

The Second Violin

Grace S. Richmond

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THE SECOND VIOLIN

BY GRACE S. RICHMOND

Author of
"Red Pepper Burns," "Mrs. Red Pepper,"
"The Indifference of Juliet," "With Juliet in
England," Etc.

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BOOK I

THE SECOND VIOLIN

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CHAPTER I

Crash! Bang! Bang! "_The March of the Pilgrims_" came to an abrupt end. John Lansing Birch laid down his viola and bow, whirled about, and flung out his arms in despair. "Oh, this crowd is hopeless!" he groaned. "Never mind any other instrument, providing _yours_ is heard. This march is supposed to die away in the distance! You murder it in front of the house. That second violin--"

Here his wrath centered upon the red-cheeked, black-eyed young player.

The second violin returned his gaze with resentment. "What's the use of my playing like a midsummer zephyr when Just's sawing away like mad on the bass?" she retorted.

The first violin smiled pleasantly on the little group. "Let's try it again," she suggested, "and see if we can please John Lansing better."

"You're all right," said Lansing, with a wave of his hand at Celia, "if the rest of the strings wouldn't fight to drown you out. Charlotte plays as if second violin were a solo part, with the rest as accompaniment."

Charlotte tucked her instrument under a sulky, round chin, raised her bow and waited, her eyes on the floor. Celia, smiling, softly tried her strings.

"That's it, precisely," began the leader, still with irritation. "Celia tunes between practice; Charlotte takes it for granted she's all right and fires ahead. Your E string is off!"

The second violin grudgingly tightened the E string; then all her strings in turn, lengthening the process as much as possible. The 'cello did the same--the 'cello always stood by the second violin. Jeff gave Charlotte a glance of loyalty. His G string had been flatter than her E.

Lansing wheeled about and picked up his instrument, carefully trying its pitch. He gave the signal, and the "_March of the Pilgrims_" began--in the remote distance. The double-bass viol gripped his bow with his stubby twelve-year-old fingers, and hardly breathed as he strove to keep his notes subdued. The 'cello murmured a gentle undertone; the first violin sang as sweetly and delicately as a bird, her "_legato_" perfect. The second violin fingered her notes through, but the voice of her instrument was not heard at all.

The leader glanced at her once, with a frown between his fine eyebrows, but Charlotte played dumbly on. The Pilgrims approached--"_crescendo_" ; drew near--"_forte_" ; passed--"_fortissimo_" ; marched away--"_diminuendo_" ; were almost lost in the distance--"_piano_"--"_pianissimo_" . Uplifted bows--and silence.

"Good!" said a hearty voice behind them. Everybody looked up, smiling--even the second violin. His children always smiled when Mr. Roderick Birch came in. It would have been a sour temper which could have resisted his genial greeting.

"Mother would like the '_Lullaby_' next," he said. "She's rather tired to-night. And after the '_Lullaby_' I want a little talk with you all."

Something in his voice or his eyes made his elder daughter take notice of him, as he dropped into a chair by the fire. "Play your best," she warned the others, in a whisper. But they needed no warning. Everybody always played his best for father. And if mother was tired--

The notes of the second violin fell daintily, caressing those which wrought out the melody enveloping but never overwhelming them. As the music ceased, the leader, turning to the second violin, met her reluctant eyes with a softening in his own keen ones. The hint of a laugh curved the corners of her lips as his smiled broadly. It was all the truce necessary. Charlotte's sulks never lasted longer than Lanse's

impatience.

They laid aside their instruments and gathered round their father. Graceful, brown-eyed Celia sat down beside him; Charlotte's curly black hair mingled with his heavy iron-gray locks as she perched upon the arm of his chair, her scarlet flannel arm under his head. The youngest boy, Justin, threw himself flat on the hearth-rug, chin propped on elbow, watching the fire; sixteen-year-old Jeff helped himself to a low stool, clasping long arms about long legs as his knees approached his head in this posture; and the eldest son, pausing, drew up a chair and sat down to face the group.

"Now for it," he said. "It looks serious--a consultation of the whole. Mayn't we have mother to back us?"

"I've sent mother to bed," Mr. Birch explained. "She wanted to come down to hear you play, but I wouldn't let her. And indeed there are moments--" He glanced quizzically at his eldest son.

"Yes, sir," Lansing responded, promptly. "There are moments when the furnace pipes convey up-stairs as much din as she can bear."

Mr. Birch sat looking thoughtfully into the fire for a minute or two.

He began at last, gently, "Celia--has mother seemed quite strong to you of late?"

"Mother--strong?" asked Celia, in surprise. "Why, father, isn't she? She--had that illness last winter, and was a long time getting about, but she has seemed well all summer."

Their eyes were all upon his face. Even young Justin had swung about upon his elbows and was regarding his father with attention. They waited, startled.

"I took her to Doctor Forester to-day, and he--surprised me a good deal. He seemed to think that mother must not spend the coming winter in this climate. Don't be alarmed; I don't want to frighten you, but I want you to appreciate the necessity. He thinks that if mother were to have a year of rest and change we need have no fears for her."

"Fears!" repeated Lansing, under his breath. Was it possible that anything was the matter with mother? Why, she was the central sun about which their little family world moved! There could not--must not--be anything wrong with mother!

"Tell us plainly, father," urged Celia's soft voice. She was pale, but she spoke quietly.

Charlotte, at the first word of alarm, had turned her face away. Jeff's bright black eyes--he was Charlotte's counterpart in colouring and looks--rested anxiously on the second violin's curly mop of hair, tied at the neck with a big black bow of ribbon. It was always most expressive to Jeff, that bow of ribbon.

Lansing repeated Celia's words. "Yes, tell us plainly, sir. We'd rather know."

"I am alarming you," Mr. Birch said, quickly. "I knew I could not say

the slightest thing about her without doing that. But I need to talk it over with you all, because if we carry out the doctor's prescription it means much sacrifice for every one. I had no doubt that you would make it, but I think it is better for you to understand its importance. Doctor Forester says New Mexico is an almost certain cure for such trouble as mother's, if taken early. And we are taking it early."

Justin and Jeff looked puzzled, but Celia caught her breath, and Lansing's ruddy colour suddenly faded. Charlotte buried her head in her father's shoulder and drew the scarlet flannel arm tighter about his neck.

The iron-gray head bent over the curly black one for a moment, as if the strong man of the household found it hard to face the anxious eyes which searched his, and would have liked, like his eighteen-year-old daughter, to run to cover. But in an instant, he looked up again and spoke in the cheery tone they knew so well.

"Now listen, and be brave," he said. "Mother's trouble is like a house just set on fire. A dash of Water and a blanket--and it is out. Wait till a whole room is ablaze, and it's a serious matter to stop it. Now, in our case, we've only the little kindling corner to smother, and the New Mexico air is water and blanket--a whole fire department, if need be. The doctor assures me that with mother's good constitution, and the absence of any hereditary predisposition to this sort of thing, we've only to give her the ten or twelve months of rest and reenforcement--the winter in New Mexico, the summer in Colorado--to nip the whole thing in the bud. I believe him, and you must believe him--and me. More than all, you must not show the slightest change of front to her. She knows it all, but she doesn't want you to know. I think differently about that.

"Three of you are men and women now, and the other two," he smiled into the upturned, eager faces of Jeff and Justin, "are getting to be men. Even my youngest can be depended upon to act the strong part."

Justin scrambled to his feet at that, and gravely laid a muscular boy's hand in his father's.

"I'll stand by you, sir," he said.

Nobody laughed. Charlotte's black bow twitched and a queer sound burst from the shoulder where her head was buried. Jeff's thick black lashes went down for a moment; Celia shook two bright drops from brimming eyes and patted Just's sturdy shoulder. Mr. Birch shook the hand vigorously without speaking, and only Lansing found words to express what they felt.

"He speaks for us all, I know, sir. And now if you'll tell us our part we'll take hold. I think I know what it means. Trips to New Mexico, from New York, are expensive."

"They are very expensive," Mr. Birch replied, slowly. "I must go with her. We must travel in the least fatiguing fashion, which means state-rooms on trains and many extras by the way. She has kept up bravely, but this unusual exhaustion after one day in town shows me how careful I must be of her on the long journey. Then, once away, no expense must be spared to make the absence tell for all there is in it. And most of all to be considered, while I am away there will be--no income."

They looked at each other now, Celia at Lansing, and Lansing at Jeff, and Jeff at both of them. Charlotte sat up suddenly, her cheeks and eyes burning, and stared hard at each in turn.

The income would stop. And what would that mean? The family had within three years suffered heavy financial losses from causes outside of their control, and the father's income, that of attorney-at-law in a large suburban town, had since become the only source of support. So far it had sufficed, although Charlotte and Celia had been sent away to school, and both Celia and Lansing were now in college.

It was the remembrance of these heavy demands upon the family purse which now caused the young people to look at one another with startled questioning. Lansing was about to begin his senior year at a great university; Celia had finished her first year at a famous women's college. Within a fortnight both were expecting to begin work.

Charlotte did not care about a college course, but she had planned for two years to go to a school of design, for she was a promising young worker in things decorative. As for Jefferson, sixteen years old, captain of the high-school football team, six feet tall, and able to give his brother Lansing a hard battle for physical supremacy, his dearest dream was a great military school. Even Justin--but Justin was only twelve--his dreams could wait. His was the only face in the group which remained placid during the moments succeeding Mr. Birch's mention of the astonishing fact about the income.

The father's observant eyes noted all that his children's looks could tell him of surprise, disappointment and bewilderment; and of the succeeding effort they made to rally their forces and show no sign of dismay.

Lansing made the first effort. "I can drop back a year," he said, thoughtfully. "Or I--no--merely working my way through this year wouldn't do. It wouldn't help out at home."

"Why, Lanse!" began Celia, and stopped.

He glanced meaningly at her, and the colour flashed back into her cheeks. In the next instant she had followed his lead.

"If Lanse can stay out of college, I can, too," she said, with decision.

"If I could get some fairly good position," Lanse proposed, "I ought to be able to earn enough to--well, we're rather a large family, and our appetites----"

"I could do something," began Charlotte, eagerly. "I could--I could do sewing----"

At that there was a general howl, which quite broke the solemnity of the occasion. "Charlotte--sewing!" they cried.

"Why not take in washing?" urged Lanse.

"Or solicit orders for fancy cooking?"

"Or tutor stupid little boys in languages? Come! Fiddle--stick to your

specialty."

Charlotte's face was a study as she received these hints. They represented the things she disliked most and could do least well. Yet they were hardly farther afield than her own suggestion of sewing. Charlotte's inability with the needle was proverbial.

"What position do you consider yourself eminently fitted for, Mr. Lansing Birch?" she inquired, with uplifted chin.

"You have me there," her brother returned, good-humouredly. "There's only one thing I can think of--to go into the locomotive shops. Mechanics' wages are better than most, and a little practical experience wouldn't hurt me."

It was his turn to be met with derision. It could hardly be wondered at, for as he stood before them, John Lansing looked the personification of fastidiousness, and his face, although it surmounted a strongly proportioned and well developed body, suggested the mental characteristics not only of his father, but of certain great-grandfathers and uncles, who had won their distinction in intellectual arenas. Even his father seemed a little daunted at this proposal.

"That's it--laugh!" urged Lanse. "If I'd proposed to try to get on the 'reportorial staff' of a city newspaper you'd all smile approval, as at a thing suited to my genius. I'd have to live in town to do that, and what little I earned would go to fill my own hungry mouth. Now at the shops--you needn't look so top-lofty! Dozens of fellows who are taking engineering courses put on the overalls, shoulder a lunch-pail and go to work every morning during vacation at seven o'clock. They come grinning home at night, their faces black as tar, their spirits up in Q, jump into a bath-tub, put on clean togs, and come down to dinner looking like gentlemen--but _not_ gentlemen any more thoroughly than they have been all day."

Jeff looked at his brother seriously. "Lanse," he said, "if you go into one of the locomotive shops won't you get a place for me?"

But Celia interposed. "Whatever the rest of us do," she said, "Jeff and Just must keep on with school."

Jeff rebelled with a grimace. "Not much!" he shouted. "I guess one six-footer is as good as another in a boiler-shop. You don't catch me swallowing algebra and German when I might be developing muscle. If Lanse puts on overalls I'm after him."

Celia looked at her father. "What do you think of all this, sir?" she asked. "If I stay at home, dismiss Delia, and do the housework myself, and Lanse finds some suitable position, can't we get on? Charlotte can put off the school of design another year. We will all be very economical about clothes----"

"Being economical doesn't bring in cash to pay bills," interrupted Jeff. "Do the best he can, Lanse won't draw any hair-raising salary the first year. He could probably get clerical work at one of the banks, but what's that? He'd fall off so in his wind I could throw him across the room in three months."

They all laughed. Jeff's devotion to athletics dominated his ideals at all times, and his disgust at the thought of such a depletion of his brother's physical forces was amusing.

Celia was still looking at her father. He spoke in the hearty tone to which they were accustomed, his face full of satisfaction.

"You please me very much, all of you," he said. "It will be the best tonic I can offer your mother. Her greatest trial is this very necessity, which she foresaw the instant the plan was formed--so much sacrifice on the part of her children. Yet she agreed with me that the experience might not be wholly bad for you, and she said"--he paused, smiling at his elder daughter--"that with Celia at the helm she was sure the family ship wouldn't be wrecked"

Then he told them that they might plan the division of labour and responsibility as they thought practicable. He agreed with Celia that the younger boys must remain in school, but added--since at this point it became necessary to mollify his son Jefferson--that a fellow with a will might find any number of remunerative odd jobs out of school and study hours. He commended Lansing's idea, but advised him to look around before deciding; and he passed an affectionate hand over Charlotte's black curls as he observed that young person sunk in gloom.

"Cheer up, little girl!" he said. "The second violin is immensely important to the music of the family orchestra. The hand that can design wall-papers can learn to relieve the mistress of the house of some of her cares. Celia, without a maid in the kitchen, will find plenty of use for such a quick brain as lies under this thatch."

But at this moment something happened--something to which the family were not unused. Charlotte suddenly wriggled out from under the caressing hand, and in half a dozen quick movements was out of the room. They had all had a vision of brilliant wet eyes, flushing cheeks, and red, rebellious mouth.

"Poor child!" murmured Celia. "She thinks we find her of no use."

"She is rather a scatterbrain," Lanse observed. "The year may do her good, as you say, father--as well as the rest of us," he added, with modesty.

"There's a lot of things she can do, just the same,"--Jeff fired up, instantly--"things the rest of us are perfect noodles at. When she gets to earning more money in a day than the rest of us can in a month maybe we'll let up on that second-fiddle business."

"Good for you, you faithful Achates!" said Lanse. Then he turned to his father. "You haven't told us yet when you go, sir."

"If we can, two weeks from to-day," said Mr. Birch. Then he went up-stairs to tell his wife that she might go peacefully to sleep, for her children were ready to become her devoted slaves. Justin followed Jeff out of the room, and Jeff broke away from this younger brother and hastened to rap a familiar, comforting signal of comradeship on Charlotte's locked door.

Left alone, Lanse and Celia looked at each other.

"Well, old girl--" began Lansing, gently.

"O Lanse!" breathed Celia.

He patted her shoulder. "Bear up, dear. It's tough to give up college for a year--"

"Oh, _that's_ not it!" cried the girl, and buried her face in a sofa pillow.

"No, that's not it," he answered, under his breath. He shook his shoulders and walked away to the fire, stood staring down into it for a minute with sober eyes, then drew a long breath and came back to his sister.

"It's a relief that there's something we can do to help her get well," he said, slowly. "And she will get well, Celia--she will--_she must_!"

* * * * *

CHAPTER II

"Where's the shawl-strap?"

"Charlotte, wait just a moment; are you perfectly sure that mother's dressing sack and knit slippers are in the case? Nobody saw them put in, and I don't--"

"Justin, run down-stairs, please, and get that unopened package of water-biscuit. You'll find it on the pantry shelf, I think."

"Lanse, if the furnace runs all night with the draught on, your fire will be burned out in the morning, and it will take an extra amount of coal to get it started again."

"Where's Jeff? He must be told about--"

"Put mother's overshoes to warm."

"I have left two hundred dollars to your credit at the bank, Lansing, and I--"

"Lanse, did you telephone for--"

"Where did Celia put the--"

"Listen, all of you. I--"

"What did Jeff do with that small white--"

"_Silence!_" shouted Lansing, above the din. "Can't you people get these traps together without all yelling at once? You will have mother so used up she can't start."

Mrs. Birch smiled at her tall son from the easy chair where she had been

placed ten minutes before, her family protesting that they could finish the numberless small tasks yet to be done. It was nine o'clock in the evening, and it lacked but an hour of train-time.

They all looked at the slender figure in the easy chair. They had learned in these last two weeks to take note of their mother's appearance as, with easy confidence in her exhaustless strength, they had never done before. Since the night when they had learned that she was not quite well, they had discovered for themselves the delicacy of the smiling face, the thinness of the graceful body, the many small signs by which those who run may read the evidences of lessened vitality, if their eyes are once opened. They wondered that they had not seen it all before, and found the only explanation in the cheery, undaunted spirit which had covered up every sign of fatigue.

"She is too tired already," declared Celia. "Run away, and let father and me finish."

But they would not go. How could they, with only an hour left? They subdued their voices, and ran whispering about. Jeff held a long conference in an undertone with his mother. Justin perched on the arm of her chair, with his head on her shoulder, and she would not have him taken away, her own heart sick within her at thought of the long absence from them all. Altogether, when one took into account the preceding fortnight of making ready for the trip, it was not strange that in this last hour of preparation she gave out entirely.

The first they knew of it was when Mr. Birch, with a low exclamation, sprang across the room, and catching up his wife in his arms, carried her to a couch.

"Water!" he said. "And open the window!"

Startled, they obeyed him. It was only a brief unconsciousness, and the lovely brown eyes when they unclosed were as full of bravery as ever, but Mr. Birch spoke anxiously to Lansing in the hall outside.

"I don't like to start with her, as worn-out as this," he said. "Yet everything is engaged--the state-room and all--and I don't want to delay without reason. There's not time to send to the city for Doctor Forester. Suppose you telephone Doctor Ridgway to come around and tell us what to do about starting. If he is out, try Sears or Barton. Have him hurry. We've barely forty-five minutes now."

In three minutes Lansing came back and beckoned his father out of the room.

"They're all out," he said, "I tried old Doctor Hitchcock, too, but he's sick in bed. How about that new doctor that's just moved in next door? I like his looks. He certainly will know enough to advise about this."

Mr. Birch hesitated a moment. "Well, call him," he decided.

