



MARY
BY
Nelia Gardner White

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MARY

by

NELIA GARDNER WHITE

AUTHOR OF "MARGE"

With Illustrations by ELIZABETH PILSBRY

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Mary

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To

IVA and RUTH

and

All Parsonage Boys and Girls

Everywhere,

I Dedicate this Book

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Mary

CHAPTER ONE

“ALL ABOARD FOR STONY JERICHO!”

Mary Humphreys stood on the parsonage steps. The wind swept her bronze curls across her face, hiding the tears in her gray eyes. The wind also swept the dry leaves in little scurrying rushes up against the wheels of the loaded wagon; it blew the Rev. Humphreys’ long coat tails out ahead of him (he always wore his Prince Albert, even on moving day!); and it bellowed the canvas covering till it seemed they would never get it tied down above the furniture.

“All aboard for Stony Jericho!” called out Mary’s father.

The tears suddenly almost blinded Mary. She gave one panic-stricken last look at the stripped living-room, the curtainless windows, the great, pleasant yard—then ran down the step toward the wagon.

“I’m going on the train!” her sister Marjorie said importantly.

Mary couldn’t answer her because of the lump that came into her throat. There was deaf Obed Taylor waiting to boost her up to the high seat. Matt was already there, curled up on a box behind the driver’s place under the big canvas cover. Harlo was trying to get up by himself and was having a hard time of it.

“Think it’s liable to rain?” Mary’s father said to Obed.

Obed put his hand behind his ear.

“What’s that? What’s that?” he asked.

“Rain—think it’ll rain?” her father asked, more loudly.

Obed edged nearer.

“I’m kind of hard of hearing,” he said patiently. “If you’ll just speak a mite louder!”

“Rain! RAIN!” her father shouted. “Maybe Mary ought to go on the train—TRAIN!”

“Oh, no—’twon’t rain—red sky last night!”

He gave Mary a lift up over the big wheel and there she was, perched up so high that the parsonage and all the dear, loved things seemed small and far away.

“Oh, bother!” said Matt. “They’ve forgotten that little box of books!”

Mary whirled about on the seat and looked at Matt stormily.

“You’re mighty anxious to leave!” she said hotly.

Matt looked back at her queerly and didn’t answer.

“Good-bye!” called Mumsie and Marjorie and Mrs. McDonald from next door.

“’Bye!” called Harlo at the top of his voice.

They were off.

Mary looked straight ahead. The familiar streets and houses were soon left behind but, even before they reached them, they seemed far away, part of an old world that Mary would never see again. She felt cross at Harlo because he was so excited, so eager to go. Harlo was eating already on the apples he had saved for the journey, asking questions as fast as he could into Obed’s deaf ear.

“How far will it be? Will we be there by night? Did you know I could drive? I bet you don’t know how many squirrels I’ve seen this year! Do you think fifty? Why don’t you have isinglass in those holes? They have curtains with glass in down to Bray’s. Do you ever let the boys drive—boys riding with you—boys moving to a new town, I mean?”

Obed drove steadily on through the gray October day and answered never a word. Mary, too, sat quite still, the rough old robe over her lap, her cold hands down under it.

They could hear the second load, bumping along behind—the Rev. Humphreys’ voice raised gladly in song:

“Count your blessings—count them one by one——!”

Mary tossed her head rebelliously.

“Blessings!” she said. “I don’t see any blessings in moving to Stony Jericho!”

Matt sat up straight behind her.

“Huh?” he said wonderingly. “What’s the matter, Red?”

“Matter! *What’s the matter?* Oh, you make me tired!” The words came tumbling, choked with tears. “You don’t care a bit—not a single bit! You like to move—Marge does, too! She wants to go so much she’s been all fidgety ever since Father came home from Conference. We’re always moving—just get to like a place and go on! There was the playhouse under the porch at Morley, with all the little diamond windows the lattice made—oh—of course I’m too big for it now, but it was *mine*, and none of you could get under, you were so fat! Then we moved away from it! And the rambler rose at Pleasantville—all over the fence. Mumsie just got it trimmed and growing and we had to go away and leave it!”

“We’ve had a good time in Corey,” Matt said.

“Yes, and now we’re going—just as we get to liking it here! And—and you promised to take me chestnutting up in Casey’s woods as soon as the frosts came!”

“Oh, there’ll be chestnuts in Stony Jericho!” put in Harlo.

“I’ll bet they won’t have a river you can see out of the school windows, nor a real park with seats and a band to play there on Saturday nights! *Stony Jericho*—why, it sounds like the very end of the earth!”

“Oh, well, I don’t like it either!” said Matt, suddenly sober. “Think I want to go off just after we’ve got up that bunch to go trapping? Do you think I want to leave Tod and the rest of our gang? Why, we’ve just worked up a code that Bill Laurence and his crowd’ll never get onto! Why——”

Then Harlo was digging Mary with his elbow.

“Look! Look—he’s letting me drive!” he said excitedly. They were crossing a bridge that rattled and Harlo was immensely proud when they were safely over.

“You’re like the frog that swelled up—you’ll bust, too, if you aren’t careful!” Mary said to him crossly.

“Rather bust ’n be a cry-baby like some folks!” fat Harlo said calmly.

“Bust?” said Obed unexpectedly, taking the reins. “Has that strap gone and busted again? Whoa—whoa, there!”

“Not the strap—*me!*” shouted Harlo. But Obed climbed down and examined the strap. Matt doubled up with laughter. But Mary couldn’t laugh, even at that. She was remembering the hollowed out place in the stump fence up on the side hill. She just fitted there and there would never be another fence like it anywhere—never, never!

It seemed that the journey would never end. Toward evening, the wind became so cold that finally they just sat still, huddled close, stiff and tired. Just as they came over the top of the last hill before Stony Jericho, it began to rain.

“I’ll be hornswizzled!” said Obed. “Never knew that sign to fail before!” He fastened the side curtains more securely.

But Mary wasn’t surprised. It seemed fitting, somehow, that it should rain as they came into town. Nothing was ever going to be right in Stony Jericho, she knew. Out the little holes in the curtains, she could see only dripping trees, their brightness dulled—ditches full of old, brown leaves—mud—the backs of the horses, glistening with rain.

Then, at last, they were there. Marjorie and Mumsie, who had come on the train, were there waiting, in the dusky, empty house. Mary saw that they were cold and tired, too. The men came tramping in with boxes and chairs and beds, the water making dirty streaks across the floors. Harlo and Matt raced through the house.

“Oh, gollywhilikens! There’s an attic big as anything!” Harlo announced excitedly.

“There’s a barn—with a loft!” called Matt.

“We’re going to have the back bedroom—the roof slants!” Marjorie said to Mary.

“Where *are* the mattresses?” said Mumsie. “Oh, there they are! Spread out some papers, James—we’ll just sleep on the floor to-night. I think I could sleep standing up!”

“We’re here!” Marjorie whispered eagerly as she undressed.

Mary didn’t answer her. The room seemed so ugly and so cold. She kept thinking of their room back in Corey, with its three casement windows. It was out of such windows that ladies of Ivanhoe’s day looked out on knights riding by! She crawled under the covers and shut her eyes.

“Didn’t say your prayers!” said Marjorie.

“Not going to!” Mary answered.

Marjorie gave a little gasp. What a terrible thing to say!

Then came giggles from the hall.

“I’ll bet you don’t dare!” said Matt.

“Do, too!” said Harlo. “It’s stopped raining and, gollywhilikens, I’m hungry!”

Marjorie sat up in bed.

“Where you going?” she demanded.

“Sh!” said Harlo. “We’re going to go out in the yard and get an apple! You ought to see Matt—he’s got a blanket like an Indian chief!”

Marjorie giggled in reply. She would have liked an apple, too, but it was so warm under the covers, and she was tired. The boys came back, creaking every stair as they came up.

“Boys!” called Father.

Then the house was still.

But Mary wasn’t asleep. She lay awake a long, long time, lonesome—terribly lonesome—for Corey.

CHAPTER TWO

STONY JERICHO

Mary had made up her mind she would hate Stony Jericho.

“It’s ugly!” she said.

“There’s a creek right back of the house, though!” said Marjorie. “And I saw two girls down the street that looked awfully nice!”

“Don’t know how anyone nice *could* be here!” Mary insisted.

“It makes me think of a robin’s nest,” said Mother. “It’s stuck down here between these great, gaunt old hills just like the nest in the fork of the branches of the apple tree back home!”

“*Back home!*” Mary picked her words up. “Even you don’t think it looks like home, Mumsie! Now, do you?”

Her mother smiled, though a little tiredly. She had been shortening curtains all morning.

“Well, we came at a bad season—no place looks very homelike when there are wet leaves under foot everywhere and so much mud! But that’s our job—to make it home!”

“Mud is right!” put in Matt. “I went in up to my shoe tops going down to the office! Robin’s nest it is, Mother, all stuck together with mud!”

“In the summer I imagine it’s very lovely through the valley here,” said Mother. “Leaves and flowers make a lot of difference. And when we get these curtains up and things in order and you get acquainted at school, you’ll feel better!”

Mary didn’t answer, but she didn’t believe she’d ever feel any better.

The first day at school she almost cried. As they walked along the bumpy cinder path, Marjorie held her chin up importantly, for all the boys and girls they saw stared at them questioningly. Once they even heard someone say in a loud whisper—“They’re the new minister’s girls!” It made Mary embarrassed and lonesome. It didn’t seem as if she would ever know them all. And the schoolhouse was so different from the neat brick building at Corey. A little, old, two-room, wooden building, was the schoolhouse at Stony Jericho, with double seats and blackboards that were worn and gray. All over the seats initials were carved. In one corner was a tall gray cupboard

and a globe and dictionary on a little shelf beside it. A huge, rusty stove was in the back of the room and, the day being cool and damp, there was a little fire in it. Mary sat near, her back scorching all day while her hands were cold.

Marjorie sat in the same seat with her. Marjorie smiled at the girl next them, but Mary made up her mind not to smile. They had different books here and it made her feel as if she were starting school all over again to look at them. At recess, Marjorie talked to them, told the girls her name and all about Corey; but Mary sat still in her seat, pretending to look at her geography but really only feeling lonesome. She wished she could talk like Marge, and laugh—but she couldn't.

Miss Baine, the teacher, went over once and opened the gray cupboard. Books—from top to bottom—*books!* Mary's heart jumped. Maybe, some day, she would dare to go up there and look at them all. But to-day she just sat still and looked at her geography.

Marjorie skipped and laughed all the way home.

"Isn't that girl next to us pretty? I'll bet she'll be my chum! She's going to ask if she can come over to-morrow after school. Wasn't that boy with freckles funny?"

Marjorie talked excitedly at the supper table. Matt and Harlo kept trying to interrupt. They all had things to tell except Mary.

"There's a place we can go nutting up on Beech Hill!" said Harlo. "There's a boy—Wogglebug, they call him—he's going to take me!"

"I'm going, too!" said Matt.

"Are not!" said Harlo.

"Boys!" Father said sharply.

"Well, you don't own Beech Hill!" Matt insisted to Harlo. "I guess I can go by myself if I want to! Anyway, I'll bet you don't know about the big house across the road!"

"I do!" that was Marjorie. "There's a rich old man lives there—and a boy. And the man's crazy—and——!"

"He is not crazy! But he has about a hundred animals and birds and things, and all summer he fusses with flowers!"

"Well, isn't that crazy?"

"*Crazy?* Why, he has some dancing mice and birds that talk and a flying squirrel and a great big Russian dog as tall as a tree——!"

“Tall as a *tree*—why, Matt Humphreys, a dog as tall as a tree! Whoever heard of such a thing!”

“Well, he’s tall anyway. As tall as Harlo, and kind of silvery white. I saw him!”

“Honest true?” Harlo’s blue eyes were round.

“Honest—cross my heart! I saw the old man, too. They were coming down the path and just as I came to the place in the hedge where the driveway goes in, I saw him. The dog was beside me and he was terribly big!”

“Does the boy go to school? I’m going to get him to let me see the dancing mice!”

“I guess you won’t! Nobody goes there. They’re afraid to. And the boy doesn’t go to school. The old man teaches him. They said that the truant officer got after him once and tried to make him come but they found out he knew more than any of the Stony Jericho boys of his age and so they had to let him alone. How’d you like to stick in a place like that all your life—like in a prison with an old ogre? There’s a lady there, his nurse when he was little, I guess, and she takes care of ’em. And the old man has millions and trillions of dollars!”

“Trillions? That’s a lot of money, Matt!” said Father, with a twinkle.

“Well, he’s rolling in money, somebody said!”

“There’s a girl in school who can walk over the top of the bridge up past the church!” interrupted Marjorie. “They all said she could! Her hair is bobbed—Mumsie, *can’t* I have my hair bobbed, too?”

“I could walk over there—if I could get balanced right to start!” Harlo boasted. They all laughed at him and his round face was very red.

Mary laughed, too, and wondered why it was so much fun to contradict each other. It sounded like quarreling, but it wasn’t. She wondered why they had all found such interesting things and she had found nothing.

After supper Mary wiped the dishes and then finished putting the books on their shelves. She felt not quite so lonesome when she had finished. Her father had built a fire and it was warm as toast. The things she knew were getting in place again—the old couch with its bright, shabby pillows, the chairs and the bookcase and the long table with its legs a little shaky from the many movings. The picture of “The End of Day” was hanging above the couch and Marjorie’s baby picture was smiling beside the bookcase. There

was a bay window with a deep window-seat all around it—it would be a good place to sit and read.

Before Mary got into her bed, she looked out of the window. The clouds were gone and there were stars everywhere in the sky. Across the way, behind the great, thick hedge, she could see the edges of the house of the man who was rolling in money. There was only one little light there.

“If *I* were rich, I’d have lights in every single room in the house!” she said to Marjorie.

“If *I* were rich,” said Marjorie, “I’d have a silk dress with a ribbon sash, and some silk stockings and a box with a hundred hair ribbons all colors of the rainbow—and handkerchiefs with lace edges!”

Mary laughed and got into bed. But she couldn’t sleep for a long time. She felt a little scared thrill because the queer, rich man lived across the road from her. All kinds of strange pictures danced before her eyes—a boy shut up in a prison, white mice dancing all about him; a great ogre standing watch with a dog almost as tall as he beside him; a gray cupboard full of books that opened of themselves to stories and beautiful pictures; a place on Beech Hill where nuts were piled high for anyone to take.

“Why, maybe, after all, it will be fun living in Stony Jericho!” she thought. And then all the pictures danced away into a jumbled dream and Mary was asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

“SOMETHING’S UP!”

On Saturday, Marjorie and Sarah, the girl who could walk on the top of the Jericho bridge, and Mary planned to go after nuts. Harlo and Wogglebug were going to Beech Hill but Sarah said she knew a better place yet, up in a field on the hill across the bridge. There were three chestnut trees in the field and they were loaded. Even though Mary still insisted in her heart that she hated Stony Jericho, she felt almost happy on this frosty morning. The house was getting settled and she had spelled down all her class the day before, and she had had a glimpse of the great silvery-gray dog across the way. She loved, too, to climb trees and to gather nuts.

But the day came near to being spoiled before it started. First, Mother had a headache and, when that happened, Mary had to see to the meals and all. When she saw her mother’s face at the breakfast table she knew right away that it was a “headachey” day. Her own face grew sober. Marjorie hadn’t even noticed. She never did notice and, if she had, it wouldn’t have made any difference. She went on talking joyously about the day and never stopped, even when her mother put her hand up to her head once as if the noise pained her.

So, though she didn’t say anything then, Mary gave up the trip. She began to hate the town with fresh hatred—she almost felt as if she hated Marge. Then, after breakfast, Father went down after the mail. He always did that after breakfast, unless Matt raced away to the office first. When he came back, he gave a letter to Mother.

“Oh, it’s from Aunt May!” she said.

As she read it, a queer look came into her eyes and when she’d read it once she began at the beginning and read it all through again. Then she handed it to Father and he read it, very slowly.

Marjorie, bursting with curiosity, stood, first on one foot and then on the other, asking questions as fast as she could.

“Is Aunt May coming? Is she going to send another Thanksgiving box? I wish you’d tell her I want red hair ribbons! Tell me, Daddy—what is it? Don’t read it all to yourself first! ’Tisn’t fair!”

But Father didn't answer, only gave Mumsie a long look and handed the letter back to her. Then Mumsie spoke.

"You girls run along now," she said. "Get your nuts before someone beats you! Father'll help me with the dishes!"

"Oh, we'll have time after the dishes!" Mary said with a quick little breath of relief. She was to go, after all! She was going to go!

"No—you needn't wait. There aren't many dishes, and my head's better. Run along—you won't have many more nice days like this!"

Mary felt it wasn't quite right to go off and leave Mumsie with the dishes, but Mumsie seemed to want them to. Maybe there was something special going on that she didn't want them to know about. The letter—that was it! Mother always read Aunt May's letters aloud and she hadn't read a word of this one. There was something in that letter that had made her want them to go. She wanted to talk to Daddy about it.

So they put on their heavy white sweaters and white knitted tam-o'-shanters and went. The sun came out and melted the frost and all the world looked bright and sunny. When they reached the Jericho Bridge, Sarah said:

"Want to see me walk over the top of it?"

"You don't really dare!" said Marjorie.

"Oh—it's easy!" said Sarah.

The steel supports were broad and strong, but Mary felt cold all over as Sarah began to walk up the slope toward the top. What if she'd fall? What if a car came by quickly and frightened her? But Sarah, very straight and steady, walked along the top and down the other side.

"I dare you girls to!" she said when she was safely down. "It's easy if you don't look down!"

"I dare!" said Marjorie quickly. She always dared do anything—dive off rafters, catch snakes, climb trees!

"Oh, don't!" begged Mary.

Marjorie just laughed. "Why, that isn't half as hard as walking the log over Paddy's Glen and I've done that dozens of times!" she said.

"But it's so far down to the creek!" said Mary. "Please don't."

"I'll take off my shoes—they're slippery!" Marjorie said. She did it, and then began to climb. Mary wouldn't watch her at first. She was terribly

frightened and she felt, at the same time, a little envious stab because Marjorie and Sarah were so much braver than she was.

It was when Marjorie was half-way across that Mary heard Sarah give a little gasp. Mary put her hand up to stifle the scream that she almost gave, and looked around. Marjorie was standing still in the middle of the long span of steel. Her face was very white.

“She’s dizzy!” Mary thought, terror-stricken.

“Marge,” she said quietly, “don’t be frightened. Get down on your hands and knees—like John did on the log that time—and creep along that way. Just look at the thing you’re hanging onto—don’t look at the water. Get down.”

For a second, it looked as if Marjorie were too frightened to obey her. Mary wondered if her voice sounded as scared to Marjorie as it did to herself.

“Marge—get down on your hands and knees!” she said.

This time she did get down and crept along till she came to the slope of the other side. At last she was down that, too, and safe on the ground. Mary gave a little cry of relief. But Marjorie, on safe territory, was not the white-faced dizzy girl on the bridge.

“It was fun!” she declared. “I’m going to do it sometime and let Matt see me!”

“Why, Marge Humphreys, you never will! Why, you almost fell that time!”

“H’mph!” said Marjorie, scornfully, as she laced up her shoes. “Why, for just a minute, I was a little dizzy, but I just as soon do it again this minute, fraidy-cat!”

For just a second Mary wished she hadn’t come. She even had an impulse to turn around and run back home. But then they started on up the hill, and she forgot it in the fun of climbing over the fences and knolls and through a little patch of woods.

They saw three squirrels and a chipmunk running in and out the crannies of an old stump fence. A hawk circled high above them in the sky and once they saw a woodchuck sitting bolt upright, looking so stiff and serious that they all laughed aloud at it.

They found the chestnut trees at last and the ground was covered with the chestnuts. They pricked their fingers on the burs but didn’t care and, after a while, they sat on some great stones and ate chestnuts and told stories.

“I know one out of Grimm’s fairy tales—it’s called ‘King Thrushbeard!’” said Marjorie. So she told it. Sarah told one about Robert Bruce and Mary told “The Nurnberg Stove.” The girls said Mary’s was the best of all.

It was the happiest kind of a time and Mary forgot to be shy. She forgot she didn’t dare to walk over the Jericho Bridge, that Marjorie had laughed at her after she had tried to help her, and laughed and talked like the rest. She forgot, too, all about the letter that had made Mumsie look so queerly at Father, that had made her want to get rid of them for the day. On the way home they talked about Mr. St. John—the ogre behind the hedge.

“Think of all that money—and then to be so stingy!” said Sarah. “Why doesn’t he spend some of it? Once some boys crept in there at night and peeked in the window and they saw him sitting playing chess with the boy—his name’s Michael—and there was a parrot perched on the edge of the table and a big black cat curled up on the rug and cages of all sorts around! I wouldn’t dare go inside the hedge, would you?”

“Sure!” said Marjorie, the brave.

“Well, I guess you wouldn’t—not if you’d see that dog of his first!”

“I saw it,” said Mary. “It’s big, but I wouldn’t be afraid of it—it’s so beautiful!”

Mary thought it strange that a girl brave enough to climb over the Jericho Bridge should be afraid of a beautiful dog like that, and she felt not quite so ashamed of herself because she hadn’t dared climb. Maybe everybody was afraid of something!

“The boy’s red-headed,” Sarah said. “Sometimes he goes to the post-office, but he doesn’t play with any of the boys here. Mr. St. John, his uncle, won’t let him. But once he talked to my brother, Harry, and promised him a flying squirrel. He brought it, too, but Harry never got a chance to talk to him again!”

“It sounds like a story book!” said Mary.

“Yes—only you can’t ever find any more chapters,” said Sarah.

“Let’s have a club,” said Marjorie. “A club for finding out the secret of the ogre. We could call it the ‘H.M.C.’—the Hedge Mystery Club! Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“Oh, let’s!” said Mary. “And we’ll have meetings every week and report what we’ve found out. And nobody must tell in between! You could be the president, Sarah, and Marge could be the secretary——!”

“Oh, you be the secretary, Mary! You like to write and I don’t. We could put it down in a little book every week, and when it’s all done, it’ll be like a story!”

“We’ll have the first meeting at recess, Monday!” said Sarah.

Sarah said good-bye then and Mary and Marjorie went down the front walk. Marjorie was strangely silent after Sarah had gone. But just as they turned into the path that led round to the back door, she said, with a humility strange to her—“I—I didn’t mean to call you ‘fraidy-cat!’” Then she raced off into the house. That was a big apology, for Marjorie.

Mary went slowly toward the back steps. It was so warm and pleasant outside that she hated to go in. But it was dinner-time and she knew she must go and help. Especially since Mother had a headache! Matt stopped her on the back steps. She and Matt were always contradicting each other but they told each other secrets oftener than she and Marjorie, even.

“Something’s up!” he whispered.

“What?” Mary whispered back excitedly. “Is it Aunt May’s letter?”

“I don’t know—I guess so. Mother and Dad have been talking all morning, and it’s something about you and Marge. And Dad said—‘We’ll let them choose for themselves!’”

Mary’s gray eyes danced.

“Maybe it’s a visit! Aunt May said once——”

“Don’t believe so,” Matt interrupted. “Don’t see why they should be so serious about it!”

All during dinner Mary saw that Father and Mumsie were watching her and Marjorie. But it was after supper when they spoke to them.

“Mary,” said Father, “you and Marjorie come up to my study for a few minutes. There’s something we want to talk over!”

Mary looked at Matt, half frightened, then at Marjorie. Marjorie’s eyes sparkled. She jumped up and ran quickly to the stair door. Mary followed her, a little soberly.

CHAPTER FOUR

MARY CHOOSES

Mary's father's study always frightened her a little. There were so many books there. Books—books—all around the walls—and Father's desk with its creaking, old swivel chair. The books all looked so large and serious. Not dear, worn, old volumes like "Little Women" and "The Children's Kingdom"—not story books at all. Mary had tried sometimes to read there, for their own books were all read so many times that she grew hungry for new ones. One day she had gone into the study and sat at Father's desk when everyone was out and wrote a poem. It was very beautiful and she had it yet, in her bottom bureau drawer. It had been so easy to write it that she felt there must be some magic about the old desk. Her father always sat there to write his sermons and Mary could not picture him writing sermons anywhere else in the world.

Once, when she had been tiny, she had told an untruth, and Father had brought her to his study and talked to her. He hadn't scolded her nor punished her—just talked. But she had cried and cried and at last sat on Father's lap and promised him never, never to tell an untruth again.

So, to-day, she sat very still in a high-backed chair and waited. Even Marge stopped dancing a minute and waited, too. It was Mumsie, though, who talked to them this time.

"Girls," she said. "A letter came from Aunt May to-day!"

"So that *was* it!" thought Mary excitedly.

"Aunt May has written that she would like one of you girls to come to her for a year, perhaps two or three years. We have talked it over all day and we think we will let one of you go. It is a long way and it will be lonely here with one of you gone. But Aunt May has been very good to us all and she is lonely, too. And she will be able to give you opportunities you could never have here!"

"Opportunities"—it sounded such a serious, important word, the way Mumsie said it! Her voice was so different from her usual cheerful one!

"You would have a governess and plenty of music and delightful trips about the country—perhaps even a visit across the ocean, Aunt May says!

Beautiful clothes, too! Of course there won't be a sister and brothers and father and mother, though!"

Mary's heart was pounding. Aunt May was rich. She had a beautiful big house in town in the winter and another, even bigger and more beautiful, for summer, near the sea. *The sea!* Mary had never seen the sea, but sometimes she had pretended, back at Corey, that the little creek was the ocean and the other-side fields were England and France. But the real sea! She almost forgot to listen to what Mumsie was saying, so thrilled was she at the thought that she might be going to see the ocean! Then her mother's voice came clearly again.

"So we're going to let you girls decide between yourselves. You can have till to-morrow night. Perhaps it's a great deal to ask of you, but if you can settle it between yourselves, then neither of you can feel so badly because it wasn't the other way round!"

Mary looked about at Marjorie. She stood by Father's chair and her brown eyes were shining. Mary's heart suddenly stopped its mad pounding. Marge—*she was counting on going, too!* Then Father was speaking.

"It's to be a part of your education, you must remember! If we could possibly do as much for you we wouldn't feel it right for you to go. But the school here doesn't go far—and your Aunt May will give you the very best. It will be a year you can remember as long as you live!"

Pretty soon they were getting ready for bed. They didn't say much as they were undressing. But, just as they were crawling in, Marge spoke.

"If I should go, will you let me take your blue middy blouse?" she said.

"I don't—I don't know how Mumsie thinks we can decide!" was all Mary answered, soberly.

"Why—why, I suppose they think we'll see who'd like it the most, who'd be the one to cheer Aunt May up most, who'd learn the quickest from the governess and everything!"

Mary flushed. If that was to be the way of it, why, of course it would be Marge, for she always liked everything, she was always gay and laughing, and she could always get her lessons like a flash! But Marjorie had had four weeks with Aunt May last year and she, Mary, had never even visited her. Besides, Marjorie always had everything, and had it without asking.

"If I went, I could bring you back a great big box full of sea-shells!" Marjorie said.

Mary didn't say anything. She felt that Marjorie wasn't trying to settle it at all. She was just trying to give arguments for herself. Mary didn't think the arguments amounted to much. She didn't want to talk about it to-night anyway—she wanted to think it over. Marjorie spoke a couple more times and then, quite suddenly, was fast asleep. But Mary lay, wide awake, thinking of Aunt May and everything. Aunt May was so lovely to look at; she never scolded and yet you always wanted to do things for her. And—a *governess*! You just read about them in books. And, maybe, a trip across the ocean! All the queer people from her geography, all the beautiful mountains and lakes—how marvelous, just like a fairy-tale, it would be! And to leave this ugly, muddy, lonely town!

But what if she didn't leave it? What if Marjorie went? Then Mary would be all alone—no one to make friends for her, no one to talk to her nights after she got to bed, no one to do dishes with her, no one to go with her nights after the milk! Mary felt a little cold, even all snuggled up there beside Marjorie under the bedclothes, at the thought of Stony Jericho without her sister. And the club they were planning on—the H.M.C.—that would never amount to anything with Marjorie gone, for she knew how to boss such things and Mary didn't. Mary, all alone, would never dare find the mystery out, never dare go behind that great, dark hedge, and she knew Sarah, afraid of dogs, would not dare either.

It had been very still down-stairs. Through the register, Mary could hear only the rustle of the paper Father was reading. She wondered which one they thought would go. She wondered how they thought it could be decided, because, of course, they'd both want to decide for themselves. Then, suddenly, she heard her mother speak—very clearly, her voice troubled.

“James” (that was Father), “I don't know what I'll do if Mary goes—she's *such* a help to me!”

CHAPTER FIVE

KING AND THE OGRE

Sunday morning, at the breakfast table, there was a lot of talking. Marge was too excited to eat.

