

FOUR LITTLE WOMEN OF ROXBBY



MAY HOLLIS BARTON

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of ROXBY



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THE GIRLS RUSHED OUT AND CAUGHT HER IN
THEIR ARMS

Four Little Women of Roxby

OR

The Queer Old Lady Who Lost
Her Way

BY

MAY HOLLIS BARTON

AUTHOR OF "THE GIRL FROM THE COUNTRY," "NELL
GRAYSON'S RANCHING DAYS," "PLAIN JANE
AND PRETTY BETTY," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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Books for Girls

By MAY HOLLIS BARTON

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THE GIRL FROM THE COUNTRY
Or Laura Mayford's City Experiences

THREE GIRL CHUMS AT LAUREL HALL
Or The Mystery of the School by the Lake

NELL GRAYSON'S RANCHING DAYS
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FOUR LITTLE WOMEN OF ROXBY
Or The Queer Old Lady Who Lost Her Way

PLAIN JANE AND PRETTY BETTY
Or The Girl Who Won Out

(Other Volumes in Preparation)

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FOUR LITTLE WOMEN OF ROXBY

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FOUR LITTLE WOMEN OF ROXBY

CHAPTER I

HARD TIMES

THE snow fell in soft thick flakes, covering all things with a cold blanket of white.

Alice Rowe turned from the window with a gesture of impatience.

“We must do something, Jean!” she said, a note of desperation in her voice. “Things can’t go on this way!”

“What way, dear?” The girl who was sewing at a table near the center of the room looked up mildly.

At the simple, patient question Alice turned on her sister like a little wildcat.

“What way? What way? You know what I mean, Jean Rowe, as well as I do! Why sit there with that exasperatingly patient air and look at me like a great moo cow? It—it makes me crazy!”

“It seems to.” There was just the slightest touch of irony in the voice of Jean Rowe as she went on quietly with her sewing. The work in her hands was an exquisite thing—a white satin slip with embroidered garlands of posies done with cream colored silk. Jean was an excellent needle-woman, and worked swiftly as well as skillfully. She seemed concentrated on her work at the moment and appeared not to notice the sullen girl at the window.

Jean Rowe was eighteen, but small and immature for her age. She had light brown hair and golden-brown eyes, small, regular features and a lovely smile. She had a slight, graceful figure, small feet and hands that were marvelously capable. Jean was one of those girls who might have been considered very pretty if she had been able to dress well. But her dresses of a plain cut, a durable quality and color, were built rather for service than beauty and served to eclipse most of the girl’s elusive charm.

Her fifteen-year-old sister Alice was of a different type. Alice was the beauty of the family and her brilliant, fair prettiness seemed to dominate her

clothes and her surroundings and shine out from her drab background like a light.

Alice's temper was quick and her imagination rebelled against the limitations of their narrow life in Roxby, a little town some distance from the main railroad to New York, and where, to quote Alice herself, "nothing ever happened."

Now she regarded Jean's flying needle for several moments in an exasperated silence.

"I don't see how you do it!" she broke forth at last. "Day after day, week after week, sitting there sewing on lovely things you never can have yourself and always seeming so contented! Sometimes I wonder, Jean, if you are really human!"

Jean put aside her work and joined the girl at the window.

"Alice dear," she said, "whenever you are disagreeable I know that your heart has been touched or that you are more than usually worried about something. You might as well tell me right away what the trouble is and get the agony over with. I don't like being scolded, you know, especially about something I haven't done."

"You're a poor long-suffering lamb and I'm a beast," cried Alice, with a long sigh. "But I'm so fearfully worried about Bab, Jeanie. And then, with this snow and everything, I was wondering if the doctor would be able to get here."

"I'd trust Doctor Tilson to see a patient if he had to come on snowshoes," Jean replied reassuringly. "It is snowing hard though," she added, after a pause. "See how deep it is on the road."

"I see!" said Alice, with a tightening of her pretty mouth. "I've been seeing for some time past. How is Corny going to get back from Miss Johnson's, I'd like to know!"

"I begged her to wear her rubbers this morning," Jean sighed. "I even got them for her and put them near the hall door where she would have to stumble over them when she went out. There they are still. I think I'll put on my things and go up for her."

"Oh, don't, Jean. I must get that candy boxed and ready that I promised to Deacon Dare's wife. She won't take it at all if it isn't ready. And, you know, I'm counting on her to get me other orders. Some one must be with Bab, and we expect the doctor any minute. Please, don't go out, Jean. Corny will get home some way."

"Poor Corny!" Jean turned away with a sigh and began automatically to straighten the furniture in the small bare sitting room. "I'm not able to help

her half as much as I'd like to, there are so many duties at home. She hasn't been looking well lately, Alice."

"Who would?" Alice flung back, as she paused in the door on her way to the kitchen. "With poverty and worry all the time, how can any one feel well, or look well, either? Oh, Jean, sometimes I feel as though I simply can't bear it!"

Jean listened to the quick, impatient footsteps of her sister until they were lost in the clattering of tin pans and the running of water in the sink. Alice was about to fill the order of Deacon Dare's wife for a box of homemade nut fudge—Alice's specialty.

Jean smiled wistfully, sadly.

They were girls to be proud of, these three sisters of hers, girls that deserved a better chance than they would ever get here in Roxby.

Jean asked little for herself and was grateful for the skill of her needle that kept a small but steady stream of money running into the slender family purse. She worked hard and long for the little she earned, yet never thought of complaining for herself.

If she could see her sisters happy—if only there had been money enough to keep them in comfort, to banish the specter of the wolf that seemed always to lurk about their door, Jean would have been content.

But there was Cornelia, next to her in age and the only real business girl of the family. Corny had found work in Miss Johnson's millinery shop, the only shop of the sort worthy of the name in Roxby. Corny could make hats. Alice had once said that this sister of hers could take a piece of old ribbon, a bit of tinsel and a goose feather and make a hat worthy of a Parisian milliner. Perhaps this statement was a bit exaggerated, Alice being a partial critic, but the fact remained that Corny had soon made herself indispensable to Miss Johnson and was now the real power behind the throne.

In a city, Corny might have made a brilliant success. But with indifferent materials to work on and an indifferent public to cater to, she made barely enough to clothe and feed herself and add a little, a very little, to the general family fund.

Corny was thin and alert with dark, bright eyes and black hair and a quick, decided way of speaking.

With the rigorous winter weather which swept Roxby in a series of storms and icy winds, Corny had contracted a bad cold. She declared obstinately that she would consult no doctor about a mere cold in the head which, doubtless, would go away of itself if properly ignored.

But Jean was worried about Corny, who was weary these days when she returned from Miss Johnson's shop and who had even appeared, of late, a bit discouraged. Something was going wrong. Jean, as head of the struggling little family felt it, yet could not make Corny confess.

Now Bab was sick, dear little Bab, whom they all worshiped as the baby of the family. Bab was, in reality, no baby at all, having celebrated her twelfth birthday several weeks prior to the opening of this story. But she was slightly made, like Jean, and always had seemed younger than her actual years.

Bab's eyes were big and brown like Jean's, but her hair had the golden glint of Alice's. This odd coloring, together with her thin little frame and wistful mouth gave to the girl a spiritual look of fragility that awakened in every one who saw her the instinctive desire to protect and pet her.

She also had fallen a victim to the unusual cold of this Roxby winter. A bad cold had developed into a severe case of grip. This, in turn, had barely escaped the danger line of pneumonia.

The faithful care of Jean and Alice and the doctor's unremitting attention had carried her triumphantly past the crisis, yet—and herein lay the mystery—failed to cure her. Bab remained weak and languid, betrayed no appetite for food nor inclination to leave her bed. Every afternoon, late, her temperature rose; she became feverish, restless, almost petulant.

The case completely baffled the country doctor and frightened her sisters unspeakably.

What they needed, they thought, was the advice of a doctor of wider experience and knowledge, but to bring a man from the city to Roxby meant an expenditure of money, and the orphaned family made barely enough to set a frugal table and keep a roof over their heads, as it was.

Their mother and father had died of fever, contracted one from the other, when Bab was only two years old. Since they were all young children at the time, a maiden aunt had come to take charge of the little house in Roxby and its small orphaned brood.

This aunt was their father's sister, a Miss Virginia Rowe. It was reported that Miss Rowe had a considerable fortune. Either these reports had been exaggerated or the spinster had met with losses in her investments. At any rate, at her death about a year before this story opens it was found that she had only three hundred dollars to bequeath to her brother's children.

Other kindly people in town took an interest in the girls—the “four little women in Roxby” as they were generally called—and would have helped them, but Jean was old enough by this time to think herself a capable head

of the family. With the backing of Corny and Alice, she declared for freedom.

It was then that Corny found her position with Miss Johnson and a short time later Jean began to get orders for needlework.

Now, since Bab's sickness had raised an immediate demand for more funds, Alice had searched about for something at which she could make money. She had two avenues to pursue. She could play the piano tolerably well—her Aunt Virginia had been a musician of no mean talent, and for their musical education the girls had to thank her ardor and perseverance—and she could make delicious nut fudge.

She thought at first of her music as being the most easily commercialized of her two accomplishments. However, it took her only a short time to realize that, as a music teacher in Roxby, she must certainly starve.

There were already two teachers in the town, and they had captured all the available pupils in the place. Mothers were reluctant to make a change, and put off Alice with the statement that they would let her know if at any future time they should decide to place their younger children with her.

But if Roxby did not need music teachers, it certainly did need good candy—and said so. To-day Alice was about to fill her first order, and from that order hoped to gain many others.

If only the weather were not so dismal!

Jean had one foot on the stairs, intent on finding if Bab were still asleep, when the front door was violently opened, letting in a gale of frosty air—and Corny.

Jean turned and came slowly toward her sister.

“Corny, what is it?” she faltered. “There—there’s something the matter!”

CHAPTER II

THE SICK GIRL

CORNY pressed both hands to her cold face, and Jean could see that she was trembling.

“Don’t—don’t speak to me just now, Jean,” she said in a faint, odd tone. “Let me come in—where it’s warm. I’m so—terribly cold.”

She went into the front room and stood, shivering, near the register.

“Oh; Corny dear, why didn’t you wear your rubbers? Never mind, just stay here where it’s warm. You must have dry stockings. Your feet are soaked with snow water.”

“Never mind my feet, Jean. I’m—I’m not worrying about my feet.”

But the older girl was up the stairs on swift feet to the room she shared with Corny. Then a pair of dry, warm stockings, a rough towel and downstairs again.

Corny was standing just where Jean had left her, her hat and coat still on, an odd expression on her face. That look frightened Jean. She kept her gaze averted from her sister’s face as she fussed about her, taking off her hat and coat and settling her in a chair close to the register.

Something has happened! Something has happened! The monotonous refrain beat itself sickeningly upon her brain. Something has happened! What is it?

“Here, put this shawl about your shoulders. You poor dear, you are shivering yet. Aren’t you beginning to feel warm, Corny?”

“Yes. Oh, yes, I’m warm enough, Jean. Here—don’t you dare take off my shoes and stockings. I—I guess I’m good for that much, yet.”

She bent over to unlace the high shoes, but not before the quivering of her mouth had betrayed her.

Jean helped and rubbed the poor red, cold feet dry with the rough towel and drew on the warm, dry stockings.

“Feel better, dear? You are warmer now?”

“Much warmer, Jean. Oh, Jean, don’t be kind to me now! Scold me, do anything—but don’t be kind. I can’t bear it!”

Then Corny's head was against Jean's shoulder, her arm tight about her sister's neck.

"I'm done for, Jean! Miss Johnson has closed the shop! Oh, it's all over and I'm just—just worthless!"

"The shop closed!" Alice was standing in the doorway, the pan of hot fudge in her hand, spoon poised in the act of stirring it.

Jean held up a warning hand.

"But it won't be for long, dear," she soothed. "Miss Johnson will reopen in the spring, surely. She hasn't gone out of business, has she?"

"No." Corny raised her head and passed a hand wearily over her eyes. "She hasn't failed. I dare say she will open in the spring. But it's a long way to spring, girls. We must eat—and there's Bab."

"Yes—there's Bab!" muttered Alice, and began to stir rapidly at the thickening mixture in the pan.

Corny stared at her for a moment and then her glance dropped hopelessly to the floor.

"You see how useless I am," she said in a low voice.

"Nonsense!" The word came sharply from the usually gentle Jean. "I won't have you saying such things about yourself, Cornelia Rowe. You have more pep and business ability than all the rest of us put together. Miss Johnson's isn't the only shop in town, you know."

Corny shrugged her shoulders.

"It's the only place in town where I'm wanted, Jean, and you know it," she said, facing the, to them, appalling situation with the rigorous honesty characteristic of her. "I've felt this coming for over a month. After the little spurt of fall trade, business died down to almost nothing. We have had about three customers in so many weeks. We can make hats, but when there are no heads to put them on, it's a pretty hopeless situation. Miss Johnson did the only sensible thing. I really believe," here a flush tinged her pale face, "that she kept open on my account a good deal longer than she otherwise would simply because she knew I needed the money and was too kind-hearted to throw me out of a job. Sort of charity, you see. Oh, it was hard to take! But now I've not even that!"

"Well, we'll manage——"

"Manage! How?" Corny turned on her sister swiftly. "Oh, Jean, I know what a wonder you are to try to keep up our spirits and make the littlest amount of money go the longest way. There's no one like you. But

managing on next to nothing is just a little different from managing on nothing at all. And that's what you will have to do now."

"Not quite," said Jean. "I do make something with my embroidery, you know, and I was thinking of trying a little dressmaking on the side—though I don't know how good I'd be at that."

"Oh, Jean! Poor, poor Jean!" Corny beat one hand within the palm of the other, softly, yet fiercely.

"No, not poor! But glad, so glad to be able to help!" cried Jean sturdily. "And here's Alice! She thinks she may be able to fill some orders for candy and make a little money that way——"

"Oh, Jean, so little—so little!"

Jean took the younger girl by the shoulders and shook her fiercely.

"Don't let go like this, Corny. You mustn't! You frighten me!"

With a quick movement Corny got up and walked over to the window, still beating that strange tattoo with one hand in the palm of the other.

"Leave me alone, Jeanie, please," she said in a muffled voice. "I'll be all right soon. I'm trying to get hold of myself. There's Bab calling. You—you'd better run."

Jean gave her an anxious glance and went slowly from the room. Alice had already returned to the kitchen where she was pouring the fudge into molding plates. The roof might sink beneath its weight of snow, the heavens themselves might fall, but the wife of Deacon Dare must still have her box of nut fudge! Alice's pretty mouth was grimmer than ever as she went about her homely task.

Jean's heart felt weighted with lead as she ascended the creaking steps on her way to Bab.

Nothing worse could have happened to them just then than the loss of Corny's position. That had been the one steady gleam of light in all the darkness. A certain sum that one could count on every week—a slender thing to cling to perhaps, in their hard struggle against poverty, but it was all the certainty they had. Now even that was taken from them and they were cast adrift.

Jean paused outside the door of Bab's room and forced a smile to her tired lips. When she entered only the searching, discerning gaze of her little sister could have discovered that anything was wrong.

"Jean, how it snows! Come over here and tell me what it is that makes you look so sad, even when you smile. Has the doctor come yet?"

CHAPTER III

SPOILED

JEAN was glad to answer this question since it helped her to evade the other.

“Not yet, dear,” she said, and smoothed the pillows behind the fair head. Her hand, seeking Bab’s forehead, found it hot.

“Do you think he will be able to get here, Jean? It snows so!”

“The snow has drifted in places and looks deeper than it really is,” Jean replied. “The doctor will come. In the meantime I think you can drink the glass of hot milk he ordered for you every afternoon.”

“Oh, no, nothing hot, Jean! I’m burning up! Feel my hands, how hot they are. I want something cool. Do you know what I have been thinking, lying here and looking out into the snow, Jean?”

“What, dear?”

The older girl regarded Bab’s flushed face anxiously. She had noticed recently that whenever her fever rose the sick girl spoke of odd things wildly, a little incoherently.

Now she half raised herself in bed and Jean put a supporting arm behind the thin, hot shoulders.

“I want to go out in the snow and roll in it, Jean, and rub my arms in it and put some on my head. It hurts Jean—my head—it hurts so. And it’s hot—so hot! It goes around and around like a top. Some day maybe it will come off and go spinning out into the snow to cool itself. Why are you crying, Jean? Don’t say you’re not! I felt a tear on my hand. Oh, Jean, don’t cry—don’t cry! I will try to be good and not worry you so. But when is the doctor coming?”

And so on and on, while Jean’s heart turned cold with fear. What was wrong with her little sister? Was this fever that came with the lengthening shadows of afternoon simply the aftermath of her sickness, the result of weakness? Or was there some new insidious disease creeping upon her with which this Roxby physician found himself unable to cope?

It was this thought that tormented her, that filled her with the desperation of impotence.

They must have a more experienced doctor from the city! But how, when there was not money enough to buy food for them? They must find money some way! They must!

She would speak to the doctor when he came and ask for his frank opinion concerning Bab. If it was necessary to have the advice of a specialist, then they would get it some way.

Bab was quieter now. She lay back on her pillows, inert and indifferent, two red spots on her cheeks that showed oddly brilliant against the white of the bedclothes. Jean held one hot little hand in hers, caressing it gently.

“I’ll read to you, Bab,” she said after a few moments of silence. “That magazine Dave brought over is full of lovely stories.”

Bab’s eyes wandered listlessly to her sister, but failed to light up as they would have done in the old days at the prospect of a story, for the girl had liked nothing better than to sit with a bit of sewing or the kitten in her lap and listen to Jean’s soft voice flowing musically through chapter after chapter of thrilling adventures.

“No, thanks, Jean,” she said now, after a rather long pause. The words came slowly as though she deliberated each one before speaking it. “I can’t bear to hear about people who are happy and well while I am sick and must lie in bed. Why do you suppose I am so sick, Jean?”

“You won’t be sick long, dear.” Jean pressed her cool cheek against the hot one. “You wait and see! Doctor Tilson will say you may sit up to-day when he comes. I am almost sure of it.”

Bab shook her head doubtfully.

“I am not sure I want to get up,” she said. “I think I am more comfortable here. My head swims so when I try to stand and my feet— Sometimes, Jean, I think I haven’t any feet from the feel of them until I look down and see them there at the end of my legs just where they always used to be.”

“You are weak because you are such a bad child and will hardly eat what the doctor orders for you,” said Jean, pretending to scold so that she might check the tears that she felt were close to her eyes again. “I am going down now to fix the egg and milk the doctor ordered for you or he will find out that you haven’t had it and scold me, too.”

Jean gently freed herself from Bab’s entwining arms and ran down the stairs, forced to feel her way for the tears that misted her eyes.

In order to reach the pantry and bring forth the milk and egg she must pass through the kitchen.

There she found Alice sitting on the three-legged stool and staring straight before her, the very picture of gloom.

Fortunately for Jean, she had inherited a sense of humor from her mother. Alice's expression was so exceedingly doleful that it won from her older sister an hysterical giggle. At the sound Alice turned upon her a countenance so shocked and outraged that Jean was still further demoralized.

She clutched the end of the table and began to laugh, little high-pitched strangled sounds of mirth that brought Alice to her feet and Corny to the kitchen door.

"Oh, Alice, forgive me," she gasped. "But you did look so—so—funny—I mean sad—I—oh, dear me, what is the matter with me!"

"Well, if I can look funny and sad at the same time I'm quite sure that I'm the only person in the world who can," Alice said, with quite overpowering dignity. "But I've a good reason for looking sad. My fudge is spoiled! I took it off the fire too soon!"

There was tragedy in this, and they all felt it. Perhaps there were not enough ingredients in the house to make a second batch. It was Corny who put this possibility into words.

"Are you all out of chocolate and nuts?"

"N-no. There's just about enough for another pound, I guess."

"Then make it. I'm going out and sweep the front porch."

"You're going to do what?" cried Jean and Alice together.

"Sweep the snow off—or shovel it off. If it gets any deeper no one will be able to get in or out of the house. A good subject for a moving picture, entitled 'Snowbound'!"

The front bell rang and Corny went to answer it. Jean and Alice heard a boy inquire whether they wanted a path cleared through the snow and heard Corny's quick answer in the negative.

"Oh, why didn't you let him?" Alice called. "He came like an answer to prayer."

"You ask why I don't let him," said Corny, and they could tell from various sounds in the hallway that she was struggling into her winter coat. "My dear, for an answer to that question, I'd suggest that you look in the family purse!"

CHAPTER IV

DAVE BARCHESTER

“WAIT! I’LL help you with the snow,” said Alice. “And later we can make the fudge together.”

When the door had slammed behind the sisters and she could hear the crunch of the snow shovels on the porch, Jean went on quietly with the preparation of Bab’s drink.

It was not late in the afternoon, and yet the leaden sky darkened the interior of the little house until it seemed almost night.

“If it would only stop snowing, just for a little while,” thought Jean. “The snow shuts one in with trouble. We seem cut off from all the world.”

She was on her way up to Bab, glass in hand, when she looked out the window and saw that some one had joined the girls. A second glance assured her that the newcomer was Dave Barchester.

Dave was the son of a widow, Mrs. Barchester, a raw-boned, capable woman who owned the Roxby sawmill and lumberyard. Dave Barchester was a big, handsome young fellow whose generosity and frank manner had won him the affection of all in the little town where he lived.

Dave was an old friend of the four little women of Roxby and had been a familiar visitor in the little cottage on Pine Street ever since the day he had fished Jean’s new rubber ball out of the creek.

Now Jean saw that he had taken the shovel from Alice’s not too unwilling hand and was wielding it with great effect. Jean saw also that Corny had retained her own shovel and was working as energetically as Dave.

Dear, plucky Corny! What a day of disappointment and heartache it had been for her! Yet she had conquered her own despairing mood and had taken up the fight again, performing with characteristic energy the task that lay nearest to her hand!

“Where will it all end?” Jean asked herself, and then, because she dreaded to think longer on that theme and because she dared not leave Barbara any longer alone, ran up the stairs and entered the room of the sick girl.

Bab greeted her with a curious eagerness.

“I heard you laugh downstairs,” she said. “Was there something funny?”

Jean related the incident, although she took care to make it droll instead of tragic. Bab almost laughed and looked more animated than she had for a long time. Jean began to hope.

Soon afterward the doctor came. He was a kindly old man, this physician of Roxby, with snow white hair, heavy white eyebrows and a piercing benevolent stare from behind rimmed spectacles that seemed to read one through.

He came in, shaking the snow from his coat and growling at the weather.

“Awful! Can’t go anywhere without rubber boots. Snowed under first thing you know, with only the chimneys of Roxby sticking out! Well, well, how’s the patient? Better, of course! How could she help but be with such a trio of nurses!”

The four little women of Roxby loved the kindly old physician. He had attended their mother and father and their Aunt Virginia Rowe and was among their earliest recollections. Now the three followed him upstairs to Bab’s room, laughing at his growling comments on the weather much as one laughs at the antics of a lumbering, good-natured old bear. They loved Doctor Tilson, but they would love him more if he could hurry Bab’s recovery.

Bab turned as the physician entered the room, gave a glad cry, and eagerly stretched out her hand toward him.

“I thought you weren’t coming, Doctor. It snowed so hard! Doctor Tilson, I want to get out in the snow. It looks cool and I’m so hot!”

“It is cool, my dear little girl, cooler than you would like if you once found yourself out in it,” said the physician, busying himself with his kit. “From all signs, there will be a record freeze to-night, and then we shall all be able to walk on the crust of the snow.”

