

The Happy Venture

Edith Ballinger Price

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THE HAPPY VENTURE

BY

EDITH BALLINGER PRICE

AUTHOR OF "BLUE MAGIC,"
"US AND THE BOTTLEMAN,"
"SILVER SHOAL LIGHT," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

THE AUTHOR

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"Now can you see it? _Now_?"
The Maestro sat down beside Kirk
The slack length of it flew suddenly aboard
"Phil--Phil!" Kirk was saying then

THE HAPPY VENTURE

CHAPTER I

[Illustration: "Now can you see it? _Now?_"]

TALES IN THE RAIN

"How should I your true love know,
From another one?
By his cockle hat and staff,
And his sandal shoon..."

It was the fourth time that Felicia, at the piano, had begun the old song. Kenelm uncurled his long legs, and sat up straight on the window-seat.

"Why on earth so everlasting gloomy, Phil?" he said. "Isn't the rain bad enough, without that dirge?"

"The sky's 'be-weeping' him, just the way it says," said Felicia. She made one complete revolution on the piano-stool, and brought her strong fingers down on the opening notes of another verse.

"He is dead and gone, ladie,
He is dead and--"

Kenelm sat down again in the window-seat. He knew that Felicia was anxious about their mother, and he himself shared her anxiety. The queer code of fraternal secrecy made him refrain from showing any sign of this to his sister, however. He yawned a little, and said, rather brusquely:

"This rain's messing up the frost pretty well. There shouldn't be much left of it by now."

"Crocuses soon ..." Felicia murmured. She began humming to an almost inaudible accompaniment on the piano:

"Ring, ting, it is the merrie springtime...."

The rain rolled dully down the clouded window-panes and spattered off the English-ivy leaves below the sill. They quivered up and down on pale stems--bright, waxed leaves, as shining as though they had been varnished.

Kirk drifted in and made his way to Felicia.

"She's better," he observed. "She said she was glad we were having fun." He frowned a little as he ran his finger reflectively down Felicia's sleeve. "But she's bothered. She has think-lines in her forehead. I felt 'em."

"You have a think-line in your own forehead," said Felicia, promptly kissing it away. "Don't _you_ bother."

"Where's Ken?" Kirk demanded.

"In the window-seat."

Thither Kirk went, a tumble of expectancy, one hand before him and his head back. He leaped squarely upon Ken, and made known his wishes at once. They were very much what Kenelm expected.

"See me a story--a long one!"

"Oh, law!" Kenelm sighed; "you must think I'm made of 'em. Don't crawl all over me; let me ponder for two halves of a shake."

Kirk subsided against his brother's arm, and a "think-line" now became manifest on Kenelm's brow.

"See me a story"--Kirk's own queer phrase--had been the demand during most of his eight years. It seemed as though he could never have enough of this detail of a world visible to every one but himself. He must know how everything looked--even the wind, which could certainly be _felt_, and the rain, and the heat of the fire. From the descriptions he had amassed through his unwearied questioning, he had pieced out for himself a quaint little world of color and light,--how like or unlike the actuality no one could possibly tell.

"Blue is a cool thing, like water, or ice clinking in your glass," he would say, "and red's hot and sizzly, like the fire."

"Very true," his informants would agree; but for all that, they could not be sure what his conception might be of the colors.

Things were so confusing! There, for instance, were tomatoes. They were certainly very cool things, if you ate them sliced (when you were allowed), yet you were told that they were as red as red could be! And nothing could have been hotter than the blue tea-pot, when he picked it up by its spout; but that, to be sure, was caused by the tea. Yet the _hot_ wasn't any color; oh, dear!

Ken had not practised the art of seeing stories for nothing. He plunged in with little hesitation, and with a grand flourish.

"My tale is of kings, it is," he said; "ancient kings--Babylonian kings, if you must know. It was thousands and thousands of years ago they lived, and you'd never be able to imagine the wonderful cities they

built. They had hanging gardens that were----" Felicia interrupted.

"It's easy to tell where you got this story. I happen to know where your marker is in the Ancient History."

"Never you mind where I got it," Ken said. "I'm trying to describe a hanging garden, which is more than you could do. As I was about to say, the hanging gardens were built one above the other; they didn't really hang at all. They sat on big stone arches, and the topmost one was so high that it stuck up over the city walls, which were quite high enough to begin with. The tallest kinds of trees grew in the gardens; not just flowers, but big palm-trees and oleanders and citron-trees, and pomegranates hung off the branches all ready to be picked,--dark greeny, purpley pomegranates all bursting open so that their bright red seeds showed like live coals (do you think I'm getting this out of the history book, Phil?), and they were this -shaped--" he drew a pomegranate on the back of Kirk's hand--"with a sprout of leaves at the top. And there were citrons--like those you chop up in fruit-cake--and grapes and roses. The queen could sit in the bottomest garden, or walk up to the toppest one by a lot of stone steps. She had a slave-person who went around behind her with a pea-cock-feathery fan, all green and gold and beautiful; and he waved the fan over her to keep her cool. Meanwhile, the king would be coming in at one of the gates of the city. They were huge, enormous brass gates, and they shone like the sun, bright, and the sun winked on the king's golden chariot, too, and on the soldiers' spears.

"He was just coming home from a lion-hunt, and was very much pleased because he'd killed a lot of lions. He was really a rather horrid man,--quite ferocious, and all,--but he wore most wonderful purple and red embroidered clothes, the sort you like to hear about. He had a tiara on, and golden crescents and rosettes blazed all over him, and he wore a mystic, sacred ornament on his chest, round and covered all over with queer emblems. He rode past the temple, where the walls were painted in different colors, one for each of the planets and such, because the Babylonish people worshipped those--orange for Jupiter, and blue for Mercury, and silver for the moon. And the king got out of his chariot and climbed up to where the queen was waiting for him in the toppest gar--"

"Don't you tell me they were so domestic and all," Felicia objected. "They probably--"

"Who's seeing this story?" Ken retorted. "You let me be. I say, the queen was waiting for him, and she gave him a lotus and a ripe pomegranate, and the slaves ran and got wine, and the people with harps played them, and she said--Here's Mother!"

Kirk looked quite taken aback for a moment at this apparently irrelevant remark of the Babylonian queen, till a faint rustle at the doorway told him that it was his own mother who had come in.

She stood at the door, a slight, tired little person, dressed in one of the black gowns she had worn ever since the children's father had died.

"Don't stop, Ken," she smiled. "What did she say?"

But either invention flagged, or self-consciousness intervened, for Kenelm said:

"Blessed if I know what she did say! But at any rate, you'll agree that it was quite a garden, Kirky. I'll also bet a hat that you haven't done your lesson for to-morrow. It's not your Easter vacation, if it is ours. Miss Bolton will hop you."

"Think of doing silly reading-book things, after hearing all that," Kirk sighed.

"Suppose you had to do cuneiform writing on a dab of clay, like the Babylonish king," Ken said; "all spikey and cut in, instead of sticking out; much worse than Braille. Go to it, and let Mother sit here, laziness."

Kirk sighed again, a tremendous, pathetic sigh, designed to rouse sympathy in the breasts of his hearers. It roused none, and he wandered across the room and dragged an enormous book out upon the floor. He sprawled over it in a dim corner, his eyes apparently studying the fireplace, and his fingers following across the page the raised dots which spelled his morrow's lesson. What nice hands he had, Felicia thought, watching from her seat, and how delicately yet strongly he used them! She wondered what he could do with them in later years. "They mustn't be wasted," she thought. She glanced across at Ken. He too was looking at Kirk, with an oddly sober expression, and when she caught his eye he grew somewhat red and stared out at the rain.

"Better, Mother dear?" Felicia asked, curling down on a footstool at Mrs. Sturgis's feet.

"Rather, thank you," said her mother, and fell silent, patting the arm of the chair as though she were considering whether or not to say something more. She said nothing, however, and they sat quietly in the falling dusk, Felicia stroking her mother's white hand, and Ken humming softly to himself at the window. Kirk and his book were almost lost in the corner--just a pale hint of the page, shadowed by the hand which moved hesitantly across it. The hand paused, finally, and Kirk demanded, "What's 'u-g-h' spell?"

"It spells 'Ugh!'" Ken grunted. "What on earth are you reading? Is _that_ what Miss Bolton gives you!"

"It's not my lesson," Kirk said; "it's much further along. But I can read it."

"You'll get a wiggling. You'd better stick to 'The cat can catch the mouse,' _et cetera_."

"I finished that _years_ ago," said Kirk, loftily. "This is a different book, even. Listen to this: 'Ugh! There--sat--the dog with eyes--as--big as--as--'"

"Tea-cups," said Felicia.

"'T-e-a-c-' yes, it _is_ tea-cups," Kirk conceded; "how did you know, Phil?--'as big as tea-cups,--staring--at--him. 'You're a nice--fellow,' said the soldier, and he--sat him--on--the witch's ap-ron, and took as many cop--copper shillings--as his--pockets would hold.'"

"So that's it, is it?" Ken said. "Begin at the beginning, and let's hear it all."

"Ken," said his mother, "that's in the back of the book. You shouldn't encourage him to read things Miss Bolton hasn't given him."

"It'll do him just as much good to read that, as that silly stuff at the beginning. Phil and I always read things we weren't supposed to have reached."

"But for him--" Mrs. Sturgis murmured; "you and Phil were different, Ken. Oh, well,--"

For Kirk had turned back several broad pages, and began:

"There came a soldier marching along the highroad—one, two! one, two!..."

Little by little the March twilight settled deeper over the room. There was only a flicker on the brass andirons, a blur of pale blossoms where the potted azalea stood. The rain drummed steadily, and as steadily came the gentle modulations of Kirk's voice, as the tale of "The Tinder-Box" progressed.

It was the first time that he had ever read aloud anything so ambitious, and his hearers sat listening with some emotion—his mother filled with thankfulness that he had at last the key to a vast world which he now might open at a touch; Ken, with a sort of half-amazed pride in the achievements of a little brother who was surmounting such an obstacle. Felicia sat gazing across the dim room.

"He's reading us a story!" she thought, over and over; "Kirk's reading to us, without very many mistakes!" She reflected that the book, for her, might as well be written in Sanskrit. "I ought to know something about it," she mused; "enough to help him! It's selfish and stupid not to! I'll ask Miss Bolton."

The soldier had gone only as far as the second dog's treasure-room, when Maggie came to the door to say that supper was ready. From between the dining-room curtains came the soft glow of the candles and the inviting clink of dishes. "He threw—away all the copper—money he had, and filled his—knapsack with silver," Kirk finished in a hurry, and shut the book with a bang.

"I wouldn't have done that," he said, as Felicia took the hand he held out for some one to take; "I should think all the money he could possibly get would have been useful."

"You've said it!" Ken laughed.

"Yes," Mrs. Sturgis murmured with a sigh, "all the money one can get is useful. You read it very beautifully, darling—thank you."

She kissed his forehead, and took her place at the head of the table, where the candles lit her gentle face and her brown eyes—filled now, with a sudden brimming tenderness.

CHAPTER II

HAVOC

The town ran, in its lower part, to the grimy water-front, where there was ever a noise of the unloading of ships, the shouts of teamsters, and the clatter of dray-horses' big hoofs on bare cobblestones. Ken liked to walk there, even on such a dreary March day as this, when the horses splashed through puddles, and the funnels of the steamers dripped sootily black. He had left Felicia in the garden, investigating the first promise of green under the leaf-coverlet of the perennial bed. Kirk was with her, questing joyously down the brick path, and breathing the warm, wet smell of the waking earth.

Ken struck down to the docks; even before he reached the last dingy street he could see the tall masts of a sailing-ship rising above the warehouse roofs. It was with a quickened beat of the heart that he ran

the last few steps, and saw her in all her quiet dignity--the _Celestine_, four-masted schooner. It was not often that sailing vessels came into this port. Most of the shipping consisted of tugs with their barges, high black freighters, rust-streaked; and casual tramp steamers battered by every wind from St. John's to Torres Straits. The _Celestine_ was, herself, far from being a pleasure yacht. Her bluff bows were salt-rimed and her decks bleached and weather-bitten. But she towered above her steam-driven companions with such stalwart grace, such simple perfection, that Ken caught his breath, looking at her.

The gang-plank was out, for she lay warped in to one of the wharves, and Ken went aboard and leaned at the rail beside a square man in a black jersey, who chewed tobacco and squinted observantly at the dock. From this person, at first inclined to be taciturn, Ken learned that the _Celestine_ was sailing the next night, bound for Rio de Janeiro, "and mebbe further." Rio de Janeiro! And here she lay quietly at the slimy wharf, beyond which the gray northern town rose in a smoky huddle of chimney-pots.

Behind Ken, some of the crew began hoisting the foresail to dry. He heard the rhythmic squeak of the halliards through the sheaves, and the scrape of the gaff going up.

"Go 'n lend 'em a hand, boy, since yer so gone on it," the jerseyed one recommended quite understandingly. So Ken went and hauled at a rope, and watched the great expanse of sodden gray canvas rise and shiver and straighten into a dark square against the sky. He imagined himself one of the crew of the _Celestine_, hoisting the foresail in a South American port.

"I'd love to roll to Rio
Some day before I'm old..."

The sail rose steadily to the unsung chorus. Ken was quite happy.

He walked all the way home--it was a long walk--with his head full of plans for a seafaring life, and his nostrils still filled with the strange, fascinating, composite smell of the docks.

Felicia met him at the gate. She looked quite done for, he thought, and she caught his sleeve.

"Where _have_ you been?" she said, with a queer little excited hitch in her voice. "I've been almost wild, waiting for you. Mother's headache is horribly worse; she's gone to bed. A letter came this morning, I don't know what, but I think it has something to do with her being so ill. She simply cries and cries--a frightening sort of crying--and says, 'I can't--can't!' and wants Father to tell her what to do."

They were in the hall by this time.

"Wants _Father_!" Ken said gravely. "Have you got the doctor, Phil?"

"Not yet; I wanted to ask you."

"Get him--quick."

Ken ran upstairs. Halfway, he tumbled over something crouched beside the banisters. It was Kirk, quite wretched. He caught Ken's ankle.

"Mother's crying," he said; "I can hear her. Oh, _do_ something, Ken!"

"I'm going to," said his brother. "Don't sit here in the dark and make yourself miserable."

He recollected that the landing was no darker for Kirk than any other place, and added: "You're apt to be stepped on here--I nearly smashed you. Hop along and tell Maggie that I'm as hungry as an ostrich." But however hungry Ken may have been as he trudged home from the docks, he was not so now. A cold terror seized him as he leaned above his mother, who could not, indeed, stop her tears, nor tell him more than that she could not bear it, she could not. Ken had never before felt quite so helpless. He wished, as much as she, that his father were there to tell them what to do--his tall, quiet father, who had always counseled so well. He breathed a great thankful sigh when the doctor came in, with Felicia, white faced, peeping beside his shoulder. Ken said, "I'm glad you'll take charge, sir," and slipped out.

He and Felicia stood in Kirk's room, silently, and after what seemed an eternity, the doctor came out, tapping the back of his hand with his glasses. He informed them, with professional lack of emotion, that their mother was suffering from a complete nervous breakdown, from which it might take her months to recover.

"Evidently," said he, "she has been anxious over something, previous to this, but some definite shock must have caused the final collapse."

He was a little man, and he spoke drily, with a maddening deliberation. "There was a letter--this morning," Felicia said, faintly.

"It might be well to find the letter, in order to ascertain the exact nature of the shock," said the doctor.

Ken went to his mother's room and searched her desk. He came back presently with a legal envelop, and his face was blank and half uncomprehending. The doctor took the paper from him and skimmed the contents.

"Ah--_hm_. 'United Stock ... the mine having practically run out ... war causing further depreciation ... regret to inform you, ... _hm_, yes. My dear young people, it appears from this that your mother has lost a good deal of money--possibly all her money. I should advise your seeing her attorney at once. Undoubtedly he will be able to make a satisfactory adjustment."

He handed the paper back to Ken, who took it mechanically. Then, with the information that it would be necessary for their mother to go to a sanatorium to recuperate, and that he would send them a most capable nurse immediately, the doctor slipped out--a neat little figure, stepping along lightly on his toes. "Can you think straight, Ken?" Felicia said, later, in the first breathing pause after the doctor's departure and the arrival of the brisk young woman who took possession of the entire house as soon as she stepped over the threshold.

"I'm trying to," Ken replied, slowly. He began counting vaguely on his fingers. "It means Mother's got to go away to a nervous sanatorium place. It means we're poor. Phil, we may have to--I don't know what."

"What do they do with people who have no money?" Felicia asked dismally. "They send them to the poor-farm or something, don't they?"

"Don't talk utter bosh, Phil! As if I'd ever let you or Kirk go to the poor-farm!"

"Kirk!" Felicia murmured. "Suppose they took him away! They might, you know--the State, and send him to one of those institutions!"

"Oh, drop it!" snapped Ken. "We don't even know how much money it is Mother's lost. I don't suppose she had it all in this bally mine. Who _is_ her attorney, anyway!"

"Mr. Dodge,—don't you remember? Nice, with a pink face and bristly hair. He came here long ago about Daddy's business."

There was a swift rush of feet on the stairs, a pause in the hallway, and Kirk appeared at the door.

"I told Maggie," said he, "and supper's ready. And what's _specially_ nice is the toast, because I made it myself—only Norah told me when it was done."

Ken and Felicia looked at one another, and wondered how much supper they could eat. Then Ken swung Kirk to his shoulder, and said:

"All right, old boy, we'll come and eat your toast."

"Is the crackly lady taking care of Mother?" Kirk asked over a piece of his famous toast, as they sat at supper.

"Yes," said Felicia. "Her name's Miss McClough. Why, did you meet her?"

"She said, 'Don't sit in people's way when you see they're in a hurry,'" said Kirk, somewhat grieved. "_I_ didn't know she was coming. I don't think I like her much. Her dress creaks, and she smells like the drug-store."

"She can't help that," said Ken; "she's taking good care of Mother. And I told you the stairway was no place to sit, didn't I!"

"I've managed to find out _something_," Ken told Felicia, next day, as he came downstairs. "Mother would talk about it, in spite of Miss McThing's protests, and I came away as soon as I could. She says there's a little Fidelity stock that brings enough to keep her in the rest-place, so she feels a little better about that. (By the way, she tried to say she wouldn't go, and I said she had to.) Then there's something else—Rocky Head Granite, I think—that will give us something to live on. We'll have to see Mr. Dodge as soon as we can; I'm all mixed up."

They did see Mr. Dodge, that afternoon. He was nice, as Felicia had said. He made her sit in his big revolving-chair, while he brought out a lot of papers and put on a pair of drooping gold eye-glasses to look at them. And the end of the afternoon found Ken and Felicia very much confused and a good deal more discouraged than before. It seemed that even the Rocky Head Granite was not a very sound investment, and that the staunch Fidelity was the only dependable source of income.

"And Mother must have that money, of course, for the rest-place," Felicia said. "For Heaven's sake, don't tell her," Ken muttered.

His sister shot him one swift look of reproach and then turned to Mr. Dodge. She tried desperately to be very businesslike.

"What do you advise us to do, Mr. Dodge?" she said. "Send away the servants, of course."

"And Miss Bolton," Ken said; "she's an expensive lady."

"Yes, Miss Bolton. I'll teach Kirk—I can."

"How much is the rent of the house, Mr. Dodge, do you know?" Ken asked. Mr. Dodge did know, and told him. Ken whistled. "It sounds as though we'd have to move," he said.

"The lease ends April first," said the attorney.

"We could get a little tiny house somewhere," Felicia suggested.
"Couldn't you get quite a nice one for six hundred dollars a year?"

This sum represented, more or less, their entire income--minus the expenses of Hilltop Sanatorium.

"But what would you eat?" Mr. Dodge inquired gently.

"Oh, dear, that's true!" said Felicia. And clothes! What _do_ you think we'd better do?"

"You have no immediate relatives, as I remember?" Mr. Dodge mused.

"None but our great-aunt, Miss Pelham," Ken said, "and _she_ lives in Los Angeles."

"She's very old, too," Phil said, "and lives in a tiny house. She's not at all well off; we shouldn't want to bother her. And there is Uncle Lewis."

"Oh, _him_!" said Ken, gloomily.

"It takes three months even to get an answer from a letter to him," Felicia explained. "He's in the Philippines, doing something to Ignorants."

"Igorrotes, Phil," Ken muttered.

"He sounds unpromising," Mr. Dodge sighed. "And there are no friends who would be sufficiently interested in your problem to open either their doors or their pocket-books?"

"We don't know many people here," Felicia said. "Mother hasn't gone out very much for several years."

Ken flushed. "And we'd rather people didn't open anything to us, anyhow," he said.

"Except, perhaps, their hearts," Mr. Dodge supplemented, "or their eyes, when they see your independent procedure!" He tapped his knee with his glasses. "My dear children, I suggest that you move to some other house--perhaps to some quaint little place in the country, which would be much less expensive than anything you could find in town. Your mother had best go away, as the doctor advises--she will be much better looked after, and of course she mustn't know what you do. I'll watch over this Rocky Head concern, and you may feel perfectly secure in the Fidelity. And don't hesitate to ask me anything you want to know, at any time."

He rose, pushing back his papers.

"Don't we owe you something for all this, sir?" Ken asked, rather red.

Mr. Dodge smiled. "One dollar, and other valuable considerations," he said.

Kenelm brought out his pocketbook, and carefully pulled a dollar bill from the four which it contained. He presented it to Mr. Dodge, and Felicia said:

"Thank you so very, very much!"

"You're very welcome," said the attorney, "and the best of luck to you all!" When the glass door had closed behind the pair, Mr. Dodge sat down before his desk and wiped his glasses. He looked at the dollar bill, and then he said--quite out loud--

"Poor, poor dears!"