Lansing was already down the stairs. Three minutes later he returned with the young doctor. Mr. Birch met them in the hall.

"Doctor Churchill, father." Mr. Birch looked keenly into a pair of eyes whose steady glance gave him instantly the feeling that here was a man to trust.

The young people waited impatiently outside while Doctor Churchill spent fifteen quiet minutes with their father and mother. When Mr. Birch came to the door again with the physician, he was looking relieved.

Doctor Churchill paused before the little group, his eyes glancing kindly at each in turn, as he spoke to Lansing. He certainly was young but there was about him an air of quiet confidence and decision which one felt instinctively would be justified by further acquaintance.

"Don't be anxious," he said. "All this hurry of preparation has been a severe test on her, taken with her reluctance to leave her home. She is feeling stronger now, and it will be better for her to get the leave-taking over than to postpone and dread it longer. You will all make it easy for her--No breakdowns," he cautioned, with a smile. "New Mexico is a great place, and you are doing the best thing in the world in getting her off before cold weather."

He was gone, but they felt as if a reviving breeze had passed over them, and when they went back to their mother's room it was with serene faces. If Charlotte swallowed hard at a lump in her throat, and Celia lingered an instant behind the rest to pinch the colour back into her cheeks, nobody observed it. Perhaps each was too occupied with acting his own light-hearted part. Somehow the minutes slipped away, and soon the travellers were at the door.

Into Mrs. Birch's face, also, the colour had returned, summoned there, it may be, not only by the doctor's stimulating draught, but by the insistence of her own will.

"Good-by! good-by! God be with you all!" murmured Mr. Birch, breaking with difficulty away from Justin's frantic hug.

Mrs. Birch, on Lansing's arm, had gone down the steps to the carriage. The father followed, surrounded by an eager group. Only Lansing was to go to the train. The others, as they crowded round the carriage door, were incoherently mingling parting messages. Then presently they were left behind, a suddenly quiet, sober group.

Inside the carriage Mrs. Birch, with her hand in her eldest son's, was saying to him things he never forgot, while his father looked steadily out of the window.

"I leave them in your care, dear," she told Lansing, in the quiet, confident tones to which he was used from her. "I could never go, I think, if I hadn't such a strong, brave, trustworthy son to leave in care of the younger ones. Celia will do her part, and do it beautifully, I know, but it's on you I rely."

"I'll do my best," he answered, cheerfully, although he felt, even more than before, the heavy responsibility upon him.

"I know you will. Don't let Celia overdo. She will be so ambitious to run the household economically that she will set herself tasks she's not fit for. See that Jeff keeps steadily at his studies, and be lenient with Justin. He adores you--you can make the year do much for him if you take thought. And with my little Charlotte--be very patient, Lanse. She will miss us most--and show it least."

"I doubt that," thought Lanse, but aloud he said, "We'll all hang together, mother, you may count on that. We have our differences and our, eccentricities, but we've a lot of family spirit, and no one of us is going to sacrifice alone while the rest fail to take notice. And you're going to know all that goes on. We've planned to take turns writing so that at least every other day a letter will start for New Mexico."

"And if anything should go wrong?"

"Nothing will," asserted Lansing.

"That you don't know, dear," said the gentle voice, not quite so steadily as before. "If anything should come we must know."

"I'll remember," he promised, reluctantly, his hand under pressure from hers. But inwardly he vowed, "Anything short of real trouble you'll not know, little mother. Your children are stronger than you now, and they can bear some things for you."

At the train it took all Lansing's determination, sturdy fellow though he was, to keep up his cheerful front. The colour had ebbed away from Mrs. Birch's face once more, and as she put up her arms to her tall son, in the little state-room, she seemed to him all at once so small and frail that he could not endure to see her go away from them all, facing even the remote possibility that in the new land she might fail to find again her old vigour.

It had to be done, however. Lansing received her clinging good-by, whispered in her ear something which would have been unintelligible to any but a mother's intuition, so choky was his voice, gripped his father's hand with both his own, turned and smiled back at the two as he pulled open the door, and swung off the train just as it began to move.

He raced away over the streets to take a trolley-car for home, having dismissed the carriage, and craving nothing so much as a long walk in the cool September night.

At home he found everybody gone to bed except Celia, who met him at the door. She smiled at him, but he could see that she had been crying. Although he had carried home a heavy heart, he braced himself to begin his task of keeping the family cheered up.

"Off all right!" he announced, in a casual tone, as if he had just sent away the guests of a week. "Splendid train, jolly state-room, porter one of the '_Yassir, yassir_' kind. Judge and Mrs. Van Camp were taking the same train as far as Chicago. That will do a lot toward making things pleasant to start with."

"I'm so glad!" Celia agreed. "How did mother get off? Did her strength keep up?"

"Pretty well--better than I'd have thought possible after all the fuss of that last hour. The new doctor braced her up in good shape. He seems all right. Didn't you like the way he acted? Neither like an old family physician nor a new johnny-jump-up; just quiet and cool and pleasant. Glad he lives next door. I mean to know him."

Lansing was turning out lights as he talked, looking after window

fastenings, and examining things generally. Celia watched him from her place on the bottom stair. He was approaching her with the intention of putting out the hall light and joining her to proceed up-stairs, when he stopped still, wheeled, and made for the back of the hall, where the cellar stairs began.

"I'm forgetting the furnace!" he cried.

"It's all right," Celia assured him. "Jeff took care of it. He says that's his work, since you're to be away all day."

"Think he can manage it?"

"Of course he can. The way to please Jeff is to give him responsibility. He's old enough, and even having to look after such small matters regularly will help to develop him."

Lansing laughed; then, extinguishing the light, he came up to her on the stair, and putting his arm about her shoulders, began to ascend slowly with her.

"Shouldering your cares already, aren't you? Got to keep us all straight, and develop all our characters. Poor girl, you'll have a hard tussle!"

"I'm afraid I shall. Do you go to work at the shops in the morning?"

"Yes. Breakfast at six. Did you tell Delia?"

"Yes, but I'm going to let her go afterward. I arranged with her, when father first told us, to stay just till they had gone, and then leave things to me. I can't be too busy from now on, and I don't want to wait a day to begin."

"Wise girl. Sorry, though, that I have to get you up every morning so early. Couldn't you leave things ready so I could manage for myself about breakfast, somehow?"

"No, indeed! If I'm to have a day-labourer for a brother, I shall see that he has a good hot breakfast and the heartiest kind of a lunch in his pail every-day."

"You're the right sort!" murmured Lansing, patting his sister's shoulder as he paused with her in front of her door. "I must admit I shall prefer the hot breakfast. Better sleep late to-morrow morning, though."

"I shall be up when you are," Celia declared.

"Look here, little girl," said Lansing, speaking soberly in the darkness. "You know you haven't got this household on your shoulders all alone. It's a partnership affair, and don't you forget it. Now, good night, and take care you sleep like a top."

Celia held him tight for a minute, and answered bravely:

"You're a dear boy, and a great comfort."

Lansing tiptoed away to his own room, farther down the hall, feeling a strong sense of relief that the determination of the young substitute

heads of the house to begin the new regime without a preliminary hour of wailing had been successfully carried through.

"We've got the worst over," he thought, as he fell asleep. "Once fairly started, it won't be so bad. Celia's clear grit, that's sure."

Alone in her room, Celia had it out with herself, and spent a wakeful night. But she brought a cheerful face to Lansing's early breakfast, and when the younger members of the family came down later she was ready for them with the sunshine they had dreaded not to find.

Everybody spent a busy day. Jeff and Justin went off to school. Charlotte announced with meekness that she was ready for whatever work Celia might find for her, and was given various rooms up-stairs to sweep and dust, her sister being confident that vigorous manual labour would be the best tonic for a mind dispirited.

As for Celia herself, she dismissed Delia, the maid of all work, with a kindly farewell and the letters of recommendation her mother had prepared, and plunged eagerly into business. She was a born manager, and loved many of the details of housework, particularly the baking and brewing, and she was soon enthusiastically employed in putting the small kitchen to rights.

At noon Charlotte and the boys were served with a light luncheon, with the promise of greater joys to come, and by five in the afternoon the house was filled with the delightful odours of successful cookery.

At that hour Charlotte, whose labours had been enlarged by herself to cover a thorough overhauling of the entire house--such tasks being her special aversion, and therefore to be discharged without mitigation on this first day of self-sacrifice--wandered disconsolately into the kitchen with broom and dust-pan, looking sadly weary. She gazed with envious eyes at her sister, flying about in a big apron, with sleeves rolled up, her cheeks like carnations, her eyes bright with triumph.

"Well, you do start in with vim," the younger sister observed, dropping into a chair with a long sigh.

"Yes; and the work has gone better than I had hoped," declared Celia, whisking a tinful of plump rolls into the oven. "It's really fun."

"I'm glad you like it."

"Poor child," said Celia, pausing to glance at the dejected figure in the chair, its dark curls a riot of disorder, a smudge of black upon its forehead, and its pinafore disreputable with frequent use as a duster, "I gave you too much to do! Didn't I hear you in Delia's room? You needn't have touched that to-day."

"Wanted to get through with it. Delia may be a good cook, but she left a mess of a closet up-stairs. Please give me one of those warm cookies. I'm so used up and hungry I can't wait for supper."

"Justin came in half an hour ago so famished there wouldn't have been a cookie left if I hadn't filled him up with a banana. By the way, I sent him down cellar after some peach pickles, and I haven't seen him since. I'll run down and get some. I've hot rolls and honey for supper, and Lanse always wants peach pickles with that combination."

Celia took a bowl from the cupboard, opened the cellar door and started down, turning on the second step to say:

"Go and take a bath and put on a fresh frock; you won't feel half so tired. Wear the scarlet waist, will you? I want things particularly bright and cheery to-night, for I know Lanse will come home fagged with the new work. Mrs. Laurier sent over some red carnations. I've put them in the middle of the table; they look ever so pretty. I'm going to----"

What she intended to do Celia never told, if she ever afterward remembered. What she did do was to slip upon the third step of the steep stairway, and, with no outcry whatever, go plunging heavily to the bottom.

* * * * *

CHAPTER III

"Celia--Celia--are you hurt?" cried Charlotte, and dashed down the stairs.

There was no answer. With trembling hands she felt for her sister's head. It lay close against the cellar wall, and she instantly understood that Celia must be unconscious. But whether there might be more to be feared than unconsciousness she could not tell in the dark. Her first thought was to get a light, the next that she must have help at once.

She rushed up the stairs, calling Jeff and Justin, but neither boy was to be found. Then she ran to the telephone, with the idea of summoning one of the suburban physicians, but turned aside from this purpose with the further realisation that first of all Celia must be brought up from the cold, dark place in which she lay, and restored to consciousness.

She ran to the front door to summon the nearest neighbour, and she remembered then, with relief, that the nearest neighbour was Doctor Churchill, the young physician who had been called in to see her mother the evening before.

She flew across the narrow lawn between her own house and that where the new doctor had set up his office, and rang imperatively. The door opened, and Doctor Churchill, hat and case in hand, evidently on his way to a patient, stood before her.

What he thought of the figure before him, with its riotous curly black hair, brilliant eyes, pale dark cheeks, dusty pinafore, a singular smudge upon the forehead, and sleeves rolled up to the elbows, nobody would have known from his manner, which instantly expressed a friendly concern.

Charlotte could only gasp, "Oh, come--quick!"

He followed her, stopping to ask no questions. At the open cellar door Charlotte stood aside to let him pass.

"Down there--my sister!" she breathed.

"Bring a light, please," said the doctor, and he disappeared down the stairs. Charlotte lighted a little kitchen lamp and came after him. He bade her stand by while he made his first brief examination.

"I think the blow on her head isn't serious," he said, presently, "but I can't tell where else she may be hurt till I get her up-stairs."

He was strong, and he lifted Celia as if she had been a child, and carried her easily up the steep stairs.

Charlotte led the way to a wide couch in the living-room. As Celia was laid gently upon it she opened her eyes.

Half an hour later, John Lansing Birch, in his oldest clothes and wearing a rather disreputable soft hat pulled down over his forehead, with his hands and face excessively dirty and a lunch-pail on his arm, pushed open the kitchen door. "_Phew-w!_ Something's burning!" he shouted. "Celia--Charlotte--where are you all? Great Scott, what a smudge!"

He strode across the room and lifted from the stove a kettle of potatoes, from which the water had boiled away some minutes before.

"First returns from the amateur cooking district!" he muttered, glancing critically about the kitchen.

Something else in the way of overcooked viands seemed to assail his nostrils, and he jerked open the oven door. A tin of blackened rolls puffed out at him their pungent smoke.

"Well, what--" he was beginning with the natural irritation of the hungry man, who has been anticipating his supper all the way home, and sees it in ruin before his eyes, when Charlotte appeared in the doorway.

"O Lanse!" she cried, and ran to him.

"Well, what is it? Celia got a headache and left you in charge? Everything's burnt up--I can tell you that----"

"Celia is--she's broken her knee!"

"_What_?"

"She fell down the cellar stairs and----"

"Where is she?" Lunch-pail and hat went down on the floor as Lanse got rid of them and seized Charlotte's arm.

"Up in her room. Doctor Churchill's there. He's sent for Doctor Forester."

"Churchill--Forester," repeated Lanse, as if dazed. "Poor old girl--is she much hurt?"

"She's broken her knee, I tell you," Charlotte repeated. "Of course she's much hurt. She's suffering dreadfully. She hit her head, too. She was unconscious at first. I was all alone with her."

Lanse started for the door, then hesitated. "Shall I go up?"

"The doctor wants to see you as soon as you are home. He's waiting for Doctor Forester. He's made Celia as comfortable as he can, but wants our regular doctor here, he says, before he does up her knee. I don't see why. I wanted him to fix it himself."

"That's all right," said Lanse. "Doctors always do that kind of thing--the honourable ones do. It's better to have Doctor Forester see it, too. Did you get him? Will he be here right off?"

"The doctor got him. He'll be here soon."

"Go tell Doctor Churchill I'm here, will you? Maybe I'd better not see Celia till I'm cleaned up a bit. She's not used to me like this. Poor little girl! poor little girl!" he groaned, as he made his rapid way to the bath-room. "The cellar stairs--they're dark and steep enough, but how could a light-footed girl like Celia get a fall like that? And father and mother--how are we going to fix it with them?"

In the midst of his splashing and scrubbing he heard Jeff and Justin come shouting in for supper and Charlotte hushing them and telling them the news. The next instant Jeff was upon him.

"Say, but this is awful, Lanse! She was getting up a rattling good dinner, too--been at it all day. Her one idea was to please you, your first day at the shops. Been up to see her? Charlotte says I'd better not go yet--nor Just. Just's all broken up, poor youngster! Says Celia told him to go after the pickles, and he forgot it. If he'd gone she wouldn't have got her tumble. What'll father and mother say? What are we going to do, anyhow? Second Fiddle's no good on earth in the kitchen; she couldn't boil an egg. Say, breaking your knee-pan's no joke. Price Williston did it a year ago August, and he hasn't got good use of it yet,--'fraid he never will----"

"Oh, let up on that,"--Lanse cut him short,--"and don't mention it again to anybody. Doctor Forester and Churchill will fix her up all right, only it's an awful shame it should have happened. I'm going up to see Doctor Churchill."

At the foot of the stairs he met that person coming down, shook hands with him eagerly, and listened to a brief and concise account of his sister's injury. As it ended, Doctor Forester's automobile rolled up to the door.

"Did the five and a half miles in precisely twenty minutes," said Doctor Forester, as he came up the steps, watch in hand; "slow speed within limits and all. Lanse, my boy, this is too bad. Doctor Churchill--very glad to see you again. Decided to settle out here, eh? Well, on some accounts I think you're wise. Charlotte, little girl, cheer up! There are worse things than a fractured patella--I believe that's what you called the injury, Doctor Churchill."

In such genial fashion the surgeon and old friend of the family made his entry, bringing with him that atmosphere which men of his profession carry about with them, making the people who have been anxiously awaiting them feel that here is somebody who knows how to take things coolly, and is not upset at the notion of a broken bone.

He moved deliberately up-stairs toward Celia's room, listening to the younger physician's statement of the conditions under which he had been called, turning at the door to smile and nod back at Charlotte, who watched him from the top of the staircase with serious eyes.

At the end of what seemed like a long period of time the two physicians came down-stairs together, meeting Lanse at the foot.

"Well, sir," said Doctor Forester, "so far, so good. Celia is as comfortable as such cases usually are an hour or two afterward, which is not saying much from her point of view, though a good deal from ours. She has a long siege of inactivity before her to put that knee into a strong condition, but it will not be a great while before she can be about on crutches, I hope. Doctor Churchill, at my insistence, has put up the knee in the best possible shape, and I am going to leave it in his care. I'll drop in now and then, but the doctor is right beside you, and I've full confidence in him. I knew his father, and I know enough about him to be sure that you're all right in his hands."

Lanse drew a long breath of relief. "I'm very thankful it's no worse," he said. "But, Doctor Forester, what are we to do about father and mother? We can't tell them----"

"Tell them! No!" said Doctor Forester, with decision. "I wouldn't have your mother told under any consideration, so long as the girl does well. She would be back here on the next train and then we'd have something worse than a broken patella on our hands. If there is any way by which you can let your father know I should do that."

"I can, I think," said Lanse, thoughtfully. "We're to send them general-delivery letters until they're settled, and father will get those at the post-office and read them first."

"As to your other problems--housekeeping and all that, over which Celia is several times more worried than over her own condition--can you figure those out?"

"Yes, somehow."

"Good! Go up and tell her so. She thinks the house is going to destruction without her. Good chance for the second violin. Too bad that clever little orchestra will have to drop its practice for a few weeks. I meant to run in some evening soon and hear you play. Well, I'm overdue at the hospital. Good-by, Lanse--Doctor Churchill. Keep me posted concerning the knee."

Then the busy surgeon, who had put off several engagements to come out to the suburban town and look after the family of his old friend, whom he had known and loved since their college days, was off in his runabout, his chauffeur getting promptly under as much headway as the law allows, and rushing him out of sight in a hurry.

Lanse turned to Doctor Churchill, who stood upon the porch beside him, hat and case in hand.

"I'm mighty thankful you were so near," he said.

"Doctor Forester hasn't given you much choice," said the other man,

smiling. "I did my best to give you the chance of having some one of the physicians you know here in town take charge of the case, but he insisted on my keeping it. I should like, however, to be sure that you are satisfied. You don't know me at all, you know."

The steady eyes were looking keenly at Lanse, and he felt the sincerity in the words. He returned the scrutiny without speaking for an instant; then he put out his hand.

