" sighed the midget from a hollow she had made for herself among the bags.

"Yes," agreed Mabel from her camp stool. "I'm cooled off for the first time in days."

"Seems like we're leaving bad luck behind us for the rest of the season," said Hallelujah between puffs of his pipe. "I sure do think it's about time we struck it good for a spell."

"Well, don't forget trouble always comes in threes," Mabel reminded them.

"I should think," put in Flossie, "the fire would count double what with losing Chi-Chi too—" she broke off as T.T. gave a quick frown in Hepatica's direction.

"Let's go sit up under the pilot house," Tony suggested presently.

Hepatica followed him up the steep steps. It was good to have him like this again. He hadn't gone off and found some girl passenger to talk with, though several who passed had eyed him with more than casual interest. He hadn't been so near and friendly in weeks, Hepatica thought. They settled themselves in a sheltered place with their backs against a whitewashed partition which made the beat of the ship's engines seem to be coming right through them. Darkness deepened; lights came out on the distant shore line, but they seemed less real than the stars beginning to prick the blue night sky. The air felt softly cool on Hepatica's face. She took off her hat and let the freshness blow through her hair. Someone was playing an accordion off on the lower deck and somebody else was singing to it.

"Pretty poor excuse for a tune I call that," Tony laughed. "I'm glad we ain't any nearer."

"Still, I kind of like to hear it over the water."

"Nice up here, eh?"

"Oh, yes, Tony. It makes you feel . . ."

“I know. Not so many people round either. Down there, they’re all over you. That’s why I said let’s come up here awhile.”

“Yes, Tony.” Her heart was beating much louder than the engine of the *Claribel May*. She had hoped for so long that he would say something like that to her. Now he had. He had wanted to get away from all the rest, but not from her. He had wanted her to come too. He had even said so in words. She felt she could almost reach out in the darkness and take those words in her hands. But she had heard them and so they would always belong to her, no matter what happened.

His voice called her wits back suddenly.

“See what I got here,” he was saying. He struck a match and she saw his face in the quick flare, his eyes bright and his lips turned up in their teasing curves.

“What . . . what is it?”

“Silly, why don’t you look? Now you’ve put it out.” He struck another match and this time she saw him holding out a long brown object.

“A cigar?”

“You bet it is! The quarter kind, but I got it for fifteen cents. ’Tisn’t the first I’ve smoked in my time either, only you know how Josh is if anybody spends a cent. He’d jaw about it with the rest for days, so don’t you let on.”

“No, of course not,” she heard her voice saying. It surprised her that she could make it sound so natural when she felt as if she had just fallen off a precipice. She pressed her back hard against the partition. It was good to feel it so secure and wooden under her. Now her heart was quieter. The ship’s engine was making the most racket.

“You act as if you’d never seen a cigar or anybody smoking one before,” Tony went on. “Why, there’s nothing to it.”

“Nothing to it,” she repeated to herself—and she had thought, she had hoped, there might be so much!

“Well,” she forced herself to laugh, “I don’t see’s you’ve got it lighted yet.”

“Don’t you let *that* part worry you.”

He struck another match. This time he managed it. In the dark the tip glowed like a tiny, red bud; a rich, warm fragrance filled the air.

“Can’t beat a Corona-Corona,” he told her sagely as he flecked away the first ashes.

A couple edged by, the girl’s dress pale in the dimness. They slipped into a corner by one of the lifeboats. Their voices were faint whispers above the boat’s chugging, but when the girl’s laugh sounded Hepatica knew those other two had come up to get away from the people on the deck below. She was so close to Tony that she could feel his head warm against her shoulder, if she moved as much as an inch that way. Once more she bent down, and his hair brushed her cheek. She loved to feel it. If she could just let him know that she did maybe he would forget about that old cigar. She grew hot under cover of the dark, trying to plan a way to begin.

“Tony,” she said at last, pressing her hands together so hard that the burn that hadn’t quite healed made her wince, “do you believe in wishes?”

“Do I believe in what?” he repeated.

“In wishes coming true, I mean.”

“If I did you don’t suppose I’d be hanging round with an outfit like Pollock’s, do you?”

“Well, I didn’t mean just that.” Hepatica found it harder going than she had expected. “You see, I . . . I was thinking about the night you came, just before my birthday—remember?”

“Sure I do, what about it?”

“It was kind of queer. I never told you or anybody else, but they had a birthday cake for me, with candles, and I wished on them. I wished for you.”

“But you’d never set eyes on me then.”

“I know, but I wished for somebody exactly like you, and in an hour there you were.”

“Just like that, eh?” She knew how his lips must be turning up at the corners even though she couldn’t see a thing but that cigar tip.

“So you see, Tony—” she broke off, frightened that she had dared to say so much. But she didn’t care. She didn’t care if she had.

“Bet you wouldn’t dast take a pull at this cigar,” he was saying.

Just as if she hadn’t spoken at all, as if she had never told him what she had kept to herself all those weeks! Something inside her went snap. She straightened up and reached out her hand.

“You give it to me and see!” she said in a queer, flat voice.

Her fingers shook so she was afraid she might drop it. But she didn't. With a sudden, quick fling she sent it over the side.

“Hey, there,” Tony's voice came sharp with protest, “what's the matter with you, anyway? I hadn't smoked it half through . . .”

She was plunging down the stairs. Only the ropes that she clutched saved her from falling, and she crashed through a group of people at the bottom as if they had been so many ninepins. The straw of her hat cracked as she rammed it on over her flushed face and wind-ruffled hair.

“Here we are, Patty,” the midget called to her.

She turned gratefully at the sound. “Haven't we got most there, Pa?” she asked, pressing close to him, glad of his great bulk and the way he rose above her.

“Yes, we're getting in now,” Hallelujah said. “See the lights over there? That's the Battery. We'll be sighting Liberty in a minute.”

“Look, everybody's gone over to that side to see her,” Flossie was saying. “Come on, Patty, you don't want to miss any of the sights.”

But Hepatica made no move to follow the others. “She wouldn't be any treat to me,” she told the midget, “I've been taken for her too many times already.”

CHAPTER IX

Late summer and early fall found them following the trail of county fairs in New England towns.

“We’re barnstormers now and no mistake,” T.T. remarked.

It was the truth. Time and again they gave their show in empty sheds or barns. Sometimes they were lucky enough to get a place in one of the tents on the fairgrounds, but not often, for these had been taken in advance and were full to overflowing with exhibits of home cooking, of dairy and garden products, of needlework and every contraption that human minds and hands are capable of producing.

Hepatica never tired of these. She liked to slip in during the less-crowded times and study the marvelous arrays of pies and cakes and pickles, the butter and cheese displays of such extraordinary size and shape. She delighted in the flower exhibits. Never had she seen such enormous dahlias, such bright phlox and gladioli, or so many different kinds of zinnias, marigolds and hardy chrysanthemums. Sometimes the midget went along, too, and Hepatica would lift her up to see and sniff the gorgeous blooms.

“My, my,” T.T. would sigh. “It sets me hankerin’ for a garden of my own. See that sunflower over there? It’s big enough to make me a sunshade, I declare it is!”

Often the midget would exchange words with proud exhibitors, or differ emphatically with the choice of the judges.

“Now I wouldn’t of given the blue ribbon to *that*,” she would proclaim shrilly. “This one over here has it beat a mile to *my* way of thinkin’, an’ I guess I’m as good a judge of petunias as the next one!”

Hepatica seldom joined in these conversations, though she liked to stand by and listen. She liked to go with her father or Jerry into the cattle-show section where steers bellowed and lambs bleated, and the air was rich and warm with animal smells.

“Don’t see how you can stand it in there, Patty,” T.T. would say. “But I guess it’s my asthma makes me so squeamish. You wouldn’t think I was raised on a farm to see the way I act about critters now.”

But what Hepatica was most drawn to were the needlework displays, and in particular the riotously colored quilts hung about the tent sides. She would stand rapt before these, marveling at the intricate patching. She always hunted for the little slips of paper that gave names to the different patterns. Some of them were so strange and lovely, almost like music when one said them over to oneself: “Young Man’s Fancy,” “Dove in the Window,” “Indian Summer,” “Wheel of Fortune,” “Tree Everlasting,” “Rose of Sharon,” “World without End,” and “Variable Star.” They held her like charms.

“Mercy, Patty,” the midget would exclaim, “I can’t get all worked up over quilts. Guess my folks made me sew too much patchwork when I was young, ’fore I branched out an’ went into the show business. Now these crocheted spreads are twice as pretty I say!”

“I like the embroidery and cut work, myself,” Mabel would chime in, “and those hand-painted grapes on the velvet sofa cushion—why they look real enough to eat.”

“My, but the work in it all!” they always ended by sighing. “Don’t see how they ever have the patience.”

Hepatica couldn’t feel that way about such things. She thought the women must have enjoyed taking all the little stitches, matching the colors and seeing patterns grow under their hands. She couldn’t help feeling it must be nice to have time for things like that.

At one of the fairs she saw a knitted muffler in gray with bands of rainbow stripes at the ends. She decided to make one for Tony. His birthday would be in November, he had told her, and she wanted to give him something special. She kept on wanting to do things for Tony in spite of the memory of that night on the *Claribel May*, though she still flushed whenever she thought of it. Often he scarcely noticed her, then again he would be all friendliness, joking and confiding in her in his old, disarming way. She never knew from moment to moment how it would be, but perhaps that was the charm of Tony Quinn. At any rate she accepted him, black moods, gay ones; his quick responses, his unaccountable silences. They were all part of Tony. He had hurt her so many times and so deeply she had long ago given up trying to keep count, but she went right on taking his part against the others, and she was always ready if he gave her the slightest signal.

If you cared for people that way, you took whatever they had to give you. That was all there was to it. You couldn’t weigh and measure out feelings as if they were groceries behind a counter. Not that Hepatica

thought about it like that. She only knew she wanted to share everything with him. Nothing she saw or felt was quite complete unless she could catch his eye, or could smile back in answer to a look from him. So often he made her feel stupid and clumsy and miserable, but that was better than not being with him. She couldn't feel alive, not really, when he was away.

Their act was going better all the time. Everyone said so, and even Tony admitted she was getting the hang of singing popular songs. Audiences liked their act best of all now, more than the midget's or Mabel's fortune-telling one which had always been the favorite before. Since her remaining stock of photographs had been burned in the fire, Hepatica had steadily refused to have more taken and to sell them afterwards. Pollock remonstrated with her in vain.

"It's Tony's and my act now," she insisted. "I'm not just the 'Mountain of Childhood' alone anymore. I can't help it if you say all those things about me first, but I'm not going down there with my basket and pictures."

Hepatica was so set that even Pollock saw it was no use to argue.

"Well," he said with a shrug of his heavy shoulders, "if you won't, you won't. It's your loss and Hallelujah's if you don't make any picture money. You'll have to put in another song to fill out the time, and don't let me see you pinning back your hair like you done last night. You ain't a day over twelve, understand."

"All right, Josh," she promised. "Tony's teaching me a new one called 'Courting on a Wheel.'"

"Well, I got no objection to his singing about wheels, long's *he* keeps off 'em," Pollock told her. "But I've had enough of his devilments. I said to Mabel only last night I don't know what I keep him on for."

"Why, Josh," Hepatica broke in eagerly. "You know he makes the whole show go. Everybody says so. You did yourself—you said he'd put new life into it."

"Too much plenty of times, but I will say he's stuck to work better since that last time I laid him out."

That night Hepatica stared for a long time into the ladies' dressing-room mirror. It was rather dim and cracked, but she managed a fairly thorough study of her features. She had the place all to herself. This was a rare occurrence and she made the most of it. Bangs did make her look older. There was no doubt about that, though by comparison with the girls she passed, the ones that Tony seemed to admire most, her cheeks were still far

too round and childish for fifteen and her eyes too wide. She tried narrowing them at the corners as she had seen others do, but it was hard to keep them so for long. She wished her nose would turn up in that saucy way some people's did, or else be long and straight and thin. Still, as T.T. had often reminded her, she ought to be thankful it wasn't crooked. Her mouth was too big, but her hair was really nice, only what was the good of that when it had to be worn in this babyish way?

"I'm not so bad in the face," she decided critically, "if there wasn't so much of me besides—" She broke off to begin setting out the powder and paint things on the folding table. It was queer, she thought, the way hills and trees and cattle and plants were admired for their size, but not people. The biggest oxen and pumpkins and the largest dahlias and sunflowers always took first prize. "Guess Pa and I'd walk off with all the blue ribbons if it was that way," she went on to herself, brushing her curls one after another over her fingers.

"What you up to, Patty, moonin' away here all by yourself?" the midget's voice came sudden and shrill from the region of her knees.

"Why nothing, T.T." But her cheeks grew hot and the brush dropped to the floor with a clatter.

Hepatica bent to pick it up and her eyes came on a level with the midget's keen gray ones turned upon her out of their nests of wrinkles. For a second they held each other so, without words or any need of them. Something alive and secret stole out from behind their eyes and met there between them, something that was their very selves. Then the lines at the corners of Titania Tripp's eyes deepened into sharp rays. She gave a little sigh and pressed closer to Hepatica. With one tiny, hot hand she rapped her knuckles on the girl's knee.