“I shan’t, Doctor.” There was a wistful note in the young voice, almost of reproach, that made Bab’s sisters turn away and caused Doctor Tilson to examine his clinical thermometer with the greatest care. “When am I going to be able to get up, Doctor Tilson? I am so very tired lying here.”

“Soon, my dear, soon,” said the old physician, placing the thermometer beneath Bab’s tongue and so effectually cutting off all speech. “Has she taken her milk and egg to-day?” he asked, turning to Jean.

Bab made a little face of distaste, almost dropped the thermometer in so doing, and straightened her features to a most terrific gravity beneath the stern regard of the physician. He nodded, as though to say, “That’s better!”

“Yes, she has, Doctor,” Jean answered the question. “She really has been a very good girl. And, Doctor, I thought perhaps she deserved a reward.”

The doctor looked at Jean questioningly.

“If she could get up and sit by the window a little while each day,” Jean pleaded. “Wouldn’t she perhaps get her strength back that way?”

“H’m!” the doctor considered. “If she wants to sit up I have no objection as long as she is so well wrapped as not to feel the slightest chill. Do you want to sit up?” he asked of his little patient as he took the thermometer from between her lips.

“I don’t know,” she said helplessly. “It’s dull lying here and I want to get up so much. And yet when I do get up my head feels queer and I am so sick and dizzy that all I can think of is to get back to bed again. Doctor, do you think I will ever be well and strong and really want to get up again?”

Once more the doctor seemed to be very busy with his thermometer. Then he cleared his throat and looked at her quizzically from under his bushy brows.

“I never saw a youngster yet that I could keep in bed for very long—not with snow on the ground and sleighbells ringing. There seems to be a sort of magic in the sound of sleighbells. Now, young lady, let me see your tongue. Any pain in your chest? No pain! Good. Cough much? Only a little! Still better. Now then, for a prescription that will get you out of that bed before you can wink!”

Only Jean seemed to notice how the doctor had evaded Bab’s question and put her off with vague promises for the future.

She followed him to the door when he left and put a hand on his arm.

“What is the matter with Bab, Doctor?” she asked. “Whatever it is, you may tell me. I can bear anything better than this suspense. It isn’t—it isn’t consumption, is it, Doctor Tilson?”

“Bless the child, no!” The doctor’s answer was so explosive that Jean could not doubt his sincerity. “If that has been worrying you, put it out of your mind. The child couldn’t have consumption if she tried.”

“Then what——”

“I’ll tell you what it is, Jean.” The doctor had put on his great shaggy coat and stood with his hat and medicine kit in hand ready to go. “Bab has a lingering pleurisy, the kind that hangs on for weeks, even months sometimes, before it can be conquered. She must be coaxed to eat, threatened, forced to eat if necessary. Nourishing food, combined with this

medicine I am leaving, will give her back her strength. Above all things, she must not be allowed to take the slightest cold.”

His look wandered over the bare, cheerless hall, the immaculately clean but shabby front room and his glance came back to Jean with pity in it. He started to speak, hesitated, then said gruffly:

“You four little women are having an uphill struggle, Jean. Why not let your friends help? You have many in Roxby. My wife——”

“Oh, no, Doctor—please!” Jean’s voice came breathless, hurried. “We don’t need help yet, truly—at least, we can manage to get along. Oh, Doctor, let us have our pride! We—don’t seem to have much else!”

CHAPTER V

AN INTERRUPTION

THE door closed upon the physician and Jean walked slowly into the front room.

The doctor would leave the prescription for Bab's new medicine with the druggist in town and have it sent out to them, as was his kindly habit.

Jean went to the old-fashioned desk in a corner of the room, pressed the hidden spring, and a drawer opened. The desk had been her father's and he had always used the secret drawer for his important papers. Since Jean was now the head of the family the drawer had come down to her as a sort of inheritance.

From it she drew forth a wallet—a very flat wallet.

“Jean?”

The girl started and turned to the doorway. In the dim light she could just see Corny standing there.

“Why don't you make a light?” asked the other as she came into the room. With the words she struck a match and a light flared up from the gas chandelier. By it, Corny saw the wallet in her sister's hand. She smiled—a wry twisted little smile.

“About to take stock of the family finances?” she asked. “Well, I might as well be in on it, Jeanie. Goodness, how that wind does blow!”

“Where's Alice?” asked Jean, with a quick look about her.

“With Bab—telling her a story. Now's our chance, Jean. Let's see how much we have left!”

Black head bent close to brown as the two elder of the four little women of Roxby counted two five dollar bills, five single dollar bills, a quarter, a dime, a nickel, and two pennies.

“Twenty-five, thirty-five, forty, forty-two,” counted Corny. She lifted her head. The glances of the sisters met. They tried to smile, and turned away quickly to hide a sudden quivering of lips.

“Bab's medicine will take another dollar of that,” muttered Corny, as though thinking aloud.

“Yes,” said Jean.

There was dead silence in the room for a moment while the wind howled drearily about the house and Alice's voice came to them in a gentle murmur from above.

"It will be all right, Jean." Corny's voice was soft and subdued, unlike her usual crisp accents. "I'll look for work. It will not be long in coming. There must be some one in Roxby who needs a new hat or an old one made over. I'm going to find her."

"I know you will, Corny. And I've nearly finished the things for Nell Slater I've been working on. I'll deliver them in a few days and perhaps get more to do."

"Am I in on this family pow-wow?" Alice appeared in the doorway. "Or am I too young to know the awful truth?" she added.

"Altogether too young!" said Corny, closing the wallet with an air of finality and handing it over to Jean. "Is Bab asleep?"

"I'll say she is! Dropped off in the midst of my very best ghost story _____"

"Speaks well for Bab's sense, though a trifle hard on the story!" chuckled Corny. "Come on, let's make that fudge!"

Jean got dinner while Alice and Corny worked over the fudge that was to delight Alice's first customer on the morrow. This time the candy was an unqualified success, and Alice set it in the pantry to cool and harden with a sense of complete satisfaction.

"What have you got for supper, Jean?" she asked, coming back into the kitchen. "I'm starved. Oh—beans again?"

"We are lucky," said Jean wearily, "even to have beans!"

Corny later made some cream toast for Bab, the kind that almost always tempted her appetite. She put the plate on a tray with a clean fringed napkin under it to make it look a little festive. She was half-way up the stairs with it when the bell rang. She waited while Jean answered the door.

It was Jim McGuire from the drug store with Bab's medicine. The rather small bottle of water-like liquid cost a dollar and a quarter. This price made the girls gasp.

"A dollar and a quarter," said Corny when the money was paid and the door was closed upon the messenger. "Let's see, that from fifteen forty-two _____"

"Stop!" cried Jean, hands to ears. "I refuse to listen. What we don't know won't h-hurt us."

“Well, you can close your ears, Jean,” said practical Corny. “But you can’t close your eyes forever. Me—I believe in facing facts!” And she went on up with the invalid’s dinner.

For two days it did not snow. Then, on the evening of the third day, came such a storm as the girls would long remember. It was a long, desolate, worry-filled night for the four little women of Roxby. The wind howled drearily about the house, shaking windows and rattling the shutters of the old house until it seemed that they must break off from it and go rattling away before the blustering gale.

With morning came a temporary lull in the hostility of the elements. The sun came out and shone weakly on the white expanse of snow. The pathway made by Corny and Alice and Dave Barchester a short time before was nowhere to be seen. Before the house were heaped-up drifts undulating like the waves of a stormy sea. Alice guessed that in the deepest spots the snow must come above one’s knees.

“How we are going to navigate to-day, remains a mystery,” said Corny, ruefully regarding the snowy prospect.

“What we need is a dog team and a set of skis,” said Alice, peering over her shoulder.

“Three sets,” Corny corrected her. “We all have to go out to-day.”

“But not all at once,” commented Jean from the corner where she was sitting, putting the finishing stitches in Nell Slater’s satin slip. “Some one must stay with Bab.”

“You do that, Jean. She needs you and misses you more than the rest of us. I can deliver your things to Nell Slater and take any new orders she may have for you.”

“Horrid old red-haired thing,” said Alice spitefully. “She has all the money she wants and then has no more sense than to dress in bright green. Ugh! The color scheme makes your eyes ache.”

“Nell is quite good-looking in a flashy way,” said Jean pacifically. “I think she always means to be kind.”

“Kind!” snorted Alice. “Patronizing, you mean. Just because we haven’t any money! Every time I see her I have a horrible fear that she means to pat me on the head and tell me to be a good child. She can’t be more than twenty herself, either.”

“What I want to know is—how can any one leave the house with the snow as deep as it is? One needs a snowplow to-day,” observed Jean, changing the subject.

“I have it!”

Corny was out of the room in a flash and running down the stairs. They heard her rummaging in the cellar, pulling boxes about and making a great noise. A few moments later she reappeared with two pairs of high rubber boots.

These had belonged to a man who in the time of their Aunt Virginia Rowe and their comparative opulence had been employed to do odd jobs about the house. The man had departed simultaneously with the change in their fortunes and had left the boots, forgotten or permanently discarded, behind him.

Corny jubilantly held up these relics.

“Snow, thy terrors have departed! Behold, girls! Boots!”

“Good gracious, Corny, you can’t expect us to appear in those dreadful things!” came from Alice.

“Better than not to appear at all,” said Corny. She sat down and began pulling one of the boots on over her shoe with the greatest energy. “Bother! I believe this one has a tear in the heel.”

“Then what good is it?”

“Still better than nothing. You get busy there, Alice Rowe, and boot yourself. I give you fair warning, I shan’t wait for you when I’m ready.”

Fortunately the former wearer of the rubber boots had not been a big man. Although his erstwhile property came well up on the girls, they could manage to wear the boots without appearing ridiculous.

They went in to show Bab how they looked, and the sick girl laughed and said that she would wear boots twice the size for the sake of going out into the snow.

Corny wrapped up Jean’s sewing and Alice took the precious box of candy under her arm.

“We won’t be long, Jean,” they said.

“Perhaps I’ll be able to bring home some more work to you,” Corny added, “and find a hat or two to trim for myself.”

“And if Mrs. Dare likes the fudge, I’m almost certain to get more orders,” Alice added.

Jean made some cheery response and, a moment later, watched her sisters plow through the deep snow to the gate.

Her hands felt very empty. She had no more orders on hand just then, and though demands for her needlework were sure to come, there was a

doubt and uncertainty about her work that was always hard to bear—and never more so than at this time when funds were so desperately needed.

A queer sound came from the direction of the kitchen. Startled, Jean stood still and listened more intently.

This time there could be no doubt. That noise was of a doorknob turned cautiously. A moment later the sound of a guarded footstep came to Jean's ears.

Jean's first thought was that the girls had returned; her second, that they would never have entered the house in that fashion. Who could it be?

Her heart in her mouth, Jean glided swiftly, almost noiselessly, along the hallway toward the kitchen.

CHAPTER VI

THE TRAMP

DESPITE her small stature and her dainty, frail appearance, Jean had her full share of the Rowe courage.

Even when she found that the author of the footstep was a great, hulking man with a two weeks' growth of red beard on his face and a blear-eyed, brutal appearance, the girl did not cry out or fly wildly from the place. She merely stepped backward toward the stove, grasped a poker and held the weapon rigidly behind her while she faced the intruder.

The man himself had halted in his stealthy approach at sight of her and now stood near one of the windows in a half-crouching position, his head swaying a little from side to side, his watchful eyes intent upon the girl.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Jean, in a steady voice. "What do you mean by coming into my kitchen without even knocking on the door?"

The man grinned in what was evidently meant to be an ingratiating manner.

"Beggin' your pardon, Miss, I did knock," he said. "But seein's no one heered me and me being what you kinda might call cold from standin' in the snow, I took the liberty of walkin' in."

"It was a liberty," Jean said coldly. "Would you mind walking out again?"

Jean realized her mistake almost as soon as she had made it. This man was not of the type one could safely anger. She saw that instantly by the lowering look in his eyes and the fisting of his hairy hands.

"I ain't goin' to walk out till I get somethin' to eat," he told her, his mouth drawn in an offensive leer. "Get busy now and rustle some grub. Or mebbe you'd like me to hunt some for myself?"

Jean had been thinking hard during the last few seconds. There was a chance that the man was actually in want of food, and, his hunger satisfied, would go away without molesting her further. She would try being nice to him. Perhaps diplomacy would do what force could not.

"If you are hungry I'm sorry," she said, and, without moving, her hands still behind her, restored the poker silently and cautiously to its place. "Sit down and I will give you some breakfast."

The man grunted some inarticulate reply. He did not sit down, but retained his position near the window, watching her.

Despite her courage, it required all the girl's will to force herself to turn her back upon that steady regard and go about the work of warming up some beans left from the night before as quietly and unemotionally as though she were alone in the room. However, she did accomplish it and lived to marvel ever afterward at her courage.

The plate of beans was set upon the table, together with some bread and butter and a glass of milk.

The tramp set down at the table, regarded the repast with a sneer and pounded with his knife on the table.

"Coffee!" he demanded in a harsh voice. "And make it quick!"

An indignant, furious retort sprang to Jean's lips but she choked it back. For behind her anger fear was growing.

What if this man was not mollified by her generosity? What if he were merely encouraged by it to make fresh demands upon her?

The little house in which the Rows had always lived was situated on the fringe of the town of Roxby, and here the houses were few and scattered. It was too early to expect any one to drop in, even though the banked-up snow were not already sufficient discouragement to casual visiting.

She was practically at the mercy of this tramp. She must pretend to agree to all his demands, the while she tried to think of some way of escape.

The thought of Bab, helpless in her bed upstairs, chained her to the house, but this thought also served to strengthen her resolution. She, Jean, was the one barrier between Bab and the intruder. She must prove a strong one.

There was some coffee left over from breakfast. She warmed this up and placed a steaming cup before her self-invited guest.

He drank it up in one gulp—so it seemed to Jean—and, with a smacking of lips and a leer, demanded more.

"I can't give you any more." Jean tried hard to speak patiently, even conciliatingly. "We are poor and I have no more in the house."

The sneer faded from the face of the tramp and gave place to a heavy frown.

"Beans then!" he demanded.

"We haven't any more of anything," Jean said, her nerves wearing thin. "I have already given you a good breakfast—better than you would have had anywhere else. Won't you please go now?"

The man rose slowly from his chair, the expression of his face so threatening that Jean pressed a hand against her lips to strangle the cry that rose to them.

“Won’t give me any more? Ain’t got nothin’ else in the house, eh?” he sneered. “Well, mebbe we’ll see about that!”

Jean retreated before him toward the stove where her trembling fingers once more grasped the poker. As a last resort she would use it, to the best of her ability, thoroughly and well!

“You had better get out of here,” she said in a voice tremulous with mingled fear and rage. “My father will be in at any moment and I advise you not to let him find you here!”

Of course it was only a magnificent bluff, but it succeeded in holding the advance of the tramp for a moment. He stared at the girl, his sneering eyes studying her unflinching face.

“Think you can fool me, do you?” he growled. “It ain’t likely you’re expectin’ no father home this time of the morning. Think again, sister. This ain’t six o’clock.”

“I tell you he will be here at any moment,” Jean flamed at him. “And if you come a step closer, I warn you it will be the worse for you!”

The rascal chuckled and turned from her to the door of the pantry.

“I ain’t aimin’ to hurt you, sister,” he said, with a leer. “All I’m after’s a bit of grub. Them beans might have been fillin’—what there was of them, but there wasn’t half enough. Ain’t anythin’ more in the house, eh? Well, we’ll soon see about that.”

Jean watched him swing open the door of the pantry, watched with a swift plan dawning in her eyes as he opened the top door of the old ice box.

There was a key on the outside of the pantry door. If she could reach that door, close it, turn the key——

With the utmost caution she relinquished the poker, but despite her care it clinked softly against the stove. The tramp closed the upper door of the ice box with an irritated bang and the slight sound of the poker was lost.

Jean must act swiftly, silently! Summoning all her courage, she ran quickly across the room and slammed shut the door of the pantry.

She heard a swift, irate exclamation from the man on the other side. There was the sound of a heavy body flung against the door and a heavy hand laid on the knob.

Sobbingly, Jean fumbled with the key. From disuse it had rusted in the lock and was hard to turn. With the strength of desperation she tugged at it

and it slipped groaningly into place just as a great pull on the inside of the door would have wrenched it from her hand.

The lock groaned, but held.

Jean leaned against the door frame, white and trembling.

She had won this much of the battle, but common sense told her that her victory would not be of long duration.

The door of the pantry was old, like all the rest of the little house, and not over-strong. It would take only a short time for the furious man within to burst it from its hinges or break through one of the panels.

“Open this door, will you?” cried a raging voice from within. “Or do I have to break it down?”

At the same moment the door creaked and groaned beneath the furious impact of a heavy body.

CHAPTER VII

RESCUE

JEAN ROWE leaped back from the door, frightened and with hand at her throat.

Fear cried to her to fly from the house, to run to her nearest neighbor and bring aid.

But there was Bab! She would be left alone in the house at the mercy of this furious rascal! Impossible!

It would be only a matter of moments now before the door yielded to the rascal's onslaughts. Jean trembled when she thought of opposing her small strength to that tide of liberated rage.

"What shall I do? What can I do?" she cried. "Oh, if I only had somebody—somebody——"

There was the crackling sound of shattered wood and a panel of the door burst outward.

Jean caught up the poker again and backed to the farthest limits of the room, watching the pantry with staring eyes. A great hairy hand was thrust through the broken panel. The key turned with a rasping protest.

Again Jean felt an almost irresistible impulse toward flight. She gripped the poker tightly, wondering if she would be able to use it when the moment came or if she would just die of fright!

Snarling like a tiger just liberated from a trap, the tramp broke into the kitchen. At sight of him, Jean's breath came in frightened gasps; she felt her knees go weak beneath her.

"You will play a trick on me, will you? You will try to get me in a trap, eh? Well, now, I'll just show you what foolin' with Jerry Linkel means!"

The man advanced swiftly, menacingly.

Jean tried to lift the poker, but suddenly everything went black before her. She reached gropingly for the window casing. She was going to faint! Oh, Bab—Bab——

A familiar voice came from a great distance—a strong arm went about her shoulders.

“Give him the bum’s rush, Dick,” she heard a familiar voice say. “I’ll tend to Jean here. The poor kid’s about all in!”

The black mist cleared suddenly from before the girl’s eyes. Some one had lifted her as though she were a baby and set her down in a chair. Some one was holding a glass of water to her lips.

“All right, Jean,” the familiar voice was saying. “Don’t hold on to me so hard, you poor kid. This ain’t a raft and you ain’t about to sink.”

Jean laughed shakily, but clung to Dave Barchester’s big hand all the harder. It was all that saved her from bursting into a passion of tears, and she would not have cried for the world, she told herself.

“H-how did you happen to get here, Dave?” gasped Jean. “And where’s the tramp?”

Dave chuckled.

“As far from here as Dick can throw him,” he said. “You should have seen him, Jean. It took about two wallops to knock him out. I landed on his nose and Dick landed on his jaw, and the big stiff went down like a log of wood. Then Dick threw him out while I stayed to take care of you. Feel better, Jean?”

“Oh, yes, I’m all right now. Dave, I’m so grateful——”

“It ain’t a question of gratitude, Jean.” The big fellow was bashful when praised. “It was a real pleasure to get in a wallop at that hobo. I bet his nose bleeds for a week. But say, Jean, how did it happen? How did we come to find a hobo in your kitchen and you threatening him with a poker—just like a kitten spitting at a mastiff?”

Jean giggled, then choked. Dave pretended not to notice when she wiped a telltale tear from her eye.

“He just walked in the back door. I must have left it open without knowing. No one ever bothers us, you know. Here comes Dick Rockwell,” as another young fellow loomed up in the doorway, rubbing his hands suggestively on his overcoat. “Wh-what did you do to him, Dick?”

“Plenty,” replied the young fellow laconically.

Dick Rockwell, a son of the hardware dealer in the town, was a big man, too, though not as powerful as Dave. At the time of this story he was just twenty-one, and felt the dignity of every one of his years. Dick had waving brown hair, brown eyes with glints of grey, and a pleasant, reckless expression to his handsome mouth. Any one, just by looking at him, might guess that Dick never hesitated at any danger. He would step into the street to stop a runaway horse or on to the tracks to flag a runaway train with as

much nonchalance as though he had merely walked into a restaurant to order his lunch.

Most people liked Dick Rockwell, including Nell Slater of the green sweater and the red bobbed hair. And Nell Slater, at least, took no pains to hide the fact.

Dave Barchester was of an opposite type. Rugged, commanding, slow and drawling of speech, he was not so quick to make friends as Dick, but those friends he made stuck to him through thick and thin. Dave was twenty-four, and now had almost complete charge of his mother's business. He was on the way to becoming quite a figure in the financial life of Roxby.

To these young fellows, then, Jean told the story of the tramp. Before she had half finished Dave had rushed to the door with the avowed intention of overtaking the tramp and bringing him back for further punishment.

On Jean's earnest entreaty he reconsidered his determination, however, and reseated himself while the girl finished her story.

"How there happens to be tramps in a snowbound town like Roxby, I can't see," she said. "We scarcely see any, even in the summer, and now with the snow thick on the ground——"

"There are several stalled trains along the way, Jean," Dick said. "That may possibly explain the hobo. Perhaps he was stealing a ride to another city, even hounded by the police. What more natural than that he should drop off here for a free breakfast——"

"And as much more, probably, as he could put his greasy hands on," muttered Dave, looking about the room. "He sure made a wreck of your pantry door, Jean."

"Oh, the pantry door," said Jean, with expressively outstretched hands. "As long as that's all! Boys," she added, as though it had just occurred to her, "what was it you came for—anything special? Or did it just happen?"

"I begin to believe we were led by fate," said Dave solemnly. "Jean, when I think of that hobo and what might have happened——"

"Don't think of it!" said Jean quickly. "I'd really rather not, Dave. But you haven't answered my question. What brought you?"

"Good intentions," answered Dick, with a grin. "We were going to dig you out—came armed with shovels and everything. Gee, it's good we didn't break one of them over the tramp's head. We might have been up for murder!"

"No 'might' about it," said Dave grimly. He rose, laying one big hand over Jean's for a moment. "If you're all right," he said, "we may as well be

getting on with our job.”

“You’re awfully good, both of you,” said Jean gratefully. “Regular rescuing angels.”

Dick chuckled.

“I bet that’s the first time you were ever called an angel, Dave. How about it?”

“And likely to be the last,” replied Dave, with his slow smile. “Come on, Dick, let’s go.”

“You’ll come in again before you leave, won’t you?” asked Jean.

“Oh, yes,” answered Dave, as the two young men went outside.

As Jean listened to the lusty scraping of the shovels and gathered up the few soiled breakfast dishes, she was hard put to it to believe that the recent happening had not been a dream. Only the broken panel in the pantry door served to remind her of the reality of that terrible experience.

Presently Bab called to her. Jean left the dishes half done and ran upstairs.

Nevertheless, before she left the kitchen she was very careful to lock the kitchen door.

CHAPTER VIII

NELL SLATER'S FRIEND

JEAN hoped that the sick girl had not heard the disturbance, or at least had not guessed the cause of it.

One glance at Bab assured her that her youngest sister had not been frightened, though she had heard the voices below stairs and was curious.

"Dave and Dick," Jean explained cheerfully, as she raised the shade higher so as to let in a dazzling stream of sunshine and adjusted the little sufferer in her bed so that she might see the white-swathed world without. "They have come to shovel us a path to the street. If Alice and Corny had waited a little while they would not have had to wade through snow to their knees. How do you feel this morning, dear? Better?"

"A little better, I think, Jean; though I am always stronger in the mornings, you know. It was nice of Dick and Dave to come. It's lucky we have them, Jean, to help us out sometimes when we need help most."