"Somehow I feel as if I do," he said, slowly. "Anyhow, I'm going to know you, and I'm glad of the chance."

"Thank you." Doctor Churchill shook hands warmly and went down the steps. "I will come over for a minute about ten o'clock," he added, "to make sure that Miss Birch is resting as quietly as we can hope for to-night."

Lanse watched the broad-shouldered, erect figure cross the lawn and disappear in the office door of the old house near by; then he turned.

"Well, we're in a sweet scrape now, that's certain," he said gloomily to himself, as he marched up-stairs.

At the top he encountered his young brother Justin. That twelve-year-old stood awaiting him, his face so disconsolate that in spite of himself Lanse smiled.

"Cheer up, youngster," he said. "It's pretty tough, but as Doctor Forester says, it might be worse. Want to go in with me and see sister a minute?"

But Justin got hold of his arm and held him back. "Lanse, I've got to tell you something," he begged. "Please come here, in your room a minute."

Lanse followed, wondering. Justin, although a healthy and happy boy enough, was apt to take things seriously, and sometimes needed to be joked out of singular notions. In Lanse's room Justin carefully locked the door.

"It's all my fault, Celia's knee," he said, going straight to the point, as was his way. His voice shook a little, but he went steadily on. "She sent me down cellar after pickles, and I sat on the top of the stairs finishing up a banana before I went. I've been down there to look, and--and the banana skin was there--all mashed. It was what did it."

He choked, and turned away to the window.

"You left a banana skin on those stairs?" Lanse half-shouted.

"Yes."

"Right there, at the top--when Delia almost broke her neck more than once going down those stairs only last winter, just because they're so steep and narrow?"

Just nodded.

"And you fell on a banana skin once yourself, and wanted to thrash the

fellow who left it!"

Just's chin sank lower and lower.

Lanse eyed him a moment, struggling with a desire to seize the boy and punish him tremendously. But as his quick wrath cooled a trifle in his effort to control himself and act wisely, something about Just's brave acknowledgment, where silence would have covered the whole thing, appealed to him. The thought of the way the absent father and mother had met every confession of his own that he could remember in a life of prank-playing softened the words which came next to his lips.

"Well, it's pretty bad," he said, in a deep voice of regret. "I don't wonder it breaks you up. Such a little thing to do so much mischief--and so easy to have avoided it all. I reckon you'll take care of your banana skins after this. But I like the way you own up, Just, and so will Celia. That's something. You haven't been a sneak in addition to being thoughtless. It would have been hard to forgive you if I had found it out while you kept still. It's pretty hard as it is," he could not help adding, as his imagination pictured Celia spending her winter as a cripple.

Just said not a word, but the outline of his profile against the fading light at the window was so suggestive of boyish despair that the elder brother walked over to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It gives you a chance to make it up to her in every way you can," he said. "There are a lot of things you can do for her, and I shall expect you to try to square the account a little."

"I will! Oh, I will!" cried poor Just, who had longed for his mother in this crisis, and had found facing the elder brother, whom he both admired and feared, harder than anything he had ever had to do. "I'll do anything in the world for her, if she'll only forgive me."

"She'll forgive you, for she's made that way. It's forgiving yourself that can't be done."

"I never shall."

"Don't. If I thought you would, I'd thrash you on the spot," said Lanse, grimly, sure that a wholesome remorse was to be encouraged. Then he relented sufficiently to say in a tone considerably less severe:

"Go and wash up, and begin your good resolutions by getting down and seeing to the kitchen fire. It's undoubtedly burnt itself out by this time. There's probably no dinner for anybody, but we can't mind little things like that to-night."

He went to Celia's room at last, feeling many cares upon him, a sensation which an empty, stomach did not tend to relieve. He found his sister able to give him a very pale-faced but courageous smile, and to receive his earnest sympathy with a faint:

"Never mind, dear. Don't worry. It might have been worse."

"That seems to be everybody's motto, so I'll accept it. We'll take courage, and you shall have us all on our knees, since yours are laid up for repairs."

"You haven't had your dinner, Lanse," murmured Celia. She was suffering severely, but she could not relax anything of her anxiety for the family welfare.

"Oh, I forgot there was such a thing as dinner in the world!" cried Charlotte, and was hurrying to the door when Celia called her back. "_Please_ wash that smudge off your face," she whispered, and covered her eyes.

* * * * *

CHAPTER IV

Coming down-stairs from Celia's room, Dr. Andrew Churchill made his way through what had now become somewhat familiar ground to the little kitchen. As he looked in at the door he beheld a slim figure in a big Turkey-red apron, bending over a chicken which lay, in a state of semi-dissection, upon the table. As he watched for a moment without speaking, Charlotte herself spoke, without turning round.

"You horrid thing!" she said, tragically, to the chicken. "I hate you--all slippery and bloody. Ugh! Why won't your old windpipe come out? How anybody can eat you who has got you ready I don't know!"

"May I bother you for a pitcher of hot water?" asked an even voice from the doorway.

Charlotte turned with a start. Her cheeks, already flushed, took on a still ruddier hue.

"Yes, if you'll please help yourself," she answered, curtly, turning back to her work. "I am--engaged."

"I see. A congenial task?"

"Very!" Charlotte's tone was expressive.

"Did I gather that the fowl's windpipe was the special cause of your distress?" asked the even voice again.

Charlotte faced round once more.

"Doctor Churchill," she said, "I never cleaned a chicken in my life. I don't know what I'm doing at all, only that I've been doing it for almost an hour, and it isn't done. I presume it's because I take so much time washing my hands."

She smiled in spite of herself as the doctor's hearty laugh filled the little kitchen.

"I think I can appreciate your feelings," he remarked.

He walked over to the table. "Get a good hold on the offending windpipe, shut your eyes and pull."

"I'm afraid of doing something wrong."

"You won't. The trachea of the domestic fowl was especially designed for the purpose, only the necessary attachment for getting a firm grip on it was accidentally omitted."

"It certainly was." Charlotte tugged away energetically for a moment, and drew out the windpipe successfully. The doctor regarded the bird with a quizzical expression.

"I should advise you to cut up the chicken and make a fricassee of it," he observed.

"I want to roast it. I've got the stuffing all ready." She indicated a bowlful of macerated bread-crumbs mixed with milk and butter, and liberally seasoned with pepper.

"I see. But I'm a little, just a little, afraid you may have trouble in getting the stuffing to stay in while the chicken is roasting. You see--" He paused.

"I suppose I've cut it open too much."

"Rather--unless you're a very good amateur surgeon. And even then--"

"I'm no surgeon--I'm no cook--I never shall be! I--don't want to be!" Charlotte burst out, suddenly, beginning to cut up the chicken with vigorous slashes, mostly in the wrong places.

"Yes, you do. Hold on a minute! That joint isn't there: it's farther down. There. See? Once get the anatomy of this bird in your mind, and it won't bother you a bit to cut it up. Pardon me, Miss Charlotte, but I know you do want to be a good cook--because you want to be an accomplished woman."

Charlotte put down her knife, washed her hands with furious haste, got out a pitcher, poured it full of hot water, and handed it silently to Doctor Churchill without looking at him. He glanced from it to her with amusement as he received it "Thank you," he said, politely, and walked away.

When he came down-stairs fifteen minutes later, he found the slim figure in the Turkey-red apron waiting for him at the bottom. As the girl looked up at him he noted, as he had done many times already in the short two weeks he had known her, the peculiar, gipsy-like beauty of her face. It was a beauty of which she herself, he had occasion to believe, was absolutely unconscious, and in this he was right.

Charlotte disliked her dark skin, despised her black curls, and considered her vivid colouring a most undesirable inheritance. She admired intensely Celia's blonde loveliness, and lost no chance of privately comparing herself with her sister, to Celia's infinite advantage.

"Doctor Churchill," she said, as he approached her, hat in hand, "I was very rude to you just now. I am--sorry."

She held out her hand. Doctor Churchill took it. Charlotte's thick black

lashes swept her cheek, and she did not see the look, half-laughing, half-sympathetic, which rested on her downcast face.

"It's all right," said Doctor Churchill's low, clear voice. "Don't think I fail to understand what it means for the cares of a household like this to descend upon a girl's shoulders. But I want you to know that I--that they are all immensely pleased with the pluck you are showing. I have seen your sister's lunch tray several times since I have been coming here; it was perfect."

"I burned her toast just this morning," said Charlotte, quickly. "And poached the egg too hard. Lanse says the coffee is better, but--oh, no matter--I'm just discouraged this morning, I--shall learn something some time, perhaps, but----" She turned away impulsively. Doctor Churchill followed her a step or two.

"See here, Miss Charlotte," he said, "how many times have you been out of the house since your sister was hurt?"

"Not at all," owned Charlotte, "except evenings, after everything is done. Then I steal out and run round and round the house in the moonlight, just running it off, you know--or maybe you don't know."

"Yes, I do. Will you do something now if I ask you to very humbly?"

Charlotte looked at him doubtfully. "If you mean go for a walk--which is what doctors always mean, I believe--I haven't time."

Doctor Churchill looked at his watch. "It is half past ten. Is that chicken for luncheon?"

"No, for supper--or dinner--I don't know just what it is we have at night now. I simply began to get it ready this morning because I hadn't the least idea in the world how long it takes to cook a chicken." She was smiling a little at the absurdity of her own words.

"And you didn't want to ask your sister?"

"I meant to surprise her."

"Well, of one thing I am fairly confident," said Doctor Churchill, with gravity. "If you take a run down as far as the old bridge and back, there will still be time to see to the chicken. What is more, by the time you get back, all big obstacles will look like little ones to you. Go, please. I am to be in the office for the next hour, and if the house catches fire I will run over and put it out. I could even undertake to steal in the back door and put coal on the kitchen fire, if it is necessary."

"It won't be."

"Then will you go?"

"Perhaps--to humour you," promised Charlotte.

"Thank you! And remember, please, Miss Charlotte, if you are to do justice to yourself and to your family, you must not plod all the time. Plan to get away every day for an hour or two. Go to see your friends--anything--but don't cultivate 'house nerves' at eighteen."

"I'm older than that," said Charlotte, as she watched him go down the steps. He turned, surprised. "But I shall not tell you how much," said she, and closed the door.

Doctor Churchill went straight through his small bachelor house to the kitchen. Here a tall, thin woman, with sharp eyes and kindly mouth, was energetically kneading bread.

"Mrs. Fields," said he, "I wish you would find it necessary to-morrow morning to run in at that door over there"--he indicated the little back porch of the Birch house--"and borrow something."

Mrs. Fields eyed him as if she thought he had taken leave of his senses. "Me--borrow?" she said. "Doctor Andrew--are you----"

"No, I'm not crazy," the doctor assured her, smiling. "I know it's tremendously against your principles, but never mind the principles, for once--since by ignoring them you can do a kindness. Run in and borrow a cup of sugar or something, and get acquainted."

"Who with? That curly-haired girl with the red cheeks? She don't want my acquaintance."

"She would be immensely grateful for it if it came about naturally. Take over some of your jelly for Miss Birch, if that way suits you better, but get to know Miss Charlotte, and show her a few things about cookery. She's trying to do all the work for the whole family, and she knows very little about it."

"I suspected as much. You haven't told me about 'em, and of course, being a doctor's housekeeper, I'm too well trained to ask."

The doctor smiled, for Mrs. Fields had been housekeeper in his mother's family in the days of his boyhood, and she felt it her right to tell him, now and then, what she thought. She was immensely proud of her own ability to hold her tongue and her curiosity in check.

"So I know only what I've seen. You told me the oldest girl had broke her knee, and that's all you've said. But I see this girl a-hanging dish-towels, and opening the kitchen door to let out the smoke each time she's burned up a batch of something, and I guessed she wasn't what you might call a graduate of one of those cooking-schools."

"You must be a bit tactful," warned the doctor. "The young lady is a trifle sensitive, as is natural, over her inefficiency, but she's very anxious to learn, and there's nobody to teach her. She is too independent to go to the other neighbours, but I've an idea you could be a friend to her."

"She looks pretty notional," Mrs. Fields said, doubtfully. "Shakes out her dust-cloth with her chin in the air----"

"To avoid the dust."

"And pulls down the shades the minute the lamp is lighted----"

"So do you."

"I saw her lock the kitchen door in the face of that Mis' Carter the other day, when she caught sight of her coming up the walk."

"See here, Fieldsy, you've been spying on your neighbours," said Doctor Churchill severely. "You despise that sort of thing yourself, so you mustn't yield to it. Go over and be neighbourly, as nobody knows how better than yourself, but don't judge people by their chins or their curls."

He gave her angular shoulder an affectionate pat, looked straight into her sharp eyes for a moment, until they softened perceptibly, said, "You're all right, you know,"--and went whistling away.

"That's just like your impudence, Andy Churchill," said Mrs. Hepsibah Fields to herself, as she laid her smooth loaves of bread-dough into their tins and proceeded energetically to scrape the board. "You always did have a way with you, wheedling folks into doing what they didn't want to just to please you. Now I've got to go meddling in other people's business and getting snubbed, most likely, just because you're trying to combine friendship and doctoring."

But Mrs. Fields, when her work was done, went to look up her best jelly, as Doctor Churchill had known she would do. And twenty-four hours had not gone by before she had made friends with Charlotte Birch.

It was not hard to make friends with the girl if one went at it aright. Mrs. Fields came in as Charlotte was stirring up gingerbread.

"I don't think much of back-door neighbours," Mrs. Fields said, "but I didn't want to come to the front door with my jelly. I thought maybe your sister would relish my black raspberry."

"That's very kind of you," said Charlotte. "You are--I think I've seen you across the way. Won't you come in?"

"No, thank you. You're busy, and so am I. Yes, I'm Doctor Churchill's housekeeper, and his mother's before that."

The sharp eyes noted with approval, in one swift glance as Charlotte turned away with the jelly, the fact that the little kitchen was in careful order. To be sure, it was four o'clock in the afternoon, an hour when kitchens are supposed to be in order, if ever, yet it was a relief to Mrs. Fields to find this one in that condition. Brass faucets gleamed in the afternoon sunlight, the teakettle steamed from a shining spout, the linoleum-covered floor was spotless, and the table at which Charlotte was stirring her gingerbread had been scrubbed until it was as nearly white as pine boards can be made.

"Gingerbread?" said the housekeeper, lingering in the doorway. "I always like to make that. It seems the biggest result for the smallest labour of anything you can make, and it smells so spicy when it comes out of the oven."

"Yes, when it isn't burned," agreed Charlotte, with a laugh. Things had gone fairly well with her that day, and her spirits had risen accordingly.

"Burning's a thing that will happen to the best cooks once in a while. 'Twas just day before yesterday I blacked a pumpkin pie so the doctor

poked his fun at me all the time he was eating it," said the housekeeper, with a tactful disregard for the full truth, which was that a refractory small patient in the office had driven the doctor to require her assistance for a longer period than was consistent with attention to her oven.

"Oh, did you?" asked Charlotte, eagerly. "That encourages me. Doctor Churchill told me he had the finest cook in the state, and I've been envying you ever since."

"Doctor Churchill had better be careful how he brags," Mrs. Fields declared, much gratified. "Well, now, I'll tell you what you do. It ain't but a step across the two back yards. When you get in a quandary how to cook anything--how long to give it or whether to bake or boil--you just run across and ask me. I ain't one o' the prying kind--the doctor'll tell you that--and you needn't be afraid it'll go any further. I know how hard it must be for a young girl like you to take the care of a house on yourself, and I'll be pleased to show you anything I can."

"That's very good of you," said Charlotte, gratefully, as Mrs. Fields went briskly down the steps; and she really felt that it was. She would have resented the appearance of almost any of her neighbours at her back door with an offer of help, suspecting that they had come to use their eyes, and afterward their tongues, in criticism. But something about Mrs. Hepsibah Fields disarmed her at once. She could not tell why.

"This gingerbread is perfect," said Celia, an hour later, when Charlotte had brought up her supper. "You are improving every day. But it frets me not to have you come to me for help. I could plan things for you, and teach you all the little I know. I'm doing so well now, the doctor says I may get down-stairs on the couch by next week. Then you certainly must let me do my part."

But Charlotte shook her head obstinately. "I'm going to fight it through myself. I'd rather. You've enough to do--writing letters."

When Lanse came into Celia's room that evening, his first words were merry.

"What I'm anxious to know," he said, "is what you did with your rice pudding. Charlotte says you ate it--and the inference was that it was good to eat. So I ate mine--manfully, I assure you. But it was a bitter dose."

"Poor little girl! She tries so hard, Lanse. And the gingerbread was very good."

"So it was. It helped take out the taste of the pudding. Did you honestly eat that pudding?"

"See here." Celia beckoned him close. She reached a cautious hand under her pillow and drew out her soap-dish. "Please get rid of it for me," she whispered, "and wash the dish. I couldn't bear not to seem to eat it, so I slipped it in there."

Striving to smother his mirth, Lanse bore the soap-dish away. Returning with it, he carefully replaced the soap and set the dish on the stand, where it had been within Celia's reach. "I wish I had had a soap-dish at

the table," he remarked, "but the cook's eye was upon me, and I had to stand up to it. But see here. I've a letter for you--from Uncle Rayburn."

Celia stretched an eager hand, for a letter from Uncle John Rayburn--middle-aged, a bachelor, and an ex-army officer, retired by an incurable injury which did not make him the less the best uncle in the world--could not fail to be welcome. But she had not read a page before she dropped the sheet and stared helplessly and anxiously at Lanse.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Why, Uncle Rayburn writes that he would like to come to spend the winter with us," answered Celia.

"What luck!"

"Luck--with Charlotte in the kitchen?"

"Uncle Ray is a crack-a-jack of a cook himself. His board bill will help out like oil on a dry axle, and if we don't have a lot of fun, then Uncle Ray has changed as--I know he hasn't."

* * * * *

CHAPTER V

"Two cripples," declared Capt. John Rayburn--honourably discharged from active service in the United States Army on account of permanent disability from injuries received in the Philippines,--"two cripples should be able to keep a household properly stirred up. I've been here five days now, and my soul longs for some frivolity."

He leaned back in his big wicker armchair and looked quizzically across at his niece Celia, who lay upon her couch at the other side of the room. She gave him a somewhat pale-faced smile in return. Four weeks of enforced quiet were beginning to tell on her.

"Some frivolity," repeated Captain Rayburn, as Charlotte came to the door of the room. "What do you say, Charlie girl? Shall we have some fun?"

"Dear me, yes, Uncle Ray," Charlotte responded, promptly, "if you can think how!"