"It's hard bein' old, Patty," she said, almost in a whisper, "but it's harder bein' young. I know."

Before Hepatica could answer she had turned abruptly to her bandbox. In another minute she was getting out her fascination, humming "Sally in Our Alley" as she shook out the red frizzes.

"Peace Pipe. Peace Pipe. Last stop. Don't forget your parcels." The conductor was calling on an afternoon in early October.

Hepatica never forgot that queer name and the smell of drying tobacco leaves hung up in the great red barns whose sides could be opened like

shutters to the sun and air. It was the most dusty-sweet smell she had ever known. She sniffed it delightedly as they left the train. It was a sprawling, Connecticut Valley town, the houses broad and comfortable under the arching trees that were already turning yellow. The stores, the courthouse, and pointed church steeples were pleasant to see clustering about the village green, and there were glimpses of the river, winding wide and quiet through the rich tobacco lands, resting now after a late crop.

“I like it here, don’t you, T.T.?” she asked as Pollock packed as many of them as he could with the luggage into a ramshackle express wagon going to the fairgrounds.

“Couldn’t ask for no prettier spot,” she chirped, squeezing herself and her alligator bag in between Mabel and Hepatica, “only I hope all this tobacco hangin’ up to dry don’t start my asthma up again. It’s dreadful hot for October. I feel struck with the dry wilt after that train.”

They were lucky enough to get a whole tent to themselves, right in the middle of the fairgrounds. A near-by farmhouse would take some of them in to sleep and Jerry, Hallelujah and Tony could camp in the barn for the three nights the fair lasted. The woman who took them in was pleased and talkative.

“Never had such a lot of freaks all under my roof together before,” she told them as she led the way upstairs. “I had a balloonist and his wife last year, and a trapeze performer and her father that tamed the bucking broncho time before last, and of course there’s always been plenty of plain exhibitors if I want to take ’em. They’re good payers, but I kind of like something out of the usual run of folks. It gives you something to think about afterwards. Yes, I’m one that’s all for novelty in this world, so it’s lucky you got here before the crowd. Look out for your head there,” she warned Hepatica as she ushered her into a low-ceilinged room.

Hepatica ducked, but not quite in time. Her head struck the door frame with a resounding thud.

“My, now, I’m real sorry,” the woman went on. “I never thought but what you’d clear it all right. My son can and he’s more’n six foot. If the bump starts to swell you let me know and I’ll fix you up with brown paper and vinegar.”

As soon as she could Hepatica escaped. It was too hot in the farmhouse rooms and she didn’t want any brown paper plasters, not even from so kind and garrulous a landlady. She went out toward the fairgrounds, already

resounding to hammerings and the noise of cattle from the farther end. The Ferris wheel was in place, its round frame towering above the trees and white canvas tents that dotted the great open field like a gigantic variety of toadstool. None of these or their contents were new to Hepatica, but she always liked to watch them being made ready for the opening. She liked to see whether the present cocoanut-hitting booth held as many as last week's, if the shooting gallery looked as fiercely painted with such glittering arrays of prizes waiting to be won, and if there were as many booths for tossing rings over stakes. She wished Tony were there to compare notes with her. But Josh had sent him in to town with Jerry to put up posters. He ought to be back, though, soon. She kept looking toward the entrance for a sight of him.

A yellow leaf drifted noiselessly down past her face from a maple tree wedged between the merry-go-round and the fruit-and-vegetable tent. It was incongruous to see others lying pointed and golden on the backs of the painted horses waiting patiently in their places for to-morrow's riders.

"Well, well," a man's voice spoke suddenly in her ear, "what's a little girl like you doing all by her lone? Miss Hepatica Hawks herself, or I'm very much mistaken, more remarkable than her remarkable father, stands six feet four in her stockings, *in her*—"

Hepatica wheeled about sharply with flaming cheeks. A young man in a checked suit with sandy hair and a great deal of gold in his teeth was smiling at her as he lounged against the other side of the tree trunk. There was something familiar about him, and his voice—surely she had heard it before. Why, of course, he had been at one of the first fairs they had played. She remembered him now. He had been running a lottery booth. You paid ten cents for numbers that spun on a red-and-blue wheel. When it stopped a marble showed whether your number was the lucky one. If it was, you had your choice of a pearl brooch, a ladies' chatelaine watch or a gentlemen's with a solid gold chain, or one of the latest cameras on a tripod. Tony had squandered thirty cents trying to win the camera. It was queer how no one ever seemed to bet on the right number.

"We *have* met before then? I see you recognize me."

"You were at Parkerstown Fair last month," Hepatica answered with more truth than enthusiasm.

"Enterprising young fellow you had along with you then," the man went on, strolling uninvited beside her. "He still with your outfit?"

“Why, yes,” she admitted, moving in the direction of their own tent, “he’s with Pollock’s Freaks and Fandangos.”

“How about a glass of lemonade or pop?” her companion suggested, pointing with his cane toward a man who was setting up a refreshment stand. “Or peanuts?”

Hepatica shook her head. “No thank you,” she spoke with firm politeness. She decided she liked this man less and less even if he did seem so appreciative of Tony. “Well, I guess I’d better be turning in here,” she added with relief as she caught sight of her father carrying a trunk into the next tent. “I must go and help.”

“Sorry I can’t persuade you to stay out longer with me,” he smiled at her again in that way that made her feel uncomfortable. “No . . . well, perhaps later, and you might just tip your friend off that I’m around. He’ll remember me. We had quite a talk before. Jake Trundy, that’s my name. Pleased to have met you again, I’m sure.”

Hepatica made an indistinct rumble in her throat. She didn’t feel at all pleased to have met Mr. Jake Trundy and she had no intention of saying so—not in words. From between the tent flaps she watched him stroll off, a too jaunty figure in his tight-fitting suit, derby hat, and cane.

“I see you had company,” her father greeted her, “real smart-looking fellow, what I could see of him.”

“He ran a lottery at one of the fairs we did last month,” she explained reluctantly, “but I don’t think much of him, Pa, he talks too slick.”

“Well, you watch out for that kind,” Hallelujah told her, “and if he says anything he hadn’t ought to, you just send for me. You’ve got a Pa that can put any young whippersnapper in his right place.”

“He didn’t say anything much—not exactly,” Hepatica answered. “Pa, when do you think Tony and Jerry’ll be back?”

“Why, Jerry’s here now,” Hallelujah jerked his thumb toward the other end of the tent. “Come in ten minutes ago. Said Tony give him the slip soon’s they got the posters put up.”

Tony was late for supper and gave no explanation of his afternoon’s activities. He seemed absent minded all through the meal and it was only when Hepatica delivered Jake Trundy’s message that he came to sufficiently to answer. It appeared he had already run into him on the fairgrounds.

“Is he going to set up that lottery booth again?” she asked as they rose from the table.

“No,” he told her, “they’re dreadful strict in this state. It’s against the law to sell chances on things; but,” he added in a rather too elaborate, offhand manner, “he’s got other plans right now.”

He walked off whistling casually, but Hepatica, watching from the farmhouse windows, noticed that he quickened his steps once he was past the gate. She was quite sure, too, in spite of the gathering dusk, that he was joined by someone in a familiar checked suit and cane just behind the farthest clump of lilac bushes.

CHAPTER X

“Here,” said Tony just before the show on the third and last night of the Peace Pipe Fair, “I won this over at the ring-toss place. Thought maybe you could use it.”

He thrust a small box into her hand. Inside, resting on a pink cotton cloud lay a watch in silver-and-blue enamel, with a chatelaine pin in the shape of a fleur-de-lis. Hepatica caught her breath. The pink and blue and silver all ran together before her eyes in a joyful blur.

“Oh, Tony!” she gasped. “Did you *really* win it?”

“Well, if you don’t believe me, you don’t need to keep it.” He spoke stiffly, hunching up his shoulders in the way he had when he was offended.

“Oh, goodness, I didn’t mean—” Hepatica was all apologies. “It just seems a miracle sort of. I thought nobody ever won the big prizes, just the little ones like handkerchief cases and paper cutters and maybe sometimes the pearl-handled penknives.”

Tony was mollified. “Listen. It’s tickin’ away as nice as can be,” he pointed out. “It’s from Switzerland, see, the letters say so there under the hands. Nothin’ second rate about *this* watch!”

“I should say not. Oh, Tony, I haven’t said thank you yet, and I want to only I don’t—”

“Hey, you two, quit gabbin’ if you don’t want to hold the show up!” Jerry broke in on his way back from giving Molly an airing.

There was no time to say anything more, so clutching the little box tight Hepatica went in to put on her make-up. The warm weather of the last few days had changed suddenly. Frost was in the air that came up under the tent flaps. Flossie had pulled a shawl over her Hawaiian Belle costume; the midget shivered as she dressed. But it might have been mid-summer as far as Hepatica’s feelings went. Her cheeks were so flushed and her eyes so bright she hardly needed the paint and burnt cork her hands reached for mechanically. She felt suffocated with happiness. What had happened was so much more amazing than anything she had ever dreamed could happen to her. A watch for her very own, and from Tony! She had expected to rush to T.T. with it, yet something held her back. Just for a little she wanted it to be

completely hers, unshared by anyone except Tony. After the show she would take it out for them all to see, for now she would slip it in the bodice of her costume, where even through the little box she could hear the steady tick-ticking.

“What ails you, Patty, you look all lit up?” questioned T.T. “Frost don’t seem to mean a thing to you. I expect I was the same at your age, but I’d put a jacket on over those bare arms if I was you.”

Hepatica couldn’t bring herself to answer. She slipped out to wait with Jerry and Molly on one of the trunks. Over on the other side of the fairgrounds the merry-go-round was playing “Dixie Land” and there was a confused babel of voices and cries and the beating of Tony’s drum in front of the tent. The smell of hot buttered pop corn and peanuts came in along with sawdust and ripening fruit and leaves burning on near-by bonfires.

Just one thing troubled her, try as she would to put it from her mind. Tony had certainly said he’d won the watch at the ring-toss place, yet that very afternoon Hepatica had stopped by to look at the display of prizes. The only ladies’ watch there was plain gold with a bow-knot pin. She was sure because she had thought how much prettier that other had been—the one in blue enamel and silver that she had seen in Parkerstown in Jake Trundy’s lottery booth. For the first time in her life she found herself wishing she didn’t have such a good memory.

“Well, I declare if that isn’t a beauty!”

“Sure is the handsomest little watch I ever set eyes on.”

“Don’t see how that boy ever drew a prize like that. Didn’t think he had it in him.”

“My, but you’ll look like a Vanderbilt now, Patty.”

They were all exclaiming as they clustered round her after the show, passing it admiringly from hand to hand. Hepatica was proud and beaming, but she did wish Tony had been there too. Once again he had managed to slip off before the grand finale.

It was long after midnight when Hepatica fell asleep. Everything was packed and ready for their departure in the morning. The hammerings had stopped over on the fairgrounds. Only occasional faint moos or gruntings came from the cattle stalls, though the crickets clamored shrilly on through the fall night and the little watch ticked and ticked under her pillow, as if Tony had made her a present of time to keep forever and ever.

Breakfast was early and they were all cross and sleepy when they gathered for it in the farmhouse kitchen.

“No sign of Tony as usual,” said T.T. glancing round the table, “looks like winning that prize must of gone to his head.”

“I ain’t seen him since he done his part,” put in Jerry between gulps of coffee. “Don’t believe he slept in the loft at all last night from the looks of the hay. You see him, Hallelujah?”

“Not me, I was dead to the world from the time I struck it. I tell you taking down an’ lashing things on top of the show’s no joke. He most likely came in and went out again without our knowing.”

“He’s gettin’ to be a regular nuisance, I say,” began Mabel.

“He’ll turn up before train time, he always does,” Hepatica reminded them.

“He’d better,” Joshua Pollock rose with his morning cigar as the farmer appeared in the doorway.

“Somebody to see you,” he said, and Pollock followed him out into the narrow hall.

Presently men’s voices were talking together in a low rumble. Molly sniffed and then barked uneasily. The farmer’s wife left her stove to peer out. She took one look and hurried back to the group about the table.

“The sheriff,” she whispered, her eyes widening. “He’s out there with three other men. Some kind of trouble, or I miss my guess.”

They all set down their cups and spoons and crowded to the door.

“No, I can’t say’s I’ve missed anything,” Josh was saying. “Not cash anyhow, for I went over my receipts just now. Come on, Sheriff, I want to make the eight-nineteen for Danbury, what’s up?”

“Plenty,” one of the other men broke in. “You won’t make no eight-nineteen.”

“Why, the fact is,” the gray-haired man with the badge on his chest, was speaking, “there’s been a pretty bad robbery over on the fairgrounds and we’ve got our suspicions about who done it.”

“You don’t say!” Flossie and Mabel were all excitement, till the sheriff silenced them with a look.

“We’ve got to account for all you folks who was over there. Looks like an inside job for everything was all right when they put the last visitors out.”