"Yes, very, very lucky," said Jean, with a fervor that the younger girl could not understand.

Meanwhile Corny and Alice were having their own adventures. Although these were not as exciting as the one experienced by Jean, they were almost as harrowing in a different way.

Arrived at the main street of the town, the two girls went their separate ways—Corny to Nell Slater's house, Alice to the home of Deacon Dare.

It happened that on this particular morning Mrs. Dare was suffering from one of her rare attacks of indigestion. Ordinarily a peaceful, good-natured soul, this malady magically transformed her into as irritable, capricious and cranky an old woman as ever lived.

The sight of Alice's carefully made and really delicious nut fudge filled her with irritation where ordinarily she would have felt only pleasure.

She took a critical bite, made a face, said the candy was too hard and had not enough nuts.

"It ain't tasty like I supposed it would be," said the old woman, peering over thick-lensed spectacles at her pretty, straight-lipped young visitor. "Not like the fudge my sister Caroline's daughter can make. Maybe you had the fire too hot under it."

“Maybe,” Alice managed, sitting very still.

“Anyway, I don’t think it’s worth a dollar,” said Mrs. Dare, pawing over the rich sweets with thin old hands like claws. “But I can give you seventy-five cents, if that’s agreeable.”

Alice wanted to shout that seventy-five cents was not “agreeable,” that Mrs. Dare had agreed to pay her a dollar for her candy, that her fudge was as good as it was possible for any fudge to be, that she was ready to keep her part of the bargain and she expected the old woman to keep hers.

But she dared not speak, for fear she would say too much or, worse still, would break into tears and so disgrace herself forever.

So she sat still and straight and white-lipped while Mrs. Dare limped over to a table in the center of the room, drew forth a pocketbook and carefully and slowly counted out seventy-five cents in dimes and nickels.

This she poured into the girl’s limp hand with an air of great magnanimity.

Alice rose swiftly and walked to the door, the old woman limping after her.

“Maybe next time it will be better,” said the latter consolingly.

“If there is a next time!” muttered Alice.

“What say?” The query was sharp and querulous. “Don’t go muttering to yourself, Alice Rowe. ’Tisn’t polite.”

But Alice had called out a good-bye and was already stumbling, half-blinded, through the snow, angry tears forming a film before her eyes.

“Seventy-five cents!” she said over and over to herself. “That’s about fifteen cents’ profit. How does she think I’m going to live on that? Stingy old thing! Oh, I’m a fine one to help the girls along! Fifteen cents. Good gracious, isn’t there some way, any way, that I can earn some money?”

Meanwhile Corny had repaired to the ostentatious home of Nell Slater immediately after parting with her younger sister.

Corny was in a reckless mood. The closing of Miss Johnson’s shop and the consequent loss of her position had thrown a great responsibility upon her young shoulders.

She knew that Jean could not contribute a great deal to the family income, since it was her place to keep house and take care of Bab.

Alice was trying her gallant best to make money, but Corny had not much faith in her candy venture. In a larger town or in a city where candy could be produced and sold in quantities, there would have been a better

chance to work up a paying business. But quantity production was a necessity if one hoped to show real profits.

Therefore, if Alice and Jean between them could make only a pittance, it was obviously up to her, Corny, to supply the deficiency in the family income. How to do it?

The Slaters' house loomed up before her, and Corny was conscious of a dull resentment as she looked at it. The Slaters were the richest family in the town. Their house was an atrocity of glaring red brick with gimcrack balconies everywhere and a pair of iron stags on either side of the walk.

In spite of its extreme ugliness, the house wore an air of affluence that made it subtly commanding and lent to its very ugliness an air of dignity.

The house was like Nell Slater herself, Corny thought whimsically. Nell was garish, a little brazen, a little ugly, yet Nell rode in the only high-powered motor car Roxby boasted, and so gained a certain importance, a certain attractiveness.

With the package under her arm—the package representing so much of Jean's time and effort and skill—which she would exchange for Nell Slater's cash, Corny walked between the twin stags and up the broad steps of the porch, the while her sense of injury grew.

To have possessed just a little portion of Nell Slater's money would mean comfort, almost luxury, to her sisters and herself, would give Bab the best kind of care and tempting food. Just a little would do all this, and Nell and her smug father and her patronizing mother would never miss the difference.

The bell was answered by Nell Slater herself.

"Well, hello, Corny Rowe! Come in. Where's Jean? Oh, I see—you've come in place of her. What immense rubber boots! Very useful on a day like this though—yes, indeed. Leave them on the porch, though. There won't be room in the parlor for both you and the boots. The room's so small. Don't let father hear me say that, though. He thinks the parlor is quite all right, of course. Want any help? No? Well, you always were too independent for your own good."

"Do you think so?" asked Corny, quietly following the other girl into the over-elaborate hall, Jean's bundle of sewing under her arm.

"Think so! That's good! I know so, Corny Rowe! You stick up your nose, you and your three sisters, at things other poor people would be glad enough to get. Oh, so there's the sewing. Let me see."

Perhaps the glint in Corny's eye warned the other girl that she had gone too far in her criticism of the Rowe sisters. At any rate, she changed the

subject abruptly and reached for the bundle almost with an air of embarrassment.

Without a word Corny handed over her burden and watched coldly while Nell Slater undid the string.

“Ah-h!” It was an involuntary exclamation of delight from the red-haired girl. “Jean can embroider. What a love of a slip! Hold this up in front of you, Corny, so I can see it better.”

It was the tone of the request, rather than the request itself, that jarred upon Corny and made her long to refuse. Nell Slater had a way of treating those less fortunate than herself in a very supercilious and curt manner.

Corny hesitated, bit her lip, then almost snatched the slip from Nell Slater’s outstretched hand and held it up in front of her.

Nell clapped her hands and was about to speak when from the doorway came the sound of a giggle.

Nell chuckled, too, and waved her hand in the direction of the sound.

“Come in, Ruth,” she called. “Maybe you’ll want some of this work yourself.”

CHAPTER IX

THE OLD LADY

CORNY dropped the slip into Nell Slater's lap and turned toward the door.

"I think I'll go now," she said. "If there's any more work you'd like Jean to do——"

"Oh, wait a minute! There's loads more work I want Jean to do, and I'm not half finished with you yet. Ruthie, what are you waiting for?"

At the words a girl bounced into the room. She was a pretty girl in a babyish sort of way, but one need be in her presence but a short time to realize that about the only asset this girl possessed was her looks.

She was elaborately dressed—Corny thought the frock she wore pretty enough for any party—had dark hair and eyes and giggled incessantly. All this Corny ascertained in the one brief glance she directed toward Nell Slater's friend.

Corny was on edge to be off and yet did not like to go until Nell had paid her for Jean's work. She had no desire to meet a friend of Nell Slater's, especially when the latter was bound to treat her with a hauteur that never failed to enrage the independent girl.

"Hold the slip up again, Corny, do!" Nell was saying. "This is Corny Rowe, Ruthie, one of the Rowe girls I was telling you about. Her sister Jean does the most exquisite needlework I have ever seen. I am going to have her do more work, and maybe you'd like to give her an order or two while you're here."

The giggling Ruthie, whose last name was Durnham, exclaimed delightedly over the pretty embroidery on the satin slip, but hesitated when Nell suggested that she also give Jean work to do.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I really have all the pretty underthings I need. Now, if she could do dresses——"

"She can, can't she, Corny?" asked Nell.

"I'm sure Jean can do anything in the way of sewing that she wants to do," Corny said, with pride in her sister's ability.

"But would she?" Nell insisted.

Corny had heard Jean say that she would be able to make more money in dressmaking than she could with her embroidery needle, since art work was always slow work if one would do it well. So now, mindful of her sister's interests, she answered confidently:

"I'm sure she would. What would you like done?" she added, turning to Nell Slater's friend.

"Oh, perhaps an afternoon dress," the latter answered carelessly. "You know I spilled chocolate on my gray one the other day, Nell, and I really need one to take its place. And then—let's see—I could use several morning dresses. My supply is running quite low. Of course," she added, turning to Corny with a condescending air, "your sister would have to be quick. I would need these things in a hurry or not at all."

Corny wanted to say that Jean would on no account make dresses for any one who spoke in that way. But she thought of her sister's delight in such a large order, of the expensive medicines and tempting food the money would buy for Bab.

"After all, beggars can't be choosers," she told herself, and so bit her lips on the sharp words that rose to them and answered quietly:

"My sister is very quick with her needle. I'm sure she would have your dresses for you as soon as you wanted them."

"Well, that's nice. Send her here to-morrow—or no, I'm going away to visit another friend for a few days. I'll be back in four or five days. Then I'll let you know when your sister can come. But she'll have to hurry the work."

"All right," said Corny, and turned again toward the door.

Nell Slater called her back.

"What's your hurry, Corny Rowe? Don't you want your money? Or are you so rich you don't need it?"

Ruth Durnham giggled. Evidently Nell Slater had described to her in detail the poverty of the Rowe sisters and the cruel joke on the part of her friend, touched Ruth's sense of humor.

Corny flushed darkly and bit her lip.

"Where's your pride, Corny Rowe?" she scolded herself. "Don't dare let them know that they can hurt you!"

"Of course my sister expects payment for the work she has done, Nell. But there is no real hurry. We know you are good for it."

Strike one! It was Nell Slater's turn to flush.

"Well, I should hope so," she cried, with a toss of her head and an angry glance as her friend giggled again. "Of all things!"

She counted out the money with her nose in the air and handed it to Corny as though she were giving alms to an impudent beggar.

The latter accepted the money calmly. There was even the trace of a smile on her lips as she turned to the door.

“Good-bye,” she said. “I will tell Jean what you said about the dresses.”

From the window of the parlor Nell Slater watched Corny Rowe trudge off through the snow in the high rubber boots that were far too big for her.

“Poor as church mice!” she grumbled, as her friend joined her at the window. “Poor as church mice and proud as peacocks, those Rowe girls, those ‘four little women of Roxby.’ I believe sometimes they haven’t enough to eat, and yet they act as though they owned the earth. Did you hear the way that Corny Rowe spoke to me?”

“I certainly did, Nell. She gave you a good one,” said Ruth, and giggled—a giggle that was not calculated to make Nell feel more kindly toward the Rowe girls, “those four little women of Roxby.”

Although Corny had, in a sense, come off with the honors from her encounter with the red-haired girl, she was by no means elated as she trudged on her way toward home. The interview had been humiliating, and she wished passionately that neither Jean nor she need pass over the doorstep of Nell Slater’s home again.

Still, Jean would be pleased with the order. It would mean something to tide over their immediate necessities. By the time Nell Slater’s friend had returned to her home there might be other orders. Or perhaps, wistfully, she herself might have found some work to do.

On the way home it was necessary to pass Miss Johnson’s millinery shop. Corny turned her eyes away from the bare show window and hurried on.

If only she had a little capital, a little ready money with which to buy out the business and start again under her own management!

Corny had faith in her ability to make hats. She had faith also in her ability to make a hat to fit every face—a gift rare enough to command respect and patronage even in Roxby.

Miss Johnson had been afraid of her most daring ideas, calling them revolutionary. Corny had been hampered. If alone, she felt that she would be able to give free rein to her imagination.

“Roxby would sit up and take notice and I would sell hats,” she mused, eyes bright with her vision. “Within six months I believe not even a native of Roxby would be able to recognize Miss Johnson’s place in the new Elite

Shoppe. I would have little gray enameled tables inside with three mirrors apiece, so that one could see all angles of a hat at once. The walls would be done in gray panels, and I could have some sort of gray and rose rug on the floor. There ought to be a wicker chair or two, I suppose, for friends of customers. I'd make it so attractive and I would have so many becoming hats for each customer that no one could bear to leave the shop without at least one new hat—and perhaps two or three if she had money enough!

“I'd have pretty rose and gray hat boxes, too,” she went on, blinded to everything about her by this radiant inner vision, “so that whenever any one put on a hat she would be reminded of the Elite Shoppe. That's good advertising—the best kind, really, I should think—because it isn't forced on one.

“Within a year I believe I could work up a business that would put us all beyond the reach of want. But what's the use of all this star-gazing?” She brought herself up almost angrily. “The plain fact is, Corny Rowe, that you haven't a bit of money, and you're out of a job as well. You might as well face the truth, even if it isn't as pleasant as that lovely, bubbly dream-castle you were just building. Hello!” she cried and stopped abruptly. “What's this?”

In her preoccupation she had reached her own street without knowing it. Now, turning the corner, she saw an old woman ahead of her struggling along through drifts which, at this point, were almost waist deep.

As Corny watched, strength seemed to desert the old woman and, not far from the Rowe house, she pitched forward on the snow, umbrella and satchel flying from her hand.

Corny darted instantly to her aid.

CHAPTER X

MYSTERY

THE old woman who had fallen tried to raise herself and smiled as the girl bent over her. At the same moment the door opened and Alice came flying out, a sweater caught about her shoulders.

“Gracious!” cried the latter. “What shall I do, Corny?”

“Go inside,” Corny replied, as she glanced at the shivering girl. “You will catch your death of cold.”

“Nonsense. I’m going to help.”

“My satchel,” said the old woman faintly, as Corny’s strong young arms went about her.

“I’ll get it,” said Alice quickly. “And your umbrella, too.”

She kept her promise, even though by doing so she was forced to flounder several feet through the snow.

Corny gave her sister an exasperated glance, but did not protest. The damage was done and, besides, she had her own hands full. The woman was trembling with fatigue and could only creep toward the house, resting almost her entire weight upon Corny’s supporting arm.

Alice pressed past them and ran into the house to deposit the satchel and umbrella. Then she came back and took the woman’s other arm.

Between them, the girls got her into the house, where Jean was awaiting them with an anxious face. She had pushed a big chair close to a register and heaped it high with cushions.

So far the old lady had not spoken, except to call for her satchel. Now she sank down in the chair with a sigh of sheer exhaustion and rested her head against the back of it.

Her white face and closed eyes frightened the girls.

“Make a cup of hot chocolate, Alice,” Jean directed, but as her sister started to obey Corny interposed.

“I’ll do it,” she said. “Meanwhile you go upstairs, Alice Rowe, and change your shoes and stockings. We are not going to have you down with pneumonia.”

“Yes, do, my dear.” The words were spoken faintly, but with a certain precision.

The girls started and looked at their unexpected guest. Her eyes were open and in them was a gleam of authority. “There is nothing worse for the health than to get one’s feet wet with snow water. Be sure to rub them with a good rough towel.”

Alice said afterward that she was too surprised to rebel. With an almost laughable meekness she went upstairs, leaving her sisters to marvel at the change in her. It was one of the few times they had seen Alice yield a point without disputing it!

Corny went into the kitchen to concoct a hot drink and Jean was left alone with her unexpected guest.

“You must be cold and wet, too, floundering along in that snow,” she said, taking the old lady’s cold hand and rubbing it. “You must change your clothes. I’ll go up and get some of my things for you.”

“Oh, no, my dear!” The old lady got quickly to her feet as Jean turned toward the door. She stood there, hand clinging to the arm of the chair for support, tremulous but determined. “I must go on. I just wandered from the train in the hope of finding help——”

“Help?” repeated Jean, coming slowly back to the woman. “What for? Please sit down again while you answer me. You can’t be in a great hurry.”

The old lady sank back into the chair again, though her veined old hand kept up a restless tattoo on the arm of the chair.

“No, I don’t suppose there’s any hurry,” she admitted. “My train won’t go for some time. Shouldn’t wonder if some one would have to come and dig it out of the snow.”

“Oh,” hazarded Jean, remembering what Dave Barchester had told her. “I suppose the railroad cut is full of snow again and your train is stalled on the other side of it?”

The old woman nodded.

“That’s it. I couldn’t see any use in sitting in that train any longer,” she added. “So I got out and started to walk into town.”

“That was a pretty large undertaking, with the snow as deep as it is,” Jean said.

The old lady nodded, keeping up the restless drumming on the arm of her chair.

“If I’d known how deep it was, I’d never have started,” she said. “But I thought probably the cut had caught the worst of it. Didn’t seem to snow so

hard overnight. Anyway, I thought maybe I could get an automobile to take me where I want to go.”

“Where do you want to go?” asked Jean.

“To Philadelphia. I have a half-sister there,” said the old lady.

Jean was startled.

“That’s a long way to go by automobile in winter,” she suggested.

The old lady nodded, a perplexed look in her tired old eyes.

“I suppose it is. But I thought maybe I could get to another railroad line, anyway, that would get me where I want to go. Here! This is the address— just wait a minute—” She fumbled in the hand bag that hung from her wrist. Jean looked on with interest. She could hear Alice in Bab’s room upstairs, and so, knowing that the invalid was well attended, she could afford to spend more time with her pathetic, interesting visitor.

A dazed look came into the face of the old woman. Her fumbling in the bag became frantic.

“Where is it?” she cried, panic in her voice. “I had it here! I put it here, myself!”

“What?” asked Jean gently.

“A card—my card!” The old lady was becoming more and more agitated. She rose to her feet and shook out the black silk dress, peering eagerly about her on the floor in search of the missing object.

“What card?” asked Jean, sharing the excitement of her visitor. “Is it very important?”

The old lady straightened herself and looked at Jean. There was a suggestion of tragedy in the pose of the frail old figure.

“That card contained the address of my half-sister in Philadelphia,” she said slowly. “Now I have lost the card.”

“Surely, that is easily remedied!” cried Jean. “If you can’t remember the address, you can look up your half-sister in the telephone book. Don’t be so distressed,” she added, as the old lady sank into the chair and covered her face with her wrinkled hands. “Certainly we can find out what you want to know for you.”

“No, no, I’m afraid you can’t,” she said. “Not unless I can think of the name.”

“Surely, you can remember the name of your half-sister!” cried Jean.

The old lady looked up at her, eyes pathetically dimmed.

“You would think so, wouldn’t you, my dear—you who are young and can remember so easily? But I am old,” she passed her hand across her forehead. “Sometimes when I most wish to remember, I find only emptiness here. It is like that now.”

Jean did not speak. She was exceedingly sorry for this poor old lady with no one to care for her, adrift in a strange place with her memory impaired.

She drew up a chair and sat close to the pathetic old figure in sympathetic silence.

“My own name is Tamley, Grace Tamley, Mrs. Grace Tamley,” the woman said, looking at Jean with a half-smile on her lips. “I can remember that much, at least.”

“Mine is Jean Rowe,” the girl returned. “My sisters and I live here alone, and we shall be very glad to have you stay with us as long as you can.”

“Thank you, dearie. You’ve been very kind to an old woman, you and your sisters. You’re a sweet girl, too. But I can’t stay. They would be worrying about me—my half-sister and her husband.” This was said wistfully as though the old lady in her heart were not at all sure of being worried about! “If I could only remember the name!”

She sat in a brown study for a moment. Then her face brightened.

“Brown! That’s it! That’s the name! Now there is nothing to stop me any longer! I must be getting on!”

CHAPTER XI

GREAT DANGER

MRS. TAMLEY got to her feet and looked about her for her satchel as though she actually intended leaving at that moment.

Jean put a deterring hand upon her arm.

“Do you remember the initials of your sister’s name?” she asked. “There must be a great many Browns in a city as large as Philadelphia, you know.”

At the words the old lady collapsed, sinking into the chair and rocking to and fro in a hopeless way that went to Jean’s heart.

“No, no, I can’t think of the first name. You are right, my dear. There must be great many—a great many Browns—a great many Browns—” She said it over and over again so many times and in such a queer despairing way that Jean became actually frightened. Either the old lady was already mad or would be soon if something were not done to arouse her.

Corny came in at that moment with the hot chocolate, and between them the sisters managed to cheer and comfort their strange guest and to assure her that they would do all in their power to restore her to her relatives.

Jean persuaded her to go upstairs with them after a while and change her wet clothes for dry comfortable things.

“You must stay with us for as long as you like, or until you can hear from your friends,” Jean said.

Corny echoed this invitation, but with a sinking of her heart as she thought of the leanness of the family purse and wondered how they could manage to feed another mouth.

The old lady adapted herself meekly enough to the routine of the household in the days that followed, although she seemed always abstracted and wistful. She was a complete mystery to the girls, and though they wondered about her a great deal and earnestly wished to help her, they could think of no way to do so.

The only one of the four little women in whom the old lady seemed to take an acute interest was Bab. She spent hours in the sick girl’s room, and Bab always liked to see her there and missed her when she was absent.

The girls became more and more worried about Bab. Then came the black day when their fears reached the point of wild alarm.

Jean was sewing in the living room when suddenly Alice appeared in the doorway, her face white, her lips compressed, a look of fear in her eyes.

“Bab wants you, Jeanie,” she said. “Her fever is rising again and she’s talking wildly. Jean, where do you suppose I found her when I went upstairs?”

“Where?” Jean cried out in sudden, terrible alarm. “Oh, Alice, why do you look so? Where did you find her?”

“At the window, Jean! She had it open and was standing in the cold draught. Jean—Jean—don’t look that way! I—oh, what shall we do?” Alice turned away and burst into sobs, tearing, strangling sounds that wracked her.

Jean was flying up the stairs, white-lipped. She burst into Bab’s room and flung herself beside the sick girl’s bed.

“Bab! My little Bab! What have you done? Standing by the open window with only this little nightie on. It’s cold, Bab! Do you hear? Bab!”

Jean’s eyes widened, darkened, as she stared at the sick girl. She raised a hand to her mouth and kept it pressed there hard, to choke back a cry of terror.

Bab’s lips were blue. The bright, feverish color had faded from her cheeks. She huddled beneath the blankets, shivering so violently that her teeth clicked together.

“I’m s-sorry, Jean. I was so hot. I just wanted to cool myself a little. But now I’m not hot. I’m c-cold. Jean, if you could put your arms about me and hold me tight I think I would be warmer. That’s right, poor dear Jean. Don’t cry, dear, I’m m-much better now!”

“Oh, my dear, my dear little sister! If Jeanie could lie down here now and see you well——”

A hand was laid on Jean’s shoulder. There was authority in the touch, though the hand was only a soft old wrinkled one.

“Let me take care of her,” said Mrs. Tamley. Behind her in the doorway Jean could see her two sisters, Alice, her face swollen and tear-stained, Corny with a cup of hot milk in her hand.

“I used to be a nurse,” the old woman added, as Jean still stared at her, uncomprehending. “I’ve not forgotten the trick of it. This little girl needs a nurse as badly as any one I’ve ever seen.”

Jean rose to her feet slowly, still holding Bab’s hand.

“A nurse?” she repeated. “Then you will take care of her?”

“Yes,” said the old lady briskly. “Have you any stimulant in the house?”

“A little,” said Jean. “The doctor prescribed it.”

“Then get it, please. And a half glass of milk. Will the doctor come to-day?”

“We can expect him any time now,” Jean said.

She was answering dazedly. Her fierce anxiety, the truly remarkable change in Mrs. Tamley bewildered her.

It was Corny who first recovered command of herself. She set the glass of milk on Bab’s bedside table close to the old lady’s elbow.

“You had better drink this, Mrs. Tamley,” Corny said. “If you are going to take charge of the case you will need all your strength.”

The old woman appeared to recognize the logic of the advice. She drank the milk and set the empty glass back in the saucer with a satisfied clink.

“There!” she said. “That’s enough of me. Now we will take care of the patient.”

She turned to Bab, who had been following her movements curiously.

“Are you a nurse?” she asked.

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs. Tamley. She bent over the sick girl and smoothed her hair back from her face with experienced fingers. “I’m going to take care of you and make you well.”

“I’m glad,” said Bab faintly, shutting her eyes. “I feel pretty sick.”