"I can. Is there a birthday or anything that we may celebrate? I've no compunction about getting up festivities on any pretext, but if there happened to be a birthday handy--"

"November--yes. Why, we had forgotten all about it! Lanse's birthday is the fourth. That's--"

"Day after to-morrow. Good! Can you make him a birthday-cake? If not, I--"

"Oh, yes, I can!" cried Charlotte, eagerly. "I've just learned an orange-cake."

"All right. Then we'll order a few little things from town, and have a jollification. Not a very big one, on account of the lady on the couch there, who reminds me at the moment of a water-lily whom some one has picked and then left on the stern seat in the sun. She looks very sweet, but a trifle limp."

Celia's smile was several degrees brighter than the previous one had been. Nobody could resist Uncle Ray when he began to exert himself to cheer people up.

He was a young, or an old, bachelor, according to one's point of view, being not yet forty, and looking, in spite of the past suffering which had brought into his chestnut hair two patches of gray at the temples, very much like a bright-faced boy with an irrepressible spirit of energy and interest in the life about him. It could hardly be doubted that Capt. John Rayburn, apparently invalided for life and cut off from the activity which had been his dearest delight, must have his hours of depression, but nobody had ever caught him in one of them.

"I should like some music at this festival," Captain Rayburn went on. "Is the orchestra out of practice?"

"We haven't played for six weeks," Charlotte said. "And Celia's first violin--"

"You couldn't play, bolstered up?"

Celia shook her head. "I should be tired in ten minutes."

"I'm not so sure of that, but we'll see. Anyhow, I've the old flute here--"

"Oh, fine!" cried Charlotte.

"Suppose we ask Doctor Forester out, and your young doctor here next door, and two or three of your girl friends, and a boy and girl or two for Jeff and Just."

"What a funny mixture, Uncle Ray! Doctor Forester and Norman Carter, Just's chum, and Carolyn Houghton?"

"Funny, is it?" inquired Captain Rayburn, undisturbed. "Now do you know, that's my ideal of a well-planned company, particularly when all the family are to be here. Invite somebody for each one, mix 'em all up, play some jolly games, and you'll find Doctor Forester vying with Norman Carter for the prize, and enjoying it equally well. It sharpens up the young wits to be pitted against the older ones, and it--well, it burnishes the elder rapiers and keeps them keen."

"All right, this is your party," agreed Charlotte, and she went back to her duties.

"You're not afraid it will be too much for you, little girl?" Captain Rayburn asked Celia, whose smile had faded, and who lay with her head turned away.

"Oh--no."

"Mercury a little low in the tube this morning?"

"Just a little."

"Any good reason why?"

"N-no."

"Except the best reason in the world--heavy atmospheric pressure. Knee a trifle slow to become a solid, capable, energetic knee, such as its owner demands. Owner a bit restless, physically and mentally. Plans for the winter upset--second lieutenant winning spurs while the colonel lies in the hospital tent, fighting imaginary battles and trying to keep cool under the strain."

Celia looked round and smiled again, but her head went back to its old position, and tears forced themselves out from under the eyelids which she shut tightly together.

"And a little current of anxiety for the inhabitants of New Mexico keeps flowing under the edge of the tent and makes the colonel fear it's not pitched in the right place?"

Celia nodded.

"Well, that's not warranted in the face of the facts. Latest advices from New Mexico report improvement, even sooner than we could have expected. Then at home--Lanse is conquering the situation in the locomotive shops very satisfactorily. Doctor Churchill told me yesterday that he's won the liking of nearly all the men in his shop--which means more than a girl like you can guess. Jeff and Just are prospering in school, according to Charlotte, who is herself working up in her new profession, and whose last beefsteak was broiled to a turn, as her critical soldier guest appreciates. As for Celia--"

He got to his feet slowly, grasped his two stout hickory canes and limped across the room to the couch, showing as he went a pitiful weakness in the tall figure, whose lines still suggested the martial bearing which it had not long ago presented, and which it might never present again. Captain Rayburn sat down close beside Celia and took her hand.

"In one thing I made a misstatement," he said, softly. "They're not imaginary battles that the colonel lies fighting in the hospital tent. They're real enough."

There was a short silence; then Celia spoke unsteadily from the depths of her pillow:

"Uncle Ray, were you ever mean enough to be jealous?"

The captain looked quickly at the fair head on the pillow. "Jealous?" said he, without a hint of surprise in his voice. "Why, yes--jealous of my colonel, my lieutenants, my orderlies, my privates, my doctors, my nurses--jealous of the very Filipino prisoners themselves--because they all had legs and could walk."

"Oh, I know--I don't mean that!" cried Celia, "Of course you envied everybody who could walk. Poor Uncle Ray! But you weren't small enough to mind because the officers under you had got your chance?"

"Wasn't I, though? Well, maybe I wasn't," said the captain, speaking low. "Perhaps I didn't lie and grind my teeth when they told me about the gallant work Lieutenant Garretson had done with my men at Balangiga. A mere boy, Garretson! The whole world applauded it. If I'd not been knocked out so soon it would have been my name that would have gone into history. Yes, I chewed that to shreds many a sleepless night, and hated the fellow for getting my chance."

Captain Rayburn drew a long breath, while his fingers relaxed for an instant; and it was Celia's hand which tightened over his.

"But I got past that," he said, quietly. "It came to me all at once that Garretson and the other fellows in active service weren't the only ones with chances before them. I had mine--a different commission from the one I had coveted, to be sure, but a broader one, with infinite possibilities, and no fear of missing further promotion if I earned it."

There was a little stillness after that. When the captain looked down at Celia again he found her eyes full of pity, but this time it was not pity for herself. He comprehended instantly.

"No, I don't need it, dear," he said, very gently. "I've learned some things already in the hospital tent I wouldn't have missed for a year's pay. And you, who are to be only temporarily on the sick-leave list, you don't need to mind that the little second lieutenant--"

But the second lieutenant was rushing into the room, bearing on a plate a great puffy, round loaf, brown and spicy.

"Look," she cried, "at my steamed brown bread! I've tried it four times and slumped it every time. Now Fieldsy has shown me what was the matter--I hadn't flour enough. Fieldsy is a dear--and so are you!"

She plunged at Celia, brown bread and all, and kissed the top of her head, tweaked a lock of Captain Rayburn's thick hair, and was flying away when Celia spoke. "You're the biggest dear of anybody," she said, with a smile.

* * * * *

It was getting up a party in a hurry, but somehow the thing was accomplished. Whether Lanse remembered his own birthday at all was a question. When he came home at six o'clock on that day, Charlotte told him that she had special reasons for seeing him in his best.

"Why, you're all dressed up yourself," he observed. "What's up?"

"Doctor Forester's coming out to hear us play," was all she would tell him, and Lanse groaned over the fact that the little orchestra was so out of practice.

When the guests arrived, they found the man with the birthday anxiously looking over scores. He greeted them with enthusiasm.

"Doctor Forester, this is good of you, if we can't play worth a copper

cent. Miss Atkinson! Well this is a surprise--a delightful one! Miss Carolyn, how goes school? How are you, Norman? You'll find Just in a minute. Miss Houghton, now you and I can settle that little question we were discussing. Charlotte, you rogue, you and Uncle Ray are at the bottom of this! Ah, Doctor Churchill! This wouldn't have been complete without our neighbour. Miss Atkinson, allow me to present Doctor Churchill."

Thus John Lansing Birch accepted at once and with his accustomed ease the role of host, and enjoyed himself immensely. Celia, watching him from her couch, said suddenly to Captain Rayburn, who sat beside her:

"This is just what the family needed. If you hadn't come we should probably have gone drudging on all winter without realising what was the matter with us. No wonder poor Lanse appreciates it. He's had a month of hard labour without an enlivening hour. And Charlotte--doesn't she look like a fresh carnation to-night?"

"Very much," agreed the captain, with approving eyes on his younger niece, who wore her best frock of French gray, a tint which set off her warm colouring to advantage. Celia had thrust several of Captain Rayburn's scarlet carnations into her sister's belt, with a result gratifying to more than one pair of eyes.

"Still," remarked the captain, his glance returning to Celia, "I'm not sure that I can say whether a fresh carnation is to be preferred to a newly picked rose. That pale pink gown you are wearing is certainly a joy to the eye."

Celia blushed under his admiring glance. There could be no question that she was very lovely, if a trifle frail in appearance from her month's quiet, and it was comforting to be assured that she was not looking like a "limp water-lily" to-night.

"When are we to hear the orchestra?" cried Doctor Forester, after an hour of lively talk, a game or two, and some remarkable puzzles contributed by Just. The distinguished gentleman from the city was enjoying himself immensely, for he was accustomed to social functions of a far more elaborate and formal sort, and liked nothing better than to join in a frolic with the younger people when such rare opportunities presented.

"Of course we're horribly out of practice and all that," explained Lanse, distributing scores, and helping to prop up Celia so that she might try to play, "but since you insist we'll give you all you'll want in a very few minutes. Here's your flute, Uncle Ray. If you'll play along with Celia it will help out."

It was not so bad, after all. Lanse had chosen the most familiar of the old music, everybody did his and her best, and Captain Rayburn's flute, exquisitely played, did indeed "help out."

Celia, her cheeks very pink, worked away until Doctor Churchill gently took her violin from her, but after that the music still went very well.

"Good! good!" applauded Doctor Forester. "Churchill, you're in luck to live next door to this sort of thing."

"Now that I know what I live next door to," remarked the younger

physician, "I shall know what to prescribe for the entire family on winter evenings."

There could be no question that Doctor Churchill also was enjoying the evening. Helping Charlotte and the boys serve the sandwiches and chocolate, which appeared presently--the chocolate being made by Mrs. Fields in the kitchen--he said to the girl:

"I haven't had such a good time since I came away from my old home."

"It was so nice of Fieldsy to make the chocolate," Charlotte replied, somewhat irrelevantly. Then as the doctor looked quickly at her and laughed, she flushed. "Oh, I don't call her that to her face!" she said, hurriedly.

"I don't think she would mind. That's what Andy Churchill called her, and calls her yet, when he forgets her newly acquired dignity as a doctor's housekeeper. I'm mighty glad Fieldsy can be of service to you. You've won her heart completely and I assure you that's a bigger triumph than you realise."

"She's the nicest neighbour we ever had," said Charlotte, gaily. The doctor paused, delayed them both a moment while he rearranged a pile of spoons and forks upon his tray, and said:

"If you talk of neighbours, Miss Charlotte, there's a certain homesick young doctor who appreciates having neighbours, too."

Charlotte answered as lightly as he had spoken: "With Mrs. Fields in the kitchen and you in here with a tray full of hospitality, I'm sure you seem very much like one of our oldest neighbours."

"Thank you!" he answered, with such a glad little ring in his voice that Charlotte could not be sorry for the impulsive speech. But she found herself wondering more than once during the evening what he had meant by calling himself "homesick."

"See here, Mrs. Fields," called Jeff, hurrying out for fresh supplies, "this is the best chocolate ever brewed! Doctor Forester wants another cup, and all the fellows looked sort of wistful when they heard him ask for it. May everybody have another cup?"

"Well, I must say, Mr. Jefferson!" said Mrs. Fields, in astonishment. "I thought Miss Charlotte was going clean crazy when she would have three double-boilers made. But it seems she knew her friends' appetites. Don't you know it ain't considered proper to pass more than one cup--light refreshments like these?"

"Oh, this isn't any of your afternoon-tea affairs, I can tell you that!" declared Jeff, watching with pleasure the filling of the tall blue-and-white chocolate pot. "People know they are going to get something good when they come here. I warned the fellows not to eat too much supper before they came. Any more of those chicken sandwiches?"

"For the land's sake, Mr. Jeff!" cried Mrs. Fields.

"What's the matter, Jeffy?" asked Charlotte, coming out. Doctor Churchill was behind her, bearing an empty salad bowl.

"I want more sandwiches," demanded Jeff.

"Everybody fall to quick and make them," commanded Charlotte. "Norman Carter and Just have had seven apiece. That makes them go fast."

"Well, I never!" breathed the housekeeper once more. But Charlotte was slicing the bread with a rapid hand. The doctor, laughing, undertook to butter the slices, and Jeff would have spread on the chicken if Mrs. Fields had not taken the knife from his hand.

Ten minutes later Jeff was able to announce that everybody seemed to be satisfied.

"That's a mercy," said Mrs. Fields, handing him a tray full of pink and white ices, Captain Rayburn's contribution to the festivities. "You'd have to give 'em sody-crackers now if they wasn't. Carry that careful, and tell Miss Charlotte to send out for the cake. I'll light the candles."

Doctor Churchill came out alone for the cake. It stood ready upon the table, Charlotte's greatest success--a big, old-fashioned orange "layer-cake," with pale yellow icing, twenty-three pale yellow candles surrounding it in a flaming circle, and one great yellow Marechal Niel rose in the centre.

"Whew-w, that's a beauty!" cried Doctor Churchill. "Did you make it, Fieldsy?"

"Indeed I didn't," denied Mrs. Fields, with great satisfaction. "Miss Charlotte made it herself, and I didn't know but she'd go crazy over it, first for fear it wouldn't turn out right, and then for joy because it had."

The doctor handed it about with a face so beaming that Doctor Forester leaned back in his chair and regarded his young colleague quizzically.

"You make this cake, Churchill?" he asked.

The doctor laughed. "It was joy enough to bring it in," he said.

"Who did make it?" demanded Forester. "It was no caterer, I know."

Charlotte attempted to escape quietly from the room, but Lanse barred the way. "Here she is," he said, and turned his sister about and made her face the company. A friendly round of applause greeted her, mingled with exclamations of surprise. They all knew Charlotte, or thought they did. To most of them this was a new and unlooked-for accomplishment.

"It's not half so good as the sort Celia makes," murmured Charlotte, and would hear no more of the cake. But Celia, in her corner, said softly to Doctor Forester:

"It's going to be worth while, my knee, for the training Charlotte is getting. She'll be a perfect little housekeeper before I'm about again."

"It's going to be worth while in another way too," returned her friend, with an appreciative glance at the face which always reminded him of her mother's, it was so serenely sweet and full of character.

"It is? How?" she asked, eagerly, for his tone was emphatic.

"I have few patients on my list who learn so soon to bear this sort of thing as quietly as you are bearing it," he said. "Don't think that doesn't count." Then he rose to go.

Celia hardly heard the leave-takings, her mind was so happily busy with this bit of rare praise from one whose respect was well worth earning. And half an hour afterward, as Lanse stooped to gather her up and carry her up-stairs to bed, she looked back at Captain Rayburn, who still sat beside her couch, and said, with softly shining eyes:

"The colonel _almost_ wouldn't be the second lieutenant if he could, Uncle Ray."

Lanse, lifting his sister in his strong arms, remarked, "I should say not. Why should he?"

Celia and Captain Rayburn, laughing, exchanged a sympathetic, comprehending glance.

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CHAPTER VI

Three times Jefferson Birch knocked on his sister Charlotte's door. Then he turned the knob. The door would not open. "Fiddle!" he called, softly, but got no reply.

"You're not asleep, I know," he said, firmly, at the keyhole. "I can see a light from outside, if you have got it all plugged up here. Let me in. I've some important news for you."

Charlotte's lock turned and she threw the door open. "Well, come in," she said. "I didn't mean anybody to know, but I'm dying to tell somebody, and I can trust you."

"Of course!" affirmed Jeff, entering with an air of curiosity. "What's doing? Painting?"

The table by the window was strewn with artist's materials, drawings, sheets of water-colour paper and tumblers of coloured water. In the midst of this confusion lay one piece of nearly finished work--the interior of an unfurnished room, showing wall decoration and nothing more. The colouring caught Jeff's eye.

"That's stunning!" he commented, catching up the board upon which the colour drawing was stretched. "What's it for? Going to put in some furniture?"

Charlotte laughed. "No, I'm not going to put in any furniture," she said. "This is just to show a scheme for decorating a den--a man's den. Do you really like it?"

"It's great!" Jeff stood the board up against the wall and backed away,

studying it with interest. "Those dull reds and blues will show off his guns and pictures and things in fine shape. How did you ever think it up?"

Charlotte brought out some sheets of wall-paper, as Jeff thought, but he saw at once that they were hand-work. They represented in full-size detail the paper used upon the den walls. Jeff studied them with interest.

"So this is where you are evenings, after you slip away. You're sitting up late, too. See here, this won't do!"

"Oh, yes, it will. Don't try to stop me, Jeff. I'm not up late, really I'm not--only once in awhile."

"I thought people couldn't paint by artificial light."

"They can when they get used to the difference it makes. But I do only the drudgery, evenings--outlines and solid filling in and that sort of thing."

"Going to show this to somebody?"

"Oh, don't talk about it!" said Charlotte, breathlessly. "If I can get my courage up. You know Mr. Murdock, with that decorating house where the Deckers had their work done? Well, some day I'm going to show him. But I'm so frightened at my own audacity!"

"If he doesn't like this, he's a fool!" declared Jeff, vigorously, and although Charlotte laughed she felt the encouragement of his boyish approval. Putting away her work, she suddenly remembered the excuse her brother had given for forcing his way into her room.

"You said you had important news for me. Did you mean it, or was that only to get in?"

"Oh," said Jeff sitting down suddenly and looking up at her, his face growing grave. "You put it out of my head when I came in. I met the doctor just now. He'd been to see Annie Donohue. She's worse."

Charlotte dropped her work instantly. "Worse?" she said, all the brightness flying from her face. "Why, I was in yesterday, and she seemed much better. Jeff, I must go down there this minute."

"It's after ten--you can't. Wait till morning."

"Oh, no!" The girl was making ready as she spoke. "You'll go with me. Think of the baby. There'll be a houseful of women, all wailing, if anything goes wrong with Annie. They did it before, when they thought she wasn't doing well. The baby was so frightened. She knows me. Of course I must go. Think what mother would do for Annie--after all the years Annie was such a faithful maid."

That brought Jeff round at once. In ten minutes he and Charlotte had quietly left the house. A rapid walk through the crisp January night brought them to the poorer quarter of the town and the Donohue cottage. A woman with a shawl over her head met them just outside.

"Annie's gone," she said, at sight of Charlotte. "Took a turn for the

worse an hour ago. I never thought she'd get well, she's had too hard a life with that brute of a man of hers."

Charlotte stood still on the door-step when the woman had gone on. She was thinking hard. Jeff remained quiet beside her. Charlotte had known more of Annie than he; Annie had been Charlotte's nurse.

All at once Charlotte turned and laid a hand on his arm. "Jeff," she said, very softly and close to his ear, "we must take little Ellen home with us to-night."

"What!"

"Yes, we must. She's such a shy little thing. Every time I've been here I've found her frightened half to death. It worried Annie dreadfully."