“If I go, Mumsie, can I have a new dress—blue, with red braid, like Patty Deane’s at school?”

“Who said you were going?” demanded Matt.

“Dunno what she wants girls for!” Harlo said scornfully. “A boy wouldn’t be half the bother!”

“Harlo—haven’t I told you not to talk when you’ve just had a bite of a half slice or more of bread!”

“Greedy—Greedy—green-eyed Greedy!” Marjorie mocked.

“Not any more greedy than you are,” said Harlo. “You want all the good times, don’t you? Say, what do you think we saw yesterday—Wogglebug and I? He wanted to keep it a secret but I’m not going to! A coon—yes, honest—a coon! Wogglebug said it was a bear at first!”

“We saw a woodchuck and some squirrels,” said Marjorie. “A hawk, too. You ought to have seen the woodchuck! It was sitting up straight—just like a person! If I go to Aunt May’s, I’ll bet I see sea-gulls and cranes!”

“I’d like to see a sandpiper,” said Matt. “If you get a chance, you catch one and put it in a crate and send it home!”

“I don’t believe you could ever catch one, do you, Dad? I think they’re too swift!” said Harlo.

“If I should go across the ocean, I’d get something in all the other countries to bring back and show you!” said Marge. “If I should go, that is!”

“Yes—*if*,” Matt repeated.

Mary didn’t join in much—she couldn’t. She couldn’t eat much, either. For Mary had made her part of the decision and she was trying to find courage to tell them! It was hard to say anything when they all laughed so much and talked so fast.

“What’s the matter, Red—aren’t you going to eat your apple sauce? Can I have it?”

Mary had to laugh at that. Harlo was *such* a pig!

“I don’t care,” she said. “But you’ll be as fat as that Clarence in the eighth grade, if you don’t look out!”

“Well, I wouldn’t care! You ought to see him play football! Anyway, if I’m hungry, I think I ought to eat, don’t you, Mumsie?”

“Was there ever a time when you weren’t hungry, son?”

Mary laughed then, too. That paid Harlo back for calling her “Red” so much. Her hair wasn’t so terribly red anyway—not like a brick or a carrot or any of the horrid things he called it!

“I’ll bet, at Aunt May’s that there’ll be ice-cream every day!” Harlo said, unabashed. “Say, if you ever get a chance to go into the pantry, I wish you’d get a dozen or so cream puffs and send ’em home! I don’t believe they’d get stale on the way, do you, Mumsie?”

“Maybe it’ll be Mary,” insisted Matt. “I don’t see why you keep saying ‘Marge,’ when it isn’t decided yet! Marge went for a visit—I don’t think it would be fair for her to go again!”

Now—*now* was the time! Mary swallowed hard, and said it. She even laughed as she said it.

“Well, I don’t care if ’t isn’t fair,” she said. “She can go if she wants to! I’m just getting used to this place and I’m not going to have to go getting acquainted all over again! I don’t have to go if I don’t want to, do I, Mother?” Oh, she shouldn’t have said “Mother”—that made it so serious and important and she didn’t want it to sound that way.

Her mother was looking at her with startled, glad eyes.

“Why, no, dear, of course not!” she answered.

“Marge’ll like it better than I would,” Mary went on. “I’d be afraid of a governess, and if I went across the ocean I’d probably get seasick!”

“Why, Mary Humphreys—you always said you wanted to see the ocean!” said Harlo.

“Well, I’ve changed my mind—I’d rather stay here!”

“*Truly*, Mary?” Marjorie was so happy she got up and ran ’round the table and hugged Mary. Mary wished she might get up from the table and go somewhere and cry. But of course she couldn’t. She even laughed the loudest of any when Harlo got up and threw his arms around Matt’s neck, saying in an excited, high voice like Marjorie’s:

“*Truly*, darling?”

Then Marjorie began to plan in earnest—the good times she was going to have, her clothes, the things she would bring home, the letters she’d write.

“Yes—and a silk dress with feather trimmings!” Harlo mocked her. “And satin shoes with diamond buckles! Oh, boy—won’t we look grand!”

But Matt, coming to the kitchen after a drink while Mary was washing dishes, mumbled:

“Bet we have more fun here than she does, Red!”

Mary smiled at him, though only a second before a big tear had splashed into the dishwater. She always had a warm, happy feeling when Matt was kind to her.

“We were going to—to have a club!” she said. “A club to find out about the queer folks over in the big house behind the hedge! And, if Marge is gone, it’ll all go to pieces!”

“Oh, no it won’t! That’s a dandy idea—I’ll come in it! Who else is in it? Anyone?”

“Sarah—but she won’t want to be if Marge is gone!”

“I hope not—let’s just have it you and me! I’ll bet we find out some awfully exciting things!”

“Oh, Matt—will you truly? I won’t care half so much about her going if you will!”

“Thought you didn’t want to go!” said Matt.

Marjorie came out then, but Matt winked at Mary as if they had a secret between them and went off to get ready for church.

In the afternoon, Marjorie wanted to go get Sarah to go for a walk with her.

“She wants to tell her about going,” thought Mary. Somehow she felt she didn’t want to hear about it, so, when Marge teased her to come along, she wouldn’t.

“I’m going to read ‘Hans Brinker,’ ” she said.

She did read for a while, all curled up in the new window-seat, but she could look out of the window and see the warm, sunny hillside and the few bright leaves that were left, and she wanted to be out, too. She wanted to get away somewhere, anyway, where folks wouldn’t see her, for she felt as if she

might cry and, if she did, her mother would ask why. She'd find out that Mary really did want to go, that she was really staying just because her mother needed her, and Mother mustn't know that. So she put on her things—not her Sunday coat and hat, but the white sweater and tam she wore to school.

“Is it all right if I go for a walk, Mumsie?” she asked.

“Why, why didn't you go with Marge?”

“I was going to read—but it's so nice out, I can't!” said Mary. “Maybe I'll take my book with me.”

“All right, dear! Only be sure to be back for supper!”

Mary was almost afraid she might meet Marge and Sarah and she ran till she came to the place where the houses stopped and the country road stretched out between the hills. Yesterday she had seen a little path up across a field toward some woods. She watched for this path and, when she came to it, hurried up it till she was out of sight of the road. She had thought she wanted to cry when she got out of sight but it was so pleasant up there in the woods away from everything and everyone, that she changed her mind. She couldn't cry when there were crisp, brown leaves to her shoe tops, when she saw plainly a red-headed woodpecker as he drummed noisily on a giant oak tree, when the sky above through the branches was such a deep blue. She sat down on a log and made a little pile of leaves with a hole in the top and thought it looked like the crater of a volcano. Then she opened her book. The book was better up here with the sunshine and the rustle, rustle, rustle all about her. She forgot she had come to cry, so interested was she in Hans and his sister.

She did not hear anything, did not know anyone was near her—and then, suddenly, something moist and cool touched her neck. She gave a little cry and dropped her book, too frightened at first to look around. There was something there behind her, something alive, something big. She thought of the coon Harlo and Wogglebug had seen, of bears and wolves and tigers. Then she looked, and gave another cry—this time of joy and delight.

It was the Russian dog, so tall, so graceful, so silvery white, that it was no wonder Mary thought for a minute that he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. He put his slim nose again into her hand. But this time she did not cry out. She dropped again to the log, put her arms about his neck, laid her cheek against his silky coat.

“Oh, you beautiful thing! You big, beautiful dog!” she said. “And you tried to make friends with me! You don't look like an ogre's dog—you look

like the dog of a fairy prince! How did you happen to come up here—and where’s your master? Wait till I tell Matt—we can put it into our book for the club!”

She patted him softly and he stayed close to her.

“Why, I was so lonesome!” she whispered. “With Marge going away and everything—and now here you are, a brand new friend!” The tears she had wanted to shed before came now, a few of them. But they were not the tears of heartache she had expected, only the tears of a great relief because she had thought everything in her world was at sixes and sevens and had suddenly found out that things weren’t so bad after all! She brushed them away quickly and stood up.

“You’d better come home,” she said. “You might get lost up here in these woods—then whatever would the ogre say!”

The dog’s head turned sharply and Mary looked up.

There, standing not ten feet away, was the ogre! Mary just stood still and stared at him. He was big, really huge like an ogre—only, of course, there weren’t such things, really—and he had very thick silvery hair, all bushy, as if he didn’t comb it. His eyes were very deep-set and she could see even from there how very blue they were. She was frightened, far more frightened than at the dog. It is a different thing to be afraid of something you can’t see and something you can. The latter is much the worse. She thought about the dancing mice and all the things in cages. She thought about the boy who never played with other boys, the boy with the red hair like hers. She thought about the great yard and the high hedge that wouldn’t let people see inside. She thought about the huge stone house with only one little light in it at night. And all the time she stood still and looked at the ogre, and the ogre looked back at her.

Then, quite suddenly, as suddenly as her fright had gone when she had seen the dog, her fear of the ogre vanished. For she saw in the very blue eyes something that was almost a smile—something warm that made her feel as if he understood all about the tears in her eyes, why she had come up here all by herself, all about Marjorie’s going and how she felt lost in this new, different town.

“Well, King,” he said at last, “I see you’ve made a new friend!” his voice was very deep, but it was kind, too. “When you consider that Michael and I have been friends enough, now, for several years, I think you’ve made a pretty sensible first choice!”

Yes, he *was* smiling—really smiling now!

“*King!*” she exclaimed. “What a beautiful name for him! He looks like a king, doesn’t he?”

He came over nearer to her, bent down and picked up the book.

“Why, this is one Michael likes, too!” he said. “But I didn’t see Michael shed any tears over it!”

“The tears were for something else,” she said honestly. She felt a little thrill as he sat down on the log, to think that the man they’d all been afraid of was sitting there beside her, really talking to her.

“Well, well—tears on a day like this! Doesn’t seem sensible, does it, King?”

“But—if you’d wanted all your life to see the ocean—and Marge had been there before—if you’d been counting on Marge to—to help start a—a club,” she almost stopped, terrified at the thought that she had almost told *him* what the club was for! “And then, if you’d had a chance to go and had to lose it just because—just because——”

He didn’t say—“Chance to go where?” or “What kind of a club?” or “Who’s Marge?” or anything like that. He just said:

“Yes—because what?”

And she told him. Of how she’d longed to go, and of what she’d heard her mother say.

“Of course, I couldn’t—after that!” she said. There was a little catch in her voice.

He looked down at her, straight into her honest, warm gray eyes beneath the bronzy curls and the white tam-o’-shanter. There was a little puzzled frown between his own eyes.

“Why, I really believe you couldn’t, child!” he exclaimed. “And why shouldn’t you hate this town—ugly, muddy hole—ugly, stingy, gossipy people!”

He looked for a moment as fierce as ever she had expected him to look.

“Don’t blame you for wanting to go away—anyone would! Don’t know why I stay here myself—only I said I would, and I always do what I say I will!”

“Maybe it won’t be so bad—in the spring!” Mary said, suddenly wanting, somehow, to stand up for the town.

“In the spring it’s worse,” he said briefly. “This season it’s passable—but, in the spring, there’s nothing but mud.”

“Sarah says there’s arbutus in these woods!” she insisted.

“Well, so there is—so there is!” he looked at her sharply. “You aren’t one of these awful creatures always trying to find silver linings, are you?” he demanded.

Mary laughed aloud at that.

“Why, no—didn’t you see me crying? Seems to me I’m always unhappy about something!”

The ogre got to his feet.

“Come, King!” he said. “We must get along. You’d better, too, child. The evenings are pretty cold. Come to see me sometime—I live in the——”

“Oh, I know—behind the mystery hedge!” Mary interrupted him excitedly. He smiled suddenly, a little grimly.

“So that’s what they say!” he said. “Well, come anyway—it’s a long time since Michael and I have had any company!” He paused, then turned to her with his blue eyes twinkling. “I may be an ogre,” he said, “but I’ve never eaten a red-headed girl yet!”

He strode off through the trees, his big figure looking truly like a giant’s. The beautiful dog trotted by his side. Mary watched them till they were out of sight. Then she picked up her book, not even trying to finish her chapter. She ran down the hill, so anxious to see that other member of the H.M.C. that she was all out of breath when she reached the house. Things more exciting and beautiful than anything from books had happened to her!

CHAPTER SIX

THE OTHER RED-HEAD

It was the day of Marjorie's going. The little, old trunk had been brought down out of the attic days before and now it was full and shut and strapped. It had taken a lot of hustling to make the trunk full, for the Humphreys girls had only a few clothes, well taken care of. Mrs. Humphreys had been sitting up late nights, sewing. She had cut up an old red dress of her own that she'd been saving, and made a beautiful dress with a little white guimpe to it. Mary had red hair ribbons that had been given her and she gave them to Marjorie.

"I can't wear red on my hair—you might as well have them to match your dress," she said. But it hurt her to give them up, for she loved their silky, shimmering loveliness, even if she couldn't wear them, and she had often opened the box and spread them out on her bed, looking at the card—"Love to Mary Humphreys from Mrs. McDonald." Marjorie had hinted a good many times that Mary give them to her but Mary had firmly resolved never to do it. But now she did do it, feeling different about it, somehow, now that Marjorie was going off on this great adventure.

She had also given up her blue middy and her two best white petticoats—one of them the one that had the beautiful tating edge to it. And Marjorie took her pick of the handkerchiefs from the precious Japanese box Aunt May had once sent them.

Now they were waiting, just waiting, for train time.

"It'll be almost the middle of the night when I get there!" Marjorie said importantly.

"Don't forget about the sandpiper!" said Matt.

"Don't forget about the cream puffs!" said Harlo.

"Don't forget to write!" said Mumsie.

"Well, we'd better go," said Father. "Time we buy your ticket and see about your trunk and all, it'll be train time. There's Jud now!" Jud was the Stony Jericho drayman.

With the trunk gone, half the parting was over. Only Father was going to the station, for it was noon and almost time to go back to school. They kissed Marjorie—Mumsie, a good many times; Harlo and Matt, with pretendedly scornful little pecks; Mary, with a little sob. Marjorie hugged Mary hard as if

she were almost sorry, now at the last minute, to leave her. Then she was gone, walking very straight down the walk beside Father. At the street she waved at them—she waved every little ways till she got to the corner, and then they couldn't see her any more—her blue coat nor her beaver hat nor her shiny new shoes!

“Why, Mary,” her mother said, “you didn't half eat your dinner! Finish your pudding before you go back to school!”

Mary slipped into her chair but she could not swallow another bite of pudding.

“I can't!” she said miserably. Her mother patted her bright curls for a tender second.

“Well, you needn't, dear,” she said. “I couldn't myself!”

At school it was horrid, too. Marjorie had been sitting with her in the big, double seat, and now Mary sat alone, the whole seat to herself—a great, empty space under the desk where Marjorie's books had been. And sometimes, when there had been lots of talking in class, they had whispered softly behind their books. Mary couldn't even study her spelling and, when it came class time, she missed a word.

When school was over, she walked home alone. Even Sarah ran along with some other girls. A boy pulled at her curl as he ran by.

“H'lo—Carrot-top!” he said. The other boys laughed.

Mary's cheeks burned but she didn't say anything.

“I don't see that it's any worse to have red hair than 'tis to be a towhead like he is!” she thought.

She walked past the stores and up the street toward home.

“When I get home, I'll write a letter to Marge,” she said to herself. But, after all, what was there to write about so soon? Marge had just gone and there wasn't any news, yet. It had all been as she had thought about the H.M.C. When Sarah knew Marjorie was going away, she lost all interest in it. Matt had been excited when she'd told him about the ogre, but he'd said:

“Oh, gee! But I wouldn't ever dare go there, even if he did say so, would you? Maybe, some day when we're going by, he'll ask us in!”

Mary put it all down in the little note-book. Matt had bought the note-book (he had earned a dime one day for doing an errand for old Mrs.

Falconer), and Mary had put on the front page in very beautiful, careful letters:

“The Mystery of the House Behind the Hedge.”

She didn't tell Marjorie for it seemed just a secret between herself and Matt. She wrote down about her going to the woods and meeting the ogre. She even wrote the parts she couldn't quite tell Matt—of how the ogre's eyes had twinkled at her and of how she couldn't, when he was there smiling at her, feel a bit afraid of him. After he had gone, the fear came back a little. She wished, now, that she had some more to put in the book.

She came to the hedge and, at the tall, iron gate, she paused. Through the gate she could see the great, stone house and the wide door with its curved top and its knocker shaped like a lion's head. It was like one of the old castles, maybe a castle like in *Ivanhoe's* time. There was even a tower and it almost seemed as if there ought to be a drawbridge and pages running about on errands. If only she dared go in—just once! But she would never dare open that great gate. Probably it was locked, anyway. She went on, a little slowly, till she came to the opening to the driveway. There were iron gates there, too, but they were swung open and up the driveway she could see the beautiful dog that had been friendly to her up in the woods!

Suddenly courage came to her from somewhere. She ran swiftly through the opening in the hedge.

“*King—King!*” she called softly. The dog turned, ran toward her. She put an arm about him. She didn't feel so frightened with him there beside her. The lawn looked so huge with its paths, bare now of their flower borders, and its wide stretches of browning grass and its stiff little spruce trees. It looked a long, long way to that big front door with the lion's head knocker, but she walked along up the road, saying to herself:

“There's nothing to be afraid of—there's nothing to be afraid of! He told me to come!” She gave an excited, soft little laugh. “He said he never ate red-headed girls, didn't he, King?”

When she came near the house, her courage began to sink. She simply couldn't stand there by the lion's head waiting for someone to come and open the door to her! She went on around the house to the back door. She didn't even have to knock, for King began scratching at the door and it was quickly swung open.

And there he stood—the boy the ogre shut up in his castle, and he was so like Matt and all the other boys that she gave a little gasp of surprise! His hair was red—she had known that—a brighter red than hers, and he had a thin

face with a grin almost like any boy's, sort of mischievous and impudent and friendly. Only his eyes—they were different. They were not like Matt's, nor anyone's. Very dark blue, very lonely, very shy, they were. Mary stood quite still beside King looking up at him. She was very shy herself, was Mary Humphreys, but, for probably the first time in her life, she was seeing someone more shy than herself. She forgot herself because of it. All she could think of was that this boy was lonely, that he wanted friends, maybe more than she did, and that she must say something to show him she would be one. But the right words would not come.

“The ogre——” Oh, what a horrible beginning she was making! “I—I mean Mr. St. John asked me to come!” she got out at last. She kept her hand on King's silvery neck, as if the feeling of his soft coat were a sort of protection. Then she saw that the boy was smiling.

“Uncle Quill's not here,” he said, “but he'll be back soon. Will you come in and wait?” He was very polite—much more polite than Matt or Harlo! But the politeness seemed to belong to him, somehow, and to the house, as if he were a prince or an earl's son or someone like that.

She stepped in and the door of the castle closed behind her. It, for just the smallest second, frightened her. Then she forgot fright and ogres and lonely boys and Marge's going and all, in sudden joy at the beauty of the room in which she stood. It was the kitchen—but it was not the parsonage kitchen, with its old, cracked stove that wouldn't draw right and its uneven floor and its ugly, gray sink and one tiny window! It was not even a third cousin to that kind of a kitchen! There was a great fireplace at one end of the room and a huge thing like a giant's brass kettle at one side filled with logs of wood such as those burning in the fireplace. There was a fire now and the light made little gleams over all the room, little, twinkling, shining places on the copper pans and kettles that hung along the wall in a beautiful row. They all looked so scoured, so lovely for just cooking dishes. She remembered the granite kettle that things always stuck to and wondered how it would seem to have things like these to clean.

There was a long table, more beautiful than the one in the parlor at home and it was rubbed till the surface was like a mirror.

Suddenly Mary became aware that the boy was standing there, waiting for her to do or say something. Her cheeks grew hot.

“I didn't know there were such kitchens in the world!” she said. The boy laughed.

“I like it, too!” he said. “I like to sit out here and study if Hepsey isn’t too busy! Sometimes I come out here and look at Uncle Quill’s dishes all afternoon—would you like to look at them till Uncle Quill comes?”

He turned to the cupboards—such beautiful kitchen cupboards, with little leaded panes shaped like the ones of her under-the-porch playhouse of so long ago! And there were the many shelves filled with blue dishes, plates and platters and vegetable dishes and pitchers. She liked the pitchers best with their many sides and pictures of trees and swans and bridges and queer, old-fashioned people walking about.

“You can see better up on a chair,” said the boy. So they climbed up on chairs and he told her about the different dishes.

“This platter with the border of shells around it—that’s The Harbor of Dublin. A man named Wood made it. But I like these plates best. The Stevenson plates, Uncle Quill calls them. They all have borders of acorns around them. That one is the old City Hall in New York. Uncle Quill says it’s still there. The back of it is made out of brick and the front is of beautiful marble from Italy, and the reason that it isn’t all marble is that they used to say New York would never grow beyond the Commons and so no one would ever see the back of the City Hall! Here’s another acorn one—King’s College. That’s in New York still, too—but it has another name now!”

“Why, it’s like making a game out of history lessons!” she cried.

“Don’t you like history?” asked the boy. “I love it—it’s better than parsing and algebra and such things! Why—don’t you like to think about old Rameses and all those old kings who could make better roads than we have now and that had books and all right in the beginning of the world?”

Mary stared at him.

“I don’t know about Rameses,” she said. “I just know about this country—Bunker Hill and the Surrender of Burgoyne and the Pilgrims and things like that! Who teaches you about—about kings?”

“Uncle Quill—and he has books—I’ll show them to you sometime—with pictures of all those old countries! And he has things from them too! You ought to see the dagger he has from Egypt! And a sword that came from England, old almost as England is!” Mary’s eyes grew wide with wonder.

“See that copper thing hanging by the fireplace—the long-handled thing with the lid and the little holes in the top? That came from England, too, and it’s terribly old! It’s a chestnut popper. And that copper cup hanging up over the mantel between those queer jugs—Uncle Quill says a king used to drink

out of that. It has words on it—Anglo-Saxon, Uncle Quill says, and they mean—‘Let only friends drink together from this cup!’ It’s worth a lot of money and Uncle Quill likes it best of all his things because he says a friend gave it to him, and he hasn’t many friends. I’ll get it down for you!”

They climbed down from the chairs and he went over to the fireplace, reached up and took down the cup. Mary took it into her hands and looked at the queer words on the side. They looked like English and yet weren’t. And kings had drunk from it!

“Uncle Quill told me about you,” the boy said shyly. “He said your hair was like this cup when the fire was shining on it!”

Mary looked down at the cup and flushed.

“That—that was a nice thing to say!” she stammered. “Harlo and Matt—they’re my brothers—they call me ‘Brick’ and ‘Carrot-top’ and ‘Pumpkin-locks.’”

“Well, it’s better to be called those names than just plain ‘Michael’—folks don’t have nicknames for you unless they like you!” He sounded so lonesome that Mary wanted to call him a nickname right then to show him she liked him.

“We—we call you ‘Prince Michael’ down at our house!” she said. “Because it looks like a castle here, you know! And Mr. St. John—we call him ‘the ogre!’”

Michael laughed aloud at that. It made his face much nicer when he laughed.

“Why, I’m as poor as a church mouse!” he exclaimed. “Uncle Quill just looks after me out of—of charity, I suppose! But he’s very good to me!” he put in hastily. “He teaches me so many things and I have everything I want, except brothers and sisters and a chance to get out and——”

“But why—why can’t you——?” Mary was all breathless with excitement. Maybe she was going to find out the mystery right now! But before he could answer her, the door opened and in came the ogre! King jumped to meet him.

“Why—here’s the little girl who feels unhappy over something most of the time but who laughs just the same! And what do you think of my boy, Michael—and of my copper cup?”

“I think it’s beautiful!” Mary said. “I—I mean the cup!” Then, embarrassed, but afraid of hurting Michael’s feelings, “I—I like Michael,

too!”

“Well, that’s good—I knew you would! Did you show her your copy of Hans Brinker, Michael? She likes it, too, and she’d like the pictures in yours!”

“Oh, it’s getting dark—I’ll have to run!” said Mary. “Mother will be worried!”

“Well, well—we mustn’t let mothers worry! But—wait just one minute! Hepsey—Hepsey!”

Out into the kitchen came hurrying a thin, little, oldish lady, almost running, the way Mary’s mother did sometimes on busiest of days, and looking very anxious, as if she had lots to worry about.

“Hepsey, get some milk, please! We have a friend with us to-day and she must drink out of our friendship cup!”

“H’mph! Spoil your dinner—spoil your dinner!” she grumbled. But she went out and brought in a jug of milk. The jug was an old Toby jug with a funny smiling face to form the front of it and it was worth its weight in gold. But Mary did not know that—she only thought how lovely it must be to keep milk in a jug like that!

Her hands trembled a little when she took the shining cup. She thought of the kings who had held it—golden crowns and jewelled ladies with long trains and great thrones and knights to do one’s bidding. It was as if she were becoming a member of some great and beautiful society! Her eyes were like stars as she handed the cup back to Hepsey.

“Well—run along, now—come back soon, little Gray Eyes!”

“You come to see us!” said Mary warmly. The ogre scowled a little.

“We don’t go out much, Michael and I,” he said. “But you come—often!”

He held the door open and she went out and down the long driveway. It was dusky there now and the high hedges and the trees made great shadows everywhere. But Mary didn’t mind that—she was remembering the bright fire in the great stone fireplace, the little kettle hanging above it. Such warm, friendly things in your mind left no room for fear!

She heard a shrill whistle.

“Hoo—oo—*Matt!*” she called.

“Say—scare a fellow to death, why don’t you—jumping out of a hedge like that!”

“Oh, Matt—there are blue dishes with pictures on them—and a fireplace in the kitchen and copper things to cook in and a cup—a copper cup that kings drank out of—and Michael isn’t any older than you and he studies algebra and about Egypt and——.”

“Say—slow up! What are you talking about? Do you mean you honestly went inside—saw that boy?”

“Honest—cross my heart!”

Matt gave a whoop and made a running jump for the front porch.

“Oh—*Boy!* This is going to be *some club!*” he called back to her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MARY AND MATT HAVE A MEETING

Mary spent most of her spare minutes for a week putting down in her book the record of the visit. Every now and then she would remember something new that she had not written about.

“Oh, Matt,” she recalled excitedly one night at the table, “there was a rug—a ‘hooked rug,’ he said,—and it——” then she saw that Matt was scowling warningly at her and quickly put her hand over her mouth.

And, once, she ran all the way from school to put in the book about the jug that had a hound for a handle. It was so beautiful, just as if the dog had just lifted his head from a cool drink.

“They used to take more pains with things,” Michael had said. “Uncle Quill says no one’s proud of the work he does any more!”

“I wish we had some new dishes!” Mary said to her mother one night, remembering the cupboards filled with the blue dishes.

“So do I, dear,” her mother said. “So do I! I hoped maybe this winter we could manage it, but the moving and this trip of Marjorie’s have cost so much! Perhaps—next winter——!”

“Oh, it’s always next winter!” Mary cried rebelliously. “Next winter we’ll have new parlor curtains—next winter Marge and I can have furs—next winter you’re going to have a new suit—next winter Father’s going to have a new bookcase for his study—next winter—next winter—*next winter!*” She hung up the dishpan with an angry little bang and ran out of the kitchen. But she had seen her mother’s hurt eyes and soon she crept out into the kitchen again. Her mother, right in the midst of stirring up a cake, had sat down in the chair by the window and was staring out of the window. Mary ran to her. It was hard for her to show folks she loved them. Marjorie was always hugging and kissing Father and Mumsie and her friends but Mary, while she often longed to, somehow couldn’t. But now she ran over to her mother and put her arm about her and put her cheek against her mother’s.

“I’m sorry, Mumsie!” she whispered. “I don’t care—really—only—only——”

“Only what, dear?”

“Oh, I don’t know! We have lots of fun, more than most folks, I guess! For we have games at night and you read aloud to us and everything—only—only we always have to get along with ‘second-bests’—and it seems as if we might have just *one* thing that isn’t a ‘second-bester’! Only I don’t care—not really, Mumsie! Sometimes I get cross and I don’t know what makes me!”

“Yes—we all do, Mary. Mother does, too. But second-bests aren’t always so second-best as they look. You see, there’s just so much money, and if it went for things that cost a great deal we couldn’t have good food or books or save any toward the day when you children will go to college. Some folks get things anyway—go in debt for them—but that’s a second-best, too. I’d rather have a second-best lot of furniture than a second-best heart, wouldn’t you, dear?”

“Oh—yes, yes!” it wasn’t like Mumsie to be so serious, to talk so long about a thing. Mary felt she must have hurt her mother a lot. “We’d be like the fisherman’s wife, wouldn’t we—if we weren’t ever satisfied?”