“Well, well, I’ll do anything I can to be of service.” Pollock was beginning in his best “Freaks and Fandangos” manner.

The other cut him short.

“Then you can trot out that young feller that plays the banjo in your troupe. He’s one we’re after.”

Hepatica felt her heart begin to spin queerly about in a hollow that was herself. The kitchen and little hall beyond were a jumble of dim faces as she listened to what they were saying about Tony . . . Tony. He had been seen a lot in the company of one Jake Trundy—probably went by other names, too, they were hunting down his record. They hadn’t let him open his lottery booth. That was against the law in their state, besides they’d been hearing on good authority that he used a trick wheel, one cleverly weighted so that the numbers on his tickets never won. He was pretty mad when they refused him a permit. He’d hung around and acted unpleasant. But they couldn’t put him off the fairgrounds without some cause. He and the boy from Pollock’s were seen a lot together. They went off on long jaunts to town. No harm in that of course, but still . . .

“Other plans,” Hepatica found herself remembering Tony’s words on their first evening there. He had told her Jake Trundy had other plans. She felt suddenly sick in the pit of her stomach. She gripped the door frame and tried to follow what they were saying.

Nearly eight hundred dollars was gone, all the receipts for the three days’ and nights’ entrance tickets. Strong box and all, it was gone. The ticket man had stepped out to lock the gate after the last visitors. No one from outside could have got past him. The only other opening was through a small, high window at the back, one that gave on the fairgrounds. A slim, active boy could have squeezed in if he had been boosted from behind and had someone waiting to take the heavy cash box. They had found two sets of footprints just there, and a cloth cap. One of the men was holding this up for exhibition. No one spoke till the midget broke the silence.

“Of course,” she said in a voice that tried to be hopeful, “it might not *be* Tony’s even if it is the same kind.”

It couldn’t have happened, Hepatica told herself over and over as time dragged by, and yet it had. Even when the sheriff and the other men asked her all those questions it hadn’t seemed real exactly, not as if this concerned

Tony. “It must be someone else they’re talking about,” she told herself, “it must be.”

“You and this young feller were pretty good friends, eh?” he asked her, fixing her with his keen eyes as if he felt sure she knew more than the rest.

“Why, yes,” she told him, her voice so slow and steady it astonished her to hear it. “We did our turn together. No, sir, we did it just the same as ever last night. He played the banjo and I sang.”

“He didn’t say anything to you then?” the words seemed to come to her from a long way off though she heard each one distinctly. “Nothing to make you think he was up to any such business?”

“No, he didn’t *say* anything to make me think that.”

It was true. He hadn’t said anything, though under the ruffles of her dress the blue and silver watch ticked and ticked. If she told them it had come from Jake Trundy’s lottery booth that would leave no doubt in their minds. But why should she? What good would it do now? The money was gone and Tony was gone. Of course if they should ask her if Tony had done anything out of the ordinary the night before then she would have to tell them about it. She clenched her hands and waited for the next question. It came at last.

“This Trundy chap—did he hang around much?”

“Why some—the day before the fair opened he—he kind of tried to make up to me.”

“He did, eh? What did he say?”

“Nothing much, just wanted me to have some lemonade with him. But I didn’t want any.”

“That’s all. Send Pollock in again and then we’ll have to get back to the courthouse.”

As she passed the kitchen door Hepatica heard a clatter of voices. Mabel’s, raised emphatically, came to her from their midst.

“Of course he done it! Don’t tell *me*. And didn’t I say trouble always comes in threes?”

Hepatica slipped out past the porch and farmhouse garden. She was glad none of them noticed her. She didn’t want to hear them discussing the robbery, saying Tony’s name over and over, wondering and speculating. She

wanted to be by herself for a little, without even her father and T.T. trying to be kind.

“Well, he didn’t get anything out of me,” she told herself, remembering the sheriff’s questions, “and he never will,” she added aloud, “no matter what.”

She stood for a good while in the clear fall sunshine under one of the farmhouse maples, watching the final dismantling of the Peace Pipe Fairgrounds. Now the Ferris wheel was a gaunt skeleton of its former self; tents were collapsing into lifeless lengths of canvas. Already the little bright booths, the shooting gallery, and the merry-go-round had vanished. Soon there would be only the cattle sheds, trampled grass and a litter of sawdust and torn paper to mark the place. So things came to an end before one’s very eyes; so people did, too, no matter how close they had seemed, or how hard one had tried to keep them.

She unpinned the watch from her dress and turned it over and over in her hands. Queer, to think that yesterday at this time it hadn’t been hers. Tony had been with them then as he would never be again. She understood so well now why he had given it to her. It was his way of saying his thanks and good-by. Her fingers closed about it, and that inner numbness changed to pain. She tried to put all the thoughts out of her mind. But she couldn’t, they would keep crowding in. She had to keep going over all that had happened since Tony’s coming. So little had happened to Hepatica herself since she got her growth. Perhaps, she decided, it was better not to have much happen to you, because, once you began, one happening started another, and you couldn’t be sure they were going to come out all right.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned to find her father.

“I’ve been looking for you, Patty,” he said, his eyes worried and kindly as they searched her face.

“I got tired of all the talk, Pa,” she explained lamely.

“Guess they’re about through now. Josh thinks we can make the one o’clock train.”

“What are they going to do? The sheriff, I mean?”

“Getting out a warrant or something. I don’t understand such things rightly myself. But they’re offering a reward for both of ’em. They’ve telegraphed the police for miles around. Still, they got a pretty good start, and that Trundy seems to be a smart one.”

“I know, Pa.” Hepatica edged closer, though she kept her face turned from his. “I didn’t say a thing about the watch.” She held it out in her hand. “They never asked if Tony gave me anything, and so I didn’t. You don’t think it was wrong of me not to?”

“I guess they know enough,” he told her. “They’d want to keep it most likely, and after all it’s yours. He won it, didn’t he?”

“He said he did.” Somehow she couldn’t bear to tell even her father about her suspicions. “Oh, Pa,” she broke out suddenly, “it don’t seem as if it *could* be Tony.”

“I know.”

She leaned against his great strength for a moment. It was a comfort to feel him there while the yellow leaves moved one against another above them, and crickets shrilled in the dry grass at their feet.

“Pa,” she began, plucking at the rough sleeve of his coat while she tried to keep her voice steady, “you remember the night before my birthday how you asked me . . . you said if I ever minded being a freak I was to let you know.”

“Yes, I recollect.”

“Well, I kind of think I do now. It was different when I had Tony to do the turn with, but I don’t feel as if I could go back to being the ‘Mountain of Childhood’ alone again.”

“All right, Patty, you don’t have to.”

It helped to have put it into words, though she still couldn’t trust herself to lift her eyes to his.

“You’re sure you can manage, Pa?”

“I’ll manage.”

“Josh’ll be pretty cross, specially after this.”

“You leave him to me, only I guess I won’t say nothing till to-morrow. He’s kind of edgy right now.”

“You see he thinks I can go on being twelve years old forever just by wearing curls and his saying I am, but I can’t.”

“I know. I’ll have it out with him. Don’t you worry.”

He reached out and gave her hand a sudden squeeze, so hard it hurt.

CHAPTER XI

“Ain’t you goin’ to turn in soon, Patty?” the midget asked from the depths of the big bed in the corner of the room they shared that night.

“I’m not very sleepy, T.T., and I want to finish darning these stockings. I’ll fix the shade so the light won’t bother you.”

She tilted it and bent over the darning. There were only a few more stitches to take, but she had something else to attend to. After she rolled the stockings into a neat ball, she began to sort over the contents of her lap. Painstakingly she went over the little collection, piece by piece. Each was in some way connected with Tony. Her hands shook as she laid them on the folds of the half-knitted muffler. Here was the willow whistle he had cut and played for her that first spring day when they waited for the train. The wood had darkened since then, but she could still remember how quick and brown his fingers had looked moving up and down the holes, and how his lips had puckered about the mouthpiece. Here was a sample of the calling cards he had had the penmanship expert write for him at one of their first fairs—Tony Quinn, Esquire, with heavy downward strokes and hairlines on the upper ones and the most marvelous flourish at the end. That bottle of Cashmere Bouquet he had drawn somewhere or other and handed over to her. Hepatica had kept it for the very special occasion that had never come, that would never come now. One of the points of the brittle pink starfish broke in her hands as she put it with the rest. She would never forget how she had felt when Tony laid it in her lap; how they had all been part of that wonder of sea and sand. She could see his dark hair blowing and Chi-Chi, a curled, brownish ball, beside her. Yes, she sighed, Chi-Chi was part of all this too, the way animals were if you cared for them.

She had saved the tintype for the last because she had most dreaded looking at it. Now she held it under the lamp, scrutinizing every smallest detail. Although she shivered in the chilly room, she could feel again all the heat and heaviness of the photograph tent at Bright Sands. From that little square of tin Tony smiled at her, his hair in damp spikes on his forehead under the enormous sombrero, his banjo beside him on the rustic seat. One corner of his mouth turned up in the way she knew so well, and there were the painted clouds and stiff cat-tails of the screen behind. There he was, just as if nothing had happened, and yet so much had it made her feel numb to

think. The worried-looking photograph man with his cough had wanted to take them together. She wished so much now that he had. She wondered if he was still taking pictures, coughing behind his hand and being so careful to arrange things just so. He was part of it all, too, and always would be, though she didn't even know his name.

"I mustn't cry. I mustn't," she told herself firmly as she laid the picture with the other things and rolled them tightly in the half-done muffler.

Groping to her valise, she felt blindly till she reached the bottom corner and thrust the bundle in under her clothes. Some day she knew she would be able to let it go, but not yet. No, not for a good while.

"Patty," she heard the midget speaking to her from the region of the table legs. She felt the clinging fingers round her knees. "Patty, you mustn't take on this way. Cry if you want to, that's better'n to keep your feelin's bottled up like you have all day."

Hepatica couldn't answer for a minute, so she gathered T.T. into her arms.

"Lord, Patty, it seems just yesterday that you used to take me up like this an' pretend I was your doll. Remember?"

"Yes, T.T." Hepatica spoke jerkily against her tears, "I always liked you better'n the china-headed ones Pa bought me."

"Hallelujah used to say it made him feel queer to see you rock me like I was one, me an' my gray hair, an' you with your curls an' rosy cheeks lookin' like one of those German Christmas Angels—"

"Tree and all," put in Hepatica with a catch in her breath.

"I'd be willin' to bet no midget ever raised a giant's daughter before, but I guess it all comes of our bein' odd sizes together."

"Don't talk to me about odd sizes—not to-night, T.T."

"I guess there ain't a person livin' don't feel kind of off the pattern sometimes. But I tell you, Patty, it won't stay so bad as this. Your feelin's ease up after awhile if you can just keep goin'."

"But I don't care about after awhile. It's *now* that matters."

"I know all about that, too, though I don't s'pose you'll believe it."

Fortunately for them all there was nearly a week's lull between performances of the Freaks and Fandangos. This gave Pollock a chance to

recover somewhat from the affair at Peace Pipe, and Hallelujah could choose his time for breaking the news of Hepatica's decision not to go on with her part. She never knew exactly what passed between the two men, but she guessed it had not been easy for her father to hold out against Joshua. He wasn't used to having people, least of all a member of his troupe, stand out against him, and he tried by every wile to change her mind.

"Now look here, Patty," he began persuasively, "I know you're pretty cut up over that young scapegrace. It was a shock to me, let alone losing a good performer that I'd laid out money on and never got back either. Still, you're too sensible a girl to get notions like this."

"But it isn't a notion, Josh," Hepatica said. "I've thought a lot about it ever since . . . and I've made up my mind."

"Now don't be hasty, never pays to. It's no disgrace to see the elephant as they say in the show business." At her bewildered look he explained between puffs on his cigar, "Never heard that saying—well, it means getting experience, generally at your own cost. I've done it plenty of times, but you don't see me laying down in my tracks, do you?"

"It's not the same thing."

"I can't see where the difference comes in, we both get paid for entertaining folks." Seeing her set lips, he tried another method, "Of course, if you don't want to sing 'The Last Rose of Summer' and go down front with your pictures and the basket, I'm willing to cut that part out. Hallelujah says you don't like some of the lines I've been using. Well, maybe you are getting too old, so I'll take out any to humor you. Maybe I'll be able to get hold of somebody else to play the banjo later on."

"It wouldn't make any difference who you got." Hepatica wasn't easily shaken once she had made up her mind. "I'm not going to get up there and sing or do my stunt any more. Pa says I don't have to, and it's a free country, isn't it?"

Joshua Pollock regarded her with grudging admiration. He hadn't expected to find her so stubborn. "You're looking at things all wrong," he went on. "Now just put all this nonsense out of your head and listen to me sensibly. Facts are facts, you're a freak. There's no getting round that."

"I know what I am, Josh, and . . . I'd rather not talk about it, please."

"I ain't through my say yet, not by a long shot. How many girls your age are famous, like I've made you, and earning good pay every week?"

“I don’t know, Josh. I don’t know a thing about other girls.”