"Well--but, Charlotte--some of these women can take care of her--Annie's friends."

"They are not Annie's friends; they're just her neighbours. Not Annie's kind at all. They're good-hearted enough, but it distressed Annie all the time to have any of them take care of Ellen. They give her all sorts of things to eat. She's only a baby. She was half-sick when I was here Thursday. Oh, don't make a fuss, Jeff! Please, dear!"

"But you don't know anything about babies."

"I know enough not to give them pork and cabbage. I can put the little thing to sleep in Just's crib. It's up in the attic. You can get it down. Jeff, we must!"

But Jeff still held her firmly by the arm. "Girl, you're crazy! If you once take her, you've got her on your hands. Annie has no relations. You told me that yourself. The child'll have to go to an asylum. It's a good thing that husband of hers is dead. If he wasn't, you'd have some cause to be worried."

"Jeff," said Charlotte, pleadingly, "you must let me do what I think is right. I couldn't sleep, thinking of little Ellen to-night. Besides, when Annie was worrying about her Thursday, I as much as promised we'd see that no harm came to the baby."

Jeff relaxed his hold. "I never saw such a girl!" he grumbled. "As if you hadn't things enough on your shoulders already, without adopting other people's kids!"

* * * * *

Dr. Andrew Churchill opened the door which led from the room of one of his patients into the small, slenderly furnished living-room of the tiny house which had been her home. It was her home no longer. Doctor Churchill had just lost his first patient in private practice.

In the room were several women, gathered about a baby not yet two years old. Over the child a subdued but excited discussion was being held, as to who should take home and, for the present, care for poor Annie Donohue's orphan baby.

Doctor Churchill closed the door behind him and stood for a moment,

looking down at the baby, a pretty little girl with a pair of big frightened blue eyes.

"Well, I guess I'll have to be the one," said the youngest woman of the company, with a sigh. "You're all worse fixed than I am, and I guess we can make room for her somehow, till it's decided what to do with her. Poor Mis' Donohue's child has got to stay somewhere to-night besides here, that I do say."

"Well, that's kind of you, Mary, and we'll all lend a hand to help you out. I'll bring over some extra milk I can spare and---"

A sudden draft of January air made everybody turn. A girlish figure, in a big dark cape with a scarlet lining which seemed to reflect the colour from a face brilliant with frost-bloom, stood in the outer door. The next instant Charlotte Birch, closing the door softly behind her, had crossed the room and was addressing the women, in low quick tones. The doctor she did not seem to notice.

"I've come for the baby," she said, with a gentle imperiousness. "I've just heard about poor Annie. Of course we are the ones to see to little Ellen. If mother were here she would insist upon it. Where are her wraps, please? And has one of you an extra shawl she can lend me? It's a sharp night."

As she spoke, Charlotte knelt before the child and held out her arms. Baby Ellen stared at her for an instant, then seemed to recognise a friend and lifted two little arms, her tiny lips quivering. Charlotte drew her gently up, and rising, walked away across the room with her, the small golden head nestling in her neck. The women looked after her rather resentfully.

"I suppose the child wouldn't be sufferin' with such as us," said one, "if we ain't got no silk quilts to put over her."

"Neither have I," said Charlotte, with a smile, as she caught the words. "But I'm so fond of her. Annie was my nurse, you know."

"May I carry her home for you?" asked the doctor, at her elbow.

"Jeff is here," she answered.

But it was the doctor who carried the baby, after all, for she cried at sight of Jeff. She was ready to cry at sight of any strange face, poor little frightened child! But Doctor Churchill held her so tenderly and spoke so soothingly that she grew quiet at once.

It was a silent walk, and it was only as they reached the house that the doctor said softly to Charlotte, "If you need advice or help, don't hesitate to call on Mrs. Fields. She's a wise woman, and her heart is warm, you know."

"Yes, I know, thank you! And thank you, doctor, for--not scolding me about this!"

"Scold you?" he said, as Charlotte took the baby from him at the door. "Why should I do that?"

"Jeff did, and I didn't dare tell Lanse."

"If you hadn't brought the baby home," whispered the doctor, "I should have." And Charlotte, looking quickly up at him as Jeff opened the door and the light streamed out upon them, surprised upon his face, as his eyes rested upon the baby's pink cheek, an expression which could hardly have been more tender if he had been Ellen's father.

"Now, Jeffy, get the crib down, please, as softly as you can," begged Charlotte, when she had laid the baby on her own white bed and noiselessly closed the door. Jeff tried hard to do her bidding, but the crib did not get down-stairs without a few scrapings and bumpings, which made Charlotte hold her breath lest they rouse a sleeping household.

"Now go down and warm some milk for her in the blue basin. Don't get it hot--just lukewarm. Put the tiniest pinch of sugar in it."

"You seem to know a lot about babies," Jeff murmured, pausing an instant to watch his sister gently pulling off the baby's clothes.

"I do. Didn't I have the care of you?" answered Charlotte, with a mischievous smile.

"Two years younger than yourself? Oh, of course, I forgot that," and Jeff crept away down-stairs after the milk. It took him some time, and when he came tiptoeing back he found the baby in her little coarse flannel nightgown, her round blue eyes wide-awake again.

"She seems to accept you for a mother all right," he commented, as Charlotte held the cup to the baby's lips, cuddling her in a blanket meanwhile. But the girl's eyes filled at this, remembering poor Annie, and Jeff added hastily, "What'll happen if she wakes up and cries in the night? Babies usually do, don't they?"

"Annie has always said Ellen didn't, much, and she's getting to sleep so late I hope she won't to-night. I don't feel equal to telling the others what I've done till morning," and Charlotte smiled rather faintly. Now that she had the baby at home she was beginning to wonder what Lanse and Celia would say.

"Never mind. I'll stand by you. You're all right, whatever you do--if I did think you were rather off your head at first," promised Jeff, sturdily. He was never known to fail Charlotte in an emergency.

Whether it was the strange surroundings or something wrong about the last meal of the day cannot be stated, but Baby Ellen did wake up. It was at three o'clock in the morning that Charlotte, who, excited by the strangeness of the situation, had but just fallen asleep, was roused by a small wail.

The baby seemed not to know her in the trailing blue kimono, with her two long curly braids swinging over her shoulders, and in spite of all that Charlotte could do, the infantile anguish of spirit soon filled the house.

Charlotte walked the floor with her, alternately murmuring consolation and singing the lullabies of her own childhood; but the uproar continued. It is astonishing what an amount of disturbance one small pair of lungs can produce. It was not long before the anxious nurse, listening with both ears for evidences that the family were aroused,

heard the tap of Celia's crutches, which the invalid had just learned to use. And almost at the same moment Lanse's door opened and shut with a bang.

"Here they come!" murmured Charlotte, trying distractedly to hush the baby by means which were never known to have that effect upon a startled infant in a strange house.

Her door swung open. Celia stood on the threshold, her eyes wide with alarm. Lanse, lightly costumed in pink-and-white pajamas, gazed over her shoulder.

"Charlotte Birch!" cried Celia, and words failed her. But Lanse was ready of speech.

"What the dickens does this mean?" he inquired, wrathfully. "Have we become an orphanage? I thought I heard singular sounds just after I got to bed. Is there any good reason why the family shouldn't be informed of what strange intentions you may have in your brain before you carry them out? Whose youngster is it, and what are you doing with it here?"

Charlotte's lips were seen to move, but the baby's fright had received such an accession from the appearance of two more unknown beings in the room that nothing could be distinguished. What Charlotte said was, "Please go away! I'll tell you in the morning." But the visitors, failing to catch the appeal, not only did not go away, but moved nearer.

"Why, it's Annie Donohue's baby!" cried Celia, and shrieked the information into Lanse's ear. His expression of disfavour relaxed a degree, but he still looked preternaturally severe. Celia hobbled over to the baby, and sitting down in a rocking-chair, held out her arms. But Charlotte shook her head and motioned imperatively toward the door.

At this instant Jeff, in a red bathrobe, appeared in the doorway, grasped the situation, nodded assurance to Charlotte, and hauled his elder brother across the hall into his own room, where he closed the door and explained in a few terse sentences:

"Annie died last night--to-night. We heard of it late, and Charlotte thought she wouldn't disturb anybody. The doctor was there. He carried the baby home. We couldn't leave her there. She was scared to death. She knows Fiddle, and she'll grow quiet now if you people don't stand round and insist on explanations being roared at you."

"But we can't keep a baby here," began Lanse, who had come home late, unusually tired, and was feeling the customary masculine displeasure at having his hard-earned rest broken--a sensation which at the moment took precedence over any more humanitarian emotions.

"We don't have to settle that to-night, do we?" demanded Jeff, with scorn. "Hasn't the poor girl got enough on her hands without having you scowl at her for trying to do the good Samaritan act--at three o'clock in the morning?"

Jeff next turned his attention to Celia. He went into Charlotte's room, picked up his elder sister without saying "by your leave," and carried her off to her own bed.

"But, Jeff, I could help Charlotte," Celia remonstrated. "The poor baby

may be sick."

"Don't believe it. She's simply scared stiff at kimonos and pajamas and bathrobes stalking round her in a strange house. Charlotte can cool her down if anybody can. If she can't, I'll call the doctor. Now go to sleep. Charlotte and I will man the ship to-night, and in the morning you can go to work making duds for the baby. It didn't have anything to wear round it but a summer cape and Mrs. O'Neill's plaid shawl."

This artful allusion touched Celia's tender heart and set her mind at work, as Jeff had meant it should; so putting out her light, he slipped away to Charlotte, exulting in having so promptly fixed things for her.

But Charlotte met him with anxious eyes. The baby was still screaming.

"See how she stiffens every now and then, and holds her breath till I think she'll never breathe again!" she called in his ear. "I do really think you'd better call Mrs. Fields. You can wake her with a knock on her window. She sleeps in the little wing down-stairs."

As he hurried down the hall, the door of Captain Rayburn's room opened, and Jeff met the quiet question, "What's up, lad?"

He stopped an instant to explain, encountered prompt sympathy, and laid a hasty injunction upon his uncle not to attempt to assist Charlotte in her dilemma. That gentleman hobbled back to bed, smiling tenderly to himself in the dark--why, if he had seen him, Jeff never would have been able to guess.

* * * * *

CHAPTER VII

"I've got a sewing-machine that I know the kinks of," said Mrs. Fields to Celia and Charlotte and the baby, who regarded her with interest from the couch, where they were grouped. "The doctor's going to be away all day to-morrow, and if you'll all come over, we can get through a lot of little clothes for the baby. Land knows she ain't anyway fixed for going outdoors in all kinds of weather, the way the doctor wants her to."

This was so true that it carried weight in spite of the difficulties in the way. So before he went off to school on a certain February morning, Jeff had carried Celia across to Mrs. Field's sitting-room, and by ten o'clock three busy people were at work. Captain Rayburn had begged to be of the party, and although Mrs. Fields received with skepticism his declaration that he could do various sorts of sewing with a sufficient degree of skill, she allowed him to come, on condition that he look after the baby.

"Well, for the land's sake!" cried the forewoman of the sewing brigade, as she opened the big bundle Captain Rayburn had brought with him. "I should say you haven't left much for us to do!"

The captain regarded with complacency the finished garments she was holding up.

"Yes," said he, "I telephoned the big children's supply shop to send me what Miss Ellen would need for out-of-doors. It seemed a pity to have her stay in another day, waiting to be sewed up. Aren't they right? I thought the making of her indoor clothes would be enough."

Celia and Charlotte were exclaiming with delight over the pretty, wadded white coat which Mrs. Fields held aloft. There was a little furry hood to match, mittens, and a pair of leggings of the sort desirable for small travellers.

"If he hasn't remembered everything!" cried Mrs. Fields, when this last article of apparel came to view. "Well, sir, I won't say you haven't saved us quite a chore. I've got the little flannel petticoats all cut out. Doctor Churchill bought flannel enough to keep her covered from now till she's five years old. Talk about economy--when a man goes shopping!"

Mrs. Fields plunged into business with a will. The sewing-machine hummed ceaselessly. Celia, with rapid, skillful fingers, kept pace with her in basting and putting together, and Charlotte--well, Charlotte did her best. Meanwhile Captain Rayburn and the baby explored together mysterious realms of pockets and picture-books.

"For the land's sake, Miss Charlotte!" cried Mrs. Fields, suddenly, in the middle of the morning. "If you ain't made five left sleeves and only one right!"

Charlotte looked up, crimsoning. "How could I have done it?"

"Easy enough." Mrs. Field's expression softened instantly at sight of the girl's dismay. "I've done it a good many times. Something about it--sleeves act bewitched. They seem bound to hang together and be all one kind or all the other, anything but pairs."

"Why don't you rest a little, and take baby outdoors in her new coat?" Celia suggested. "Sewing is such wearisome work, if one isn't used to it."

So Charlotte and her charge gladly went out. A neighbour had lent an old baby sled, and in it Miss Ellen Donohue, snuggled to the chin in the warmest of garments and wrappings, took her first airing since the night, a week before, when she had been brought home in Doctor Churchill's arms.

She was a shy but happy baby, and had already won all hearts. Nobody was willing to begin the steps necessary to place her in any of the institutions designed for cases like hers. Charlotte, indeed, would not hear of it; and even the practical John Lansing, who had learned to figure the family finances pretty closely since he himself had become the wage-earner, succumbed to the touch of baby fingers on his face and the glance of a pair of eyes like forget-me-nots.

As for Captain Rayburn, he was the baby's devoted slave at all times, his most jealous rival being Dr. Andrew Churchill, who was constantly inventing excuses for coming in for a frolic with Baby Ellen.

"If the doctor could look in on us now," observed Mrs. Fields, suddenly, in the middle of the afternoon, when Charlotte was again bravely trying

to distinguish herself at tasks in which she was by no means an adept, "he'd be put out with me for having this party a day when he was away. He sets great store by anything that looks like a lot of people at home."

"Is he one of a large family?" Celia asked.

"He was two years ago. Since then he's lost a brother and a sister and his mother. His father died five years ago. He has a married brother in Japan, and an unmarried one in South Africa. There ain't anybody in the old home now. It broke up when his mother died, two years ago. He hasn't got over that--not a bit. She was going to come and live with him here. It was a town where she used to visit a good deal, and since he couldn't settle near the old home, because it wasn't a good field for young doctors, she was willing to come here with him. That's why he's here now, though I suppose it don't begin to be as advantageous a place for him as it would be in the city itself. He thought a terrible lot of his mother, Andy did. Seems as if he wanted to please her now as much as ever. And he has some pretty homesick times, now and then, though he doesn't show it much."

It was the first time the doctor's housekeeper had been so communicative, and her three hearers listened with deep interest, although they asked few questions, made only one or two kindly comments, and did not express half the sympathy they felt. Only Captain Rayburn, thoughtfully staring out of the window, gave voice to a sentiment for which both his nieces, although they said nothing in reply, inwardly thanked him.

"Doctor Churchill is a rare sort of fellow," he said. "Doctor Forester considers him most promising, I know. But better than that, he is one whose personality alone will always be the strongest part of his influence over his patients, winning them from despair to courage--how, they can't tell. And the man who can add to the sum total of the courage of the human race has done for it what it very much needs."

A few minutes after this little speech the subject of it quite unexpectedly came dashing in, bringing with him a great breath of February air. He stopped in astonishment upon the threshold.

"If this isn't the unkindest trick I ever heard of!" he cried, his brilliant eyes flashing from one to another. "I suppose that arch-traitor of a Fieldsy planned to have you all safely away before I came home. I'm thankful I got here two hours before she expected me. See here, you've got to make this up to me somehow."

"Sit down!" invited Captain Rayburn. "You may hem steadily for two hours on flannel petticoats. If that won't make it up to you I don't know what will."

"No, it won't," retorted the doctor. "Sewing's all right in its way, but I've just put up my needle-case, thank you, and no more stitching for me to-day. I want--a lark! I want to go skating. Who'll go with me?"

"By the process of elimination I should say you would soon get at the answer to that," remarked the captain. "There seems to be just one candidate for active service in this company--unless Mrs. Fields--I've no doubt now that Mrs. Fields----"

"Will you go?" Doctor Churchill turned to Mrs. Fields. She glanced up into his laughing eyes.

"Run along and don't bother me," she said to him. "Take that child there. She's about got her stent done, I guess."

Doctor Churchill looked at the curly black head bent closely over the last of the little sleeves.

"You don't deceive me, Miss Charlotte," said he. "You're not as wedded to that task as you look. Please come with me. There's time for a magnificent hour before you have to put the kettle on. Miss Birch, I wish we could take you, too. Next winter--well, that knee is doing so well I dare to promise you all the skating you want."

Celia looked up at him, smiling, but her eyes were wistful.

"Doctor," cried Captain Rayburn, "telephone to the stables for a comfortable old horse and sleigh, will you? Celia, girl, we'll go, too."

"And I'll look after Ellen," said Mrs. Fields, before anybody could mention the baby. "Go on, all of you."

"May we all come back to supper with you?" asked Doctor Churchill, giving her a glance with which she was familiar of old.

"If you'll send for some oysters I'll give you all hot stew," she said, and received such a chorus of applause that she mentally added several items to the treat.

"Now I can enjoy my fun," whispered Charlotte to Celia, as she brought her sister's wraps, and pulled on her own rough brown coat. "Such a jolly uncle, isn't he?"

"The best in the world. Wear your white tam, dear, and the white mittens. They look so well with your brown suit. Tie the white silk scarf about your neck--that's it. Now run. I'm so afraid somebody will call the doctor out and spoil it all."

Charlotte ran, and found the doctor waiting impatiently, two pairs of skates on his arm. He hurried her away down the street.

"We must get all there is of this," he said. "I feel as if I could skate fifty miles and back again. Do you?"

"Indeed I do. I've wanted to get up and run round the block between every two stitches all day."

"They say the river is good for three miles up. That will give us just what we want--a sensation of running away from the earth and all its cares. And when we get back we'll be ready for Fieldsy's stew."

They found everybody on the river; Charlotte was busy nodding to her friends while the doctor put on her skates. In a few moments the two were flying up the course.

"Oh, this is great!" exulted Doctor Churchill. "And this is the first time you've been on the ice this winter--in February!"

"This is fine enough to make up. I do love it. It takes out all the puckers."

"Doesn't it? I thought you'd been cultivating puckers to-day the minute I saw you--or else I interpreted your mood by my own. Talk about puckers--and nerves! Miss Charlotte, I've done my first big operation in a certain line to-day. I mean, in a new line--an experiment. It was--a success."

She looked up at him, her face full of sympathy. "Oh, I'm so glad!" she said.