“Is she the one who had only a little hut and then when she had a chance to wish, kept making her wishes bigger and bigger till she wanted to rule the sun and the stars, like a god, and then found herself back in her hut? Yes, dear, we’d be like her!”

Mumsie got up and began to stir her cake again and Mary went away into the other room. She made herself very busy dusting, and when the room was all tidy, the magazines in neat little piles on the bottom shelf of the table and the faded cushions straightened on the old couch, she felt more ashamed than ever. Maybe the things were all old and faded and ugly but it did all look comfortable and like home. It wouldn’t seem like home with all stiff, new things. Why, what if the old, sagging couch were gone! She had curled up there so many winter evenings while her mother read to them. She could never get along without that! And the bookcase—with a shelf that belonged to each of them! And the table, with its rose-shaded lamp! Why, there wasn’t a thing she would want to give up! Still, she thought wistfully, if only there was something—some one thing that was really beautiful, like the copper cup or the pitcher with the hound for a handle, just one thing, for a treasure!

Matt came in, whistling. Matt loved to whistle, but he always whistled a little off the tune. He came over by the stove where Mary was brushing up, with a little feather brush, the ashes that had spilled when Father carried the ash-pan out.

“Say!” he whispered loudly. “We’ve got to have a meeting of the H.M.C.! I’ve got some news!”

“Really?” Mary whispered back. “We can have it now if we keep quiet. Come on over on the couch!”

They curled up on the couch.

“Listen!” said Matt. “I was down in the post-office this morning and _____”

“*Sh!*” said Mary.

Father was coming down from the study.

“What’s all this secret conference about?” he said laughing. “Needn’t get so red about it, Mary—I won’t stay any longer! I know when I’m in the way!” He pretended that his feelings were quite hurt but he winked at Mary as he went out.

Matt began again.

“I was down in the post-office and the mail was just being handed out and, what do you think——!”

And then, Mumsie put her head in the doorway.

“Matt, will you fill the wood-box for me? There isn’t enough wood for my baking.”

Matt made up a little face but he got up.

“Back in a minute,” he said. Mary heard him whistling “Coming Through the Rye” as he threw an armful of wood with a great bang into the wood-box. The kitchen door opened and shut—he was gone for more. Mary wished he would hurry. What could have happened down at the post-office—what, that could have had anything to do with the H.M.C.? Why didn’t Matt hurry?

There—he was in again! Now, in a minute, she’d know! What was it Mumsie was saying?

“You go up and get those shoes of yours now, Matt, and take them down to the cobbler’s. Maybe you can get them by night and it will save wearing your best ones to school!”

“Oh, can’t I wait till after dinner? There’s something I want to tend to!”

“No, you’ll have to go this morning. He wouldn’t get them done to-day if you waited!”

“*Oh—bother!*” Matt said under his breath. Then—“Can Mary go with me?”

“Why, I really wanted her to fix some apples for the pies. Just run along, Matt—it won’t take you long!”

Mary’s heart sank. The cobbler was way at the other end of town. And it was a slow job, slicing apples for pies. It would be dinner-time soon and then would come the dishes.

“*Oh—bother!*” she echoed Matt in a little whisper. But she couldn’t say anything, of course, without telling their secret, and she didn’t want to do that. She went down to the cellar and brought up a pan of apples, perched up on the high stool by the kitchen table, her feet twisted between the rounds, and pared apples.

After a long time, Matt came back but by then it was time to set the table for dinner. And, after dinner, came the dishes. It took her a long time to do the dishes without Marge there to help her. Sometimes Mother helped but she had Father’s suit to press for Sunday to-day and so Mary did it alone.

There had been a letter from Marjorie and Father had read it aloud at the table. She was having a wonderful time.

“I am learning to speak French!” she wrote. “And I am wearing my hair a new way, and you ought to see the big double bows Jennie puts on! Harlo ought to be here for we had ice-cream shaped like apples and pears and peaches last night, and I had two helpings. Harlo, you would be fatter than ever if you were here. Aunt May took me to see a play last night. We didn’t get back till eleven. It was all played by the children and it was beautiful. It was about ‘Snow White and the Seven Little Dwarfs,’ and you ought to have seen Snow White. She was lovely. We are going to a gallery to-morrow to see some pictures. I will have to close now and study my arithmetic.”

Mary thought about Marjorie all the time she was doing the dishes. It wasn’t quite fair, she thought, that Marjorie should be having all the fun, while she stayed home and washed dishes! Only, of course, she’d told Marjorie she wanted her to go. It wasn’t Marjorie’s fault. But a play, a real play on a stage! Snow White—beautiful Snow White—as red as blood, as black as ebony, as white as snow! And a gallery where you could see walls and walls full of pictures! But Matt had to wear patched shoes and she had to dust and pare apples for pies and make beds and wash dishes and—suddenly Mary felt her face getting red. She was being like the fisherman’s wife again, always wanting more, never satisfied!

Then Matt came into the kitchen and Mary almost forgot Marjorie, wondering how she could manage to see Matt alone. She happened to think of a book she had borrowed from Sarah.

“I’ll take that book back,” she said to herself, “and Matt can go with me!”

So, when her work was at last done, she put on her afternoon dress and asked Mumsie if she could take the book home.

“Come on!” she whispered eagerly to Matt.

But, when they started down the front walk, Harlo ran suddenly around the corner of the house.

“Where you going?” he demanded. He was eating a big red-cheeked pear and one cheek stuck out as if he had mumps.

“To Sarah’s,” Mary said quickly. “Just to take a book back!” She tried to say it as if it didn’t much matter, for, if Harlo thought anything was up, he would stick to them like a leech.

“I’m going down to Wogglebug’s,” he said, and walked along beside them, biting away at his pear.

“Oh, go on!” Matt said. “You’re always hanging around when you aren’t wanted! I want to tell Red something!”

“Oh, you do? Well, I’m going to hear it too!”

“Yes, you are—*not!*”

Harlo didn’t answer, only grinned exasperatingly and chewed away on the core of his pear.

“If you don’t stop eating seeds, you’ll have a whole orchard growing inside of you!” Mary teased him.

“I wouldn’t care—always have something to eat handy by!” Harlo said.

“If you don’t go on, I’ll put a cold wash-rag on your face in the morning!” Matt threatened.

“H’mph—you never wake up quicker ’n me!” Harlo was not at all disturbed.

So the three of them walked on down the street till they came to Sarah’s and Harlo ran off to Wogglebug’s. Matt sat on the top step to wait for Mary. She came out of Sarah’s almost at once and they hurried down the walk. Just as they got to the street, they saw Harlo come round the corner again!

“Run!” said Matt. So they ran, as fast as they could go, up the street toward home. Harlo came trotting along after them but he was so fat he couldn’t quite catch up.

“Oh, well—who cares about your old secrets!” he panted as he saw they were gaining on him. They came just then to the St. John’s driveway.

“Quick,” said Mary. “In here!”

She grabbed Matt’s arm and pulled him inside the hedge.

“He’ll never dare come in here!” she whispered.

“*Ogre’ll eat you up! Ogre’ll eat you up!*” chanted Harlo softly.

They thought, for a second, that he was coming in. But soon they heard him running across the street to the house.

“Goodness, what a time trying to have a meeting!” said Mary. “And what a queer place to have it! Quick, tell me—what happened at the post-office?”

But, even then, Matt was not to tell his secret.

“Come on!” he said suddenly. “Let’s get out of here—there comes the boy himself!”

“No—let’s stay! He won’t hurt anyone—I want you to know him!”

Michael came nearer. He hadn’t seen them before but suddenly his eyes fell upon Mary’s white tam.

“Oh—hello!” he said. “What are you playing?”

Matt began to stammer. “We—we——”

“We aren’t playing anything,” said Mary. “We’d been trying to have a meeting of our club and something always happened. And now Harlo was tagging us and we ran in here and——”

“And now *I’m* in the way!” Michael laughed.

“Oh, no! Why—maybe you’d just as soon tell us—you see, the club is about—shall I tell, Matt?”

“I don’t care,” mumbled Matt, a little embarrassed.

“It’s about your house and your uncle—and you! And we think it’s a mystery house and we’re trying to find out about it!” her words tumbled over each other in her eagerness. Then she saw that Michael looked very sober.

“Well, so ’tis a mystery house!” he said. “But it’s a mystery to me, too. And if you’d find out, I’d be very glad! You see, I didn’t even know I had an Uncle Quill and then, all of a sudden, I was here and——”

“Oh, Matt!” Mary interrupted him. “Shall we have him in the H.M.C.? Michael, will you be in it? H.M.C. is the ‘Hedge Mystery Club,’ and it’s just

Matt and I!”

The shy face brightened.

“Yes, I’d like to very much,” he said, with that queer politeness of his. “You see, things happen every day—things I can’t understand, and I want to find out about them. But somehow, you can’t ask things of Uncle Quill. If he wants to tell you, he will—and, if he doesn’t, you can’t coax him to. Why, today, a letter came——!”

“Yes!” said Matt. “That was the clue I was going to tell Mary about! That’s why we were running away from Harlo—so I could tell her. I was standing by you in the post-office and I saw the stamp. I collect stamps so I noticed it right away! From India—wasn’t it?”

“Yes—from India. It was on very thin paper and the writing was very fine, but plain, like print. Uncle Quill gets mail from lots of queer places, because he collects china and furniture, you know, but I don’t think he ever had one from India before. And I don’t think it’s anything about china, either. When I took it in to him, he took it in his hands and put his glasses on and looked at it, like he always does. Then he dropped it, as if it had burned him!”

“I guess it *was* a clue!” exclaimed Matt.

“Well, maybe—but maybe not. It doesn’t look as if it were going to be, now. I sat as still as I could, so Uncle Quill wouldn’t notice I was there, for I wanted to see what was going to happen to that letter.”

“What did happen?”

“Nothing! He just stood there and looked at it for a long time and then he bent over and picked it up and sat down by the fire. But he didn’t open the letter. I waited and waited and he just sat and stared at it. After a while, dinner was ready and he put the letter up on the mantel and came to the table. But he only ate a few bites. And all afternoon, he’s been sitting by the fire with the letter in his hands, not opened yet. I was going to stick right there as long as he did, but Hepsey came in and she wanted to know why I wasn’t studying. Uncle Quill began to roar at me like anything, so I ran out. And I don’t know any more about the letter than ever!”

“Oh, that makes it all the more mysterious!” said Matt. “It wouldn’t be any fun if we found it all out in a minute!”

“No danger!” said Michael. “I’ve been there since I was five and I haven’t found out anything yet!”

“Well—we will—that’s what the H.M.C. is for! And if you find any clues, you could signal us!”

“Oh, that’s a jolly idea!” said Michael. “A white flag, shall I, from the castle tower! I sleep up there in the tower and so I can go there any time. If I put a white flag in the window that will mean to come at once—coast is clear and I have something to tell you!”

“Great!” said Matt. “Oh, gee—come on, Red—here comes the ogre!”

“Michael!” he called—his voice sounded very big and stern.

“Yes, Uncle Quill!” Michael called back. “I’m coming!” Then he turned to them. “Don’t forget—the white flag in the tower!” he said, and ran swiftly up the path toward Quiller St. John.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BIRTHDAY THAT WASN'T SECOND-BEST

It was Mary Humphreys' birthday. Birthdays in the Humphreys family were days of great importance. There was always a surprise supper with extra good things to eat and there were always presents. When Mary woke up on this thirteenth day of December, she felt all tingling with expectation over something—for just a second she had forgotten what. Then the tingling died away in a little ache of disappointment. It was going to be a birthday without presents!

Mumsie had told her so last night. They were very slow in this new town about paying the salary and it was hard to make ends meet. And Father had to have new shirts. He couldn't have appeared in the pulpit again in his old patched ones! So there was nothing left for birthdays, not even a few cents. Some other birthdays had been slim ones, but this—this was to be an absolutely bare birthday! Only her supper—she was to have her birthday supper just the same and she needn't help with the dishes or even peek into the kitchen all day long. And she could wear her best dress to school if she wanted to.

She put the best dress on slowly. It had been her best dress last year, too, and it was a little tight for her and quite short. It couldn't be let down for it had been faced in the beginning. After she had it all fastened up, she took it off again. It didn't seem right for school, somehow. She put on her brown school dress and went down-stairs, feeling more comfortable. Her feet danced a little on the way down for, after all, even without presents, it was a *birthday!*

But, always, there had been something to open at the breakfast table and this birthday morning there was nothing! Mary pretended not to care, but she found herself feeling cross and disappointed.

"It seems as if they could have spent a little—just a few cents or so!" she whispered to herself as she got ready for school. "There's Marge having a good time every day—and I can't have even a *tiny* present!" But she stopped at the post-office to see for sure if there wasn't a box. Surely, Marge would remember, would send her at least a card! But the little box was quite empty and she couldn't get up courage to ask if there was a package. They always put a little red slip in the box, anyway, if a package had come. But she stood, looking wistfully at the box for a long time.

“Maybe, this once, they forgot!” she thought. But Mr. Wilkes, the postmaster, looked questioningly out at her through the little window and he said nothing at all about a package. Mary flushed and went out.

She walked slowly the rest of the way to school. When Sarah caught up with her and took hold of her arm, Mary drew away from her.

“I got a letter from Marge!” Sarah said. “Look!” She pulled it out from her history book. It was very thick. Mary wanted to run away from Sarah. Just to think that Marjorie would write Sarah such a thick letter—and not a word to her—*on her birthday!*

“Marge just has her lessons in the morning!” Sarah said excitedly. “And they’re buying things for their Christmas tree already. It’s going to be *full* of electric lights! It doesn’t sound real, all the things she’s doing, does it? Have you got your diagramming all done? I didn’t know how to do that sentence about whales. What did you do with that word—‘splashing’? Does it modify whale?”

For just a second, Mary wanted to say “No,” so Sarah would have it wrong. But she didn’t. She even sat beside her when they reached the schoolhouse and helped her with the rest of her sentences. Still, she was cross, cross as two sticks, and she wrote her composition untidily, on purpose. She had brought her lunch, because it was a special treat to bring a lunch to school, and she even felt cross about that.

“You’d think they didn’t *want* me home on my birthday!” she said to herself, when she was supposed to be studying history. But when she opened her lunch box, she was ashamed. There were two mince tarts, and Mary loved mince tarts! There were sandwiches with pressed meat for filling—and there were sweet pickles and a great red apple. Just the very thing she liked best!

Her crossness melted away.

“They do love me!” she thought remorsefully.

The afternoon went easier. She didn’t miss anything in spelling and Miss Baine praised her map she had made for geography class. She had a warmer feeling inside.

When she came out of school, it was snowing—great flakes like feathers. It was the first snow of the year and Mary wanted to laugh out loud she was so happy to see it. Matt was waiting for her at the fence corner and he walked along beside her.

“Got to have a meeting!” he mumbled.

“Oh, Matt—more news?”

“Uh-huh—just a little. Queer, though. It’ll be good to put in the book!”

“What is it?”

“Walk slow—till the rest get by, then I’ll tell you.”

So they walked slowly along the cinder path till they were the last of all the laughing, shouting boys and girls. The snow brushed against their cheeks.

“Oh, I’m glad it’s winter!” Mary said. “I was awfully cross this morning! I was mad at Harlo and Mumsie and Marge and everybody—but now I’m not! Oh, they’re all by, Matt! What is it?”

“Well, you know what they said when we first came—about the mice and the birds and all up there? But you didn’t see anything like that, did you?”

“Why, no—I forgot all about it!”

“So did I—till to-day. And all of a sudden, I remembered, and I wondered where on earth he kept all his things, and I wondered why you didn’t see anything! Well, I planned to go up there—come down from the hill at the back and peek in as many windows as I could see. So this noon I ran up there on the hill and when I came down I pretended I was running toward the road, but I got close to the house. I couldn’t see through the back windows at all but around at the side toward the church, there’s a low window and I could see inside just as easy! Listen, Red, what do you suppose I saw?”

“What, Matt? Tell me quick!”

“I saw Michael sitting by the table with his head down on his arms as if he were crying and Mr. St. John stood beside him with a whip in his hands, as if—as if he’d been beating him—or was going to! Oh, boy—it made me shiver! I ran back to school as fast as I could leg it! I wouldn’t want that old ogre to get after *me* with that whip!”

“But, Matt—he—why, he’s *kind*! I know he’s kind! Why, he was just as jolly as anybody! He wouldn’t *whip* Michael!”

“Maybe he didn’t—I don’t know. But, anyway, he had a whip in his hand, and Michael looked as if he were crying! That’s all I know!”

“Let’s go up there—maybe we can see Michael and find out about it!”

“Go up there? Whew! Trot right along—but you don’t catch me inside that hedge!”

“But, Matt—maybe Michael needs somebody—needs a friend or someone to help him!”

Matt grinned at her.

“Yes—but you didn’t see that whip!”

“Oh, I’m not afraid of Mr. St. John, but I’m just afraid of—of the *house* and the *queerness* of everything! Let’s walk along up beside the hedge on the outside, anyway, and maybe we’ll get a glimpse of Michael, shall we?”

“All right!”

So they walked along beside the hedge that separated the mystery house from the churchyard.

“Maybe, if you’d whistle—soft—Michael will hear you!” suggested Mary.

“But how would he know who it was?” said Matt. He whistled, though, and in a second, King’s silvery head poked through a hole in the hedge. Mary went down on her knees and patted his face.

“Oh, King!” she whispered. “Go get Michael—go get Michael!”

“Do you think he knows what you said?” Matt asked scornfully.

“You watch and see!” Mary answered. “Why, Matt, that dog knows more than a person!”

And, sure enough, after King had scratched at the door a minute, Michael came to the door.

“Oh, look!” breathed Mary softly. “He won’t go in—King won’t go in! Good King!”

Matt whistled again and Michael looked over to the hedge and saw them. He closed the door cautiously and ran across the yard to them.

“We sent King after you!” Mary said. “Isn’t he a wonderful dog? Matt saw you—through the window—to-day, and he thought the ogre was going to whip you. Was he?” she queried bluntly.

Michael went very red and kicked his foot in the dry leaves. But he smiled, too.

“Goodness, no! Uncle Quill never whipped me! You seem to think, just because you got up that name for him, that he’s a real ogre! But he’s as good to me as your own father is to you, I’ll bet! But—but, you see—that letter I told you about—you know he put it on the mantel. Or maybe I didn’t tell you

that. It was there when I went to bed. But next day he couldn't find it. I saw him looking everywhere but he didn't say anything to me at first. I hunted, too, when I had a chance, but I couldn't find it. I thought maybe, if I could find it and give it to him, he might tell me what it was all about. But neither of us found it, and then, he came to me and asked me if I knew anything about it. Of course I said 'No!' but after a while he asked me again. Now he keeps talking to me about it as if I'd stolen it and could tell if I wanted to!"

Michael looked very sober and Matt said, "Well, of all the nerve!"

"Well, I suppose it did look queer," Michael said. "It just went, and there's no one but Hepsy and Uncle Quill, besides me. Hepsy wouldn't have any use for it, and maybe I would—for it was probably something about me. But I didn't touch it—and when Uncle Quill scolded me—I—I guess ——" he looked most ashamed but blurted it out nevertheless, "I guess I cried!"

"But the whip," said Mary excitedly. "What was that for?"

"Oh—that was just an old whip that hung in the corner and lots of times Uncle Quill takes it down and snaps it just for fun—the way folks fuss with things when they talk. He just had it in his hands, that was all. But—but it hurt just as much as a whip—not to have him believe me!"

"Well, it's another clue, anyway!" said Matt. Matt was always sympathizing with folks and Mary saw he looked as if he were as badly hurt as Michael himself. Only he tried to change the subject—for he was a boy, and boys weren't supposed to care about things like girls did.

"I wouldn't call it a clue!" Mary said. "I'd call it some more mystery!"

"I'll have to get back!" said Michael. "Uncle Quill will be looking for me. I have to do some more Latin sentences before dinner. I got to thinking about the letter so much I didn't have my lessons this morning and I have to make it up now!"

"Latin! Do you study Latin?" said Matt. "I won't till next year! How did you get way up into high school things just studying alone?"

"Oh, Uncle Quill makes my lessons interesting. I like to get over things so I'll know what's coming next!"

"Gollywhilikens!" Matt stared at him in surprise. He couldn't understand a boy, a regular boy that liked mysteries and everything, liking to study. He was going to ask Michael some more about Latin but Michael had nodded "good-bye" and was gone, running across the yard, King beside him.

Matt and Mary went slowly down across the churchyard.

“Say, this is getting exciting!” said Matt. “Where do you suppose the letter went?”

“Maybe it fell off into the fire.”

“Don’t see how it could do that! There’s Harlo—let’s run and beat him home!”

They ran down to the road, Mary’s coppery curls flying in the snow, and beat Harlo to the door by about a yard.

“Oh, you make me tired, you two, with your old secrets!” Harlo said. “Come on—let me in your club, will you?”

“You’re too little!” said Matt exasperatingly.

When they opened the door, the house was full of good smells—birthday smells. Mary had quite forgotten to be sorry because it was such a presentless birthday and suddenly she felt ashamed that she had ever been sorry. She had had so much fun with Matt and she had seen Michael again—and there was to be a birthday supper! She didn’t need presents! She felt as if she wanted to help, to show how happy she was. She ran to the kitchen.

“Oh, Mumsie!” she called. “There’s the most beautiful snowstorm—isn’t it nice that it came on my birthday? I’ll take the plates in!”

Mumsie had on her best dress and she smiled at Mary.

“No, dear—I’ll do it! You don’t need to help a bit to-night!”

“But I’d just as soon,” said Mary. “I want to!”

“Well, I’ll let you carry in one thing—just one! It’s in on the pantry shelf!” Her mother’s eyes twinkled.

Mary ran to the pantry. And there, on the shelf, was the most beautiful birthday cake! It was huge—four layers and the thickest of frosting and the brightest of red candles!

Mary gave a little “Oh!” of delight. She hardly dared carry it in, but she did, calling to the boys and Father to shut their eyes till it was on the table. When it was safely there, in the middle of the table, Harlo opened his eyes and gave a great whoop that made Mumsie come running to see what was the matter. Harlo ran to his chair and slid into it, his eyes never leaving the cake, his round face one wide smile of anticipation and joy. They all laughed at him, but he didn’t care. He just sat and looked at the cake.

Then the rest came on—the meat loaf—just hamburg, that’s all, but with onions and seasoning just right—oh, it was a treat! And on the best platter, the one without the crack! And the gilt-edged sauce-dish filled with canned peaches! And hot raised biscuits! Mary felt almost as greedy as Harlo looked. Harlo even held out his plate all the time Father was saying grace.

After it was all over, even to the third piece of the four-layer birthday cake, Mumsie slipped out of her seat and came back in a minute with a box.

“It’s from Aunt May!” she said and put it in Mary’s hands. They all crowded around her and Father gave her his jack-knife to cut the string. The string was off—the paper! The cover to the box was lifted! Oh—beautiful soft blue—a new best dress! And, so silky and shiny beside it, a new blue hair ribbon—“with love from Marge”!

“Oh, I’m so glad!” said Mumsie. “You *did* so need a new dress, Mary!”

Mary was so glad she couldn’t talk about it. She put her hand gently on the blue cloth and spread out the hair ribbon above it—it just matched! Then she became aware that Harlo was shoving something into her hand. It was a tiny sack of the cinnamon drops she liked so much!

“Matt’s got something for you, too!” he whispered.

She looked up at Matt, whose hands were behind his back. He was grinning at her.

“Bet you can’t guess!” said Harlo. “He’s been working on it out in the barn!”

Matt brought it out in front of him—a little green bird-house!

“You said last year you wanted one,” he explained. “So I found some wood and some paint out in the barn and made it. It’s kind of early, but you can save it!”

Mary’s eyes were shining. She was just going to tell Matt how much she liked it when Mumsie came in from the kitchen holding something very carefully. Mary gave a little gasp. It was a teapot—but such a beautiful teapot! It was of a lovely coppery color, only shimmery like a jewel, and it had a beautiful design in blue and gold. Mumsie put it down before Mary.

“It was my great-grandmother’s,” she said. “I’ve kept it always—in a trunk in the attic—and I planned to give it to one of you girls when you were grown. It’s lustre-ware and it’s worth a very great deal. But, after what you said one day, about second-bests, I thought perhaps you were right—that you needed at least one thing that wasn’t second-best. So I decided to give you

this for your very own. We'll keep it here on the bureau so you can see it every day!"

Mary felt her very heart was going to burst, so full was it of love for all of them. She looked from the dress to the bird-house perched on the table's edge, from the bird-house to the little sack of cinnamon drops, from the cinnamon drops to the shining beauty of the blue and gold teapot!

"You—you said I wasn't going to have a birthday!" she said bewilderedly. "And here—it's the very best one I've had yet!"

She put the box on a chair, passed the cinnamon drops around and even told Harlo to take two. She put the bird-house up on the shelf behind the stove and then carried the teapot over to the bureau—the old, worn bureau of walnut that had served them as buffet ever since Mary could remember. But, with the teapot on top, it was not ugly any more. The bureau, the whole room, was suddenly beautiful. Mary even put her cheek down to the lovely, blue-touched coppery sheen of it and imagined it was soft.

After dishes were done, they all played anagrams. With Mumsie in her best dress and all, it seemed like a party.

After she had gone to her room, Mary heard her mother out in the hall. She ran out and put her arms about her mother's neck and kissed her. She didn't say anything but she knew Mumsie would know it was for the teapot that wasn't second-best! And long after all the rest were asleep, Mary lay awake, too happy to shut her eyes. Happy because Marjorie hadn't forgotten her, happy because Harlo had spent a penny just for her, because of all those hours Matt had worked on the bird-house for her, because of the new dress, because—most of all because she had one thing of her very own that was all beautiful—not a made-over, not a cheap thing, not an ugly thing—all beautiful and all hers!

CHAPTER NINE

THE FLAG FROM THE TOWER

It was a week and two days after her birthday that Mary was all alone one Sunday afternoon. Father preached Sunday afternoons at a little church five miles out in the country. Generally he walked or hired a horse, but to-day a man had come for him in his car and asked Mumsie and the boys to go along. There hadn't been room for Mary and she didn't much want to go anyway. And someone really needed to stay home to see about supper. So Mary was left all alone and she felt rather pleased and important about it. First of all, she set the table for supper, just so it would be done and she would be free to read or do whatever she wished. She put on her mother's apron and was very careful about it all, just as her mother was. But, just to show *she* was doing it and not Mumsie, she put one of Mumsie's "tiddly-winks" plants in the middle of the table, where its red and green prettiness glowed like the Christmas that was almost there.

Then she got out the little note-book with the adventures of the H.M.C. inside its covers, and sat in the window-seat to write. She hadn't put in the last adventure yet and she thought this would be a good chance. Then, when she was finished with that, she would write to Marjorie. But she had written only a few lines when she looked out of the window toward the big house that she always called the "castle" in the book, and saw something that made her drop the book and jump quickly to her feet. It was a white flag flying from the tower at the corner of the house!

She had almost forgotten by now the bargain they had made with Michael, but the sight of the bit of white brought it quickly back to her. What should she do! She wished Matt had stayed at home so that he might go with her. Perhaps she ought not to leave the house—her mother hadn't said anything about it but, of course, she hadn't thought she needed to. But Michael wanted her—there was news—the coast was clear! She hurried to the kitchen and fixed the things as nearly ready as she could for supper, put some coal in the kitchen stove, pulled on her sweater and cap and was away, across the road and up the long, snowy driveway like a flash.

Michael met her at the door. She could see Hepsey sitting by the fireplace, knitting. Michael put his finger up to his lips.

"She has to finish to a certain place, always, before she talks!" he whispered. "Come on in here!"

He led her into the library and closed the door behind him.

“Where’s Mr. St. John?” she asked.

“He went for a walk. He always does on Sundays, and he’s never back till supper-time. He almost always takes me along but he’s still cross about the letter and he didn’t ask me to-day!”

“Haven’t you found it yet?”

“No—not yet—but that’s why I called you to come. I think I have a clue. I think Hepsey has it!”

“Hepsey!”

“Yes—Hepsey! Anyway, I think she knows. For this morning at breakfast, Uncle Quill was grumbling about it just as Hepsey was bringing in the toast, and I saw her give him the queerest look, just as if to say—‘You’ll never see that letter so you might as well stop talking about it!’ It made me feel queer, I can tell you! Hepsey’s always been here—and she seems such a part of the place somehow, only like the dishes and the old furniture and all—and I never could think of her mixed up with secrets. But she’s in one now—she certainly is! I’ve been watching her all morning and she has something on her mind!”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“I don’t know—it’s sort of hard to!”

“Shall I?” asked Mary. “I’d just as soon—and if she knows things about you, I think she ought to tell you!”