“Well, I tell you there’s plenty would like to step into your shoes.”

“Size nine,” she reminded him bitterly. “I guess not many would.”

“Hang it all, Patty, what’s got into you anyway? You’re the way you are and you might’s well make the most of it. You won’t shrink any just because you stop doing your turn in front of folks. You act like an ostrich trying to bury its head in the sand.”

“I don’t care if I do! That’s my lookout.”

“A pretty poor one when you don’t see no pay at the end of every week.”

“I’ll make out,” she told him. “I’ve got some saved up. It’s mine.”

“You’ll find how quick it goes, too.” He shifted his cigar and his arguments. “That’s your business, of course, but I’ve got my side, and you might think of that. It’s been a losing season so far. One piece of bad luck after another ever since we took that boy on.”

“He never touched a cent of your money.”

“Maybe he didn’t take it out of my cash box, but I laid a lot out on him that I never got back. Then what with the fire and losing Chi-Chi, and all those extra repairs, I’m way behind as it is without your going back on me.”

Hepatica wove and unwove her fingers. He had kept this plea for the last and she knew he counted on rousing her sympathies.

“I took Tony on to please you mostly,” he was going on, “you put me up to it against my better judgment, so it’s a nice time to leave me in the lurch. Times ain’t what they were, and neither’s the troupe, though I don’t throw it up to them fifty times a day like some managers would. Adam’s letting down and Jerry takes more’n is good for him to drink, and you can see for yourself T.T.’s broke up a lot since spring.”

“She hasn’t,” Hepatica contradicted sharply, but she knew he was right.

“Mabel’s lost four pounds worrying, and she can’t afford to do that right in the middle of the season. You’re the one I depend on most, Patty. You wouldn’t go back on us all now just for some little whim you got in your head?”

“I’m sorry, Josh, but I can’t do it any more. I just can’t.”

“Well, *there’s* gratitude for you!” He tossed away the stub of his cigar and turned to face Titania Tripp who had appeared in the door. “Walking out

on us same's if I hadn't raised her to the boards like she was my own."

"Stuff an' nonsense, Joshua Pollock!" the midget snapped up at him from her scant three feet. "To hear you anybody'd think you ran a charity bazaar. Patty's old enough to know her own mind an' you leave her be."

"Oh, T.T.," Hepatica sighed as they watched him cram on his hat and go down the steps with squared shoulders, "he made me feel mean. Maybe I'd ought to try and go back to the old part."

"Don't you do it, Patty. He thinks he's the big dog with the brass collar round here, but you stand right up to him. It's the only way."

CHAPTER XII

“Pa,” Hepatica found her father hunched over a newspaper in Mrs. Blodgett’s shabby back parlor, “I’m going out to get some more of T.T.’s medicine. We’re most through that last bottle.”

“Want me to get it, Patty?” He began to uncoil himself from the chair with its washed-out chintz roses. “I might’s well go as sit here and look at the weather.” He jerked his head toward the windows that streamed with rain, blurring the dripping tree and board fence of the back yard.

“I thought I’d like to walk. I’m so tired of staying cooped up in that bedroom. T.T.’s got to sleep and Flossie’s going to keep an eye on her.”

“All right. How about cash?”

“T.T. gave it to me, but, Pa, if the laundry man should come I guess you’d better leave a dollar with Mrs. Blodgett. I’ve only got seventy-five cents or I would.”

“Don’t worry, pay day’s coming round in two more.”

“I think it was mean of those Dime Museum people to cut you down ten whole dollars a week.”

“Well, Josh says we’re lucky to get anything steady over the winter, even if it is kind of a comedown to be over on Fourteenth Street in a joint like that. It ain’t the crowd we’re used to drawing and I’m glad you’re out of the show.”

“Still, it does cramp us.” Hepatica drew her brows together in a little worried frown as she buttoned up her old coat with the bands of soutache braid. “And I don’t know if T.T. can hold out, Pa. I get scared every time she goes on her breath’ll give out in the middle of her act.”

“Mighty lucky she’s got you to double for her on the singing,” he said. “She’d have had to give out last month when she lost her voice in that spell.”

“Oh, I don’t mind doing her song,” Hepatica assured him, “I kind of like it scrouging down there behind her booth and nobody out front knowing it’s me.”

“Well, you be careful crossing streets in all this downpour,” he cautioned her. “There’s so many trolleys and horse cars and cabs nowadays I don’t know what we’re coming to if it keeps on.”

“We’re too big for ’em to run over us, Pa,” she reminded him.

She paused by the long mirror in the hall to straighten her hat, a limp affair of steamed-over blue velvet with a fan of paler pleatings in front and the back tilted on what looked more like a pin cushion. Flossie was responsible for its refurbishing as she had been for letting down Hepatica’s last year’s coat. It was still a good deal too short and the hem was at least one shade brighter.

“Well, what of it?” Hepatica spoke defiantly to her reflected self.

Her curls were pinned up now, which made her look taller and really grown up. Also her cheeks were a trifle less childishly round and pink. She had to stoop to see the top of her head in the glass, when she straightened up the dusty gold frame cut her off at the eyebrows.

“Patty,” she heard Mabel’s voice from the third-floor landing, “bring me a bag of gumdrops, will you? I haven’t a thing left to chew on.”

“All right,” she called back, opening the front door to the chill and wet of East Twelfth Street.

She turned away from Third Avenue where the line of elevated railroad roared overhead, walking westward toward Fourteenth Street and the gap between buildings which was Union Square. Everything looked cold and sodden that December afternoon, but Hepatica was glad to be out of Mrs. Blodgett’s rooming house. All day she had wanted to escape from the bedroom and back parlor, from the familiar contents of her boxes and T.T.’s, from Mabel and Flossie, even from her father’s kindness and the midget’s determined cheerfulness as she lay propped among the pillows of the iron bedstead that looked so many times too large for its wizened occupant. An open umbrella gave her the privacy she had longed for since morning. It was like being an island bobbing along in a sea of other islands. You could cry beneath it in comfort, undisturbed by curious glances. Even if you were jostled and people saw that your face was wet they might easily think you had a hole in your umbrella.

On pleasant days she was apt to keep closer to walls or the edge of sidewalks, conscious of her size and the glances that followed her. But no one would notice her much to-day. Each human being under his umbrella was busy steadying it against the wind and rain, watching out for trolley cars

and drays where streets crossed. Sidewalks were running over with office workers and shop girls, for it was past the closing hour. Snatches of quick talk and laughter came to Hepatica as she plodded along. Now and again she paused by some lighted store window to stare in. Not that she wanted anything in particular, but it helped. There was the fur place with headless dummies in stylish dolmans and fitted jackets of sealskin and mink, carrying little round muffs she was sure she couldn't squeeze even one of her hands into. Farther on she passed a toy shop, gay with early Christmas displays. A small village of painted wood and cardboard had been set out on a mound of green felt, with a magnificent Noah's Ark alongside. Stiffly the animals and people were scattered about, everywhere two by two.

"Yes, that's the way it ought to be," she thought, the tiny bright shapes misty before her eyes, "everybody ought to come the same size and in pairs."

She splashed through a puddle, gained the farther curb just before a van and two soggy horses bore down on her, then started across the soaked spaces of the square. There were fewer people here and she was over her fit of crying, though she still sniffed and her cheeks were wet. It was nice to see the windows lighting up through the gathering dimness. The Flatiron Building towered far ahead, vast as the shape of some gigantic ship. Hepatica couldn't help feeling drawn to it because of its size, as if she ought to give some special sign in passing. She had spoken of this to her father once and he had laughed.

"Want I should tip my hat to it?" he had asked in one of his rare flights of fancy.

Starting back with her packages of medicine and candy, she felt suddenly cold and hungry. She hadn't eaten much at noon and such spicy smells came from a bakery lunch room that she decided to have a cup of coffee and one of the cinnamon buns that looked so big and shiny in the window. It was an extravagance, but one had to be reckless sometimes, especially on afternoons like this.

Her spirits rose in the warmth and savoriness of the bakery. She had the place all to herself and a girl about her own age with blue eyes and a crown of thick brown braids brought her coffee and a whole trayful of buns to choose from. Hepatica smiled at her shyly. She liked the way she stepped about on her small, brisk feet in buttoned kid boots. She envied her their trimness, and the easy way she moved from counter to table, talking German to the older woman who tended to the paper-bag and box customers. They

looked alike, those two. Hepatica wondered if they were mother and daughter or sisters. She wished she knew German and could understand the curious guttural sounds they made. But maybe they were making comments on her own looks, so perhaps it was just as well she couldn't.

She sipped her coffee slowly and took very small bites of the bun, carefully eating the crusted-sugar top first. How nice it would be to work in a place like this—to carry in trays of brown, delicious food hot from the oven, to bring cups of coffee to hungry customers, to talk and joke with regular ones who came to carry home loaves of bread and pies and scalloped cakes. A fat yellow cat stole in from a back room on pads of velvet. Back arched, and tail delicately swishing, it advanced to Hepatica's chair. She bent to pat it and was rewarded by a loud, rumbling purr.

“She vill to you not a trouble be?” the woman asked with a smiling lift of her eyebrows.

Hepatica shook her head. “Not a bit,” she made quick response. “I like cats though I never had one.”

“No? Such a pity.”

The woman broke off to wait on a customer who spoke to her and the girl in German. Hepatica went on stroking the cat, listening to the unintelligible flow of sounds that came from the three smiling mouths about the counter.

“Maybe,” Hepatica's thoughts ran wild for a minute as she relaxed under the spell of food and good smells, “maybe they'd let me work here if I asked them. I could reach things down from those upper shelves and I guess they have to stand on chairs too.” She stared into her nearly empty cup, trying to think of the best way to ask such a thing. Did one lead up to a question like that ever so carefully, or was it better to plunge in, head over heels. She tried over different speeches to herself: “Do you happen to need any help around your shop? I just thought I'd mention it in case you do, because I'm not busy myself right now.” Or again the more simple and abrupt: “Please can't I come and work for you? I'll do anything you say.”

She let herself imagine that they wanted her. She saw herself, miraculously shrunken several sizes, waiting on customers at these tables; on familiar terms with that girl and the smiling older woman, even learning to talk German with them. And then, as always when she let her mind have its way, Tony came into the scene. She saw him stroll in, his hat at the

familiar tilt, his dark face suddenly lighting at sight of her. “Oh, Tony,” she would say in a thrilling voice like the heroines in books, “is it really you?”

He would take both her hands and stand looking at her the way she had always wanted him to; the way he never had. “Patty,” he would say, “where have you been, my dear, all these months? Don’t you know I’ve been tramping the streets looking for you?”

They would sit at that farthest table in the corner, holding hands across it and never taking their eyes off each other. The kind German woman and the girl would nod and smile together, and wait on all the customers so that she and Tony could talk on and on undisturbed. She would show him the blue and silver watch pinned over her heart. He would explain away all those ugly suspicions from Peace Pipe Fair. She didn’t know just how he would do that, but it would all be simple and right somehow. Of course he hadn’t stolen the money. He had guessed that Jake Trundy was a crook and had only pretended to take up with him to bring him to justice. It had been difficult because it had meant seeming to be partner in the crime. But now he had cleared himself with the authorities. He had earned their undying gratitude and a handsome reward. Still, nothing mattered to him till he had found her; till she knew that he was innocent.

And she would say: “I didn’t really believe what they said about you, Tony. I always knew you’d come back and tell me it was all right.”

Then he would lean across the table and look at her with shining eyes, and say: “And I’ve got something else to tell you, Patty, something I’ve wanted to say for a long time. . . .”

Her cheeks burned as she came to that part. The bakery swam before her in a happy mist.

“You vant anyting more?” that other girl’s voice came to her out of it.

“N-no, thank you.”

Her spoon clattered. She was alone at the marble-topped table, getting out a dime from her purse, gathering up her things to go out into the rain again. She felt suddenly twice her size, and so self-conscious she couldn’t even return the woman’s pleasant nod as she went out.

It was quite dark now, though the rain still came down in steady, slanting sheets. A near-by church chime struck six, and she quickened her steps, splashing through puddles of water that made chill splatterings above her boots. She must hurry if she was to give T.T. her medicine and supper and

carry her over to the Dime Museum in time for her to do her Vanishing Circassian Dwarf act.

CHAPTER XIII

Christmas came and went with wreaths at every window and freshly cut evergreen trees stacked along the curbs till even Third Avenue wore the look and smell of a northern wood. Fourteenth Street had spilled over with cars and cabs and holiday shoppers, bundle laden and bustling. The Dime Museum, in spite of rather slim business had put on tinsel and pop-corn streamers, and “The Season’s Greetings” in frosted letters over its dingy portal, and the one-armed door man who guarded the back alley where Pollock’s troupe and the other performers went in had hung a red bell by the “Positively No Admission” sign. T.T. had revived from her earlier attack though she still croaked in uncertain whispers. She had been well enough to go shopping with Hepatica and Flossie on a couple of their afternoon expeditions to Broadway, where they had taken turns carrying her through crowds and up flights of stairs. Hallelujah would have done this, but they had discovered it caused too much of a sensation. They had nearly been mobbed with curious followers on one occasion.