CHAPTER III

UP STAKES

That night, Kenelm could not sleep. He walked up and down his room in the dark. His own head ached, and he could not think properly. The one image which stood clearly out of the confusion was that of the Celestine, raising gracious spars above the house-tops. The more he thought of her, the more a plan grew in his tired mind. The crew of the Celestine must be paid quite well—he could send money home every week from different ports—he could send gold and precious things from South America. There would be one less person to feed at home; he would be earning money instead of spending it.

He turned on his light, and quickly gathered together his hockey sweater, his watch-cap, and an old pair of trousers. He made them into a bundle with a few other things. Then he wrote a letter, containing many good arguments, and pinned it on Felicia's door. He tiptoed downstairs and out into the night. From the street he could see the faint green light from his mother's room, where Miss McClough was sitting. He turned and ran quickly, without stopping to think.

No one was abroad but an occasional policeman, twirling his night-stick. On the wharves the daylight confusion was dispelled; there was no clatter of teaming, no sound but the water fingering dank piles, and the little noises aboard sleeping vessels. But the Celestine was awake. Lights gleamed aboard her, men were stirring, the great mass of her canvas blotted half the stars. She was sailing, that night, for Rio de Janeiro.

Ken slipped into the shadow of a pile-head, waiting his chance. His heart beat suffocatingly; his hands were very cold. Quietly he stepped under the gang-plank, swung a leg over it, drew himself aboard, and lay flat on deck beside the rail of the Celestine in a pool of shade. A man tripped over him and stumbled back with an oath. The next instant Ken was hauled up into the light of a lantern.

"Stowaway, eh?" growled a squat man in dungaree. "Chuck him overboard, Sam, an' let him swim home to his mamma."

In that moment, Ken knew that he could never have sailed with the Celestine, that he would have slipped back to the wharf before she cast loose her hawsers. He looked around him as if he had just awakened from sleep-walking and did not know where he found himself. He gazed up at the gaunt mainmast, black against the green night sky, at the main topsail, shaking still as the men hauled it taut.

"I'm not a stowaway," he said; "I'm going ashore now."

He walked down the gang-plank with all the dignity he could muster, and never looked behind him as he left the wharf. He could hear the rattle of the Celestine's tackle, and the boom, boom of the sails. Once clear of the docks he ran, blindly.

"Fool!" he whispered. "Oh, what a fool! what a senseless idiot!"

The house was dark as he turned in at the gate. He stopped for an instant to look at its black bulk, with Orion setting behind the

chimney-pots.

"I was going to leave them--all alone!" he whispered fiercely. "Good Heavens!"

He removed the letter silently from Felicia's door,--he was reassured by seeing its white square before he reached it,--and crept to his own room. There a shadowy figure was curled up on the floor, and it was crying.

"Kirk! What's up?" Ken lifted him and held him rather close.

"You weren't here," Kirk sniffed; "I got sort of rather l-lonely, so I thought I'd come in with you--and the b-bed was perfectly empty, and I couldn't find you. I t-thought you were teasing me."

"I was taking a little walk," Ken said. "Here, curl up in bed--you're frozen. No, I'm not going away again--never any more, ducky. It was nice in the garden," he added.

"The garden?" Kirk repeated, still clinging to him. "But you smell of--of--oh, rope, and sawdust, and--and, Ken, your face is wet!"

* * * * *

Mrs. Sturgis protested bitterly against going away. She felt quite able to stay at home. To be sure, she couldn't sleep at all, and her head ached all the time, and she couldn't help crying over almost everything--but it was impossible that she should leave the children. In spite of her half-hysterical protests, the next week saw her ready to depart for Hilltop with Miss McClough, who was to take the journey with her.

"You needn't worry a scrap," laughed Felicia, quite convincingly, at the taxi door. "We've seen Mr. Dodge, and there'll be money enough. You just get well as quick as ever you can."

"Good-by, my darlings," faltered poor Mrs. Sturgis, quite ready to collapse again. "Good-by, Kirk--my precious, precious baby! How can I!"

And the taxicab moved away, giving them just one glimpse of their mother with her poor head on Miss McClough's capable shoulder.

"Well," Ken remarked, "here we are."

And there was really nothing more to be said on the subject.

Such a strange house! Maggie and Norah gone; Felicia cooking queer meals--principally poached eggs--in the kitchen; Miss Bolton failing to appear every morning at ten o'clock as she had done for the last three years; Mother gone, and not even a letter from her--nothing but a type-written report from the physician at Hilltop.

Gone also, as Kirk discovered, was the lowboy beside the library door. It was a most satisfactory piece of furniture. From its left-hand corner you could make a direct line to the window-seat. It also had smoothly graceful brass handles, and a surface delicious to the touch. When Kirk, stumbling in at the library door, failed to encounter it as usual, he was as much startled as though he had found a serpent in its stead. He tried for it several times, and when his hands came against the bookshelves he stopped dead, very much puzzled and quite lost. Felicia found him there, standing still and patiently waiting for the low-boy to materialize in its accustomed place.

"Where is it!" he asked her.

"It's not there, honey," she said. "We're going to a different house, and it's sent away."

"A different house! When? What _do_ you mean?"

"We've finished renting this one," said Felicia. "We thought it would be nice to go to another one—in the country. Oh, you'll like it."

"How queer!" Kirk mused. "Perhaps I shall. But I don't know about this corner; it used to be covered up. Please start me right."

She did so, and then ran off to attend to a peculiar pudding which was boiling over on the stove. She had not told him that the low-boy was sent away to be sold. When she and Ken had discovered the appalling sum it would cost to move the furniture anywhere, they heartbrokenly concluded that the low-boy and various other old friends must go to help settle the accounts of Miss Bolton and the nurse.

"There are some things," Ken stoutly pronounced, however, "that we'll take with us, if I have to go digging ditches to support 'em. And some we'll leave with Mr. Dodge—I know he won't mind a few nice tables and things."

For the "different house" was actually engaged. Mr. Dodge shook his head when he heard that Ken had paid the first quarter's rent without having even seen the place.

"Fine old farm-house," said the advertisement; "Peach and apple orchards. Ten acres of land. Near the bay. Easy reach of city. Only \$15.00 per month."

There was also a much blurred photograph of the fine old farm-house, from which it was difficult to deduce much except that it had a gambrel roof.

"But it does sound quite wonderful," Felicia said to the attorney. "We thought we wouldn't go to see it because of its costing so much to travel there and back again. But don't you think it ought to be nice? Peach and apple orchards,—and only fifteen dollars a month!"

"I dare say it is wonderful," said Mr. Dodge, smiling. "At any rate, Asquam itself is a very pretty little bayside place—I've been there. Fearfully hard to get your luggage, but charming once you're there. Don't forget me! I'll always be here. And you'd better have a little more cash for your traveling expenses."

"I hope it really came out of our money," Ken said, when he saw the cash.

Nothing but a skeleton of a house, now. No landmarks at all were left for Kirk, and he tumbled over boxes and crates, and lost himself in the bare, rugless halls. The beds that were to be taken to Asquam were still set up,—they would be crated next day,—but there was really nothing else left in the rooms. Three excited people, two of them very tired, ate supper on the corner of the kitchen table—which was not going to the farm-house. That house flowered hopefully in its new tenants' minds. Felicia saw it, tucked between its orchards, gray roof above gnarled limbs, its wide stone door-step inviting one to sit down and look at the view of the bay. And there would be no need of spending anything there except that fifteen dollars a month—"and something for food," Felicia thought, "which oughtn't to be much, there in the country with hens and things."

It amused Kirk highly—going to bed in an empty room. He put his clothes

on the floor, because he could find no other place for them. Felicia remonstrated and suggested the end of the bed.

"Everything else you own is packed, you know," said she. "You'd better preserve those things carefully."

"Sing to me," he said, when he was finally tucked in. "It's the last night--and--everything's so ugly. I want to pretend it's just the same. Sing '_Do-do, petit frere_', Phil."

Felicia sat on the edge of the bed and sang the little old French lullaby. She had sung it to him often when she was quite a small girl, and he a very little boy. She remembered just how he used to look--a cuddly, sleepy three-year-old, with a tumble of dark hair and the same grave, unlit eyes. He was often a little frightened, in those days, and needed to hold a warm substantial hand to link him with the mysterious world he could not see.

"_Do-do, p'tit frere, do-do_."

His hand groped down the blanket, now, for hers, and she took it and sang on a bit unsteadily in the echoing bareness of the dismantled room.

A long time afterward, when Kenelm was standing beside his window looking out into the starless dark, Felicia's special knock sounded hollowly at his door.

She came over to him, and stood for a while silently. Then she turned and said suddenly in a shy, low voice:

"Oh, Ken, I don't know how you feel about it, but--but, I think, whatever awful is going to happen, we must try to keep things beautiful for Kirk."

"I guess we must," Ken said, staring out. "I'd trust you to do it, old Phil. Cut along now to bed," he added gruffly; "we'll have to be up like larks to-morrow."

CHAPTER IV

THE FINE OLD FARM-HOUSE

Asquam proper is an old fishing-village on the bayside. The new Asquam has intruded with its narrow-eaved frame cottages among the gray old houses, and has shouldered away the colonial Merchants' Hall with a moving-picture theater, garish with playbills and posters. Two large and well-patronized summer hotels flourish on the highest elevation (Asquam people say that their town is "flatter'n a johnny cake"), from which a view of the open sea can be had, as well as of the peninsulas and islands which crowd the bay.

On the third day of April the hotels and many of the cottages were closed, with weathered shutters at the windows and a general air of desolation about their windy piazzas. Asquam, both new and old, presented a rather bleak and dismal appearance to three persons who alighted thankfully from the big trolley-car in which they had lurched through miles of flat, mist-hung country for the past forty minutes.

The station-agent sat on a tilted-up box and discussed the new arrivals with one of his ever-present cronies.

"Whut they standin' ther' fer?" he said. "Some folks ain't got enough sense to go in outen the rain, seems so."

"T ain't rainin'--not so's to call it so," said the crony, whose name was Smith. "The gell's pretty."

"Ya-as, kind o'," agreed the station-agent, tilting back critically. "Boy's upstandin'."

"Which one?"

"Big 'n. Little 'un ain't got no git-up-'n'-git fer one o' his size. Look at him holdin' to her hand."

"Sunthin' ails him," Smith said. "Ain't all there I guess."

The station-agent nodded a condescending agreement, and cocked his foot on another box. At this moment the upstanding boy detached himself from his companions, and strode to where the old man sat.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "can you tell me how far it is to the Baldwin farm, and whether any of Mr. Sturgis's freight has come yet?"

"Baldwin fa'm?" and the station-agent scratched his ear. "Oh, you mean out on the Winterbottom Road, hey? 'Beout two mile."

"And Mr. Sturgis's freight?"

"Nawthin' come fer that name," said the agent, "'less these be them." He indicated four small packages in the baggage-room.

"Oh no," said Ken, "they're big things--beds, and things like that. Well, please let me know if they do come. I'm Mr. Sturgis."

"Oh, you be," said the agent, comprehensively.

"Ain't gonna walk away out to the Baldwin place with all them valises, air you?" Smith inquired, breaking silence for the first time.

"I don't know how else we'll get there," Ken said.

"_Yay_--Hop!" shouted Smith, unexpectedly, with a most astonishing siren-like whoop.

Before Ken had time to wonder whether it was a prearranged signal for attack, or merely that the man had lost his wits, an ancient person in overalls and a faded black coat appeared from behind the baggage-house. "Hey? Well?" said he.

"Take these folks up to the Baldwin place," Smith commanded; "and don't ye go losin' no wheels this time--ye got a young lady aboard." At which sally all the old men chuckled creakily.

But the young lady showed no apprehension, only some relief, as she stepped into the tottering surrey which Hop drove up beside the platform. As the old driver slapped the reins on the placid horse's woolly back, the station-agent turned to Smith.

"George," he said, "the little 'un ain't cracked. He's blind."

"Well, gosh!" said Smith, with feeling.

Winterbottom Road unrolled itself into a white length of half-laid dust, between blown, sweet-smelling bay-clumps and boulder-filled meadows.

"Is it being nice?" Kirk asked, for the twentieth time since they had left the train for the trolley-car.

Felicia had been thanking fortune that she'd remembered to stop at the Asquam Market and lay in a few provisions. She woke from calculations of how many meals her family could make of the supplies she had bought, and looked about.

"We're near the bay," she said; "that is you can see little silvery flashes of it between trees. They're pointy trees—junipers, I think and there are a lot of rocks in the fields, and wild-flowers. Nothing like any place you've ever been in—wild, and salty, and—yes, quite nice."

They passed several low, sturdy farm-houses, and one or two boarded-up summer cottages; then two white chimneys showed above a dark green tumble of trees, and the ancient Hopkins pointed with his whip saying:

"Ther' you be. Kind o' dull this time year, I guess; but my! Asquam's real uppy, come summer--machines a-goin', an' city folks an' such. Reckon I'll leave you at the gate where I kin turn good."

The flap-flop of the horse's hoofs died on Winterbottom Road, and no sound came but the wind sighing in old apple-boughs, and from somewhere the melancholy creaking of a swinging shutter. The gate-way was grown about with grass; Ken crushed it as he forced open the gate, and the faint, sweet smell rose. Kirk held Felicia's sleeve, for she was carrying two bags. He stumbled eagerly through the tall dry grass of last summer's unmown growth.

"Now can you see it? _Now_?"

But Felicia had stopped, and Kirk stopped, too.

"Are we there? Why don't you say anything?"

Felicia said nothing because she could not trust her voice. Kirk knew every shade of it; she could not deceive him. Gaunt and gray the "fine old farm-house" stood its ground before them. Old it assuredly was, and once fine, perhaps, as its solid square chimneys and mullioned windows attested. But oh, the gray grimness of it! the sagging shutter that creaked, the burdocks that choked the stone door-step, the desolate wind that surged in the orchard trees and would not be still!

Ken did what Felicia could not do. He laughed—a real laugh, and swept Kirk into warm, familiar arms.

"It's a big, jolly, fine old place!" he said. "Its windows twinkle merrily, and the front door is only waiting for the key I have in my pocket. We've got home, Quirk—haven't we, Phil?"

Felicia blessed Ken. She almost fancied that the windows did twinkle kindly. The big front door swung open without any discourteous hesitation, and Ken stood in the hall.

"Phew--dark!" he said. "Wait here, you fellows, while I get some shutters open."

They could hear his footsteps sound hollowly in the back rooms, and shafts of dusky light, preceded by hammerings and thumpings, began presently to band the inside of the house. Felicia stepped upon the painted floor of the bare hall, glanced up the narrow stairs, and then stood in the musty, half-lit emptiness of what she guessed to be the living-room, waiting for Ken. Kirk did not explore. He stood quite still beside his sister, sorting out sounds, analyzing smells. Ken came in, very dusty, rubbing his hands on his trousers.

"Lots of fireplaces, anyway," he said. "Put down your things—if you've anywhere to put 'em. I'll load all the duffle into this room and see if there's any wood in the woodshed. Glory! No beds, no blankets! There'll _have_ to be wood, if the orchard primeval is sacrificed!" And he went, whistling blithely.

"This is an adventure," Felicia whispered dramatically to Kirk. "We've never had a real one before; have we?"

"Oh, it's nice!" Kirk cried suddenly. "It's low and still, and—the house wants us, Phil!"

"The house wants us," murmured Felicia. "I believe that's going to help me."

It was quite the queerest supper that the three had ever cooked or eaten. Perhaps "cooked" is not exactly the right word for what happened to the can of peas and the can of baked beans. Ken did find wood—not in the woodshed, but strewing the orchard grass; hard old apple-wood, gray and tough. It burned merrily enough in the living-room fireplace, and the chimney responded with a hollow rushing as the hot air poured into it.

"It makes it seem as if there were something alive here besides us, anyway," Felicia said.

They were all sitting on the hearth, warming their fingers, and when the apple-wood fire burned down to coals that now and again spurted short-lived flame, they set the can of peas and the can of baked beans among the embers. They turned them gingerly from time to time with two sticks, and laughed a great deal. The laughter echoed about in the empty stillness of the house.

Ken's knife was of the massive and useful sort that contains a whole array of formidable tools. These included a can-opener, which now did duty on the smoked tins. It had been previously used to punch holes in the tops of the cans before they went among the coals—"for we don't want the blessed things blowing up," Ken had said. Nothing at all was the matter with the contents of the cans, however, in spite of the strange process of cookery. The Sturgises ate peas and baked beans on chunks of unbuttered bread (cut with another part of Ken's knife) and decided that nothing had ever tasted quite so good.

"No dish-washing, at any rate," said Ken; "we've eaten our dishes."

Kirk chose to find this very entertaining, and consumed another "bread-plate," as he termed it, on the spot.

The cooking being finished, more gnarly apple-wood was put on the fire, and the black, awkward shadows of three figures leaped out of the bare wall and danced there in the ruddy gloom. Bedtime loomed nearer and nearer as a grave problem, and Ken and Felicia were silent, each wondering how the floor could be made softest.

"The Japanese sleep on the floor," Ken said, "and they have blocks of wood for pillows. Our bags are the size, and, I imagine, the consistency, of blocks of wood. _N'est-ce pas, oui, oui_?"

"I'd rather sleep on a rolled-up something-or-other _out_ of my bag than on the bag itself, any day—or night," Felicia remarked.

"As you please," Ken said; "but act quickly. Our brother yawns."

"Bedtime, honey," Felicia laughed to Kirk. "Even queerer than

supper-time was."

"A bed by night, a hard-wood floor by day," Ken misquoted murmuringly.

"Hard-wood!" Felicia sniffed. "_Hard_ wood!"

The problem now arose: which was most to be desired, an overcoat under you to soften the floor, or on top of you to keep you warm?

"If he has my overcoat, it'll do both," Ken suggested. "Put his sweater on, too." "But what'll _you_ do?" Kirk objected.

"Roll up in _your_ overcoat, of course," Ken said.

This also entertained Kirk.

"No, but really?" he said, sober all at once.

"Don't you fret about me. I'll haul it away from you after you're asleep."

And Kirk snuggled into the capacious folds of Ken's Burberry, apparently confident that his brother really would claim it when he needed it.

Ken and Felicia sat up, feeding the fire occasionally, until long after Kirk's quiet breathing told them that he was asleep.

"Well, we've made rather a mess of things, so far," Ken observed, somewhat cheerlessly.

"We were ninnies not to think that none of the stuff would have come," Felicia said. "We'll _have_ to do something before to-morrow night. This is all right for once, _but_ --!"

"Goodness knows when the things will come," said Ken, poking at the fore-stick. "The old personage said that all the freight, express, everything, comes by that weird trolley-line, at its own convenience."

"Shouldn't you think that they'd have something dependable, in a summer place?" Felicia signed. "Oh, it seems as if we'd been living for years in houses with no furniture in them. And the home things will simply rattle, here."

"I wish we could have brought more of them," Ken said. "We'll have to rout around to-morrow and buy an oil-stove or something and a couple of chairs to sit on. Ah hum! Let's turn in, Phil. We've a tight room and a fire, anyhow. Shall you be warm enough?"

"Plenty. I've my coat, and a sweater. But what are you going to do?"

"Oh, I'll sit up a bit longer and stoke. And really, Kirk's overcoat spreads out farther than you'd think. He's tallish, nowadays."

Felicia discovered that there are ways and ways of sleeping on the floor. She found, after sundry writhings, the right way, and drifted off to sleep long before she expected to.

Ken woke later in the stillness of the last hours of night. The room was scarcely lit by the smoldering brands of the fire; its silence hardly stirred by the murmurous hissing of the logs. Without, small marsh frogs trilled their silver welcome to the spring, an unceasing jingle of tiny bell-notes. Kirk was cuddled close beside Ken, and woke abruptly as Ken drew him nearer.

"You didn't take your overcoat," he whispered.

"We'll both have it, now," his brother said. "Curl up tight, old man; it'll wrap round the two of us."

"Is it night still?" Kirk asked.

"Black night," Ken whispered; "stars at the window, and a tree swaying across it. And in here a sort of dusky lightness--dark in the corners, and shadows on the walls, and the fire glowing away. Phil's asleep on the other side of the hearth, and she looks very nice. And listen--hear the toads?"

"Is that what they are? I thought it was a fairy something. They make nice noises! Where do they live?"

"In some marsh. They sit there and fiddle away on bramble roots and sing about various things they like."

"What nice toads!" murmured Kirk.

"_Sh-sh!_" whispered Ken; "we're waking Phil. Good night--good morning, I mean. Warm enough now?"

"Yes. Oh, Ken, _aren't_ we having fun?"

"Aren't we, though!" breathed his brother, pulling the end of the Burberry over Kirk's shoulders.

* * * * *

The sun is a good thing. It clears away not only the dark shadows in the corners of empty rooms, but also the gloom that settles in anxious people's minds at midnight. The rising of the sun made, to be sure, small difference to Kirk, whose mind harbored very little gloom, and was lit principally by the spirits of those around him. Consequently, when his brother and sister began reveling in the clear, cold dawn, Kirk executed a joyous little _pas seul_ in the middle of the living-room floor and set off on a tour of exploration. He returned from it with his fingers very dusty, and a loop of cobwebs over his hair.

"It's all corners," he said, as Felicia caught him to brush him off, "_and_ steps. Two steps down and one up, and just when you aren't 'specting it."

"You'd better go easy," Ken counseled, "until you've had a personally conducted tour. You'll break your neck."

"I'm being careful. And I know already about this door. There's a kink in the wall and then a hump in the floor-boards just before you get there. It's an exciting house."