“Yes—maybe,” Michael looked very sober, in a grave, grown-up, lonely way he had at times. “Only all my life’s been such a secret, you see—it must be they want it that way or they’d have told me before. It might only make it worse if I asked—they’d think I was snoopy. And maybe there are things they really don’t want me to know!”

“It’s most worth having to live in a secret if you can be in a beautiful house like this!” Mary said, looking around at the beautiful room. There was a fireplace here, too, with a stone above it carved in queer, square letters—“Friends and Books Grow Dearer About the Fire.” On either side of the fireplace and at both ends of the room were books. Many of them looked old and had leather bindings.

“Here are my books,” Michael said, going over to a little section next the fireplace.

“ ‘Moby Dick’—that’s a queer name!” said Mary.

“Oh, that’s a corker! Matt would like it—it’s about a whale! It’d make your hair stand up—the part where they chase Moby Dick!”

“Here’s Hans Brinker, too!” It was like seeing an old friend in a strange land. She took it out and opened it—“Oh, what lovely pictures!”

They were all there—the books youth has loved through the years. “The Christmas Carol” and “Ivanhoe” and “The Merrie Adventures of Robin Hood,” “The Last of the Mohicans,” “The Secret Garden.” Mary lingered longest over “The Merrie Adventures of Robin Hood.”

“You can borrow some any time!” offered Michael. He seemed so eager to be friendly, as if he seldom had a chance.

“Oh—may I? I’d be awfully careful of them. You can take any of ours you want, too, only I guess you have most of them already!” She turned as a clock began to strike three. “Is that a grandfather clock?” she asked Michael.

“Yes—it’s very old. Uncle Quill went way up in Maine after it and he had to bargain a week before the folks would sell it to him. And this table—it was made by a man named Duncan Phyfe, and Uncle Quill’s very proud of it. He got it down near Philadelphia and he was so pleased that he brought me three dandy presents that trip! This Duncan Phyfe made tables better ’n anyone in the country, I guess, and folks pay lots of money to get them now. You see, he didn’t have a factory—made them all by hand and spent a long time on each one. Things like that seem to always be better, and you like them more, when you think how folks spent their whole life just to make them perfect!”

Mary thought of her lustre-ware teapot and felt a warm little thrill. There was an old desk—walnut inlaid with curly maple. It had a great many drawers and Mary fancied there must be secret hiding places back in it somewhere. She was just going to ask Michael about it when the door opened and Hepsy put her head in.

“Who you talking to, Michael?” she asked sharply.

“Miss Mary—the girl from across the street!” Michael said. “Miss Mary”—Mary had to smile a little at that! Michael was always so polite! She wondered what made him so different—was it because he had lived here alone with his queer uncle so long?

“Miss Mary, eh? Guess ‘Mary’s’ enough for a little girl!” Hepsy came into the room and Michael pulled a chair up by the fire for her. That made Mary smile, too. Imagine Matt or Harlo getting a chair for anyone, without being asked! Still, Matt had worked awfully hard on that bird-house for her—

polite or not, she loved him! Hepsey sat down and picked up her knitting. Mary wanted her to talk instead of knit but she could not think of anything to say to her. Hepsey spoke first herself, putting down the sweater she was working on and looking sharply about at Mary.

“Time there was young folks around the place!” she grumbled. She seemed to be the kind that always grumbled and never meant anything by it. “I’ve told Mr. St. John so a thousand times but he doesn’t take any more heed ’n a chipmunk! Michael, here, is getting just as old as the rest of us—sticking in by himself with a book! Ought to be parties here and boys running in and out! Make a batch of cookies and nobody to eat ’em but Michael—they get stale! Cookies hadn’t ever ought to get stale in a house where there’s boys! I’ll bet they don’t down to your house, do they, child?”

She looked quickly at Mary over her glasses. Mary laughed aloud.

“Why, no!” she said. “But there’s four of us, when Marjorie’s there—and Harlo’s such a pig! You see, every time he goes to the cooky jar he takes four—if no one’s looking!”

“That’s the way—that’s the way it ought to be!” Hepsey cut in. “Boys was meant to eat—it isn’t any comfort to cook for ’em if they don’t!”

Mary laughed again. Hepsey sounded so funny to her, she couldn’t help it. Hepsey gave her the ghost of a smile.

“My, it seems good to hear that!” she said. “Makes you get all sour and wrinkled up inside not to hear folks laughing around! Not that there’s any blame to Michael for not laughing—don’t know what he’d laugh about in this still, dark, old place! Full of ghosts and secrets and shadows and things!”

Mary pulled the little stool she was on excitedly nearer to Hepsey.

“Ghosts!” she exclaimed. “Not really, truly ghosts that go clanking around at night like Old Scrooge’s ghost? Not truly?”

“Don’t know Old Scrooge,” said Hepsey. “Don’t know as I ever *saw* any ghosts, but you can *feel* ’em here all the time!”

“I know!” said Mary. “I feel them, too, every time I come inside the hedge! But it’s such a lovely old house—there never was a house with such beautiful things in it, if only the secrets could be got out of it!”

“That’s what I say—that’s what I tell *him*! But he hangs onto his secrets like a bulldog! If he’d get out in the village like any man ought to do and get acquainted with his neighbors and send Michael to town to school! It ain’t natural for a boy to do his lessons all by himself! But he has to stick to his old

grudges and grouches and make himself and everybody around him miserable!”

Mary jerked the stool still a couple inches nearer.

“What grudges?” she demanded. “What makes him do it, Miss—Miss Hepsey? He seems so good and so kind and yet so stand-offish and sad down under. What makes him that way, Miss Hepsey? Have the secrets got anything to do with Michael?”

Mary could see Michael’s sober eyes shining expectantly across the hearth from her. Hepsey hesitated a moment as if maybe she had said too much. Then she gave a quick little toss of her head and answered Mary.

“Why, of course they’ve got anything to do with Michael! But *what* is more than I—or anybody but him—can say, I guess!” Mary gave a little sigh of disappointment. “I’ve been here going on nine years,” Hepsey went on, “*nine years*—and I’ve never found out a thing! But I’m going to now! I’m going to now! It’s more than human beings can stand to be so in the dark years on end. I’m not complaining about the pay—Mr. St. John’s been more ’n generous with me and I’ve not been out much for clothes and such, so I’ve got a good bit saved up for a rainy day! But money ain’t everything and I can’t stand this much longer. I ain’t going to—I ain’t going to, either! I’ve got Quiller St. John where he’s going to tell me something now—or I’ll go—I’ll go, and I’ll take the letter with me!”

“Hepsey!” Michael sprang forward. “Hepsey, do you know where the letter is? Do you?” He put a hand imploringly on her arm. “Hepsey, Uncle Quill thinks I took it! Where is it—you’ve got to tell him!”

Hepsey smiled, a little acidly.

“Oh, no—I haven’t got to tell him! But I don’t mind telling you. It fell down behind the mantel—between the stones—and just an edge was sticking out! I took it—and I’m going to keep it—that is, I guess I am, till Mr. St. John tells me why he sticks in here year in and year out with never any company or anything!”

“What made you come in the first place?” Mary demanded.

“Well, I was out of work—I’d been sick quite a spell and I was staying with my sister in London.”

“In London?” Mary and Michael cried together. “London—*England*?”

“Well, I’m not acquainted with any London over here, are you? As I was saying, I was staying with my sister in London. And there was this boarder

there—a tall, thin man, very dark and handsome he was, too—and he paid a very good price for his board. And he had a little boy with him. A little boy with red hair—an awful quiet little lad! And while I was there the man went away one day and didn't come back, and the little boy was left there. We used to puzzle over it a lot, my sister Mattie and I, but nothing happened to clear up the thing till one day a letter came from India with money in it for the boy's board. A good, generous sum it was. The money came three times after that and we took care of the boy as best we could, but we could see he was lonesome. We were both awful fond of him."

Michael was standing in front of Hepsey, his hands in his pockets, his eyes never wavering an instant from watching Hepsey's face. He looked so terribly eager that Mary wanted to hurry Hepsey along. But Hepsey couldn't be hurried. In her own good time she went on.

"Then one day—it was in the early fall, and a horrid, rainy day, I remember—a man came. Mr. St. John, it was—and he said he'd come for the boy. He was such a still sort of a man and so sober-like, that we didn't take much of a fancy to him, Mattie and I—but he had a paper from the man who'd sent the board money and it was the same writing and all so we didn't know what to do except to let the boy go. But it broke us all up, for we'd got fond of the child, as I said. Then Mr. St. John asked Mattie if she knew of a good woman he could get to take care of the child in America and be a sort of housekeeper, too. And Mattie and I talked it over and decided maybe it was a good chance for me. So I came."

"But the other man—my father!" Michael cried. "What about him?"

"Don't know as it was your father!" said Hepsey. "He went by the name of Smith but we never thought as it was his rightful name, and you used to call him 'Papa John,' so we couldn't clearly tell if 'twas your father or just someone as took care of you!"

"But the letter—you said the letter——"

"Oh, yes—you know you brought the letter up from the office, Michael! Well, when Mr. St. John put it up on the mantel, I saw right away that it was the same writing as the man from India wrote that time. It was queer writing, small letters but plain as printing, so I never forgot it. And, so far as I know, there's never been a letter from him before. I saw it upset Mr. St. John and all of a sudden it seemed to me I couldn't stand it another minute! Nothing but mysteries and secrets and no neighbors to talk to because they're all afraid of you! I just made up my mind I'd find out about it all or leave here. So I took

the letter and I was going to make him tell me about everything before I gave it to him—I *am* going to as soon as I lay hands on it again!”

“*Again!*” Mary ejaculated.

“Well—I put it on a little cleat across the top of my bed and, this morning it was gone!”

“*Gone?*”

“Yes—but I’ll find it—it must have just slipped down somewhere! I’m sure he hasn’t got it. And when I get it——! There, I’ve broke my word and talked about you, Michael, and your father—or whoever the man was—but I don’t care! I’m glad of it! There’s some things worse ’n breaking your word—and one is to be always brooding over things that maybe ought to be told!”

She shut her lips grimly then and began to knit with a furious swiftness. Mary drew a deep breath. She looked at the grandfather clock. Half-past four! She must hurry! The folks would be home at five. She got to her feet, looked uncertainly toward Hepsey, wondering whether or not to say “good-bye.” But Hepsey, bending her head above the click-click, click-click of the needles, seemed not to see her, so Mary crept softly out to the kitchen and Michael followed her.

“It isn’t much,” he said to her at the door. “Not really much of anything—but it’s *something!* You can’t think how awful ’tis not to know—not to remember about yourself! And what if the letter’s from my—*my father!*” His eyes were shining. “I’m going to turn Hepsey’s room upside down till I find it!”

“You hang the flag out if there’s any news!” said Mary. “I must fly now!”

She fled down the snowy road in the dusk, worried for fear she wouldn’t have supper ready. She had to poke the fire up a little and it wouldn’t blaze as it should but at last things were cooking. She opened the can of sauce and cut the bread. But she was so busy puzzling over it all that she almost forgot what she was doing at times. Things were all ready when the folks came—all but the teacups; Mary had forgotten the teacups. Harlo and Matt told all about the trip—Harlo always talking right into Matt’s talking. A man had asked the boys to come up on his farm some Saturday and stay till Father went up on Sunday. His boys had a big pair of bobs and there was a hill a mile long near his house. And Mother had promised!

“D-didn’t you, Mumsie?” Harlo demanded. “You did—you did!”

Mumsie smiled. The cold had made her cheeks very pink.

“Yes—I promised. But I don’t believe they’ll ever ask you a second time, Harlo, if you stuff like that at *their* table!”

“Well—goodness—a boy can’t go hungry!” Harlo mumbled.

They all laughed. Mary thought of Michael up in the big house—living always in the midst of secrets. Her own house and folks suddenly seemed very dear to her—dear and safe. No secrets here—just laughing and arguments and talking and games and happy times! She didn’t even envy Michael his books and all the beautiful furniture just then!

CHAPTER TEN

“MERRY CHRISTMAS TO MISS MARY!”

It was Christmas day at the Humphreys'. Mary was up even before Father got the fire going in the big heater. Matt was up before she was. Harlo was up before Matt. Father made them all sit on the couch till the little blue flames began to dance up through the coals.

“Why, your fingers'll be so cold you couldn't undo the strings!” Father said. Small chance, when they were all so tinglingly warm with excitement! They couldn't keep their eyes from the tree, from all the mysterious, nubbly presents on and about it! It was a perfect tree. Harlo had discovered it up in a pasture above town and he had asked the farmer if they could have it. It was just tall enough, just round enough, just thick enough of branch! Matt and Harlo and Mary had gone up to the hill and brought it on Matt's sled. All the afternoon before, except the little bit Mary had spent on finishing the apron she was to give her mother, she had spent stringing popcorn and cranberries for the tree. Mary knew how to make beautiful “snowflakes” out of tissue paper and they all tried to get the loveliest, laciest designs to hang on the green branches. Even without the presents, it was marvelous. And now! Harlo kept talking about the presents.

“That green one is Dad's! Bet you don't know what mine is for you, Matt! What do you s'pose those nubbly packages are? Gee—I've been trying and trying to guess! See that long one done up in red paper—that came out of Aunt May's box! I peeked when Mumsie was opening it! Dad—can't we get down now? We aren't cold a bit!”

But just then Mumsie came to the kitchen doorway.

“Breakfast's ready,” she said. “You'd better eat first or you'll never have time for a bite all day!”

“Oh, *Mother!*” begged Matt. “Presents first!”

“I'm not hungry!” said Mary—wondering, wondering what those three nubbly packages could be! But Harlo's stubby nose wrinkled suddenly into an appreciative sniff. Christmas presents—all was forgotten because of the smell from the kitchen! He rubbed his hands over his stomach and jumped from the couch.

“Come *on!*” he cried. “It's pancakes 'n' *sausage!*”

So they had breakfast first—and, then, the tree! Mumsie loved her apron, told Mary what beautiful stitches she had made and how nicely she had embroidered the pocket! And Father was so pleased with the book Matt and Mary had bought together for him! Harlo had bought Mary a special, soft drawing pencil she had wanted and Matt had given her a beautiful handkerchief with a little rose flower in the corner. Little things, the Humphreys' children's gifts—but, oh, the fun and the love mixed up with them and their giving!

The nubby packages were from Aunt May and were the greatest surprise of all. *Skates!* Harlo was so happy he lay down on the floor and rolled over and over, giving a whoop of joy with every roll. There was a deep creek running through the town, Stony Jericho Creek, and already it was frozen deep enough for skating along the edge. They had longed for skates last year at Corey but couldn't have them. And here they were—so shiny and sharp and new!

But Harlo soon forgot his transports of happiness over the skates at the sight of a box of candy. There was a box of candy for each of them from Aunt May. Chocolates—with nuts in! It hardly seemed a minute till Harlo said:

“My top layer's gone!”

Mary looked at hers, thought how pretty some of the pieces looked, all wrapped in gold or silver tinfoil. But she didn't eat any, yet. She had spied a book and hoped—hoped so hard, that when Father put it into her hands she felt as if she had known all the time it would be for her. And then she started with surprise—for it was one of the books from Michael's shelf up in the big house! It was—she knew it was! “The Merrie Adventures of Robin Hood!” She remembered the picture on the cover, the laughing, daring face of Robin Hood. She remembered the lovely, crimson binding, the shape of it and the thickness. It was Michael's book!

She looked up, her cheeks flushed, from a picture of Maid Marian, to hear her mother say:

“That's the mystery present, Mary! When Father came in from the store last night, he found this on the step. And not a sign of who brought it! It wasn't wrapped up very Christmasy—just brown paper and string, as if it were done in a hurry, and it said on the outside—‘Merry Christmas to Miss Mary!’ Now, who on earth in Stony Jericho would call you ‘Miss Mary?’”

Mary's cheeks grew redder and redder. She looked helplessly from Mumsie to Matt and then back to Mumsie again. Even her mother had to see how confused she looked.

“Why, Mary—I believe you know who brought it!” she said. “Whoever was it! I didn’t think you knew any folks here well enough for them to give you such a gift! It’s a lovely book—we can read it aloud! Father and I had been thinking fairies dropped it on the doorstep—where *did* it come from, dear?”

Mary only grew redder. If she told, they would ask a million questions and first thing she knew, all the secrets of the H.M.C. would be coming out! “Why—why, I think I know,” she stammered. “But I can’t tell!”

Mumsie looked at her, surprised, and Father, too. Harlo forgot his chocolates for a minute.

“Uh-huh!” he said, with deep significance. “Mary’s got a beau!”

Mary found words then.

“Why, you big silly!” she said scornfully. “If you want to know so bad—it came from the ogre’s house! But I can’t tell any more about it because it’s all a secret—and don’t anybody *dare* ask me!” Then she got up and grabbed Harlo by one fat arm, pulling him to the door.

“Come on!” she threatened. “Come on, or I’ll do something worse!” She opened the door and pulled him out on the porch. There she picked up a handful of snow and rubbed it hard against Harlo’s round, red cheeks.

“Will you stop your teasing?” she demanded. “Will you?”

“Uh-huh! Uh-huh! Yes—I will—honest, I will! *Ouch!*”

But, though Harlo said no more about it, Mary kept thinking about the book, nevertheless. One of Michael’s most beautiful books—and he had sent it to her for a Christmas present because she had said she liked it!

After Christmas dinner, when they all—not only Harlo—stuffed themselves to exhaustion, the three—Harlo, Matt and Mary—went down to the creek, the new skates proudly hanging over their shoulders. Matt knew how to skate some, but Mary and Harlo not at all. Matt helped Mary on with her skates and then tried to show her what he knew about it. But, for some magical reason, it seemed Mary didn’t need to be shown! She didn’t stumble and fall and wave her arms wildly about as Harlo did, but she felt as if she had grown wings on her feet like—like—who was that man in the book of myths at school with wings on his feet? Was it Perseus? Well, she felt that way, anyway!

But Harlo—poor Harlo! He was no sooner up than he was down!

“Never saw such s-skates!” he said. “Must have been meant for your head!”

But he kept on trying and, every time he fell down, he laughed and scrambled up again. By the time he had achieved two successive strokes without a tumble between, he was as red in the face as a Baldwin apple and puffing like a porpoise. He kept trying to talk through his struggles and Mary and Matt grew breathless with laughter, watching and hearing him.

“Don’t see any sense trying to walk on ice, anyhow!” he said once. “Never meant to be walked on!” *Bump*—loud puffings as he got to his feet. “Ice is for making ice-cream with and ought to be used f-for that!” *Bump!* “Ouch! Say, I’m not going to do this any more! Laugh, if you want to—but I’m black and blue all over!” *Bump!* “Say, I just as soon stand on my head on the grass but I never said I wanted to on ice—not s-steady!” *Bump!*

Mary and Matt laughed so hard they had to sit down on a log and rest.

“It ought not to hurt you—you’re padded good all over!” said Mary.

“Say”—*Bump!*—“my padding’s all wore off!”

At dusk, laughing and happy, they went up across the stony field toward the house.

“I hope it won’t melt off before to-morrow!” said Harlo. “So’s we can go again!”

Mary and Matt shrieked with mirth.

“Thought you weren’t going again!” Mary said.

“Say—I’m going to learn how to skate or bust! Didn’t I do five strokes that last time without falling!”

At the house, they had to look over their presents again before they had supper. It was almost like seeing them all brand new again. After supper, Matt passed his box of candy around.

“Aren’t you going to open yours?” Harlo demanded of Mary. His was long since empty. Mary shook her head.

“Not to-night,” she said, and flushed a little when Harlo sang out—“Greedy, greedy!”

They sang Christmas carols then. Mother played the old organ and Father softened his big voice so that it sounded not much louder than Matt’s.

“Oh, come all ye faithful!” and “Oh, little town of Bethlehem!” and “There’s a star in the East,” “Ring, ring, happy bells!” Father sang a funny old song—

“Christmas is coming—the geese are getting fat,
Please to put a penny in an old man’s hat!
If you haven’t got a penny, a ha’penny will do,
If you haven’t got a ha’penny, God Bless You!”

Mother played it softly, with chords, and they all learned it—Harlo smacking his lips at the thought of the geese getting fat!

Then, tired but happy, to bed. Mary stole one last look at “The Merrie Adventures of Robin Hood.” And then, with a white box hidden under her arm, went up the stairs to her room. In her room, she lifted the cover from the candy box and looked longingly at the rows of chocolates. She didn’t get much candy, and this was so very beautiful and luscious-looking! But she put the cover back on without taking a piece. For she had made up her mind to take her box of candy up to Michael as a “thank-you” for his beautiful book!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE PITCHER

Mary didn't get a chance to go up to the big house till late the next afternoon. There was no school till after New Year's, so they had the day free for play. Harlo begged so hard that they go skating that, after Mary had done the breakfast dishes and pared the potatoes for dinner, they all went.

"You'd better bring along your box of candy," Harlo suggested to Mary. "It'll taste good when you're working so hard!"

"Nobody works but you!" said Matt. Mary only shook her head.

"What you keeping it for?" insisted Harlo. "It'll get stale!"

"Well, it's mine!" Mary said. It bothered her that they should think her stingy, but she didn't tell what she was going to do, either! She wouldn't have minded telling Matt—but, Harlo! She didn't want him to know—he'd tell all the boys and girls at school and they would tease her and ask a lot of questions!

"When *are* you going to open it?" demanded Harlo. "Will you give me three pieces when you do? One with nuts in? You ought to—didn't I give you a dandy drawing pencil?"

Mary's cheeks grew so red that the freckles were all swallowed up by the crimson. But she didn't answer Harlo.

"Come on!" she said, instead, grabbing her skates by the strap. "I'll beat you down to the creek!"

They went, shouting and sliding, down across the field back of the house and across the tracks by the tower. Harlo haunted the tower when his mother would let him.

"I'm going to be a telegraph operator some day!" said Harlo, as they stood a minute by the tower listening to the click-click-clickety-click-click-click up there. "You can stop wrecks and everything!"

"Yes—and some time you'd be so busy eating something that you'd forget and send the wrong signal!" said Matt. "Then there'd *be* a wreck and you'd be to blame and they'd fire you—and——"

"Say—do you think I'd be that kind of an op'rator? Why, I know most all the dot and dash letters already! I'll bet I could send a message right now!

You and Mary think you're smart because you've got up some kind of a club but——”

“Well, come on! We won't get there before the ice is all melted!” Matt said impatiently.

Harlo got a good many bumps but he didn't seem to mind. He got painfully up and went at it, grumbling and laughing at the same time. Wogglebug Wilson and another boy came skating up the creek.

“Getting ready for the carnival?” Wogglebug asked Harlo, grinning as Harlo's fat body hit the ice again.

“What's a carnival?” asked Harlo, raising himself on one sore elbow.

“Oh, they have one every winter!” said Wogglebug. “It's for the skaters—anybody not seventeen yet. They have races and fancy skating and prizes. There's a big race—the ‘Ballinger Race,’ they call it, because old Mr. Ballinger gives the prize for it, *twenty dollars*! Oh, boy, wouldn't I like to get it! Mr. Ballinger used to be a great skater when he was in college—that's why he gives the prize. But Harve Prentiss'll get it. He has for three years! He came from Canada and knew how to skate when he was a baby, he says. Wish somebody else'd get it once—he thinks he's so smart!”

“Maybe I will!” said Harlo. Just as he said it, his heels went flying into the air. They all shrieked with laughter. “Maybe you will—oh, yes—*maybe* you will!” they told him. But he laughed at himself, too, and got up.

Mary tried to get them to come home early so she could go up to Michael's before dinner, but they were all having such a good time they didn't want to leave. Mary, herself, thought she could skate forever.

After dinner there was no chance to slip off when no one was watching. Mother said she would read them a chapter in the book and they all sat in front of her on the floor, cross-legged like three young tailors, and listened. It was beautiful—they'd known about Robin Hood before, but just little bits, not a long, fascinating story like this. They teased so hard for two chapters that Mother said—“Well, seeing it's vacation!” and read them two. Then Harlo wanted to play it and he got a hen's feather to put in his hat and Matt was a rich old miser and Mary was Maid Marian. They played it for an hour.

Mary began to get nervous. It would soon be dark and she hadn't yet gone up to Michael's. But then Matt had to get some wood and Mumsie went to fix some meat for hash and Harlo begged to look at the book all alone. So Mary slipped up and took the box out of her bureau drawer. She put on her things and went out as quietly as she could. Harlo was right by the sitting-room

door, and she was so afraid he would notice the box—if he ever did, he would raise a terrible uproar before he let it get out of the house! But Harlo was so intent upon the pictures that he never said a word and so she ran up the walk and across the road and inside the hedge. King ran barking to meet her. He seemed very glad to see her.

“H’lo, King!” she greeted him softly. “Did you have a happy Christmas? Or were all the secrets there to keep you from being happy?” He just looked up at her, but it seemed to her almost as if he were answering her—saying that secrets never troubled him, that he was happy always if he was with folks who loved him!

At the kitchen door, Mary hesitated. What would she say if Mr. St. John came! But it was Hepsy who opened the door. An actual glimmer of a smile stirred the sour old face for a second into pleasantness.

“So it’s you!” she said, as if she were really pleased. “Here’s Mary come to see you, Michael!” Michael was sitting on a high stool by the fire, reading. But he got quickly to his feet with that politeness that Mary laughed at and yet liked. Mary came over beside the fireplace, smiling shyly. She hardly knew how to present the candy, with Hepsy there listening. But she didn’t have to, for Hepsy muttered something about getting her knitting and went off up the back stairs.

Mary held out the box.

“It’s a little late for a Christmas present,” she said. “You—can just—just call it a ‘thank-you’ present, if you want to!”

“Oh, thanks! That’s dandy!” Michael said. “I could eat a bushel of candy!”

“The book was beautiful!” Mary said, as she spread her fingers before the roaring fire. The firelight danced on her bronzy curls, making them shine there in the dusky room, against the white of her sweater. The fire gleams touched, too, the slender, winsome face and the half-shy, half-friendly smile, the freckles on the straight little nose—she seemed like a little princess there in the fireglow! But Mary didn’t know how lovely she looked. She went on talking. “Mumsie read us two chapters in it this afternoon and Harlo is looking at the pictures now!”

“I—I’d like to have got something new,” Michael said. “But I didn’t have much money—and I didn’t know what to get—so I thought if I gave you something I liked a lot myself, it would be most as good!”

“It’s better!” said Mary. “I love it! The candy is one of my presents, too.”

They were still a minute. Then Mary remembered the H.M.C.

“I’ve watched every day for the flag!” she said softly. “Haven’t you found the letter yet?”

Michael shook his head soberly.

“It’s just gone,” he said. “And I’m sure Uncle Quill hasn’t it. But he doesn’t seem to suspect me any more! He’s in the other room now, writing. He’s been at it all day. He writes a little and then he tears it up and then writes a little more. He didn’t want any dinner and when I went in to ask him something, he just acted as if he didn’t hear me. He seems awfully worried about something.”

“Maybe he’s writing to find out about the letter,” Mary said.

“Maybe—I don’t know. If I thought he was really writing to—to *my father*, I’d *make* him tell me! Sometimes I think he is. Last night, late, he said to me—‘It hasn’t been much of a Christmas for you, has it, Michael?’ But I said I’d liked it. I had, too, for we had a dandy dinner and a tree with lots of presents and Uncle Quill was awfully good to me all day. In the afternoon I went out on the pond and skated. It was kind of lonesome but I liked it and I told him so. But then he sat down in his big chair and looked at the fire for a long time.

“‘Sort of queer not to have anyone to give presents to—queer for a boy, anyhow!’ he said. And he seemed so friendly I told him I’d given one present away, and I told him what it was.

“‘That’s good—that’s good!’ was all he said. After a while he said—not as if he were talking to me—‘Christmas softens a man up—foolishness—frumpery and foolishness—but it softens a man up!’

“Then he went into the library and got out paper for a letter, and he didn’t come up-stairs till long after I went to bed. Then this morning, he went to writing again, right after breakfast. I can’t get head or tail to it. Unless maybe it’s an answer to that letter he lost. And, if it’s my father, why did he go off and leave me? And why doesn’t he ever write to me or anything? Did he and Uncle Quill quarrel, or what? Seems like a queer dream sometimes. I try and try to remember and, after Hepsy told us that the other day, it seemed as if I could see the sea, with some great white birds swooping down by the railing. But whether I really could remember it or not, I don’t know. It—it’s terrible—not to know about yourself!”

Mary felt so sorry for him, she felt a lump come in her throat. If only Michael had a father and mother and brothers and sisters like she did! Even if

they were poor as poor, he'd like it better! She tried to comfort him!

“Well, maybe you will know after a while—maybe the H.M.C. will find out all about things before we get through!”