But the afternoon of December the twenty-fourth Hallelujah in a sudden burst of recklessness had taken Hepatica and the midget riding in a hansom cab.

“Just a little Christmas spree,” he had explained, “for the three of us. Don’t let on to Josh or the rest. We’ll drive up Fifth Avenue and back home by Broadway just as good as if we’re Vanderbilts and Astors.”

There had been some difficulty fitting Hallelujah’s legs into the cab, and when Hepatica got in, too, it had looked as if the doors couldn’t possibly shut over their knees. But somehow that had been accomplished, and T.T. was squeezed between them so that only her peaked small face under the wagging purple toque and a bit of her marabou boa showed.

“My, my, this is life!” she had sighed contentedly, little bright spots of color appearing on her sallow cheeks as they joined the procession of other cabs. “I declare I feel like the Queen of England or somebody. Only trouble is, it’s goin’ to make me hanker from now on.”

Hepatica had returned the squeeze the midget had given her hand. She, too, had felt happy and elated shut in there behind the trotting horse with the unseen cabby perched behind. He pulled at the reins and flourished a whip

which was of no possible use, there being no chance of speed in the stream of cabs, carriages, horse cars and delivery wagons moving up and down the avenue. Hepatica never forgot that ride or the queer feeling of detached security riding in a hansom cab gave. You were part of the crowd and yet removed from it. No one could have told that the three of them were odd sizes. If only, she had wished, they could go jogging on forever in this complete, snug world with the driver clucking and slapping reins to the swaying creak and clatter of wheels and harness. There had been snow to make it all even nicer—not a heavy fall to blind and chill them, but large, lazy flakes to whirl round the lighted street lamps, to lie in starry white wheels on the cab doors and their own coat sleeves.

They had pointed all the special places out to one another.

“See, there’s the Holland House, Patty.”

“Yes, pretty soon we’ll be passing the Waldorf-Astoria with the little lamps on all the tables.”

“And Tiffany’s, that’ll be on our side of the Avenue.”

“How about stoppin’ off there to look at a diamond sunburst?”

“No, thanks, T.T., not just now.”

“Well, I expect it *would* be pretty crowded. There’s Sherry’s, too, but I s’pose we’d better not stop for chocolate and French pastry?”

“Might take away our appetite for Mrs. Blodgett’s delicious dinner. Did you smell the cabbage when we went out?”

So they had joked together, past windows like brightly lighted small stages and brownstone houses where maids were drawing curtains on high-ceilinged, mahogany-filled rooms. Coming back along Broadway they had passed theaters and the Metropolitan Opera House where a late matinee audience was pouring out from the enormous doors.

“Some day we’ll go to the opera, too, Patty,” Hallelujah said.

“Me, I’d rather see a Belasco play,” T.T. insisted. “Mrs. Leslie Carter’s worth all this German opera tra-la-la put together.”

Hepatica peered at the lettered posters near the front entrance. She spelled out the names to herself as they halted with the other cabs: *Il Trovatore*, *Siegfried*, *Lohengrin*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Faust*, *Die Walküre*. They had a queer, magic sound. She wished she knew what the words meant and how to pronounce them.

“Did you ever go to the opera?” she asked.

“Not here, I didn’t,” the midget told her, “but once years ago there was a grand-opera company playin’ where we stopped an’ I heard *The Bohemian Girl*. It was funny, everybody singin’ instead of talkin’ to each other. It’s all right for them that likes it, but it ain’t natural enough to suit me, though I must say the prima donna sang ‘I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls’ as nice as could be.”

“Well, I’d like to go all the same.”

Over on Fortieth Street people were pressing close to a side entrance. Hepatica watched them from the jungle of carriages in which their own cab was caught. They clustered in an eager group about a closed carriage and two waiting horses. Whenever that door opened a tingle of excitement filled the air. Each time it happened there were shoves and whisperings and curious glances.

“Wonder what’s up over there?” her father asked.

T.T. suddenly craning her neck, grew tense and awe struck.

“Why,” she told them, “it must be Melba! That’s the stage door an’ they’re waitin’ to see her come out. I read in the paper only yesterday she was goin’ to sing. My, my, I hope this jam don’t clear till we see her.”

“Melba—you don’t say!” Even Hallelujah seemed impressed.

“She’s the best one of all, isn’t she, T.T.?”

“You don’t s’pose anybody else could keep a crowd like that standin’ in the snow, do you, Patty? Talk about prima donnas—why you can’t hardly pick up a paper without there’s some piece about her in it, let alone havin’ toast an’ peaches an’ dear knows what all named after her. She’s the rage, that’s what she is.”

“Yes, I remember.” Hepatica leaned forward, staring hard through the falling flakes. “They call her the Australian Lark.”

“I know.” The midget’s hat tilted still farther over one eye in her eagerness. “Sounds like somethin’ out of a book to read how she got on. There ain’t a crowned head in Europe hasn’t had her to sing for ’em. Nellie Melba’s golden voice—that’s what the papers always call it.”

“I guess it’s golden, all right,” Hallelujah put in. “I heard she gets paid more’n a thousand dollars a time.”

“A thousand dollars a time!” Hepatica repeated incredulously. “Pa, you don’t mean every single time, for just *singing*?”

“There’s singin’ *an*’ singin’,” chuckled the midget. “You’d ought to try that kind, Patty. I wouldn’t put it past you to get famous some day an’ have folks clutterin’ the sidewalks for a sight. Look, she’s comin’ now.”

They were too far to see more than a fur-wrapped figure following the man who cleared a way through the crowd and handed her into the carriage. But even that was exciting and mysterious.

“Didn’t she bow nice?” sighed T.T. as their cab slipped through an opening and turned into the more familiar lengths of lower Broadway. “An’ did you see all the flowers her maid was carryin’?”

“I wish I could have seen how tall she was,” Hepatica answered absently. “I wonder—” She broke off, staring before her in silence as they joggled on. She found herself feeling as she had felt after reading *Peter Ibbetson*, all agog over what couldn’t possibly be real. Yet this time even her father had vouched for the truth. She was sure she would never forget that gracious, bending figure moving to the carriage through the snow and all the faces turned upon it.

That snowy ride in the hansom cab had been the best part of Christmas, though of course there had been presents and an unusually heavy dinner at Mrs. Blodgett’s to mark the holiday. Gifts had been less expensive that year. They were all feeling poor and anxious, whether they spoke of the future or not. The Dime Museum was not prospering. Joshua Pollock had to divide profits with the manager who owned the place and with the burlesque girls and the minstrel group and the Four Tumbling Fosters. These made up the other half of the program.

“If anybody’d told me I’d be glad of a chance on Fourteenth Street,” he often complained, “when I was booked ahead for months in the best houses from Maine to Florida I wouldn’t have believed it. But it shows what a run of bad luck will do. Bad luck and obstinacy,” he would usually add with a look in Hepatica’s direction.

“Oh, well, wait till spring,” Mabel would put in with a cheerfulness that deceived no one, “we’re sure to get something better then.”

“Sure, eh?” Joshua would bite on the cigars which he had cut down to three a day instead of his earlier half dozen. “I wish I was, that’s all I’ve got to say round here.”

Hallelujah now spent his afternoons in front of the Dime Museum, selling his rings and trying to attract passers-by. He had never resorted to this before, and though he was outwardly cheerful and uncomplaining Hepatica knew he hated it.

“Someone’s got to,” he told her when she protested. “It really don’t matter—much.”

“Pa, if you think it would do any good for me to go back to my old part, I will.”

“I don’t, Patty. Anyways I wouldn’t let you. Not over there in that joint. They’re a pretty rough crowd sometimes. I wish you didn’t even have to go over to help T.T. out.”

“I’m glad to. Nobody can see me. It was funny, though, wasn’t it, about that man bothering Joshua to know if T.T. really sang ‘Listen to the Mocking Bird’? I wonder what possessed him to?”

“He was after me again yesterday. You know, Patty, he’s awful suspicious she isn’t doing it.”

“I hope he won’t find out.”

“Not from me, he won’t, or Josh neither. It would look bad if they found out you doubled on the song part, specially after the way Josh goes on about his having only genuine freaks. No, it would dish the act if it got round who does the song.”

“I wonder why he’s so curious, Pa?”

“Search me. Well, he ain’t one of the ticket crowd anyhow, so I guess it’s nothing to worry over.”

“You said he worked there. You’d seen him round the hall.”

“Yes, he beats the drum for the Four Fosters’ tumbling act, and plays that crazy-sounding piano up back in the intermission. He ain’t such a bad sort. He’s a foreigner with nice manners. I kind of like him if he didn’t pester me so about T.T.’s act.”

“It’s a funny thing for him to do. I’m glad he didn’t get anything out of you or Josh.”

Hepatica took special care after that to let no one see her creep in under the curtains surrounding T.T.’s little booth. She could slip in unnoticed from the dressing room. Then, by crouching below the tiny blue-and-gilt stage, wait, completely hidden, till the cue came for her to start the music box and

lift up her own voice in the familiar tune. Titania Tripp squeaked through her jokes and made her usual bows and pirouettes first, but at three sharp taps of her high heels on the boards of the stage, Hepatica would begin. She rather enjoyed it, singing away there alone to the tinklings and tappings that were her accompaniments. Careful practice had given them great precision in keeping together. T.T. opened and shut her lips so realistically it didn't seem possible that anyone in the audience could suspect the notes were not coming from between them. No one ever had, till this queer old man had approached Pollock and Hallelujah.

Perhaps, she decided, thinking the matter over a night or two later in bed, she had been letting her voice out too much. She hadn't thought much about that till the old man's question had made her wonder. The music did go rather high where it repeated that mocking-bird part. High notes had always been so easy for Hepatica, she had taken them as a matter of course. Even Tony had always said she sang well, though he had teased her for taking so long to learn a tune and for going over and over it till she had every note just so. People had always liked to hear her sing from the time she was a child. She had never dreaded that part of her turn as she had the dancing and going down into the audience. Sometimes now she sang as she moved about their room, setting things to rights or darning her stockings and her father's socks. Once or twice Mrs. Blodgett had stopped on the landing to hear her.

"I declare you could sing in a church choir," she had told her once. "The lady soprano over at our chapel can't get up near so high without goin' into a squeak. Why, I bet you could carry a whole chorus with a voice like that."

Hepatica had felt relieved. She had been half afraid Mrs. Blodgett might be going to scold her for making too much noise.

"It's because I'm so big," she had explained, "I could go on forever without getting tired. Pa always said he'd like me to take music lessons, but we never stopped long enough in one place for that."

About the middle of January the weather turned bitter cold and sleety. The grates and stoves at Mrs. Blodgett's burned scuttles of coal without apparently giving much warmth and back stage at the Dime Museum felt like the arctic regions. Hepatica and Jerry walked over there together every day from Twelfth Street, each carrying a bundled charge, the midget in her heaviest wraps and Molly's pointed terrier nose emerging from red flannel.

Over on the Fourteenth Street entrance Hallelujah stamped his feet and watched his own breath stream out before him. He wore a plaid muffler

under his old ulster and sometimes he bought hot potatoes from street vendors to keep for hand warmers in his pockets.

“I don’t mind cold weather long’s I can keep moving,” he told Hepatica one day when he came in to get ready for his turn. “It’s this standing round that chills me up.”

Hepatica didn’t feel the cold much herself, but she worried about T.T. After each performance she felt relieved. A weight seemed to be lifted from her till it was time to get ready for to-morrow’s. The midget never admitted she had fears of her own, but Hepatica knew she had. She pretended not to notice how her fingers shook as she put on the paint and powder and adjusted the fringes of her fascination.

“I’m a regular cricket, I guess,” she would croak. “Always did hate the cold. But I’ll be good’s ever soon’s it warms up a little.”

“If it ever does,” Flossie would be sure to add. “Seems like it never could be June again.”

That day in early February had begun as others, without a hint of its importance. That was the way with days. Thinking of it afterwards Hepatica wondered how she could have eaten her breakfast and done errands on Third Avenue as calmly and unconcernedly as she had. She had fixed Molly’s food and patched a new thin place in her father’s tights. They had all had an early dinner before setting out for Fourteenth Street, and there had been the usual jokes and complaints about Mrs. Blodgett’s tough beefsteak and watery custard. No, nothing had marked it from the pattern of other days.

The drum was beating for the Four Tumbling Fosters’ act, and Mabel had gone out to the wings to be ready for her fortune-telling turn.

“Pretty good house to-night,” Flossie remarked from her mirror. “Adam says they gave him a hand. I bet I could get one, too, if I didn’t have to come on right after the intermission with everybody banging seats and streaking up and down the aisles.”

“Well, you know how it is when they’ve got burlesque girls on a bill. They always get the best places,” the midget reminded her. “Here, Patty, I’m all ready to be hooked up.”