"That it is!" said Ken, reaching with a forked stick for the handle of the galvanized iron pail which sat upon the fire. Nobody ever heard of boiling eggs in a galvanized iron pail but that is exactly what the Sturgises did. The pail, in an excellent state of preservation, had been found in the woodshed. The pump yielded, unhesitatingly, any amount of delicious cold water, and though three eggs did look surprisingly small in the bottom of the pail, they boiled quite as well as if they'd been in a saucepan.

"Only think of all the kettles and things I brought!" Felicia mourned. "We'll have to buy some plates and cups, though, Ken." Most of the Sturgis china was reposing in a well-packed barrel in a room over Mr. Dodge's garage, accompanied by many other things for which their owners longed.

"How the dickens do we capture the eggs!" Ken demanded. "Pigs in clover's not in it. Lend a hand, Phil!"

CHAPTER V

THE WHEELS BEGIN TO TURN

Ken walked to Asquam almost immediately after breakfast, and Felicia explored their new abode most thoroughly, inside and out. Corners and steps there were in plenty, as Kirk had said; it seemed as if the house had been built in several pieces and patched together. Two bigish rooms downstairs, besides the kitchen; a large, built-in, white-doored closet in the living-room,--quite jolly, Felicia thought,--rusty nails driven in unbelievable quantities in all the walls. She couldn't imagine how any one could have wanted to hang anything in some of the queer places where nails sprouted, and she longed to get at them with a claw-hammer.

Upstairs there was one big room (for Ken and Kirk, Phil thought), a little one for herself, and what she immediately named "The Poke-Hole" for trunks and such things. When Mother came home, as come she must, the extra downstairs room could be fitted up for her, Felicia decided--or the boys could take it over for themselves. The upstairs rooms were all under the eaves, and, at present, were hot and musty. Felicia pounded open the windows which had small, old-fashioned panes, somewhat lacking in putty. In came the good April air fresh after the murk of yesterday, and smelling of salt, and heathy grass, and spring. It summoned Felicia peremptorily, and she ran downstairs and out to look at the "ten acres of land, peach and apple orchards."

Kirk went, too, his hand in hers.

"It's an easy house," he confided. "You'd think it would be hard, but the floor's different all over--bumpy, and as soon as I find out which bump means what, I'll know how to go all over the place. I dare say it's the same out here."

Felicia was not so sure. It seemed a trackless waste of blown grass for one to navigate in the dark. It was always a mystery to her how Kirk found his way through the mazy confusion of unseen surroundings. Now, on unfamiliar ground, he was unsure of himself, but in a place he knew, it was seldom that he asked or accepted guidance. The house was not forbidding, Felicia decided--only tired, and very shabby. The burdocks at the door-step could be easily disposed of. It was a wide stone door-step, as she had hoped and from it, though there was not much view of the bay, there were nice things to be seen. Before it, the orchard dropped away at one side, leaving a wide vista of brown meadows, sown with more of the pointy trees and grayed here and there by rocks; beyond that, a silver slip of water, and the far shore blue, blue in the distance. To the right of the house the land rolled away over another dun meadow that stopped at a rather civilized-looking hedge, above which rose a dense tumble of high trees. To the left lay the over-grown dooryard, the old lichened stone wall, and the sagging gate which opened to Winterbottom Road. Felicia tried to describe it all to Kirk, and wondered as she gazed at him, standing beside her with the eager, listening look his face so often wore, how much of it could mean anything to him but an incomprehensible string of words.

Ken returned from Asquam in Hop's chariot, surrounded by bundles.

"Luxury!" he proclaimed, when the spoils were unloaded. "An oil-stove,

two burners--and food, and beautiful plates with posies on 'em--and tin spoons! And I met Mrs. Hopkins and she almost fainted when I told her we'd slept on the floor. She wanted us to come to her house, but it's the size of a butter-box, and stuffy; so she insisted on sending three quilts. Behold! And the oil-stove was cheap because one of the doors was broken (which I can fix). So there you are!"

"No sign of the goods, I suppose?"

"Our goods? Law, no! Old Mr. Thingummy put on his spectacles and peered around as if he expected to find them behind the door!"

"Oh, my only aunt! They are wonderful plates!" Felicia cried, as she extracted one from its wrapper.

"That's my idea of high art," Ken said, "I got them at the Asquam Utility Emporium. And have you remarked the chairs? Mrs. Hopkins sent those, too. They were in her corn-crib,--on the rafters,--and she said if we didn't see convenient to bring 'em back, never mind, 'cause she was plumb tired of clutterin' 'em round from here to thar."

"Mrs. Hopkins seems to be an angel unawares," said Felicia, with enthusiastic misapplication.

It was the finding of the ancient sickle near the well that gave Ken the bright idea of cutting down the tall, dry grass for bedding.

"Not that it's much of a weapon," he said. "Far less like a sickle than a dissipated saw, to quote. But the edge is rusted so thin that I believe it'll do the trick."

Kirk gathered the grass up into soft scratchy heaps as Ken mowed it, keeping at a respectful distance behind the swinging sickle. Ken began to whistle, then stopped to hear the marsh frogs, which were still chorusing their mad joy in the flight of winter.

"I made up a pome about those thar toads," Ken said, "last night after you'd gone to sleep again."

Kirk leaped dangerously near the sickle.

"You haven't made me a pome for ages!" he cried. "Stop sickling and do it--quick!"

"It's a grand one," Ken said; "listen to this!"

"Down in the marshes the sounds begin
Of a far-away fairy violin,
Faint and reedy and cobweb thin.

"Cricket and marsh-frog and brown tree-toad,
Sit in the sedgy grass by the road,
Each at the door of his own abode;

"Each with a fairy fiddle or flute
Fashioned out of a briar root;
The fairies join their notes, to boot.

"Sitting all in a magic ring,
They lift their voices and sing and sing,
Because it is April, 'Spring! Spring!'"

"That is a nice one!" Kirk agreed. "It sounds real. I don't know how you can do it."

A faint clapping was heard from the direction of the house, and turning, Ken saw his sister dropping him a curtsy at the door. "That," she said, "is a poem, not a pome--a perfectly good one."

"Go 'way!" shouted Ken. "You're a wicked interloper. And you don't even know why Kirk and I write pomes about toads, so you don't!"

"I never could see," Ken remarked that night, "why people are so keen about beds of roses. If you ask me, I should think they'd be uncommon prickly and uncomfortable. Give me a bed of herbs--where love is, don't you know?"

"It wasn't a bed of herbs," Felicia contended; "it was a dinner of them. This isn't herbs, anyway. And think of the delectable smell of the bed of roses!"

"But every rose would have its thorn," Ken objected. "No, no, 'herbs' is preferable."

This argument was being held during the try-out of the grass beds in the living-room.

"See-saw, Margery Daw,
She packed up her bed and lay upon straw,"

sang Felicia.

But the grass was an improvement. Grass below and Mrs. Hop's quilts above, with the overcoats in reserve--the Sturgises considered themselves quite luxurious, after last night's shift at sleep.

"What care we if the beds don't come?" Ken said. "We could live this way all summer. Let them perish untended in the trolley freight-house."

But when Kirk was asleep, the note of the conversation dropped. Ken and Felicia talked till late into the night, in earnest undertones, of ways and means and the needs of the old house.

And slowly, slowly, all the wheels did begin to turn together. Some of the freight came,--notably the beds,--after a week of waiting. Ken and Hop carried them upstairs and set them up, with much toil. Ken chopped down two dead apple-trees, and filled the shed with substantial fuel. The Asquam Market would deliver out Winterbottom Road after May first. Trunks came, with old clothes, and Braille books and other books--and things that Felicia had not been able to leave behind at the last moment. Eventually, came a table, and the Sturgises set their posied plates upon it, and lighted their two candles stuck in saucers, and proclaimed themselves ready to entertain.

"And," thought Felicia, pausing at the kitchen door, "what a difference it does make!"

Firelight and candle-light wrought together their gracious spell on the old room. The tin spoons gleamed like silver, the big brown crash towel that Ken had jokingly laid across the table looked quite like a runner. The light ran and glowed on the white-plastered ceiling and the heavy beams; it flung a mellow aureole about Kirk, who was very carefully arranging three tumblers on the table.

The two candle-flames swayed suddenly and straightened, as Ken opened the outer door and came in.

He too, paused, looking at the little oasis in the dark, silent house.

"We're beginning," he said, "to make friends with the glum old place."

There was much to be done. The rusty nails were pulled out, and others substituted in places where things could really be hung on them—notably in the kitchen, where they supported Felicia's pots and pans in neatly ordered rows. The burdocks disappeared, the shutters were persuaded not to squeak, the few pieces of furniture from home were settled in places where they would look largest. Yes, the house began to be friendly. The rooms were not, after all, so enormous as Felicia had thought. The furniture made them look much smaller. At the Asquam Utility Emporium, Felicia purchased several yards of white cheese-cloth from which she fashioned curtains for the living-room windows. She also cleaned the windows themselves, and Ken did a wondrous amount of scrubbing.

Now, when fire and candle-light shone out in the living room, it looked indeed like a room in which to live—so thought the Sturgises, who asked little.

"Come out here, Phil," Ken whispered plucking his sister by the sleeve, one evening just before supper. Mystified, she followed him out into the soft April twilight; he drew her away from the door a little and bade her look back.

There were new green leaves on the little bush by the door-stone; they gleamed startlingly light in the dusk. A new moon hung beside the stalwart white chimney—all the house was a mouse-colored shadow against the darkening sky. The living-room windows showed as orange squares cut cheerfully from the night. Through the filmy whiteness of the cheese-cloth curtains, could be seen the fire, the table spread for supper, the gallant candles, Kirk lying on the hearth, reading.

"Doesn't it look like a place to live in—and to have a nice time in?" Ken asked.

"Oh," Felicia said, "it almost does!"

CHAPTER VI

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HEDGE

The civilized-looking hedge had been long since investigated. The plot of land it enclosed—reached, for the Sturgises, through a breach in the hedge—was very different from the wild country which surrounded it. The place had once been a very beautiful garden, but years and neglect had made of it a half-formal wilderness, fascinating in its over-grown beauty and its hint of earlier glory. For Kirk, it was an enchanted land of close-pressing leafy alleys, pungent with the smell of box; of brick-paved paths chanced on unexpectedly—followed cautiously to the rim of empty, stone-coped pools. He and Felicia, or he and Ken, went there when cookery or carpentry left an elder free. For when they had discovered that the tall old house, though by no means so neglected as the garden, was as empty, they ventured often into the place. Kirk invented endless tales of enchanted castles, and peopled the still lawns and deserted alleys with every hero he had ever read or heard of. Who could tell? They might indeed lurk in the silent tangle—invisible to him only as all else was invisible. So he liked to think, and wandered, rapt, up and down the grass-grown paths of this enchanting play-ground.

It was not far to the hedge—over the rail fence, across the stubbly meadow. Kirk had been privately amassing landmarks. He had enough, he considered, to venture forth alone to the garden of mystery. Felicia was

in the kitchen--not eating bread and honey, but reading a cook-book and making think-lines in her forehead. Ken was in Asquam. Kirk stepped off the door-stone; sharp to the right, along the wall of the house, then a stretch in the open to the well, over the fence--and then nothing but certain queer stones and the bare feel of the faint path that had already been worn in the meadow.

Kirk won the breach in the hedge and squeezed through. Then he was alone in the warm, green-smelling stillness of the trees. He found his way from the moss velvet under the pines to the paved path, and followed it, unhesitating, to the terrace before the house. On the shallow, sun-warmed steps he sat playing with fir-cones, fingering their scaly curves and sniffing their dry, brown fragrance. He swept a handful of them out of his lap and stood up, preparatory to questing further up the stone steps, to the house itself. But suddenly he stood quite still, for he knew that he was not alone in the garden. He knew, also, that it was neither Ken nor Felicia who stood looking at him. Had one of the fairy-tale heroes materialized, after all, and slipped out of magic coverts to walk with him? Rather uncertainly, he said, "Is somebody there?"

His voice sounded very small in the outdoor silence. Suppose no one were there at all! How silly it would sound to be addressing a tree! There was a moment of stillness, and then a rather old voice said:

"Considering that you are looking straight at me, that seems a somewhat foolish question."

So there was some one! Kirk said:

"I can't see you, because I can't see anything."

After a pause, the voice said, "Forgive me." But indeed, at first glance, the grave shadowed beauty of Kirk's eyes did not betray their blindness.

"Are you one of the enchanted things, or a person?" Kirk inquired.

"I might say, now, that I am enchanted," said the voice, drily.

"I don't think I quite know what you mean," Kirk said. "You sound like a Puck of Pook's Hill sort of person."

"Nothing so exciting. Though Oak and Ash and Thorn do grow in my garden."

"Do they? I haven't found them. I knew it was a different place, ever so different from anything near--different from the other side of the hedge."

"I am not so young as you," said the voice, "to stand about hatless on an April afternoon. Let us come in and sit on either side of the chimney-corer."

And a long, dry, firm hand took Kirk's, and Kirk followed unhesitatingly where it led.

The smoothness of old polished floors, a sense of height, absolute silence, a dry, aromatic smell--this was Kirk's impression as he crossed the threshold, walking carefully and softly, that he might not break the spellbound stillness of the house. Then came the familiar crackle of an open fire, and Kirk was piloted into the delicious cozy depths of a big chair beside the hearth. Creakings, as of another chair being pulled up, then a contented sigh, indicated that his host had sat down opposite him.

"May I now ask your name?" the voice inquired.

"I'm Kirkleigh Sturgis, at Applegate Farm," said Kirk.

"... I s'pose you know, Miss Jean,
That I'm Young Richard o' Taunton Dean...."

murmured the old gentleman.

Kirk pricked up his ears instantly. "Phil sings that," he said delightedly. "I'm glad you know it. But you would."

"Who'd have thought you would know it?" said the voice. "I am fond of Young Richard. Is Phil your brother?"

"She's my sister--but I have a brother. He's sixteen, and he's almost as high as the doorways at Applegate Farm."

"I seem not to know where Applegate Farm is," the old gentleman mused.

"It's quite next door to you," said Kirk.

"They call it the Baldwin place, really. But Ken happened to think that Baldwin's a kind of apple, and there is an orchard and a gate, so we called it that."

"The old farm-house across the meadow!" There was a shade of perplexity in the voice. "You live there?"

"It's the most beautiful place in the world," said Kirk, with conviction, "except your garden."

"Beautiful--to you! Why?"

"Oh, everything!" Kirk said, frowning, and trying to put into words what was really joy in life and spring and the love of his brother and sister. "Everything--the wind in the trees, and in the chimney at night, and the little toads that sing,--do you ever hear them?--and the fire, and, and--everything!"

"And youth," said the old gentleman to himself, "and an unconscious courage to surmount all obstacles. But perhaps, after all, the unseen part of Applegate Farm is the more beautiful." Aloud, he said: "Do you like to look at odd things? That is--I mean--"

Kirk helped him out. "I do like to," he said. "I look at them with my fingers--but it's all the same."

Such things to look at! They were deposited, one after the other, in Kirk's eager hands,--the intricate carving of Japanese ivory, entrancingly smooth--almost like something warm and living, after one had held it for a few adoring moments in careful hands. And there was a Burmese ebony elephant, with a ruby in his forehead.

"A ruby is red," Kirk murmured; "it is like the fire. And the elephant is black. I see him very well."

"Once upon a time," said the old gentleman, "a rajah rode on him--a rajah no bigger than your finger. And his turban was encrusted with the most precious of jewels, and his robe was stiff with gold. The elephant wore anklets of beaten silver, and they clinked as he walked."

Kirk's face was intent, listening. The little ebony elephant stood motionless on his palm, dim in the firelight.

"I hear them clinking," he said, "and the people shouting--oh, so far away!"

He put the treasure back into his host's hand, at last. "I'd like, please, to look at _you_," he said. "It won't hurt," he added quickly, instantly conscious of some unspoken hesitancy.

"I have no fear of that," said the voice, "but you will find little worth the looking for."

Kirk, nevertheless, stood beside the old gentleman's chair, ready with a quick, light hand to visualize his friend's features.

"My hair, if that will help you," the voice told him, "is quite white, and my eyes are usually rather blue."

"Blue," murmured Kirk, his fingers flitting down the fine lines of the old gentleman's profile; "that's cool and nice, like the sea and the wind. Your face is like the ivory thing--smooth and--and carved. I think you really must be something different and rather enchanted."

But the old man had caught both Kirk's hands and spread them out in his own. There was a moment of silence, and then he said:

"Do you care for music, my child?"

"I love Phil's songs," Kirk answered, puzzled a little by a different note in the voice he was beginning to know. "She sings and plays the accompaniments on the piano."

"Do you ever sing?"

"Only when I'm all alone." The color rushed for an instant to Kirk's cheeks, why, he could not have said.

"Without a word, the old gentleman, still holding Kirk's hands, pushed him gently into the chair he had himself been sitting in. There was a little time of stillness, filled only by the crack and rustle of the fire. Then, into the silence, crept the first dew-clear notes of Chopin's F Sharp Major Nocturne. The liquid beauty of the last bars had scarcely died away, when the unseen piano gave forth, tragically exultant, the glorious chords of the Twentieth Prelude--climbing higher and higher in a mournful triumph of minor chords and sinking at last into the final solemn splendor of the closing measures. The old gentleman turned on the piano-stool to find Kirk weeping passionately and silently into the cushions of the big chair.

"Have I done more than I meant?" he questioned himself, "or is it only the proof?" His hands on Kirk's quivering shoulders, he asked, "What is it?"

Kirk sat up, ashamed, and wondering why he had cried. "It was because it was so much more wonderful than anything that ever happened," he said unsteadily. "And I never can do it."

The musician almost shook him.

"But you can," he said; "you must! How can you _help_ yourself, with those hands? Has no one guessed? How stupid all the world is!"

He pulled Kirk suddenly to the piano, swept him abruptly into the wiry circle of his arm.

"See," he whispered; "oh, listen!"

He spread Kirk's fingers above the keyboard--brought them down on a fine chord of the Chopin prelude, and for one instant Kirk felt coursing through him a feeling inexplicable as it was exciting--as painful as it was glad. The next moment the chord died; the old man was again the gentle friend of the fireside.

"I am stupid," he said, "and ill-advised. Let's have tea."

The tea came, magically--delicious cambric tea and cinnamon toast. Kirk and the old gentleman talked of the farm, and of Asquam, and other every-day subjects, till the spring dusk gathered at the window, and the musician started up. "Your folk will be anxious," he said. "We must be off. But you will come to me again, will you not?"

Nothing could have kept Kirk away, and he said so.

"And what's your name, please?" he asked. "I've told you mine." A silence made him add, "Of course, if you mind telling me--"

Silence still, and Kirk, inspired, said:

"Phil was reading a book aloud to Mother, once, and it was partly about a man who made wonderful music and they called him 'Maestro.' Would you mind if I called you Maestro--just for something to call you, you know?"

He feared, in the stillness, that he had hurt his friend's feelings, but the voice, when it next spoke, was kind and grave.

"I am unworthy," it said, "but I should like you to call me Maestro. Come--it is falling dusk. I'll go with you to the end of the meadow."

And they went out together into the April twilight.

Ken and Felicia were just beginning to be really anxious, when Kirk tumbled in at the living-room door, with a headlong tale of enchanted hearthstones, ebony elephants, cinnamon toast, music that had made him cry, and most of all, of the benevolent, mysterious presence who had wrought all this. Phil and Ken shook their heads, suggested that some supper would make Kirk feel better, and set a boundary limit of the orchard and meadow fence on his peregrinations.

"But I promised him I'd come again," Kirk protested; "and I can find the way. I must, because he says I can make music like that--and he's the only person who could show me how."

Felicia extracted a more coherent story as she sat on the edge of Kirk's bed later that evening. She came downstairs sober and strangely elated, to electrify her brother by saying:

"Something queer has happened to Kirk. He's too excited, but he's simply shining. And do you suppose it can possibly be true that he has music in him? I mean real, extraordinary music, like--Beethoven or somebody."

But Ken roared so gleefully over the ridiculous idea of his small brother's remotely resembling Beethoven, that Phil suddenly thought herself very silly, and lapsed into somewhat humiliated silence.

* * * * *

It was some time before the cares of a household permitted the Sturgises to do very much exploring. One of their first expeditions, however, had been straight to the bay from the farm-house--a scramble through wild, long-deserted pastures, an amazingly thick young alder grove, and finally out on the stony, salty water's edge. Here all was silver to the

sea's rim, where the bay met wider waters; in the opposite direction it narrowed till it was not more than a river, winding among salt flats and sudden rocky points until it lost itself in a maze of blue among the distant uplands. The other shore was just beginning to be tenderly alight with April green, and Felicia caught her breath for very joy at the faint pink of distant maple boughs and the smell of spring and the sea. A song-sparrow dropped a sudden, clear throatful of notes, and Kirk, too, caught the rapture of the spring and flung wide his arms in impartial welcome.

Ken had been poking down the shore and came back now, evidently with something to say.

"There's the queerest little inlet down there," he said, "with a tide eddy that runs into it. And there's an old motor-boat hove way up on the rocks in there among the bushes."

"What about it?" Felicia asked.

"I merely wished it were ours."

"Naturally it's some one else's."

"He takes mighty poor care of it, then. The engine's all rusted up, and there's a hole stove in the bottom."

"Then we shouldn't want it."

"It could be fixed," Ken murmured; "easily. I examined it."

He stared out at the misty bay's end, thinking, somehow, of the Celestine, which he had not forgotten in his anxieties as a householder.