The old woman looked about the room.

“Where’s that medicine?” she demanded.

“Here!” said Jean. She had run downstairs for the stimulant and reappeared with a bottle and a half glass of milk in her hand. “Do you need anything else—a spoon, or a measuring cup?” she asked anxiously.

The old lady shook her head. With swift sure fingers she prepared the drink which was to restore the sick girl’s vitality and perhaps ward off that dreadful sickness to which the girls’ fears would give no name.

She held the glass to her patient’s lips and after a moment of hesitation and a questioning glance into the face of the woman Bab swallowed the mixture without protest.

Alice, Jean, and Corny had drawn off into a corner of the room, watching the ministrations of their strange visitor with anxious eyes.

“Jean, I’m afraid!” Alice gripped her sister’s fingers in a clasp that hurt. “That chill! Do you suppose—it’s pneumonia?”

“No, no!” Jean put up her hand as though to ward off a blow. “I can’t bear even to think of the word! Wait till Doctor Tilson comes. Then—we’ll know.”

“Do you think it’s safe to trust Bab to Mrs. Tamley?” Corny asked in a low voice. “After all, we don’t know much about her.”

“She seems awfully sweet,” Jean said. “And she can’t do Bab any harm. When the doctor comes he can decide whether she ought to be allowed to nurse our Bab. Oh, girls, I wish the doctor would come!”

“There he is now,” said Alice, as she looked out the window in time to see the doctor trudging up the cleared path to their door, bag in hand.

“I’ll have a talk with him before I let him come up,” said Jean, and went out, closing the door softly behind her.

In a few hurried sentences Jean sketched for the attentive physician the important happenings of the past hour. The doctor started when he heard of Bab’s exposure at the open window, reached for his bag and was for going up to his patient at once. Jean detained him a moment more.

“This old lady who has been with us says she is a nurse, Doctor.”

“We’ll soon find out about that!” The doctor’s voice was gruff and he broke away from Jean’s detaining hand, leaving her to follow as she would. “But I’ll say this much, my child. If you have picked up a real nurse out of the snow, you never did a better bit of work in your life!”

The girls were all sent downstairs while the doctor examined first his patient and then Mrs. Tamley at great length.

So great was their anxiety that the three sisters scarcely spoke a word until the doctor’s step upon the stairs told them that the interview was over.

They surrounded him in an eager group as he reached the lower hall.

“Well, my dears,” he said slowly, looking from one to the other of them with a gravity of expression that frightened them more than his words. “I am sorry to say that your sister is in a very serious condition.”

“Oh, Doctor!” they cried together, and Corny added slowly: “Just what do you mean by that, Doctor Tilson?”

“I mean that she is hovering on the edge of pneumonia,” said the physician, looking at them in his steady, kindly way. “It will take the greatest care—professional care—to pull her through. Fortunately, you have a professional right at hand.”

“Doctor!” cried Jean. “You mean that the old lady really is a professional nurse and that you would trust Bab to her?”

“By all means. She knows her business thoroughly, and in her younger days must have been at the top of her profession. Of course she is old now,” he said, picking up his hat, “and must be relieved often. I have given her

directions and I'll drop in later in the afternoon to see how the patient is getting along."

"She is very bad, Doctor. If you find it necessary to call twice a day!" faltered Alice.

"Bab is a very sick girl. But with good nursing we ought to pull her through. Don't worry too much. I can't have any more patients on my hands."

"So that's that," said Corny, as the door closed behind him.

The three girls went up to their sister's room and were met at the door by Mrs. Tamley, finger on lips.

"She is almost asleep," said the old lady. Her face was flushed now, eyes bright with her new responsibility. "I'll tell you as soon as she asks for one of you or there is any change in her."

She closed the door then without a sound and left the sisters standing in the hall. They looked at each other silently and then tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen where they could talk things over.

"I don't like being shut out like this," said Alice, a day or two later as she walked restlessly up and down the room. "After all, she is our sister _____"

"But it is Bab we must think about now, first of all," urged Jean. "We have no right to think of ourselves until she is out of danger. And if that dear old lady will take charge of her now and give her the expert nursing she needs, I'll feel as though she had been sent to us by——"

"Providence," finished Corny, with a nod of her head. "Right you are, Jean. We must think of nothing but our poor Bab, now——"

"And how to make enough money to keep Bab in medicines!" Alice paused at the table, her hand on the table, knuckles white where they pressed against the bare wood. "Girls, girls, we've got to do something, and that in a hurry!"

Jean took out a shabby purse and from it counted out the money she had received from Nell Slater.

"Three dollars and twenty-five cents," she said. "That's something."

"Three dollars and a quarter for three days of the hardest kind of work!" burst out Alice fiercely. "Starvation wages, Jean! Not worth the time you spent upon it."

"It is better than nothing," answered Jean. She had been shocked and pained when first she had heard of Nell Slater's meanness, but was now becoming resigned to it. Corny had said nothing about the possible work

from Nell's friend. The girl might change her mind about having the dresses made, and what was the use of raising Jean's hopes only to have them dashed to the ground?

"Better than nothing! Oh, how tired I am of hearing that!" Alice flung herself into a chair and stretched an arm between her sisters, palm upward, while they stared in surprise at her flashing eyes, at the color that flamed in her face. "It may be better than nothing to have just enough to eat one night to keep us from starving before morning. But are we to be satisfied with that and nothing more?"

"You know we are not, Alice," came from Corny.

"Then why not think of something? Why not do something?"

"Why don't you?" again from Corny.

There was a brief, tense silence. Then Alice leaned forward, lowering her voice.

"I have!" she said.

CHAPTER XII

A PLAN

FOR a moment Alice's older sisters were too surprised to speak. Then both Corny and Jean spoke at once.

"What do you mean by that?" they cried.

"I have been thinking, girls," said Alice quickly. "And I shouldn't wonder if I have thought to a purpose. You may laugh at my scheme—perhaps I ought to, I don't know—but at any rate, it may give us a chance to make a little more than pin money."

"What on earth does she mean?" cried Corny. "Proceed!"

Alice answered indirectly by asking a question.

"When you open a magazine you find that about half of it is given over to advertising, don't you?"

"Sometimes more," Jean agreed.

"But what——"

"Wait a minute. I'm coming to the point. It's just this—whenever a person has anything to sell, they advertise it, don't they?"

"Naturally."

"Well, then, why haven't we?"

"Advertised what?" demanded Corny, a trifle ironically.

"What have we to sell, Alice?" asked Jean gently.

"Ourselves, our time, our effort!" Alice was pounding her fist upon the table to emphasize her words. "Our health, our youth, our ambition! Our good honest effort to get ahead and rise a little from our poverty! Aren't all those things worth something?"

"If we can find some one who thinks so——"

"That's just the point! How can we ever find out about anything if we don't advertise ourselves and what we can do?"

"It pays to advertise——" began Corny, but Alice broke in passionately, her eyes suddenly full of tears.

"You needn't joke about it. I never was so earnest in my life!"

“Honey, we’re not joking!” Jean put her hand over the tight, white-knuckled fist of her sister. “I can see that you have some plan or other. What is it, dear?”

“This.” Even the faint half-smile on Corny’s lips faded as Alice in a low eager voice began to expound her theory. “The other day I met Dick Rockwell and I think it was he who gave me the germ of my idea. He says there’s a dreadful epidemic of grippe among the clerks in the village stores. Most shops are short-handed, but they don’t like to hire new help when they need it for only a few days——”

“I begin to see light,” murmured Corny. “Proceed, my sister. You interest me strangely!”

Jean looked bewildered, but listened with more interest than before as Alice continued.

“Well, I got to thinking that if you can’t be a Jack of any particular trade, you might as well try to be a Jack of all trades, if only for a short time.”

“You mean,” Corny took her up eagerly, “that if the storekeepers of Roxby knew that there was some one who was willing to fill in for any length of time——”

“Even for a day!” said Alice.

“Exactly! Even for a day at the same wage—or slightly less—than their regular clerk receives, they might be only too glad to accept that temporary aid?”

“You have it!” Alice’s eyes were very bright and she looked from one to the other of her sisters hopefully.

Corny slapped a fist into the open palm of her other hand.

“I believe there’s a good deal in that, Alice. I believe it’s a scheme that might be turned into real money if it’s worked right——”

“But listen a minute!” Jean’s brow was drawn into an anxious frown. “You go altogether too fast for me. Suppose there are storekeepers in Roxby who would be glad of a little temporary aid because of the absence of sick clerks. How are you going to let them know that you are willing to be a—well, as you yourself express it, a Jack of all trades?”

“Go to them in person and tell them, I suppose,” answered Alice.

“No, wait a minute!” There was greater vitality in Corny’s voice than at any time since she had announced the loss of her position with Miss Johnson. “I have something better than that, Alice. If you just went in and told them that you were willing to help out in case of emergency, each

storekeeper would probably look you over, catalogue you as a foolish or ambitious kid, as the case might be, and promptly forget all about you.”

“Oh, Corny!” There was anguish in the younger girl’s voice at what she evidently considered to be the blighting of her hopes.

“But!” Corny raised a hand to ward off interruption, then continued: “If you were to have a reminder of your proposition, some card or other that you yourself could tack up right over the manager’s desk——”

“Oh, Corny, you precious old thing!” Alice’s arms were about her sister in a strangling hug. “I might have known you would think of the really practical thing. But how,” her face fell again and the corners of her mouth drooped pathetically, “am I going to have cards printed when we haven’t any money?”

“We have a little,” Jean stated.

Corny put a loving hand over her mouth to stop further words.

“We haven’t anything to gamble with, Jeanie,” she said. “Besides it wouldn’t be half enough, dear. How about,” she seated herself again and stared at Alice, her eyes dancing, “printing those cards ourselves?”

“Oh, do you think we could?” Alice’s eyes were bright, her breath came fast with excitement. “Corny, do you really think we could make them look nice?”

“Plenty nice enough, silly. The main thing is to make the lettering big enough to attract attention. In that way, you see, every time the boss looks up over his counter or desk he sees that card telling him that Miss Alice Rowe is available whenever he needs her. A drop of water will wear away a stone if it keeps on dropping long enough, and so that suggestion will wear away the resistance of the crusty old boss!”

“Suppose he isn’t crusty?” Jean suggested.

“Then the process is all the easier, and if——” Corny broke off to stare incredulously. “Well, for goodness’ sake, child, what do you think you’re crying for now?”

Alice fumbled for a handkerchief and wiped away the tears that had spilled over from her eyes.

“I didn’t know I was crying. I’m so glad you like my idea and think it will work. *Do* you think it will work, Corny?”

“It ought to—that is, if the storekeepers of Roxby know what is good for them. Get a slip of paper and we’ll work out an advertisement bound to catch the eye.

“By the way, Jean,” Corny continued as Alice ran to get the slip of paper. “I meant to ask you before. What happened to that pantry door?”

“Oh, I didn’t want to worry you about that,” was the answer. “Goodness knows you have worries enough—all of us have.”

“But what happened to the door, tell me?”

“Jean was entertaining tramps one day when we were out,” said Alice, returning with the paper. “And she said he wasn’t even good-looking.”

“Tramps!” gasped Corny.

“Good-looking!” Jean shuddered. “I hope I never have to see that awful face again!”

Corny stared.

“Well, so do I!” she said. “But If you’d just tell me where the face comes in and how——”

To stem the tide of Corny’s sarcasm Jean told about the tramp in almost the same words in which she had previously explained to Alice the mystery of the broken door panel.

Corny was excited and alarmed, and before her sister had finished the recital, went to the door to be sure that it was fastened. Alice nodded sympathetically.

“That’s what I did the very first thing when Jean told me,” she said. “I think after this we had better see that all our shutters are locked at night as well.”

“But Jean, weren’t you horribly frightened?” cried Corny, coming back to the table and staring at the older girl with an added respect. “To think that you actually had the nerve to threaten that tramp with a poker!”

“That’s about all I did do—threaten him,” said Jean ruefully.

“Better be careful, Jean, and keep the door locked all the time you are alone,” Corny said. “Although you won’t be alone any of the time as long as Mrs. Tamley stays with us,” she added.

“That brings up a question that has been bothering me, girls,” Jean said thoughtfully. “What shall we do with the old lady? I don’t mean while she is here. What I’m worrying about is whether we ought not to notify her folks and let them know that she’s staying here with us? That is, if we can find out just who her folks are and where they live.”

The girls listened with interest when Jean said that, in her opinion, the old lady was not always in full possession of her faculties.

“She seems quite old——”

“Must be over seventy, I should think,” said Alice.

“And a pity she has to travel about all alone at her time of life,” Corny added with indignation for Mrs. Tamley’s unknown relatives.

“And I think her memory is considerably impaired,” Jean continued. “She can’t remember the first name of her half-sister’s husband, you know, and it was only with great difficulty that she managed to remember the last name.”

“What is it?” asked Corny. “I don’t believe you ever told me.”

“Brown—easy enough to remember, one would think.”

“But about impossible to find any particular Brown in a telephone book or city directory without either address or initials,” Corny finished. “Our old lady has given us rather a pretty problem to solve, it would seem.”

“Of course she may solve it herself almost any day,” Alice said. “Or perhaps she will find the card about her some time. Old ladies with uncertain memories are apt to put things in odd places.”

“And in the meantime—” Jean began.

“We can be very glad that we were the ones to help Mrs. Tamley in her need since she seems the very one to help us in our trouble,” Corny finished solemnly.

In the silence of the kitchen the three sisters clasped hands.

“If only she pulls our Bab through!” said Alice, and her breath caught on a sob. “Oh, girls, if she doesn’t, what shall we do?”

At the moment there came a loud thump on the back door. The three girls started nervously at the sound.

CHAPTER XIII

AN ALARM

AFTER the first frightened gesture no one moved, no one spoke.

In the heart of each one of them was the thought:

“That tramp has come back!”

“How perfectly silly!” cried Corny, as though in direct response to this unuttered thought. “It’s just a—a——”

“A what?” demanded Alice, her nerves on edge.

“I don’t know, but we’ll soon see!”

Corny started valiantly to the door, Jean and Alice close behind her.

Before slipping back the bolt they all listened intently. No sound. Only the silence of a snow-carpeted world faintly broken by the distant jingle of sleighbells.

“Now then!” cried Corny, as she drew back the bolt and flung open the door.

Just what they were prepared for, the girls could not afterward have told. Certainly they were not prepared for the blank emptiness that greeted their eyes.

Nothing was there, nothing, from the look of the landscape, had been there for some time.

“Maybe he’s hiding around the house,” Alice suggested.

“Nonsense,” said Corny. “See! Here’s the tramp!”

Her sisters started, but the next moment giggled nervously as Corny pointed down at a great slab of snow and ice on the ground.

“This probably fell from the roof and thumped on the door in passing.”

“Maybe it was cold,” suggested Alice, with a giggle.

“But nothing to what we’ll be if we don’t get inside,” Jean said, giving her sisters a gentle push.

But Corny still lingered on the doorstep.

“Looks like more snow,” she predicted. “And if you don’t believe me, just cast your eye on that lead-colored sky.”

“I don’t want to,” said Jean, with a shiver. “If we have much more snow we won’t be able to leave the house at all.”

“But maybe you’ll have to go anyway, Jean,” said Corny.

“Why, what do you mean?”

“Well, I didn’t want to say anything before, because I didn’t want to raise false hopes. You know some people change their minds so often. But I saw Nell Slater’s friend go past the house, so I know she is really back again—and I suppose ready for those new dresses.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded Jean, her eyes full of wonder.

Corny sketched quickly the details of her interview with the giggly Ruthie, omitting most of the unpleasantness. She did not care to arouse Jean’s indignation and so make it harder for her to accept the order of Nell Slater’s friend.

Jean was pleased.

“That ought to mean quite a little profit,” she said.

“If they will only pay you something for it,” grumbled Alice.

“I’ve been trying to break into the dressmaking end for some time,” Jean continued thoughtfully. “But there’s Bab,” she added, a shadow crossing her face. “I hate to leave her, even for a little while.”

“One of us will manage to be at home when the others are out, and of course Bab will have old Mrs. Tamley all the time,” Corny said. “You will be perfectly free to go, Jean and”—with a wry smile—“we need the money, you know.”

“Oh, I forgot—here’s the miserable seventy-five cents I got from Deacon Dare’s wife.” The pieces of silver rang with an indignant sound on the bare board top of the table.

The door was safely bolted again, Jean was lingering at the door leading to the hall with the hope—or, perhaps the fear!—of hearing some sound from above that might denote a change in the condition of the patient.

At the clink of the money, Corny looked up at the younger girl, surprised.

“Seventy-five cents!” she repeated. “I thought you were to get a dollar.”

“So did I!” Alice’s tone was bitter. “Listen while I tell you the details of my exciting adventure the other day.”

Jean had already heard the story. Corny’s face burned with wrath as it was recounted again.

“So you see,” Alice came close to Corny and sat down in the chair beside her, “the only chance I have of making money is this scheme I told

you about. Oh, Corny—Jean—do help me to get busy on it right away!”

“I’ll help with my valuable advice,” Jean said. “But first I must run upstairs and see how the nurse and patient are and then I must prepare some sort of meal. It’s away past lunch time now, and we’ve none of us thought of eating. You and Corny put your heads together and I’ll pass on the result.”

Jean spoke bravely enough, but her heart was heavy as she went upstairs. Worry for Bab was hardest of all to bear, of course, but added to that was the sordid, ever-present problem of how to make ends meet.

There was another mouth to feed now, there would be more medicines, expensive medicines, that somehow bit so deeply into the contents of their slender purse.

Of course the order from Nell Slater—or rather, from her friend—seemed providential. The work, if she really got it, would bring them in a little money, would tide them temporarily over this hard spot. But again the question faced her, more insistent, more menacing than before:

“After that money is spent, what then?”

There might be more work for her, Miss Johnson might reopen her millinery shop and demand Corny’s services again, Alice might make something of her wild scheme—for to Jean’s belief, this venture had a hundred chances of failure to one of success—but all these things were “mights.” With all her heart Jean longed for something certain, something that would disperse forever the fears for to-morrow, the day after that, or the week after that, something that would set the future on a safe, sure footing.

Jean asked little for herself. Her thought was all for her sisters. She was of that rare type of person who finds her happiness in the happiness of others and who serves unceasingly and tirelessly without any thought of reward. Perhaps it was because of this trait in her that her sisters thought always of Jean first and valued her comfort and happiness beyond their own. For it is a pretty well recognized fact that only those who give themselves completely, receive full measure in return, and those who go about demanding affection and attention, get only their own.

Jean knocked at the door of the sick room. It always seemed odd to ask for admittance to that room where she had so recently reigned supreme. For a moment she was jealous of the old lady who had usurped her place at Bab’s side—but only for a moment. For every other feeling was instantly lost in gratitude that the old lady had come to them mysteriously, miraculously almost, just when they needed her.

The door was opened a crack and Jean felt a gust of cold air blow over her. Instantly she was alarmed for Bab.

“Oh, you have the window open! Won’t she—won’t Bab get cold?”

“Hush!” said the old lady, and laid a finger on her lips. “She has as much cold already as she could possibly get. The cool air will lower her temperature and soothe her poor laboring lungs.”

“Is she asleep?” asked Jean, only half convinced.

Mrs. Tamley nodded.

“If you are very quiet you may come in and see her.”

Jean tiptoed to the bed. Bab lay there, her face flaming against the white of the pillows, her breath coming in hurried, uneven gasps.

An old screen that had stood in a corner of the room had been adjusted near the bed by Mrs. Tamley in such a way that the cold air could not blow directly on the sick girl.

“Isn’t she lovely?” The whispered words were half a sob. Jean felt the old lady’s soft, veined hand steal into hers.

“Poor little sick bird,” she said crooningly. “We’ll pull her through, dearie, never fear.”

Jean raised the kind old hand to her face, pressed it to a cheek wet with tears.

“You are so good,” whispered Jean, faltering. “How are we ever going to repay you?”

Suddenly, to her own great surprise, Jean found that she was in the arms of this wrinkled old lady, crying fiercely, silently, on her shoulder.

CHAPTER XIV

FIFTEEN DOLLARS

How good it felt to be mothered again!

Jean could not have known how hungry she was for the help and sympathy of an older person until she felt Mrs. Tamley's arms about her and heard her whispered words of comfort and reassurance.

"Poor lamb! All worn out with watching and worrying. Cry all you like, honey, if it makes you feel better. But don't fret about our poor little sick girl. I've fought through many cases worse than this, and I've never lost one yet. And at my age, you just wager I'm not going to begin!"

There was this much to be said about this woman, that when she set about comforting a person she did not stop half way.

There was a soothing, healing quality in the crooning old voice, in the touch of the soft, wrinkled hands that had been so nobly used in the service of humanity.

She drew Jean out into the hall where they could not disturb the patient, and there petted and comforted her and cheered her until the tears were all gone and Jean could even smile a little.

By this time the girl was utterly captive to the dear old lady.

"We've got to be very careful not to let you tire yourself," she said, taking the soft old hand in hers and squeezing it. "Please let me put you into some soft warm things of mine and then take you down to the kitchen where you can have something to eat and get warmed through. I'll have one of the girls come up and sit with Bab."

The old lady consented reluctantly, and only after she had convinced herself that Bab was sleeping quietly and would require no further attention for an hour or so.

Alice was called up from below, slipped on a winter coat—for the temperature of the room was low and one could not sit in it long without feeling half-frozen—and went to set with the sick girl.

"Corny has thought up a wonderful ad for me," she whispered to Jean, in passing. "Make her show it to you when you go down."

Jean nodded and went with Mrs. Tamley into her own room. The old lady was about Jean's size, and the girl rummaged in her closet and brought

forth a warm bathrobe and a pair of slippers.

“These will keep you snug,” she said, and held the bathrobe out on her arm. She paused, looking at the old lady curiously. The latter had put her grip upon the bed and perhaps for the hundredth time since her arrival was searching eagerly in every corner of it.

She looked up, met Jean’s eyes, and smiled wistfully.

“I always have a feeling that I must find my half-sister’s card somewhere,” she said.

“Please put this on.” Jean wrapped the bathrobe about the woman. “If it wasn’t awfully selfish,” she added, “I’d wish that you might never find that card. For then you would never want to leave us. I can’t bear to think of ever losing you!”

Over the old lady’s face spread a soft flush of pleasure.

“It is a long time since I have been truly wanted and needed, my dear,” she said. “It would break my heart to leave poor little Ladybird until she is well again. I’m glad you want me!”

“You are like a fairy godmother,” said Jean, with a laugh, her eyes bright. “I have often wondered what it would be like to have one.”

“A poor sort of fairy godmother, my dear,” said the old lady and shook her head sadly. “If I could make a magic coach from a pumpkin or grow dollars in a turnip field, I might be of more use, eh, my dear?”

“If you will make our Bab well, that will be better than all the magic in the world,” Jean answered.

That was how the dear old lady got her name with the girls. “Godmother” she was from that day forth, and there was so much affection in the term that the old lady’s face grew bright whenever she heard it and not for the world would she have been called by any other name.

In the days that followed her keen old eyes noted the poverty of the girls, noticed how sparingly they ate and how cautious they were in the expenditure of a single penny.

Poor young motherless chicks, struggling against sickness, against loneliness, against poverty! What a life for four lovely girls, hungry for the natural delights of girlhood!

The old lady did not probe too deeply into the affairs of the four little women of Roxby, but from their frank and fearless conversation ascertained that, as far as relatives were concerned, they were alone in the world except for one uncle about whom they spoke vaguely and who seemed to have

faded from their lives long before. She also learned that they had to depend upon their own efforts to keep the hungry wolf from the door.