The little blue-and-gilt booth was up and in place. Hepatica lifted T.T. to its high stage and then crawled under the curtains beneath. Practice had made her very adept at fitting her bulk into the space there. She folded her legs under her and reached for the music box. It was all wound and ready, all she had to do was push the spring. Her head touched the boards of the tiny

stage where she would presently hear the click of heels and castanets. Already Joshua Pollock's voice was coming from the other side of the footlights, familiar and booming:

"I refer to Miss Titania Tripp, Ladies and Gentlemen, unrivaled for smallness in two hemispheres . . . born in the State of Rhode Island . . . less than the height of an ordinary yardstick . . . tipping the scales at twenty-six pounds and wearing slippers that her illustrious namesake might have envied, she will perform for you her impersonation of the Vanishing Circassian Dwarf. Miss Titania Tripp."

Through the wooden framework and canvas of her hiding place, Hepatica heard the big curtain go creaking up, and then the quick swish of the midget's own small crimson silk one as she pushed it aside. Someone out front was clapping. Splendid. They almost never got applause right at the start. That would hearten T.T. Yes, there was certainly a better crowd than usual to judge by rustlings and murmurs.

Tap. Tap. Tap. The unseen red heels gave their signal and Hepatica reached for the music-box spring. Tinkling notes were trooping out now in precise gayety. Overhead the clicking and tapping came in quick patter. Hepatica could feel the vibration as if she were holding the tiny stage and its performer by sheer force. She waited for the preliminary trills to swing into the tune. Then she opened her lips and began. She scarcely needed to think at all she had done it so many times.

"I'm dreaming now of Hallie,
Sweet Hallie, in the valley . . ."

Above her the brisk beat sounded steadily. T.T. was keeping right up to the time. She hadn't dragged a bit so far. That was a comfort because she had seemed just a little more breathless than usual on the way over, and her hands had refused to stay warm in spite of rubbings.



Almost time for the chorus now. Hepatica shifted her position as much as she could in the cramped quarters, not that she dreaded the high part, but one of her feet was going to sleep under her.

“Listen to the mocking bird,
The mocking bird . . .”

Her voice rose, full and clear above the bell-like notes.

And then, suddenly, she realized that the boards above her were strangely still. Her own voice and the music box were going it alone without a single tap of heels or castanets. Hepatica’s eyes widened with alarm; her ears strained for some sound. But none came to reassure her.

“Listen to the mocking bird,
The mocking bird . . .”

That was her voice singing on and on. She was wound up, too, like the music box. She couldn’t stop till she finished the tune, no matter what was happening there in that strange quiet above her.

“And the mocking bird is singing o’er her grave.”

She waited for nothing after that. Thrusting aside the curtains she struggled out, banging her head against the wood, stumbling over the music box as she went. Already there was a commotion beyond the footlights. Gasps and whispers were growing into cries. A voice rang out shrilly: “Hey, what’s up? She’s keeled over!”

Hands were clapping. Some of them must think it was part of the act. The sudden glare of footlights blinded Hepatica after her wait in the dimness.

“Oh, T.T.!” she cried, groping with outstretched hands.

“Curtain! Ring down the curtain, somebody!” she heard Pollock shouting, and then, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I regret a slight indisposition on the part of Miss Titania Tripp. Kindly keep your seats and the performance will continue. . . .”

The curtain was down at last. Hepatica heard it thump at the same moment her eyes stopped blinking and she saw the crumpled heap of yellow satin, red fringes, and scarlet slippers on the floor of the little booth.

“Pa,” she shouted as she gathered the limp, small body into her arms, “Pa, come quick, she’s fainted!”

The stage was full of people now. All the freaks had come running in various states of dress. Molly was barking and leaping about Jerry, and the three burlesque girls in their tights were frantically trying to come on for their turn.

“I’m here, Patty.” She heard Hallelujah’s voice. “I’m coming.”

“Get the booth off,” she told him, “and then call a doctor—quick!”

Everyone was trying to help, asking questions, getting in her way. She struggled through arms and legs and away from peering faces.

“Oh, please,” she begged, “let me get her to the dressing room.” They made a way for her at last. She carried T.T. in and laid her down on a trunk with her old coat for a cover. Flossie was hunting for the smelling salts, and an old man with a shiny bald head appeared from nowhere with a glass of water. Even as she fumbled over the fastenings of the midget’s dress Hepatica found herself wondering who he was and why he looked at her so intently from behind gold-rimmed spectacles.

CHAPTER XIV

“Oh, Pa,” Hepatica sighed as the doors of the big hospital closed behind them and they went down the steps to the street, “it don’t seem as if we ought to leave her there. She’s so little.”

“I know, she didn’t feel heavier’n a sheet of paper when I carried her out to the cab. But I guess being in there’s the best chance she’s got. That first doctor and the others all said so.”

“You don’t think she could . . .? I mean, if she . . . and we weren’t there. Pa, how bad does the doctor think it is?”

“Well . . .” Hallelujah buttoned his coat and rammed his gloveless hands in his pockets. A river wind blew bitterly up the lengths of deserted pavement where only the street lamps burned, eerie and dwindling in the chilly dark of a winter morning. “He didn’t say much different to me from what he told you. It’s her heart. He said he didn’t know how she’d kept going so long, and then those complications.”

“But he said she has a chance?” Hepatica pressed him. “He did say that to you, too?”

“Yes, he did. Only, of course, he said he hadn’t had any dealings with midgets. He didn’t know how she’d stand the treatments—at her age.”

“She’s not so very old, is she, Pa?”

“Lord, Patty, I don’t know. She never would tell any of us, not even Josh, and she’s looked the same ever since I joined up with the show.”

“I wish we could have afforded a room for her. I didn’t like the sound of that ward they were going to put her into.”

“Or me, but what else could we do? The doctor said they’d treat her all right and that nurse looked kind.”

“I wish T.T.’d come to again before they took her up there. It was so dreadful the way she kept going off. Pa, do you think we ought to tell Josh what the doctor said about her not being able to go on with the show again?”

“I guess we won’t need to. Josh ain’t blind, Patty.”

They walked on in silence for some blocks. A solitary policeman passed on his round. He eyed them curiously, swinging his club and whistling. It was strange being out like that at half past two in the morning. Somehow it seemed as if anything could happen in those cheerless spaces. The blank-eyed houses looked grim and forbidding. It didn't seem possible that living, friendly people were asleep there behind the brick and brownstone. Hepatica's feet felt like clods as she pushed them along. Such weariness and despair were upon her that she felt like a lead figure of a person who walked beside the great, stalking shape of another leaden figure that bore a queer resemblance to her father.

Mrs. Blodgett's darkened house loomed before them at last. They mounted the gritty, ash-strewn steps and let themselves in. A blue tip of gas flame burned in the hall as they felt for the stair rail. The uncarpeted steps creaked under their feet as they went up. At her door Hepatica felt for her father's hand. She clung to it a moment, pressing her cheek to his coat sleeve.

"There, now," he whispered back, "you go right in to bed. Try to get some sleep. You need it after to-night."

She undressed in the dark, mechanically unfastening her clothes and laying them on a chair. It was only when she felt her way to the bed and her feet stumbled over the midget's little slippers set out beside it, that she began to cry. She buried her face in the pillows to smother her sobs. Morning showed bright behind the neighboring chimney pots and Mrs. Blodgett's Nottingham lace curtains, before sleep overtook her.

It was past ten o'clock when she woke, her eyelids so heavy and swollen from last night's tears that she could hardly open them in answer to knocking on her door.

"Someone to see you, Patty," her father's voice was saying.

Only a little while ago and she would have thought it might be Tony. But now she did not at once leap to that forlorn hope. In spite of herself he was less vivid in her mind. Almost, she thought, she could let the little bundle of souvenirs go, especially if she did not open and look them over again.

"Oh, Pa, is it about T.T.?"

"No," he told her. "Flossie and Adam are up at the hospital now, so we'll have word soon."

She ran to the door, opening it a crack to peer out at him.

“But who is it? Who wants to see me?”

“Listen, Patty,” he spoke from the dimness of the hall, “you put on your clothes and come down to the back parlor. It’s . . . well, it’s that old fellow I told you about. The one who pestered me to find out who done the singing.”

“Well, but what of it? I don’t want—”

“Guess you’ll have to talk to him, Patty. He’s all possessed about you. He’s—you’ll have to see him yourself. He won’t take No. He wouldn’t even wait till to-morrow.”

“What can he want of me?” she thought as she threw on her clothes carelessly, her mind going over and over the midget’s collapse; the strain of watching while the doctor worked over her; the long wait at the hospital, and the dread she could not yet put into words, not even to herself. Her fingers were clumsy as she fastened the collar of her old blue woolen dress. She did not bother to pin up her hair, and though she tied it back with a ribbon, the curls tumbled over her shoulders as she ran down the three flights to Mrs. Blodgett’s back parlor.

She had expected to find her father there. But her visitor rose, alone, a stocky elderly man with a bald head and small blue eyes that peered at her from behind spectacles. Just for a minute Hepatica couldn’t think where she had seen them before. Then she remembered.

“Why,” she said in sudden recognition, “you’re the one who brought the water last night after T.T. fainted. I guess I forgot to thank you. I couldn’t think of anything then except if she’d come to.”

“You didn’t have to thank me.” He bowed with old-fashioned formality and his voice was thick and rather soft with a foreign accent. She took the card he handed her and read the name printed on it—“Herr Heinrich Grosmeier”—while he took off his glasses, polished them with care, and put them on again to study her even more intently, his head tilted slightly to one side.

“Pa told you my name, did he?” The visitor nodded. “Won’t you sit down?”

He took one of Mrs. Blodgett’s plush and rosewood chairs, while she let herself down on the steadier part of the sofa.

“You know why I have come?” He bent toward her, still searching her face. “Your father, the giant, he has explained to you?”

Hepatica shook her head. “No, he just said you wanted to see me.”

“Well, then, I tell you—” But he broke off to ask her abruptly, “You are, how old?”

“Pretty nearly sixteen.” She pushed back one of the curls that had crept over her shoulder, wishing she had pinned her hair up after all.

“Sixteen. It is good you are no older. And you are built . . . on the grand scale.” She flushed under his scrutiny and looked away. She wished he wouldn’t grow personal so soon, but then people usually did. Forcing the smile that people expected when they mentioned her size, she turned back to him. But he wasn’t smiling. It didn’t seem to strike him as funny. “Such a voice comes not by chance,” he was saying more to himself than to her, “I might have known.”

Hepatica felt bewildered. She tried to fix her mind on the words he was saying. But it was difficult. It didn’t seem possible that he could be talking about her. It must be someone else, some other girl. Yet he fixed her so intently with his spectacled eyes, and he went on and on saying these extraordinary things about a voice—her voice.

“Excuse me,” she ventured as he paused for breath, “I guess I haven’t got it quite straight. You don’t mean you think because I’ve been doing the mocking-bird song for T.T.’s act that I could ever be a singer, the way you said?”

“You think I would have gone to all the trouble to hunt you out like this on such a cold morning if I did not mean just so?” He frowned in his earnestness.

“Well, but it was just that one song. I don’t even know what some of those notes and marks mean. Tony taught me the easy ones and if I once hear a tune I can most always remember it, but—”

“You will learn. There is time . . . plenty. Gott in Himmel, to be sixteen again!”

He sounded so sad when he said that, that Hepatica stopped her questions and let him go on. He was saying a great many more things about her and about himself. He didn’t belong over there in the Dime Museum either. No, up to five years ago he had played bass viol in the Metropolitan Opera House, and before that in an orchestra in Berlin. But rheumatism had come to him almost overnight. He spread out his fingers to show her the knots that had crippled them. People had been kind, but he could not take charity. There were always odd jobs like the Fourteenth Street one. He could beat drums still, and play on pianos that were so out of tune it didn’t matter

if his fingers were stiff and fumbling. Hepatica wanted to tell him she was sorry, but she knew from the way he looked that it would never do. After all, he explained, it could have been much worse. He could have lost his hearing like another musician he called Beethoven. He still had the opera, and he could go any time he pleased. He had a pass. When he talked about music and the opera Hepatica noticed that a change came over him. His eyes quickened behind their glasses. His whole face shone. He hardly seemed the same pudgy, bald old man in shabby coat and trousers worn shiny in places.

He had gone back to talking about her again. He always managed to get back to that, to her voice. He was telling her how sure he had been from the first time he watched the Vanishing Circassian Dwarf act that the midget wasn't singing the song. Such tone couldn't have come out of anyone so tiny and old. If he had been able to leave his place in the back of the hall and prowl behind scenes it wouldn't have taken him so long to discover the owner of it. He had tried to pump the giant and that manager, but they had been secretive. So he had watched and waited. He knew he would find out some day. He had already talked to his friends in the orchestra about it. He had even been to see another old friend, a man who taught singing to the prima donnas, who had made Materna, the greatest Brünnhilde of her time, who even coached Melba in her rôles. Hepatica listened in a daze. Her head reeled at all the strange names of people and operas she had never heard of before. She snatched at them as they went by. She lost the sense of what he was saying, and when she caught up with him again, he was always on the same subject. It frightened her to hear him saying the things he did about her voice.