But even the joy of April on the bayside was shadowed when the mail came to Applegate Farm that day. The United States mail was represented, in the environs of Asquam, by a preposterously small wagon,—more like a longitudinal slice of a milk-cart than anything else,—drawn by two thin, rangy horses that seemed all out of proportion to their load. Their rhythmic and leisurely trot jangled a loud but not unmusical bell which hung from some hidden part of the wagon's anatomy, and warned all dwellers on Rural Route No. 1 that the United States mail, ably piloted by Mr. Truman Hobart, was on its way.

The jangling stopped at Applegate Farm, and Mr. Hobart delved into a soap-box in his cart and extracted the Sturgis mail, which he delivered into Kirk's outstretched hand. Mr. Hobart waited, as usual, to watch, admire, and marvel at Kirk's unhesitating progress to the house, and then he clucked to the horses and tinkled on his way.

There was a penciled note from Mrs. Sturgis, forwarded, as always, from Westover Street, where she, of course, thought her children were (they sent all their letters for her to Mr. Dodge, that they might bear the Bedford postmark—and very difficult letters those were to write!), a bill from the City Transfer Company (carting: 1 table, etc., etc.), and a letter from Mr. Dodge. It was this letter which shadowed Applegate Farm and dug a new think-line in Ken's young forehead. For Rocky Head Granite was, it seemed, by no means so firm as its name sounded. Mr. Dodge's hopes for it were unfulfilled. It was very little indeed that could now be wrung from it. The Fidelity was for Mother—with a margin, scant enough, to eke out the young Sturgises' income. There was the bill for carting, other bills, daily expenses. Felicia, reading over Ken's shoulder, bit her lip.

"Come back to town, my dear boy," wrote Mr. Dodge, "and I will try to

get you something to do. You are all welcome to my house and help as long as you may have need."

It had been dawning more and more on Ken that he had been an idiot not to stay in town, where there _was_ work to do. He had hated to prick Phil's ideal bubble and cancel the lease on the farm,--for it was really she who had picked out the place,--but he was becoming aware that he should have done so. This latest turn in the Sturgis fortunes made it evident that something must be done to bring more money than the invested capital yielded. There was no work here; unless perhaps he might hire out as a farm-hand, at small wages indeed. And he knew nothing of farm work. Nevertheless, he and Felicia shook their heads at Mr. Dodge's proposal. They sat at the table within the mellow ring of lamplight, after Kirk had gone to bed, and thrashed out their problem,--pride fighting need and vanquishing judgment. It was a good letter that Kenelm sent Mr. Dodge, and the attorney shook his own head as he read it in his study, and said:

"I admire your principle, my boy--but oh, I pity your inexperience!"

CHAPTER VII

A MAYING

The City Transfer bill was paid; so were the other bills. Ken, on his way out from Asquam, stopped with a sudden light in his dogged face and turned back. He sought out the harbor-master, who was engaged in painting a dory behind his shop.

"Wal, boy, want to get a fish-hook?" he queried, squinting toward Ken with a preoccupied eye. (He sold hardware and fishing-tackle, as well as attending to the duties of his post.)

Ken disclaimed any desire for the fish-hook, and said he wanted to ask about a boat.

"Ain't got none for sale ner hire, just now," the harbor-master replied.

Ken said, so he had heard, but that wasn't it. And he told the man about the abandoned power-boat in the inlet. The harbor-master stood up straight and looked at Ken, at last.

"Wal, ding!" said he. "That's Joe Pasquale's boat, sure's I'm a-standin' here!"

"Who," said Ken, "is Joe Pasquale?"

"He is--or _woz_--a Portugee fisherman--lobsterman, ruther. He got drowned in Febrerry--fell outen his boat, seems so, an' we got _him_, but we never got the boat. Couldn't figger wher' she _had_ got to. He was down harbor when 't happent. Cur'ous tide-racks 'round here."

"Whose is she, then?" Ken asked. "Any widows or orphans?"

"Nary widder," said the harbor-master, chewing tobacco reflectively. "_No_ kin. Finders keepers. B'longs to you, I reckon. Ain't much good, be she?"

"Hole stove in her," Ken said. "The engine is all there, but I guess it'll need a good bit of tinkering at."

"Ain't wuth it," said the harbor-master. "She's old as Methusaly, anyways. Keep her--she's salvage if ever there wuz. Might be able to git sunthin' fer her engine--scrap iron."

"Thanks," said Ken; "I'll think it over." And he ran nearly all the way to Applegate Farm.

Kirk did not forget his promise to the Maestro. He found the old gentleman in the garden, sitting on a stone bench beside the empty fountain.

"I knew that you would come," he said. "Do you know what day it is?"

Kirk did not, except that it was Saturday.

"It is May-day," said the Maestro, "and the spirits of the garden are abroad. We must keep our May together. Come--I think I have not forgotten the way."

He took Kirk's hand, and they walked down the grass path till the sweet closeness of a low pine covert wove a scented silence about them. The Maestro's voice dropped.

"It used to be here," he said. "Try--the other side of the pine-tree. Ah, it has been so many, many years!"

[Illustration: The Maestro sat down beside Kirk]

Kirk's hand sought along the dry pine-needles; then, in a nook of the roots, what but a tiny dish, with sweetmeats, set out, and little cups of elder wine, and bread, and cottage cheese! The Maestro sat down beside Kirk on the pine-needles, and began to sing softly in a rather thin but very sweet voice.

"Here come we a-maying,
All in the wood so green;
Oh, will ye not be staying?
Oh, can ye not be seen?"

Before that ye be flitting,
When the dew is in the east,
We thank ye, as befitting,
For the May and for the feast.

Here come we a-maying,
All in the wood so green,
In fairy coverts straying
A-for to seek our queen."

"One has to be courteous to them," he added at the end, while Kirk sat rapt, very possibly seeing far more garden spirits than his friend had any idea of.

"I myself," the Maestro said, "do not very often come to the garden. It is too full, for me, of children no longer here. But the garden folk have not forgotten."

"When I'm here," murmured Kirk, sipping elder wine, "Applegate Farm and everything in the world seem miles and years away. Is there really a magic line at the hedge?"

"If there is, you are the only one who has discovered it," said the old gentleman, enigmatically. "Leave a sup of wine and a bit of bread for the Folk, and let us see if we cannot find some May-flowers."

They left the little pine room,--Kirk putting in the root hollow a generous tithe for the garden folk,--and went through the garden till the grass grew higher beneath their feet, and they began to climb a rough, sun-warmed hillside, where dry leaves rustled and a sweet earthy smell arose.

"Search here among the leaves," the Maestro said, "and see what you shall find."

So Kirk, in a dream of wonder, dropped to his knees, and felt among the loose leaves, in the sunshine. And there were tufts of smooth foliage, all hidden away, and there came from them a smell rapturously sweet--arbutus on a sunlit hill. Kirk pulled a sprig and sat drinking in the deliciousness of it, till the old gentleman said:

"We must have enough for a wreath, you know--a wreath for the queen."

"Who is our Queen of the May?" Kirk asked.

"The most beautiful person you know."

"Felicia," said Kirk, promptly.

"Felicia," mused the Maestro. "That is a beautiful name. Do you know what it means?"

Kirk did not.

"It means happiness. Is it so?"

"Yes," said Kirk; "Ken and I couldn't be happy without her. She is happiness."

"Kenneth is your brother?"

"Kenelm. Does that mean something?"

The old gentleman plucked May-flowers for a moment. "It means, if I remember rightly, 'a defender of his kindred.' It is a good Anglo-Saxon name."

"What does my name mean?" Kirk asked.

The Maestro laughed. "Yours is not a given name," he said. "It has no meaning. But--you mean much to me."

He caught Kirk suddenly in a breathless embrace, from which he released him almost at once, with an apology.

"Let us make the wreath," he said. "See, I'll show you how."

He bound the first strands, and then guided Kirk's hands in the next steps, till the child was fashioning the wreath alone.

"My love's an arbutus
On the borders of Lene,"

sang the Maestro, in his gentle voice. "Listen
and I will tell you what you must say to Felicia
when you crown her Queen of the May."

The falling sun found the wreath completed and the verse learned, and the two went hand in hand back through the shadowy garden.

"Won't you make music to-day?" Kirk begged.

"Not to-day," said the old gentleman. "This day we go a-maying. But I am glad you do not forget the music."

"How could I?" said Kirk. At the hedge, he added: "I'd like to put a bit of arbutus in your buttonhole, for your May."

He held out a sprig in not quite the right direction, and the Maestro stepped forward and stooped to him, while Kirk's fingers found the buttonhole.

"Now the Folk can do me no harm," smiled the old gentleman. "Good-by, my dear."

* * * * *

Felicia was setting the table, with the candle-light about her hair. If Kirk could have seen her, he would indeed have thought her beautiful. He stood with one hand on the door-post, the other behind him. "Phil?" he said.

"Here," said Felicia. "Where have you been, honey?"

He advanced to the middle of the room, and stopped. There was something so solemn and unchancy about him that his sister put a handful of forks and spoons on the table and stood looking at him. Then he said, slowly:

"I come a-maying through the wood,
A-for to find my queen;
She must be glad and she must be good,
And the fairest ever seen.

And now have I no further need
To seek for loveliness;
She standeth at my side indeed—
Felicia--Happiness!"

With which he produced the wreath of Mayflowers, and, flinging himself suddenly upon her with a hug not specified in the rite, cast it upon her chestnut locks and twined himself joyfully around her. Phil, quite overcome, collapsed into the nearest chair, Kirk, May-flowers and all, and it was there that Ken found them, rapturously embracing each other, the May Queen bewitchingly pretty with her wreath over one ear. "I didn't make it up," Kirk said, at supper. "The Maestro did--or at least he said the Folk taught him one like it. I can't remember the thanking one he sang before the feast. And Ken, he says _your_ name's good Anglo-Saxon and means 'a defender of his kindred.'"

"It does, does it?" said Ken. "You'll get so magicked over there some time that we'll never see you again; or else you'll come back cast into a spell, and there'll be no peace living with you."

"No, I won't," Kirk said. "And I like it. It makes things more interesting."

"I should _think so_, " said Ken--secretly, perhaps, a shade envious of the Maestro's ability.

As he locked up Applegate Farm that night, he stopped for a moment at the door to look at the misty stars and listen to the wind in the orchard.

"A defender of his kindred," he murmured. "_H'm!_"

* * * * *

Hardly anything is more annoying than a mysterious elder brother. That Ken was tinkering at the _Flying Dutchman_ (as he had immediately called the power-boat, on account of its ghostly associations) was evident to his brother and sister, but why he should be doing so they could not fathom.

"We can't afford to run around in her as a pleasure yacht," Felicia said. "Are you going to sell her?"

"I am not," Ken would say, maddeningly, jingling a handful of bolts in his pocket; "not I."

The patch in the _Flying Dutchman_ was not such as a boat-builder would have made, but it was water-tight, and that was the main point. The motor required another week of coaxing; all Ken's mechanical ingenuity was needed, and he sat before the engine, sometimes, dejected and indignant. But when the last tinkering was over, when frantic spinings of the flywheel at length called forth a feeble gasp and deep-chested gurgle from the engine, Ken clapped his dirty hands and danced alone on the rocks like a madman.

He took the trial trip secretly--he did not intend to run the risk of sending Phil and Kirk to that portion of Davy Jones' locker reserved for Asquam Bay. But when he landed, he ran, charging through baybush and alder, till he tumbled into Felicia on the door-step of Applegate Farm.

"I didn't want to tell you until I found out if she'd work," he gasped, having more enthusiasm than breath. "You might have been disappointed. But she'll go--and _now_ I'll tell you what she and I are going to do!"

CHAPTER VIII

WORK

On a morning late in May, a train pulled into the Bayside station, which was the rail terminal for travelers to Asquam, and deposited there a scattering of early summer folk and a pile of baggage. The Asquam trolley-car was not in, and would not be for some twenty minutes; the passengers grouped themselves at the station, half wharf, half platform, and stared languidly at the bay, the warehouse, and the empty track down which the Asquam car might eventually be expected to appear. It did not; but there did appear a tall youth, who approached one of the groups of travelers with more show of confidence than he felt. He pulled off his new yachting-cap and addressed the man nearest him:

"Are you going to Asquam, sir?"

"I am, if the blamed trolley-car ever shows up."

"Have you baggage?"

"Couple of trunks."

"Are you sending them by the electric freight?"

"No other way _to_ send them," said the man, gloomily. "I've been here before. I've fortified myself with a well-stocked bag, but I sha'n't have a collar left before the baggage comes. As for my wife--"

"I can get your luggage to Asquam in a bit over an hour," said the businesslike young gentleman.

The somewhat bored group lifted interested heads. They, too, had trunks doomed to a mysterious exile at the hands of the electric freight.

"I'm Sturgis," said the youth, "of the Sturgis Water Line. I have a large power-boat built for capacity, not looks. Your baggage will be safe in a store-room at the other end,"--Captain Sturgis here produced a new and imposing key,--"and will be taken to your hotel or cottage by a reliable man with a team at the usual rate of transfer from the trolley. My charges are a little higher than the trolley rates, but you'll have your baggage before luncheon, instead of next week." A murmuring arose in the group.

"Let's see your vessel, Cap," said another man.

Ken led the way to a boat skid at the foot of the wharf, and pointed out the _Flying Dutchman_, unpainted, but very tidy, floating proudly beside the piles.

"I have to charge by bulk rather than weight," said the proprietor of the Sturgis Water Line, "and first come, first served."

"Have you a license?" asked a cautious one.

Ken turned back a lapel and showed it, with the color rushing suddenly to his face.

But the upshot of it was, that before the Asquam car--later than usual--arrived at Bayside, the _Flying Dutchman_ was chugging out into the bay, so loaded with trunks that Ken felt heartily for the Irishman, who, under somewhat similar circumstances, said "'t was a merrcy the toide wasn't six inches hoigher!" Out in the fairway, Ken crouched beside his engine, quite thankful to be alone with his boat and the harvest of trunks--so many more than he had hoped to have. For this was the first trip of the Sturgis Water Line, and its proprietor's heart, under the new license, had pounded quite agonizingly as he had approached his first clients.

Down at Asquam, the room on the wharf under the harbor-master's shop stood waiting to receive outgoing or incoming baggage; at the wharf, Hop would be drawn up with his old express-wagon. For Hop was the shore department of the Line, only too glad to transport luggage, and in so doing to score off Sim Rathbone, who had little by little taken Hop's trade. He and Ken had arranged financial matters most amicably; Ken was to keep all his profits, Hop was to charge his usual rates for transfer, but it was understood that Hopkins, and he alone, was shore agent of the Sturgis Water Line, and great was his joy and pride.

Ken, on this first day, helped the old man load the trunks, rode with him to their various destinations, saw them received by unbelieving and jubilant owners, and then tore back to Applegate Farm, exultant and joyful. Having no breath for words, he laid before Felicia, who was making bread, four dollars and a half (six trunks at seventy-five cents apiece), clapped the yachting cap over Kirk's head, and cut an ecstatic pigeon-wing on the kitchen floor. "One trip!" gasped Phil, touching the money reverently with a doughy finger. "And you're going to make two round trips every day! That's eighteen dollars a day! Oh, Ken, it's a hundred and twenty-five dollars a week! Why, we're--we're millionaires!"

Ken had found his breath, and his reason.

"What a little lightning calculator!" he said. "Don't go so fast, Philly; why, your castle scrapes the clouds! This time of year I won't

carry _any_ baggage on the up trips--just gasoline wasted; and there's the rent of the dock and the store-room,--it isn't much, but it's quite a lot off the profit,--and gas and oil, and lots of trips when I sha'n't be in such luck. But I _do_ think it's going to work--and pay, even if it's only fifteen or twenty dollars a week."

Whereupon Felicia called him a lamb, and kissed him, and he submitted.

That night they had a cake. Eggs had been lavished on it to produce its delectable golden smoothness, and sugar had not been stinted.

"It's a special occasion," Felicia apologized, "to celebrate the Sturgis Water Line and honor Captain Kenelm Sturgis--defender of his kindred," she added mischievously.

"Cut it!" muttered Ken; but she took it to mean the cake, and handed him a delicious slice.

"All right," said Ken. "Let's feast. But don't be like the girl with the pitcher of milk on her head, Phil."

* * * * *

If you suppose that Miss Felicia Sturgis was lonely while her brother, the captain, was carrying on his new watery profession, you are quite mistaken. She hadn't time even to reflect whether she was lonely or not. She had no intention of letting Applegate Farm sink back to the untidy level of neglect in which she had found it, and its needs claimed much of her energy. She tried to find time in which to read a little, for she felt somewhat guilty about the unceremonious leave she had taken of her schooling. And there was cookery to practise, and stockings to mend, and, oh dear, such a number of things!

But Kirk's education filled the most important place, to her, in the scheme of things at Asquam. If she had not been so young, and so ambitious, and so inexperienced, she might have faltered before the task she set herself, temporary though it might be. Long before the Sturgis Water Line had hung out its neat shingle at the harbor-master's wharf; before the Maestro and music had made a new interest in Kirk's life; while Applegate Farm was still confusion--Felicia had attacked the Braille system with a courage as conscientious as it was unguided. She laughed now to think of how she had gone at the thing--not even studying out the alphabet first. In the candle-light, she had sat on the edge of her bed--there was no other furniture in the room--with one of Kirk's books on her knee. Looking at the dots embossed on the paper conveyed nothing to her; she shut her eyes, and felt the page with a forefinger which immediately seemed to her as large as a biscuit. Nothing but the dreadful darkness, and the discouraging little humps on the paper which would not even group themselves under her fingers! Felicia had ended her first attempt at mastering Braille, in tears--but not altogether over her own failure.

"Oh, it must be hideous for him!" she quavered to the empty room; "simply hideous!"

And she opened her eyes, thankful to see even good candle-light on bare walls, and the green, star-hung slip of sky outside the window. But somehow the seeing of it had made her cry again.

Next day she had swallowed her pride and asked Kirk to explain to her a few of the mysteries of the embossed letters. He was delighted, and picked the alphabet, here and there, from a page chosen at random in the big book. The dots slunk at once into quite sensibly ordered ranks, and Felicia perceived a reason, an excuse for their existence.

She learned half the alphabet in an hour, and picked out _b_ and _h_ and _l_ joyfully from page after page. Three days later she was reading, "The cat can catch the mouse"--as thrilled as a scientist would be to discover a new principle of physics. Kirk was thrilled, also, and applauded her vigorously.

"But you're looking at it, and that's easier," he said. "And you're growner-up than me."

Felicia confessed that this was so.

And now what a stern task-mistress she had become! She knew all the long words in the hardest lessons, and more too. There was no escaping school-time; it was as bad as Miss Bolton. Except that she was Felicia--and that made all the difference in the world. Kirk labored for her as he had never done for Miss Bolton, who had been wont to say, "If only he would _work_--" The unfinished sentence always implied untold possibilities for Kirk.

But Felicia was not content that Kirk could read the hardest lessons now. They plunged into oral arithmetic and geography and history, to which last he would listen indefinitely while Phil read aloud. And Felicia, whose ambition was unbounded,--as, fortunately, his own was,--turned her attention to the question of writing. He could write Braille, with a punch and a Braille slate,--yes, indeed!--but who of the seeing world could read it when he had done? And he had no conception of our printed letters; they might as well have been Chinese symbols. He would some day have a typewriter, of course, but that was impossible now. Phil, nothing daunted by statements that the blind never could write satisfactorily, sent for the simplest of the appliances which make it possible for them to write ordinary characters, and she and Kirk set to work with a will.

On the whole, those were very happy mornings. For the schoolroom was in the orchard--the orchard, just beginning to sift scented petals over the lesson papers; beginning to be astir with the boom of bees, and the fluttering journeys of those busy householders, the robins. The high, soft grass made the most comfortable of school benches; an upturned box served excellently for a desk; and here Kirk struggled with the elusive, unseen shapes of A. B. C.--and conquered them! His first completed manuscript was a letter to his mother, and Phil, looking at it, thought all the toil worth while. The letter had taken long, but Felicia had not helped him with it.

DEAR MOTHER

I AM WRITING THIS M
YSELF A ROBIN IS SINGI
NG NEARME BECAUSE HE H
AS THREE EGGS WHICH FI
L FOUND YESTERDAY. I H
OPE YOU ARE BETTER DEAR
AND CAN COME BACK SOON
YOUR KIRK XXXXXXXXXXXX

Mrs. Sturgis's feelings, on reading this production, may be imagined. She wept a little, being still not herself, and found heart, for the first time, to notice that a robin was singing outside her own window. There is no question but that Kirk's days were really the busiest of the Sturgis family's. For no sooner did the Three R's loose their hold on him at noon, than the Maestro claimed him for music after lunch, three times a week. Rather tantalizing music, for he wasn't to go near the piano yet. No, it was solfeggio, horrid dry scales to sing, and rhythm, and notation. But all was repaid when the Maestro dropped to the piano-stool and filled a half-hour with music that made Kirk more than

ever long to master the scales. And there was tea, always, and slow, sun-bathed wanderings in the garden, hand in hand with the Maestro.

He must hear, now, all about the Sturgis Water Line, and Ken's yachting cap with the shiny visor, and how Kirk had taken the afternoon trip three times, and how--if the Maestro didn't know it already--the sound of water at the bow of a boat was one of the nicest noises there was.

"There are those who think so," said the old gentleman. "Kirk, tell Ken not to let the sea gain a hold on him. He loves it, does he not?"

"Yes," said Kirk, aghast at the sudden bitter sorrow in the gentle voice. "Why?"

"The sea is a tyrant. Those she claims, she never releases. I know."

He stood among the gently falling blossoms of the big quince-tree by the terrace. Then he suddenly drew Kirk to him, and said:

"I spoke of the garden being filled, to me, with the memory of children; did I not?"

Kirk remembered that he had--on May-day.