The old lady was thoughtful as she went upstairs to take over the charge of her patient again. She shut the windows, for the room was cold enough, and noticed in a vague way that it was snowing again.

She sat down beside Bab, listening to her breathing, feeling her pulse with a professional touch, and now and then tucking in the covers a little closer about her neck and shoulders.

Once she took out her handbag, examined its contents carefully, and put it away from her with a sigh.

Fifteen one dollar bills, folded neatly together! What good would they do, how far would they go toward relieving poverty? Mrs. Tamley shook her head, sighed, and bent more closely over the sick girl.

Where was the card of her half-sister in Philadelphia? What had she done with it? Where could she have lost it?

Questions, questions, questions, and no answer to them!

What would she do when the poor little sick girl was well? She could not stay on with the sisters, poor as they undoubtedly were.

She had searched her grip for that card and had not found it. She might have pulled it out of her handbag with her handkerchief while on the train. Yes, that was a plausible explanation. How, then, was she ever going to find the address of her half-sister in Philadelphia?

While the old lady was puzzling over her own problems in the sick room, the three sisters were holding a council in the kitchen below.

Alice ate hungrily of eggs and toast and tea, Corny read aloud the rough draft of the card that was to advertise her sister's new business venture.

“Is your clerk sick? Are you overworked, tired? Are you losing money because you cannot wait on customers fast enough? I will help you. I will dispel that tired feeling. I will take the place of your sick clerk. Call on me for a day, half a day, for an hour, if you like. You will find me available, always ready to serve. Yours for mutual benefit, Alice Rowe.”

“There!” Alice demanded of the bright-eyed Jean when Corny had finished reading. “How's that? I ask you, is it calculated to bring home the bacon, or is it not?”

“My, I hope so,” Jean said, with one of her sudden flashes of humor. “What a welcome change from beans!”

CHAPTER XV

THE SNOWDRIFT

THREE of the little women of Roxby discussed the new absorbing project all the rest of that afternoon. They discussed it while getting their frugal supper, discussed it while washing the dishes, and after that far into the night.

“It’s a chance, of course,” Alice said, when at last she was preparing for bed. “But no one ever got anywhere in this world who wasn’t willing to take a chance. I’ll start out to beard the storekeepers of Roxby in their dens the first thing in the morning and maybe—when I come home—I’ll have news for you, girls! Oh, wouldn’t it be wonderful?”

Her sisters agreed with her that it would, but with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Corny, possessing the business head of the family, believed wholeheartedly in the scheme. Jean, though infected with the germ of their enthusiasm, was more conservative and cautious by nature. It worried her to see how entirely Alice had set her heart upon the success of her idea, for she knew her sister’s nature well and how bitter would be her disappointment should the plan fail.

It is safe to say that no one in the Rowe house rested easily that night.

In the first place, some one had to be continually at Bab’s bedside. Doctor Tilson had sent more medicine from the drug store in the village—two tall bottles of odd-colored liquid which, as usual, had made an alarming hole in their slender purse—and this medicine must be given at regular intervals all during the night.

The physician had been very grave about his patient when he called that evening. He had praised Mrs. Tamley’s nursing and had given further instructions which were to be followed implicitly. He did not actually say so, but his manner implied that were these instructions not followed with the utmost care he would not answer for the consequences.

So it was arranged that Corny and Jean and Mrs. Tamley would take turn and turn about during the night at the bedside of the sick girl.

It had been arranged between Corny and Jean that Alice must have her rest this night in order that she might start on her new business venture the

following morning in the right frame of mind.

Alice had not accepted this dictum without vehement protest, but was eventually put down by sheer weight of argument.

It was a cold, bitter night with the wind rising and wailing dismally about the house. It became too cold for snow. The light flurries of the earlier evening gave place to a biting, below-zero temperature that seemed to clothe the world in a coating of ice.

In the silence of the sick room, fear and anxiety pressed heavily upon the lonely watcher shivering beneath layers of coats and blankets with only the tiny flickering light of the night lamp to dispel thick shadows, and the burden of poverty and worry seemed too heavy to bear.

During the night Bab's fever rose. She became restless, strove to fling off the covers in her sleep, babbled ceaselessly in strange disjointed sentences. Stark terror caught at the hearts of those who loved her.

At last Corny, after two hours of watching, could bear the strain no longer. She went to rouse her dozing sister and brought Jean into the room, stumbling still with sleep and desperately apprehensive.

"Jeanie, I'm sorry," it was Corny whispering, her cold hand in her sister's. "I wouldn't have waked you—but I was afraid! She talked so! Listen!"

Jean bent over the bed. Strange terrifying words and phrases dropped from the lips of the sick girl, tortured by the fever that poured liquid fire through her veins.

"I'm cold! No, no—hot, so hot! Going away— Long, long journey—I'm frightened! Oh, so cold and frightened! No, burning up, burning up! Jean! Corny! Where are you?"

"Here, Bab darling—here."

They were bending over her, caressing her, their tears falling on her face. For a moment she seemed to feel the comfort of them, clung to them, sighing contentedly in the knowledge that they were close to her.

Then again the twisting and turning, the terrible restlessness and broken, muttered phrases. Adrift again, frightened, her poor tired little brain running about in frantic circles, oblivious to everything but the imagined terrors of delirium.

The wind moaned about the house, rattling the loose shutters, blowing with fierce gusts upon the window panes, rising now to a hideous shriek, again falling to a moaning undertone that clutched at the heart.

Jean and Corny, clinging together, listened to that sound and felt their courage ebb.

“Oh, Jean, Jean, are we going to lose our little sister?”

What was that?

A gust of wind, fiercer than any that had come before, swept about the house, shaking it ruthlessly as if it were a toy in the grip of a giant. There was a rending, breaking sound and then a thud, as if some heavy object had struck against the side of the house.

Bab started up with a wild cry of alarm, throwing the covers off of her.

“What is it? What is it? The house is falling! I am falling—down—down—down——”

Trembling with fright, Jean sprang to the bed, pushed the sick girl back upon the pillows, and drew the covers up about her.

Bab struggled to be free. In her delirium she evidently thought herself faced by some terrible danger, thought for a moment, not recognizing Jean, that her sister was an enemy, maliciously trying to prevent her escape.

She struggled wildly, striking at Jean. Corny came to the aid of her sister, and between them they held the sick girl beneath the covers by force.

“It’s nothing, dear,” Jean said over and over again. “Just a shutter blown off, I think. See, the wind is very high to-night. Listen to it!”

After a while her sisters succeeded in quieting the sick girl. She lay there, huddled under the covers, whimpering a little like a hurt animal.

They heard a rustling in the shadows and saw Mrs. Tamley standing there, a blanket wrapped about her shoulders.

“Run along, you two,” she said with the air of authority that had returned with her professional duties. “You will get your death of cold standing there. I’ll take care of the little girl.”

She bent over Bab then turned to say in a low voice, “What was that noise I heard? Sounded as if part of the roof fell in.”

“I think it was the shutter of the attic window,” Jean answered in the same low tone. “It has been loose for some time.”

“Better go and see,” suggested the old lady, as she again bent over Bab. “Lucky if it was only a shutter blown loose.”

“She’s right, Jean,” said Corny, as they turned away. “Suppose part of the roof did give way beneath the weight of snow? I shouldn’t be a bit surprised.”

Neither would Jean, if the truth were told. The roof was very old and had been patched and mended in a dozen places. It seemed only a question of

time until the cracked and ancient timbers should collapse entirely.

They opened the door to the attic and were greeted by a gust of cold air.

“Corny!” gasped Jean. “It must be the roof!”

“Humph! Shouldn’t wonder!” grunted Corny. “But come on. Might as well know the worst at once!”

The two girls ran swiftly up the steep steps, shivering, teeth chattering. They did not know what devastating sight might greet their eyes when they reached the top step of the stairs.

Corny had been thoughtful enough to bring with her a box of matches. She lit one of these, but the draft was so great that the feeble flame went out almost before it was born. A second and a third followed the fate of the first and the girls finally despaired of keeping anything alight in that gale-swept place.

“I g-guess there’s nothing for it,” Jean said, between chattering teeth. “We’ll simply have to feel our way, that’s all.”

“All right,” said Corny. “Only take care you don’t fall over a box or d-down the stairs. Good gracious!” as a frightened cry came from Jean. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, Corny!” Jean’s voice was half hysterical laughter, half tears. “Come dig me out. I’ve f-fallen into a snowdrift!”

CHAPTER XVI

A HARD NIGHT

PROBABLY it sounds funnier than it actually was.

Snow on one's attic floor in the dead of a winter night is really no joking matter. Add to this the fact that one does not know through what aperture the snow has forced its way or how much damage may have been done to the roof because of the packed weight of the snow on it, and any one will have a faint idea of how Corny Rowe felt as she stumbled through the darkness toward the sound of her sister's voice.

Jean had extricated herself from the snowdrift—and that is really just what it was—and intercepted Corny's stumbling progress.

"Are you all right?" gasped Corny.

"Only a little c-cold," said Jean, with an hysterical giggle. "Corny, where do you suppose that snow came from?"

"That's just what I intend to find out," said Corny, and took an energetic step forward. This step landed her in the middle of Jean's snowdrift.

"Oof!" she grunted. "Why didn't you tell me it was so close?"

"You didn't ask!" with another giggle. "Corny, are your feet wet?"

"No! How can you ask? Don't you know snow is guaranteed to keep feet dry?" Corny was wading through snow half-way up to her knees. Her mood was not a pleasant one. "Stay where you are, Jean. I think I see the cause of this thing."

"Not—the roof?" said Jean fearfully.

"No, it's as we thought." Corny had reached the window and was peering out, shivering, into the wind-swept darkness. "The shutter blew off in the wind and with nothing to keep it out, the snow has seeped in through this broken pane of glass."

"Seeped! I should say it had seeped! But how could the snow have come in since the shutter blew off Corny?" she added as an afterthought. "There hasn't been time and—it hasn't been snowing!"

"The facts are beyond argument," said Corny dryly. "On further examination I find that the other shutter is gone also. When it deserted us, no one knows, but it was probably some time during the last big storm we had."

“But it’s a wonder the snow didn’t melt and come through the roof,” Jean said.

“Probably some of it has melted and more of it would have, only that this broken pane of glass has made the attic a sort of refrigerating plant. We’ll have to find some old rags to stuff up this broken place, Jean.”

“Better heave the snow out first,” the latter suggested.

Corny chuckled.

“I might almost have had common sense enough to think of that, myself!” she said.

Between them the girls managed to raise the window and demolish the snowdrift. It was slow work and cold work, and when it was finally accomplished and rags stuffed into the broken pane of the window Jean and Corny realized that they were chilled through.

“Better go down and make a cup of hot tea,” Jean said. “Your cold won’t improve with this kind of treatment. Oh, Corny, Corny,” on a bitter note she could not repress, “where will this all end?”

Corny asked herself that question, too, and found no answer to it. Even after the cup of hot tea that she and Jean made and shared with Mrs. Tamley had cheered and comforted her somewhat and she was safely tucked into bed again, the question haunted her.

“Where would this all end?”

Sometimes it seemed as though they all must sink, beneath the weight of their troubles and discouragements. It was only pride and a certain inborn, indomitable courage that made them face each sunrise with head held high and a hope that on that day the tide might turn and bring their battered little skiff of life into a safe, protected harbor.

But things had never been quite as bad as they were now. The wolf, for a long time hovering perilously close, had never been upon their very doorstep howling for admission as he was now. None of them had ever been as sick as Bab was now. Suppose her sisters should lose her—golden-haired, laughing Barbara?

Corny shuddered and crept closer under the covers.

That snowdrift in the attic! Dismal, dreary; though they tried to make light of it. There was nothing bright, nothing warm and beautiful in life. Again the question:

“Where will it all end?”

The morning found Jean and Corny white and heavy-eyed. But the patient was better.

“Oh, what do we care for anything?” cried Alice, wiping away the tears that came to her eyes. “Bab is better!”

“Not so much better, dearie,” warned Mrs. Tamley, cautious, professional. “The improvement is very slight——”

“But there is an improvement!” the girls cried together.

“Oh, yes, we have more hope to-day than we had yesterday,” the old lady said, with her motherly smile. “But I would not have you hope too much. Disappointment is a bitter thing. I know! I know!”

She turned away before the girls could question her further, and the sisters went down together arm in arm to prepare breakfast.

Alice had dressed herself in the best she owned—which was none too good—eagerly anticipating her great adventure.

The evening before she and Corny had prepared three of the cards with which she hoped to gain the respectful interest and attention of the three most influential storekeepers in Roxby.

“The question is,” she propounded, as Corny and Jean flew about getting breakfast ready, “who *are* the three most influential storekeepers of Roxby?”

“Ask me a hard one!” Corny set down a plate of bread and began to enumerate on the fingers of her left hand. “In the first place, there’s Jim Rooney, who runs the general store.”

“Well, of course I’d thought of Jim,” Alice said.

“And Bill Robinson. His drug store certainly looks prosperous enough,” suggested Jean.

“Of course, Bill Robinson. He’s second,” Corny nodded. “And then, of course, there’s Dick Rockwell’s father.”

“Old man Rockwell!” Alice faltered. “Oh, Corny, I’d never have the nerve even to speak to him. They say he’s as hard as the first part of his name and as cranky as a sick bear.”

“Nevertheless, he owns one of the best businesses in town,” Corny insisted. “All the farmers for miles around come to him for their tools and machinery. He and Dick do repairing, too, you know, and the other day Dick told me that he and his father had more than they could do, getting things ready for the early spring plowing.”

“But they could hardly use me for that sort of thing!” Alice objected.

“No. But they might be able to use your services in the shop,” Corny retorted. “That red-headed boy they used to have, Clem Parsons, is pretty sick with the flu. They don’t know whether he will pull through or not. His bad fortune might be your good fortune. If you expect to make anything of

this little venture of yours, Alice, it seems to me you can't afford to overlook a chance like that."

"Oh, all right." Alice still retained a rueful, inner picture of "old man Rockwell." "I can only die once in the good cause, that's a comfort. He shall be my third and, probably, my last chance."

"Last chance! I should say not. While you and Jean are gone I'll make you more cards, Alice Rowe. And either this afternoon or to-morrow morning early you may deliver those too. There must be no storekeeper in Roxby but has been hunted to his lair by the time you are through!"

Alice was so excited that she could scarcely eat her breakfast. When Jean said that she would go with her as far as Nell Slater's house, she stood with her hand on the knob of the door like a pony straining at the leash.

Later Corny kissed them both and promised her older sister to take care of Bab and see that Mrs. Tamley lacked for nothing until Jean's return.

"One thing I don't intend to do," Jean said resolutely. "I won't do this sewing at Nell Slater's house. I'm going to bring it home, Corny, so that I can be with Bab and leave you free to look for work yourself. Don't suppose that you are going to be tied to the house."

"Always thinking of some one else, aren't you, Jean?" Corny again kissed the girl, and with more than usual gentleness. "You know our motto — 'all for one and one for all.' I'm glad to be able to help in any way I can. Don't worry about me. Just try thinking about yourself for a change and see what it's like!"

Nevertheless, when the door closed upon her sisters and she saw them walk off over the crisp hard surface of the snow, Corny turned back into the quiet house with a feeling of terrible depression.

"If only there were something I could do to keep me from worrying!" she thought, then squared her shoulders and walked resolutely toward the kitchen. "At least I can wash the dishes!"

Meanwhile Alice and Jean went on together as far as Nell Slater's house, where the sisters parted.

"Good luck, Jean," Alice said, as they clasped hands hard for a moment before separating. "If Nell Slater gets too funny, just refer her to me."

"Good luck yourself, Alice Rowe," laughed Jean, thinking that she had never seen any one so lovely as this sister with the rosy cheeks and the flyaway golden hair. "You look like a thousand dollars."

"And I'd be grateful for a thousand cents," said Alice, with a rueful smile.

“Well, cheerio, old dear. See you later!”

Jean sighed and turned up the driveway guarded by the two iron stags.

Meanwhile Alice was on her way to conquer—or be conquered. She thought the latter most probable, and as she neared the general store presided over by that good-natured Irishman, Jim Rooney, her courage faltered and her quick feet lagged.

She had chosen the general store as the scene of her first skirmish because the proprietor was a good friend of hers and notoriously fun-loving and kindly.

There were no customers in the store when Alice finally found the courage to turn the knob and enter. Only Jim himself was behind the counter at the end of the store, sorting out goods on one of the shelves.

He looked up as Alice entered and came to greet the glowing girl with a cordial smile.

“Well, it’s fresh as the mornin’ you are,” he said. “And what can I do for such a good-lookin’ young lady so early in the mornin’?”

“Oh, please, Jim Rooney,” cried Alice breathlessly, “please don’t laugh. I want you to give me a job!”

CHAPTER XVII

A DISAPPOINTMENT

IF ALICE had asked the owner of the general store to give her a million dollars, that genial Irishman could have appeared no more astonished.

“A job!” he echoed, staring at her. “Where? Here?”

“Where did you think I meant?” retorted Alice, gaining courage now that the ice was broken. “Of course I mean here, Jim Rooney.” She took out one of the carefully printed cards with quite an air and pushed it across the counter toward him: “Do me the kindness to pass your eye over that!”

As Jim Rooney read the message on the card, his grin widened until it appeared—to Alice—to stretch from ear to ear. Finally, to the consternation of the girl, he burst into a great guffaw of laughter.

“Well, I’m sayin’ it’s the early bird will not be beatin’ you gettin’ up in the mornin’, Alice Rowe,” he said. “I didn’t know there was any one in Roxby had that much git up an’ git in ’em. I’ll be shakin’ hands with ye, that’s what I will, for a spunky young spalpeen!”

Alice helplessly yielded her hand to the grip of his great red paw, though her face was growing scarlet.

“Please, Jim, I don’t mean it as a joke.” There was pleading in her voice, but there was a youthful dignity, too, that arrested the attention of the jovial Irishman and sobered his face.

“Well, well, it’s a bad habit I’ve got into to laugh at everything. Sorry I am if I’ve hurt your feelin’s, me lass.”

“You *will* hurt my feelings if you don’t try to understand that I’m in dead earnest,” Alice said. “Jim Rooney, I want a job.”

“So you mean this—what you’re sayin’ here?” said the Irishman, and rapped the card with his knuckles. “I had an idee it was maybe a joke you were playin’ on me.”

“I thought if any of your clerks were sick,” Alice explained, finding it not hard to state her case now that she had begun, “or if you were short-handed for any reason, I might be able to fill in for a day or two, or even for an hour or two, as I say on the card. I’m not exactly stupid,” she said, with a quick smile that revealed all her pretty white teeth, “and I think with a little coaching I might be able to suit you, really I do, Jim Rooney.”

“Well, well, I shouldn’t be so surprised if you would!” Alice’s heart leaped at the words but sank a moment later as the Irishman added: “But I’m really not in the need of any help just now. I’m after bein’ about the only storekeeper in town, I shouldn’t wonder, who hasn’t half his clerks away with some sickness or other. I can’t be after employin’ you, Alice Rowe, without dischargin’ some of the others. And that wouldn’t be exactly fair, would it now?” Jim was wheedling now, trying to soften his refusal of her services.

Alice smiled bravely.

“No, I don’t suppose it would,” she said, with a heavy heart. “But perhaps you don’t mind keeping the card——”

“Sure not!” cried the Irishman heartily, glad that there was something he could promise. “I’ll be keepin’ your card all right an’ the first clerk that walks out on me, I’ll be lettin’ you know. Good-mornin’, to ye, Alice Rowe, and may you have good luck!”

Alice smiled again, went quickly to the door, opened it and let herself out into the crisp cold air. Her frame of mind was a strange one. She was feeling hopeful and at the same time depressed.

Surely, Jim Rooney had been kind, and after his first amusement had considered her proposition gravely enough. He had promised to keep her in mind anyway, and though the probability of one of his clerks “walking out on him” was a remote one—Jim Rooney paid well for the services of his employees and treated them well to boot—still, much stranger things had happened!

That was the optimistic side.

On the other side was the fact that Jim Rooney had not been able to give her immediate work—and it was immediate work that she needed. Alice would have exchanged the possibility of receiving twenty-five dollars a month from that time on, for five dollars put in her hand at the moment.

“With five dollars I would be rich,” she thought longingly. “I could go back to Jim Rooney’s store and pile a basket full of lovely nourishing things for Bab and I’d get a beefsteak for the rest of us, or maybe,” her eyes shone at the magic thought, “a chicken! Yes, I believe we could almost have a chicken. Bab could have the broth—I reckon she could eat that—and I can almost see Corny with a drumstick in each hand and Jean with a heap of the breast on her plate. Jeanie loves the white meat so!”

With an effort Alice shook herself free of this alluring vision and hurried on to make her next application. This was to be at Robinson’s drug store.

Alice had never felt at home in this store since it had been taken over by Bill Robinson and made all shiny with new fixtures and plate glass and elaborate show cases.

Alice had liked it better when old Eben Snow had reigned there, Eben with his long white beard and twinkling eyes. Eben had died only a few months before, mourned by all his fellow townsmen. The drug store had been a meeting place for the neighborhood in Eben's day, an informal club. Now, as Deacon Dare said, it was only a place "where ye could spend three times as much for a wuthless article as it was wuth."

Alice would have been sure of a kindly hearing from Eben Snow. She could almost see those pleasant, twinkling eyes on her and hear the drawling voice say:

"Well, Alice Rowe, I admire to see you steppin' out for yourself, I do. I'll see what I can do for you, little gal. Shouldn't wonder if we could get together on this here thing."

Alice felt the sudden smart of tears in her eyes. She had loved old Eben Snow!

The shining plate glass of Robinson's Pharmacy was before her.

With quick beating heart, Alice pushed open the heavy door and stepped inside.

Bill Robinson was not a prepossessing young man. He was medium-sized, he had narrow shoulders that had acquired an habitual slump and a chest that sagged inward. His thin lips were querulous, his small, sharp eyes darted restless, suspicious glances at every one as though he suspected the whole world of being his enemy.

This person was at the moment of Alice's entrance engaged in what seemed to be an exceedingly private conversation with a broad-shouldered young man who leaned across the counter toward him.

At sight of Alice, Robinson scowled irritably. He said a word or two in a low voice to his companion, then advanced toward the girl.

"What can I do for you to-day?" he asked.

"You can give me a moment of your time," said Alice, the words coming in a rush. It was now or never with her, and she knew it. "I—I'd like to speak to you a moment on business."

The latent suspicion in the eyes of the pharmacist changed to active distrust.

"I am very busy this morning," he said, in a cold tone. "If you are quite sure there is nothing I can do for you——"

If he had opened the door and shown her out into the street he could not have insulted her more pointedly.

Alice stared at him and her face slowly grew white.

“No,” she said quietly, “there will never be anything that you can do for me from this time on.”

She sent him one steady glance before which his own small nervous eyes fell, then, with head up, went quickly to the door.

Once outside in the street she choked and clenched her hands. She strove valiantly against a furious flood of tears.

“The horrid old thing!” she raged. “I’d like to tear his hair out!” She then gulped hysterically at the picture. “I don’t believe he has enough hair to pull, really. Oh, I’d like to get even!”

She had walked for two long blocks before she came to a realization of her surroundings.

“Why,” with a gasp, “I’m going toward home!”

Home! What a safe, sane sound it had just then! What a temptation it was to run there and shut herself in with her humiliation and anger!

Alice shut her lips tight and resolutely faced about. She would not let a man like Bill Robinson beat her, not at the very beginning, anyway.

Who, then, was next? Her heart sank at the name. “Old man Rockwell.”