“So fresh and golden . . . rich like honey, but fine and clear as a bell on the high notes. . . . And perfectly true. . . . No, never once a flat or lagging behind the music.”

Hepatica, reddening to the roots of her hair, stopped him. “I've got pretty good breath,” she admitted.

“And you will have need of it.” He nodded at her. “You will practice to get even more. And if Wagner had made you himself you could not look more like his goddesses—so fair and so big—”

Hepatica grew a deeper red. “Look here,” she heard herself interrupting, “I know you mean it all right. I'm a freak and I know it. I did a turn of my own in the show awhile back, but I'm through with getting up in front of people. That's why I didn't mind singing for T.T. I was all scrouged under the booth. Nobody knew it was me.”

“So . . . that’s how it is?”

She heard him make a little clicking sound under his breath, but she could not look at him. Her eyes were filling with the tears she hadn’t meant to let come. She struggled against them, clenching her hands till she saw her knuckles whitening. All the time she knew Herr Grosmeier was watching her with his queer, deep-seeing gaze. She felt helpless before him, as if nothing she had ever thought or felt was safe from his intentness. She hadn’t meant to burst out like that, to say what she had never admitted even to her father and T.T.

“Excuse me,” she said, gulping, still not daring to look up into his face, though she had her tears better in control, “but you see the way it is. I couldn’t do . . . what you talked about just now . . . not even if my voice is as good as you think. I can’t make a spectacle of myself anymore like I used to.” She hesitated, hoping he would come to her aid, but he didn’t, so she went on. “Something . . . happened and . . . but even before that I’d been hating it. I hated Josh saying I was a ‘Mountain of Childhood,’ and then when I’d have to go down and sell my pictures and they’d joke and feel of me—”

She broke off again, and his voice came faintly to her through the ringing in her head.

“Ach, then, it was being yourself that you did not like? It would not matter if you should be someone else, eh?”

“I never thought of that.” She looked up at last and saw that he was smiling gravely. “Of course it would make everything different, only—I’m so *big*.”

“You couldn’t be as big as the music,” he told her, “nothing is.”

CHAPTER XV

Hepatica hurried along the hospital corridors with their smell of ether and disinfectant. She had grown used to all this in the last few weeks—the hushed bustle, the busy nurses and doctors, the humped shapes of patients in beds or wheel chairs, the presence of pain behind closed doors. She had never had anything to do with pain before, not physical pain at least. Now she was aware of it all about her. Often as she waited for her chance to see the midget, she could feel it like an almost tangible shape passing her by.

But to-day there was no waiting and the ward nurse had been more cheerful than usual.

“Yes,” she said as Hepatica paused at the little desk in the hallway, “you can go right in. Miss Tripp’s expecting you. What? Oh, a pretty fair night for her. The doctor says her vitality’s wonderful. He wouldn’t have believed with a heart like that she could hold out so well. But she’s got the grit of ten her size, I’ll say that for her.”

Hepatica stripped the paper from a tight little bunch of arbutus she had bought on Fourteenth Street, and made her way over to a screen at the far end of the long room. Behind it T.T. beamed at her from pillows she scarcely dented. The stiff bed cover reached almost to her chin and seemed to rob her of her body. She was like the head of a paper doll snipped out and pasted to a blank, white sheet. It was always a shock to Hepatica to see her so, in spite of the familiar crinkling about the dark eyes and kind mouth.

“T.T.,” she said, pressing close to the bed, laying her cheek that was cold and rosy with March winds to the midget’s tiny, shriveled one, “I came as soon as I could, but the lesson lasted longer to-day. He kept me going over and over those exercises.”

“He ain’t workin’ you too hard, Patty?” she whispered in her faint croak. “Lord, it most drives me crazy to be trussed up like this just when you—Missin’ all the fun of you learnin’ to be a singer.”

“You wouldn’t think it was much fun to hear me singing those scales over and over.” Hepatica knelt down on the linoleum-covered floor so that her face came on a level with T.T.’s. “Herr Trautmann says he never tried to get anyone who knew so little ready for an audition.”

“A . . . what?” the midget screwed up her face with puzzled interest.

“That’s what they call it when you go and sing for them at the Opera House. The director hears you and says if you’re good enough. Oh, T.T., I’m so frightened sometimes. Nights, when I have time to lie awake and think about it.”

“Shucks, I ain’t worried a mite about you, Patty. Remember that time we drove by an’ saw Melba?”

“Yes.” Hepatica smiled. “I never thought then there’d ever be a chance. It doesn’t seem so now, and when Herr Grosmeier talks about it I get feeling he can’t mean me.”

“There ain’t any reason at all you couldn’t be as good as Melba,” the midget broke in. “My, my, Patty, think what ’twould mean! You a prima donna—singin’ away there in Eyetalian an’ German an’ all the curtain calls an’ flowers an’ money pourin’ in so fast you couldn’t spend it. I wouldn’t wonder if you got started at it inside of six months.”

“Oh, goodness, T.T.,” Hepatica laughed fondly and patted one of the hands that looked almost as frail as the dried starfish from Bright Sands, “it’ll more likely be six years, even if they should think I’m worth training and those people put up the money for me to go to Germany, same’s Herr Grosmeier says they’re willing to.”

“How about ’em? Were they nice to you when he took you there to sing?”

“Oh, yes, I liked them. He was an old man and his wife was nice, too. She called me ‘Dear,’ and they gave us the best things for tea afterwards. I wanted to bring you back one of the little cakes in my pocket, but I kind of didn’t dare to for fear the butler would see me.”

“A butler, mercy, Patty, I’d of been all skitters with one waitin’ on me! I expect their house was awfully grand?”

“It was—way up on Fifth Avenue. I never saw so much furniture all at once in one place. I had on my new clothes and my shoes squeaked. I had to walk just so. It was hard because the rugs would kind of slide under you. I didn’t want to fall on my nose and disgrace Herr Grosmeier and Herr Trautmann after all the trouble they’d been to.”

“I should say not! When are you goin’ to do this . . . this business of singin’ at the Opera House?”

“Herr Grosmeier thinks next week. He’s seeing about it. He’s got friends there. He introduced me to some of them when he took me to the opera.”

“Tell me again the name of that piece you saw. I couldn’t make much out of that program you fetched me with all those German words.”

“It’s *Die Walküre*. I wouldn’t have known what it was all about except for Herr Grosmeier explaining it to me between the acts. The people in it were mostly gods and goddesses and there were crags and caves and a magic sword, and Brünnhilde, she’s the one I liked best because she tried to save Siegmund, she came in with armor and a real horse—”

“Sounds more like the circus to me!” T.T. chuckled faintly and then gasped at the effort it had been. “Only I hope you steer clear of horses when you do it, Patty. I don’t trust ’em, never did.”

“I wish you could have heard that music, T.T. Sometimes it was so loud and roaring you felt as if all the storms in the world were coming at you, and then when they were making love it was so soft and different. Herr Grosmeier told me what to listen for, ‘themes’ he called them, but they were just parts that repeated so you could tell the kind of feelings they were having or going to have. And the kettledrums made me feel so queer in the pit of my stomach, just the way you said the engines starting on the *Claribel May* did. Do you remember?”

“I should say I do. But what about the leading lady and all the rest of the troupe?”

“They weren’t so much to look at, not at first. I was kind of surprised. The one who played Sieglinde had more double chins than Mabel and the tenor’s legs looked funny, but it didn’t seem to matter after they started to sing. Oh, and Brünnhilde was big, too, almost as big as I am. I tell you it made me feel good to see her.”

“I expect that’s why they call it grand opera. Go on, tell me some more before that nurse comes to put you out.”

“Well, it got sort of sad toward the end. You see they had to punish Brünnhilde because she disobeyed Wotan’s orders. I got a little mixed up in that part, but anyway they put her to sleep for years in the forest with a circle of magic fire round her. She lay there in the middle of it with her helmet and armor on—”

“Goodness, it sounds pretty uncomfortable to me!”

“Oh, T.T.,” laughed Hepatica, “aren’t you awful? But if you’d heard the fire music you wouldn’t have thought of that. It was so beautiful I cried. Lots of people all round were crying and blowing their noses, too.”

There was a crackle of starched apron and the nurse poked her head round the screen.

“You can have till I come back with Miss Tripp’s tray,” she said with a nod. “It’s past visiting hours now, but this patient’s a special favorite of mine.”

The midget sighed faintly. Hepatica noticed the quick beating of the little pulse in her scrawny throat. Her own heart grew sick with fear and pity. She pressed closer as if she could will her young strength and vigor into T.T.’s little body.

“They’re real kind mostly, these nurses,” the midget went on. “Yes, they’re awful good to me. But I wish I could get back to the show. I miss it. Seems like I can’t stand it round seven o’clock when I’d start to get the make-up an’ my fascination out. You don’t think the moths have got in it, do you?”

“I take it out of the box every day and shake it same’s you told me to.”

“Wish they’d let me wear it here evenings.” T.T. smiled and pushed back a wisp of scant gray hair. “Never thought I’d take to pigtails at my time of life, but it just goes to show. . . . Well,” she screwed up her face in the old amused way, “it’s never too late to die or get married, that’s what an aunt of mine used to say.”

“Oh, T.T., if only you could have a room all to yourself! I’m going to manage it someday, just as soon as I can.”

“Shucks, what would an old grasshopper like me want of a whole room? What’s that you got in your other hand?”

“Some arbutus,” Hepatica brought the bunch out. “A man had a trayful over on Fourteenth Street. I guess it’s come a long way. I’m afraid the flowers are getting brown at the edges, but they’re still sweet.”

She held it to the midget’s nose. T.T. sniffed as if she could never get enough. Light was fading there in the ward, though the late March afternoon was still clear beyond the windows. Other patients behind their screens moved and complained, chinaware rattled, and footsteps padded by in the corridors; but the two heads bent close together over the tight small bunch

scarcely stirred. Between them the spicy wood-fragrance rose, fresh and chill and unbearably sweet.

“I’m glad I didn’t die without I smelled that again,” T.T. spoke at last. “It’s like nothin’ else in the world—that I’ve ever come across anyhow. I used to find ’em every spring in the woods when I was a child. I’d always spy ’em ahead of the other young ones, bein’ nearest to the ground, I guess. . . .” She broke off, but she still kept them pressed to her nose. “It’s like the years were rollin’ off me to sniff ’em.”

It always moved Hepatica queerly when T.T. talked of being young. It seemed as if she could never have been anything but tiny and gray and wrinkled, and yet she must have been her age once, with all the same feelings.

“I thought you could have them by you to-night in case you wake up.” Hepatica explained practically, just as if that was what she had really been thinking.

“Well, here we are.” The nurse was beaming broadly over a supper tray set out with thick white crockery. “Time for this little girl to say bye-bye to visitors.”

Hepatica rose and began buttoning her coat. “Oh, T.T.,” she said, “I didn’t tell you half the things I meant to, or give you all the messages the rest sent. Jerry wants you to know he’s teaching Molly a new trick. He says to her, ‘Where’s T.T. gone?’ and she jumps up on the sofa and puts her head on the pillow. You ought to see her. She looks so comical.”

They all laughed together. As she went out Hepatica bumped into a hurrying interne. He looked annoyed until he saw that she was crying.

CHAPTER XVI

Hepatica woke early, knowing that the day had come. She lay in bed, listening to the Saint Mark's clock striking six.

"When it strikes six times again," she thought, an awed shiver running through her under the bedclothes, "it'll be all over. I'll know for sure."

Her new dress waited for her on the back of a chair, blue cashmere with trimmings of shot silk from an old waist of Flossie's. A dressmaker two blocks away had made it under Flossie's supervision and the sleeves were puffed out so at the shoulders and there were so many butterfly bows going up to the collar that Hepatica still felt a little shy of herself in it. She would have felt more at ease in her old woolen, but she couldn't disappoint the rest after all the interest and pains they had taken. It was a good thing she had worn the newness off those twelve-button kid boots the time she went to sing at the big Fifth Avenue house. She felt glad that old man and his wife wouldn't be at the audition. If she wasn't good enough it would be better for Herr Grosmeier to tell them. He and Herr Trautmann would be there, of course. They were coming to call for her at a quarter before ten.

While she dressed and did her hair up behind in the shower of curls the way Flossie had taught her to fix it, she forced her mind to go over and over that piece Herr Trautmann had taught her for the audition. He had warned her not to sing beforehand for fear of straining her voice. But she was learning to think the notes in her mind as she had never been able to before. It was quite a difficult piece. At least she had thought so, although Herr Trautmann had assured her he was choosing the simplest one he could find that would be suitable. It was called "Goodbye" by Tosti. There were English words and that was one of the reasons they had chosen it. It went pretty high, too, but it hadn't nearly as many musical trimmings as "Listen to the Mocking Bird." Herr Trautmann and Herr Grosmeier had seemed satisfied with the way she had sung it yesterday. Still, she had known they were anxious in spite of their assurances that she need have no qualms.

"After all," Herr Grosmeier had said as he walked back to Mrs. Blodgett's with her from the lesson, "if the Herr Director should not think as we do about your voice, it is not the end. You can learn to sing for churches and in concerts. The opera is not the whole world of music—no."