"Are you? Thank you! I wanted somebody to be glad--and I hadn't anybody. I had to tell you. It's too soon to be absolutely sure, but it promises so well I'm daring to be happy. It's the sort of operation in which the worst danger is practically over if the patient gets through the operation itself. She's rallied beautifully. And whatever happens, I've proved my point--that the experiment is feasible. Some of the men doubted that--all thought it a big risk. But I had to take it, and now--Ah, come on, Miss Charlotte! Let's fly!"

Away they went, faster and faster--long, swinging strokes in perfect unison; two accomplished skaters with one object in view; working off healthy young spirits at a tension. They did not talk; they saved their breath; they went like the wind itself.

At the farthest extremity of the smooth ice, which ended at a little frost-bound waterfall, they came to a stop. Churchill looked down at a face like a rose, black eyes that were all alight, and lips that smiled with the fresh happiness of the fine sport.

"I've skated at Copenhagen and at St. Petersburg," he said gaily, "to say nothing of Fresh Pond and Lake Superior and other such home grounds. But it's safe to say I never enjoyed a mile of them like that last one. You--you were really glad, weren't you, that it went so well with me to-day?"

"How could I help it, Doctor Churchill?" she answered, earnestly. Ever since coming out she had been remembering the little revelation his housekeeper had made of his life, and it had touched her deeply to know why he had come to settle in the suburban town instead of in the much more promising city field--a question which had occurred to her many times since she had known him.

"I always expected," he went on, in a more quiet way, "to be able to come home and tell my mother about my first triumphs. She would have been so proud and happy over the smallest thing. Her father was a distinguished surgeon--Marchmont of Baltimore. He died only four years ago--his books are an authority on certain subjects. My other grandfather was Dr. Andrew Churchill of Glasgow--an old-school physician and a good one. So you see I come honestly by my love for it all. And mother--how we used to talk it all over--"

He stopped abruptly, with a tightening of the lips, and stood staring off over the frozen fields, his eyes growing sombre. Charlotte's own eyes fell; her heart beat fast with sympathy. She laid the lightest of touches on his arm.

"I know," she said, softly. "Fieldsy told me--a little bit. I'm so

sorry."

He drew a long breath and looked down at her, his eyes searching her face. "You _are_ a little comrade," he said, and his voice was low and moved. Then with a quick motion he seized her hands again and they were off, back down the river. Not so fast as before, and silently, the two skaters covered the miles, and only as they came within sight of the crowd of people at the beginning of the course did Doctor Churchill speak.

"This has been a fine hour, hasn't it?" he said. "Your face looks as if you had lost all the puckers. Have you?"

"Indeed I have! Haven't you?"

"It has done me a world of good. I was wrought up to a high pitch--now I'm cool again. I have to go back to the hospital as soon as supper is over. I shall stay all night."

"When you get back," said Charlotte, "will you telephone me how the case is doing?"

"May I?" he answered, eagerly.

"Of course you may. I shall be anxious till I know."

"I have no business to add one smallest item of anxiety to your list of worries," he admitted. "But it seems so good to me to have somebody care, just now. Fieldsy's a dear soul--I couldn't get on without her, but--Never mind, that's enough of Andrew Churchill for one afternoon. Shall we make a big spurt to the finish? Let's show them what skating is--no little cutting of geometrical spider-webs in a forty-foot square!"

They drew in with swift, graceful strokes, threaded their course through the crowd of skaters, and were soon on their way home. Captain Rayburn and Celia passed them, called back that it was a great day for invalids and children, and reached home just in time for the doctor to carry Celia into the little brick house. Charlotte ran to summon her three brothers, for it was after six o'clock.

Never had an oyster stew such enthusiastic praise. Not an appetite was lacking, not a spoon flagged. Mrs. Fields, moved to lavish hospitality, in which she was upheld by the doctor, produced a chicken pie, which had been originally intended for his dinner alone, and which she had at first designed, when she proposed the oysters, to keep over until the morrow. This was flanked by various dishes, impromptu but delectable, and followed by a round of winter fruit and spongecake--the latter the pride of the housekeeper's heart, and dear to her master from old association.

"If you live like this all the time, Doctor Churchill," said John Lansing Birch, leaning back in his chair at last with the air of a man who asks no more of the gods, "I advise you to keep up a bachelor establishment to the end of your days."

"How would that suit you, Mrs. Fields?" asked the doctor, laughing.

Mrs. Fields, from her place at the end of the table--they had insisted

on having her sit down with them--answered deliberately:

"As long as a man's a man I suppose nothing on earth ever will make him feel so satisfied with himself and all creation as being set down in front of a lot of eatables. Now what gives me most peace of mind to-night is knowing that that little Ellen Donohue, asleep on my bed, has got enough new clothes, by this day's work, to make a very good beginning of an outfit."

"Now, how do you old bachelors feel?" cried Celia, amidst laughter, and the party broke up.

At ten o'clock that evening, when Charlotte had seen her sister comfortably in bed--for Celia still needed help in undressing--had tucked in Just and warned Jeff that it was bedtime, the telephone-bell rang.

Lanse and Captain Rayburn sat reading in the living-room, where the telephone stood upon a desk, and Lanse, who was near it, moved lazily to answer it. But before he could lift the receiver to his ear Charlotte had run into the room and was taking it from him, murmuring, "It's for me--I'm sure it is."

"Well, I could have called you," said Lanse, looking curiously at her as, with cheeks like poppies, she sat down at the desk and answered. With ears wide open, although he had again taken up the magazine he had laid down, he listened to Charlotte's side of the conversation. It was brief, and no more remarkable than such performances are apt to be, but Lanse easily appreciated the fact that it was giving his sister immense satisfaction.

"Hullo--yes--yes!" she called. "Yes--oh, _is_ she? Yes--yes, I'm so glad! Yes--of course you are. I'm _so_ glad! Thank you. Yes--Good night!" Charlotte hung up the receiver and swung round from the desk, her face radiant, her eyes like stars.

"Is she, indeed?" interrogated Lanse, lifting brotherly, penetrating eyes to her face. "Engagement just announced? When is she to be married? I'm glad you're glad--you might so easily have been jealous."

Charlotte laughed--a ripple of merriment which was contagious, for Captain Rayburn smiled over the evening paper, and Lanse himself grinned cheerfully.

"Mind telling us the occasion of such heartfelt joy?" he inquired. But Charlotte came up behind him, laid a warm velvet cheek against his for a moment, patted her uncle on the shoulder, cried, "Good night to you, gentlemen dear!" and ran away to bed.

* * * * *

CHAPTER VIII

Charlotte let little Ellen slide down from her lap, washed and brushed.

"Now, Ellen, be a good girl," she said as she set about picking up the various articles she had been using in the baby's bath and dressing. "Charlotte's in a hurry."

The door-bell rang. Celia was in the kitchen, stirring up a pudding. It was April now, and Celia's knee was so far mended that she could be about the house without her crutches, with certain restrictions as to standing, or using the knee in any way likely to strain it.

It was Charlotte who did the running about, and it was she who started for the door now, after casting one hasty look around the bath-room to make sure that the baby could do herself no harm.

Left to herself, Ellen investigated the resources of the bath-room and found them wanting. After she had thrown two towels, the soap and her own small tooth brush back into the tub from which she had lately emerged, and which Charlotte had not yet emptied, she found her means of entertainment at an end. The other toilet articles were all beyond her reach. She gazed out of the window; there was nothing moving to be seen but a row of Mrs. Fields's dish-towels waving in the wind.

She turned to the door. Charlotte had meant to latch it, but it was a door with a peculiar trick of swinging slowly open an inch after it had apparently been closed, and it had not been latched. Ellen pushed one small hand into the crack and pulled it open.

Charlotte was nowhere to be seen or heard. Across the hall was the door of her room, ajar; and since doors ajar have somehow a singular charm for babies, this one crossed to it and swung it wide.

Here was richness. This was Charlotte's workshop. She slept in a smaller room adjoining, the baby in the crib by her side; and with that smaller room little Ellen was familiar, but not with this. The tiny feet travelled eagerly about, from one desirable object to another. And presently she remembered the big, porcelain-lined bath-tub. There was nothing Ellen liked so well as to throw things into that tub and see them splash.

Two books crossed the hall and made the plunge, one after the other, into the soapy water. Ellen gurgled with delight. Two more journeys deposited a shoe, a hair-brush and a small box, contents unknown, in the watery receptacle. Then Ellen made a discovery which filled her small soul with joy.

Just two days before, Charlotte had completed the set of colour drawings which delineated the wall decoration of four rooms--a "den," a dining-room and two bedrooms. They represented the work of the winter, pursued under the exceeding difficulties of managing a household, and, for the last three months, caring in part for a little child.

But Charlotte had toiled faithfully, with the ardour of one who, having only a small portion of time to give to a beloved pursuit, works at it all the more zealously. And she had gone on from one room to another, in her designing, with the hope that if in one she failed to please those upon whom her success depended, some one of the series might appeal to them, and give her the desired place in their interest.

It was her intention on this very day, after luncheon should be over and she should be free for a few hours, to make the much-dreaded,

wholly-longed-for visit to the great manufacturing house where she was to show her wares.

The drawings lay in a pile upon Charlotte's table, ready to be wrapped. Baby Ellen, spying the pile of drawings, with an edge or two of brilliant colour showing, trotted gaily over to the table. She stood on tiptoe and pulled at the corner nearest her. The drawings fell from the table in a disordered heap on the floor.

The sight of them pleased Ellen immensely. She held one up and shook it in her small fists, slowly and carefully tore a corner off it, and cast the sheet down in favour of the next in order. This she tore cleanly in two in the middle. The paper was tough, to be sure, but the little fists were strong.

Then she remembered that seductive bath-tub. A patter of little feet, a laugh of pleasure--"Da!" cried Ellen, gleefully---and the first sheet was in.

Seven trips, pursued with vigour and growing hilarity, and Charlotte's work had received its initial plunge into a new state of being. Four of the drawings had been torn in two. The bath-tub was a mass of softly blending colours.

Charlotte came running back up the stairs, her mind, which had been held captive by a young caller, reverting with some anxiety to the small person whom she had left, as she thought, shut up in the safe bath-room. She expected to hear Ellen crying, as was likely to be the case when left alone without sufficient means of amusement; but the silence, as she flew up-stairs, alarmed her. Silence was almost sure to mean mischief.

The bath-room door was ajar. Charlotte pushed it open and looked in. One glance showed her the havoc which had been wrought. She stopped short, staring with wild eyes into the bath-tub; then she caught her treasures out of it, held them dripping before her for an instant, and let them drop on the floor. She turned and ran out of the room to look for Ellen.

The baby sat calmly on a rug, in the middle of Charlotte's room, engaged in pulling the leaves, one by one, out of a small sketch-book which had been on the table with the drawings. She looked up, a most engaging and innocent expression on her round face, and smiled at Charlotte. But she met no smile in return.

"You little wretch!" breathed Charlotte, between her teeth, as she seized the sketch-book and whirled the baby to her feet. "_Oh!_ Is this the way you pay me for all I've done for you? You _wicked--cruel--heartless_----"

It was the explosion of a blind wrath which made the girl shake the tiny form until Baby Ellen roared lustily. Charlotte set her upon the floor again, and stood looking down at her with blazing eyes. The small head was clasped in two little fists, as the child tore at her yellow curls, her infant soul stirred to indignation and fright at this most unexpected treatment. Suddenly Charlotte seized her again and bore her swiftly away to Captain Rayburn's room.

"Take care of her for an hour? Surely. But what's the matter?"

It was small wonder he asked, for Charlotte's face was white, her eyes brilliant, and her lips quivering as she spoke:

"It's nothing--only baby has spoiled something of mine, and I'm so angry I don't dare trust myself with her."

She dropped little Ellen in his arms and fled, leaving her uncle to think what he might. He looked grave as he soothed the baby, whose small breast still heaved convulsively.

"Are you conscientiously trying to do your full share in developing our little second fiddle's capacity to play first?" he asked the baby, with his face against hers. "Never mind, little one, never mind. Baby doesn't know--but John Rayburn does--that this being a means of education to other people is a thankless task sometimes. Don't cry. Aunty Charlotte will kiss her hard and fast by and by, to make up for losing her temper with the little maid. I suspect you were very, very trying, to make Aunty Charlotte look like that."

Charlotte came down-stairs after a time and attended to the luncheon, her lips pressed tight together, her eyes heavy--although not with tears. She would not let herself cry.

Celia had a headache and did not notice, being herself disinclined to talk, and Captain Rayburn forbore to look at Charlotte. But Jeff, when he came in, observed at once that something was amiss. As soon as the meal was over he drew Charlotte into a corner.

"You haven't been to Murdock with the pictures and been--turned down?" he asked.

"No."

"Going this afternoon, aren't you?"

"No."

"Why not? Thought that was the plan."

Charlotte turned away, fighting hard for self-control. Jeff caught her arm.

"See here, Fiddle, you've got to tell me. You look like a ghost. No bad news--from New Mexico?"

"Oh, no--no! Please go away."

"I won't till you tell me what's up. You're not sick?"

Charlotte ran off up-stairs, Jeff following. "Charlotte," he cried, as he pursued her into her room before she could turn and close the door, "what's the use of acting like this? Something's happened, and I'm going to know what it is."

Charlotte sat down in a despairing heap on the floor and hid her face in her hands. Jeff glanced helplessly from her to the table in the corner. Then he observed that it was bare of the pile of drawings.

"Nothing's happened to the wall-paper?" he asked, eagerly.

Charlotte nodded.

"What?"

"Go look up in the attic, if you must know."

Jeff dashed up-stairs, and surveyed the havoc. He came back breathless with dismay.

"How did it happen?"

"Baby--bath-tub."

"The little--_imp_! Are they spoiled?"

"You saw."

"Yes; colours run together a bit on some, others torn in two. Yet they show what they were, Fiddle--I vow they do. I'd take them just as they are, explain the whole thing, and see what comes of it."

Charlotte raised her head to shake it vigorously. "Offer work in such shape as that? I'm not such a goose."

"Got to do them all over?"

Her head sank again. "If I can get the courage."

"Of course you can," declared Jeff, more cheerfully. "You never lack pluck. Poor girl, I'm mighty sorry, though. It's simply tough to have it happen at the last minute. You're all tired out, too--I know you are; you ought never to have to do it all over again."

"If I could just have shown them to Mr. Murdock," said Charlotte, heavily, "and have found out that it was the sort of thing they would like, it wouldn't seem so hard to do them all over again. But to work for weeks more--and then perhaps have it a failure, after all----"

"I know. Well, I've got to be off, or I'll be late. Mid-term exams this week. Cheer up, Fiddle, maybe you can fix 'em up easier than you think."

Late in the afternoon Charlotte came to her uncle for the baby. He had cared for her all day.

"She's safe with you now?" he asked, with a keen look up into her quiet face.

"I hope so." Charlotte's cheek was against the little head; she held the baby tenderly.

"When she is in bed to-night will you come and tell me what she did?"

Charlotte shook her head, with a faint smile. "She wasn't to blame. I left her alone for ten minutes."

"But I should like to know about it," he said, coaxingly. "I have had rather a busy day with Ellen-baby--why not reward me with your confidence?"

But she would not promise; neither did she come. This was exceedingly characteristic of the girl, but Captain Rayburn, his sharp eyes observing in her aspect the signs of misery in spite of a brave attempt to seem cheerful, made up his mind to find out for himself. Twice he encountered her coming down from the attic, and each time she avoided speaking to him.

That night, after everybody was in bed, Captain Rayburn, his canes held under his arm, crept slowly up-stairs, a little electric candle of his own in his pocket. By means of this he soon discovered Charlotte's ruined work, which she had not yet found heart to remove from the place where she had first laid it, trusting to the privacy of a place which was seldom invaded by anybody.

He sat down on a convenient box and studied the coloured plates and sketches. As he looked, his lips drew into a whistle of surprise and admiration, followed by a long breath of pity for what he was sure he understood.

Jeff, having just dropped off into the sound sleep of the healthy boy, found himself gently punched into wakefulness.

"Come to, Jeff, and tell me what I want to know," said Captain Rayburn, smiling at his nephew in the dim white light from the candle. Jeff raised himself on his pillow.

"Wh-what's up?" he grunted, blinking like an owl.

"Nothing serious. What was Charlotte going to do with her colour drawings? Show them to some wall-paper manufacturers?"

"What--er--yes--no. What do you know about it?" Jeff was up on his elbow now, staring at his uncle.

"All about it--except that."

"Charlotte tell you? I didn't think she----"

"She didn't. I guessed--and found out. You may as well tell me the rest."

"Isn't it a shame? Poor girl's worked months on those things; just got 'em done. You ought to have seen them; they were great. I told her she could take them as they were, but she wouldn't hear of it."

"But where were they going?"

"To Mr. Murdock, at Chrystler & Company's office. He saw something of Charlotte's once by chance, through a niece of his who's Charlotte's friend, and he sent word to Fiddle that she ought to cultivate that colour sense, or whatever it was, I forget what he called it--for she had it to an unusual degree. Charlotte has cultivated it for two years since then, and now--oh, confound that baby! That's what you get for trying to be a missionary. I wish we'd sent her to an orphanage right off. What's the use?"

"You don't feel that 'sweet are the uses of adversity'? Sometimes they are, though, son. The little second violin hasn't given in and wailed

about it; I saw no traces of tears."

"No, you're right you haven't," agreed Jeff, proudly. "She's not that sort. She's all broken up, though, inside, and I don't blame her."

"No. Jeff, to-morrow--it's Saturday, isn't it? You must get those drawings early in the morning, while Charlotte is busy with her Saturday baking. We'll have a livery outfit, and you shall drive me down to Chrystler's."

"Uncle Ray! You're a trump! It's just what I said should be done. The work shows perfectly well what she intended, and if a chap like you explains it----"

Captain Rayburn limped away, laughing, his hand red with the tremendous grip his nephew had just given it. It gave him great pleasure to see the way the boy invariably stood by his sister. It was a characteristic of the Birch family, as a whole, which, it may be said, was worth more both to themselves and to the world at large than the possession of almost any other trait.

It was not until dinner was over that Captain Rayburn and his nephew returned, begging pardon for their tardiness, and explaining that they had taken luncheon in the city.

"Fiddle," Jeff said, with a face of preternatural gravity, "come up to Uncle Ray's room when the dishes are done, will you?"

He vanished before his sister could ask why, and before she could see the grin which overspread his ruddy countenance as he turned away. But something he could not keep out of his voice roused her curiosity, and she made quick work of the dishes.