“Well, he can’t do or say anything worse to me than Bill Robinson did,” she reflected. “There ought to be some comfort in that!”

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. ROCKWELL BARKS

AS ALICE proceeded toward Mr. Rockwell's hardware store, deliberately delaying, by going a full block out of her way, the dreadful moment when she must meet this man, the girl recalled various things she had heard about him both from Dick Rockwell and other people of Roxby.

Mr. Rockwell was a tall man and heavy, with commanding gray eyes that could change in a moment from a deceptive mildness to a ferocity that subjugated almost all who came in contact with him.

His wife was a quiet, meek woman who lived only to obey her lord's wishes. Dick might have had more influence with his father, for Mr. Rockwell worshiped his stalwart son, had they not been so much alike in disposition. As it was, they were like two pieces of flint that whenever they were brought together give out a spark. Dick was as quick to anger as his father, though not so ruthless in his judgments. Rockwell, senior, admired his son the while he deplored his disposition and considered it a point of honor never to yield a point to him.

But, even as Achilles, old man Rockwell had his vulnerable spot.

He had living with him, a grandchild, a lovely little girl named Angela. The child fitted her name, for she had blue eyes of an exquisite shape and expression and her hair was soft and fair, fluffing about her head like a halo. This was the child of Mr. Rockwell's only daughter who had died when Angela was born and whose husband had later drifted off to find his fortune in another city, entrusting his little girl to the grandparents.

Angela was by no means as gentle and docile as her looks and name might have suggested. In fact, she had a distinct will of her own—inherited no doubt from her Grandfather Rockwell—and a love of adventure with the spice of danger in it, perhaps inherited from the same source.

She was the leader of the children of her own age—eight—or younger and occasionally involved them in predicaments from which she was powerless to rescue them.

She was a lovable child despite her wildness, and her tyrannical old grandfather adored her. There was a saying in Roxby that the only way to the heart of the elder Rockwell was through Angela.

“And since I can’t very well appeal to him through Angela, I suppose I haven’t a chance in the world,” said Alice, with a wry smile.

Her reflections had brought her to the door of the hardware store. She hesitated only a moment before entering.

“Might as well have the agony over with,” she thought. “Anyway, I’m getting hardened, I guess.”

Her murmured wish as she entered was that Dick would not be with his father. She hoped that, whatever else might happen, Dick would not be a witness to the interview between her and the old man.

Her hope, almost her prayer, was not destined to be answered.

Dick Rockwell was in the store with his father and—what was a good deal worse—they had obviously just been having a quarrel.

The elder Rockwell was looking at his son like a maddened bull about to charge. Dick was glaring back at him, his face livid with wrath, strong hands clutching the edge of the counter until the knuckles showed white.

“I tell you,” Dick was saying in a harsh, grating voice Alice had never heard from him before, “I’m old enough to settle some questions for myself. If you try to force your will on me any longer, I warn you, something’s going to break——”

“Perhaps you’d better save your oratory till some other time.” The hard dry words fell coldly on the surcharged atmosphere. “I prefer to conduct our quarrels in private. Now, as you see, we have an audience.”

“Any time you like,” said Dick, controlling his fury with an effort. He smiled at the girl, a barely perceptible movement of the mouth.

“’Lo, Alice. Anything we can do for you?”

“A bad beginning,” thought Alice. Just what Robinson had said! She shivered—and plunged!

Alice addressed herself to the elder Rockwell. She held out one of her cards to him, trying to think what Corny would have done in a situation like this.

“If you will just read this,” she said faintly, “perhaps you will understand a little better what I have come for.”

Mr. Rockwell read the card through hastily, then glared at her over his spectacles.

“Well, what has this to do with me?” he snapped.

Alice became suddenly angry, almost as angry as Dick had appeared when she entered the store. She looked the elder Rockwell in the eye and took an impulsive step toward him.

“I’m trying to make a living,” she said in a hard, dry voice entirely unlike her own. “It’s hard work, and when one comes up against men like you it seems pretty nearly impossible. Maybe it is, I don’t know. But I still think there are some people in Roxby who will give a girl a chance when she is really trying to make money and doesn’t care how hard she works to earn it. I’m that girl, Mr. Rockwell, and if you should want me you—you know where to find me!” Her courage suddenly deserted her and she saved herself the ignominy of tears only by swift flight.

Mr. Rockwell looked after the slammed door, and there was half a twinkle in his grim eye.

“A girl with spirit,” he remarked dryly. “A little too much spirit probably. I like ’em calmer.”

“You would!” said Dick, in a harsh voice. He opened the door with a vicious pull and flung out after Alice.

Dick Rockwell’s father’s crooked eyebrows went up the fraction of an inch and a quizzical look came into his eyes.

“So the wind lies in that direction, does it?” he mused. “The boy likes that girl. Well, he might go further and fare worse. Nice girls, those four little women of Roxby—and proud. Must have cost her something to come in here with this.”

Since Mr. Rockwell admired courage in any one more than any other virtue, he sat with Alice’s card in his hand, looking at it, for a long time.

Meanwhile, his irate son had caught up with Alice. Dick thrust his hand through the girl’s arm and forced her to a slower gait.

“Sorry, Alice,” he said, peering down until he could look into her averted face. “The old man’s a bear. Sometimes I could place a bomb under his chair and put a lighted match to the fuse with great pleasure.”

Alice gave an hysterical giggle.

“S-so could I!” she said.

Dick squeezed her arm, and for a little way they walked along in silence. Then Alice stopped and turned to the boy at her side.

“You’d better go back, Dick,” she said. “It won’t help you any with— with your father to seem to side with me. And besides,” as he shook his head stubbornly, “I’m afraid I’m going to cry, and I like to be alone when I do that.”

“Let me come along, to catch the tears,” said Dick, with his whimsical smile.

“You’d need a bucket,” replied the girl, with a shake of her bright head. “No, Dick, it’s dear of you to try to help me, but you can’t. I’ve got to think things out and—I’d rather be alone. You don’t mind?”

“I do. I’d rather you’d think them out with me.” Dick caught her hand in his and held it with a comforting pressure. “If there’s anything you want—or need—you can count on me, Licia, understand?”

It was his old, friendly, yet half-teasing name for her, and Alice could not answer. She nodded, tried to smile, and turned swiftly away.

When she had gone a little way she looked back again, saw him still standing where she had left him, and waved her hand. Then she went on more swiftly than before, for she could see he had been tempted to join her again.

Dear old Dick! Why did he have such a terrible father?

She would go home, thought Alice, and rest for a while and see if Corny had any more cards ready for her. She must, she supposed, keep on with the thing, though the thought of facing any more storekeepers made her feel almost physically ill.

As the days went by and Corny made more cards for her and still more and Alice kept on doggedly making the rounds of the not very numerous stores of Roxby, the hardware merchant’s crankiness seemed to be reflected in most of the worried, harrassed, short-handed shopkeepers.

She had canvassed about every place in town and Corny declared, half-laughing, half-rueful that she was developing “printer’s cramp.”

No one had taken Alice’s gallant adventure into business seriously. Not one reply had she received from all the cards that she had started out so hopefully to deliver.

Now, as she was on her way home, dejected and dispirited, Alice paused suddenly, listening.

The voices and shouts of playing children drew her thoughts from herself and she looked up to find herself on the edge of Deer Pond, a small body of water on the outskirts of the town.

Deer Pond was very deep in the middle and scarcely ever froze solid even in the dead of winter. The ice near the shore was firm and hard, but toward the center of the pond it was apt to crack and give treacherously.

There were perhaps a score of children skating in hilarious groups, “cracking the whip” and in other ways exercising their glorious spirits.

Alice watched, and a smile curved the corners of her mouth. It was such a little time ago since she herself was skating on the borders of Deer Pond as

carefree and joyous as any of these happy children. Alice was only fifteen, and it was hard to be seeking for work instead of skating with these children, even though most of them were younger than she.

There was one little girl who seemed always to be where the fun was most hilarious. She broke away from the others after a moment and Alice recognized Angela, the pride and pet of the fearful old man who, it was said, had only one vulnerable spot!

Alice smiled wryly and was about to pass on when something arrested her attention.

Angela, daring little imp that she was, had struck out straight and swiftly for the center of Deer Pond!

“Why, she mustn’t do that!” Alice found herself saying aloud. “That ice in the center will never hold!” Then she raised her voice and called: “Angela! Angela! Come back!”

CHAPTER XIX

TERRIBLE DANGER

JEAN ROWE was having troubles in the home of Nell Slater.

Nell received her patronizingly, a manner hard for any one of the four little women of Roxby to bear, and took her into the living room where her friend, Ruth, was lolling at ease in a chair near the window.

Nell Slater did not condescend to perform a proper introduction between the two girls, but merely said in an offhand manner to her guest:

“This is Jean Rowe. She makes lovely things, really, as you yourself have seen, Ruthie, dear. I am sure she will do her best for you.”

“I certainly hope so,” Ruth returned languidly. “My things are in rags. But I expect you to be quick, my dear,” with a patronizing nod for Jean, “for I always find fittings exhausting, positively exhausting.”

Jean wondered how she supposed the fitter felt, but held her peace. She put her shabby coat on a chair and quietly took out needle and thread and a paper of pins.

“After all, it would mean a great deal if she could manage to work into the dressmaking line here in Roxby,” she thought. She must be very careful not to offend this rich girl. Though why, she thought, with a flash of resentment she could not control, need the girl be so offensively patronizing? Did money really mean so much?

Then began a session that Jean would never forget.

Ruth had some choice materials in her trunk which, it seems, she had brought along, partly to show to her friend, Nell, and partly in the hope that she would find some one in Roxby clever enough to make them up for her and—though that she did not admit—who would not ask much for doing so.

Jean had not meant to do her sewing away from home. Her mind was so preoccupied with thoughts of sick Bab and with the innumerable small duties that would probably go undone if she were not there to perform them that hours spent away from home were little short of torture to her.

But when she ventured to give voice to this preference, both Nell Slater and her friend snapped her up and appeared so outraged that Jean said nothing further on the subject.

“Now I think this changeable silk is nice,” Ruth said, holding the beautiful fabric up to the light. “We’ll start on this.”

Jean was in a panic. She had made dresses for her sisters, many of them, and was even able to cut into new material certainly and surely without a pattern, fitting to a nicety and turning out a perfect garment.

But this was different. She had never worked on such expensive material, nor for such a captious critic. Her sisters had always been pleased with the results of her labors, but she thought that was perhaps because they were fond of her and liked everything she did.

Ruth was not at all fond of her—quite the contrary—and Jean could see quite easily that she was prepared to dislike everything she did.

Her first remark was a criticism.

“You handle the scissors so clumsily,” she said pettishly. “Now this is the way I do it,” illustrating in a very clumsy manner indeed.

Jean bit her lip and continued to use the scissors as always. Her very silence and self-control seemed to irritate not only Nell Slater’s guest, but Nell Slater herself. It appeared to poor Jean that after that they went out of their way to make things unpleasant for her.

If Ruth had settled on a plain model for the silk dress Jean’s task would have been easier. But Nell Slater’s guest was the type of girl who could see no beauty nor dignity in plain, simple things. She must always be decked out in ribbons and ruffles that made her already slightly plump figure look plumper still and emphasized all her bad points while revealing none of her good.

Jean saw this, and at first ventured a remonstrance, outlining to Ruth her own idea of what would suit her best.

“I guess I know what I want better than any one else,” Ruth told her, adding with a giggle that was more insulting than her hauteur: “I don’t usually ask my dressmakers about it, either. Perhaps,” with a thoughtful look, “you think you are not capable of making the kind of dress I want? In that case, of course, I can look about for some one else.”

This was too much! Jean would have put down her work then and refused to take another stitch for this unpleasant girl if it had not been for thought of her sisters at home.

Bab needed expensive medicine, tempting food. Somehow, the little household must be kept together during the dreary winter months that still stretched ahead of them. She must try to think of that and nothing else.

The hours lagged on until lunch time and she was patronizingly offered some sandwiches and tea.

Jean accepted the tea and drank it gratefully. She nibbled half of one sandwich, but could eat no more. Weariness of both body and mind had driven away all desire for food.

The afternoon hours passed until it was almost dusk, and still Jean sat bent over her sewing, nimble fingers flying in and out, in and out. Beneath her fatigue, beneath her anxiety for Bab, for old Mrs. Tamley, for her other sisters, ran the hot thought:

“Oh, if the time will ever come when I can tell these girls what I think of them, when I can refuse to take a stitch for them even if they should get down on their knees to me and offer me a hundred dollars a minute! Oh, if I were in their place and they in mine, I could not be so cruel, so unkind!”

While Jean was bent over her work, her fingers weary, her tired mind seared with hot resentful thoughts, Alice was having an adventure, an adventure fraught with danger at the time and of amazing possibilities for the future.

Standing on the shore of Deer Pond, she called frantically to the fair-haired little girl who so joyously skated toward disaster.

The other children, who had started to “follow the leader,” shrank back at Alice’s frightened cry and huddled close to the shore of the pond.

Not so Angela. Either she had not heard Alice or she chose to ignore the warning. At any rate, she kept on toward the danger spot, skating swiftly and surely.

Alice waited no longer, but ran over the ice as quickly as she could, slipping and skidding and falling once or twice on the way.

“Angela! Angela! come back!” she screamed, then paused for a moment in abject terror, hand pressed to mouth, eyes staring.

What she had feared had happened. The ice, cracking in a long seam, broke beneath the weight of the child.

Angela screamed and flung herself backward. Too late! The very attempt to save herself proved her undoing. She came down full force on the ice. It cracked and broke beneath her, and the child disappeared.

In a nightmare Alice was working her way toward that sluggishly rippling pool which a moment before had been filmed over with ice.

She dared not trust her weight too close to that broken edge, and yet she must get close to it, and quickly, if she were to save the life of golden-haired Angela.

She flung herself flat and wriggled forward slowly, a prayer on her lips, terror at her heart.

Upon her depended a life! Upon her judgment and strength and resourcefulness depended a life! She thought, “what if this were Bab?” and cried aloud.

She was on the edge of that dark pool now! The ice was groaning and creaking beneath her. Where was Angela? At any moment she herself might fall through that treacherous surface. Where was Angela?

Ah, there was that bright hair!

Alice reached for it, caught a heavy strand of it in her fingers, clenched her teeth and pulled.

That motion filled her with despair and with a feeling of impotence. It was a nightmare, for while she pulled the child closer to her, she herself slipped over the glazed surface. Her face was almost in the water. The thin crust of ice was sinking beneath her.

“Oh, what shall I do! What shall I do!” she moaned, but clung desperately to that shining hair.

CHAPTER XX

A HEROINE

ALICE had reached the point where it seemed impossible for her to do anything more.

If she tried to draw the child up on the ice, she would only sink beneath that icy water herself and they would both be drowned. On the other hand, she could not long stay as she was, for her hands were becoming numb. In a short time her half-frozen fingers would lose their strength and she could no longer cling to that strand of bright hair.

She sobbed and cried aloud:

“Help! Oh, help!”

There might be some one near who would hear! The children might run for help! Some one must come soon, or—Alice did not finish the sentence even in her thoughts.

She had succeeded in raising the child’s head above the water. That was her only hope. But Angela had fainted—or her heart had stopped beating and she was dead! Her face was like marble, her parted lips colorless.

It was only a matter of seconds now before the tragedy would be complete.

Alice could still have saved herself if she had been willing to release the burden of the unconscious child. But that possibility never entered her mind!

Her fingers were slipping! The layer of water over the ice penetrated her clothing and chilled her to the bone.

She thought of the girls at home, shut her eyes, clenched her teeth, and held on.

There was a scurrying on the ice behind her, the noise of shouts and hurrying feet.

Help was coming!

Alice tried to call out something, but found that her voice was only a hoarse croak. She could not speak nor move—she could scarcely even feel.

Some one was advancing cautiously on the ice behind her. Some one had grasped her ankles. Alice could have sobbed aloud with thankfulness at the

strong grip. It was the only real thing in all the hideous nightmare she was living through.

A rope splashed beside her. She heard a voice—Dick Rockwell’s voice—call:

“Can you get that around the kid—under her arms? I’ll hold you, and I daren’t go out that far myself.”

Numbed as she was, Alice managed to work the rope under the child’s arms, pulling it tight. She could not speak, but jerked at the rope as a sign that all was ready.

Angela was drawn from the water, her limp body slithered across the ice. Alice herself was drawn backward until she was upon solid ice and could be helped to her feet.

The scene that followed was vague and unreal to her.

She saw Dick strip off his coat and wrap it about the child and hand her to one of the men in the small crowd that had gathered.

Another man in the crowd stripped off his coat, and Dick wrapped it very carefully about Alice and kept his arm about her.

“If you will take Angie home, Dave,” and Alice recognized Dave Barchester for the first time, “I’ll take care of Alice. And hurry the kid, Dave. I’m afraid she’s in a pretty bad way.”

Alice then found herself walking away from the pond with Dick’s arm protectingly about her and Dick himself like a tower of strength bending over her.

She had need of strength just then. She was trembling with cold and reaction, and everything was swirling before her eyes.

“Can you walk?” asked Dick gently. “If you can’t——”

“I—I’m all right,” she answered. “Oh, Dick, I just want to get home! I just want to get—warm——” Then everything went black before her and for a long time she knew nothing more.

Alice came to herself with the vision of loving anxious faces bending over her and a sensation of delicious warmth.

Mrs. Tamley’s worn hands were rubbing hers briskly, Corny was bathing her head with something that felt cool and smelled very sweet, and Doctor Tilson was sitting on a chair beside her, regarding her keenly.

“She’ll do now,” said the latter, as Alice sighed contentedly and closed her eyes again. “Shock is the worst thing—and exposure, of course. If she is kept very warm all the rest of to-day and to-night, she ought to be herself to-morrow. Don’t forget the prescription.”

Prescription! Another prescription!

Alice was beginning to remember now, and the delicious mood of physical relaxation and comfort was passing.

More prescriptions! No money! All the round of nagging worries and anxieties over again!

Her breath caught in a little sound that was half moan, half sob.

Mrs. Tamley's arms went about her and a caressing old hand touched her cheek.

"Everything's all right, honey," she said. "You've been a right brave girl, and we're proud of you."

"The whole town's proud of you." Corny came back from seeing the doctor out and dropped on her knees beside her sister. "Doctor Tilson says the whole town is talking about the way you saved the life of that little tow-headed Angela."

"Is she all right? Is she going to live?" Alice half rose from the couch, but Mrs. Tamley pushed her back again.

"Yes, she'll live. The doctor says they will probably have a hard fight to ward off pneumonia, but the child's a husky little thing and will probably get along all right. He says," there was humor in Corny's dry tone, "that old man Rockwell is frantic with two things—relief and— But you'll never guess the other, Alice."

"I don't know that I want to," came very faintly from the girl on the couch.

"A wild desire to throw his arms about you and embrace you! Doctor Tilson says he is quite sure the old man is your slave for life."

"I wouldn't take him as a gift!" said Alice, and her face became suddenly so white and drawn that Mrs. Tamley signaled a caution to Corny.

"Just rest now, that's a dear," said the old lady to Alice, as she smoothed the fair hair back from her forehead. "The doctor says you must be kept good and warm, so I'll just stir up the fire in the stove and heat some more water for the water bag——"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!"

Corny was on her feet, an arm about the old lady, wresting the hot-water bag from her not unwilling hand.

"You go up and see to Bab, Godmother dear. She can't seem to live two minutes without you now. I declare it's enough to make us all jealous!"

With the words to warm her heart and a kiss to bring a flush to her face, the old lady left the room. Corny turned to the stove and began to heat some

water in a pan.

Alice realized then for the first time that she was in the kitchen. The couch had been moved from the front room and brought as close to the coal stove as could be done.

That accounted for the delicious sensation of warmth she had had on first awaking. That, and the fact that she seemed to be wrapped in layers of clothing and that the couch was heaped with blankets.

“Corny?”

“Yes, dear?”

Corny turned from the stove, the pan of steaming water in her hand.

“How is Bab?”

“Better.”

Corny’s answer was prompt, but there was something in her voice that caused Alice to look at her sharply.

“You don’t quite mean that, Corny! I want the truth, please! You know you never can fib to me.”

Corny carefully filled the hot-water bottle, wedged in the cork, screwed on the top, tucked it beneath the bedclothes at her sister’s feet, and sat down beside the couch.

“Well, then, since I can’t fib to you successfully, I’ll tell you the truth. Don’t look at me like that, Alice Rowe! Your stare’s enough to frighten me into silence. It isn’t so very dreadful.”

“Then tell me quickly!” Her voice came in a gasping whisper, for she had seen Corny’s lip tremble and Corny’s face whiten, and her own heart was suddenly filled with an agony of dread. “She isn’t—our sister isn’t _____”

“Oh, no, no!” Corny put a hand over Alice’s lips to choke back the dreadful word they were about to utter. “Do you think I could be sitting here beside you like this, if—if— But I can’t say it!”

“Then what?” Some of the terror left Alice’s face and she leaned back among the pillows, regarding her sister intently.

Corny gained control of herself. She spoke in a steadier voice.

“The doctor says that she is approaching a crisis; that some time tomorrow the fever will either break and she will get well; or——”

But this time it was Alice’s hand that went out in quick protest.

“Oh, no, Corny! No! We won’t let her go, our Bab! Oh, Corny! What is it makes me so cold? Oh, Corny, put your arms about me! That’s right—

closer— Oh, Corny, dear, dear Corny, what shall we do?”

CHAPTER XXI

THE CRISIS

JEAN came in drooping, weary, marshaling a gallant smile to her lips to cover her discouragement.

Early winter dusk had fallen on the little house. In one or two of the rooms a lamp had been lit, throwing a feeble flicker of light on the white expanse of snow without.

The kitchen was the only cheerful-looking spot in the house, and it was into this that Jean came to find the couch pulled up close to the kitchen stove and Alice lying on it, white and languid.

The latter cried out fondly when she saw the older girl and stretched out a hand to her.

“It’s all right, Jeanie. Don’t look so frightened, you poor, tired darling. Come and sit down here where you can get warm. There, that’s better. Now then, I’m not going to die, as that look on your face seems to intimate.”

“But——”

Corny came in at the moment, kissed the new arrival and took off her hat—which Jean had completely forgotten—then drew up a chair and told her all about everything, omitting nothing that had to do with their sister’s heroism.

Jean was horrified one minute and inflated with pride the next, scolding Alice one moment for recklessness and following the scolding with encomiums of praise calculated to turn any girl’s head.

The result was extremely satisfactory to all concerned, and Jean almost forgot her own recent fatigue and discouragement in pride in her sister.

All that might have been very well if Jean had not had to learn so quickly about Bab.

But as soon as Corny had finished her story, she left the latter to prepare the scanty evening meal and went upstairs to the sick room.

There she was met by Mrs. Tamley, a finger to her lips.

“You must go very softly,” she said. “The doctor said she was not to be disturbed.”

Jean looked over at the still little form on the bed. She gripped the hand of the old woman hard.

“Is she asleep?” she whispered.

Mrs. Tamley shook her head and Jean could see from that gesture the depth of her anxiety.

“She has lain that way all day,” she said softly. “She ain’t exactly what you can call sleeping, and yet she ain’t properly conscious, either. If you speak to her, sometimes she’ll answer and sometimes she’ll just lie there as if she hadn’t heard you.”

“Dear Godmother,” Jean’s hand tightened on the kind old one, “you wouldn’t tell me what wasn’t true, would you? You’d know how unkind that would be?”

“I would, dearie, and I won’t—tell you what ain’t the truth, that is.”

The old woman’s voice sank to a very faint whisper and Jean had to lean close to her to hear at all.