“Maybe,” said Michael discouragingly. Then he laughed a little. “Ought not to worry about things so near Christmas!” he said, as if ashamed of talking so much about himself. “You ought to see Uncle Quill’s new pitchers! He has three new ones and one of them I like the best of any of his blue dishes!”

They went over to the cupboard.

“I really ought to go,” said Mary. “It’s getting late and I have to help with supper!”

“Just let me show you the pitchers first!” said Michael. He opened the cupboard door, the door with the beautiful little diamond-shaped panes.

“This is another Toby jug—like the one we use for milk,” he said. “But I like this one better. The other one’s the sailor boy,” he put the pitcher in Mary’s hands. It was so funny—the fat, little old man with his three-cornered hat, and his jug of ale on his knee! Mary had to smile back at the fat, little man.

“Here’s another—this isn’t so valuable but it’s such a queer shape!” He handed her the odd, squat little pitcher with its wide, spreading handle and its wreath of old-fashioned flowers around its jolly, fat middle.

“But this—this is the best of all!” he handed it down reverently. It *was* the best of all! Such a deep, beautiful blue—deeper than sky-blue, deeper than ocean blue—almost like the blue of Mary’s new birthday dress! She gave a little gasp of delight.

“Oh, gorgeous beautifulness!” she exclaimed. “And what are the steamships on the side?”

“That was when Lafayette came to visit America—he’s on one of the steamships. You know all America was glad when he came—so they even made dishes telling about it!” He put the pitcher carefully into Mary’s two brown hands.

Then—Mary never knew afterward how it happened—she hadn’t been frightened or careless or anything—but, all of a sudden, the beautiful pitcher of lovely blue, with its story of that faraway time, slipped from her fingers and fell with a crash to the kitchen floor! Mary stood perfectly still, her hands still raised as if holding it, staring with frightened eyes at the rough white

broken edges of the pitcher. She felt cold from head to foot. She didn't dare raise her eyes to Michael, who still stood there on the chair, as silent and frightened as she.

Suddenly she heard footsteps—they were heavy footsteps—*the ogre's!* Sheer terror swept over Mary. She turned and *ran* across the kitchen floor to the door, frantically clutched at the knob, opened the door and sped off through the snow on wings of fright. She remembered, when she got to the hedge, that she had not even shut the door!

CHAPTER TWELVE

MARY MAKES IT RIGHT

When Mary came flying into the house, Mumsie was already setting the table and the teakettle was bumping away on the kitchen stove. Mary pulled off her sweater and cap and began hurriedly to help. She brought the sugar-bowl and the milk, she brought the plates with the queer, spidery pattern, and put them at the places. She drew the chairs up and filled the water pitcher. But all the time her heart was pounding away so loudly that it seemed as if her mother must hear it and ask about it. Her hands felt like ice—she was cold all over, though she heard Mumsie call to Father to check the fire a little—it was too warm there! She was glad Mumsie wasn't asking her things. She felt as if she couldn't have answered anyone a single word. Once, when she heard the sound of steps on the front porch, she almost dropped a dish. But it was only Mr. Caraway, come to get the hymn numbers for choir practice.

At the table, it was just as bad. Mary couldn't eat—she simply *couldn't* eat. Not if all the things she liked best were there before her, could she have eaten! She took things on her plate but then she just sat, cold and listening, and stared at them.

“Come, Mary, eat your supper!” Father said.

“I—I don't feel hungry!” Mary stammered.

“Well, eat a bite, anyway!”

But Mary couldn't. Out the window she could see the shadowy lines of the great house and one faint light showing through the dusk. Every second she expected the door to open and the ogre to appear. What would he do to her—*what would he do to her?* But supper was over at last and the dusk became black outside—and he did not come. She remembered how Matt had seen him that time with the whip in his hand. She couldn't remember that Michael had laughed about it—only the bigness of Mr. St. John and the fierceness of the whip stood out clearly in her memory. His best pitcher—his best pitcher of all! *What would he do to her?*

“Are you going to choir practice with Father?” Mumsie asked. Mary always loved to go to choir practice. She would sit down in one of the pews and listen to the music, sometimes hum the hymns softly to herself and pretend she was in the choir, too. But—go out that door to-night—and across the road? She couldn't—she never could!

“I don’t believe I’ll go to-night,” she stammered. “I don’t feel very well!”

“Why, what’s the matter, dear? You didn’t eat any supper, either! You’ve been eating too many sweets over Christmas, I’m afraid. You’d better go to bed early!”

“I think I will,” Mary said. “I think I’ll go now!” She could hardly wait till she was safely up-stairs and inside her door. Even then she was still frightened. But when she was inside the bed and the covers tight up under her chin, she gave a sigh of relief. Bed seemed such a safe place, once you were in and your feet all curled up warmly! She was safe for to-night, anyway!

But she could not sleep. What had happened after she had run out of the kitchen? What had Mr. St. John said to Michael and what had Michael answered his Uncle Quill? Had the ogre seen her as she went out the door? His best pitcher—his very best pitcher of all! She remembered the beautiful blue of it—bluer than June sky or any blue she had ever seen. She remembered how the pieces had looked, gaping up at her, their white edges so rough and uneven. How had she done it—how ever had she done it? She had been so careful, because she knew it was worth such a very great deal of money. It had just slipped—for no reason in the world!

Father came home from choir practice and she could hear him getting out the game board from behind the bureau in the dining-room. Father always liked to play a game of anagrams before they all went to bed. She could hear Harlo’s excited voice and Matt’s pleased voice as he stole a word from somebody. She heard Harlo go to the bookcase after the dictionary. Harlo was always looking up words. Then the board was put away and Father went out to get a drink and wind the clock and fix the fires for the night.

Matt and Harlo raced each other up-stairs. Father and Mother came, then, more slowly. Mumsie opened Mary’s door, came in. Mary shut her eyes tight and pretended to be asleep when Mumsie laid her hand on Mary’s forehead. Mumsie went softly out and then the house became still. Very still. Too still! There were little snapping, creaking noises that sounded ever so loud. And once, when someone’s feet went squeaking by in the snow, Mary’s heart almost stopped beating. Now—*now*, he was coming! But the creak-creak, creak-creak died away and no one came. A sleigh went by, the driver shouting at his horses. The town clock struck eleven. It seemed as if it would never stop. Mary sat up once and looked over the end of her bed toward the window. She dropped quickly back to the warm little hollow beneath the covers. The light still burned across the way!

But at last the fears were only troubled dreams. When Mary woke to bright sunlight on the snow and in her room, she had almost forgotten what it was that had so frightened her. But before her feet touched the floor she remembered. To-day—to-day, surely he would come! He would not wait any longer—and what would he do to her? She couldn't pay for it—not possibly! And Father couldn't, either. Father had hard work making ends meet as it was. Why, probably that pitcher cost more than Father earned in months!

When she came down-stairs, she was almost ashamed to meet her mother's eyes. Then, at breakfast, she was even more ashamed.

"Oh, he'll never catch me!" Harlo was boasting. "He may be bigger 'n I am, but he can't run as fast!" They were talking about Clare Horner, a big boy who liked to tease the smaller ones.

"What—*run away!*!" said Father, in a surprised tone. "I didn't suppose you boys ever ran away from anyone!"

Harlo looked rather foolish and bent his red face low over his plate. He mumbled something about Clare's being a big bully and then busily ate his breakfast without talking any more. But Harlo wasn't half as ashamed as Mary! She would have liked to hide somewhere where none of them could ever, ever see her again! For she had run away—run away—*run away!* She had got into a peck of trouble and then run away like any fraidy-cat might do! She could eat only a few mouthfuls of breakfast.

All morning long—and, oh, but it was a terribly long morning for Mary Humphreys—Mary went about her tasks, still and ashamed and scared. When her mother asked her if she didn't feel better this morning, she said, almost crossly—"Oh, I feel all right!"

But she didn't feel all right. First she was hot, then she was cold and once, right by the kitchen stove, she shivered all over. But the hours crept by and dinner was over—more long hours and it was supper-time. Mumsie urged Mary to go down to the creek with the boys in the afternoon but Mary didn't want to. When Matt came home from skating, he came into the sitting-room and found her sitting there alone with a book, the tears running down her cheeks. He stood before her, his hands in pockets, his blue eyes wide with curiosity and surprise.

"S'matter, Red?" he asked.

The tears came rushing.

"Oh, Matt—I've done something awful! I don't know what to do!"

"What do you mean—something awful?"

“Matt, I went up to Michael’s and—and he showed me his Uncle Quill’s new pitcher and—and I *broke one—the best one of all!*”

“Whew!” Matt whistled softly. “How’d you do it? What did the ogre say?”

The tears spilled over again.

“I don’t know!” she confessed. “I—I was alone in the kitchen with Michael and—and I *ran away!*”

“Whew!” was all Matt said again.

“I don’t know what to do—I don’t know what to do!” Mary said.

“No sense crying about it!” Matt said cheerfully. “ ’Twon’t make it whole again. Maybe you can save up your money and pay for it!”

“Oh, I couldn’t—it costs more than I’d get for years! And, even if I could, he wouldn’t be able to buy another like it, for Michael said it was the only one in the country! Maybe the only one in the world!”

“Whew!” Matt said for the third time. “Well, I should say you *are* in a pickle! You’d better tell Mother!”

“I don’t dare!” whispered Mary.

“Well, maybe she could think of something to do—I don’t know what!”

“And Michael,” she went on miserably, “he’ll think I—I’m such a coward! I—I never said a word. I heard Mr. St. John coming and I was so frightened I didn’t know what to do—I just ran! And left Michael there to face him all alone! I don’t know what he’ll think—when he just gave me his beautiful book, too!”

“Geewhilkens! Well, anyway, I think you ought to go tell Michael’s uncle!”

Mary’s small face got quite white.

“Oh, I can’t!” she said in a scared whisper. “*I can’t!*”

Her mother came in suddenly and Mary bent quickly over her book so that her tear-stained face would not show.

“Reading—in the dark again?” her mother asked. “Mary, you’ll spoil your eyes reading from morning till night as you do! Get a match, dear!”

Mary went to get a match but all she could think of as she went was—“I think you ought to tell Michael’s uncle!” Ought to tell him—ought to tell him! But he knew—he knew already! What sense was there in telling him

something he knew? But he didn't know how sorry, how terribly sorry she was! And Michael didn't know how sorry she was that she had run off and left him! Maybe he would never be friends with her again, and he was quite the nicest boy she had ever known! Maybe he'd been waiting and waiting for her to tell! Only—even if she told them—that wouldn't make the pitcher whole again. Nothing would ever, ever make the pitcher whole again. And there wasn't another, not another in the whole United States like it! What could she do—what could she do?

Then, at supper-time, all in a sudden minute, the answer came to her. She was sitting there, very still and unhappy, when she chanced to look up and past Matt's blue eyes to something bluer yet—the blue design on her lustre-ware teapot on the old bureau! There it sat, so shining and lovely, its blue and gold pattern twinkling even brighter in the lamplight, the loveliest thing in the room, the loveliest thing in the house, and, as Mary sometimes thought, the loveliest thing in the world! There it was, sparkling softly at her—the answer—it was the answer!

“Oh—I *can* it!” said Mary's heart. “*I can't—I cant—I can't!*”

But, turn which way she would, there was the copper and blue of the teapot before her eyes—her answer! After supper she said to her mother, with a little frightened quiver in her voice:

“Great-grandma's teapot is mine, isn't it? Not part Marjorie's or anyone's?”

“Yes, it's all yours,” her mother said. “Why, dear?”

“Oh, I just wanted to know! I could do anything I wanted to with it, couldn't I?”

“Why, yes! What do you want to do—would you like to put it up in your room or some other place?”

“No—oh, no!” Mary wished she could creep into Mumsie's arms and tell her the whole story. But she couldn't. It was all part of the strange friendship that was mixed up with the secret of the H.M.C. and all. She had to work out of it by herself. “I—I mean if—if I should ever want to give it away—I could, couldn't I?”

Mumsie looked at her, puzzled.

“Why—it's yours,” she said slowly. “But, of course, Mother never expected you to give it away. It's been in the family such a long time and I thought you needed something beautiful like that that you could see every day!”

“But, if I want to—I can, can’t I?” Mary persisted. Her heart felt like a big, hard stone.

“Why, what is it, Mary? To whom do you want to give it? Can’t you tell Mother about it?”

“Why—why, I—why, if you’d spoiled something belonging to someone else, something very beautiful and you couldn’t make it whole again—wouldn’t you give him your teapot, or whatever nice thing you had, to make up for it?”

Mumsie looked at her questioningly.

“Well, I couldn’t tell, dear, unless I knew all about it. Perhaps I would. If it’s something that’s a secret, you’ll have to decide for yourself. But, of course, I’d awfully hate to have the teapot go to someone not in our family!”

“It is, partly, a secret,” Mary said slowly. “But maybe I could tell that it— it’s Michael’s uncle, the one we call the ogre—he—he had a new pitcher and—and I broke it!” her voice sounded very small to herself. She thought Mumsie would right away ask what she was doing up there in the big house, but Mumsie didn’t. She only looked at her, puzzled and loving at the same time, and said, “You’ll have to do what you think’s right, Mary!” and turned to her work.

Mary went to the drawer in the pantry where they kept the old pieces of tissue and paper and string. She got out the smoothest tissue she could find, and then she went into the dining-room and took down the teapot. It had never seemed so beautiful and precious as she carried it out to the kitchen table and wrapped it about with tissue.

“I can’t—I can’t—I just can’t give it away!” she thought. But her mother passed by then and put a hand on her bright curls, and she went on wrapping it.

Then she put on her things.

“It’s pretty late—don’t you want someone to go with you?” her mother asked. Mary swallowed hard and shook her head.

She went out the back way, so the rest wouldn’t ask questions. She did not hurry; she took every step carefully, afraid ice might be beneath the snow. If she ever fell, with the teapot in her arms! But she did not fall. She went inside the hedge—there were dark shadows on the snow and the wind made a low moaning in the bare branches. But Mary kept her eyes on the lighted window and went steadily up the drive and to the back door.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

QUILLER ST. JOHN

Mr. St. John himself came to the door. Mary had hoped it would be Hepsey or Michael—anyone but Quiller St. John! But there he was, looking so huge, towering above her in the doorway.

“Oh!” he exclaimed. “It’s Mary from across the way! What is it, child—won’t you come in?”

Mary could hardly find voice to answer him at first. But she came in and held the teapot toward him.

“What’s this—what’s all this?” he asked in his deep voice.

“It—it’s my teapot,” Mary said breathlessly. “I brought it because—because of the—the pitcher! It’s really very old and it’s been in our family for years and years and years, but Mumsie gave it to me for my birthday so it’s really mine to give away! Maybe it isn’t worth so much—I don’t know—but I think it’s very beautiful, and maybe you won’t care quite so much about the pitcher if you have it! I’m sorry—truly, I’m terribly sorry about the pitcher, Mr. St. John! I—I don’t know how it happened!”

“Bless my soul! Bless my soul! Come over by the fire, Curlylocks! Your teeth are chattering—did you think I’d bite you? Sit down—no, not in that stiff old chair—here, in Hepsey’s little sewing chair! That’s right! Now—what about all this?” He was unwrapping the teapot as he spoke. “Ah!” he gave a sharp exclamation. “Where on earth did you get this, child?”

“I told you—it was Mother’s and Grandmother’s and *her* mother’s! And it *was* mine but I’m giving it to you because—because of the pitcher!”

Mr. St. John was looking the teapot over, inside and out and on the bottom. He turned to Mary.

“I’ve looked for this for years!” he said.

“Do you like it?” Mary asked. “Will it make up for the other?”

“Make up? What are you talking about, child? Why, this is worth twice what the pitcher was! Come along with me!” He turned abruptly and eagerly and led the way to the library where Hepsey dozed over her knitting. There was a little alcove off the library and Quiller St. John went straight to it. On a little table in one corner stood a brass tray.

“See!” he exclaimed triumphantly. “Here’s the rest of the set!” And there they were—the sugar-bowl and creamer and the cups and saucers, resting on the tray, waiting—just waiting for that teapot! Mary gave a little gasp. “I’ve hunted everywhere for that teapot!” Mr. St. John said. “And now you bring it right to my very door! It’s the most beautiful design I’ve ever seen and I couldn’t give it up! Why, I was just saying the other day that I’d give my eye teeth if I could find that teapot!”

“You won’t have to!” Mary said, with a little ghost of a smile twitching at her lips. “It’s yours anyway, you know!”

“Mine? *Mine!* Well, well—we’ll have to talk about that! Did your mother, now, know you brought it here?” Mary nodded soberly.

“Yes, she knew. She—she was sorry, of course. She’d had it a long time, you see, and she loves it, like I do. And, of course, when she gave it to me she didn’t dream but what it would always be there, just the same! But she said for me to do what I thought was right!”

“And you thought it was right to bring it to me—because of the—accident?”

Mary nodded, her eyes longingly upon the teapot. Mr. St. John turned and led the way back to the kitchen, pulled Mary’s chair near the fire and sat down beside her.

“Do you know, Mary,” he said, with a twinkle in his eyes, “do you know, I believe you’re an uncommonly honest, nice, young lady! How did you think, unless you told me, that I’d ever have known you broke my pitcher?”

“Ever have known? Why, I was there—I was the only one there with Michael and if—if Michael didn’t, I must have!”

“Yes, Mary—but, you see, Michael never said a word about your having been here—Michael never, in fact, said one word to make me think *he* wasn’t the one to break it!”

“Oh!” Mary gasped. “But he didn’t—he wasn’t even touching it! I had it right in my two hands and all of a sudden it—it just dropped—and then—and then I heard you coming and I—I was so scared, I *ran!*” Mary’s voice sank to a shamed whisper. Mr. St. John smiled at her—a very comforting, friendly sort of a smile.

“But you ran back, didn’t you?” Mary gave a quick, little laugh.

“No, I didn’t—I *walked*. I didn’t want to break the teapot, too!”

“Well, you came, anyway. That’s the main thing. And now Michael’s gone to bed—he wasn’t to have any reading for a week, as punishment. I’ll have to make it up to him to-morrow! But, do you know, I saw the door was open last night, and it made me wonder. It did, for a fact, it made me wonder! And now I wonder all the more. It’s plain to see, Mary, that you weren’t brought up in Stony Jericho!”

“Why, what do you mean?” Mary looked up at him, startled.

“Why, Stony Jericho is stingy and selfish and ugly—folks don’t do things like that here!” He said it as a creed.

“Oh, yes—they *are* kind here, Mr. St. John! Truly, they are! Why, once, when I lost some money on my way to the store, old Miss Wilday came out and helped me hunt for a long time, and, when I couldn’t find it, she said she’d give me what I’d lost! And folks call her a stingy old maid! And one day a girl at school invited me to a party, when I hardly knew her! And Miss Baine, she saw I had a cold one day and she didn’t make me stay after school to do the words I missed!”

“Whoa—whoa, there! You told me once that you weren’t one of these folks who are always finding silver linings! And here you go finding them just as fast as you can! Now I tell you, I’ve lived here for a good many years, and nobody’s ever done me a kindness yet—not till to-night! And I haven’t any hopes anyone ever will again! That’s why——”

“Is that why you never, never go any place or let Michael go?” He looked at her quizzically.

“Has Michael been complaining?” he asked a little sharply.

“No—oh, no! Not exactly complaining, but you can’t help seeing he’s lonesome! You see, he hasn’t any Matt or Harlo or Marjorie to play with, and of course it can’t be much fun to live all by yourself and never, never have any friends!”

“Does Michael say he doesn’t have any fun?” he queried sternly.

“Oh, *no*! Why, Michael’s too polite to say such a thing even—even if it were true! But I just meant that I wouldn’t like to be alone always—so it seemed as if Michael couldn’t like it, either! But he never said so—he said what a nice Christmas you gave him and how good you were to him and how interesting you made his lessons—and——”

“He did, eh?” Quiller St. John’s voice was curiously softer now.

“Yes. Only I wish you’d let him come down to our house some time, will you? We have such fun because there’s so many of us, and Matt wants awfully to get better acquainted with him. Could he—just once?” she begged eagerly.

“Well—we’ll see—we’ll see! Maybe, one of these days!”

“Oh, good! We’ll play games and maybe Mumsie will read aloud to us! *Oh—oh—what’s that?*”

With a swoop of blackness, something rushed down through the air to Mary’s shoulder.

“There—don’t be scared! Don’t be scared—it’s just Michael’s crow! Don’t know how it got out—Michael keeps it up in the tower!”

“Oh, has he a crow—and dancing mice and all kinds of animals? Some of the boys said so, but I’d never seen any, and I thought it couldn’t be so!”

“Well,” Mr. St. John smiled twinklingly, “I wouldn’t say *all* kinds, Mary! He hasn’t an elephant—nor even a Bengal tiger! But he has a few pets. The mice are down cellar but the rest are up in the tower. He has two rooms there and one is for his pets. He has a parrot and a squirrel or two—well, you’ll have to come up and see them some day! It’s quite a menagerie! Sooty, what are you doing down here? Is your door open again?”

The crow flew up to the top of the clock and Mary, looking after him, saw the hour.

“Oh, it’s ever so late!” she exclaimed. “I must hurry! Please let Michael come to see us—and tell—tell him I’m sorry I—ran away!”

“Yes, I will! Let me walk to the hedge with you—it’s pretty late.”

At the street he said “Good-night!” to her, then called her back.

“Oh, I meant to tell you—I wouldn’t dream of keeping your teapot, child! But, if you’ll let me, I’d like to keep it for a few days, just to look at. May I? I can remember, then, how my set looks, completed, even if I don’t have it! It’s rare—and beautiful, and you wouldn’t want to let it out of your family!”

“But—but I can’t pay you!” Mary stammered. “It—it’s the only thing I have!”

“My dear—you’ve given me something better than any pitcher or teapot to-night,” he said. “I’d forgotten, I’d been shut away from folks so long, that friends were such pleasant things! I’m more than paid, Mary—more than paid!”

“Now, what did he mean by that?” Mary asked herself as she ran up the steps and into the house.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MICHAEL COMES ACROSS THE STREET

It was recess time in the Stony Jericho school. Mary loved recess time. She knew the boys and girls better now and she didn't feel so lonesome when they all began to chatter and laugh together after the bell rang. To-day it was so bitterly cold that no one, except a few of the bigger boys, went outside. The windows were thick-covered with fern and castle pictures so that Mary could not even see the tops of the trees in the old apple orchard next the school yard. The huge stove at the back of the room was red-hot but, even then, those who sat in the seats next the windows were cold. They all crowded about the stove at recess time, laughing and pushing each other to get the best place.

"Mary'll never get cold—unless she has her hair cut!" said one of the boys. Mary laughed with the rest and didn't mind.

Then they all began to talk about the skating carnival.

"Harve, don't you dare win the Ballinger Race again!" Clare threatened with a grin. "Give somebody else a chance, why don't you?"

Harve Prentiss smiled in a superior fashion. "Everybody gets the same chance!" he said loftily.

Harve was a tall boy, the tallest boy in school, and his eyes were a very light blue, and his chin not much of a chin. None of the boys liked him—but oh, how he could skate! Harlo stuck his fat face between two tall boys, one cheek full of apple.

"Maybe I'll beat you, Harve!" he said, in a funny little voice.

There was a shout of laughter.

"Say, Harlo, if you were to go skating with a snail, the snail 'd beat you by a mile!"

"You'd have to stop for lunch half-way there!" said another.

"If you'd lie down and roll, you might beat!" said Harve.

Harlo went busily on with his apple and grinned back at them good-naturedly. Harlo always seemed to like jokes on himself better than on anybody else. So everybody liked him, even if he was fat and slow and always hungry.

“If this weather keeps up, the creek’ll be frozen up clear to the bottom!” someone said.

“All the better—say, I can do a figure eight now!”

“Aw—I’ll bet you can’t! Come down after school and show me!”

“I can do it, too!” Mary said shyly.

“Can you—honest? Say, there isn’t a girl here can do it! Maybe you’ll get a prize at the carnival!”

Mary’s eyes shone.

“Oh, no—I’ve just learned how to skate this winter!”

“Well, maybe you will just the same! The other day, you know, you skated up to the Cove in five minutes—that’s pretty speedy! None of us can beat that!”

“I can do it in four and a quarter!” put in Harve.

“Oh, *you!* Well, you’ve been skating ever since you were born!”

“Whew, hear that wind! Hope the carnival doesn’t come on a day as windy as this!”

“Oh, well, when you’re skating you don’t feel the cold! And there’ll be a big bonfire at the starting place!”

“Will there be anything to eat?” piped up Harlo.

The bell rang then and they all rushed for their seats. Mary felt very happy. What if she *did* have a chance to win one of the races! She almost forgot to study her history, thinking about it. She’d go down and practice every day—maybe—maybe she’d even dare go in the Ballinger Race! She could hardly wait for school to be over so that she could go down and practice.

But, after school, there was a regular blizzard blowing and the wind almost took you off your feet. You could hardly see the walk ahead. Matt and Mary ran along by the fence that surrounded the apple orchard next the school, gasping for breath.

“Whew!” said Matt. “This is a humdinger! Let’s stop in the post-office a few minutes!”

They ran up Main Street to the post-office and hurried inside. It was warm there and they were glad to be out of the wind. They stamped their feet and shook the snow from their caps. Then Matt said:

“Look—there’s Michael!” Sure enough, there was Michael standing by the window getting his mail.

“H’lo, Michael!” Matt called. Some of the other boys turned and stared at Matt as if he must be crazy. For Matt had kept his secret well and no one knew that Matt and Mary knew the boy of the big house. Michael looked so pleased to see them there and came over at once to talk to them. He took off his cap as he talked to Mary and it made her feel rather shy and important.

“Goodness—I didn’t know it was going to snow so hard!” he said. “It was only blowing when I started!”

They went out together and battled their way up the street toward home. In the shelter of the hedge they paused and drew a deep breath.

“Why don’t you come down to-night?” Mary asked. “Your Uncle Quill said maybe you could some time! See if you can, will you?”

“Oh, I’d like it!” Michael said. “But I don’t know—if Uncle Quill will let me, I’ll be there by seven!”

Matt and Mary ran across the road toward home.

“If he comes, maybe Mother’ll let us have popcorn!” Matt said excitedly. They went around to the kitchen door and went stamping up the steps. Harlo was already there and had his things off. Mother had made molasses cookies and Harlo had stuffed one, whole, into his mouth.

“Oh, boy—’l-’lasses cookies!” he shouted at them.

“Can I have one, Mumsie?” Matt and Mary asked together. Mumsie’s molasses cookies—crisp and sugar-sprinkled and still warm!

“Yes—one! But *only* one! You mustn’t spoil your supper!”

“Just one more!” Harlo begged, but Mumsie shook her head.

“Please, Mumsie—please, please, *please*! It was only a teeny-teeny one I had!” But Mumsie still shook her head.

“Mother, I’m hungry—honest, I’m hungry! Do you think a boy ought to go hungry?”

“I don’t think a boy’ll get very hungry between now and supper-time!” his mother smiled at him. “Not a boy who had seven sandwiches in his lunch!”

“Say—those sandwiches didn’t *half* fill my tummy! You know, when a boy’s growing fast, he ought to have all he wants to eat! Would you want me

to get thin and sick? Would you, Mumsie? Listen, Mumsie—gimme just a little one—just one of those little strips that you made with the left-over dough! Just one!”

Mumsie smiled but she said “No!” so decidedly that Harlo ceased to tease and went in the other room.

“Listen, Mother,” Matt began.

“Now, don’t you begin teasing, too! You’ll all have to wait till supper!”

“ ’Tisn’t cookies—it’s Michael, the boy across the road! Maybe his uncle will let him come down to-night! Could we—do you think we could have popcorn?”

“Michael? I’ve never seen Michael, have I? The boy that gave Mary the lovely book? I’d like to have him come! We’ll see about the popcorn! You’d better get some studying done before supper if you’re going to have company!”

Matt gave a little crow of delight. When Mother said “We’ll see!” it almost always meant “Yes!”

All through supper they kept wondering if Michael would come. Maybe it would be too stormy! Maybe his uncle wouldn’t let him!

“I’m going to stay up as long as any of you!” said Harlo. “Even if I don’t belong to your old club! Say, if you’ll let me be in it, I’ll give you my dessert for a month!” That, for Harlo, was a frightfully big price to pay, but they only laughed at him.

“This is an important club,” said Matt. “It’s not anything to do with eating!”

“Oh, I know it! It’s about some mystery—but I’m going to get Mary’s book some day and read all about it, anyway!”

Mary jumped up in fright.

“Harlo Humphreys, have you touched my book?”

He just laughed. “Don’t you wish you knew?” he said.

“I’ll hide it some place where you’ll never find it!” she said.

When it was near seven, Mary wanted to know if she could put on her new blue dress, “in case he comes”!

“Why, you’d think this was a regular party!” said her mother. “Yes, you may put it on if you’ll promise to be very careful.”