"Come in, come in!" invited Captain Rayburn, and Jeff rose from the couch, where his nose had been buried among some of his uncle's periodicals.

There were always books and magazines by the Score wherever Captain Rayburn settled himself for any length of time.

The ex-soldier and the schoolboy eyed each other doubtfully for an instant as Charlotte dropped into a chair. Her usually bright face was still very sober, and her eyelashes swept her cheek as she waited.

Captain Rayburn nodded at Jeff. The boy stood on one foot, then on the other, pushed his hands deep into his pockets, pulled them out again, cleared his throat, laughed nervously, and strode suddenly across the room to his sister. He thrust out his hand as he came to a halt before her. "Congratulations to the distinguished decorator!" he cried, and came to the end, temporarily, of his eloquence.

Charlotte looked up in amazement. Jeff seized her hand and pumped it up and down. She glanced in bewilderment at her uncle, and met his smile of encouragement.

"Mine, too," he said.

"What--" she began, and her voice stuck in her throat. Her heart began to thump wildly. Then Jeff told it all in one burst:

"Uncle Ray found your stuff in the attic--thought it great--woke me up and ground it out of me what you meant to do with it. He was sure, as I was, it was fit to show, and you ought not to do it all over first. Got a horse, drove into Chrystler's, saw Murdock. He would look at anything, listened to the story about the baby, looked at the stuff. Face changed--didn't it, Uncle Ray?--from politeness to interest, and all the rest of it. Said the work had faults, of course--you expected that, Fiddle--but it showed promise--'great promise,' that's just what he said. He wants to see everything you do. He wants you to come and see him. He thinks he can use at least two of your rooms, after you've made them over. Oh, he was great! You've done it, Fiddle, you've done it!"

But he was not prepared for the way his sister took the good news. She sat looking solemnly at him for a minute; then she jumped up, turned toward Captain Rayburn with a face on fire with conflicting and uncontrollable emotions, then whirled about and was out of the room like a flash.

"Well, if I ever!" declared Jeff, in intense displeasure, staring at his uncle. But Captain Rayburn's face was the picture of satisfaction.

"It's all right, Jeff," said his uncle. "You never can tell what a woman will do, but you can count on one thing--it won't be what you expect."

"You don't suppose she was angry, do you?"

The captain smiled. "No, I don't think she was angry," he said confidently.

The door flew open again. Two impetuous arms were around Jeff's neck from behind, nearly strangling him. A breezy swirl of skirts, and Captain Rayburn feared for the integrity of his head upon his shoulders. And then the two were alone again.

"Christopher Columbus!--discovered America in 1492!" ejaculated Jefferson, an expression of great delight irradiating his countenance. Then he looked at his uncle with an air of superior wisdom. "_Now_ she'll cry," he said.

"I shouldn't wonder if she did," agreed the captain, nodding.

* * * * *

CHAPTER IX

Lanse stood in the kitchen door, lunch-pail in hand. It lacked ten minutes of seven of a June morning; therefore he wore his working clothes. He glanced down at them now with an expression of extreme distaste, then from Celia to Charlotte, both of whom wore fresh print dresses covered with the trim pinafore aprons which were Celia's pride.

"When this siege is over," he remarked, "maybe I won't appreciate the privilege of wearing clean linen from morning till night every day in the week."

"Poor old Lanse!" said Celia, with compassion. "That's been the part that has tried your soul, hasn't it! You haven't minded the work, but the dirt----"

"I hope I'm not a Nancy, either," Lanse went on. "I'm sure I don't feel that my wonderful dignity is compromised by my occupation. Better men than I soil their hands to more purpose every day, but--well, I must be off."

He departed abruptly, leaving Celia standing in the door to wave a hand to him as he turned the corner.

"John Lansing is tired," she said to Charlotte, sisterly sympathy in her voice. "I don't think we've half appreciated what all these months in the shops have meant to him. It isn't as if he were training for one of the engineering specialties, and were interested in his work as practical education in his own line. He'll never have the least use for anything he's learning now."

"He may," Charlotte suggested. "He may marry a girl who will want him to do odd jobs about the house. A mechanic in the family is an awfully desirable thing. Mrs. Fields says there's nothing Doctor Churchill can't do in the way of repairing; and when I told that to Uncle Ray he said that all good surgeons needed to be born mechanics, and usually were. And even though Lanse makes a lawyer, like father, he may need to get out of the automobile he'll have some day, and crawl under it and make it over inside before he can go on."

Celia laughed, and went to call the rest of the family from their beds, early hours having now perforce become the habit of the Birch family.

It was some three hours later that Charlotte sat down for a moment to rest on the little vine-covered back porch. The breakfast work and the bed-making were over, the kitchen was in order, and there was time to draw breath before plunging into the next set of duties.

Celia had gone up-stairs to some summer sewing she had on hand; Captain Rayburn had taken the baby around the corner to a pretty park, where the two spent long hours now, in the perfect June weather; the boys were at school, and the house was very still.

Charlotte stretched her arms above her head, drawing a long breath.

"How long ago it seems that I was free after breakfast to do what I wanted to!" she said to herself. "And how little I realised all the cares that were always on mother! Oh, if it were only time for them to come back--this day--this hour--this minute! I wouldn't mind the work now, if they were only here."

The girl's gaze, fixed wistfully on the leafy treetops above her, suddenly dropped to earth. A man's figure was stumbling along the little path which led diagonally from the back of the Birch premises through a gateway and off toward a back street, the route by which Lanse was accustomed to take an inconspicuous short cut toward the locomotive shops, by the river.

For an instant, only the similarity of the figure to Lanse's struck her, for the wavering walk and bandaged head, with hand pressed to the

forehead, did not suggest her brother. At the next instant the man lifted a white face, and Charlotte gave a startled cry as she saw that it was John Lansing himself, in a sorry plight.

She ran to him. His head was clumsily tied up in a soiled cloth, which the blood was beginning to stain. As she put her arm about him he smiled wanly down at her, murmuring, "Thought I couldn't make it--glad I have. No--not the house--Doctor's office. Don't want to scare Celia. It's nothing."

It might be nothing, but he was leaning heavily on his sister's strong young shoulder as they crossed the threshold of Doctor Churchill's little office, Charlotte having flung open the door without waiting to ring. Nobody was there.

"No, don't try to sit up in a chair. Here, lie down on the couch," she insisted, and Lanse yielded, none too soon. His face had lost all colour by the time he had stretched his tall form on the wide leather couch which stood ready for just such occupants.

Charlotte went back to the door and rang the bell; then, as nobody appeared, she explored the lower part of the house for Mrs. Fields in vain.

Returning, she caught sight for the first time of a little memorandum on the doctor's desk: "_Out. Return 10:30 A.M._" She glanced at the clock. It was exactly quarter past ten.

She studied her brother's face anxiously. The stain upon the cloth was rapidly growing larger. She was sure he ought not to lie there with the bleeding unchecked. She went to the door of the small private office; her eyes fell upon a package labeled "Absorbent Cotton." She opened it, pulled out a handful, and went back to her brother.

She lifted the cloth from his head, and saw a long, uneven gash, from which the blood was freely oozing. Taking two rolls of cotton, she laid one on each side of the wound, forcing the edges together. After a little experimenting she found that by holding her cotton very firmly and pressing in a certain way, the flow of the blood was almost completely checked.

"Does that hurt?" she asked Lanse. He nodded without speaking, but she did not lighten her pressure. She saw that he was very faint.

"I'm sorry it hurts you, dear," she said, "but it stops the blood when I press this way, and I'm sure that's better for you. The doctor will be here soon, and I think I'd better hold it till he comes."

Lanse nodded again, his brows contracting with pain, not only from the pressure upon the wound, but from the reaction from the blow which had caused it.

Charlotte's eyes watched the clock, her hands never relinquishing their task.

"What next?" she was thinking. "Will the time ever be up and father and mother come back to find us all safe? Three more months--three more months----"

Dr. Andrew Churchill came whistling softly across the lawn, glancing at his watch, and noting that he was fifteen minutes later than he had expected to be. In the doorway of his office he came to a surprised halt.

"Miss Charlotte! What's happened?"

Lanse spoke faintly for himself: "Got hit at the shop--wrench slipped out of man's hands above me--nothing much----"

"No--I see," the doctor answered, surveying the situation.

He lifted Charlotte's cotton rolls, noted the character and extent of the injury, and lost no time in getting at work.

"Keep up that pressure just as you were doing, please, Miss Charlotte, while I make things ready. We'll have you all right in a jiffy, Birch."

Two minutes later the doctor had Lanse stretched on a narrow white table in an inner office. "I've got to hurt you quite a bit," he said to his patient. "I don't want to give you an anesthetic, but somebody must hold your head. Shall I call Mrs. Fields?"

He glanced at Charlotte, and met what he had counted on--her help. "No, I can manage," she said quietly.

The doctor was soon ready, with arms, surgically clean, bared to the elbows.

It was rather a bad ten minutes for Lanse that followed, although he bore it bravely, without a sound. The strong, steady support of his sister's hands on the sides of his head never varied, and her eyes watched the doctor's rapid movements with absorbed attention. Doctor Churchill glanced at her two or three times, but met only quiet resolve in her face, which, although pale, showed no sign of weakness.

The injury was a severe one, being no clean cut, but a jagged gash several inches in length, caused by a heavy blow with a rough tool. Charlotte observed that the worker seemed never at a loss what to do, that his touch was as light as it was practised, and that his eyes were full of keen interest in his work. At length Doctor Churchill finished his manipulations and put on the smooth bandages, which, he remarked with a laugh, were to turn Lanse into the image of the Terrible Turk.

"You show all the Spartan attributes of the real martyr," declared the doctor, as he helped his patient back to a couch. "It took pluck to get home here alone. How was it they sent no man with you?"

"Everybody busy. A man was coming with me if I'd let him, but I didn't care for his company so I slipped out. It was farther home than I thought," Lanse explained. "How long will this lay me up? I can go back to-morrow, can't I?"

"Suppose we say the day after. That hammock on your front porch behind the vines strikes me as a restful place for you. A bit of vacation won't hurt you."

By afternoon the ache in John Lansing's head had reached a point where he gladly lay quietly in the hammock and submitted to be waited on by

two devoted feminine slaves. The doctor came over to see him after supper, and found him in a high state of restlessness. He got him to bed, stayed with him until he fell into an uneasy slumber, then left him in charge of Celia, and came so quietly down to the front porch again that he startled Charlotte, who lay in the hammock Lanse had lately quitted.

"Do you need me?" she asked eagerly. "I thought Lanse would rather have Celia with him, and I was sure she wanted to take care of him, so I stayed. But I'm ready, if I'm wanted."

"You're wanted," returned Doctor Churchill, gently, "but not up-stairs just now. Lie still in that hammock; let me fix the pillows a bit. Yes, do, please. Do you know it's positively the first time I've seen you appearing to rest since I've known you?"

"Why, Doctor Churchill!"

"It's absolutely so. You're growing thin under the cares you've assumed. And I suspect, besides the cares, you keep yourself busy when you ought to be resting. Am I right?"

Charlotte coloured in the twilight of the porch, which the thick vines of the wisteria screened from the electric light on the corner, except for a few feet at the end nearest the door. She had been working harder than ever all the spring over her designs for Chrystler & Company, and her cheeks were of a truth somewhat less round and her colour less vivid of hue. She was tired, although she had not owned it, even to herself.

"You see, Doctor Churchill," she said, slowly, "until father and mother went away I had been the lazy one of the family, the good-for-nothing--the drone--and I've not yet learned to work in the quiet way my sister does, which accomplishes so much without any fuss. Now that she can get about again she does twice as much as I do, but she doesn't make such a clatter of tools, and doesn't get the credit for being as busy as I."

"I see. Of course I had a feeling all along that this dish-washing and dinner-getting and baby-tending were mere pretense, and I'm relieved to have you own up to it!"

Charlotte laughed. "After all, one doesn't like to be taken at one's own estimate," she admitted. "I confess I feel a pang to have you agree with me, even in jest."

"Do you know," he said, abruptly, after an instant's silence, "you gave me great pleasure this morning?"

"I? How?"

"By the way you stood by your brother."

"Oh!" said Charlotte, astonished. "But I didn't do anything."

"Nothing at all, except keep cool and hold steady. Those are the hardest things a surgeon can set a novice at, you know."

"But you needed me; and Mrs. Fields was out. You didn't know that, but I did. And I don't think I'm one of the fainting-away kind."

"No, you can stand fire. I think sometimes--do you know what I think?"

Charlotte waited, her cheeks warm in the darkness. Praise is always sweet when one has earned it.

"I believe you would stand by a friend--to the last ditch."

Charlotte was silent for a minute; then she answered, low and honestly, "If he were a friend at all worth having I should try."

"And expect the same loyalty in return?"

"Indeed I should."

"I should like," said Doctor Churchill's steady voice, "to try a friendship like that--an acknowledged one. I always was a fellow who liked things definite. I don't like to say to myself, 'I think that man is my friend--I'm sure he is--he shows it.' No, I want him to say so--to shake hands on it. I had such a friend once--the only one. When he died I felt I had lost--I can't tell you what, Miss Charlotte. I never had another."

There was a long silence this time. The figure in the hammock lay still. But Charlotte's heart was beating hard. She knew already that Doctor Churchill was the warm friend of the family. Could he mean to single her out as the special object of his regard--her, Charlotte--when people like Lanse and Celia were within reach?

Charlotte rose to her feet, the doctor rising with her. She held out her hand, and he could see that she was looking steadily up at him. He gazed back at her, and a bright smile broke over his face.

"Do you mean it?" he said, eagerly. "Oh, thank you!"

He grasped the firm young hand as Charlotte fancied he might have grasped that of the comrade he had lost.

"Can't we take a little walk in this glorious moonlight?" he asked, happily. "Just up and down the block once or twice? Or are you too tired?"

Charlotte was not too tired; her weariness had vanished as if by magic. The two strolled slowly up and down the quiet street, talking earnestly. The doctor told his companion about several interesting cases he had among the children, and of one little crippled boy upon whom he had recently operated. The girl listened with an unaffected interest and sympathy very grateful to the man who had long missed companionship of that sort. An hour went by as if on wings.

Celia came to the door as the two young people were saying good-night at the foot of the steps. The doctor looked up at her with a smile.

"Is the patient quiet?" he asked.

"Yes, only he mutters in his sleep."

"That's not strange. He's bound to be a bit feverish after that blow; but I don't anticipate serious trouble. Let Jeff sleep on the couch in

his room; that will be all that's necessary."

Celia stood looking down at the doctor as her sister came up the steps. "It's strange," she said, "for I know Lanse isn't badly hurt, but all I can think of to-night is how I wish father and mother were here."

"That's been in my head all day," said Charlotte, with her arm around Celia's shoulder.

"I can understand," Doctor Churchill answered them both, and they knew he could. "But just remember that though they were on the other side of the world to stay for years, they can still come back to you. Just to know that seems to me enough."

They understood him. Celia would have made warm-hearted answer, but at that instant the sound of heavy carriage-wheels rapidly rounding the corner and coming toward them made all three turn to look. The carriage came on at a great pace, swerved toward them, and drew in to the curb, the driver pulling in his horses at their door.

"Who can it be?" breathed Celia. "Nobody has written. It must be a mistake."

Charlotte gasped. "It couldn't be--Celia--it _couldn't_ be----"

The driver leaped from the box and flung open the door. A tall figure stepped out, turned toward them as if trying to make sure who they were, then waved its arm. The familiar gesture brought two cries of rapture as Charlotte rushed and Celia hurried down the steps.

The doctor stood still and watched, his pulse quickening in sympathy. He saw the tall figure grasp in turn both the slender ones, heard two eager cries of "_Mother!"_ and beheld the second occupant of the carriage fairly dragged out, to be smothered in two pairs of impetuous young arms. Then he went quietly away over the lawn to his own house, feeling that he had as yet no right to be one of the group about the home-comers.

In his room, an hour later, he stood before the portrait of a woman, no longer young, but beautiful with the beauty which never grows old. He stood looking up at it, then spoke gently to it.

"She's just your sort, dear," he said, his keen eyes soft and bright. "It's only friendship now, for she's not much more than a child, and I wouldn't ask too much too soon. But some day--give me your blessing, mother, for I've been lonely without you as long as I can bear it."

* * * * *

CHAPTER X

"The gentle art of cooking in a chafing-dish," discoursed Captain John Rayburn, lightly stirring in a silver basin the ingredients of the cream sauce he was making for the chopped chicken which stood at hand in a bowl, "is one particularly adapted to the really intelligent masculine

mind. No noise, no fuss, no worry, no smoke, everything systematic,"--with a practised hand he added the cream little by little to the melted butter and flour--"business-like and practical. It is a pleasure to contemplate the delicate growth of such a dish as this which I am preparing. It is----"

"You _may_ have thickening enough for all that cream," Celia interrupted, doubtfully, watching her uncle's cookery with an anxious eye.

"And you _may_ have sufficient mental poise to be able to lecture on cookery and do the trick at the same time," supplemented Doctor Churchill, his eyes also on the chafing-dish. In fact, everybody's eyes were on the chafing-dish.

The entire Birch family, Doctor Churchill, Lanse's friend, Mary Atkinson; Jeff's comrade, Carolyn Houghton; and Just's inseparable, Norman Carter--Just scorned girls, and when asked to choose whom he would have as a guest for Captain Rayburn's picnic, mentioned Norman with an air of finality--sat about a large rustic table upon a charming spot of greensward among the trees of a little island four miles down the river.

A great bowl of pond-lilies decorated the centre of the table; and bunches of the same flowers, tied with long yellow ribbons, lay at each plate.

When Captain Rayburn entertained he always did it in style. And since this picnic had been especially designed to celebrate the home-coming of the travellers, a week after their arrival, no pains had been spared to make the festival one to be remembered.

Mrs. Birch was in the seat of honour, a position which she graced. In a summer gown of white, her face round and glowing as it had not been in years, she seemed the central flower of a most attractive bouquet. Mr. Birch looked about him with appreciative eyes.

"I don't think _I_ could attend to the chafing-dish with any certainty of result," he remarked. "I am too much occupied in observing the guests. It strikes me that nowhere, either in New Mexico or Colorado, did I see any people approaching those before me in interest and attractiveness. Except one," he amended, as a general laugh greeted this extraordinary statement, "and even she never seemed to me quite so----" He hesitated.

"Say it, sir!" cried Lanse. "We're with you whatever it is. I think 'beautiful' is the word you want."

Mr. Birch's face lighted with a smile. "Thank you, that is the word," he said.

The captain stirred his chopped chicken into his cream sauce with the air of a chef. "Now here you are," he said.