"A little boy and a little girl played here once," said the Maestro, "when the pools were filled, and the garden paths were trim. The little girl died when she was a girl no longer. The boy loved the sea too well. He left the garden, to sail the seas in a ship--and I have never seen him since."

"Was he your little boy?" Kirk hardly dared ask it.

"He was my little boy," said the Maestro. "He left the garden in the moonlight, and ran away to the ships. He was sixteen. Tell Kenelm not to love the sea too much."

"But Ken wouldn't go away from Phil and me," said Kirk; "I _know_ he wouldn't."

Kirk knew nothing of the call that the looming gray sails of the _Celestine_ had once made.

"I thought," said the Maestro, "that the other boy would not leave his sister and his father." He roused himself suddenly. "Perhaps I do Ken injustice. I want to meet the gallant commander of the _Flying Dutchman_. It seems absurd that such close neighbors have not yet met. Bring him--and Felicia, when you come again. We'll drink to the success of the Sturgis Water Line. And don't dare to tell me, next time, that you never heard of the scale of A flat major, my little scamp!"

Kirk, to whom the Maestro's word was law, delivered his message very solemnly to Ken, who laughed.

"Not much fear of my cultivating too strong an affection for Mud Ocean, as navigated by the _Dutchman_. If I had a chance to see real water and real ships, it might be different."

"But how horrid of his son never to let him know--poor old gentleman!" said Felicia, who was putting on her hat at the window.

"Probably the old gentleman was so angry with him in the beginning that he didn't dare to, and now he thinks he's dead," Ken said.

"Who thinks who's dead?" Phil asked. "You'd never make a rhetorician."

"I should hope not!" said her brother. "Why, the sailor thinks his father's dead. Get your hat, Kirk."

"We're going to an auction," Felicia explained.

"A 'vandew'," Ken corrected. "You and Phil are, that is, to buy shoes and ships and sealing-wax, and a chair for my room that won't fall down when I sit in it, and crockery ware--and I guarantee you'll come home with a parlor organ and a wax fruit-piece under a glass case."

Phil scoffed and reproved him, and he departed, whistling "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep," lugubriously. His brother and sister caught up with him, and they all walked together toward Asquam, Ken bound for his boat, and the others for the "vendu," which was held at an old farm-house where Winterbottom Road joined Pickery Lane.

Many ramshackle old wagons were already drawn up in the barn-yard and hitched to trees along the cart track. Their owners were grouped in the dooryard around the stoves and tables and boxes of "articles too numerous to mention," chattering over the merits and flaws of mattresses and lamps, and sitting in the chairs to find out whether or not they were comfortable. A bent old farmer with a chin-beard, stood chuckling over an ancient cradle that leaned against a wash-tub.

"There's one most 's old 's I be!" he said, addressing the world at large; "fust thing I 'member, I crawled outen one like thet!"

The auctioneer was selling farm tools and stock at the other side of the house, and most of the men-folks were congregated there--tall, solemn people, still wearing winter mufflers--soberly chewing tobacco and comparing notes on the tools. Felicia and Kirk, though they would have liked well enough to own the old white horse and the Jersey heifers, felt themselves unable to afford live stock, and stayed in the dooryard. Among the furniture so mercilessly dragged from its familiar surroundings to stand on the trampled grass, was a little, square, weathered thing, which Felicia at first failed to recognize as the inevitable melodeon. It lacked all the plush and gewgaws of the parlor organ of commerce; such a modest, tiny gray box might easily have passed for a kitchen chest.

Felicia pushed back the cover, and, pressing a pedal with one foot, gave forth the chords of her favorite, "How should I your true love know?" The organ had a rather sweet old tone, unlike the nasal and somewhat sanctimonious drone of most melodeons, and Felicia, hungry for the piano that had not been brought to Asquam, almost wished she could buy it. She remembered Ken's prophecy--"you'll come home with a melodeon"--and turned away, her cheeks all the pinker when she found the frankly interested eyes of several bumpkins fixed upon her. But Kirk was not so ready to leave the instrument.

"Why don't we get that, Phil?" he begged. "We must have it; don't you think so?"

"It will go for much more than we can afford," said Felicia. "And you have the Maestro's piano. Listen! They're beginning to sell the things around here."

"But you haven't the Maestro's piano!" Kirk protested, clinging very tightly to her hand in the midst of all this strange, pushing crowd.

The people were gathering at the sunny side of the house; the auctioneer, at the window, was selling pots and candles and pruning-shears and kitchen chairs. Felicia felt somehow curiously aloof, and almost like an intruder, in this crowd of people, all of whom had known each other for long years in Asquam. They shouted pleasantries

across intervening heads, and roared as one when somebody called "Lisha" bought an ancient stovepipe hat for five cents and clapped it on his head, adding at least a foot to his already gaunt and towering height. She felt, too, an odd sense of pathos at the sight of all these little possessions--some of them heirlooms--being pulled from the old homestead and flaunted before the world. She did not like to see two or three old women fingering the fine quilts and saying they'd be a good bargain, for "Maria Troop made every stitch on 'em herself, and she allus was one to have lastin' things." Poor little Mrs. Troop was there, tightly buttoned up in her "store clothes," running hither and thither, and protesting to the auctioneer that the "sofy" was worth "twicet as much's Sim Rathbone give for 't."

A fearful crash of crockery within brought her hand to her heart, and a voice from the crowd commented jocularly, "Huh! Breakin' up housekeepin'!" Even Mrs. Troop smiled wryly, and the crowd guffawed.

"Now here," bellowed the auctioneer, "is a very fine article sech as you don't often see in _these_ days. A melodeon, everybody, a parlor organ, in size, shape, and appearance very unusual, so to _say_."

"Ain't it homely!" a female voice remarked during the stout auctioneer's pause for breath.

"Not being a musician, ladies and gents, I ain't qualified to let you hear the tones of this instrument, _but_ --I am sure it will be an ornament to any home and a source of enjoyment to both old and _young_. Now--what'll you give me for this fine old _organ_?"

"Seventy-five cents," a deep voice murmured.

"Got your money with you, Watson?" the auctioneer inquired biting. "I am ashamed of this offer, folks, but nevertheless, I am offered seventy-five cents--_seventy-five cents_, for this fine old instrument. Now who'll--"

The melodeon climbed to two dollars, with comparative rapidity. The bidders were principally men, whose wives, had they been present, would probably have discouraged the bidding, on the score that it was impossible to have that thing in the house, when Jenny's had veneer candle-stands and plush pedals. Felicia was just beginning to wonder whether entering into the ring would push the melodeon too high, and the auctioneer was impatiently tapping his heel on the soap-box platform, when a clear and deliberate voice remarked:

"Two dollars and ten cents."

Several heads were turned to see the speaker, and women peeped over their husbands' shoulders to look. They saw a child in green knickerbockers and a gray jersey, his hand in that of a surprised young girl, and his determined face and oddly tranquil eyes turned purposefully to the auctioneer.

"Make it a quarter," said a man lounging against the leader-pipe.

"Two and a quarter," said the auctioneer. "I'm bid two dollars and a quarter for the organ."

"Two dollars and fifty cents," said the young bidder, a shade of excitement now betraying itself in his voice. The girl opened her mouth, perhaps to protest, and then closed it again. "Two-fifty!" bawled the auctioneer. "Two-fifty? Going--any more? Going--going--" he brought his big hands together with a slap, "_Gone!_ at two dollars _and_ fifty cents, to--who's the party, Ben?"

Ben, harassed, pencil in mouth, professed ignorance.

"Kirkleigh Sturgis," said the owner of the musical instrument, "Winterbottom Road."

"Mister Sturgis," said the auctioneer, while Ben scribbled. "Step right up, young man. Give Ben your money and put your planner in your pocket. Now folks, the next article--"

Kirk and Felicia, not to speak of the organ, two chairs, a wash-basin, a frying-pan, two boxes of candles, a good mop, and a pot of soft soap, were all carted home by the invaluable Hop. They met Ken, in from his second trip, in the middle of Winterbottom Hill, and they gave him a lift.

"Oh, if you knew what you're sitting on!" Phil chuckled.

"Good heavens! Will it go off?" cried Ken, squirming around to look down at his seat. "I thought it was a chest, or something."

"It's--a melodeon!" Phil said weakly.

"A melodeon! Oh, ye gods and little fishes!" shouted Ken. "Oh, my prophetic soul!" and he laughed all the way to Applegate Farm.

But while Felicia was clattering pans in the kitchen, and Ken went whistling through the orchard twilight to the well, the purchaser of the organ felt his way to it, not quite sure, yet, of its place by the window. He sat down in front of it, and pressed the stiff old pedals. His careful fingers found a chord, and the yellow notes responded with their sweet, thin cadence--the _vox humana_ stop was out. He pulled, by chance, the diapason, and filled the room with deep, shaken notes. Half frightened at the magic possibilities, he slipped from the chair and ran out into the young May night, to whisper to it something of the love and wonder that the Maestro's music was stirring in him. Here in the twilight dooryard he was found by his brother, who gave him the hand unoccupied by the bucket and led him in to the good, wholesome commonplaces of hearth-fire and supper and the jolliest of jokes and laughter.

CHAPTER IX

FAME COMES COURTING

At first, each day in the old house had been an adventure. That could not last, for even the most exciting surroundings become familiar when they are lived in day after day. Still, there are people who think every dawn the beginning of a new adventure, and Felicia, in spite of pots and pans, was rather of this opinion.

It was, for instance, a real epoch in her life when the great old rose-bush below the living-room windows budded and then bloomed. She had watched it anxiously for weeks, and tended it as it had not been tended for many years. It bloomed suddenly and beautifully,--"out of sheer gratitude," Ken said,--and massed a great mound of delicate color against the silver shingles of the west wall. It bore the sweet, small, old-fashioned roses that flower a tender pink and fade gracefully to bluish white. Felicia gathered a bunch of them for the Maestro, who had bidden the three to come for tea. Neither Ken nor Felicia had, as yet, met Kirk's mysterious friend, and were still half inclined to think him a creature of their brother's imagination.

And, indeed, when they met him, standing beside the laden tea-table on the terrace, they thought him scarcely more of an actuality, so utterly in keeping was he with the dreaming garden and the still house. Felicia, who had not quite realized the depth of friendship which had grown between this old gentleman and her small brother, noted with the familiar strangeness of a dream the proprietary action with which the Maestro drew Kirk to him, and Kirk's instant and unconscious response. These were old and dear friends; Ken and Felicia had for a moment the curious sensation of being intruders in a forgotten corner of enchanted land, into which the likeness of their own Kirk had somehow strayed. But the feeling passed quickly. The Maestro behind the silver urn was a human being, after all, talking of the Sturgis Water Line—a most delightful human being, full of kindness and humor. Kirk was really their own, too. He leaned beside Felicia's chair, stirring his tea and she slipped an arm about him, just to establish her right of possession.

The talk ran on the awakening of Applegate Farm, the rose-bush, lessons in the orchard, many details of the management of this new and exciting life, which the Maestro's quiet questioning drew unconsciously from the eager Sturgises.

"We've been talking about nothing but ourselves, I'm afraid," Felicia said at last, with pink cheeks. She rose to go, but Kirk pulled her sleeve. No afternoon at the Maestro's house was complete for him without music, it seemed, and it was to the piano that the Maestro must go; please, please! So, through the French windows that opened to the terrace, they entered the room which Kirk had never been able to describe, because he had never seen it. Ken and Phil saw it now—high and dim and quiet, with book-lined walls, and the shapes of curious and beautiful things gleaming here and there from carved cabinet and table.

The Maestro sat down at the piano, thought for a moment, and then, smiling, rippled into the first bars of a little air which none of his listeners had ever before heard. Eerily it tripped and chimed and lilted to its close, and the Maestro swung about and faced them, smiling still, quizzically.

"What does it mean?" he asked. "I am very curious to know. Is it merely a tune—or does it remind you of something!"

The Sturgises pondered. "It's like spring," Felicia said; "like little leaves fluttering."

"Yes, it is," Ken agreed. "It's a song of some sort, I think—that is, it ought to have words. And it's spring, all right. It's like—it's like—"

"It's like those toads!" Kirk said suddenly. "Don't you know? Like little bells and flutes, far off—and fairies."

The Maestro clapped his hands.

"I have not forgotten how, then," he said. "It has words, Kenelm. I hope—I hope that you will not be very angry with me."

He played the first twinkling measures again, and then began to sing:

"Down in the marshes the sounds begin
Of a far-away fairy violin,
Faint and reedy and cobweb thin."
Cobweb thin, the accompaniment took up the plaintive chirping till the Maestro sang the second verse.

"I say," said Ken, bolt upright in his chair. "I say!"

"_Are_ you angry?" asked the Maestro. He flung out his hands in a pleading gesture. "Will he forgive me, Kirk?"

"Why, why--it's beautiful, sir!" Ken stammered. "It's only--that I don't see how you ever got hold of those words. It was just a thing I made up to amuse Kirk. He made me say it to him over and over, about fifty-nine times, I should say, till I'm sure I was perfectly sick of it."

"Having heard it fifty-nine times," said the old gentleman, "he was able to repeat it to me, and I took the opportunity to write it off on a bit of paper, because, my dear boy, I liked it."

"A lovely, scrumptious tune," said Kirk. "It makes it nicer than ever."

"What do you say," said the Maestro, "to our giving this unsurpassed song to the world at large?"

"Do you mean having it printed?" Felicia asked quickly, "Oh, what fun!" She beamed at Ken, who looked happy and uncomfortable at once.

"I'm afraid I'm too unknown, sir," he said. "I--I never thought of such a thing."

"Perhaps," said the Maestro, with a smile, "the composer is sufficiently well known to make up for the author's lack of fame."

Ken's face grew a shade redder. "Of course," he stammered. "Oh, I beg your pardon."

"Then the permission is granted?"

Quite naturally, Ken granted it, with what he thought ill-worded thanks, and the Sturgises walked home across the meadow without knowing on what they trod.

"A real author!" Felicia said. "I _told_ you that wasn't a pome, when I first heard it."

But Ken chose to be severe and modest, and frowned on the "Toad Song"--as it was familiarly called--for a topic of conversation. And as weeks slid by, the whole affair was almost forgotten at Applegate Farm.

Those were weeks during which the Maestro, from the shadowy hero of Kirk's tales, became a very real part of this new life that was slowly settling to a familiar and loved existence. The quiet garden and the still old house became as well known to Ken and Felicia as to their brother, and, indeed, the Maestro might often have been seen in the living-room at Applegate Farm, listening to Kirk's proud performance on the melodeon, and eating one of Phil's cookies.

CHAPTER X

VENTURES AND ADVENTURES

Ken had not much time for these visits. The Sturgis Water Line was so popular that he could not even find a spare day or two in which to haul out the _Dutchman_ and give her the "lick of paint" she needed. He had feared that, with the filling of the cottages at the beginning of the season, business would fall off, but so many weekly visitors came and

went at the hotels that the _Dutchman_ rarely made a trip entirely empty, and quite often she was forced to leave, till the next time, a little heap of luggage which even her wide cockpit could not carry. Sometimes Ken made an extra trip, which brought him back to the pier at Asquam as the first twilight was gathering.

He had just come in from such an "extra," one day during the busy Fourth of July weekend, and climbed out upon the wharf when the shadows of the pile-heads stretched darkly up the streetway. Hop fastened the tail-board of his wagon behind the last trunk, rubbed his hands, and said:

"Wife sent ye down some pie. Thought ye deserved it a'ter runnin' up 'n' down all day."

He produced the pie, wrapped up in a paper, from under the seat, and presented it to Ken with a flourish and a shuffle that were altogether characteristic. Supper was waiting at Applegate Farm, Ken knew, but the pie—which was a cherry one, drippy and delectable—was not to be resisted, after long hours on the water. He bit into it heartily as he left Asquam and swung into Pickery Lane.

He hurried along, still wrapped in the atmosphere which had surrounded him all day. He felt still the lift of the boat over the short swell, he smelled the pleasant combination of salt, and gasoline, and the whiff of the hayfields, and his eyes still kept the glare and the blue, and the swinging dark shape of the _Dutchman's_ bows as he headed her down the bay. Just before he reached Winterbottom Road, he saw, rather vaguely through the twilight, the figures of a man and a small boy, coming toward him. They had, apparently, seen him, also, for the man walked more quickly for a step or two, then stopped altogether, and finally turned sharply off the road and swung the child over a stone wall, with a quick remark which Ken did not hear.

He did hear, however, the child's reply, for it was in a clear and well-known voice. It said: "I don't think _this_ can be the way. I didn't come over a wall."

The remainder of the cherry pie dropped to the dust of the Winterbottom Road. Not more than three gigantic leaps brought Ken to the spot; he vaulted the wall with a clean and magnificent spring that would have won him fame at school. The man was a stranger, as Ken had thought—an untidy and unshaven stranger. He was not quite so tall as Ken, who seized him by the arm.

"May I ask where you're going?" roared Ken, at which the small boy leaped rapturously, fastened himself to Ken's coat-tail, and cried:

"Oh, I'm so glad it's you! I started to come and meet you, and I walked farther than I meant, and I got lost, and I met this person, and he said he'd take me home, and—"

"Shut up!" said Ken. "_And let go of me!"_ at which Kirk, thoroughly shocked, dropped back as though he could not believe his ears.

"I was takin' the kid home," muttered the man, "just like he says."

"Why were you going in exactly the opposite direction, then?" Ken demanded.

As he leaped abreast of the man, who was trying to back away, the day's receipts of the Sturgis Water Line jingled loudly in his trousers pocket. The stranger, whose first plan had been so rudely interfered with, determined on the instant not to leave altogether empty-handed, and planted a forcible and unexpected blow on the side of Ken's head.

Ken staggered and went down, and Kirk, who had been standing dangerously near all this activity, went down on top of him. It so happened that he sprawled exactly on top of the trousers pocket aforesaid, and when the man sought, with hasty and ungentle hands, to remove him from it, Kirk launched a sudden and violent kick, in the hope of its doing some execution.

Kirk's boots were stout, and himself horrified and indignant; his heel caught the stranger with full force in the temple, and the man, too, was added to the prostrate figures in the darkening field. Two of them did not long remain prostrate. Ken lurched, bewildered, to his feet, and seeing his foe stretched by some miracle upon the ground, he bundled Kirk over the wall and followed giddily. Stumbling down the shadowy road, with Kirk's hand in his, he said:

"That was good luck. I must have given the gentleman a crack as he got me."

"He was trying to steal your money, I think," Kirk said. "I was lying on top of you, so I kicked him, hard."

"Oh, that was it, was it?" Ken exclaimed. "Well, very neat work, even if not sporting. By the way, excuse me for speaking to you the way I did, but it wasn't any time to have a talk. You precious, trusting little idiot, don't you know better than to go off with the first person who comes along?"

"He said he'd take me home," Kirk said plaintively. "I told him where it was."

"You've got to learn," said his brother, stalking grimly on in the dusk, "that everybody in the world isn't so kind and honest as the people you've met so far. That individual was going to take you goodness knows where, and not let us have you back till we'd paid him all the money we have in the world. If I hadn't come along just at that particular moment, that's what would have happened."

Kirk sniffed, but Ken went on relentlessly:

"What were you doing outside the gate, anyway? You're not allowed there. I don't like your going to the Maestro's, even, but at least it's a safe path. There are automobiles on Winterbottom Road, and they suppose that you can see 'em and get out of their way. I'm afraid we'll have to say that you can't leave the house without Phil or me."

Ken was over-wrought, and forgot that his brother probably was, also. Kirk wept passionately at last, and Ken, who could never bear to see his tears, crouched penitent in the gloom of the road, to dry his eyes and murmur tender apologies. At the gate of the farm, Ken paused suddenly, and then said:

"Let's not say anything about all this to Phil; she'd just be worried and upset. What do you say?"

"Don't let's," Kirk agreed. They shook hands solemnly, and then turned to the lighted windows of Applegate Farm. But it would not have been so easy to keep the unpleasant adventure secret, or conceal from Felicia that something had been wrong, if she herself had not been so obviously cherishing a surprise. She had thought that Kirk was waiting at the gate for Ken, and so had been spared any anxiety on that score. She could hardly wait for Ken to take off his sweater and wash his hands. Supper was on the table, and it was to something which lay beside her elder brother's plate that her dancing eyes kept turning.

Ken, weary with good cause, sat down with a sigh, and then leaned

forward as if an electric button had been touched somewhere about his person.

"What--well, by Jiminy!" shouted Ken. "I never believed it, never!"

"It's real," Phil said excitedly; "it looks just like a real one."

"_What?_" Kirk asked wildly; "tell me what!"

Ken lifted the crisp new sheet of music and stared at it, and then read aloud the words on the cover.

"_Fairy Music_" it said--and his name was there, and the Maestro's, and "_net price, 60c_" "like a real one," indeed. And within were flights of printed notes, and the words of the "Toad Pome" in cold black and white. And above them, in small italics, "_Dedicated to Kirkleigh Sturgis_"

"Just like Beethoven's things to the Countess von Something, don't you know!" Phil murmured, awed and rapturous.

When Ken laid the pages down at last, Kirk seized on them, and though they could mean nothing to him but the cool smoothness of paper and the smell of newly dried printers' ink, he seemed to get an immense satisfaction from them.

But the surprise was not yet over. Beneath the copy of the song lay a much smaller bit of paper, long, narrow, and greenish. It bore such words as _Central Trust Company_, and _Pay to the Order of Kenelm Sturgis_. The sum which was to be paid him was such as to make Ken put a hand dramatically to his forehead. He then produced from his pocket the money which had so nearly gone off in the pocket of the stranger, and stacked it neatly beside his plate.

"One day's bone labor for man and boat," he said. "Less than a quarter as much as what I get for fifteen minutes' scribbling."