“Oh, I promise!” cried Mary and ran off up-stairs to put on her dress. She put on the ribbon that matched, too, and smoothed her shining curls. She smiled happily at herself in the glass. She could hear the snow still thudding against the window and her heart sank a little. Maybe he wouldn’t come in such a storm! But just then she heard someone come stamping up on the porch and her cheeks grew pink with excitement. She flew down-stairs, feeling very happy because of the new dress and Michael’s coming and all. Mumsie had already gone to the door and Michael was standing there, smiling bashfully at her.

“So this is Michael!” Mumsie said. “We’re very glad you could come down for a while. Matt, you take his coat out by the kitchen fire so it will get dried out! Isn’t it a terrible storm?”

Michael sat down and they all began talking, all except Harlo. Harlo just sat and stared at him as if he were from some cannibal isle. Mary had never seen Harlo so quiet and it made her want to laugh.

Then Matt said:

“Want to play anagrams?”

“I don’t believe I know how!” Michael said.

“Oh, it’s just letters that you make into words and you see who can get the most words. You draw a letter every time and you can take somebody else’s word to make a new one with your letter, if you want to. You’ll see!”

So he got the game board and the box of letters. Then Father came clown from the study.

“Here, now!” he said. “Are you going to play letters without your Dad?”

So Father joined them, too. Harlo was careful to get on the opposite side of the board from Michael.

“Aren’t you coming, too, Mother?” Matt called.

“I’m busy out here for a few minutes,” Mumsie answered. “You go ahead—I’ll be there soon!” Matt winked at Mary. That meant that Mumsie was making the corn.

Michael didn’t need much help in learning to play. Once he made the word “igloo.”

“Aw—that’s no word!” cried Harlo and he jumped up for the dictionary.

“The snow house of the Esquimaux,” he read. He looked at Michael with a new and great respect. “How’d you know that?” he asked.

“Oh, I have a book about Esquimaux,” Michael said. “You can take it if you want to!”

“Gollywhilikens!” said Harlo.

They played the game with plenty of talking and laughter and when Mary saw that Michael was getting ahead of Father, she almost upset the game board in her excitement. Michael was pleased, too, and almost forgot to be polite, so anxious was he for his turn to come. It was always hard to get ahead of Father, for he could think of such long words, and when someone else beat for a change, they all rejoiced. Pretty soon it was a tie between Michael and Father—nine words apiece. Matt came next and then Mary and then Harlo with only two small words. They were all urging Michael to find a word he could steal.

“Oh, just one more and you’ll beat!” Matt egged him on. “Just one—I don’t care if it’s mine you take—only don’t let Dad beat! He always comes out ahead—come on—just one!”

Michael studied the words with care, but could see nothing.

“If you don’t Father’ll get one next time, sure as anything, and then he’ll beat! What’s your letter? ‘A’? Oh, surely you can find something!”

Father laughed. “No fair—no fair!” he said. “Four against one!”

“We’re not telling anything,” said Harlo.

“No—but you’re terribly afraid he’s going to give up!”

Suddenly Michael’s blue eyes brightened. He reached across the board for one of Father’s words—“mall,” it was.

“What is it—what is it?” begged Harlo. “L-l-a-m-a—oh, I know what that is! It’s a kind of animal from South America—it looks like a camel! Atta-boy, Michael!”

Just then in came Mumsie with a big pan of corn, heaped high. Harlo gave a whoop.

“Why, Harlo—Michael will think you’re a wild Indian!” Mumsie reproved him. But Harlo had rushed out after dishes.

“Thought I smelled something—thought I did!” he said. They all scooped out a big dish and then Mumsie brought in a plate of butternut candy and Harlo was so full of joy that he almost upset the pan of corn getting to it. Michael had quite lost his air of shyness and was having as good a time as any of them.

“I wonder if Michael would like to hear some in our book,” Father said. “We could tell him the first of it—would you like it, Michael?”

“Oh, yes, sir! I’d like it a lot—I’d hoped you would read!”

“It’s the story of a dog brought up among wolves,” Father began and told him the first chapters. Then, while they all nibbled at popcorn and candy, curled up warmly by the stove, Mumsie read them three chapters in the book. They all begged for more but Mumsie said “More next time!” and put the book away.

Then they talked about the carnival. Michael asked all about it.

“Wish I could go in it!” he said. “I’d rather skate than anything. But Uncle Quill only lets me skate on the pond up back of the house!”

“Maybe, if you’d tease——” Matt suggested.

Michael shook his head.

“You can’t tease Uncle Quill for things!” he said. “If he says ‘No!’ he means ‘No!’”

Harlo nodded. “Uh-huh, that’s the way with Mumsie. But sometimes she says ‘We’ll see!’ and then we know maybe we can do it! Pass the candy, Matt—why do you always keep it by you?”

“I got the butternuts for it last fall!” Matt said. He held the plate close to Harlo’s eager, fat fingers and then jerked it away.

“Say, ’tisin’t your candy! Please—please—*please*, gimme a piece!” Matt let him have it this time.

Michael got up to go.

“You’ll have to come again to see how the book comes out!” Harlo said to him as he went out after his coat.

“I will if I can,” said Michael.

“I hope you’ll come again soon!” Mother said to him.

“Thank you!” Michael said politely. But he didn’t look so lonely as usual. “I’ve never had such a good time!” he said.

They all called things after him as he went.

“Here—take a piece of candy to eat on your way—oh, a bigger one ’n that!” that was Matt.

“Ask your Uncle Quill about the carnival—it’s for anybody under seventeen!” that was Mary.

“Come again, Michael—I won’t let you beat me next time!” that was Father.

“Good-night, Michael!” that was Mumsie.

Then he was gone, through the storm, up toward the big house.

“Isn’t he nice?” demanded Mary.

“A very nice lad,” said Father. “Very polite and gentlemanly! And he shows he’s studied a little!”

Harlo made a wry face.

“Say, who couldn’t be polite with all that boy’s got?”

“He hasn’t got much!” Mary said. “He hasn’t any family or any fun like we have! He has lots of books and some pets—but he hasn’t anyone to read with him or to play with the pets with him!”

“Mary’s right,” said Mumsie. “He hasn’t much. He’s a poor boy—in spite of the big house and all. I feel sorry for him! But I like him very much, better than any boy I’ve seen here—I hope he’ll come often!”

Mary smiled happily to herself as she helped carry out the dishes and straighten the chairs. It had all been just as she’d hoped—just fun and yet like a party. And Mumsie had liked Michael and now maybe he could come again some day! If only he could go in the carnival—maybe she would ask the ogre herself! He wasn’t really cross—why, think, he hadn’t even kept her precious teapot! Maybe he’d let him—maybe he would!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE CARNIVAL

It was the day of the carnival. A perfect day for a carnival—not blustery, like the day they had talked about it, but sunny, with just enough snap in the air. The creek was a shining ribbon of glass and everyone was happy. School had been let out for the afternoon, for one thing, and that was always enough to cause happiness. There was a huge bonfire beside the creek and a big pile of wood to keep it going till after the races. A lot of the fathers had come down to see the races and it seemed like Christmas or some big holiday. Some of the boys were singing:

“Jingle—jingle—jingle, on the frosty air!
Jingle—jingle—jingle, sleighbells everywhere!
Jingle—jingle—jingle, hear the merry cry,
Jingle—jingle—jingle, see the sleighs dash by!”

It was one of the favorites in school and they shouted it out loudly, more loudly than they had ever been allowed to in school!

Mumsie had washed Mary’s white sweater and tam so that they looked cleaner than the snow on the creek banks. And Father had come for the afternoon. And she’d done the distance of the Ballinger Race in less time than even Harve Prentiss, only no one knew it but she and Matt! Maybe—*maybe she had a chance!* Harlo skated about, pretending to do fancy stunts and succeeding in getting himself all tangled up with his skates. Each pocket bulged with a huge Northern Spy apple.

“You going in the Ballinger?” someone asked him.

“Sure! Didn’t you hear me tell Harve I’d beat him?”

And he skated off with as ridiculously long strides as he could manage. The whole crowd laughed. Harlo could really do pretty well now, if he kept straight ahead, but he would never be a fancy skater! It was almost time to begin now. Mary wondered if it was foolish for her to go in the Ballinger Race. Only one other girl was going to enter it and she was a girl who lived down the creek and skated back and forth to school when she could. The skaters began to gather round the starting point.

Suddenly Mary looked up to see someone coming down over the bank. *Michael!* Matt saw him at the same time and ran to meet him.

“Oh, can you go in? Did your Uncle Quill let you?” Matt asked eagerly. Michael shook his head a little sullenly.

“He didn’t let me. I—I just wanted to so much—I—I *came!*”

“Good for you! He hasn’t any business keeping you shut up there so close! Come on—they’re most ready to start! Fancy skating comes first—do you want to go in that?”

“That’s what I like best!” Michael said.

They went down to Mary and Matt whispered the news to her. Then he went up and told young Mr. Ballinger, who had charge of the races, that Michael wanted to go in the fancy and the Ballinger Race. He could see that there was lots of excitement among the rest of the boys and girls because Michael had come. He felt important because he was Michael’s friend.

Then a bell rang and it began.

Some of them did some fine fancy skating, but Michael was so far ahead of them all, even of Harve Prentiss, that there was no question about who was to win that event. Michael could make figures and flowers and names and other pictures. He could skate backward and on one foot. Everyone was excited watching him, and no one begrudged him the prize, even if he wasn’t one of the schoolboys. He looked as if he were having an awfully good time while he was skating but when they handed him the prize, a fine hockey stick, he grew red and embarrassed.

“I—I’m an outsider—it doesn’t rightly belong to me!” he said. “Give it to someone else!”

But they insisted that he keep it. He handed it to Matt afterward. “You keep it!” he whispered. “I don’t dare take it home to Uncle Quill!”

Then came the girls’ race and the race for the small boys and the handicap race. And then the big race of all—the Ballinger!

There were fourteen lined up for it—among them Harve Prentiss, Phœbe Oliver, Ted Sloane, Mary, Michael and Harlo. When Harlo’s short, fat figure appeared on the end of the line, a roar of laughter went up. Harlo’s father came out on the ice and expostulated with him.

“Why, son, you’ll just get yourself laughed at!”

Harlo grinned but his round face was very determined.

“Said I was going in and I am! Don’t care if they do laugh—might ’s well laugh at me as anything! Here—hold these apples till I get back, will you? No

use to carry them with me!” He eyed the apples wistfully, however, as his father stuffed them into his pocket. The crowd edged closer to the edge of the creek.

Then the bang of the pistol—*they were off!*

The bright stretch of the ice-covered river sped away behind them. Mary couldn't think, at first, that she was in a race. It was so pleasant there in the sun and the ice was so smooth and free from snow! She just skated on as she would have skated any time.

Then, suddenly, Harve Prentiss began to creep ahead of her on one side and Michael on the other! *Then* she knew she was racing! It was like a game of anagrams, when Matt was one word ahead! She went a little faster, found herself side by side with Harve Prentiss. Side by side, and then a little, just the tiniest bit ahead! Harve looked sideways at her as she passed and his face was not very pleasant. She sped on—was two lengths ahead of him! Oh, but this was fun! Where was Michael, she wondered? She looked around—he was far over on the free side of the creek and he was not far behind!

On—on—faster than she had ever skated before! The race was to the Big Willow Bend and back again. Past the Jarvis farm, past the stump fence that came down to the creek's edge, past the old, disused schoolhouse. Mary could see no one ahead—she felt as if she were going on wings, and as if no one in the wide world could possibly get ahead of her. Harve Prentiss—why, she was going to beat Harve Prentiss, who'd skated always, “ever since he was a baby”!

And then suddenly, ahead of her, on the left, she saw the black stretch of ice that was known as “Dead Man's Hole,” a queer place that never froze over, except for a deceptive, thin layer. And she remembered Michael—Michael, skating on the left side of the pond! Michael—who didn't know the course! For just an instant she felt rebellious and hateful—why, she'd lose her race—*she'd lose her race!* But it was only for an instant. She remembered Michael, her friend Michael, who'd given her his book—her friend, Michael, who had taken the blame for the breaking of the pitcher! She paused sharply, so sharply that the air seemed still after steadily facing the wind. It seemed to her that the day was just ordinary again—the wings were gone from her feet. Harve Prentiss sped forward, giving her an amazed look out of his little, pale blue eyes. Even Harlo went by, doggedly plugging away not so far behind Harve. It seemed a hideously long time that she waited but in reality it was but a few seconds till Michael came near enough to shout.

“Michael—Michael! To your right!” she called. “To your right—there’s a bad place ahead—keep to this side!”

Michael swerved abruptly to the right and they skated on side by side. But the wings and the hope were gone. Mary felt tired. She and Michael saw Harve and Ted and Harlo turn at Willow Bend and start the homeward course before they reached them. There was not a chance—not a chance in the world! They had too big a lead now! And Father had come down to watch her and all—she wanted to cry, only, she thought, with a little smile, the tears might freeze!

Back past the old schoolhouse, past the stump fence, past the Jarvis farm! But now Harve was ahead and Harlo, fat little Harlo, was rushing along behind. He made hard work of it but he was clinging close to Harve’s heels just the same. Then, Mary and Michael and Ted Sloane almost side by side! They could see the crowd now—hear them cheering—see the warm blaze of the big bonfire. Almost there—almost there! Mary’s eyes stung with tears.

And then something happened, no one knew what, except that they saw Harve catch his foot on something—a crack or a little hummock of ice—reach out his arms to save himself and go sprawling. He was up almost instantly but they were too near the line, and Harlo, fat, slow Harlo, went puffing across the line first!

Oh, such laughing and shouting and cheering! Harlo dropped down by the fire, so tired he could not go a step farther! But they raised him up on some of the big boys’ shoulders and paraded around the bonfire singing—“What’s the matter with Tubby—*he’s all right!*”

Mary saw that Harlo was trying to say something, but they were all making so much noise that he couldn’t be heard. But finally he made a trumpet of his hands and shouted so loudly that they couldn’t help but listen.

“Dad—Dad! Lemme have my apples!” he yelled.

Mary felt as happy as if she had won the race herself. Her brother—fat Harlo, that they all laughed at! Oh, what a joke—what a joke on the superior Harve! Everyone was pleased—everyone but Harve, that is! Mary could even see how tickled Father felt. His eyes were twinkling and he was smiling proudly at everybody. Then there was a speech by young Mr. Ballinger. He was a nice, young man and he made a funny little speech. When he handed the twenty dollars to Harlo, they all cheered and someone started the school yell. Harlo was embarrassed and kept eating rapidly at his apples all the time the speech and the cheering were going on.

Father walked home between Matt and Harlo and Mary and Michael walked behind. They didn't talk much till they came to the path that led across to Mary's house. Michael stood there, swinging his skates nervously. He had something to say but he didn't quite know how to say it. But he finally got it out.

"You—you were a brick, Mary—to tell me about the bad place!" he said. "Guess you'd have won easy but for that!"

"Oh, probably not!" Mary said.

"Yes, you would! You were way ahead! Maybe—maybe some day I can do something—something for you!"

Mary was a little embarrassed, too, and her head drooped.

"I hope your uncle won't scold!" she said.

"Good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Michael.

Mary felt warm and pleased. She didn't care at all now. Not a bit—about losing the race! It was much nicer to please a friend, a good friend like Michael!

They were talking fast as fast could be when she got into the house. Matt and Father were telling Mumsie about the race and Father interrupted almost as many times as Matt. Harlo just stood in front of the fire and grinned and grinned, but he looked so pleased that you feared he might pop open with pride any minute!

Then Father turned to Mary. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"You'll be proud of our Mary, too, Mother!" he said. "Ted Sloane was telling what you did, Mary! She stopped to tell Michael about 'Dead Man's Hole'—he was skating on that side of the creek! And she was way ahead till then, Ted said. I think that was pretty fine, Mary!"

Mary went pink with pleasure, but she tried to laugh it off.

"Well, I didn't *want* to!" she said. "But, of course, I couldn't let him drown!"

It was when they were eating their supper that someone came knocking with loud angry knocks, at the front door. Mumsie got up and went to answer the knock. Quiller St. John stood there, a fierce frown between his bristling eyebrows.

“How do you do?” Mumsie said. “Won’t you come in?” Mr. St. John stepped inside.

“Madam—my ward, Michael, disobeyed me this afternoon!” He did not stop to beat about the bush. “He has never wilfully disobeyed me before and I believe it was the influence of your family and yourself that made him run in this race! There are reasons—specific reasons—important reasons—why Michael should not mingle with the village boys and girls! He knows he must not and yet he deliberately went to the creek with them this afternoon. I will thank you, Madam, to desist from filling the boy’s head with notions and discontent!”

Mumsie’s chin was lifted very high and she looked rather angry, too.

“Mr. St. John,” she began, “I am sure——!”

But she got no farther. With a rush, Mary left her place at the table and ran to her mother’s side.

“Stop!” she cried. “Don’t you dare to talk to Mumsie like that! She didn’t know Michael was going in the races—Matt and I asked him to! And I’m glad he did—I’m glad he did! You didn’t have any right not to let him! You just keep him in and keep him in and don’t tell him why, or anything! If there’s a reason—a really, truly reason—why don’t you tell it to him? Would you like to be always wondering and wondering and wondering about something and never, never find out about the answer? You seem to think Michael’s a baby! I thought you were kind—because of the teapot—but you’re hateful! You’re just too stingy to let Michael have one good time!” her voice was quivering with passion.

“Mary! Mary!” Father reproved. “You’re forgetting yourself!”

“No, I’m not!” Mary insisted—some of the defiance, though, melting out of her voice before Quiller St. John’s steady gaze. “But Michael—Michael’s my friend and—and it seems cruel not—not to even let him skate with us!”

Quiller St. John’s angry frown was gone now. He suddenly looked only troubled and sad.

“I beg your pardon!” he said with slow formality. “I beg your pardon, all of you, for such a scene! I must have been out of my head! But I forget sometimes how things look to the outside world—in fact, I do not often care! But Mary is right—I do look stingy, perhaps! I beg you to believe that I am not! Michael’s happiness—and safety—mean more to me than they possibly can to you! Please believe I was thinking only of that—and if my anger

seemed personal, remember that a great fear caused it. May I again beg your pardon and bid you good-night!”

There was silence for a minute after he had gone.

Then—“Gollywhilikens!” said Harlo.

“A queer man!” said Father.

“A very sad and pathetic man!” said Mumsie.

“A regular ogre!” said Matt.

“I—I wish I hadn’t—hadn’t been so angry!” Mary said slowly.

“Golly whilikens!” said Harlo again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

INVITED OUT TO “TEA”!

It was two weeks after that, that one day Matt came in, all excitement, after school.

“Where’s Mary?” he demanded.

“In the kitchen,” said Harlo. “Why—what do you want of her?”

“Never mind what, snoopy!” said Matt. “I just want her—something important!”

“Something about that old club of yours, I s’pose!” Harlo said scornfully. But Matt did not answer. He was in the kitchen, talking eagerly to Mumsie and Mary. Harlo slipped out after him. Harlo could not bear to miss anything—anything in the way of food or conversation.

“He was as pleasant as anything!” Matt was saying when Harlo reached the door. “He just said it like anyone would—‘Can’t you and Mary come up for a little skating on our pond and then have tea with Michael and Hepsey?’ Can we, Mother—can we? Please!”

Mumsie gave a puzzled frown.

“Why, I don’t know!” she said slowly. “It’s such a queer place—I don’t just like the idea, somehow! And yet, I feel sorry for the man—and for Michael, too!”

“Oh, *please*, Mumsie!” begged Mary. “Then Matt can see the blue dishes and the cup the kings drank from and the chestnut popper—and everything! *Please*, Mumsie! We’ll come back right after supper! May we?”

“Tea!” corrected Harlo in a high voice from the corner. “Not supper—*tea*! And if you’re going, you’ve got to let me go, too!”

“Not invited!” said Matt briefly.

“I think he just wanted the ones near Michael’s age,” Mumsie consoled Harlo. “Never mind, son—Mother made a fresh roll-jelly cake for supper!”

Harlo grinned triumphantly at them.

“Then we can?” Matt asked anxiously. Mumsie smiled assent.

“You go up and slip on another dress, Mary,” she said.

Mary's fingers fairly flew with the fastenings and in ten minutes, in a clean white middie and pleated blue skirt, she was hurrying beside Matt up toward the big house.

"Guess your scolding did some good, after all!" Matt said, on the way. "It's a queer mess, isn't it? Wonder what happened to that letter, anyway. Do you suppose it *is* from Michael's father?"

"I don't know," said Mary. "We keep finding out things—but such little things—I'd like to get a big clue!"

"So would I!" said Matt. Then they were there.

They went up on the ice right away and had a lot of fun while Michael tried to teach them some fancy strokes. But, almost before they knew the afternoon was going, Hepsey was calling them in. Tea was ready in the library—on the Duncan Phyfe table before the fire. It was really very jolly. Hepsey had made a great quantity of the tiniest round biscuits and Mary ate so many of them she felt ashamed. She was glad Harlo couldn't see her—how he would crow! But Michael ate as many as she did and, every time Hepsey passed them, he would say—

"Take one—I'm going to!"

They laughed a great deal and Hepsey beamed happily as she heard them.

"Now this is something like!" she said once. And then again, later—"Now I call this something like!"

They ate—actually *ate*—from some of the blue plates, and Matt had a good laugh at the old Toby jug which held the milk. Mr. St. John told them of some of his adventures, collecting his beautiful things. There was one lantern with rose-colored glass, that looked very lovely hanging between two windows.

"I was walking down a street of second-hand shops in Philadelphia," he said. "And suddenly I spied this lantern, stuck in with a basket of old truck, mostly junk. It was so black and dusty, you couldn't even tell it was rose-colored! But I thought it had a pretty shape, so I stopped to get it. The man in the shop said someone else had a chance on it till two. I said I'd wait. It was only eleven then and it was a terribly hot day, and the shop was dirty. But I stuck, and every time anyone glanced that way, I'd feel sure they were after that lantern. But at last quarter of two came—then two—then quarter after! 'Yours!' said the little old man. He didn't even wrap it up, so I had to carry it, all black and dusty, to my room at the hotel. But I *had* it! And now it's

washed, and has a light in it, it makes you think of a lantern in some old monastery, doesn't it? And this old desk back here—now *that's* a story!”

“Oh, tell us!” said Mary, eyes ashine.

“Well, I bought that a good many years ago, and then I had to wait a long time for it! I got track of it through a man I knew who used to live down in that section. 'Twas down between some pretty tall hills in Pennsylvania, back from the town on a muddy country road. They didn't have many paved roads then, nor many automobiles, either. I drove in a bumpy, rickety old buggy I'd hired from the little hotel in town. But I was younger then and I didn't mind the bumps so much! And when I was going after beautiful furniture, I didn't think about much else, anyway!

“When I got there, I found an old, run-down farm, and an old lady. Very old and very feeble, she was. She walked with a curious old black cane, I remember. I had taken longer than I expected and it was just about supper-time when I arrived. Folks were always so hospitable, then, I thought she might ask me to supper—but she didn't. And, after a while, I saw why.

“She had a place set for herself in the kitchen and there was only a piece of bread, dry bread, and a cup of very weak tea there! So I asked her about the desk in a hurry. Yes, she had a desk—she took me into the parlor and there it was—just as lovely as you see it now! It was carefully dusted and shining from many rubbings. You could see she loved it. When I asked her if she'd sell it, she acted afraid, and went back into the kitchen, mumbling away and almost crying. I talked to her, as kindly as I could, and when I told her what I'd be willing to pay, she nearly fell over. She just nodded weakly. I think she was so hungry she had to. I made her out a check right away for fear she'd change her mind. I told her I'd come back for it next day and get it ready for shipping. Then I drove back down the muddy road to town.

“Well, the next day—are you tired listening? I'm a tiresome old fogy, I know, when it comes to my things!”

“Oh, no—oh, no!” Mary and Matt exclaimed. “Go on—please go on!”

“Well, the next day, I'd made arrangements to go after the desk with a wagon, when a boy came to the hotel. The boy had an old envelope and my check was pinned inside it! He said old 'Grandma Carpenter'—that's what they all called her—had said to tell him she couldn't do it. It was part of the family!

“Of course I felt terribly disappointed about the desk, but I felt worse about old Grandma Carpenter. There she was—starving herself, to keep the old desk! I didn't know what to do. But I went to see her again. I tried to set

her mind at rest—told her I wouldn't think of taking her old treasure from her, when she cared so much for it! She seemed to feel badly to have disappointed me.

“I'm pretty old—pretty old to get on without my old things about me,” she said. “Close onto ninety now—and I've written a good many letters to my boy on that desk! Mebbe, after I'm dead and gone, you can get it. I'd like for you to have it—you're so set on it!” Then the thought came to me that perhaps I might pay her for it on condition that she leave it to me later! It was hard to suggest it but she didn't seem to mind.

“That's all right—I know I'm close to the other side!” she said. “And I'd be right pleased to do that!” You could see by her shining old face that it was salvation to her—literally food! And so we arranged it. But even though she was ‘close to ninety,’ it was four years before word came that the desk was there waiting for me! I often wondered if the money I gave her for it lasted her all those years! So, you see, I think lots of that desk and I always think, when I sit there, of—of that old lady writing to—to her son!”

There was so much feeling in his voice that they all hesitated to speak. It seemed almost as if he meant something—something very special, something having nothing to do with the old lady, by that last sentence. But at last, the silence became so long and so embarrassing that Mary spoke, with a shy exclamation:

“What a beautiful, beautiful story!” she said.

Quiller St. John gave a little start, as if he were suddenly aware of them again. He was, Mary saw, in his friendly mood again. She thought—“How nice of him to ask me here when I flew into such a temper at him!” He seemed to know what she was thinking about for he smiled at her and rose to walk back and forth before the fire. Hepsey had slipped away to “do up” the dishes, and there were just Mary and the two boys there watching him. Presently he turned to them.

“I got to thinking maybe you were right about Michael,” he said then, abruptly, straight at Mary. “Perhaps it *is* wrong to keep him in so close—without rhyme or reason! You're probably right! Draw up here—draw up, all of you children, before the fire! I want to talk to you a little!”

Mary's heart pounded with sudden eagerness. She dropped down on a little old-fashioned tuffet close by Mr. St. John's feet. She felt as if she wanted to be very near, so as not to miss anything.

“You must know, Michael,” he began slowly, almost pleadingly, “that I wouldn't keep you here, so like in—in a prison, perhaps—without a good

reason?”

Michael was standing, facing Quiller St. John, as if too excited to sit down. He nodded soberly.

“I suppose so, sir!” he said. “But—but I couldn’t help wonder, of course. About the letter—and who I am and all!”

“Of course not—of course not! You were only a little boy when you came here—only a little boy! Why, you couldn’t read yet—just pick out your letters! And you didn’t wonder much then and I guess I’ve sort of taken it for granted that you never would wonder, that you’d never question what it was all about. But little Miss Curlylocks here—she’s sort of made me see myself as—as I must look to you! I——” his voice was a little wistful, like an old man’s, almost. “I haven’t meant to make you unhappy, Michael!”

Michael stepped forward and put a hand on his uncle’s arm protestingly.

“Oh, sir!” Even now, Mary thought, when he was so anxious and in such trouble, he was still polite. “You haven’t made me unhappy—you’ve always been awfully kind—but maybe you don’t know how it would be to just come from nowhere, not to remember your own folks, never to be able to look ahead much! I—I don’t know as I felt it so much till I saw the Humphreys—how they all have so much fun and yet, it’s all out in the open and there are never any secrets to bother them! Oh, I don’t mean to find fault, Uncle Quill, only—only—you see——”

“Yes, I see, Michael—I see!” Quiller St. John said gently. “A family is a beautiful thing, anyway. I’ve tried to be a—a sort of father—but it’s a little hard for an old man, set in his bachelor ways and tied down to a hobby, to be a whole family to a boy!”

“Oh—Uncle Quill!” Michael protested further.

“Never mind—never mind!” Quiller St. John said. “I know just how you’re feeling! But I couldn’t help it. I can’t tell you much—even now—but I hope you’ll understand that I kept you here, almost in hiding, because—because I was afraid of something!”

“Afraid? Afraid of what?” Matt questioned eagerly.

“Of someone who wanted Michael! There’s never a day passes by when I’m not in fear. And all I can say is that it’s someone not—not fit—not worthy to take care of my boy!”

Michael’s face got quite white, so that his hair looked redder than ever.

“You don’t mean my—my *father*?” he questioned, almost in a whisper.

“*Your father!* No, no, Michael! Good heavens, is *that* what you’ve been thinking? Why, your father, boy—*your father*——!” he paused and began to stride up and down before the fire.

“My father?” Michael prompted longingly.