“She’s hovering——”

“Yes!”

“She’s hovering between life and death. We’re going to fight for her——”

“And we’ll know?” Jean’s whisper was the merest shadow of a sound.

“Some time to-morrow.”

Jean bent down and touched the old lady’s cheek with her lips.

“I don’t know what we would do without you, dear Godmother.” Her voice failed her, but she walked with steady step over toward the bed.

She knelt down beside the little sister who looked, even then, as if she might be communing with the angels. So white and still and lovely with her dark eyes wide and fixed upon some vision only to be seen by her, the fair hair spread upon the pillow, one thin, transparent hand lying outside the covers, fingers curled palm inward like a tired baby’s.

Jean took the thin hand in hers and put it to her lips.

“Bab dear, Jeanie’s here.”

There was a stirring of the fingers until they closed feebly about hers. A look of comprehension came into the wide, dark eyes.

“Jeanie——”

“Yes, darling.”

“Don’t cry, Jean—poor Jean. I’m all right. I’m very—comfortable——”

After a long pause:

“Jean?”

“Yes, my little Bab?”

“Am I going to die, Jean?”

“No! Oh, no!”

“But I think I am. No, don’t cry, Jean. I—I don’t think I mind very much. I feel so light. I am very light, Jean?”

“Very light, my little sister!”

“I think I could lie on that great fleecy cloud I saw to-day and go up and up—straight up—far, far up—and never—never—come back——”

The little hand relaxed in Jean’s. Jean saw the look of consciousness fade in the big dark eyes and the dreaming expression return.

She laid her head down on the edge of the bed and poured forth her grief in a passion of silent sobs that left her weak and spent.

Then she sent Mrs. Tamley to lie down for a while, drew up a chair to the bedside and sat down to watch and wait and pray—pray as she had never prayed before that the little sister might be spared to them.

It was a dreary, bitter night. Alice must be kept snug and warm, but Jean and Corny took turn and turn watching with the old lady at Bab’s bedside. The medicine, sent up from Bill Robinson’s drug store by the doctor, was to be taken every three hours.

Alice protested that her sisters must not bother about her. They had enough to worry them. She could get along all right.

And Corny, poor Corny, whose cold would not get well, coughed all through the night.

Between them, Jean’s heart was wrung. It seemed humanly impossible that she would be able to keep the forlorn little family together through that nightmare winter.

When the soft breezes of spring melted the layers of snow and drifted in at the open windows of the little house, would they all be there or would the summer sun, rising, shine upon an empty place?

Morning dawned at last, and with it the grim shadow of disaster seemed to settle down more closely over the cottage and its inmates.

Some time that day, Doctor Tilson had said, the feet of their little traveler would choose one of two paths.

The girls met in the kitchen.

Alice had remained on the couch before the fire all night.

"I'm all right," she said. "I'm not going to lie here any longer. I'll get the breakfast, Jeanie. You go and lie down."

Jean looked utterly weary. Her delicate face was pinched, shadows were etched deep beneath her eyes. Still she shook her head.

"Not to-day," she said. "I feel as though I would never rest again."

"Did you have any luck yesterday—with the cards?" asked Corny of Alice.

The latter shook her head. She could not bring herself to go into details of yesterday's experiences before the accident on the ice.

"I'll leave more cards when I can get out again," she said. "But not to-day."

How often was that phrase, "But not to-day," spoken by them during the next few hours?

They did not speak of Bab upstairs—drifting—but each knew what the other was thinking and heart spoke to heart with silent sympathy.

Jean had planned to run up to Nell Slater's early and explain to her that she could not be away from home that day, and possibly for some days, and why, adding that she would do as much sewing at home as she could.

But Bab roused from her stupor repeatedly to call to Jean. No one but Jean would satisfy her, no one but Jean could quiet her, no hand but Jean's in hers could soothe and comfort her.

"I'll go, Jean, and explain!" Corny offered. "You stay here."

So it was agreed, and Corny dressed in feverish haste, eager to do her errand and return—for who knew what might happen while she was away?

Some time before, while Jean and Alice had been away from home, Corny had found a half-made-up hat on which she had been working when Miss Johnson closed her shop and which had been given to her.

Partly because she was restless and partly because there was a half-formed plan stirring in her mind, she had completed the hat.

It was pretty and smart. Corny regarded it with pride, even while she deplored the fact that there were few people in Roxby who would appreciate it.

Now, desperate at the depleted condition of the family pocketbook, she packed the hat carefully in a little hat box—not the gray and rose of her imagination, but a nice little box, nevertheless—and repaired to Nell Slater's house.

"I shan't be gone long, Jean," she said, as she started. "Is there anything you want me to get at the store while I'm out?"

Jean hesitated, went into the house for a moment, and returned with the family pocketbook. She thrust it into Corny's hand.

"I suppose we'll have to have something to eat," she said. "Get whatever you like."

The two sisters did not look at each other. In the hearts of each of them was the thought:

"How long will it be before there is nothing left to buy anything with?"

It would come to that unless some sort of income were found, and soon!

So absorbed was Corny in unhappy musing that the iron stags on either side of the Slaters' driveway loomed up before she was prepared for them.

Nell herself let her into the house and ushered her into the living room with barely concealed irritation.

"Where's Jean?" she asked. "We wanted to go out this afternoon, and we can't sit around here all day!"

"You won't have to," said Corny, and explained in as few words as possible why it was impossible for Jean to keep her appointment.

She was turning away without mentioning the hat box that she still held in her hand when Nell Slater's guest pounced upon it.

"What's that?" she cried, with her foolish giggle. "Looks like a hat."

"So it is," said Corny quietly, and opened the box, displaying the smart little hat.

Ruth immediately tried it on her own fuzzy head and broke into a shrill scream of merriment.

"Oh, funny!" she cried. "It's the funniest thing I ever saw! It's a scream!"

Corny's face flamed. Her eyes showed rage, but the tone in which the retort came, in spite of herself, from her lips was low and tense.

"On you, it is!"

CHAPTER XXII

A WONDERFUL SURPRISE

CORNY snatched the hat from the silly girl's head and faced her, quivering with wrath.

"You couldn't have it now at any price!" she cried.

"Don't worry, she wouldn't want it!" This from Nell Slater. Corny had replaced the hat in the box. Now the red-haired girl snatched it up and perched it at an absurd angle on her own flaming bobbed head.

"How's this?" she cried, and danced around until she was facing a mirror. "Oh, my, what a hat!"

Corny was beside herself with rage. The dreadful days she had been living through, the gnawing, heartrending anxiety over Bab, the thwarted hope of selling the hat and so making a little money, all these things combined now to shatter her self-control.

She leaped for Nell Slater like a tigress. But Nell was quick, too. She snatched off the hat, held it behind her and danced out of Corny's reach.

Corny stood glaring at her, hands clenched at her sides, bosom heaving with quick angry intake of breath.

"Give me my hat," she said in an ominously quiet voice that should have warned Nell Slater that she had gone too far. "If you don't, I'll get it from you if I have to tear your red hair out by the roots!"

Nell merely laughed and continued to hold the hat behind her.

"Try and get it!" she taunted.

Corny would have gotten it—and in the simplest and most primitive manner—if there had not at that moment come a most astonishing interruption.

"Perhaps I can put an end to this little dispute by asking you to return *my* hat," said an easy, pleasant voice.

Both girls whirled and beheld a gracious figure in the doorway.

"Your hat!" gasped Corny. "What do you mean?"

"That I am going to buy it," said this strange person. "I have seldom seen a hat so simple and tasteful in design and so admirably suited to my face."

Corny looked at this woman, suspiciously. Was this just another cruel joke? But suspicion vanished and triumph began to take its place when she saw the expression on Nell Slater's face.

For Nell was staring at the newcomer with eyes wide open and jaw a little dropped. She took the hat from behind her and regarded it with what was certainly new respect.

"Miss Higginson," she said, "you don't really mean that you *like* the hat?"

"Indeed I do mean it!"

The lady took the smart little hat from Nell Slater's hand and, before the astonished eyes of all of them, approached the small mirror at the farther end of the room, at the same time taking off the pretty and becoming hat she already wore.

Corny's eyes were beginning to gleam. There was the light of the artist in them. The hat would look well on that tall, stately, serene-faced woman! The hat might have been made for her!

Hardly knowing what she did she crossed the room until she stood close to the mirror. Miss Higginson's eyes met those of Corny in the mirror and smiled. Corny did not smile. She was too intent.

The hat fit snugly over the graying hair of the tall lady, tilted at just the right angle over her broad brow, flared at just the right point to reveal the graceful curve of her neck.

"Oh, perfect!" The words were wrung from Corny, her eyes were shining. "I believe you are the one person in Roxby who could wear it!"

The older woman smiled.

"And I am from outside of Roxby," she said.

She took off the hat and looked at it critically, turning it this way and that, admiring its perfect workmanship. Then she smiled again at Corny. Nell Slater and her guest were forgotten in the corner, gaping with astonishment and chagrin.

"I don't believe I have to ask who you are," she said. "You answer Miss Johnson's description so perfectly. And if you did not, the evidence of this hat would be enough."

"Miss Johnson!"

Mystery and more mystery! Corny's head began to whirl and yet she was strangely excited, elated. There was something gracious and charming in this stranger's manner, something subtly complimentary that soothed her bruised spirit. This stranger spoke her own language.

“You are wondering what Miss Johnson has to do with it,” said Miss Higginson, reading her thoughts. “She has, or rather, had a great deal. Miss Johnson has sold out her millinery shop, and I am the new owner.”

It was lucky for Corny that there was a chair near by, for she sat down rather suddenly and stared at her informant.

“Oh, I—I didn’t know,” she stammered.

“No, of course not. No one else did,” Miss Higginson’s manner was suddenly brisk, efficient, businesslike. “I came here to speak to Mrs. Slater, who kindly volunteered to give me information concerning some of the families of Roxby which will undoubtedly be of great value in my business. I intended to ask her at the same time where I could most quickly get in touch with you.

“While I was waiting for Mrs. Slater to come down—I was in the room next to this,” Miss Higginson’s eyes twinkled enjoyably— “I heard the sound of raised voices in here and ventured—wrongly, perhaps—to take a hand in the scene. Behold the reward of my temerity! One very good-looking hat and the discovery of Miss Cornelia Rowe.”

“You—you were looking for me?” Corny thought she must be dreaming.

“My dear Miss Rowe, you are very modest. Of course I was looking for you! And now that I have met you I am more than ever set in my design.”

“Which is?” asked Corny eagerly, not daring yet to hope.

“To ask for your services in the new shop,” said Miss Higginson promptly. “By the way, your name is Cornelia Rowe, is it not?”

“Yes,” said Corny breathlessly. “When—does this wonderful thing begin to happen?”

“As soon as I can get the shop in shape. Shall we say to-morrow?”

To-morrow! That took Corny’s breath away. But before she could answer a maid appeared in the doorway to announce that Mrs. Slater was in the library and would see Miss Higginson now, if that lady so desired.

Miss Higginson turned toward the door, and as she did so slipped something into Corny’s hand.

“In payment for the hat,” she said. “The winter is almost gone,” she added, “and we shall have a busy time before us preparing for the early spring trade. Shall we say to-morrow then, at nine o’clock?”

Miss Higginson went to the library to have a talk with Mrs. Slater, who knew a great many facts about the business life of Roxby, as well as the social, and could be counted upon to give the new owner of the millinery

shop much valuable information. Corny opened her hand. In it was a five dollar bill!

Corny left the Slater house in triumph. Nell recovered sufficiently from the shock of her surprise and chagrin to come to the door and fire a passing shot after her enemy.

“You can tell Jean Rowe that if she doesn’t get that dress done by tomorrow, she needn’t bring it back at all. We don’t want her kind of sewing anyway.”

“Sheer spite!” thought Corny, and tucked the five dollar bill away in her pocketbook—the poor thin family pocketbook!

She stopped on the way home and bought a chicken. They would have a feast that night. And there would be some nice rich chicken broth. Perhaps Bab might even be able to take a little of it.

The name and the ever-present dread in her heart hurried her feet from the grocery store and down the street that led toward home.

The doctor’s car was standing before the door.

Corny’s breath came quickly. Dread closed cold fingers about her heart. Had she been away too long?

The moment the door was opened to her by Alice she knew that the time had come, that Bab’s uncertain feet were hovering at the crossroads.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’ve come!” Alice dragged her into the silent house with its atmosphere of expectancy and softly closed the door. “I was afraid you might be too late!”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RIGHT ROAD

CORNY went into the kitchen to put her bundles down and Alice followed her there, as silent as a shadow.

Corny was very quiet, now that the moment had come—so different from Alice who was shivering with nervousness and whose eyes were red with weeping. Corny felt cold inside, as if some part of her was dead, but she was perfectly calm.

“The doctor is here?” she asked.

Alice could only nod her head.

Together they went up the stairs, footsteps muted, clinging together.

“Is she conscious?” Corny stopped to ask before they entered the sick room.

“No, I don’t think so. She just lies there. Oh, Corny—” Alice caught herself up at Corny’s quick look, pressed a hand tight over her lips, and nodded toward the door.

Doctor Tilson was standing near the bed, Bab’s hand in his. He nodded as the girls slipped noiselessly into the room. Jean knelt beside her sister, hungry eyes never leaving Bab’s face.

Mrs. Tamley stood at the foot of the bed, her old eyes alertly on the doctor, ready instantly to comply with his demands.

The shades were half drawn. The dreadful silent expectancy that hovers over all sick rooms, hovered here and seemed to shut out every ray of the bright sunshine that bathed the world outside.

Alice was shivering with a nervous chill and Corny put an arm about her to steady her.

Jean looked up briefly and flashed an agonized message to them. Then her eyes returned to Bab’s face.

The girl was so still and white that her little feet might already have passed the turning on the way to the Eternal City. Only the slight rise and fall of her breast with the feebly indrawn breath gave evidence that she still lived. Doctor Tilson, feeling that faint pulse, waited for the moment, now

fast approaching, which would decide the winner in the age-old battle between life and death.

Suddenly Bab stirred and opened her eyes.

Alice and Corny took a step nearer to the bed. Jean half-started up. The barest gesture of the doctor's hand kept them where they were.

"Doctor——"

The great shaggy doctor bent closer over the faintly moving lips.

"Doctor—I think—I'm going to—get well!"

Bab closed her eyes again and there was not the sound of a breath in that silent room. She lay so very still that for a moment it seemed as though she might have left them.

The three girls started forward, but again the doctor raised his hand in a warning gesture. His eyes were bent intently on the sick girl, his fingers never ceased for an instant to count that feebly beating pulse.

One moment—two—while the spirit of a young girl hung balanced over eternity.

Then nursing won—and love and prayer.

Bab sighed wearily, contentedly, and slipped into a deep refreshing sleep.

The nurse looked at the doctor. The doctor looked at the nurse and nodded.

Very gently he put the little hand that he had held so fearfully beneath the covers and drew the blanket up and tucked it beneath Bab's chin as tenderly as though she had been his own.

Then he too sighed deeply, contentedly, tiredly.

"She'll do!" he said.

Bab's sisters crept closer to him, eyes wet, incredulous, not daring to believe.

"Doctor?"

"She'll get well," he told them gruffly, turning away to hide the fact that his own eyes were not so keen and bright as usual. "She's getting the first real sleep now that she's had for weeks. From now on improvement should be steady."

"She'll—get—well!"

The doctor had to take the three sisters out into the hall then for fear they would disturb the sick girl. They were all laughing and crying at once, and

the doctor's own eyes were not free of tears. But he pretended to scold them and so got as far as the front door.

But when he had shrugged himself into his shaggy overcoat, Jean took one of his hands and pressed it to her face.

"Thank you, Doctor. You have left some happy hearts behind you to-day."

Then what joy! What a blessed relief! What a lightening of all their spirits when they thought of Bab upstairs, sleeping peacefully!

They went about on tiptoe for fear of waking her, but with a smile on their lips and joy in their hearts.

Alice wandered into the kitchen and discovered Corny's packages, forgotten till then.

"Good gracious, Corny Rowe! Where did you get a chicken?"

"Climbed over a fence and wrung its neck!" said Corny.

She remembered her good news and told it while the girls listened with shining eyes.

"Your old place back again! Oh, Corny, we shall be rich!"

"Not rich," corrected Corny. "But at least able to live."

There was a shadow on her face, but when questioned about it she stubbornly refused to disclose her reason for it; in fact, denied that there was a reason. But she was thinking of the parting shot Nell Slater had called after her concerning Jean's work. If the latter should work all that day and all the following night she would not be able to finish Ruth Durnham's dress. Corny dreaded the reception Jean would receive when she returned it to the Slater home.

Still, if Jean lost the order with Nell and did not pick up any new ones in the village right away, they could still live by squeezing pennies, now that she had her old position back.

"Maybe Bab can eat a little chicken broth when she wakes up," Jean said. "We must get it ready, anyway."

And what an odor there was in the big kitchen when that fat fowl began to stew! It made the three Rowe girls ravenous, and long before it was done they were quite certain they could never wait until dinner time.

Jean made Mrs. Tamley lie down, despite the old lady's protest. She was looking very white and tired, and they were all afraid that she might be the next one to be taken sick.

When she was resting quietly they took turn and turn about at Bab's bedside, watching the quiet sleeper anxiously, praying for her swift recovery.

Several days went by and Bab continued to improve. The improvement was maddeningly slow and there were hours when she seemed to slip backward ever so little. But both the doctor and Mrs. Tamley told the anxious sisters that this was inevitable, and that if the girl were carefully guarded from taking fresh cold, she would in time recover.

Corny was busy at the millinery shop and Jean was at work on Ruth Durnham's dress; so Alice spent a great deal of her time at Bab's bedside, relieving Mrs. Tamley in every way that she could. It was late one afternoon as she sat beside her younger sister that she heard the doorbell ring downstairs. She heard Corny who had just come in, go to the door, and went into the hall to see who the newcomers could be.

Then her face turned a dull red. There were voices, men's voices, two of them. Alice recognized the first as Dick Rockwell's, the second as his father's.

Before she could retreat into the sickroom Corny had run lightly up the stairs and was calling softly to her.

"Alice! Oh, Alice! There is some one down there who wants to speak to you!"

There was nothing for the younger girl to do then but to come forward. Alice was still smarting at the memory of the elder Rockwell's look and manner. Her resentment was still strong against him.

So when she reached the living room where the guests were awaiting her she was not prepared for the cordiality of Mr. Rockwell, senior.

He came forward and took both her hands in his. His eyes under the grizzled brows were soft.

"So here's the girl who saved my little Angela, eh?" he said. "A pretty girl, and a brave one, too. I tried to get here before, but a fall that housed me for a few days prevented. My dear, I want to thank you, but I don't know how."

An audacious thought came to Alice then.

She glanced at Dick, who was standing beside his father, looking at her gravely. Then turned to the older man, a demure quirk at the corners of her mouth, a little flutter of mingled fear and hope in her heart.

"I don't want any thanks," she said. "But there's something you might do for me, instead——"

"And what's that?" asked the elder Rockwell, his eyes beginning to twinkle.

"You might give me a job," replied Alice in one breath.

“If you want the whole shop, you can have it, Alice Rowe!”

Yes, those were Mr. Rockwell’s words, incredible as it seemed—doubly incredible—to Alice, who had seen the old man in his wrath. It was almost impossible to believe that any one could be so changed.

CHAPTER XXIV

A PROMISE

IN the talk Alice and the owner of the hardware store had after that, Dick's father told her that they really were short-handed at the place and that if she wanted to help them out for a few days they would be glad to have her.

Alice was dazed with triumph for a few moments, until a suspicion flashed through her mind that threatened to spoil everything.

Mr. Rockwell was hiring her through gratitude, not because he really needed her services! But when this was put to him the old man denied it vehemently.

"I liked the way you talked back to me in the shop," he told her, the twinkle in his eyes growing. "I made up my mind then that I'd give you a chance to prove that you really wanted to work. Then when Angela was brought home and I learned what you had done—" His voice failed and for a moment he was too deeply moved to go on. "Well, that clinched it. I said to myself, 'That's the kind of young person I want in my store.' So, what do you say? Going to help an old man out?"

In spite of herself Alice could not but warm to this grim, grizzled old bear of a man who, she came to suspect, was ninety-nine per cent. bark and one per cent. bite.

She took his outstretched hand and her face glowed with an anticipation.

"Only try me and see!" she said.

When after a little further talk Alice saw the Rockwells, father and son, to the door, Dick lingered behind to squeeze the girl's hand victoriously.

"We did it!" he said. "How about going to the movies to-night to celebrate?"

Alice had almost forgotten there was such a thing as movies, but she nodded assent to the suggestion and even squeezed Dick's hand a little in good comradeship.

"If this is any of it your work, thanks, Dick. You're a dear."

"So're you!" said Dick, with a grin, and went out to join his father.

When Alice turned back into the hall, Corny did a silent little war dance of triumph about her, then dragged her toward the stairs.

“Hurrah!” she cried. “Let’s tell Jean.”

Jean had already stolen from the sick room, where she had taken Alice’s place, eager for news. Now she met her sisters at the head of the stairs and in quick excited whispers they told her what had passed during the interview.

“So now I’m a wage earner,” said Alice, throwing out her chest. “You and Corny don’t need to think you’re the only ones!”

“Well, you deserve it, Alice dear, if ever any one did,” said Jean, tears of relief and gratitude in her eyes. “I’m so glad. Our luck seems to be coming in bunches.”

The girls made a gala occasion of dinner that day. They already had a chicken, as they frequently made chicken broth for Bab. But they cooked extra vegetables and opened a glass of jelly.

Alice volunteered to stay with the sick girl while Mrs. Tamley came down and ate with the family for once. The latter protested, but came, finally, all dressed up in her black silk and smiling happily because of the great improvement in her patient.

Later that evening, while Corny and Jean washed the dishes and spoke happily of their good fortune, Alice went with Dick Rockwell to the only moving picture house in Roxby.

They saw a picture antiquated beyond belief where a typical wild Westerner—the kind that are only in the movies nowadays—rescues the fair heroine from a swiftly moving train at the imminent risk of his own life.

But Alice had not been to see a moving picture for so long and was so starved for any form of entertainment that she gasped with genuine admiration for the hero’s daring feats and was sorry when the picture was over.

“We must go there lots,” Dick said, when he took her home and stood, hat in hand, on her doorstep. “Do the rest of the family like movies?”

“Oh, yes, Dick.” Alice hesitated, then acted on a generous impulse. “And, Dick, there’s our dear old Mrs. Tamley. She’s been so good to us and she never gets anywhere. If we could just take her with us some time——”

Alice had always had a pretty good opinion of Dick Rockwell, but her good opinion jumped still higher at his enthusiastic reception of her suggestion.

“She’s a good sport, that old lady. Sure, we’ll take her. Love to!”

From that time on the heavy weight of dread that had pressed upon it during Bab's sickness was lifted from the Rowe household.

The sick girl improved steadily and rapidly. More steadily and rapidly than any of them had dared to hope. She began to take an interest in her food and that interest was hailed with joy by her adoring family.

Most of the combined income of the girls went to satisfy that appetite and provide the little invalid with the necessary medicines and tonics.

Meanwhile, that combined income developed a maddening habit of disappearing almost as soon as it was earned.

Although Corny was earning twelve dollars a week at Miss Higginson's shop—two dollars more a week than had been paid her by Miss Johnson—and Alice was in fairly constant demand among the shopkeepers of Roxby, the money they made scarcely extended over the daily needs of the household, leaving them nothing whatever for clothes or for the badly needed repairs on the house.

Jean finished the dress for Ruth Durnham and was paid for it. The rest of the rather extensive order for Nell Slater's guest was abruptly cancelled, however, and no reason offered for the action.