"And the Maestro says there'll be more," Felicia put in; "because there are royalties, which I don't understand."

"But," said Ken, pursuing his line of thought, "I can depend on the _Dutchman_ and my good right arm, and I _can't_ depend on the Pure Flame of Inspiration, or whatever it's called, so methinks the Sturgis Water Line will make its first trip at 8:30 promptly to-morrow morning, as advertised. All the same," he added jubilantly, "what a tremendous lark it is, to be sure!"

And he gave way suddenly to an outburst of the sheer delight which he really felt, and, leaping up, caught Felicia with one hand and Kirk with the other. The three executed for a few moments a hilarious ring-around-a-rosy about the table, till Felicia finally protested at the congealing state of the supper, and they all dropped breathless to their seats and fell to without more words.

After supper, Felicia played the Toad Song on the melodeon until it ran in all their heads, and Kirk could be heard caroling it, upstairs, when he was supposed to be settling himself to sleep.

It was not till Ken was bending over the lamp, preparatory to blowing it out, that Phil noticed the bruise above his eye.

"How did you get that, lamb?" she said, touching Ken's forehead, illuminated by the lamp's glow.

Ken blew out the flame swiftly, and faced his sister in a room lit only

by the faint, dusky reflection of moonlight without.

"Oh, I whacked up against something this afternoon," he said. "I'll put some witch-hazel on it, if you like."

"I'm so _awfully_ glad about the Toad Song," whispered Felicia, slipping her hand within his arm. "Good old brother!"

"Good old Maestro," said Ken; and they went arm in arm up the steep stairs.

Ken lighted his sister's candle for her, and took his own into the room he shared with Kirk. There was no fear of candle-light waking Kirk. He was very sound asleep, with the covers thrown about, and Ken stood looking at him for some time, with the candle held above his brother's tranquil face. "I wonder where he'd have been sleeping to-night if I hadn't come along just about when I did?" mused Ken. "The innocent little youngster--he never supposed for a minute that the rascalion would do anything but take him home. How's he ever going to learn all the ways of the wicked world? And what _ever_ possessed him to shoot off the Toad Pome to the Maestro?"

Ken put the candle on the bureau and undid his necktie.

"The blessed little goose!" he added affectionately.

There is nothing like interesting work to make time pass incredibly quickly. For the Sturgises were interested in all their labors, even the "chores" of Applegate Farm. It goes without saying that Kirk's music--which was the hardest sort of work--absorbed him completely; he lived in a new world. So, almost before they could believe it, September came, filling the distance with tranquil haze, and mellowing the flats to dim orange, threaded with the keen blue inlets of the bay. Asters began to open lavender stars at the door-stone of Applegate Farm; tall rich milkweed pressed dusty flower-bunches against the fence, and the sumach brandished smoldering pyramids of fire along the roadsides.

Ken came home late, whistling, up from Asquam. Trade for the Sturgis Water Line was heavy again just now; the hotels and cottages were being vacated every day, and more baggage than the _Dutchman_ could carry lay piled in the Sturgis "warehouse" till next morning. Ken's whistle stopped as he swung into Winterbottom Road and began to climb the hill. Just at the crest of the rise, where the pale strip of road met the twilight of the sky, the full moon hung, a golden disc scarcely more luminous than the sky around it. As he moved up the hill, it moved also, till it floated clear of the dark juniper-trees and stood high above them. Crickets were taking up their minor creaking, and there was no other sound.

Through the half dusk, the white chimneys of Applegate Farm showed vaguely, with smoke rising so lazily that it seemed almost a stationary streak of blue across the trees. What a decent old place it was, thought Ken. Was it only because it constituted home? No; they had worked to make it so, and it had ripened and expanded under their hands.

"I shouldn't mind Mother's seeing it, now," Ken reflected.

He sighed as he remembered the last difficult letter which he and Phil had composed--a strictly truthful letter, which said much and told nothing. He wondered how much longer the fiction would have to be sustained; when the doctor at Hilltop would sanction a revelation of all that had been going on since that desolate March day, now so long ago.

As Ken neared the house, he heard the reedy voice of the organ, and, stopping beside the lighted window, looked in. Felicia was mending

beside the lamp; Kirk sat at the melodeon, rapturously making music. From the somewhat vague sweetness of the melody, Ken recognized it as one of Kirk's own compositions--without beginning, middle, or end, but with a gentle, eerie harmony all its own. The Maestro, who was thoroughly modern in his instruction, if old-school himself, was teaching composition hand in hand with the other branches of music, and he allowed himself, at times, to become rather enthusiastic. "Even if I didn't want him to make music of his own," he told Felicia, "I couldn't stop him. So I supply the bricks and mortar for the foundation. He might as well build his little tunes rightly from the beginning. He will go far--yes, far. It is sheer harmony." And the Maestro would sigh deeply, and nod his fine head.

Ken, remembering these words with some awe, studied his brother's face, through the pane, and then came quietly in at the door. Kirk left his tune unfinished, and launched himself in the direction of Ken, who scooped him into his arms.

"Do you know, Phil," Ken said, voicing at once the thought he had felt all the way up Winterbottom Road; "do you know, I think, after all, this is the very best thing we could have done."

"What?" Phil asked, not being a mind-reader.

"_This_," Ken said, sweeping his arm about the lamplit room. "This place. We thought it was such a horrible mistake, at first. It _was_ a sort of venture to take."

"A happy venture," Felicia murmured, bending over her sewing. "But it wouldn't have been so happy if the defender of his kindred hadn't slaved on the high seas 'for to maintain his brither and me,' like _Henry Martin_ in the ballad."

"Oh, fiddlestick!" said Ken. "Who wants to loaf around? Speaking of loaf, I'm hungry."

"Supper's doing itself on the stove," Phil said. "Look lively with the table, Kirk."

Kirk did so,--his efficiency as a table-setter had long since been proved,--and Ken, as the weary breadwinner, stretched out in a chair.

"Did you happen to remember," said Felicia, coming to the door, spoon in hand, "that the Kirk has a birthday this week?"

"It _has_?" exclaimed Ken. "I say, I'd forgotten."

"It's going to be nine; think of that!" said Phil. "Woof! My kettle's boiling over!" She made a hasty exit, while Ken collared his brother and looked him over.

"Who'd ha' thunk it!" he said. "Well, well, what's to be done about this?"

"Lots," said Felicia, suddenly appearing with the supper. "_Lots!_"

CHAPTER XI

THE NINE GIFTS

Two evenings later, Ken confronted his sister at the foot of the stairs

as she came down from seeing Kirk to bed.

"Where," said Ken, "is your Braille slate?"

"_What_," said Felicia, "do you want with a Braille slate, if I may ask?"

"You mayn't," said Ken, conclusively.

"But it makes a difference," Phil argued. "If you want to write Braille with it,--which seems unlikely,--I'll consider. But if you want it to prop open the door with, or crack nuts on, or something, you can't have it."

"I can think of lots better things to crack nuts on than a Braille slate," said Ken. "I want to use it for its rightful purpose. Come now, my girl, out with it!"

"Wish you luck," said Felicia, going to the educational shelf; "here it is."

Ken eyed it mistrustfully--a slab of wood, crossed by a movable metal strip which was pierced with many small, square openings. "Also," said Ken, "the alphabet of the language."

"American Uncontracted, or Revised, Grade One and a Half?" Phil asked airily.

"They sound equally bad, but if there's any choice, give me the easiest. Sounds like geological survey stuff."

Phil rummaged again, and brought to light an alphabet which she had made for herself in her early Braille days.

"And the paper and stuff you use," Ken demanded.

"_Here_," take everything!" cried Felicia, thrusting out handfuls of irrelevant books and papers. "Stop asking for things in dribbles."

Ken settled himself at the table, scowled at the embossed alphabet, and then clamped a piece of the heavy paper into the slate. He grasped the little punch firmly, and, with a manner vigorous, if not defiant, he set to work.

"You just poke holes in the paper through the squares, eh, and they turn into humps?"

"The squares don't turn into humps; the holes do. Don't whack so hard."

There was silence for a short time, broken only by Ken's mutterings and the click of the stylus. Felicia looked up, then gazed meditatively across the table at the enterprise.

"Is it for a Hebrew person?" she inquired gently.

"_Hebrew?_" Ken said; "I should rather say not. Why?"

"You're writing it backward--like Yiddish."

"I'm doing it from left to right, which is the way one usually writes," said Ken, in a superior tone. "You're looking at it upside-down. You're twisted."

"The holes," said Felicia, mildly, "in order to become readable humps on the other side, have to be punched right to left."

"Oh!" said Ken. After a moment of thought he exclaimed, somewhat indignant: "You mean to say, then, that you have to reverse the positions of all these blooming dots, besides writing 'em backward?"

"Yes."

"You have to read 'em one way, and write 'em another, and remember 'em _both_?"

"You do."

"And--and Kirk does that?"

"Yes; and he knows Revised, Grade One and a Half, too, and our alphabet besides, and embossed music, a little, and arithmetic, and--"

"Don't," said Ken. "It makes a fellow feel cheap."

With which he removed the paper and clamped in a fresh sheet. The work progressed silently; Ken occasionally gnashed his teeth and tore away the paper, but after a time the mistakes grew fewer, and Felicia, looking across at her brother's brown, handsome face, found it tranquil and sober, an earnest absorption in his gray eyes and a gently whimsical smile about his mouth. She knew of whom he was thinking, and smiled tenderly herself as she watched his big hand plod systematically and doggedly across the unfamiliar way. Bedtime found Ken elated and exhibiting to his sister several neatly embossed sheets of paper.

"All day my--" read Felicia.

"Murder!" cried Ken. "I forgot you could read the stuff! Go to bed, go to bed!"

At a rather early hour the next morning, Felicia was awakened by the stealthy approach to her bedside of a small and cautious figure in pajamas. It stood quite still beside the bed, listening to find out whether or not she was asleep. She spread her arms noiselessly, and then flung them about the pajamaed one. When the confusion of kisses, hugs, and birthday greetings had subsided, and Kirk was tucked under the quilt, he said:

"Now see me a story."

"But I can't--not like Ken," Felicia protested.

"Oh, _Phil_!" Kirk said in a tone of withering reproach. "Silly! A birthday special one, please."

Felicia thought for some time; then she said:

"It's not very nice, but it's a sort of birthday one. It's called The Nine Gifts."

"One for each year," said Kirk, wriggling comfortably.

"Exactly. Once upon a time there was a nice person who lived in an old house on a hill. One autumn day was his birthday, but he wasn't thinking of any gifts, because there could be no one to give him anything, and he was quite poor--as far as gold and silver went. So he was feeling just a little sad, because people like to have gifts. He came downstairs and unlocked his door, and opened it to the beautiful young day all strung with dew--"

"Could he see it?" asked Kirk.

"No," said Felicia, "he couldn't."

"Then it _was_ me."

"We-e-ll," said his sister, "possibly. But when he opened the door, in came the wind, all as fresh and dewy as a dawn-wind can be. It ruffled up his hair, and fluttered the curtains at the windows, and ran all about the room. Then it said:

"I am the wind. I give you the breath of the dawn, and the first sigh of the waking fields and hedge-rows, and the cool stillness of the forest that is always awake. Take my birthday kiss upon your forehead!"

"And that was the First Gift. The person was quite surprised, but he was very much pleased, too. He went out and brought in some bread and milk for his breakfast, and then he went to get some water at the well. There was a gentle, delicious warmth all about in the air, and a far-off, round voice said:

"I am the sun. I wrap you in a glowing mantle of warmth and light. I make the earth grow and sing for you. It is I who wake the dawn-wind and the birds. Take my warm kiss on your upturned face."

"And that was the Second Gift. The person thanked the sun very much, and went in, with his heart all warmed, to eat his breakfast. As he sat eating, in at the window came all manner of little sounds—twitterings and sighings and warblings and rustlings, and all the little voices said together:

"We are the sounds of the open. We are the birds in the russet meadow, and the whispering of the orchard trees, the cheep of the crickets in the long grass, and the whole humming, throbbing voice of out-of-doors. Take our kiss upon your waiting senses."

"That was the Third Gift. The person ran out at the door to thank the little sounds, when what should meet him but a host of the most delicious scents!

"We are the smell of the tawny grass, and the good tang of the wood-smoke. We are the fragrance of ripening apples in the orchard, and honeysuckle over the wall. We are the clean, cool, mellowing atmosphere of September. Breathe our sweetness!"

"That was the Fourth Gift. To be sure, the nice person was quite overwhelmed by this time, for he never had expected such a thing. As he stooped to thank the delicious scents, he touched a little clump of asters by the door-stone.

"Greeting!" they piped. "We are the flowers. We are the asters by the door, and burnished goldenrod in the orchard; trumpeting honeysuckle on the fence, sumach burning by the roadside, juicy milkweed by the gate. Take our cool, green kiss on your gentle fingers!"

"He stroked their little purple heads, and flung himself down beside them for a moment, to thank them. As he did so, a big, warm voice came from beneath him:

"I am the earth. I am the cool clasp of the tall grass by the gate. I am the crispness of the heath-grass on the upland. I will rock you to sleep on my great, grass-carpeted breast. I will give you rest and security. Take my great kiss on your body."

"That was the Sixth Gift. Dear me! the person was delighted. He lay with his cheek to the good earth's heart, thanking it, when a big gusty voice

came swinging out of the east.

"I am the sea. I give you the sound of water about the boat's bow, and the cry of the gulls; the wet, salt smack of me, the damp fog on your face, and the call out into the wide places.'

"The person jumped up and turned his face to the blue glint of the bay, and thanked the sea for the Seventh Gift. Then he went into the house to tidy up the hearth. As he came into the room, a queer, gentle, melodious voice, which seemed to come from the organ, said:

"I am Music. I hold the key to enchantment. It is I who will sum up for you all the other gifts and make them mine--and yours. Take my kiss within your soul.'

"And that was the Eighth Gift," Felicia paused.

"But the ninth?" Kirk whispered.

"I'm trying to think of it."

Kirk clapped his hands suddenly.

"_I_ know what it was!" he cried. "Don't you? Oh, _don't_ you, Phil?"

"No, I don't. What was it?"

"Shall I finish?" Kirk asked.

"Please do."

"And the person said, 'Thank you,' to the organ," Kirk proceeded gleefully; "and then in the door what should stand but a beautiful lady. And _she_ said: 'I'm your sister Felicia--Happiness.' And _that_ was the most best gift of _all_!"

"Naughty person!" said Felicia. "After all those really nice gifts! But--but if you will have it that, she said, 'Take my kiss upon your heart of hearts.' Oh, Kirk--darling--I love you!"

Flowers twined Kirk's chair at the breakfast table--golden honeysuckle, a sweet, second blooming, and clematis from the Maestro's hedge. Kirk hung above it, touching, admiring, breathing the sweetness of the honeysuckle; aware, also, of many others of the Nine Gifts already perceptible about the room. But his fingers encountered, as he reached for his spoon, a number of more substantial presents stacked beside his plate. There was the green jersey which Felicia had been knitting at privately for some time. He hauled it on over his head at once, and emerged from its embrace into his sister's. There was, too, a model boat, quite beautifully rigged and fitted, the painstaking care with which it was fashioned testifying to the fact that Ken had not been quite so forgetful of his brother's approaching birthday as he had seemed to be. "She's called the _Celestine_," said Ken, as Kirk's fingers sought out rapturously the details of the schooner. "It's painted on her stern. She's not rigged according to Hoyle, I'm afraid; I was rather shaky about some of it."

"She has a flag," Kirk crowed delightedly. "Two of 'em! And a little anchor--and--" he became more excited as he found each thing: "oh, Ken!"

There was another gift--a flat one. A book of five or six short stories and poems that Kirk had loved best to hear his sister read--all written out in Braille for him in many of Felicia's spare hours. Now he could read them himself, when Phil had no time to give him. Breakfast was quite neglected; the cereal grew cold. Kirk, who had not, indeed,

expected so much as the nine gifts of Phil's tale, was quite overcome by these things, which his brother and sister had feared were little enough. There was one thing more--some sheets of paper covered with Braille characters, tucked beside Kirk's plate.

"That's Ken's handiwork," Felicia said, hastily disclaiming any finger in the enterprise. "I don't know _what_ you may find!"

"It's perfectly all right, now," Ken protested. "You'll see! You can read it, can't you, Kirk?"

Kirk was frowning and laughing at once.

"It's a little bit funny," he said. "But I didn't know you could do it at all. Oh, listen to it!"

He declaimed this, with some pauses:

"TO MY RELATIVE, K. S.

"While I am at my watery work
All up and down the bay,
I think about my brother Kirk
A million times a day.

"All day my job seems play to me,
My duties they are light,
Because I know I'm going to see
My brother Kirk that night.

"I ponder over, at my biz,
How nice he is
(That smile of his!),
And eke his cheerful, open phiz.

"And also I am proud of him,
I sing the praises loud of him,
And all the wondering multitude
At once exclaims: 'Gee Whiz!'

"It seems this relative of mine
Is going to have a fete.
They tell me that he'll now be nine,
Instead of half-past eight.
How simply fine!
We'll dance and dine!
We'll pass the foaming bowl of wine!

"And here's our toast
(We proudly boast.
There isn't any need to urge us):
Hip, Hip, Hooray for Kirkleigh Sturgis!"

Ken gave the three cheers promptly, and then said: "That one's silly. The other's the way I really feel. Oh, don't read it aloud!"

Kirk, who had opened his mouth to begin the next page, closed it again, and followed the lines of Braille silently. This is what he read:

"At eight o'clock on the day you were born,
I found a fairy under a thorn;
He looked at me hard, he looked at me queerly,
And he said, 'Ah, Ken, you shall love him dearly.'

"I was then myself but a wee small lad,

But I well remember the look that he had;
And I thought that his words came wondrous true,
For whom could I love more dear than you?

"To-day at dawn I was out alone,
I found a wee fairy beside a stone;
And he said, as he looked at me, far above him,
'Ah, Ken, you have only begun to love him!'"

There could be no possible answer to this but a rush from Kirk and an onslaught of hugs, from which it was long before Ken could disentangle himself.

"Oh, what have I done!" Ken cried. "Yes, of course I mean it, silly! But do, do have a care--we're all mixed up with the marmalade and the oatmeal, as it is!"

Ken had proclaimed the day a half-holiday for himself, but Kirk was to go with him on the morning trip, and Phil, too, if she wanted to go. She did want, so Applegate Farm was locked up, and three radiant Sturgises walked the warm, white ribbon of Winterbottom Road to the Dutchman. Kirk was allowed to steer the boat, under constant orders from Ken, who compared the wake to an inebriated corkscrew. He also caught a fish over the stern, while Ken was loading up at Bayside. Then, to crown the day's delight, under the door at Applegate, when they returned, was thrust a silver-edged note from the Maestro, inviting them all to supper at his house, in honor of the occasion.

CHAPTER XII

"ROSES IN THE MOONLIGHT"

The Maestro's house wore always a mantle of gentle aloofness, like something forgotten among its over-grown garden paths. To Kirk, it was a place under a spell; to the others, who could see its grave, vine-covered, outer walls and its dim interior crowded with strange and wonderful things, it seemed a lodging place for memories, among which the Maestro moved as if he himself were living a remembered dream.

On this rich September afternoon, they found him standing on the upper terrace, waiting for them. He took Kirk's hand, offered his arm gallantly to Felicia, and they all entered the high-studded hall, where the firelight, reaching rosy shafts from the library, played catch-as-catch-can with the shadows.

Supper, a little later, was served in the dining-room--the first meal that the Sturgises had eaten there. Tall candles burned in taller silver candlesticks; their light flowed gently across the gleaming cloth, touched the Maestro's white hair, and lost itself timidly in the dim area outside the table. Kirk was enthroned in a big carved chair at the foot of the table, very grave and happy, with a candle at either side.

"A fit shrine for devotion," murmured the Maestro, looking across at him, and then, turning, busied himself vigorously with the carving.

It was a quite wonderful supper--banquet would have been a more fitting name for it, the Sturgises thought. For such food was not seen on the little table at Applegate Farm. And there was raspberry wine, in which to drink Kirk's health, and the Maestro stood up and made a beautiful speech. There was also a cake, with nine candles flaring bravely,--no one had ever before thought to give Kirk a birthday cake with candles

that he could not see, and he was deeply impressed.

And after it was all over, they gathered content about the library fire, and the Maestro went to the piano.

"Kirk," he said quietly, "I have no very exciting present for you. But once, long ago, I made a song for a child on his birthday. He was just as old as you. He has no longer any need of it--so I give it, my dear, to you. It is the greatest gift I have to give."

In the silence that followed, there crept into the firelit room the star-clear notes of a little prelude. Then the Maestro sang softly:

"Roses in the moonlight,
To-night all thine,
Pale in the shade, and bright
In the star-shine;
Roses and lilies white,
Dear child of mine!

My heart I give to thee,
This day all thine;
At thy feet let it be--
It is the sign
Of all thou art to me,
Dear child--"

But the poor Maestro could not finish the verse. He swung about on the piano-stool, trying to frame a laughing apology. Kirk went to him instantly, both hands outstretched in his haste. His fingers found the Maestro's bowed shoulders; his arms went tight about the Maestro's neck. In his passionately whispered confidence the old gentleman must have found solace, for he presently smiled,--a real smile,--and then still keeping Kirk beside him, began playing a sonata. Ken and Felicia, sunk unobtrusively in the big chairs at the hearth, were each aware of a subtle kindredship between these two at the piano--a something which they could not altogether understand.

"He brings out a side of Kirk that we don't know about," Felicia thought. "It must be the music. Oh, what music!"

It was difficult to leave a place of such divine sounds, but Kirk's bedtime was long past, and the moon stood high and cold above the Maestro's garden.