But Quiller St. John did not answer him.

“Maybe I’ve said too much,” he said slowly, after a minute. “Maybe I haven’t said enough—but I’ve always thought I’d wait till you were eighteen!”

Michael gave a sigh. “Yes, sir!” he said with a gulp.

“Anyway, now you know you’re here with me when perhaps you shouldn’t be——”

“How would he know that—you didn’t say it before!” put in Mary.

“Didn’t I? Well, I thought I made it clear! At least, he knows that I’m keeping him away from someone who wants and shouldn’t have him—he knows that that is why I don’t want him seen much, why I worry so when I’m off on trips after china or furniture! And, if he’ll be patient—if—if—*where on earth is that letter?*” he ended fiercely.

“I’ve hunted, too—everywhere,” Michael confessed soberly. “But it—it’s just gone. Was it from—from——?”

“It was news—news, maybe about—about your father. And I’ve got to have it!”

Then his fierceness suddenly disappeared.

“We’re getting pretty serious, for young folks!” he said. “Michael, why don’t you take Matt up to see your pets, and I’ll have a game of chess with Mary!”

Mary smiled in sudden relief.

“I don’t know how!” she said. Really, she wanted to go up to the room in the tower with the boys, but she sat down across from Mr. St. John and he taught her how to move the men.

“I want you young folks to go back and forth,” he said once, abruptly. “That’s why I want you to know each other’s games and all. I think I can trust you Humphreys—you’re discreet!”

Discreet? What was that, Mary wondered.

“I haven’t meant to keep your teapot so long,” he apologized once, when he saw her gaze stray to the little alcove. “Do you know, I’ve decided it would be cruel to separate that teaset again! I wonder if you would like the rest of it, so that they can always keep together?” His eyes twinkled in friendly fashion at her.

“You don’t—mean——!”

“I mean I’d like you to have it, if you’d like it! It isn’t every girl your age who would love copper lustre-ware! I’ll bring it down to you some day soon!”

Matt and Michael came down then and only Mary’s eyes, twin stars of joy and gratitude beneath the bright curls, could thank him. Michael walked to the path with them. He was terribly excited.

“Now I feel as if I were getting somewhere!” he said. “I know a little, anyway. And I can look forward to when I’m eighteen, if nothing else! But I’m going to find that letter—if I have to go over every inch of the house! It couldn’t just disappear!”

“I—I wish we could be more help to you in finding out things!” Mary said.

“Oh—you are! It’s helped, anyway, just to—well, to have somebody to talk to! And, if it hadn’t been for you, he wouldn’t even have told me that much to-night. Now I know that that letter is about my father—that Uncle Quill’s really my friend and that he’s trying to protect me from some kind of danger! Makes me feel more like his—his partner—for he must be giving up things, too, to stay here like this! Well, come again, won’t you?”

“You bet!” said Matt.

“Oh—yes!” said Mary.

“Geewhilkens—it’s better ’n a story!” Matt said, as they went across the road. “Only—how’s it going to end?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HARLO GETS EVEN

When Mary and Matt came in from the St. Johns', Harlo was still up, pretending to study, but he had a bowl full of apples cut in small slices beside him, and his hand went steadily in and out—in and out. He sat up expectantly when they came in but he pretended not to be interested in the visit.

But when they both began to tell Mumsie all about the house and the things in it, he leaned forward, forgetting his pretense.

“Mother—honest, he had a parrot that could say—‘And how are you feeling to-day, sir?’ in that polite way, just like Michael himself. And there’s a crow and two squirrels and a *monkey*—yes, truly to goodness, a monkey! It climbed all over Michael and reached in his pocket for things. But he has to keep all his pets in the tower for they destroyed things other places!”

“Oh, gollywhilikens—the stingy old thing, not to ask me! Say, it seems to me you ought to let me in that club! Didn’t I win the Ballinger Race—don’t you think a boy that could beat Harve Prentiss is big enough for any old club?”

“You ought to have seen the biscuits, Fat!” Matt teased. “They were about as big as half a dollar and there was a mountain of ’em—and we kept on eating and eating and eating! There was honey with ’em!”

“Honey!” Harlo groaned. Of all his favorites, hot biscuits and honey took the lead! Then his face brightened.

“Anyway, we had roll-jelly cake for supper—and there isn’t any left!” he mocked.

“Well—listen—you ought to have heard him tell about an old desk he has there—how he happened to get it and all! It made Red cry!”

“I did not!” Mary interrupted indignantly. “It was sad, but I didn’t cry!”

Harlo seemed not to have heard this last. His round face had grown almost like a bulldog’s in its determination.

“Bet you do let me in your old club, anyway!” he said. “I’ll bet you do! I’ll do something so mean, you’ll have to!”

“Harlo!” reproved his mother.

“Well, I will! What business have they to have a club and not to let me in it? Just because I’m fat is no reason to keep me out of things, is it? Guess I could find out mysteries as well as anybody!”

“Aw—forget it!” Matt laughed. “Here—here’s a couple nuts I’ve been saving in my pocket! Eat ’em, and quit pestering us!”

But for once Harlo would not be appeased by nuts, or anything.

“You’ll see—you’ll see!” he said, and he was almost in tears. “I’ll make you let me in, Matt Humphreys! You and Mary needn’t think you’re so smart, just because you went out to *tea*!”

They just laughed at him. But the next day they did not laugh.

There were two rooms to the Stony Jericho school, the “little room” and the “big room.” In truth, the little room was bigger than the big room, but that was where the smaller pupils sat. Harlo was in the little room, so Matt and Mary hardly ever saw him in school hours. But this day, after school, Miss Smith, the little room’s teacher, came in as Mary was putting on her things, and said:

“Where’s Harlo to-day—is he sick?”

“Why, no,” said Mary in surprise. “Wasn’t he here? He started for school before I did to-day!”

“Well, he wasn’t here,” said Miss Smith. “He hadn’t missed a day yet, so I wondered what was the trouble!”

Mary wondered where on earth Harlo could be. Skipped school! Father would punish him for that! She ran home as fast as she could go, not even stopping at the post-office as she usually did. She burst into the house with a noisy bang of the door.

“Mumsie!” she called. “Is Harlo here?”

“Why, no, dear—he hasn’t come from school yet! Why, you’re all out of breath—what’s the matter?”

“Harlo wasn’t at school all afternoon! Miss Smith asked me if he was sick!”

“What! Why, he took his book with him!”

“I know it—he ran out ahead of us, like he always does when he wants to beat us to school! But I didn’t see him playing outside the school anywhere!”

Mumsie went to the stair door.

“*Father!*” she called. Father did not answer. When he was busy with a sermon, you always had to call him three times.

“Father! Come down!” Mumsie called again. No reply, except the squeak of the old swivel chair.

“*Father!*” This time her call was so commanding that even Father heard, got to his feet with a grunt and came to the stairs.

“I’m coming—I’m coming!” he called. “What is it—the wood-box empty?”

“No—it’s Harlo—he skipped school to-day! Miss Smith asked Mary about him this afternoon!”

“Well, well! We’ll have to see about that! When he comes in, tell him to come up to the study!” Father went back to his sermon.

But an hour slipped by and Harlo did not come. Mumsie kept going to the window.

“The little rascal!” she said once. “Where can he be?”

When it came near supper-time, she was really worried.

“Matt, you run down to Wogglebug’s and see if Harlo’s been there!” she said. Matt came running back, a few minutes later.

“No, he hasn’t been there!” he reported.

Mumsie kept going to the door and looking down the road, but no fat little boy could she see. She called Father again and told him it was getting dark and Harlo was not there yet! Father put on his coat and hat.

“I’ll look around town for him,” he said. “He must be at one of the boys’ houses. Matt, you come along—you can take one street while I take another! The bad egg—he’ll have to be warmed proper when he gets here—can’t have that kind of goings on!”

But, though they searched each street with all thoroughness, they found neither hide nor hair of Harlo! Father was worried now. It had turned cold and a raw wind had arisen, bearing a fine, icy snow. Father and Matt went back to the house, thinking surely Harlo must be there. But Harlo had not come. They wondered if he’d gone skating—but his skates still hung from their strap on the hook behind the kitchen door.

“What shall we do?” said Mary.

“Could he have gone up to the big house?” asked Father.

“I’ll go see!” said Mary. Somehow, she did not want to stay there, just waiting. She hurried across the road and up to Michael’s. Mr. St. John came to the door.

“Is Harlo here—has he been here?” she asked abruptly.

“Why, no! Is he the little fat one?”

Mary nodded.

“He didn’t go to school this afternoon and he hasn’t been home—and Mumsie’s so worried!”

“Well, well—we’ll come help you hunt! Michael—Michael! Little Harlo Humphreys is lost—we’ll go out and take a look for him!”

After another half hour of vain searching they rang the church bell and folks came running. When they found who was missing they hurried home after lanterns and went out in every direction, searching for him.

It was a horrible night, with the wind and the snow, and it seemed that the light from the lanterns made such tiny spots of light in the darkness. The men called and called till they were hoarse but no answer came to them out of the night. Up and down the creek—that was the horrible fear that clutched at all their hearts—the creek, the creek! They built a bonfire on the shore and someone brought a pail of hot coffee for the searchers. But the fire had a hard time blazing in the storm, and it all seemed so hopeless. Mumsie was out with the rest, though Father tried to make her go home. It was Michael who finally persuaded her.

“When Harlo comes, he’ll be cold and hungry,” he said. “You ought to be there to be sure he has something warm to eat and put on!”

“That’s so—that’s so!” said Mumsie, and went back to the house.

All the long night through, the men and the boys searched.

“He was such a cheerful little fellow—always full of his jokes!” said one.

“Never so tickled in my life as when he beat Harve Prentiss! Say, has anyone been up Peters’ Gully?”

“What’s that—over by the ice? Just a log? He always called out to me when he went past the store!”

They all seemed to be so sorry but they did not find him!

Mumsie wouldn’t talk to anyone after a while—just stood by the window, staring out into the storm, turning now and then to see that the things on the

stove were all right and that the warming blankets and clothes were not scorching. Mary tried to comfort her but she couldn't find any words. Her own heart was so full of dread and fear that she knew how Mumsie was feeling.

At dawn, some of the men, tired and almost frozen, went home to rest a little and thaw out. Some kept doggedly at it. But it was so hopeless! No chance, through the storm, of finding any tracks! Nothing to go on. No reason for his going. No place for him to go! But it was not quite so awful with light about. In the night you could hardly tell which way you were going, but, with daylight, you could at least tell that. They went over every road again, every path, went up and down the creek—up and down—calling, calling, calling! The town always remembered that night—"the night little Harlo Humphreys got lost!"

Some spoke of kidnapping but that seemed foolish, really, and no one took any stock in it. He had no money, there would be no real reason. No—he was lost—in the woods, somewhere—or—or he had ventured on thin ice!

Father would not even stop to rest, though occasionally, through the long hours, he came to say a word of encouragement to Mumsie and to swallow a scalding cup of coffee. The women folks of the town kept coming to the door to see if there was any news or to ask if there was anything they could do to help. But they could do nothing—nothing at all! The schoolboys who laughed at Harlo's fatness and slowness and eternal hungriness, hunted all night with the men. When morning came, no one attended to his store or other business. All the town could think of was a little boy somewhere out in the storm, a friendly little boy who didn't mind being laughed at.

It was near noon when one of the boys in Harlo's grade came shouting down Main Street.

"He's coming—he's coming!" he yelled. "Mr. St. John's carrying him! *He's coming!*"

And it was true! The big man from the big house was stalking down the road, bearing a still figure in his arms. The news winged from house to house, came to the little gray parsonage!

Mary ran out, hatless and coatless, to make sure it was true. It *was* true—it *was*! Mumsie, with tears running down her face, put the blankets nearer yet to the stove and set the teakettle nearer the front of the fire.

Mumsie reached and took him out of Mr. St. John's arms. He was very cold and his eyes were closed. The doctor had come tagging after Mr. St. John.

“Get his things off!” he commanded sharply. They worked over him then for an hour—hoping, fearing—hoping, fearing. At the end of the hour, he opened his eyes and Mumsie gave a little cry of joy, going down on her knees beside him and calling him all the little baby names out of the years gone by. Mary knelt beside her mother.

“Oh, Harlo—I didn’t mean to be so mean about the Club! Was that why you went away—was it, Harlo?”

But Harlo was too weak and exhausted to talk. Mr. St. John told them what little there was to tell. He had remembered seeing Harlo going to the woods up past the schoolhouse one day, and he’d thought he would try it there. There was an old sugar maple grove beyond the main patch of woods and there was a little cabin there, disused and broken down. But Harlo was there, huddled in a rotting, old blanket, unconscious. That was all he could tell—he’d picked him up and carried him home.

It was many hours before Harlo could talk. One of his hands was half frozen and one toe, the doctor thought. But he’d be all right! He was lucky—he was lucky, in a storm like last night’s, to have got off that easy!

Mary kept saying to him:

“Harlo—you *can* be in the club—you can, Harlo! I won’t ever call you ‘Fat’ again, Harlo! Harlo, *talk to us!*”

But though, for just an instant, when Mary and Matt were promising him over and over that he could be in the H.M.C., his eyes glowed triumphantly, he could not speak.

It was about four o’clock when he gained strength.

“Mumsie—Mumsie!” he whispered. “Make me a mountain o’ biscuits—an’ *honey with ’em!*” Then, in a soft, ashamed voice—“I—I was trying to get even about the club—but—but I didn’t mean to get even quite so hard!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HARLO KEEPS WATCH

It was two weeks after Harlo's adventure, and Mary sat in the bay window writing to Marjorie. She wrote every week to Marjorie, but sometimes Marjorie seemed very far away. Marjorie wrote about things she, Mary, had never seen. She did things every day like a girl in a book—nothing she said seemed about Mary's ordinary, everyday world. All the things they had used to talk over when they were doing the dishes or getting ready for bed, sounded silly to write about. Marjorie wouldn't care about the boy who put the mouse in Miss Baine's desk, nor about Sarah's coming to school with one blue and one red hair ribbon, nor about Freddy Haverling bringing a pail of his mother's ginger cookies to school, thinking it was his lunch pail! When Marjorie wasn't there every day and couldn't know how afraid Miss Baine was of mice and little harmless things, how proud Sarah always was of her appearance, how funny Freddy's freckled face looked when there was a joke on him—when Marjorie didn't know all these little things, it was hard to tell about them so they'd sound real.

So, to-day, when she'd said—"Dear Marge"—she stopped for a long time and looked out of the window. Nothing—not a thing had happened this week to tell Marjorie about! After a while, she wrote that the snow was all melting and that it seemed like spring. But what did Marjorie care about that? She felt very lonesome for Marjorie suddenly—a great wave of lonesomeness, it was, sweeping over her. Marjorie—so selfish and so saucy and so pretty! Mary even wished she might have her there just so she could give up things to her. But she couldn't write her. It was always that way.

She put the letter aside and brought out the note-book, in which were the chronicles of the H. M. C. When she opened the covers, the thoughts came flooding. She began to write in it, hurriedly. There wasn't much to tell for this week but in here she could put all the little things that wouldn't interest anyone else but which were important as belonging to the mystery.

"Mr. St. John has been very kind this week," she wrote. "I think Harlo ought to be thankful to him but he seems thankful to Harlo instead. He sent Harlo oranges and white grapes and two new books. Harlo went back to school on Tuesday. Everybody thinks he's a hero of some kind but he knows he was just naughty. I am glad he is in the club now for he is so happy about it and he keeps bringing clues that he thinks are important but aren't. If

anything had happened to him—if he'd been frozen or something—Matt and I would have been to blame and we would have had to be sorry all our lives. I guess we'll never tease anybody so much again, for sometimes it hurts when you don't expect it to!

“Mr. St. John came every day while Harlo was in bed to see how he was. Folks say it's the only time he's ever been in anyone's house since he's lived in Stony Jericho. Mother isn't so sorry for him now. She just likes him—because he saved Harlo. She cried when she tried to thank him for it. He acted as if he hadn't done much, but of course he had—it wasn't very easy to carry a fat boy like Harlo so far! He must be terribly strong!

“We don't find out much about the mystery. Only, one day, Michael said his uncle said to him—‘Michael, you want to always remember that your father was a brave, good man!’ Michael thought that sounded as if his father was dead. But, even if he is, it's better to have *something* to remember about him. Mr. St. John hunts and hunts for the letter, and so does Michael but they can't find it. Hepsey got very frightened and told that she took it, but that didn't make it any better. It was gone—just gone—and not a thing to show where. Michael thinks it's making his uncle almost sick. He hunts at night when he thinks Michael's asleep, but Michael hears him prowling around and he worries about it.

“I wish Michael might be in our house—our brother. No, I don't believe a brother, either, but he would have so much fun with us all and he knows about so many things we don't. He said to me the other day—‘I guess you don't call me ‘The Prince’ any more, now you know how ordinary I am!’ I don't know as we do so much out loud, but I guess we always think of him that way just the same, for he's the kind that always seems like a prince anyway. Maybe it's because he's always so polite and talks so much more grown up than other boys.”

Mary paused and then her cheeks went pink. Maybe, she thought, that sounded rather silly when you knew the boys would read it. Matt had said almost the same thing about him once. Only Harlo—Harlo was always saying silly things about “beaus” and such things. It teased Mary but it didn't seem to bother Michael. In fact, he liked it. Mary tore the page carefully out.

She went back to Marjorie's letter now. She said a few things that didn't matter. If Marjorie were there she could tell her things, but she couldn't write them. She wondered why it was so easy to write in the book and so hard to write letters.

Harlo came running in.

“Listen!” he said in an excited whisper that could be heard across the room. “Betcha I *have* got a clue this time! Listen!”

“What is it?”

“You needn’t laugh—this *is* a clue! ’Member how you told about that crow of Michael’s scaring you so that night? Well, I just read in one of the lib’ary books at school about a crow stealing a ring and hiding it, and maybe Michael’s crow stole the letter!”

“Oh—that is a clue—it is—it is!” cried Mary. “Let’s go up there right now and tell them about it. Come on, Fat—Harlo, I mean! Come on, will you?”

But they didn’t get a chance to tell anybody about it for, before they reached the house, they met Michael—a frightened, white-faced Michael.

“I was coming down to your house,” he said. “Uncle Quill’s sick—awfully sick! I don’t know what to do!”

“I’ll run for the doctor!” said Harlo.

“I’ll go after Mother!” said Mary.

Mumsie was in the midst of making cookies but she washed her hands and went at once. She didn’t think of Mr. St. John as the man whom the village thought queer, maybe crazy. She thought of him now as the one who had saved the life of her boy. She would have let more than a batch of cookies be interrupted to do him a kindness.

The doctor was there as quickly as they were. Hepsey, always flustered, was more upset and worried than ever. She kept going up to Mr. St. John’s room and then running down to the kitchen and then mounting the stairs again. The doctor was very grave as he bent over Quiller St. John. He didn’t say anything till he was outside the door.

“What is it?” asked Mumsie. Michael, Harlo and Mary listened, frightened.

“Heart’s given out,” said the doctor briefly. “A very sick man—a very sick man! Clear these youngsters out of the way!”

They went down-stairs and sat, still and terror-stricken, on the bottom step. Mumsie and Hepsey and the doctor were there for hours, it seemed. Father came but there seemed nothing he could do and after a while he went away. The three on the step went out to the kitchen. Michael put wood on the fire and they stood before the blaze, trying to talk, and failing. Once Michael said:

“I—I wish he hadn’t thought I was discontented!”

“Oh, I don’t think he really thought you were complaining!” Mary said comfortingly. Harlo said nothing at all, but his fat, round face was screwed up as if he were about to cry and he kept looking at the fire and not at the others.

“He never scolded me at all about the pitcher that time!” Mary remembered, with a wondering little catch in her voice.

“And even when he thought I took the letter, he was kind—even if he was disappointed!” said Michael.

“Remember about the old woman who owned the desk—how good he was to her? And when I got so cross after you went in the carnival—he didn’t hold it against me—he even gave me that beautiful tea set!”

Harlo did not look around—he did not dare, for the tears were running down his cheeks. But he spoke then and they heard the tears in his voice. Harlo—cheerful Harlo, who hated cry-babies!

“Oh, you make me tired!” he exclaimed. “He didn’t carry you down from Harper’s Hill, did he? When you were half frozen? He didn’t save you, did he, when you thought you were dying and maybe wouldn’t ever see your folks again—or have any fried bread ’n’ jam again—ever? He didn’t, did he? You make me tired!”

They were still then till Matt came, tapping softly on the door. He came in before anyone came to open the door. He had been running.

“Father just told me!” he said breathlessly. “Is he awfully sick? Is there anything I can do?”

“I guess he is awfully sick—the doctor acts as if he is!”

Matt fell silent with the rest of them. Once he said:

“Gollywhilikens—can’t we *do* something?”

“They sent us out!” said Michael.

“Maybe we ought to go home,” Matt said. “Just some more around to bother!”

“Don’t—please don’t!”

Hepsey came down after a glass. She came with the little running steps that Mary had noticed before.

“Is he better?” Michael demanded. “Tell me, Hepsey, is he?” Hepsey shook her gray head.

“He doesn’t know anybody,” she said. “He don’t know me—me, as has worked for him all these years!” Her fretful voice trembled.

Father came again, just as the doctor was going. The doctor seemed relieved to see Father.

“Someone ought to stay and help watch,” he said. “The woman here seems so upset and hysterical—I hate to leave her alone with Mr. St. John. But I have some more calls to make and I can’t return till late. I hate to ask it of you—I don’t suppose he’s been such a wonderful neighbor—but do you think you and Mrs. Humphreys could stay a while?”

“Why, of course!” Father answered.

“The man’s had some terrible worry, I should judge,” said the doctor. “It’s worn him out—broken him! He’s seriously ill!”

Seriously ill! Seriously ill! They heard him quite plainly—the four out in the kitchen, waiting. *Seriously ill—seriously ill!* The clock ticked it, the snap of the fire said it, King’s uneasy walking to and fro told it was the truth! King’s master, Michael’s protector, the friend of them all—*seriously ill!*

“I think it was the letter—he’s worried over it too much!” Michael said.

After a while Hepsy came down, wiping her eyes on her apron.

“Mrs. Humphreys says as I shall get you some supper!” she said.

“I’m not hungry!” said Michael.

“Neither am I!” said the rest in chorus. But when she had things ready, it *did* smell good and they all sat down in the beautiful kitchen and ate. At least, most of them did, and felt better and more hopeful because of it. But Harlo only sat and looked at his food in a sorry fashion, as if he regretted it terribly—but just *couldn’t* eat it.

After supper Mary washed the dishes and Matt and Michael dried them for her. Harlo sat in front of the fire, his chin cupped in his palms, not talking to anybody. Hepsy fixed up some beds for them all—but they sat up till late, too troubled and frightened to go to bed. But at last Father came down.

“What—you children not asleep!” he said. “You aren’t doing Mr. St. John any good by sitting here worrying. Miss Hepsy has fixed places for us all and I guess you’ll have to stay—I wouldn’t want you down home alone!”

Michael and Matt went up to Michael’s room and Mary to a couch in Hepsy’s room. But when Harlo was told to “come along,” he shook his head.

“Not going to sleep!” he said stubbornly.

“Why, of course you are!” Father said in surprise.

Harlo shook his head again.

“I’m going to sit up and watch, too!” he insisted. “Didn’t he carry me home—most frozen—way from Harper’s Hill? Didn’t he? I guess I *will* sit up and see how he is!”

Father smiled at him. “Well,” he said gently, “you can sit up here beside me for a few hours—here in this big chair by the fire. We’ll wait till Mother calls—she’s going to watch till eleven!”

Father thought Harlo would go to sleep but he sat, wide-eyed, till Mumsie called.

“I’m going up with you!” he said, then.

“Come on, then, son!” said Father. Harlo smiled gratefully up at Father for his understanding, and the two climbed the stairs to the room of Quiller St. John.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SEARCH

The next morning Quiller St. John was no better. The doctor said so, gravely.

“If he could only be freed of the worry that seems to be on his mind,” he said. “Have you any idea as to what it is?”

“Yes, we have,” said Michael, “but I don’t know how to help him! He’s lost something!”

“Well—hunt for it!” said the doctor. “Hunt for it—it’s his only chance!”

Harlo had fallen asleep at daybreak up in the rocking-chair in Quiller St. John’s bedroom. But the rest gathered about the library fire and talked things over. Mary had forgotten about Harlo’s idea of yesterday but she remembered it now.

“Harlo thought maybe your crow,” she began eagerly, “maybe it took the letter! He read it in a book about crows stealing things!”

Michael jumped up excitedly. “What a ninny I’ve been not to think of it!” he cried. “That’s it—Sooty’s the one—of course he is! Twice he got out and was all over the house! Who else on earth would have taken a letter from behind Hepsey’s bed? We’ll begin again to hunt. Let’s take each room and go over it inch by inch. We’ve got to find it—we’ve just *got* to!”

They began in the tower, in the room where Michael kept his pets. Harlo came, rubbing his eyes, but when he found out what they were doing, he was suddenly very wide awake. They searched the room from end to end—but there was no letter there!

“Sooty—Sooty—where is it? Can’t you tell us where it is?” Michael pleaded.

But Sooty only flew over by the window and kept his secret, if he had one, to himself.

They went into Michael’s sunny room, looked behind pictures, pulled the bed to pieces, hunted under the carpet—everywhere that it seemed a letter could possibly be. They looked in all Michael’s pockets—everywhere, everywhere! No letter! Harlo sat down on a chair by the bed and wrinkled his forehead into a frown.

“We’ve got to think where crows would hide things!” he said. “Where would they?”

“You can’t tell that way,” said Michael. “They choose such queer places!”

They went over Hepsey’s room again. They hunted in bureau drawers, in the clothes-press, in shoes and clothes and boxes. Hepsey came to her room and found it all topsy-turvy and began to scold. But when she heard what they were doing, she apologized.

“It’s all my fault—every bit my fault!” she said. “If I hadn’t been so nibby, I wouldn’t have touched the old letter, and then maybe Mr. St. John wouldn’t have been sick! Oh, dear—oh, dear!”

But at lunch time they were tired and discouraged. They had put the whole house in disorder and had not found a trace of the letter. The doctor had been there several times. He seemed much concerned and he had long talks with Mumsie.

After lunch, though, they went at the search again with renewed energy. They hunted down-stairs now, in the pantry and the great, cold parlor and the library.

It was in the library that they came upon something that was not the letter but something that seemed to them almost as important. They were fussing about the beautiful old desk with its inlaid surface, opening this drawer and that.

“I don’t feel as if I ought to open all these bundles of letters!” Michael said once.

“Well, if you don’t look at them, except the outside, I don’t think it will be wrong,” said Mary. “And, anyway, even if you saw them all, it wouldn’t be so bad as to let your uncle die if there was a chance to save him!”

It was Mary who, when she pulled out a little, flat piece of wood that made a shelf above a small drawer, discovered the secret. She had pulled the small drawer way out, by accident, and the boys were looking over the things in it, when she had tugged at the little shelf. When it came out, she saw in the vacant space left by the absent drawer, a little door swung open.

“Oh!” she cried. “A secret drawer—look, boys—look!” She was so excited she did not stop to think that that compartment might hold things not meant for her. She thrust her hand in, found only two bits of pasteboard, and drew them out. Then she gave an exclamation of astonishment. The boys crowded about her.

In her hand lay a picture—a picture of a boy, older than Michael, but so like Michael that you could scarcely believe it was not Michael. The same thin face with the deep, shy eyes, the same proud lift of the head that made you think of princes and castles and such things! You even imagined that the boy's hair was red, too! Across the back was written in scrawling letters—"To my friend Quill—from Michael."

"It's—it's my father—it's *my father!*" said Michael, seizing the picture and staring at it wistfully. "It's my father—when he was young—like me!"

"But he says—'to my friend, Quill'! And you call him 'Uncle'—do you suppose he isn't your uncle at all?"

But Michael scarcely heard. He was looking, with all his lonely heart in his eyes, at the slim Michael of the picture. Mary looked at the other picture. This was of a girl—not such a pretty girl, but with such a lovely, small half-smile, such a friendliness of eyes, that you loved her at once. On the back it said—"To Quill—with love, from Flower."

"Flower"—what a beautiful, beautiful name! And who was she—this Flower, not so very old, out of the long ago? Who was she? Was she someone Quiller St. John had loved long ago—or was she his sister? Or, perhaps, this other Michael's sister?

They hated to stop looking at those two old pictures. They were, they all felt, somehow a key to the whole mystery, the answer to all their questions. But the letter—they must have the letter first, before they could read the answer aright! They put the things all away in the desk—all but the pictures. These, Michael put in his coat pocket. Then they turned again to the search.

Hepsey came to replenish the fire. She continuously seized the corner of her apron and dabbed it at her eyes.