Jean was puzzled and outraged until Corny told her what Nell Slater had called after her when she left the latter's house on that eventful day of her interview with the new owner of Miss Johnson's millinery shop.

"I'm afraid my good fortune was your bad fortune, Jean dear," Corny said, an arm about the older girl. "Nell Slater was mad at me, doubly angry because she had been shown up by Miss Higginson and I had marched off with all the honors of war. She had to take out her spite on some one, so she took it out on innocent you. I'm sorry, Jeanie. I lost my temper completely, and I'm ashamed of it. But, Jean, I'm still so mad that I'm not sure I'm sorry," and Corny laughed a rueful little laugh.

"I wouldn't have had you act any other way," Jean returned loyally. "Nell Slater got her just deserts, and in one way I'm just as glad not to have to do any more work for her—or her friends either. Although," with a sigh, "I did hope a lot from my dressmaking!"

Jean did have other offers of work, for the people of Roxby were interested in and sincerely friendly to the "four little women of Roxby." Besides that, Jean's skill with her needle was well known.

The fly in that ointment was that, in order to make any real money with her dressmaking, Jean would be forced to spend a good part of her days away from home, and that, with both Corny and Alice out of the house, she

could not do because of Bab. The people of Roxby would not come to her because the weather was too bad and the distance between houses too great.

Jean finally fell back on her embroidery, which she could do altogether at home and which did bring her in a small, if irregular income.

It was about this time that they began to notice a great change in Mrs. Tamley.

As Bab grew steadily stronger and daily needed her less, the spirit of service which had upheld the old lady and kept her calm and contented through the trying days began to desert her.

On that never-to-be-forgotten occasion when Bab had been permitted by Doctor Tilson to leave her bed and sit by the window, their “godmother” evinced the first symptoms of her new mood.

She was sitting close to Bab, holding her hand—for the girl would never allow the old lady far from her sight—when she suddenly said:

“My goodness, it will be spring soon, that it will—and me still staying here! What will my sister think!”

The girls turned startled eyes upon her. Bab’s filled with tears.

“You—you aren’t thinking of going away, dear Godmother?” said the latter in that faint voice that seemed so pathetically in tune with her tiny wasted frame. “You aren’t really thinking of going away, are you?”

The old lady, who had been looking vaguely and thoughtfully from the window, her eyes fixed on the far horizon, turned to Bab and pressed the thin, blue-veined hand to her wrinkled cheek.

“Not while you really need me, Ladybird. But,” muttering to herself, as though she had again forgotten their presence in the room, “I ought to be getting back. They’ll think I’m dead, I suppose, and get to worrying over me.”

The girls thought they detected that same plaintive intonation that had been in the old lady’s voice when she had voiced a like possibility.

Nothing further was said on the subject then. But as the days and weeks dragged by that saw the ice and snow melting in the street, that later brought the first early budding of the trees, the old lady’s uneasiness increased.

The girls saw this and guessed the reason for it.

“She feels that she doesn’t belong here, no matter how much we love her and want her,” Jean said. “Then, too, she is worried because she can’t remember the name and address of those relatives of hers.”

“You can’t blame her for that,” Corny said.

“I wish we could help her,” Alice added. “But I don’t really see how we can.”

Then one day Dick Rockwell and Dave Barchester came together and invited Jean and Alice and Corny to a party.

The glee club to which both boys belonged was giving a concert with a dance and refreshments afterwards, it seemed, and Dave and Dick were anxious for the girls to go.

Corny refused directly, saying that she had nothing to wear and, besides, some one had to stay at home with Bab and their old lady.

“I wouldn’t leave them alone for worlds,” she said, when her sisters objected. “You and Alice go and have a good time. I’d rather sit at home with a good book anyway.”

They knew that this was actually so. Corny’s days at the millinery shop were recreation, not work for her. And she was such an inveterate reader that to have an evening to herself with a box of candy and a new book spelled the heights of happiness.

But Jean and Alice, especially Alice, were different. They hungered for this party, yet were at the same time anxious and worried about it.

“If we only had some decent clothes, Jean,” mourned the younger girl one day that she chanced to have free, as they dubiously examined their shabby wardrobe. “I hate to go anywhere in these old rags.”

“Yes,” Jean agreed. “They are rather dreadful. Still, we must try to do the best we can with them.”

They were startled at this moment by a faint tapping on the door.

“Is that you, Godmother?” called Jean. “Come in.”

The old lady had no sooner stepped inside the door than they saw that something unusual had happened. Her wrinkled face was flushed and her hands trembled as they held out a bit of cardboard toward the girls.

“I’ve found it!” she cried, her voice high and shrill with excitement. “I was ripping out the lining of my old dress to see if I couldn’t somehow get it to set better when I felt something way down near the hem. There must have been a hole in the pocket I sewed into the lining!”

Alice took the card and Jean bent over her while the old lady sank down on the bed, regarding them intently out of her bright dark eyes.

“Mrs. Harkness L. Brown,” Jean read aloud over her sister’s shoulder. “Why, that’s——”

“That’s my half-sister’s visiting card,” said the old lady triumphantly. “So you see I really didn’t lose it, after all.”

“Oh,” said Alice ruefully. “Well it looks as if what was good luck for you was mighty bad luck for us. So you’re going to go away and leave us, Godmother, are you?”

CHAPTER XXV

THEIR FAIRY GODMOTHER

“I WOULDN’T, honey, if I didn’t think I ought to,” said the old lady, patting the hand Alice stretched out to her. “But they’ll be expecting me and I’ve been away a right smart while now, you know.”

“But see here!” Jean had been examining the card closely and now spoke with some excitement. “There was once an address in the lower corner of the card, but it’s been rubbed out.”

“That’s right,” said Alice, seeing the smudged-out place where an address had evidently once been written in pencil. “The address has been rubbed out, for a fact.”

The old lady appeared immensely agitated over this, but Jean speedily reassured her by saying that, now they had the full name of her half-sister’s husband, there would be no difficulty about finding the address in a Philadelphia telephone directory.

“And you’ll do it right away?” urged the old lady, seizing Jean’s dress in agitated fingers.

“I don’t see just how we can get a Philadelphia telephone book,” replied Jean slowly.

“I do!” exclaimed Alice. “Don’t you remember Mark Davis, Jeanie?” she went on eagerly. “You know, don’t you, that he went to Philadelphia to work? Dave Barchester hears from him right along—Dick Rockwell told me so! Let’s get Dave to write to Mark and ask him to look for the Harkness L. Browns!”

“Good! We’ll do that right away! Let’s look up Dave right now—he won’t mind being stopped in his work for a minute or two!”

The old lady seemed comforted and the two girls put on their hats and coats at once to go to the lumberyard where they knew they would find Dave at this hour of the day.

Dave Barchester was glad to see the girls, and when they told him their errand he put on his hat and coat and went out with them, not to write to Mark Davis, as they had asked him to, but to telegraph to him!

“It’s good of you, Dave,” said Jean, when, the telegram sent, he started back to his office in the lumberyard.

“Good! Don’t be so mild, Jean! It’s perfectly darling of him!” cried Alice.

As the girls were going home, Bill Robinson came out of his store and spoke to Alice respectfully. His manner had noticeably changed since the girl’s first visit to his store when she had left him what she now laughingly called her “business card.” Alice was in demand among the shopkeepers now, had proved her eagerness to fill in at any time for any length of time besides proving beyond doubt her ability to pick up quickly the essential points of any business in which she became a temporary clerk.

It seemed that Bill Robinson was eager to have her come and help him on the following day. He was putting on a special clearance sale of toilet articles and expected a busy few hours of it. He would be very glad if Alice could find the time——

Alice cut him short with a curt little shake of the head.

“Can’t do it, Mr. Robinson,” she said. “Sorry, but after to-day I’m dated up till the end of next week. Let me know earlier next time, if you need me.”

As the two girls went on their way Alice squeezed her sister’s arm.

“Never had anything do me so much good in my life, Jeanie,” she said. “That’s once I got even with an old grouch, anyway!”

Jean did not answer. Her mind seemed to be far away on other things. When Alice spoke of this, the older girl looked at her queerly.

“Alice, doesn’t it strike you that there is something familiar about that name?”

“What name?” asked Alice, her thoughts still dwelling on the pharmacist’s discomfiture.

“The name of our old lady’s half-sister’s husband,” Jean explained. “Harkness L. Brown.”

Alice came out of her detachment. She stared at Jean wonderingly.

“Why, yes, I was thinking of that. We once had an uncle named Harkness Lane Brown, didn’t we? What are you looking so funny for, Jeanie? Do you suppose there could possibly be any connection?”

“I don’t know. I suppose not, really,” Jean said, shaking her head. “Still Harkness isn’t such a very common name, you know, if Brown is. And it’s Harkness L.”

Nothing further was said on the subject, though the girls thought of it a good deal during the days of preparation for the old lady’s departure, which began, on her insistence, as soon as Jean and Alice returned from their call on Dave Barchester.

They were all rather sad and downcast and preparations for the glee-club concert and dance did not go on as merrily as they might otherwise have done.

The old lady cried a good deal into her satchel as she packed it, and Bab grieved in her chair by the window where she was watching the first buds come on the trees.

The older girls worried about Bab. Though she was so far on the road to recovery now that there was actually no danger of a relapse, it was still very necessary that her mind be kept contented and at ease.

Still they could not keep their old lady if she wanted to go. And it certainly would not be fair to the Harkness L. Browns to detain her when they had expected her long ago and would doubtless be dreadfully worried about her.

The answer to the telegram had come with gratifying promptness, and the very night after the finding of the card Jean and Corny and Alice sat down at the kitchen table and composed a letter to Mrs. Tamley's relatives in Philadelphia.

It was a nice letter, telling all that had happened to the old lady from the time she had fallen in the snowdrift in front of their house up to the present and expressing, too, the girls' gratitude for what Mrs. Tamley had done for Bab.

The girls' letter brought a telegram in reply from Harkness L. Brown, in which he directed Mrs. Tamley to take a certain train for Philadelphia. After these directions were the words, "Letter to young ladies will follow."

The day dawned all too soon when the Rowe girls must part with the old lady.

When she went in, in her black silk, ready to take an eight-o'clock morning train, tears streaming down her withered old face, to say good-bye to her little patient, Bab threw her arms about the old lady's neck and cried heart-breakingly.

They dragged her away from Bab at last, and Corny and Alice started to the station with her, carrying her satchel, as Jean was to stay with Bab.

The window was open to let in the gentle, spring-like breeze and Bab put her head out to call:

"Come back to me, dear Godmother! Promise you will!"

And the old lady nodded and waved a handkerchief and called back chokingly:

"I will, little Ladybird, I will!"

She then kissed Jean, who had gone as far as the corner with her, and patted the young cheek that was wet with tears.

“I heard you and this pretty child here,” with a gesture of her hand toward Alice, “worrying over the dresses you were going to wear to your party. Do you know what I wished then, my dear?”

“What?” asked Jean, trying to smile through her tears.

“Why, I wished I was a real fairy godmother and could deck you out in silks and satins just by waving a wand over you. But I’m only a poor old woman——”

“You’re sweet,” said Jean, pressing the old hand to her lips. “And we love you. Come back soon, dear Godmother, and fill the place that will always be waiting for you here.”

Then she surrendered the little black bag she had been carrying to Corny and ran back to the house because the tears were falling very fast and she had not a handkerchief with her!

The last she saw of the old lady was when she turned the corner with Corny and Alice on either side of her, an arm of each about her.

It was very lonesome in the house without the unobtrusive presence of the old lady. The girls had not realized how much they had become accustomed to her gentle quiet ways, until she was gone.

From the moment of her departure everything seemed to go wrong.

Bab moped by her window, lost her appetite, and the faint color that had begun to bloom in her face, and was given to moods of brooding and depression that fairly drove her sisters frantic with worry.

Then, too, with the milder weather the epidemic of winter colds and grip seemed to have run its course. Clerks resumed their familiar places behind the counters of Roxby and there was no longer any great demand for Alice’s services.

Demands for Jean’s needlework were fairly steady, but Jean herself was showing the strain of the long hard winter in pale cheeks and dull eyes and a general air of lassitude.

She could not work as quickly as she had and impatient complaints began to pour in from all sides.

Corny seemed the only one to improve in health and spirits, but her nerves were often severely taxed by the heavy strain upon her slender income and worry for the girls at home.

The promised letter from Mr. Brown did not come, nor did they hear from Mrs. Tamley. This both puzzled and worried the girls. Did the old lady

reach her destination and was she in charge of her relatives?

To make matters a little worse Roxby was subjected to a series of early spring rains that made of it a veritable swamp. The roof of the cottage on Pine Street, already severely strained by the heavy snows of the winter, leaked drearily.

“We must have repairs, or the whole house will fall to pieces,” said Jean dejectedly. “Then where will we be?”

“Out in the street,” said Corny, but no one laughed at her witticism. The girls had seldom felt less like laughing.

The night of the glee-club dance was approaching. It should have been a great occasion, one eagerly and impatiently looked forward to. But to Alice and Jean it was like a nightmare.

They had only two dresses that could, by any stretch of the imagination, be made to do.

One was a white lawn, trimmed with antiquated ruffles and far too young for Jean—it would have been about suitable for Bab. The other was a yellow figured voile that had once been pretty but now was faded, and even shabby in spots.

Jean had done her best with them. But Jean was no magician and had never yet learned how to make bricks without straw. Try as she would, she could not make those dresses look presentable.

It was the afternoon of the very day of the dance.

Dick and Dave had called the night before to say that they had better start at seven-thirty so as to be sure to miss none of the fun.

Now Jean and Alice were standing before the mirror in Jean’s room arrayed in their party frocks.

“I know that artificial rose will never cover the spot where I burned this awful dress,” said Alice ruefully, examining the flowered voile. “Oh, Jean, it’s dreadful! I’d far rather not go at all than to go looking like this!”

“Well,” said Jean, drearily turning from the mirror, “so would I.”

“Jeanie! Alice!” They turned to find Bab standing in the doorway. There was a flush in her face and a sparkle in her eye that had long been a stranger to them. “There’s a car stopping at our house!”

“A car!” They stared at her stupidly. “What kind of a car?”

“A great big car!” cried the sick girl, ignoring Jean’s protest that she must not excite herself. “And, girls, I think I saw some one in it that we know. I think I saw Godmother!”

It took no more than two seconds for Jean and Alice to reach the front door, Bab following more slowly. Corny was there before them.

There was a car stopping before the door, sure enough, an imposing, luxurious-looking car. The girls felt very curious and greatly excited at sight of it. But when their old lady descended from it, unchanged, wearing the identical black silk dress she had worn at the time of her departure, all other emotions were swallowed up in the delight of seeing her again.

The girls rushed out and caught her in their arms, laughing and crying all at once.

They scarcely noticed the tall gentleman that stood at the little old lady's elbow or the richly clad lady who smiled at them from among the cushions of the limousine.

It was Mrs. Tamley herself who broke away from the arms of the girls and introduced these two people.

“My half-sister, Mrs. Brown, my dears——”

“And your long-lost but loving Uncle Harkness Lane Brown,” said the nice, tall gentleman, who stood beside the old lady. “Here is your letter,” he pulled the paper from his pocket and waved it at them smilingly. “And I am very fond of it, for it gives me four charming young ladies for nieces.”

“And me,” said the pleasant, smiling lady in the limousine. “Harkness, I simply will not have you leave me out!”

It took the girls a little while to reason it out, to get the right of this wonderful, astonishing thing.

They all crowded into the house talking and laughing together. Bab with her arm about the little old lady as though she would never let her go again.

In the little front room handsome Uncle Harkness drew Jean aside, looking at her intently.

“Bab is so like her mother,” he said slowly, “that she might almost be my sister Jean come back again.”

By the way he spoke her name the girls could tell that he had loved their mother and their hearts warmed to him more than ever.

“You went away when our mother was a young girl,” Alice suggested, coming closer.

“Yes. I went to Europe and later to the Orient, where I stayed for years. When I came back your mother, who had meanwhile married, was dead. I have always wanted to find her children, if she left any,” with a smile around at their intent faces. “And now that I have found you by a remarkable

chance, my wife and I are going to ask you to help us spend our money—of which we have more than we know what to do with, haven't we, Alda?"

"Much, much more," smiled the handsome lady, patting Bab's soft cheek with a jeweled hand. "These are girls to be proud of, Harkness, and we are very lucky to have found them."

The old lady had been trying to gain the attention of her brother-in-law by urgent little waves of the hand and pointings of a thumb toward the door.

Now Harkness L. Brown caught her eye and grinned boyishly.

The chauffeur, who had previously sat in the front seat of the car as motionless as a uniformed statue and so escaped the girls' attention, stood in the doorway with a box on his shoulder. He looked the picture of bored patience.

"Go in, Briggs, and land the box," said Harkness L. Brown.

The four little women of Roxby looked at their godmother curiously as Briggs obeyed. That old lady was beaming to such an extent that it seemed as though a little sun must have been lighted within her.

She pulled at Jean's sleeve and said in a stage whisper:

"I'm in time for the party, ain't I? You haven't gone yet?"

"No," said Jean, wondering. "We haven't gone yet. It's to-night."

Harkness L. Brown motioned aside the world-weary Briggs and knelt down beside the box like the great, overgrown, lovable boy he was, despite all his wealth and influence.

The old lady bounced in her seat, his wife leaned forward for a better view, the girls crowded close.

"Now, my pretty nieces, hold your eyes in!" he cried, and flung back the lid of the box.

It was a wonderful box, a beautiful box, an incredible box. It was filled with lovely things, girls' things, fairy things. The dress that lay on top was blue, sprinkled with silver, like a star-frosted night.

The girls could not speak. They knelt beside Harkness L. Brown and drew out the exquisite contents of a box that seemed to them to have no bottom.

There were dresses for all of them, such dresses as they had never before even imagined, exquisite underthings, sheer cobwebby stockings, dainty slippers to match.

Incredible! Impossible! The girls more than half expected the box and its contents to vanish in a puff of smoke.

Jean looked from Harkness L. Brown to the old lady, beaming on the sofa. She looked back again helplessly at this wonderful, newly acquired uncle.

“It’s—it’s so wonderful we can’t believe it yet,” she said. “Oh, girls, say something!”

“Say it to her,” said Harkness L. Brown, waving a hand toward Mrs. Tamley. “She it was who told us about your party and brought us here a full week before we had intended to make the trip. She was scared to death for fear she’d miss that party! She it was who would not let us write, saying she wanted to give you a surprise.”

The girls turned toward the radiant old lady, smiling, though their eyes were wet. But Bab was the first to fling herself into the kind old arms.

“Girls,” she cried, turning to her sisters as though she had made the most wonderful discovery in the world, “she *is* a fairy godmother, after all!”

Of course Jean and Alice went to their party—went like two modern Cinderellas to the ball, although, unlike the original Cinderella, their beautiful dresses were fastened on and did not fly off at the stroke of twelve.

Jean was beautiful—yes, beautiful!—in a golden frock with tiny yellow rosebuds and marvelous gold slippers to match. Her eyes shone and her face was flushed with the joy that sang in her heart. Her feet scarcely touched the ground.

Big Dave Barchester was jealous of other Roxby youths who claimed her attention.

“Jean,” David said clumsily, as they approached a more or less secluded corner, “I never knew you were so pretty. I want to ask—what I mean is—I—oh, shucks! I’d like first rate to marry you, Jeanie. What say?”

“I couldn’t think of it,” laughed Jean. Then at his long face added mischievously: “Not to-night, anyway. Oh, come on, Dave, let’s dance.”

And Alice?

How describe her loveliness in the blue, stardust sprinkled frock that matched her eyes and emphasized the golden glints in her bright hair?

Few tried, though all marveled, and the youths of Roxby crowded about her, thick as bees about a honey pot.

Nell Slater and her friend sat almost neglected in a corner and tried, without success, to look as if they were actually enjoying the evening.

“Those Rowe girls think they’re smart!” sniffed Nell, her nose in the air. “Trying to get all the fellows in Roxby! I call it disgraceful!”

“But where did they get those dresses?” asked Ruth Durnham enviously. “I thought they were poor?”

“I don’t know,” said Nell sourly. “Robbed the Roxby bank, most likely!”

The girls lingered till the musicians put away their instruments and the dance was definitely over. Then they wandered homeward through the soft-scented spring night, happy as only the young can be with confidence in the present and faith in the future.

Corny met them at the door. She flung her arms about them rapturously, each in turn, and dragged them into the hall.

“What do you think those wonderful relatives of ours are going to do for me, girls?” she cried. “They are setting me up in business! They’re going to buy a partnership for me with Miss Higginson!”

“Oh, Corny, it’s your dream come true! Oh, I’m so happy, dear!”

“But then,” said Alice, with a happy sigh, “one may expect almost anything when one has a fairy godmother!”

By rights we ought to leave them there. But the temptation is too strong to lift a corner of the curtain and look for just a moment into the future of the four little women of Roxby.

Their dear old lady never went away from them again. She was necessary to them, they told her, and their kind uncle and his wife wished only their happiness and spared no time or thought or money in the years to come to smooth the path before them.

The cottage was repaired and painted and put in order. The “family pocketbook” was never thin again, and yet the four little women of Roxby could never bring themselves to part with this shabby old symbol of the struggle that had brought them all so close together.

Jean married Dave Barchester, whom she had loved, away down deep in her heart, long before that clumsy proposal of his on the night of the glee-club dance. She was marvelously happy with a husband who adored her, and a new house not too far from the dear old lady and her sisters.

Alice married, too, when she was not yet nineteen, and had one of the handsomest and best-looking young husbands in Roxby and a grizzled old bear of a father-in-law who doted on her. Angela, grown quite sizable now, looked up to this new auntie who had once saved her life as a model of everything beautiful and good and one whose every action must be emulated.

Corny, as partner of pleasant Miss Higginson, soon realized those dreams of an "Elite Shoppe" all done in rose and gray, improvements that soon proved profitable enough to warrant an addition to the original shop and drew trade from towns other than Roxby. Corny was succeeding brilliantly and was satisfied. She might marry some day, perhaps. But for the present she was more than content. Why hurry?

And Bab? What of her?

Grown strong and well, Bab graduated from the high school with honors and, because she was the scholar of the family and desired a higher education, was sent to a large Eastern college.

So the old lady and Corny kept house together. But scarcely a day passed when Jean and Alice did not drop in, and Bab wrote to her beloved godmother almost every day.

Nell Slater never married, but remained in the house with the iron stags, a sour and sharp-tongued old maid.

"Poor as church mice they used to be and proud as peacocks, those four little women of Roxby," she would say to any one with patience enough to listen to her. "They've had luck, but, mark my words, they'll be humbled yet! And I only hope I live to see it!"

But she never did.

Courageous in their dark hour, loyal and loving to each other, forgetful of themselves, the four little women of Roxby were given their reward. For ever after the return of their old lady, peace and prosperity dwelt in the little cottage on the fringe of the town of Roxby.

"Godmother," the girls often said, reviewing that old time, "what luck it was for us that you stumbled in the snowdrift in front of our house instead of the house next door! For you have been the cause of all our good fortune and all our happiness, dear godmother."

"And you have been the cause of mine," the old lady would return, her eyes bright with content and pride in them. "For you made me feel that I was needed. You ain't old enough, maybe, to understand such things now, but some day you'll see the truth of what I say—that the gift of service is the greatest gift of all."

Some day, perhaps, they did.

THE END

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Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Four Little Women of Roxby, or The Queer Old Lady Who Lost Her Way* by Edward Stratemeyer (writing under the pseudonym Mary Hollis Barton)]