"Is it shining on all the empty pools and things?" Kirk asked, at the hedge.

"Yes, and on the meadow, and the silver roof of Applegate Farm," Phil told him.

"Roses in the moonlight, to-night all thine," Kirk sang dreamily.

"Do you mean to say you can sing it so soon?" Ken gasped.

"He ran away in the moonlight," Kirk murmured. "Away to sea. Would you, Ken?"

"Not if I had a father like the Maestro, and a brother like you," said Ken, fitting the key to the door of Applegate Farm.

A very few days after Kirk had begun on his new year, he and Felicia went into Asquam to collect a few things of which the farm-house stood in need. For there had been a hint that Mrs. Sturgis might soon leave Hilltop, and Felicia was determined that Applegate Farm should wear its

best face for her mother, who did not, as yet, even know of its existence. A great many little things, which Felicia had long been meaning to buy, now seemed to find a legitimate hour for their purchase. So she and Kirk went the round of the Asquam Utility Emporium, B. B. Jones Co., and the Beacon Light Store, from each of which places of business they emerged with another package.

"I told Ken we'd meet him at the boat," Felicia said, "so we might as well walk over there now, and all come home together. Oh, how thick the fog is!"

"Is it?" Kirk said. "Oh, yes, there goes the siren."

"I can hardly see the _Dutchman_, it's so white at the end of the pier. Ken isn't there; he must have gone with Hop to see about something."

"Let's wait in the boat," Kirk suggested. "I love the gluggy way it sounds, and the way it sloshes up and down."

They put the bundles on the wharf and climbed into the boat. The water slapped vigorously against its side, for the tide was running, and above, a wraith-like gull occasionally dropped one creaking, querulous cry.

"Goodness!" Felicia exclaimed, "with all our shopping, I forgot the groceries! I'll run back. I'll not be a minute. Tell Ken when he comes." She scrambled up the steps and ran down the pier, calling back to Kirk: "Stay just where you are!"

There were more people in the grocery store than Felicia had ever seen there, for it was near the closing hour. She was obliged to wait much longer than she had expected. When she returned to the wharf, Ken was not in sight. Neither was the _Flying Dutchman_.

"How queer!" Phil thought. "Ken must have taken her out. How funny of him; they knew I was coming right back."

She sat down on a pile-head and began humming to herself as she counted over her packages and added up her expenditure. She looked up presently, and saw Ken walking toward her. He was alone. Even then, it was a whole second before there came over her a hideous, sickening rush of fear.

She flew to meet him. "Where's the boat--_Ken_, where's the boat?"

"The boat? I left her temporarily tied up. What's the mat--" At that moment he saw the empty gray water at the pier head. Two breathless voices spoke together:

"Where's Kirk?"

"He was in the boat," Felicia gasped hoarsely. "I ran back after the groceries."

Ken was at the end of the wharf in one agonized leap. In another second he had the frayed, wet end of rope in his hand.

"That salvaged line!" he said. "Phil, couldn't you _see_ that only her stern line was made fast? I left her half-moored till I came back. That rope was rotten, and it got jammed in here and chafed till it parted."

"It's my fault," Felicia breathed.

"Mine," Ken snapped. "Oh, my heavens! look at the fog!"

"And the tide?" Felicia hardly dared ask.

"Going out--to sea."

A blank, hideous silence followed, broken only by the reiterated warning of the dismal siren at the lighthouse.

"It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. A boat would have to comb every foot of the bay in this fog, and night's coming. How long have you been gone?"

Felicia looked at her watch. She was astonished to find it had been over half an hour.

"Heaven knows where the boat could have got to in half an hour," Ken muttered, "with this tide. And the wind's going to sea, too."

Felicia shook him wildly by the arm. "Do you realize--Kirk's in that boat!" she moaned. "Kirk's _in_ that boat--do you realize it?"

Ken tore himself free.

"No, I don't want to realize it," he said in a harsh, high voice. "Get back to the house, Phil! You can't do anything. I'm going to the harbor master now--I'm going everywhere. I may not be back to-night." He gave her a little push, "Go, Phil."

But he ran after her. "Poor old Phil--mustn't worry," he said gently. "Get back to the farm before it's dark and have it all cheerful for us when we come in--Kirk and I."

And then he plunged into the reek, and Felicia heard the quick beat of his steps die away down the wharf.

The harbor master was prompt in action, but not encouraging. He got off with Ken in his power boat in surprisingly short order. The coast guard, who had received a very urgent telephone message, launched the surf-boat, and tried vainly to pierce the blank wall of fog--now darkening to twilight--with their big searchlight. Lanterns, lost at once in the murk, began to issue from wharf-houses as men started on foot up the shore of the bay.

Ken, in the little hopeless motor-boat, sat straining his eyes beyond the dripping bow, till he saw nothing but flashes of light that did not exist. The _Flying Dutchman_--the _Flying Dutchman_--why had he not known that she must be a boat of ill omen? Joe Pasquale--drowned in February. "We got him, but we never did find his boat"--"cur'ous tide-racks 'round here--cur'ous tide-racks."

The harbor master was really saying that now, as he had said it before. Yes, the tide ran cruelly fast beside the boat, black and swirling and deep. A gaunt something loomed into the light of the lantern, and made Ken's heart leap. It was only a can-buoy, lifting lonely to the swell.

Far off, the siren raised its mourning voice.

CHAPTER XIII

"THE SEA IS A TYRANT"

Ken stumbled into the open door of Applegate Farm at three the next morning. Felicia was asleep in a chair by the cold ashes of the fire. A

guttering candle burned on the table. She woke instantly and stared at him with wide eyes.

"What is it?" she said, and then sprang up. "Alone?"

"Yes," Ken said. "Not yet. I'm going back in a little while. I wanted to tell you how everybody is working, and all."

She ran to bring him something to eat, while he flung himself down before the hearth, dead tired.

"The fog's still down heavy," he said, when she came back. "The coast guard's been out all night. There are men on shore, too, and some other little boats."

"But the tide was running out," Phil said. "He's gone. Kirk's--gone, Ken!"

"No," Ken said, between his teeth. "No, Phil. Oh, no, no!". He got up and shook himself. "Go to bed, now, and _sleep_. The idea of sitting up with a beastly cold candle!"

He kissed her abruptly and unexpectedly and stalked out at the door, a weary, disheveled figure, in the first pale, fog-burdened gleam of dawn.

It was some time after the _Flying Dutchman_ parted her one insufficient mooring-rope before Kirk realized that the sound of the water about her had changed from a slap to a gliding ripple. There was no longer the short tug and lurch as she pulled at her painter and fell back; there was no longer the tide sound about the gaunt piles of the wharf. Kirk, a little apprehensive, stumbled aft and felt for the stern-line. It gave in his hand, and the slack, wet length of it flew suddenly aboard, smacking his face with its cold and slimy end. He knew, then, what had happened, but he felt sure that the boat must still be very near the wharf--perhaps drifting up to the rocky shore between the piers. He clutched the gunwale and shouted: "Ken! Oh, Ken!" He did not know that he was shouting in exactly the wrong direction, and the wind carried his voice even farther from shore. His voice sounded much less loud than he had expected. He tried calling Felicia's name, but it seemed even less resonant than Ken's. He stopped calling, and stood listening. Nothing but the far-off fog-siren, and the gulls' faint cries overhead. The wind was blowing fresher against his cheek, for the boat was in mid-channel by this time. The fog clung close about him; he could feel it on the gunwale, wet under his hands; it gathered on his hair and trickled down his forehead. The broken rope slid suddenly off the stern sheets and twined itself clammily about his bare knee. He started violently, and then picked it off with a shiver.

[Illustration: The slack length of it flew suddenly aboard]

The lighthouse siren, though still distant, sounded nearer, which meant that the boat was drifting seaward. Kirk realized that, all at once, and gave up his shouting altogether. He sat down in the bottom of the boat, clasped his knees, and tried to think. But it was not easy to think. He had never in his life wanted so much to _see_ as he did now. It was so different, being alone in the dark, or being in it with Ken or Felicia or the Maestro on the kind, warm, friendly land. He remembered quite well how the Maestro had said: "The sea is a tyrant. Those she claims, she never releases."

The sea's voice hissed along the side of the boat, now,--the voice of a monster ready to leap aboard,--and he couldn't see to defend himself! He flung his arms out wildly into his eternal night, and then burst suddenly into tears. He cried for some time, but it was the thought of Ken which made him stop. Ken would have said, "Isn't there enough salt

water around here already, without such a mess of tears?"

That was a good idea—to think about Ken. He was such a definite, solid, comforting thing to think about. Kirk almost forgot the stretch of cold gray water that lay between them now. It wasn't sensible to cry, anyway. It made your head buzzy, and your throat ache. Also, afterward, it made you hungry. Kirk decided that it was unwise to do anything at this particular moment which would make him hungry. Then he remembered the hardtack which Ken kept in the bow locker to refresh himself with during trips. Kirk fumbled for the button of the locker, and found it and the hardtack. He counted them; there were six. He put five of them back and nibbled the other carefully, to make it last as long as possible.

The air was more chill, now. Kirk decided that it must be night, though he didn't feel sleepy. He crawled under the tarpaulin which Ken kept to cover the trunks in foul weather. In doing so, he bumped against the engine. There was another maddening thing! A good, competent engine, sitting complacently in the middle of the boat, and he not able to start it! But even if he had known how to run it, he reflected that he couldn't steer the boat. So he lay still under the tarpaulin, which was dry, as well as warm, and tried to think of all sorts of pleasant things. Felicia had told him, when she gave him the green sweater on his birthday, that a hug and kiss were knit in with each stitch of it, and that when he wore it he must think of her love holding him close. It held him close now; he could feel the smooth soft loop of her hair as she bent down to say good-night; he could hear her sing, "_Do-do, p'tit frere_."

That was a good idea—to sing! He clasped his hands nonchalantly behind his head, and began the first thing that came to his mind:

"Roses in the moonlight
To-night all thine,
Pale in the shade—"

But he did not finish. For the wind's voice was stronger, and the waves drowned the little tune, so lonely there in the midst of the empty water. Kirk cried himself to sleep, after all.

He could not even tell when the night gave way to cold day-break, for the fog cloaked everything from the sun's waking warmth. It might have been a week or a month that he had drifted on in the _Flying Dutchman_—it certainly seemed as long as a month. But he had eaten only two biscuits and was not yet starved, so he knew that it could not be even so much as a week. But he did not try to sing now. He was too cold, and he was very thirsty. He crouched under the tarpaulin, and presently he ate another hardtack biscuit. He could not hear the lighthouse fog-signal at all, now, and the waves were much bigger under the boat. They lifted her up, swung her motionless for a moment, and then let her slide giddily into the trough of another sea. "Even if I reached a desert island," Kirk thought mournfully, "I don't know what I'd do. People catch turkles and shoot at parrots and things, but they can see what they're doing."

The boat rolled on, and Kirk began to feel quite wretchedly sick, and thirstier than ever. He lay flat under the tarpaulin and tried to count minutes. Sixty, quite fast—that was one minute. Had he counted two minutes, now, or was it three? Then he found himself counting on and on—a hundred and fifty-one, a hundred and fifty-two.

"I wish I'd hurry up and die," said poor Kirk out loud.

Then his darkness grew more dark, for he could no longer think straight. There was nothing but long swirling waves of dizziness and a rushing

sound.

"Phil," Kirk tried to say. "Mother."

At about this time, Ken was standing in the government wireless station, a good many miles from Asquam. He had besieged an astonished young operator early in the morning, and had implored him to call every ship at sea within reach. Now, in the afternoon, he was back again, to find out whether any replies had come.

"No boat sighted," all the hurrying steamers had replied. "Fog down heavy. Will keep look-out."

Ken had really given up all hope, long before. Yet--could he ever give up hope, so long as life lasted? Such strange things had happened--Most of all, he could not let Phil give up. Yet he knew that he could not keep on with this pace much longer--no sleep, and virtually no food. But then, if he gave up the search, if he left a single thing undone while there was still a chance, could he ever bear himself again? He sat in a chair at the wireless station, looking dully at the jumping blue spark.

"Keep on with it, please," he said. "I'm going out in a boat again."

"The fog's lifting, I think," said the operator.

"Oh, thank the Lord!" groaned Ken. "It was that--the not being able to _see_."

Yes--Kirk had felt that, too.

At Applegate Farm, Felicia wandered from room to room like a shadow, mechanically doing little tasks that lay to her hand. She was alone in her distress; they had not yet told the Maestro of this disaster, for they knew he would share their grief. Felicia caught the sound of a faint jingling from without, and moved slowly to the gate, where Mr. Hobart was putting the mail into the box. She opened her mother's letter listlessly as she walked back to the house, and sat down upon the door-step to read it--perhaps it would take her mind for a moment, this odd, unconscious letter, addressed even to a house which no longer sheltered them. But the letter smote her with new terror.

"Oh, if you only knew, my dear, dear chicks, what it will be to escape this kindly imprisonment--what it will mean to see you all again! I can hardly wait to come up the dear old familiar path to 24 Westover Street and hug you all--I'll hug Ken, even if he hates it, and Kirk, my most precious baby! They tell me I must be very careful still, but I know that the sight of you will be all that I need for the finishing remedy. So expect me, then, by the 12.05 on Wednesday, and good-by till then, my own dears."

Felicia sat on the door-stone, transfixed. Her mother coming home, on Wednesday--so much sooner than they had expected! She did not even know of the new house; and if she were to come to a home without Kirk--if there were never to be Kirk! Almost a week remained before Wednesday; how could she be put off? What if the week went by without hope; no hope, ever? Felicia sat there for hours, till the sun of late afternoon broke through the fog at last, and the mellow fields began one by one to reappear, reaching into the hazy distance. Felicia rose and went slowly into the house. On top of the organ lay the book of stories and poems she had written out in Braille for Kirk. It lay open, as he had left it, and she glanced at the page.

"When the voices of children are heard on the green,

And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast,
And everything else is still.
Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
And the dew of the night arise." . . .

Felicia gave up the struggle with her grief. Leaving the door of Applegate Farm wide, she fled blindly to the Maestro. He was playing to himself and smiling when she crept into the library, but he stopped instantly when he saw her face. Before she could help herself, she had told him everything, thrust her mother's letter into his hand, and then gave way to the tears she had fought so long. The Maestro made no sign nor motion. His lips tightened, and his eyes blazed suddenly, but that was all.

He was all solicitude for Felicia. She must not think of going back to the empty farm-house. He arranged a most comfortable little supper beside the fire, and even made her smile, with his eager talk, all ringing with hope and encouragement. And finally he put her in charge of his sympathetic little housekeeper, who tucked her up in a great, dark, soft bed.

Left alone in the library, the Maestro paced unsteadily up and down. "It is the sea that takes them!" he whispered. "It took my son; now it has taken one whom I loved as my son."

He sank down upon the piano-stool and gazed at the sheet of music on the music-rack. It was Kirk's last exercise, written out carefully in the embossed type that the Maestro had been at such pains to learn and teach. Something like a sob shook the old musician. He raised clenched, trembling fists above his head, and brought them down, a shattering blow, upon the keyboard. Then he sat still, his face buried in his arms on the shaken piano. Felicia, lying stiff and wide-eyed in the great bed above, heard the crash of the hideous discord, and shuddered. She had been trying to remember the stately, comforting words of the prayer for those in peril on the sea, but now, frightened, she buried her face in the pillow.

"Oh, dear God," she faltered. "You—You must bring him back—You _must_!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE _CELESTINE_ PLAYS HER PART

"He's a deader," said one of the men, pulling off his watch-cap.

"No, he ain't," said another. "He's warm."

"But look at his eyes," said the first. "They ain't right."

"Where's the old man?" inquired one.

"Skipper's taking a watch below, arter the fog; don't yer go knockin' him up now, Joe."

"Wait till the mate comes. Thunder, why don't yer wrop somep'n round the kid, you loon?"

The big schooner was getting under way again. The mate's voice spoke sharply to the helmsman.

"Helm up--steady. Nothing off--stead-y."

Then he left the quarter-deck and strode rapidly down to the little group amidships. He was a tall man, with a brown, angular face, and deep-set, rather melancholy, blue eyes. His black hair was just beginning to gray above his temples, and several lines, caused more by thought than age, scored his lean face.

"What have we picked up, here, anyway?" he demanded. "Stand off, and let me look."

There was not much to see--a child in a green jersey, with blown, damp hair and a white face.

"You tink he's dead?" A big Swede asked the question.

The mate plunged a quick hand inside the green sweater.

"No, he's not. But he's blind. Get out with that stuff, Jolak, what d'ye think this is? Get me some brandy, somebody."

Jolak retired with the pickled cabbage he had offered as a restorative. No one looked to see where the brandy came from on a ship where none was supposed to be but in the medicine chest. It came, however, without delay, and the mate opened the flask.

"Now," he said, when he had poured some of its contents down the child's throat, and lifted him from the deck, "let me through."

The first thing of which Kirk was conscious was a long, swinging motion, unlike the short roll of the Dutchman. There was also a complex creaking and sighing, a rustling and rattling. There was a most curious, half-disagreeable, half-fascinating smell. Kirk lay quietly on something which seemed much softer and warmer than the bottom of the Flying Dutchman, and presently he became aware of a soft strumming sound, and of a voice which sang murmurously:

"Off Cape de Gatte
I lost my hat,
And where d'ye think I found it?
In Port Mahon
Under a stone
With all the girls around it."

"I like that," said Kirk, in a small voice. "Go on."

But the singing stopped immediately, and Kirk feared that he had only dreamed it, after all. However, a large, warm hand was laid quite substantially on his forehead, and the same voice that had been singing, said:

"H'm! Thought you'd have another go at the old world, after all?"

"Where is this?" Kirk asked.

"This is the four-mast schooner Celestine, returning from South America. I am Martin, mate of said schooner--at your service. Hungry?"

"That's funny," said Kirk; "the boat Ken gave me is called the Celestine. And she's a four-masted schooner. Where's Ken?"

"I'm sorry--I don't know. Hungry?"

"I think I am," said Kirk.

Certainly the mate of the _Celestine_ had a most strong and comfortable arm wherewith to raise a person. He administered bread and hot condensed milk, and Kirk began to realize that he was very hungry indeed.

"Now you go to sleep," Mr. Martin advised, after his brief manner. "Warm, now?"

Yes, Kirk was quite warm and cozy, but very much bewildered, and desirous of asking a hundred questions. These the mate forbade.

"You go to sleep," he commanded.

"Then please sing another tune," Kirk said. "What was that you were playing on?"

"Violin," said Mr. Martin. "Fiddle. I was plunking it like a banjo. Now I'll play it, if you'll stop talking."

Kirk did, and the mate began to play. His music was untaught, and he himself had made up the strange airs he played. They sighed fitfully through the little cabin like the rush of wind and water without; blended with it, mingled with the hundred little voices of the ship. The _Celestine_ slipped on up the coast, singing softly to herself, and Kirk fell asleep with the undulating wail of the violin and the whisper of water filling his half-awakened senses.

He woke abruptly, much later, and called for Felicia suddenly; then, recollecting hazily where he was, for Mr. Martin. Hearing no sound, he was frightened, and cried out in remembered terror.

"Steady!" said the mate's voice. "What's the trouble?"

"I don't know," said Kirk. "I--I think I need to talk to somebody. There hasn't been anybody for so long."

"Well, go ahead," said the mate. "I'm in my bunk. If you think there's room enough, I'll put you in here. More sociable, rather."

There was not much room, but Kirk was so thankful to clasp a human being once more, that he did not care how narrow the quarters might be. He put his cheek against the mate's arm, and they lay silent, the man very stiff and unyielding. "The Maestro would like to hear you play," Kirk murmured. "He loves queer tunes like that. He even likes the ones I make up."

"Oh, you make up tunes, do you?"

"Little ones. But he makes wonderful ones,--and he plays wonderfully, too."

"Who?"

"The Maestro."

"Who's he?"

Kirk told him--at great length. He likewise unburdened his heart, which had been steeped so long in loneliness and terror, and recounted the wonder and beauty of Applegate Farm, and Felicia and Ken, and the model ship, and the Maestro's waiting garden, and all that went to make up his dear, familiar world, left so long ago, it seemed.

"But," he said rather mournfully, "I don't know whether I shall ever see any of them again, if we just keep on sailing and sailing. Are you going

back to South America again?"

The mate laughed a little. "No," he said. "The _Celestine's_ going to Bedford. We can't put her off her course to drop you at Asquam--harbor's no good, anyhow. My time's up when she docks. I'll take you home."

"Have you always been mate of the _Celestine_?" Kirk inquired.

"I have not," said Mr. Martin. "I signed aboard of her at Rio this trip, to get up into the Christian world again. I've been deckhand and seaman and mate on more vessels than I can count--in every part of the uncivilized world. I skippered one ship, even--pestilential tub that she was."

He fell silent after this speech, longer than any he had made so far.

"Then I'll get home," Kirk said. "_Home_." Can't we let 'em know, or anything? I suppose they've been worrying."

"I think it likely that they have," said the mate. "No, this ship's got no wireless. I'll send 'em a telegram when we dock to-morrow."

"Thank you," said Kirk. Then, after a long pause: "Oh, if you knew how awful it was out there."

"I know," said Mr. Martin.

The _Celestine_ was bowling into Bedford Harbor with a fair wind. Kirk, in a reefer any number of sizes too large for him, sat on a hatch-coaming and drank in the flying wonder of the schooner's way. He was sailing on a great ship! How surprised Ken would be--and envious, too, for Ken had always longed to sail in a ship. The wind souged in the sails and sang in the rigging, and the water flew past the _Celestine_ and bubbled away behind her in a seething curve of foam. Mr. Martin stood looking up at the smooth, rounded shape of the main topsail, and whistling the song about the hat which he had lost and so miraculously found. He looked more than usually thoughtful and melancholy.