"The doctor says he's got to sleep—got to get some natural sleep!" she said brokenly. "But he won't sleep till he has that letter! Oh, dear—oh, dear—why did I take it? I'd ought to have known that he had good reasons for what he did—ought not to have snooped into things so!"

"We'll find it!" promised Harlo stoutly. "We'll find it—don't you worry!"

But the rest were frankly discouraged.

"I think we ought to look in the kitchen," said Harlo. "That's where Mary saw the crow that time—maybe he likes the kitchen best!"

"But I've hunted in the kitchen till I know every square inch of it!" said Michael.

“Maybe you’ve missed something. Come on—let’s try!” Harlo would not be discouraged. He, who had been so afraid of the ogre—now working harder than any of them to save him! It was queer, when you remembered. But none of them remembered him as the ogre now—they just remembered that, in spite of his queerness, he had been kind. Kind and fair.

“Could it slide back of the fireplace?” Harlo asked. Michael shook his head.

“Only in one place and that’s where Hepsy found it. It isn’t there, but we’ll look again.” They found a long wire and ran it behind the stones again and again. But the letter was not there.

“Could Sooty have dropped it into the fire?” asked Matt.

“I don’t believe so. He used to perch on the mantel sometimes, but he was afraid to get too near the fire.”

Mumsie came down for a cup of tea. She looked tired.

“Is he asleep?” Michael asked anxiously. Mumsie shook her head.

“He’s delirious now—he talks about the queerest things! If only someone—something could make him sleep!”

“Let’s look in the cupboard!” suggested Harlo.

“The door’s never open,” said Michael. “Sooty couldn’t have gone in there!”

But they opened the cupboard and looked in and back of every dish. Then they looked inside all the copper dishes hanging on the wall.

“There are still some pitchers up on top of the cupboard,” said Harlo. “Did you look in them?”

“I’ve looked everywhere, I tell you!” said Michael. “But we’ll look again. Those pitchers have little narrow necks and Sooty couldn’t put anything in them if he tried!”

He climbed up on a high stool and lifted down the pitchers with great care. He handled dishes with extra caution since the pitcher had been broken. He felt along the back of the cupboard first of all, then picked up the pitchers one by one and looked inside. Nothing in the first, nothing in the second, nothing in the third. Even the fourth, and last, Michael started to lift again to its place—and then he suddenly gave a little cry and almost let the precious bit of china slip from his hands.

“It’s here—it’s here!” he cried. “Tight against the side—I almost didn’t see it! Get a knife or a fork or something—quick! It’s such a little neck, I can’t get my fingers in! *It’s here—it’s here!*”

He climbed down and carried the pitcher to the table. With a couple forks they pulled the letter to safety. It was it—it truly was! The small, clear writing—the stamp from far-off India! Michael’s hands were trembling as he took it into them. He started at once for the stairs. The rest trailed after him. Mumsie came to the head of the stairway and put her finger up warningly.

“Hush!” she said. But they came along, just the same, not pausing an instant.

“We’ve found it—the letter he wanted!” Michael whispered in excited joy. “We’ll have to give it to him—it’s what’s made him sick!”

“Come quietly!” said Mumsie. King lay patiently waiting beside the door. They went on tiptoe, past him, into the bedroom. Quiller St. John, looking queerly old and tired, lay there, very still. His silvery, rumpled hair seemed whiter than ever. He looked like an old man—a very sick old man. His lips moved constantly, with words they could not understand. Michael went swiftly to the bed, the letter tight in his hand. The rest watched from near the doorway.

“Uncle Quill—Uncle Quill! I’ve found it—the *letter!*” he said to him eagerly. “Uncle Quill—the letter from India! It was in a pitcher on top of the cupboard—Uncle Quill—Uncle Quill!”

But Quiller St. John only looked at him, seeing him but not hearing him. Michael knelt down beside the bed, imploring him to know him, to listen to him.

“It’s the letter—the letter about my father!” he said. “Look, Uncle Quill—it’s the very one! Sooty must have put it there! Harlo thought of it—thought of Sooty’s taking it! Look, Uncle Quill! Shall I open it?”

But the man still lay there, saying little half-sentences, meaningless sentences, over and over. Mary slipped to Michael’s side.

“Put it in his hands!” she whispered. “Let him feel it!”

So Michael put his uncle’s hand about the envelope. For an instant the words ceased. The big hands clutched the paper tight.

“Oh!” said Mumsie. “He’s going—he’s going to sleep!” And true enough! With a contented sigh, like a tired child’s, the ogre turned his face on the pillow and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE OTHER MICHAEL

Three days after the finding of the letter, Mr. Humphreys came into the house at supper-time with shining eyes.

“Good news! Good news!” he called out, the minute he was inside the door. They all crowded about him.

“A letter from Marge?” questioned Mary.

“A raise in your salary?” said Mumsie hopefully.

“Mr. St. John sitting up?” asked Harlo anxiously.

“Mother’s nearest!” answered Father. “They’re going to unite the three churches here and they want me to be the pastor! ‘Stony Jericho Community Church,’ they’re going to call it! It’ll be more money—and a home to keep as long as we want to stay here! We can look ahead and plan gardens—maybe a tennis court!”

He put his arms about Mumsie and she patted his shoulder in glad tenderness. Mary’s heart pounded happily. It was too good to be true! Not to have to scrimp and scrimp and scrimp—not to have to always put off till “next winter” the things you wanted to do! Not to have to leave Stony Jericho just when the house was fixed up as it should be and the flower beds beautiful and all! To think that, no matter if you went away, you’d always have a home to come back to in Stony Jericho! She forgot she had hated the town—she forgot its mud and its ugliness. It was a beautiful town—*her home town!*

“Gollywhilikens!” exclaimed Harlo at last. “Say, Mother, to celebrate, couldn’t we have plum jelly for supper?”

Mumsie smiled tremulously. Mumsie had had to get along with so little these last years—and now, maybe she could have a new suit and a new hat—and everything!

“Yes, we’ll have plum jelly—and, if you can wait a quarter of an hour, we’ll have hot biscuits,” she said. “The oven’s hot now!”

It was after they’d finished the last of the biscuits that Michael came running down the front walk. His face was alight.

“Uncle Quill’s sitting up!” he announced. “He’s read the letter and at first it broke him all up—but now he acts happy again, and glad. And he wants

Mary and Matt and Harlo to come up—he’s going to tell us all about things! Hurry, please—I can’t wait!” he almost left off his politeness, he was so eager.

The three Humphreys were out of their chairs, had grabbed their hats and were gone. They were no less excited than Michael. At last—at last, they were going to know, to know all the mystery of the house behind the hedge! And the letter—they were going to know what was in the letter! And about the picture of the other Michael. And that beautiful, friendly girl!

The air seemed like spring. It was really warm and there was a fragrance to it, of wood flowers and turned sod and smell of the released river. You felt that only happiness could come on such a night. Mary was walking beside Michael.

“Uncle Quill thought you ought to be there when he told me, Mary!” he said once.

“Why do you always say ‘Mary’?” she asked him. “Why don’t you ever say ‘Red’ like the rest do?”

“Why, I don’t know!” he said, stammering a little. “Only I—I never feel like calling you ‘Red’ or the names the boys call you because you—you’re *different!*” Mary’s cheeks grew pink. So she seemed different to Michael—as he seemed different to her! It gave her a warm feeling inside, to match the night.

Even in Quiller St. John’s room, the window was raised a little and the sweet, warm air swept in and caressed them all, stirred King’s silver, shaggy coat and made the pussy willows with which Michael had filled a deep blue and yellow bowl feel at home. Quiller St. John, wrapped in a rather shabby, red dressing gown, sat in a big chair, propped up with many pillows. He looked thinner somehow, and very white, but he seemed younger, too,—a different man than he had before his illness.

“Are you—really—going to tell us—all about it?” Mary asked him with soft, quick breathlessness. He smiled at her.

“Yes, Curlylocks!” he said. “Yes, I’m going to tell you all about it. I’m free to—at last! Bring your chairs closer around me!”

They did, and King came and stuck his nose in Mary’s hand as if he, too, were waiting.

“It’s a long story,” Quiller St. John said. “A long story—of love and of hate—of fear and of bravery. It begins a long time ago, when I was young, like you, Michael! There was a little girl next door——”

“Named ‘Flower’!” Mary put in eagerly. He looked at her in sharp surprise. “We—we found her picture when—when we were hunting for the letter!” she stammered.

“Oh, then you know how she looked! Mary, here, makes me think of her a little—only Flower’s hair was darker and not so curly. But she was always ready to be your friend, like Mary. Maybe you couldn’t tell that from the picture?”

“Oh, yes—yes, we could!” said Mary.

“Well, that’s the way I always think of her—as a little girl with dark braids and a face like a flower—eyes always saying, ‘Let’s be friends—let’s be friends!’”

“And we were friends—for a good many years. Her father had a great deal of money and so did mine, and we played together every day. We both liked tennis and long hikes in the country with a camp supper—and skating and rowing. They were beautiful days—beautiful days—when I was a boy!” he said, with a small sigh.

“But, after a while, I grew up and went away to college. Flower went to New York and studied music. She could sing—oh, well, maybe it was just because I loved her so much that I thought her voice was so marvelous! Every time I came home for vacation, she was home, too, and we liked each other as much as ever. I—I hoped to marry her when I was through with college and I think, in those first days, she used to hope for it, too.

“Then I got to know Michael Halliday in college!”

“*My father!*” Michael interrupted.

“Yes, Michael—your father. The most fascinating, interesting, charming boy I have ever known! I can feel the magic charm of him even now, across all these years, whenever I think of him! He had a way of being terribly interested in you, in everything you said and did, till you felt there was never another person in the world so understanding. He knew more songs—queer sailor chanteys—and there was always a crowd in our room (did I say he roomed with me?) just to hear him tell stories and sing. We were always together. I was on the eleven and he was a crew man and we had lots of good-natured scraps as to which sport was the best.

“But Michael was reckless. There was never an escapade among the students which he did not lead. And extravagant! He had only to know anyone was in trouble and he was there with money or whatever help was needed. He had had a good deal of money but most of it was gone—just

because he was too generous and too careless. He had a brother, John, who was as reckless without being as charming. John was always getting into scrapes, serious scrapes, and Michael was always helping him out.

“Then I was hurt—in an accident—and Michael gave some of his blood to save my life. Of course I loved him all the more, then. I didn’t care much for girls. As long as I had a friend like Michael, I didn’t need other friends. Except Flower—always, of course, there was Flower, back home!

“One summer I took Michael home with me. My letters were always full of him and my folks were anxious to know him. They fell under his charm, as I had. And, of course, they were grateful to him for what he’d done when I was hurt. I was anxious for Flower to know him. I wasn’t worried about her liking him better than me for we had always been so dear to each other that I never dreamed such a thing possible. The first night she was home, I took Michael over so she could know him. They liked each other at once and I was glad. We were there every day as long as his visit lasted and we sang together and played together and laughed together and were all very happy. And Flower said it seemed she’d known him always.

“The next year he wanted to come home with me at Christmas time and of course, I was only too eager to have him. The last minute, though, his brother wired and needed money—really quite a large sum. He had bet on some races, I think. So Michael sent him all he could scrape together and gave up his trip with me without a word as to the reason. But I wormed it out of him finally and bought his ticket home. He was like that—always doing little things on a grand scale and big things as if they didn’t amount to a row of pins. That was one reason why everyone had to love him so. You felt as if you were in a play all the time—romance all about you. Are you getting tired? I’m long-winded, I know—but—but when I get to remembering——!”

“Oh, no!” There was a chorus of the “Oh, no’s!” “Go on—please go on!”

“Well, after that Christmas vacation, things were different. Michael was quiet and sometimes I used to think he was tired of rooming with me. I had this hobby of old china collecting, even then, and I thought maybe it bored him. Sometimes he was even cross—and he’d always been so good-natured before. I worried about it but when I asked him what was troubling him, he just got angry and didn’t tell me anything.

“At last—it was close to Easter time—he came to me and told me. *He had married my Flower at Christmas time!* They had gone skating one afternoon when I’d had to go call on an old aunt, and had been married by the Justice of the Peace in the town below!”

He was still for a minute, as if feeling the hurt of that far-off time all new again.

“We had a terrible quarrel—a *terrible quarrel!* And when it was over, he packed up and left college. Flower’s folks were angry. They’d always planned that she would marry me and they didn’t think much of the penniless adventurer, Michael, who had married their little girl without even asking. But Flower would listen to nothing anyone said to her and when he came, she went with him, even though her folks told her never to come back if once she went.

“It—well, it almost broke my heart—to lose my friend Michael, and Flower, both together! Things hurt so hard when you’re young. I never went near them, but I always knew where they were and what they were doing. Michael was trying to write books but he’d have to come out of his shell sometimes to earn enough to keep them in food. He did write a book at last that sold. But then they had been married seven years. It was then, Michael, that you were born!”

He looked at Michael tenderly, as if he were seeing again the baby of long ago.

“Flower died when you were three weeks old,” he said then, gently.

Mary gave a little gasp of pity for the girl Flower of the picture, Flower, whose eyes always said—“Let’s be friends!” To have died—with a little baby Michael, waiting to be loved! But Quiller St. John was going on with his story.

“Of course it was hard—as hard for Michael as it was for me. He had loved her so that he had given up our friendship and everything for her. He didn’t seem to care so much for you, then, Michael. He left you with his brother John, and his wife, and went abroad. He had just stopped caring about living, and he went to some country in South America first, where there was a revolution going on, and got into the fighting. He was more reckless than he had ever been in the wildest days of his college life, but it seemed as if some charm was resting over him, for he was never injured. He went from that revolution to some new trouble in Mexico. He was in prison there for months but at last he escaped and went to China.

“You had grown out of babyhood, then, Michael. I used to go to the park and watch you playing in the leaves or feeding the squirrels and I used to wish and wish that you were mine. It seemed wrong, somehow, for my Flower’s little boy to be with folks like John Halliday and his wife. They left you with a nursemaid, when they had money to hire one, and when they

didn't, Mrs. Halliday used to take care of you, but sulkily, as if she hated to do it. And once, when she let you stray, as she was busy reading, I talked to you, down by the pond where the swans were, and took you in my arms a minute before she called you.

"Then Mrs. Halliday wanted to go to Florida, or somewhere, on a vacation, and she refused to take you with her. So John went off to London on a little vacation of his own—there were to be some big races in England then—and he was bound to be there. He took you with him. I knew all this because I made it a point to know all about you. I couldn't bear that Flower's little boy should be out of my sight. And I was lonely, too, for the other Michael—your father. I would have liked to ask his pardon for all my part in our horrible quarrel. I could see, then, that he wasn't to blame for having loved Flower—no one could have helped it! So I wanted to keep an eye on you for his sake, too. I kept thinking that sometime he might want to know all about what you'd been doing in the years he hadn't seen you, and I wanted to be the one to be able to tell him about you. So I went to London.

"Every day John used to go out to the races and leave you alone with Hepsy and her sister. You seemed so tiny and so lonely, it seemed to me terrible that you had no one who really loved you, to take care of you! Then John heard about a couple of racing horses in India that were for sale and off he went—leaving you suddenly, as if you did not matter in the least. Before that he had seemed to feel responsibility for your care but now, with the prospect of buying those horses, he forgot responsibility!"

Harlo's eyes grew wide with astonishment.

"'Gollywhilikens!'" he said, in a whisper.

"So that was where I came into your life. Or, really, I'd always been in it—but that was the beginning of your life with me. I stole you—yes, that's an ugly word—but I did! I even wrote out a paper in John's queer handwriting that I had seen so many times, to make it seem all regular. I took you, to keep you for your father—my old chum, Michael! And I brought you to America, bought this old house, and hid here. I thought that John's conscience would prick him at once and, that after he got his horses, he would be back after you. But he made some lucky deals there and his wife joined him and probably she persuaded him that he was well out of it all. But I kept fearing he would come, and I made myself into a hermit, pretending to hate the people and the town. I kept to myself and made you, Michael, stick close to the house, too. But, after a while, when no word came to me from John or anyone, I began to be ashamed and to worry over what I'd done. It turned me into a grouchy, white-haired old man. At last I wrote to Michael—my friend,

Michael. I sent the letter to the last place I'd known his address. It didn't come back to me so I thought he must have received it.

"I told him I was sorry and I told him of what I'd done about you, and of how John had treated you. But I told him I was going to keep you until he should come or until he told me to give you up! I let him know how—how much I loved you and what good care I would try to give you. But—the letter did not come back—and still there was no answer! I tried to think he had not received it, but there was no real reason to suppose he had not. I waited and waited—hoping and hoping—but it seemed Michael, too, had forgotten the little son—and me!

"And that's the story—the story of the years, Michael—the reason for things. I—I didn't want to tell you of your father, for fear you'd think he didn't love you. I didn't want you to think of him as an adventurer, with no love for his home country or anything! So I kept you here—and I didn't tell you. The day of the carnival, I heard about some stranger in town—it was no one I knew, but I thought it was John—and that was why I was so frightened and angry. And then the letter——"

"Yes—the letter—tell me!" begged Michael. His face was white and he was leaning forward, his eyes never leaving Quiller St. John's lips.

"When I saw it was your Uncle John's writing, I was frightened. I thought he wanted you—that he had found out where you were and was coming after you. I thought at first I wouldn't open it. I was afraid to. It made me ill to think that, after all these years, I might lose you! So I didn't open it at once. You know what happened. Then, of course, when it was gone, I feared it might have contained news of your father and, when I couldn't find it after days of searching, I was sure of it.

"And now it's here. There's a letter in it—for you, alone, Michael. Don't read it now for you will want to be by yourself. And there was a letter for me—two of them. One is from your Uncle John. He tells me of how he got trace of your father in India—he, Michael, was mixed up, as he always was, with some revolution. John had known all the time where you were—Hepsey's sister had written him, and he had known you were safe—which was all he cared for. But he wanted to see his brother and he reached the place, after many complications, where Michael was supposed to be.

"And there," his voice broke, "there he found that Michael—my old chum, Michael, had been his reckless self for the last time of all! He—he was on his way to the coast—to come home—after all these years! My letter had gone back to some of his relatives, had been put away, forgotten, till a few

months ago. Then they learned his address and sent it to him with other mail that had accumulated. When he got it, he planned at once to come home. He had thought all the years only of Flower, and now, suddenly, he thought of you and wanted you as any father wants his son!

“But there was an uprising and the town where he was staying was burned. He could have escaped, but there was an old woman, crippled and helpless, alone in a ghar, and all the household had fled. She called out and Michael flung freedom and home and all aside to save her. He saved her—but he couldn’t save himself. The revolutionists were too close—and their aim was too sure. There, Michael, boy—don’t cry! It was a beautiful—a beautiful and a noble thing to do! We mustn’t let it hurt too much, Michael—it was the way he would have liked to go—doing for others! And he has given us these letters. We’ll always have them—they *are* your father, Michael—the very, loving heart of him—like the heart of the boy I used to know! And now we can be free and open—and you can have a happier life. Yes, happier, Michael—for, even if your father’s gone, he’s ours again—*your father and my friend!* And you are mine, Michael—your father gives you to me. There, Michael—don’t cry!”

They had forgotten the Humphreys children and presently Matt got up and started out of the room. Harlo tiptoed after. Then Mary rose, too, but she put out her hand, first, and laid it with timid sympathy on Michael’s shoulder as he knelt there with his bright head buried in the folds of the old red dressing gown. She wanted to say some word of comfort, but just her hand on his shoulder—that was all she could do. Then she, too, slipped away and left them there together with the other Michael!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE END OF THE ADVENTURE

It was three weeks after that night in Quiller St. John's room. The Humphreys and Michael were sitting in the cozy parsonage sitting-room. That is, the Humphreys were sitting—Michael stood near the bay window before the great crock of wild apple blossoms. His eyes were shining and, as he talked, he tossed his red curls back again and again. He was more eager, somehow—more like Matt and Harlo than they had ever seen him. Father's face was troubled. Matt looked embarrassed—Mumsie, tender and sorry. Mary's slim face was strangely white and solemn.

“Uncle Quill's as anxious as I am!” said Michael. “He's been planning the rooms. He—he's even sent away for a picture for Mary's room! And he's been hinting to Hepsy that maybe—maybe there'll be a houseful for her to watch over soon! There's so much room and—and——”

Mary swallowed hard and tried to say something, but no words came. Michael was suddenly silent, staring about at all the troubled eyes.

“You—you *won't come?*” he said.

Mumsie got up and went to him, swiftly.

“Please understand, Michael! Please don't be hurt!” she said. “You know that we love the kindness, the thoughtfulness!”

“No thoughtfulness—except for ourselves!” Michael said gloomily.

Mumsie drew him down beside her on the window-seat.

“Well, we like being wanted,” she said gently. “But, don't you see, Michael, we've worked hard for eight months to make this a home and what you make yourself that way gets to be part of you somehow! I feel that way—and I think the rest do, don't you?” she turned questioningly.

“There's that great flower garden,” Father reminded her—“you'd love to fuss in that! And there'd be Hepsy to help in the house—it's a more beautiful house than I'll be able to buy you, ever!”

Mumsie shook her head.

“Yes, it's very beautiful—but this is *our home*. Maybe we can have new curtains by fall—even a rug! It's fun to scrimp and save for things—even if

you grumble a little now and then while you're doing it! Do you see, Michael?"

Michael was staring at Mary, a stubborn question still in his blue eyes. Mary flushed.

"Mumsie's right! I used to think it would be like heaven to live in a house like that—but—but somehow—it *is* fun to have to scrimp and plan! I—I wouldn't want to change!"

Michael looked away then.

"I don't blame you, of course!" he said. "Don't really see why you would want to come when you have a home like this—only—only——"

Harlo saved the situation. Harlo hated tears and, coming in from the kitchen at this moment, he saw, horrified, that Mary's eyes looked suspiciously like crying. He grabbed a plate of cookies from the pantry shelf and bore them in with the manner of a king's servant. He was speaking one word against crying to two for his own appetite, but he made Mary giggle and Matt grin and even sober Michael smile.

Suddenly he paused in his nonsense, the plate raised high in his chubby hands.

"Listen!" he said. "The f-flyer's stopping!"

"Harlo—wait till you finish that cookie before you speak again!"

"Somebody from a long way off come to town!" said Matt, listening to the flyer go racing off through the morning. "Wonder who 'tis!"

"Race you to the corner to see!" Harlo challenged.

"A'right!"

"Boys—boys! You're as bad as Johnny Trumbull!" Johnny used to work in the post-office at Corey and he read all the mail. Matt shouted with laughter, but he was out the door with a bang and off down the street, Harlo panting behind him.

Michael got up and went out without saying another word to anyone. Mary jumped up and started after him.

"Oh, Michael—don't be angry—I'm sorry!" she wanted to call to him, but he never even looked around as he crossed the lawn and went through the hedge to the lonely big house. It didn't seem fair, Mary thought, that they should have so much and Michael so little. She stood in the doorway looking wistfully after him till his red head could no longer be seen up the driveway.

He was hurt, Michael, but, of course, they *couldn't* give up their own home and all the things they loved so!

“You aren't disappointed, are you, Mary?” Mumsie spoke gently behind her.

“Oh, no—*no!* Only, Michael's cross—you can see he is—and—and——”

But Mary never finished that sentence. There came a great shout from Harlo down at the corner. Mumsie said afterward that everyone in town must have heard him. Mary ran out on the steps. Then she, too, gave a glad cry and sped off down the street on winged feet.

“Marge! *Marge!*” she called unbelievably.

For, coming around the corner from Depot Street, was Marjorie. Marjorie, in a new spring hat and a lovely dress of rose linen. Mary couldn't believe it—it couldn't be true! She hadn't known how much she had missed Marjorie till she saw her coming toward her up the street. Mumsie met them by the church and Marjorie flung herself into her mother's arms with a laugh that was half sob.

“Oh!” she cried. “I got so lonesome for you all—I just couldn't stand it!”

Lonesome? Marge? At Aunt May's?

“Why, Marge—Marge, dear!” Mumsie kept saying, all the way to the house.

“Are you hungry? Have you had breakfast?” Mumsie asked.

“I was supposed to eat on the train—only I got so excited, I couldn't!” Marjorie said, laughing. But, somehow, it wasn't her old scornful laughter—there was love for all of them in it. They crowded around her at the table. Harlo even sat down and kept her company by eating another breakfast. They asked a thousand questions.

“And did you come all alone?”

“Was the ocean as big as you thought?”

“Did Aunt May buy you that dress?”

“Did you bring the sea-shells?”

They were so busy asking questions that it was afternoon before they got around to tell Marjorie much about what had happened in Stony Jericho. Then they got out the book of the H.M.C. and showed it to Marjorie. Every little way they'd have to cut in with things that needed explaining.

“And what do you think!” Mary exclaimed once. “Mr. St. John asked us to come there to live! Honestly, he did! But we aren’t going to. He’s going to cut down the hedge, too, so young folks can run in and out, easy, he said. Oh, Marge—wait till you see the inside—it’s beautiful!”

“And Michael,” put in Matt. “Think of a boy with a hero father like that! And he’s just as ordinary—or no, he isn’t either—but he doesn’t put on airs! And he knows more about Ancient History, I’ll bet, than any old governess! He has more books than you could read in years!”

“Wish he’d come down!” said Harlo.

Mary wished so, too. She kept thinking of how he had gone, without speaking or even looking back.

Marjorie was looking from the book to them and from them back to the book.

“Why, you’ve been having a lot better time than I have!” she said in a small surprised voice. “I—I never dreamed of having adventures like this!”

Suddenly Mary was sorry for Marjorie—Marjorie, who’d been to Aunt May’s and had *opportunities*! And she was ashamed, too, because all the time she had been envying Marjorie, wishing she were in Marjorie’s place. She wished she could do something for Marge, find her a place in this adventure, too. Well, she could go get Michael, so Marjorie would know him—Marjorie was anxious to know him, she’d said so right away. Mary got up.

“Be back in a jiffy!” she said abruptly, and sped off across the lawn to the big house.

“Michael—Michael!” she called. It seemed queer to call it so loudly, so naturally, as if Michael were no different than other boys. Michael came to the kitchen door.

“Oh, Michael—Marge has come! My sister, Marge! Come down and see her!”

Michael didn’t answer for a long second. Then Mary saw that he was still hurt. She looked down at the gravel path, scuffed at the pebbles with her toe. Then she looked up honestly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But, you see, we just couldn’t give up the things we love so and that we’ve worked so hard to get—even for all this! But I—I wish you wouldn’t be cross!” Her toe scuffed again at the pebbles.

“Oh, that’s all right!” said Michael.

She shook her head soberly.

“Not if you’re going to be angry about it!” she insisted.

He came out the door and walked beside her down the drive. He smiled suddenly.

“I won’t be. I was at first!” he confessed. “But I can see why you wouldn’t want to leave and—and, anyway, I got to thinking it over and I don’t believe I want you to come! You—you’d be just like a sister then and I—I guess I’d rather have you across the way, like Flower, you know!”

Mary’s cheeks grew pink and she didn’t know what to say. So she ran on ahead and said nothing.

“Marge is here!” Harlo shouted.

“He knows it,” called Mary. “Can’t he *see* her? That’s Marge, Michael!”

For just an instant, as Marjorie, dimpling, smiled up at Michael with easy friendliness, Mary had a little jealous feeling. Marjorie was so pretty, maybe Michael would like her best! Then she felt ashamed, for she knew that whatever happened, she and Michael would be *best* friends.

So she didn’t mind when Marjorie began to talk excitedly to Michael about the adventure.

“I never *read* of such a mystery!” she said.

“It *has* been a mystery, hasn’t it?” Michael said soberly. “But now I know Father cared, I don’t believe any mystery’ll ever hurt me again!”

“Maybe there’ll never be another one,” said Harlo.

“I have a feeling there will,” said Mary.

And they all felt it as they sat there on the step in a row. They could feel that life was going to be different this summer, with Marjorie home and Michael free from worry. Harlo sat at the head of the row, thinking, quite soberly for him, of the part of the adventure that had almost ended in disaster for him; then Marjorie, eager and pretty and saucy, sorry to have been out of it all; Matt, with his jolly, kind face; Michael, with the proud lift of his head and his eyes like Flower’s, saying—“Let’s be friends!”; Mary, with her bronze curls and her gray eyes like those of a shy princess, most grown up! Five eager young hearts—eager for the new adventure, ready to make one if none came along! Harlo broke the silence.

“Well,” he said, “if we do have another adventure, like hunting for treasure, or camping on an island—or something like that—if we *do*, I hope

we'll be sure to like lots of food along!"

THE END

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.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by Elizabeth Pilsbry (1899-1984) have been omitted from this etext.

[The end of *Mary* by Nelia Gardner White]