But she knew that for him it was. She knew that in some unexplainable way he had transferred to her all that he felt about it. She couldn't help feeling that her voice belonged more to him and to Herr Trautmann now. Just as she felt sometimes that her own youngness belonged to Titania Tripp. There were days when she came away from the hospital aware that something deep inside her was carrying the midget, as her arms had done so often before. If she let this inner hold go for a single minute she didn't dare think what might happen. It was frightening to realize how much one meant to other people. There was her father, too, not that he ever said much; but it was the way he looked at her, the funny, awkward things he tried to do. . . .

"Well," she said to her reflected self in the mirror, "I guess you're as ready as you ever will be."

She turned to go down to breakfast, but she came back and stared into the glass again. If Tony Quinn should see her now would he find her changed, she wondered? She took up the blue and silver watch from the bureau and pinned it to her waist front, under the ruffles. She hadn't planned to wear it, but now she decided she would for old times. *Old times*. She started suddenly realizing that Tony had become part of them now. When things or people did that they couldn't hurt you anymore. Yes, it was just the way T.T. had told her it would be.

"And if I fail in the singing to-day," she told herself going downstairs, "that will get not to matter so much after awhile. This'll be old times, too, some day."

"Hello there," Jerry was calling from the hall below. "How you feeling this morning? Molly's got a new trick in honor of the day. Here, Molly." He snapped his fingers importantly. "What's Patty going to do for 'em over at the opera house to-day?"

Hepatica laughed with the rest of the group below her as the little spotted dog lifted up her voice in a long howl.

They teased her and gave her odd pieces of advice all through the breakfast she could not touch.

"Eat *something* can't you, Patty," urged her father, "you don't want to keel over in the middle of things."

"I won't, Pa." She smiled back at him across the table and tried to drink her coffee. "Anyhow you know singers aren't supposed to beforehand."

"Guess you're going to find there's lots you don't know 'bout singers 'fore Patty makes her bow." Joshua Pollock was positively jovial as he

hadn't been in months.

"Be sure to fluff out your hair back of your ears," Flossie was reminding her. "That hat does squash it down and you want to look your best. You can't tell me a voice is everything, and when a person has yellow hair and naturally curly, well, they'd ought to make the most of it, *I say.*"

"Here's some of my lemon drops to put in your pocket." Mabel pushed a little twist of striped paper across to her. "You keep sucking one and your throat won't get dry."

She went on answering them and nodding in a daze, and all the time the clock over on Saint Mark's was striking the hours and half-hours and the watch under her blue ruffles was ticking time away.

"Good-by! Good-by!" she heard herself calling at last as she followed Herr Grosmeier down the steps and into the cab where Herr Trautmann waited. She knew her father was watching her from the open door though she couldn't bring herself to look back.

The cab had been a surprise to her. She had expected to walk to the opera house. But Herr Trautmann said it was too windy and raw a morning. He was taking no chances, he told her with a smile. They did not talk much on the way over, though once or twice he reminded her of her breathing on the high notes, and how to take a certain passage she had found difficult.

"You will not be the only one," Herr Grosmeier assured her more than once, as if this must give her confidence.

"Most will have accompaniments," Herr Trautmann also told her. "I would play for you if I thought it best. But you are unused to it except for that musical box of which Herr Grosmeier has told me." He smiled as if the idea of it amused him. "And for that matter I count much on your singing alone. It is not usual and that in itself will make them more carefully listen."

Hepatica was used to empty halls and even theaters, but the opera house had a vastness she had not realized from the crowded upper gallery. She stood with Herr Grosmeier in the wings while Herr Trautmann went out front to talk with a group gathered there in the dimness. The curtain was up and she could make out the shadowy aisles flowing in straight rivers away from the orchestra pit, on and on, through wastes of plush seats where the bent shapes of scrub women moved quietly as they went about their work. Lamps burned dimly above half-visible doors and at the back of the balconies, that rose in terraces above one another with an occasional glint of gold carving. As her eyes grew used to the half light she could make out the

gilt chairs in the first-tier boxes, and nearer in the orchestra the shrouded harps and bass viols, the gleaming rounds of the silent kettledrums.

“See,” Herr Grosmeier pointed out to her, “the stage is set for the first act of *Die Walküre*—the cave for Sieglinde, you remember? They will be giving it to-night.”

He found an old wooden chair for her in the wings and left her there, promising to return. She was glad to be alone. The flies, the dangling ropes, and the queer piles of canvas rocks and painted scenery held her interest more than several scared-looking young women and a young man or two who also waited near by, some chatting together in low voices, others keeping quietly by themselves, turning over pages of music with anxious expressions. They must be waiting their turns to be heard. Hepatica felt her old shyness overcoming her as she caught them looking her over. Two of the girls whispered together, glanced at her, glanced away again. One of them tittered nervously. It sounded shrill in the back-stage quiet. Two men in shirt sleeves passed close to her, talking German; a piano sounded thin and tinkling in the far spaces beyond the footlights.

Herr Grosmeier was back again beside her. He spoke a whispered word now and then which she scarcely heard. He would tell her when it was her turn. She felt dead and yet her heart was pounding so. Her mind felt sharpened to a fine point as she watched and listened.

One of the girls had sung. Hepatica marveled at the trills she made with apparently so little effort, and the one who followed her had an even more elaborate piece, in Italian, too. How good they were, how much better than she could ever be if she tried for the rest of her life. Oh, dear, why, why had she ever come? Were Herr Grosmeier and Herr Trautmann both crazy that they had imagined anyone would bother with a voice like hers? She raised desperate eyes to Herr Grosmeier. His round forehead was puckered in a frown and he kept wiping his face with a big handkerchief, but he smiled at her and patted her hand.

“He’s scared and worried, too,” she thought. “But he doesn’t want me to think he is. Oh, goodness, there’s someone singing my piece!”

The familiar notes of “Goodbye” were coming so beautifully from another pair of lips that she gave him a second despairing look. He smiled again and bent close to her ear.

“It is nothing,” he whispered. “They all sing it. No matter.”

But it seemed she couldn't ever bear to get up and do it after that. It didn't belong to her anymore, now this other girl was singing it as Hepatica knew she never, never could. She wanted to rush away in a panic, to make for that side door they had come in by such a little while before. Her throat felt dry and rough as sandpaper. She could feel Mabel's package of lemon drops weighing down her pocket, but she couldn't muster spirit enough to take one. Soon it would be her turn, nothing would stop that from coming round.

And then she was on the stage. She had no notion of how she got there and though her knees still shook as she moved, she didn't feel frightened as she had before. Everything about her was clear cut and sharp, the way she had read once that objects looked to people who were drowning. She noticed a bit of silver paper caught in one of the cracks between the floor boards, and how the dust motes twinkled in the rays from the footlights.

The entrance to the cave set was at one side well down toward the front. She remembered how it had looked from the upper balcony, but now it was so different as she paused beside it. The rocks about it were tremendous—canvas crags that reached to her shoulders, higher than her head. Yet they had not seemed so large to her from the house. That tree which had once appeared like a stripling now towered above her, its enormous painted trunk making her feel ridiculously small beside it.

“Why,” she thought, still moving forward in a queer daze. “I'm not an outside here. I fit right into it because everything's big, too—lots bigger'n I am.”

It was wonderful. She hadn't felt so small and free and at her ease in years and years. Herr Grosmeier had said the music would be bigger than she ever could be, but he hadn't told her half enough about the rest of it. Still, this must be what he had meant—she understood now.

She came down as near to the footlights as she could get and looked out beyond them into the dim spaces of the opera house. Just for a moment she half expected to hear Joshua Pollock's Freaks-and-Fandangos voice announcing: “Ladies and Gentlemen, I present Miss Hepatica Hawks, who will prove to you that she is indeed her father's daughter,” but only silence came up to her, silence that was strangely alive. She squared her shoulders and opened her lips to begin.

“I'm dreaming now of Hallie,
Sweet Hallie, in the valley . . .”

Hepatica felt vaguely surprised to hear herself singing T.T.'s song instead of the "Goodbye," but somehow it seemed all right. She hoped Herr Trautmann and Herr Grosmeier wouldn't be too disappointed after all the trouble they had taken to teach her the other. How natural it felt to be singing it again, a little queer not to have the tinkle of the music box going along with her, but she could hear that, too, in the back of her mind. At the same time she heard her own voice giving out the familiar notes, putting in all the extras in the way of trills and trimmings that the midget had always insisted upon.

"Listen to the mocking bird,
The mocking bird . . ."

She swung into the chorus far more easily than she had ever done doubled up under the little blue-and-gilt booth. The notes came up out of her as fresh and clear as those Tony had made come out of the willow whistle that day in spring. She could think about that now and go right on singing. She could think of the way Herr Trautmann had told her to open her mouth and keep her breathing steady; and yet all the time another part of her was thinking of her father back at Mrs. Blodgett's, of the midget over in her corner of the hospital ward.

Now she was back at the mocking-bird part for the last time. She would make it sound better than she ever had before. She would make the director and the rest in that group out front like it. It would have been easier if she could fix them with her eyes the way she used to when she made people buy her picture whether they wanted to or not.

"And the mocking bird is singing o'er her grave."

Up, up, up, she heard her voice climbing, like the Ferris wheel at Peace Pipe Fair before it made the final dip to come down. For a fraction of time it stayed so, suspended somewhere above her as if it were not her voice at all but something detached, unreal. Then it was hers once more. She helped it back to the old level again before she brought the song to an end.

A young man had taken her place on the stage, and she was beside Herr Grosmeier in the wings. The shaking had come back to her knees and she could see the ruffles on her waist moving quickly up and down under her own sharp breathing. All the ease and sureness had dropped away from her. She wanted to crawl under the scenery and hide where they could never find her to tell her she had failed miserably and forever. They would try to be kind, all of them, and her father and T.T. would say it didn't matter a bit. But

she would know it had all been her fault. Oh, how could she have gone ahead and sung that song instead of the other one?

Herr Grosmeier was patting her hand and saying something. She couldn't hear him for the panic that had her in its grip. She looked down at him, her eyes begging him to forgive her, her lips trying to say words that wouldn't come.

Now the young man was through. He was the last to be heard. Almost immediately the tension lifted, voices rose, shufflings and scrapings broke the silence of the place. Hepatica drew a long breath and started for the door that opened on the side street. Her feet moved so fast she was hardly conscious where they were taking her. She lowered her head so as not to see the amused glances she felt sure those others must be giving her as she passed the scattered groups. She had almost reached the door when she felt Herr Grosmeier's hand on her arm. He was panting behind her and when she turned to face him she saw his eyes were shining behind his spectacles.

"Where are you going?" he asked her.

"Home." This time she managed to get the words out in a queer, flat voice. "I can't stay—not another minute. Please don't make me, please don't."

"But the Herr Director . . . you cannot go without seeing him. Trautmann and he are talking. I saw him beckon before you were half through, and—"

"Oh, why didn't you stop me?" Hepatica was almost crying now in her earnestness. "Why did you let me go on and make a fool of myself?"

"You make a fool of yourself . . .?" The old man blinked at her incredulously. "Why . . . what is this you're saying, my child?"

"You don't have to be kind about it, if you'll just let me get out of here." She looked back over her shoulder once more at the gigantic bough of the painted canvas tree that swept up and into the vastness of the wings. "Before I began, I thought . . . it seemed . . . I guess it was that made me forget to sing the 'Goodbye' song. I didn't mean to, honestly I didn't. Well . . ." she tried to get her arms into her coat, but the new puffed sleeves wouldn't fit without a struggle, "anyway you know now I'm no good. I don't need that director to tell me."

"No good, you say? I stand here and listen to you say such a thing when you sing so I cannot believe these old ears of mine?"

“But I didn’t sing the right piece.” It seemed to Hepatica that she could never make him understand.

“Gott in Himmel! That is what ails you, eh? You think it matters *what* you sing?”

“Doesn’t it?” her head began to spin and her hands were shaking now as well as her knees.

“Sometime, maybe.” He was speaking soothingly as he led her back the way they had come. “No, this mocking bird of yours is not for grand opera though I think you can make him famous, too, if you want.”

She heard him chuckling and making little clicking noises between his teeth.

“Jacob,” he was saying a minute later to Herr Trautmann who was waiting for them by the door that led out to the orchestra, “you must speak to her. She thinks she made a fool of herself. I have to drag her back here.”

“Oh, Herr Trautmann, I did mean to sing the other one. I did mean to, and if you think they’ll let me try . . .”

He was smiling almost as broadly as Herr Grosmeier and she was going with him to a big man who stood in the midst of a group of other men, talking in German and bending over some open sheets of music. He looked up as they came toward him. His eyes were very keen above his big nose and thick brown beard.

“So,” he spoke in a pleasant voice, still studying her with amused, kindly intentness, “you have brought the mocking bird, Trautmann. I shall be most happy if you will do me the honor to present us.”

And Herr Trautmann was bowing and saying:

“Miss Hepatica Hawks.”



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

[The end of *Hepatica Hawks* by Rachel Field]