A fussy tug took the _Celestine_ the last stage of her journey, and early afternoon found her warped in to the wharf where Ken had seen her on the eve of her departure. Then, she had been waking to action at the beginning of a long cruise; now, a battered gull with gray, folded wings, she lay at the dock, pointing her bowsprit stiffly up to the dingy street where horses tramped endlessly over the cobblestones. The crew was jubilant. Some were leaving for other ships; some were going on shore leave, with months' pay unspent.

"I'm attending to this salvage, sir," said Mr. Martin, to the captain.

"My folks live up Asquam way. I'll take him along with me."

Asquam's languid representative of the telegraph knocked upon the door of Applegate Farm, which was locked. Then he thrust the yellow envelope as far under the door as possible and went his way. An hour later, a tall man and a radiant small boy pushed open the gate on Winterbottom Road and walked across the yellow grass. Kirk broke away and ran toward the house, hands outflung.

"Phil! Ken!" he called jubilantly.

His face shadowed as his hands came against the unyielding door of the house.

"Phil--" he faltered.

"Perhaps they haven't the telegram," Mr. Martin said. "We'll have to wait around."

"They might be at the Maestro's," Kirk said suddenly. "Come--run quick--I'll show you the way. There's a hole in the hedge--are you too big to get through?"

"I think not," said the mate.

In the Maestro's library, Felicia leaned suddenly upon the piano. "Ken," she said, breathing hard, "something's going to happen--something!"

"What more can happen?" Ken said gently.

"But--oh, please! _Do_ something--I don't know--"

"Poor child!" murmured the Maestro. "Sit here, Felicia. Help her, Ken."

"I don't need help," said Phil. "Oh, you think I'm mad, I suppose. I'm not. Ken--please go and look out--go to the house. Oh, Kirk!"

The Maestro shook his head and put a hand on Felicia's shoulder.

"Better go, Ken," he said quietly.

Kenelm stepped upon the terrace. Through the long window, which he left open behind him, a joyous voice came quite clearly to the library.

"And this is the poor empty pool that I told you about, that never has had any water in it since then--and aren't we at the terrace steps now?"

Felicia vowed afterward that she didn't faint. Yet she had no clear recollection of seeing Kirk between the time when she saw him drop the hand of the tall, strange man and run up the steps, and when they all were standing around her in the library, looking a little grave.

"Phil--Phil!" Kirk was saying then. "Oh, aren't you glad to see me at _all_? It's me--oh, _Phil_!"

His eager hands sought her face, to be sure it was she, so strange and quiet.

"Just a minute, lamb," she heard Ken say, with a hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Phil doesn't feel quite right."

Then warm, delicious life rushed over her, and she could move again and fling her trembling arms around Kirk. She and Ken and the Maestro all managed to embrace Kirk at once, so that they embraced each other, too. And Ken was not ashamed of his tears, nor was the Maestro.

The ex-mate of the _Celestine_ stood discreetly on the terrace, whistling to himself. But he was not whistling the song about his hat. No, it was a little plaintive air, dimly familiar, Ken thought. Where had he heard it before? And why was the Maestro straightening with a stricken face, from Kirk?

[Illustration: "Phil--Phil!" Kirk was saying then.]

CHAPTER XV

MARTIN!

"Roses in the moonlight,
To-night all thine."

That was the tune, to be sure! The Maestro was on his feet. He walked slowly to the open French window.

"What--what right have you to come here whistling--_that_?" he breathed. He wheeled suddenly on Kirk. "Did you sing it to him?" he demanded. "Is this--_what_ is this?"

"I didn't," said Kirk, quickly; "Oh, I didn't."

The air seemed tense, burdened with something that hovered there in the stillness of the waiting garden.

"I can think of no one," said the stranger, slowly, "who has a better right to whistle it here."

The Maestro grasped the man's arm fiercely.

"Turn around!" he said. "What do you mean? What _can_ you mean--unless--" He flung his arm suddenly before his eyes, as he met the other's gaze.

"Martin!" he said, in a voice so low that no one but Kirk heard it. And they stood there, quite still in the pale September sunset--the Maestro with his arm across his eyes; the mate of the _Celestine_ with his hands clasped behind him and his lips still shaping the tune of the song his father had made for him.

Ken, within the room, swung Kirk into his arms.

"The library door's open," he whispered to Felicia. "_Cut_--as fast as ever you can!"

The little living-room of Applegate Farm bloomed once more into firelit warmth. It seemed almost to hold forth, kindly welcoming arms to its children, together again.

"What shall we talk about first?" Felicia sighed, sinking into the hearth chair, with Kirk on her lap. "I never _knew_ so many wildly exciting things to happen all at once!"

It came about, of course, that they talked first of Kirk; but his adventures went hand in hand with the other adventure, and the talk flew back and forth between the _Flying Dutchman_ and the _Celestine_, Kirk and Mr. Martin--or Martin, the Maestro's son.

"And it was the same old _Celestine_!" Ken marveled; "that's the queer part." He fidgeted with the tongs for a moment and then said, "You didn't know I once nearly ran away to sea on her, did you?"

Two incredulous voices answered in the negative.

"It was when I was very, very young," said Ken, removed by six months of hard experience from his escapade, "and very foolish. Never mind about it. But who'd have thought she'd restore all our friends and relatives to us in this way! By the way, where's the ill-starred _Dutchman_?"

"Up at Bedford," Kirk said.

"Let her stay there," said Ken. "The season's over here, for the Sturgis Water Line. And I'm afraid of that boat. When I go up after Mother I'll try to sell the thing for what I can get."

Mother! There was another topic! Kirk didn't even know she was coming home! The talk went off on a new angle, and plan followed plan, till Ken rose and announced that he was fairly starved.

"I'm worn to a wraith," said he. "I haven't had the time or the heart for a decent dinner since some time in the last century. Bring out the entire contents of the larder, Phil, and let's have a celebration."

Next morning, while the dew still hung in the hollows, Kirk got up and dressed himself without waking Ken. He tiptoed out into the new day, and made his way across the cool, mist-hung meadow to the Maestro's hedge. For an idea had been troubling him; it had waked with him, and he went now to make a restoration.

All was quiet in the garden. The first fallen leaves rustled beneath Kirk's feet as he went up the paved path and halted beside the dry fountain. He sat down cross-legged on the coping, with his chin in his hands, and turned his face to the wind's kiss and the gathering warmth of the sun. Something stirred at the other side of the pool—a blown leaf, perhaps; but then a voice remarked:

"Morning, shipmate." Kirk sprang up.

"You're just who I wanted to see," he said; "and I thought you _might_ be wanting to take a walk in the garden, early."

"You thought right."

They had come toward each other around the pool's rim, and met now at the cracked stone bench where two paths joined. Kirk put his hand through Martin's arm. He always rather liked to touch people while he talked to them, to be sure that they remained a reality and would not slip away before he had finished what he wanted to say.

"What brings you out so early, when you only fetched port last night?" Martin inquired, in his dry voice.

"I wanted to talk to you," Kirk said, "about that song."

"What, about the hat?"

"No, not that one. The birthday one about the roses. You see, the Maestro gave it to me on my birthday, because he said he thought you didn't need it any more. But you're here, and you do. It's your song, and I oughtn't to have it. So I came to give it back to you," said Kirk.

"I see," said Martin.

"So please take it," Kirk pursued, quite as though he had it in his pocket, "and I'll try to forget it."

"I don't know," said Martin. "The Maestro loves you now just about as much as he loved me when I was your size. His heart is divided—so let's divide the song, too. It'll belong to both of us. You—you made it rather easier for me to come back here; do you know that?"

"Why did you stay away so long?" Kirk asked.

Martin kicked a pebble into the basin of the pool, where it rebounded with a sharp click.

"I don't know," he said, after a pause. "It was very far away from the garden—those places down there make you forget a lot. And when the Maestro gave up his public life and retired, word trickled down to the

tropics after a year or so that he'd died. And there's a lot more that you wouldn't understand, and I wouldn't tell you if you could."

Another pebble spun into the pool.

"Are you going to stay, now?"

"Yes, I'm going to stay."

"I'm glad," said Kirk. They sat still for some moments, and then Kirk had a sudden, shy inspiration.

"Do you think," he ventured, "do you think it would be nice if the fountain could play, now?"

"Eh?" said Martin, waking from brooding thoughts.

"The fountain--it hasn't, you know, since you went. And the garden's been asleep ever since, just like a fairy-tale."

"A fairy-tale! H'm!" said Martin, with a queer laugh. "Well, let's wake the fountain, then."

They found the device that controlled the water, and wrenched it free. Kirk ran back down the path to listen, breathless, at the edge of the pool. There came first the rustle of water through long unused channels, then the shallow splash against the empty basin. Little by little the sound became deeper and more musical, till the still morning vibrated faintly to the mellow leap and ripple of the fountain's jubilant voice.

"Oh!" Kirk cried suddenly. "Oh, I'm happy! Aren't you, Mr. Martin?"

Martin looked down at the eager, joyous face, so expressive in spite of the blankness behind the eyes. His own face filled suddenly with a new light, and he put out his hands as if he were about to catch Kirk to him. But the moment passed; the reserve of long years, which he could not in an instant push from him, settled again in his angular face. He clasped his hands behind him.

"Yes," said Martin, briefly, "I'm happy."

CHAPTER XVI

ANOTHER HOME-COMING

Mrs. Sturgis stepped eagerly off the twelve-five train on to the Bedford Station platform, and stood looking expectantly about her. A few seconds later Ken came charging through the crowd from the other end of the platform. They held each other for a moment at arms' length, in the silent, absorbing welcome when words seem insufficient; then Kenelm picked up his mother's bag and tucked her hand through his arm.

"Now don't get a cab, or anything," Mrs. Sturgis begged. "I can perfectly well walk to the street-car--or up to the house, for that matter. Oh, I'm so much, much better."

"Well," Ken said, "I thought we'd have a little something to eat first, and then--"

"But we'll have lunch as soon as we get home, dear. What--"

"Well, the fact is," Ken said hastily, "you see we're not at Westover Street just now. We've been staying in the country for a while, at the jolliest old place, and, er--they want you to come up there for a while, too."

Ken had been planning different ways of telling his mother of the passing of the Westover Street house, all the way down from Asquam. He could not, now, remember a single word of all those carefully thought out methods of approach.

"I don't think I quite understand," Mrs. Sturgis said. "Are you staying with friends? I didn't know we knew any one in the country."

They were in the middle of the street, and Ken chose to focus his attention on the traffic.

"Let's get to the lunch place," he said. "It's quieter there, to talk."

"Still wearing that old suit, dear?" Mrs. Sturgis said, touching Ken's sleeve as he hung up his overcoat in the restaurant.

"Er--this is my good suit," Ken murmured. "That is, it's the only suit I have--that is--"

"See here," said Mrs. Sturgis, whose perceptions were beginning to quicken as she faced a member of her family again with the barrier of cautious letters thrown aside; "there's been enough money, hasn't there?"

"Lots," Ken said hastily. "We've been living royally--wait till you see. Oh, it's really a duck of a place--and Phil's a perfect wonder."

"What's a duck of a place?"

"Applegate Farm. Oh law! Mother dear, I'll have to tell you. It's only that we decided the old house was too expensive for us to run just for ourselves, so we got a nice old place in the country and fixed it up."

"You decided--you got a place in the country? Do you mean to say that you poor, innocent children have had to manage things like that?"

"We didn't want you to bother. Please don't worry, now." Ken looked anxiously across the table at his mother, as though he rather expected her to go off in a collapse again.

"Nonsense, Ken, I'm perfectly all right! But--but--oh, please begin at the beginning and unravel all this."

"Wait till we get on the train," Ken said. "I want to arrange my topics. I didn't mean to spring it on you this way, at all, Mother. I wish Phil had been doing this job."

But Ken's topics didn't stay arranged. As the train rumbled on toward Bayside, the tale was drawn from him piecemeal; what he tried to conceal, his mother soon enough discovered by a little questioning. Her son dissimulated very poorly, she found to her amusement. And, after all, she must know the whole, sooner or later. It was only his wish to spare her any sudden shock which made him hold back now.

"And you mean to tell me that you poor dears have been scraping along on next to nothing, while selfish Mother has been spending the remnant of the fortune at Hilltop?"

"Oh, pshaw, Mother!" Ken muttered, "there was plenty. And look at you, all nice and well for us. It would have been a pretty sight to see us

flourishing around with the money while you perished forlorn, wouldn't it?"

"Think of all the wealth we'll have _now_," Mrs. Sturgis suggested, "all the hundreds and hundreds that Hilltop has been gobbling."

"I'd forgotten that," whistled Ken. "Hi-ya! We'll be bloated aristocrats, we will! We'll have a steak for dinner!"

"Oh, you poor chicks!" said his mother. She must hear about the Sturgis Water Line, and hints of the Maestro, and how wonderful Phil had been, teaching Kirk and all, and how perfectly magnificent Kirk was altogether--a jumbled rigamarole of salvaged motor-boats, reclaimed farm-house, music, somebody's son at sea, and dear knows what else, till Mrs. Sturgis hardly knew whether or not any of this wild dream was verity. Yet the train--and later, the trolley-car--continued to roll through unfamiliar country, and Mrs. Sturgis resigned herself trustfully to her son's keeping.

At the Asquam Station, Hop was drawn up with his antiquated surrey. He wore a sprig of goldenrod in his buttonhole, and goldenrod bobbed over the old horse's forelock.

"Proud day, ma'am," said Hop, as Ken helped his mother into the wagon, "Proud day, I'm sure."

"As if I were a wedding or something," whispered Mrs. Sturgis. "Ken, I'm excited!"

She looked all about at the unwinding view up Winterbottom Road--so familiar to Ken, who was trying to see it all with fresh eyes. They climbed out at the gate of the farm, and Hop turned his beast and departed. Half-way up the sere dooryard, Ken touched his wondering mother's arm and drew her to a standstill. There lay Applegate Farm, tucked like a big gray boulder between its two orchards. Asters, blue and white, clustered thick to its threshold, honeysuckle swung buff trumpets from the vine about the windows. The smoke from the white chimney rose and drifted lazily away across the russet meadow, which ended at the once mysterious hedge. The place was silent with the silence of a happy dream, basking content in the hazy sunlight of the late September afternoon.

Mrs. Sturgis, with a little sound of surprised delight, was about to move forward again, when her son checked her once more. For as she looked, Kirk came to the door. He was carrying a pan and a basket. He felt for the sill with a sandaled toe, descended to the wide door-stone, and sat down upon it with the pan on his knees. He then proceeded to shell Lima beans, his face lifted to the sun, and the wind stirring the folds of his faded green blouse. As he worked he sang a perfectly original song about various things.

Mrs. Sturgis could be detained no longer. She ran across the brown grass and caught Kirk into her arms--tin pan, bean-pods, and all. She kissed his mouth, and his hair, and his eyes, and murmured ecstatically to him.

"Mother! _Mother_!" Kirk cried, his hands everywhere at once; and then, "Phil! _Quick_!"

But Phil was there. When the Sturgis family, breathless, at last sorted themselves out, every one began talking at once.

"_Don't_ you really think it's a nice place?"

"You came sooner than we expected; we meant to be at the gate."

"Oh, my dear dears!"

"_Mother_, come in now and see everything!" (This from Kirk, anxious to exhibit what he himself had never seen.)

"Come and take your things off--oh, you _do_ look so well, dear."

"Look at the nice view!"

"Don't you think it looks like a real house, even if we did get it?"

"Oh, children _dear_! let me gather my poor scattered wits."

So Mrs. Sturgis was lovingly pulled and pushed and steered into the dusky little living-room, where a few pieces of Westover Street furniture greeted her strangely, and where a most jolly fire burned on the hearth. Felicia removed her mother's hat; Ken put her into the big chair and spirited away her bag. Mrs. Sturgis sat gazing about her--at the white cheese-cloth curtains, the festive bunches of flowers in every available jug, the kitchen chairs painted a decorative blue, and at the three radiant faces of her children.

Kirk, who was plainly bursting with some plan, pulled his sister's sleeve.

"Phil," he whispered loudly, "do you think now would be a good time to do it!"

"What? _Oh_ --yes! Yes, go ahead, to be sure," said Felicia.

Kirk galloped forthwith to the melodeon, which Mrs. Sturgis had so far failed to identify as a musical instrument, seated himself before it, and opened it with a bang. He drew forth all the loudest stops--the trumpet, the diapason--for his paeon of welcome.

"It's a triumphal march, in your honor," Felicia whispered hastily to her mother. "He spent half of yesterday working at it."

Mrs. Sturgis, who had looked sufficiently bewildered became frankly incredulous. But the room was now filled with the strains of Kirk's music. The Maestro would not, perhaps, have altogether approved of its bombastic nature--but triumphant it certainly was, and sincere. And what the music lacked was amply made up in Kirk's face as he played--an ineffable expression of mingled joy, devotion, and the solid satisfaction of a creator in his own handiwork. He finished his performance with one long-drawn and really superb chord, and then came to his mother on flying feet.

"I meant it to be much, much nicer," he explained, "like a real one that the Maestro played. But I made it all for you, Mother, anyway--and the other was for Napoleon or somebody."

"Oh, you unbelievable old darling!" said Mrs. Sturgis. "As if I wouldn't rather have that than all the real ones! But, Ken--you didn't tell me even that he could play do-re-mi-fa!"

"Well, _Mother_!" Ken protested, "I couldn't tell you _everything_."

And Mrs. Sturgis, striving to straighten her tangled wits, admitted the truth of this remark.

After supper, which was a real feast, including bona fide mutton-chops and a layer cake, the Sturgis family gathered about the fireside.

"This is _home_ to you," Mrs. Sturgis said. "How strange it seems! But you've made it home--I can see that. How did you, you surprising people? And such cookery and all; I don't know you!"

Phil and Ken looked at one another in some amusement.

"The cookery," said Felicia, "I'll admit came by degrees. Do you remember that very first bread?"

"If I recall rightly, I replaced that loose stone in the well-coping with it, didn't I?" said Ken, "or did I use it for the _Dutchman's_ bow anchor?"

"Nothing was wrong with those biscuits, tonight," Mrs. Sturgis said. "Come and sit here with me, my Kirk."

Felicia blew out the candles that had graced the supper-table, drew the curtains across the windows where night looked in, and came back to sit on the hearth at her mother's feet. The contented silence about the fire was presently broken by a tapping at the outer door, and Ken rose to admit the Maestro and Martin. The Maestro, after a peep within, expressed himself loth to disturb such a happy time, but Ken haled him in without more ado.

"Nonsense, sir," he said. "Why--why you're part of us. Mother wouldn't have seen half our life here till she'd met you."

So the Maestro seated himself in the circle of firelight, and Martin retired behind a veil of tobacco-smoke--with permission--in the corner.

"We came," said the Maestro, after a time of other talk, "because we're going away so soon, and--"

"Going away!" Three blank voices interrupted him. Kirk left even his mother's arm, to find his way to the Maestro's.

"But I do go away," said the old gentleman, lifting a hand to still all this protest, "every autumn--to town. And I came partly to ask--to beg you--that when cold weather seems to grip Applegate Farm too bitterly, you will come, all of you, to pay an old man a long visit. May I ask it of you, too, Mrs. Sturgis? My house is so big--Martin and I will find ourselves lost in one corner of it. And--" he frowned tremendously and shook Kirk's arm, "I absolutely forbid Kirk to stop his music. How can he study music without his master? How can he study without coming to stay with his master, as it was in the good old days of apprenticeship?"

Felicia looked about the little shadow-flecked room.

"I know what you're thinking," said the Maestro, smoothing Kirk's dark hair. "You're hating the thought of leaving Applegate Farm. But perhaps the winter wind will sing you a different tune. Do you not think so, Mrs. Sturgis?"

Mrs. Sturgis nodded. "Their experience doesn't yet embrace all the phases of this," she said.

"Yes," said the Maestro, "some day before the snows come, you will come to me. And we'll fill that big house with music, and songs, and laughing--yes, and work, too. Ah, please!" said the Maestro, quite pathetically.

Felicia put her hand out to his.

"We _will_ come, dear Maestro," she said, "when this little fire will not keep us warm any longer."

"Thank you," said the Maestro.

From behind them came murmurous talk of ships--Ken and Martin discussing the _Celestine_ and her kind, and the magic ports below the Line. Kirk whispered suddenly to the Maestro, who protested.

"Oh, please!" begged Kirk, his plea becoming audible. "_Really_ it's a nice thing. I know Ken makes fun of it, but I _have_ learned a lot from it, haven't I? Please, Maestro!"

"Very well, naughty one," said the musician; "if your mother will forgive us."

He bowed to her, and then moved with Kirk into the unlit part of the room where the little organ stood. With a smile of tender amusement, he sat down at the odd little thing and ran his fingers up and down the short, yellowed keyboard. Then, with Kirk lost in a dream of rapt worship and listening ecstasy beside him, he began to play. And his touch made of the little worn melodeon a singing instrument, glorified beyond its own powers by the music he played.

The dimly firelit room swam with the exquisite echo of the melody. Ken and Martin sat quiet in their corner. Felicia gazed at the dear people in the home she had made: at Ken, who had made it with her--dear old Ken, the defender of his kindred; at Kirk, for whom they had kept the joy of living alight; at the Maestro, the beautiful spirit of the place; at her mother, given back to them at last. Mrs. Sturgis looked wonderingly at her children in the firelight, but most of all at Kirk, whose face was lighted, as he leaned beside the Maestro, with a radiance she had never before seen there.

And without, the silver shape of a waning moon climbed between the black, sighing boughs of the laden orchard, and stood above the broad, gray roof of Applegate Farm.

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