The captain would not allow everything upon the table at once, picnic fashion, but kept the viands behind a screen a few feet away, and with Jeff's and Just's assistance, served them according to his ideas of the fitness of things.

Toward the end of the feast a particularly fine strawberry shortcake appeared, which was followed by ice-cream. Altogether, the captain's guests declared no picnic had ever been so satisfactory.

"Isn't the captain great?" said Doctor Churchill, enthusiastically, to Celia, when they had all left the table and were beginning to stroll about. "Cut off from the sort of thing he would like best to do--that he aches to do--he occupies himself with what comes in his way. He would deceive any one into thinking him completely satisfied."

"I'm so glad you understand him," Celia answered. "Everybody doesn't. Just the other day a caller said to me, 'Isn't it lovely that Captain Rayburn is so contented with his quiet life? Whenever I see him sitting in the park with the baby and a book, I think what a mercy it is that he isn't like some men, or he never could take it so calmly.' Calmly! Uncle Ray would give his life to-morrow night if he could have a day at the head of his company over there in the Philippines."

"I don't doubt it for an instant. Since I've known him I've learned more admiration for the way he keeps himself in hand than I ever had for any single quality in any human being. I'm mighty sorry he's going away. It's for a year in France and Italy, he tells me."

"Yes. He's very fond of travel, and I imagine he's a little restless after the winter here. Do you know what I suspect? That he came just so that mother might feel somebody was keeping an eye on us."

"That would be like him. He's immensely fond of you all."

Celia caught sight of her uncle beckoning to her, and went to him. Doctor Churchill saw Mrs. Birch, lying among the gay striped pillows in a hammock which had been brought along for her special use, and went over to her. His eyes noted the direction in which Charlotte was vanishing, but he sat down on a log by the hammock as if he had no other thought than for the gracious lady who looked up at him with a smile.

And indeed he had thought for her. It was impossible to be with her and not give oneself up to her charm.

"I have been wanting to see you alone for a minute, Doctor Churchill," she said. "It has been such a busy week I haven't had half a chance to express to you how I appreciate your care for my little family. And especially I am grateful to you for the perfect recovery of Celia's knee. Doctor Forester has assured me that the knee might easily have been a bad case."

"I am very thankful that the results were good, Mrs. Birch," Doctor Churchill answered.

Nobody interrupted the two for a long half-hour. At the end of it Doctor Churchill rose, his eyes kindling.

"Thank you!" he said fervently. "Thank you! More than that I won't ask--yet. But if you will trust me--I promise you may trust me, little as you know me--you may be sure I shall keep my word, not only to you, but to my mother I know her ideals, and if I can be fit to be the friend of one who fills them----"

Mrs. Birch held out her hand.

"I do trust you, Doctor Churchill," she said. "Not only from what Doctor Forester has told me of your family, but from what I have seen and heard for myself."

With a light heart the doctor went away over the hill to the path which descended to the river. Far down the bank, near the pond-lilies, he had caught a glimpse of a blue linen gown.

Captain Rayburn and Celia came over to establish themselves upon rugs and cushions by the side of the hammock. Mr. Birch, who had been out with Just and Norman in a boat, appeared, sunburned and warm, and joined the party.

"I've been wanting to get just this quartet together," remarked the captain, when his brother-in-law had cooled off and was lying comfortably stretched along a mossy knoll.

"Go ahead, Jack, we are ready to listen. Your plans are always interesting," Mr. Birch replied. "What now?"

"In the first place," began the captain, "I want you people to understand that the person who has had least fun out of this absence of yours is the young woman before you."

"O Uncle Ray!" protested Celia, instantly. "Haven't I had as much fun as you?"

"Hardly. Between Mrs. Fields and Miss Ellen Donohue I don't know when I've been so enlivened. I hardly know which of the two has afforded me more downright amusement, each in her way. But Celia, I tell you, Roderick and Helen, has been one brave girl, and that's all there is of it."

"You'll find no dissenting voice here," Celia's father declared, and her mother added:

"Nobody who knows her could expect her to be anything else."

Celia looked away, her cheeks flushing.

"So now I want her to have her reward," said Captain Rayburn. "Let me take her with me for the year abroad."

Celia started, glancing quickly from her father to her mother, neither of whom looked so surprised as she would have expected. Both returned her gaze thoughtfully.

"How about the going to college?" Mr. Birch questioned. "I thought that was the great ambition."

"She shall have a four year's course in one if she comes with me. I shall spend much time in the libraries and art collections. My friends in several cities are people it is worth a long journey to meet. Undoubtedly such a year would be valuable at the end of a college course, and it may appear to you that the studies within the scholastic walls in this country had better come first. The point is that I am going now. I may not be, at the moment Celia takes her diploma. And the question of her health seems to me also one to be considered. Months of

enforced quiet haven't been any too good for her."

"There's not much need to ask Celia what she would like," Mr. Birch observed.

The girl studied his face anxiously. "But could you spare me?" she asked. "If it means that mother would have to take my place again----"

"It won't mean that," said Captain Rayburn, stoutly. "My plans cover two maids in the Birch household, the most capable to be obtained."

"See here Jack," said Mr. Roderick Birch, quickly, "you can't play good fairy for the whole family--and it's not necessary. As soon as I am at work in the office again this close figuring will be over."

"I want my niece Charlotte to go to her school of design," the captain went on, imperturbably.

"We mean that she shall."

"I wish you people would let me alone!" he cried. "Here I am, your only brother, without a chick or a child of my own. Am I to be denied what is the greatest delight I can have? By a lucky accident my money was safe in the panic that swept away yours. Pure luck or providence, or whatever you choose to call it--certainly not because my business sagacity was any greater than yours. You wouldn't take a cent from me at the time, but you've got to let me have my way now. Celia goes with me--if you agree. Charlotte goes to her art school, and if you refuse me the fun of assuming both expenses, I'll be tremendously offended--no joke, I shall."

He looked so fierce that everybody laughed--somewhat tremulously. There could be no doubt that he meant all he said. Celia's cheeks were pink with excitement; Mrs. Birch's were of a similar hue, in sympathy with her daughter's joy.

"I tell you, that girl Charlotte," began the captain again, "deserves all anybody can do for her. She has developed three years in one. Fond as I've always been of her, I hadn't the least idea what was in the child. She's going to make a woman of a rare sort. Look here!" A new idea flashed into his mind.

He considered it for the space of a half-minute, then brought it forth:

"Let me take her, too. Not for the year--don't look as if I'd hit you, Helen--just till October. I mean to sail in ten days, you know. I've engaged plenty of room. There'll be no trouble about a berth----"

"O Uncle Ray!" Celia interrupted him. There could be no question about her unselfish soul. If she had been happy before, she was rapturous now.

"Three months will give her quite a journey," the captain hurried on, leaving nobody any time for objections. "I'll see that she gets art enough out of it to fill her to the brim with inspiration. And there will surely be somebody she can come back with. May I have her?"

"What shall we do with you?" his sister said, softly. "I can't deny you--or her. If her father agrees----"

"If I didn't know your big heart so well, Jack," said Roderick Birch, slowly, "I should be too proud to accept so much, even from my wife's brother. But I believe it would be unworthy of me--or of you--to let false pride stand in my girls' way."

From the distance two figures were approaching, one in blue linen, the other in white flannel--Charlotte and Doctor Churchill.

They were talking gaily, laughing like a pair of very happy children, and carrying between them a great bunch of daisies and buttercups that would have hid a church pulpit from view.

"Let's tell her now," proposed Celia. "I can't wait to have her know."

"Go ahead," agreed her uncle. "And let the doctor hear it, too. If he isn't a brother of the family, it's because the family doesn't know one of the finest fellows on the face of the earth when it sees him."

"You're a most discerning chap, Jack Rayburn," said his brother-in-law, heartily, "but there are other people with discernment. I have liked young Churchill from the moment I saw him first. All that Forester says of him confirms my opinion."

"How excited you people all look!" called Charlotte, merrily, as she drew near. "Tell us why."

Captain Rayburn nodded to Celia. She shook her head vigorously in return. He glanced at Mr. and Mrs. Birch, both of whom smilingly refused to speak. So he looked up at Charlotte, and put his question as he might have fired a shot.

"Will you sail for Europe with Celia and me week after next, to stay till October? Celia will stay the year with me; you I shall ship home as useless baggage in the fall."

Charlotte stood still, her arms tightening about the daisies and buttercups, as if they represented a baby whom she must not let fall. A rich wave of colour swept over her face. She looked from one to another of the group as if she could not believe her good fortune. Then suddenly she dropped her flowers in an abandoned heap, clasped her hands tightly together, and drew one long breath of delight.

"Can you spare me?" she murmured, her eyes upon her mother.

Mrs. Birch nodded, smiling. "I surely can," she said.

"Turn about is fair play," said Mr. Birch, "and your uncle seems to consider himself a person of authority."

"I want," declared Captain Rayburn, his bright eyes studying each niece's winsome young face in turn, "in the interest of the family orchestra, to tune the violins."

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"Speaking of violins," said the captain, half an hour later, quite as if no interval of busy talk and plan-making had occurred, "suppose we see about how far off the key they are at present. Jeff--Just----"

Everybody stared, then laughed, for Jeff and Just instantly produced, from behind that same screen, five green-flanneled, familiar shapes. The entire company had reassembled under the oak-trees, drawn together by a secret summons from the captain.

"Now see here, Uncle Ray," remonstrated his eldest nephew, "this is stealing a march on us with a vengeance."

"I'm entirely willing you should let a march steal on me," retorted the captain, disposing himself comfortably among his rugs and cushions, "or a waltz, or a lullaby, or anything else you choose. But music of some sort I must have."

Laughing, they tuned their instruments, and the rest of the company settled down to listen. Lanse, his eyes mischievous, passed a whispered word among the musicians, and presently, at the signal, the well-known notes of "_Hail to the Chief_" were sounding through the woods, played with great spirit and zest. And as they played, the five Birches marched to position in front of the captain, then stood still and saluted.

"Off with you, you strolling players!" cried the captain. "The spectacle of a 'cello player attempting to carry his instrument and perform upon it at the same time is enough to upset me for a week. Sit down comfortably, and give us '_The Sweetest Flower That Blows_'."

So they played, softly now, and with full appreciation of the fact that the melodious song was one of their mother's favourites.

But suddenly they had a fresh surprise, for as they played, a voice from the little audience joined them, under his breath at first, then--as the captain turned and made vigorous signs to the singer to let his voice be heard--with tunefully swelling notes, which fell upon all their ears like music of a rare sort:

"The sweetest flower that blows
I give you as we part.
To you it is a rose,
To me it is my heart."

The captain knew, as the voice went on, that those barytone notes were very fine ones--knew better than the rest, as having a wider acquaintance with voices in general. But they all understood that it was to no ordinary singer they were listening.

When the song ended the captain reached over and laid a brotherly arm on Doctor Churchill's shoulder. "Welcome, friend," he said, with feeling in his voice. "You've given the countersign."

But the doctor, although he received modestly the words of praise which fell upon him from all about, would sing no more that day. It had been the first time for almost three years. And "_The Sweetest Flower That Blows_" was not only Mrs. Birch's favourite song; it had been Mrs. Churchill's also.

"See here, Churchill," said Lanse, as the orchestra rested for a moment, "do you play any instrument?"

"Only as a novice," admitted the doctor, with some reluctance.

"Which one?"

"The fiddle."

"And never owned up!" chided Lanse. "You didn't want to belong to such an amateurish company?"

"I did--very much," said Churchill, with emphasis. "But you needed no more violins."

"If I'm to be away all next year," said Celia, quickly, "they will need you. Will you take my place?"

"No, indeed, Miss Celia," the doctor answered, decidedly. "But if you would let me play--second."

He looked at Charlotte, smiling. She returned his smile, but shook her head. "I'm Second Fiddle," she said. "I'll never take Celia's place."

The eyes of the two sisters met, affectionately, comprehendingly.

"I should like to have you, dear," said Celia, softly.

But Charlotte only shook her head again, colouring beneath the glances which fell on her from all sides. "I'd rather play my old part," she answered.

Jeff caught up and lifted high in the air an imaginary glass.

"Here's to the orchestra!" he called out. "May Doctor Churchill read the score of the first violin. Here's to the First Violin! May she hear plenty of fine music in the old country, and come back ready to coach us all. And here's--"

He paused and looked impressively round upon the company, who regarded him in turn with interested, sympathetic eyes. "I say we've called her 'Second Fiddle' long enough," he said, and hesitated, beginning to get stranded in his own eloquence. "Anyhow, if she hasn't proved this year that she's fit to play anything--dishes or wall-paper or babies--" He stopped, laughing. "I don't know how to say it, but as sure as my name's Jefferson Birch she--er--"

"Hear! hear!" the captain encouraged him softly.

"Here's,"--shouted the boy, "here's to the Second Violin!"

Through the friendly laughter and murmurs of appreciation, Charlotte, dropping shy, happy eyes, read the real love and respect of everybody, and felt that the year's experiences had brought her a rich reward. But all she said, as Jeff, exhausted by his effort at oratory, dropped upon the grass beside her, was in his ear:

"If anybody deserves a toast, Jeffy boy, I think it's you. You've eaten so many slices of mine--burnt to a cinder--and never winced! If that isn't heroism, what is?"

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BOOK II

THE CHURCHILL LATCH-STRING

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CHAPTER I

"Here's another, Charlotte!"

Young Justin Birch's lusty shout rang through the house from hall to kitchen, vibrating even as far as the second-story room in the rear, where Charlotte herself happened at that moment to be. In response people appeared from everywhere. The bride-elect was the last to put in an appearance, and when she came, there was a certain reluctance in her aspect.

"Hurry up, there!" admonished Just, already busy with chisel and hammer at the slender, flat box which lay upon the hall floor, in the centre of an interested group. He paused to glance up at his sister, where she had stopped upon the landing. "You act as if you didn't want to see what's in it," he remonstrated, whacking away vigorously.

"Indeed I do," Charlotte declared, coming on down the staircase, smiling at the faces upturned toward her, which were smiling back, every one. "But I'm beginning to feel as if I--as if they--as if--"

"It must seem odd to feel like that," John Lansing agreed, quizzically. Lanse had but just arrived, having come on especially for the wedding, from the law-school at which he had been for two years.

Celia slipped her arm about her younger sister's shoulders. "I know what she means," she said, in her gentle way. "It's so unexpected to her, after sending out no invitations at all, that gifts should keep pouring in like this. But it's not unexpected to us."

"Oh, I know how many of them come from father's and mother's friends, and how many from Andy's grateful patients. It's all the more overwhelming on that account."

"Look out there, Just!" The admonition came from Jeff, and consequently was delivered from some six feet in the air, where that nineteen-year-old's head was now carried. "Don't split those pieces; they'll be fine for the Emerson boys building."

"That's so." Just wielded his tools with more care. Presently he had the long parcel lying on the floor. At this moment Mr. Roderick Birch opened the outer hall door.

"As usual," was his smiling comment, as he laid aside hat and overcoat and joined the circle. "Charlotte's latest?"

Charlotte herself undid the wrappings, wondering what the gift could be.

She disclosed a long piece of dingy-looking metal.

"A new shingle for Andy!" cried Jeff.

Just turned the heavy slab over, and it proved to be of copper. Words came into view, hammered and beaten into the glinting metal. An effective conventionalised border surrounded the whole.

"Ye Ornaments of a House are ye Guests who Frequent it," read the assembled company, in chorus.

"Oh, isn't that beautiful!" cried Charlotte.

Jeff glanced at her suspiciously. "She says that about everything," he remarked. "Don't think much of it myself. The sentiment may be awfully true--or otherwise; but what's the thing for? If anybody wanted to hint at an invitation to visit Andy and Charlotte, he might have done it without putting himself on record on a slab of copper four feet long. Who sent it, anyway?"

Celia hunted carefully through the wrappings, and everybody finally joined in the search, but no card appeared.

"I'm so sorry!" lamented Charlotte. "I shall never know whom to thank."

"It lets you out, anyhow," Jeff said, soothingly. "You won't have to tell any lies. The thing is of about as much use as a bootjack."

"Why, but it's lovely!" protested Charlotte, with evident sincerity. "Copper things are very highly valued just now, and the work on that is artistic. Don't you see it is?"

"Can't see it," murmured Jeff. "But of course my not seeing it doesn't count. I can't see the value of that idiotic old battered-up copper pail you cherish so tenderly, but that's because I lack the true, heaven-born artist's soul. Where are you going to put this, Fiddle?"

Charlotte's eyes grew absent. She was sending them in imagination across the lawn to the little old brick house next door, which was soon to be her home, as she had done every time a new gift arrived. There were a good many puzzles of this sort in connection with her wedding gifts. Where to put some of them she knew, with a thrill of pleasure, the instant she set eyes on them; where in the world others could possibly go was undoubtedly a serious question.

"Hello, here comes Andy!" called Just, from the window. "Give him a chance at it. Perhaps he can use it somewhere in the surgery--as a delicate way of cheering the patients when they feel as if perhaps they'd better not have come."

Charlotte turned as the hall door swung open, admitting Dr. Andrew Churchill and a fresh breath of October air.

Everybody turned about also. Into everybody's face came a look of affectionate greeting. Even the eyes of the father and mother--and this, just now, was the greatest test of all--showed the welcome to which their own children were happily used.

The figure on the threshold was one to claim attention anywhere. It was

a strong figure with a look of life and intense physical vigour. The face matched the body: it was fresh-coloured and finely molded; and nobody who looked at it and into the clear gray eyes of Andrew Churchill could fail to recognise the man behind.

Lanse, who was nearest, shook hands warmly. "It seems good to see you, old fellow," he said, heartily. "If this whirl of work they tell me you are in had kept up much longer, I should have turned patient myself and sent for you. Going to find time to be married in, think, Andy?"

"I rather expect to be able to manage it," responded Doctor Churchill, laughing. "How long have you been home, Lanse--two hours? Just promised to let me know when you came."

"I started, but you were whizzing up the street in the runabout," protested Just, picking up the debris of the unpacking and carrying it away. "There was a trail of steam behind you sixteen feet long. I think you were running beyond lawful speed."

"Here's your latest acquisition." Jeff pointed it out, picking up the copper slab and holding it at the stretch of his arms for inspection. Doctor Churchill turned and regarded it with interest. Then his bright glance shifted to Charlotte, and he smiled at her.

"That's great, isn't it?" he said, and she nodded, smiling.

Just, returning, shouted. "Trust 'em both to get round anything that may turn up! 'That's great!' is certainly safe and non-committal of a four-foot motto that's of no earthly use."

"Well, but I like it," Doctor Churchill asserted, and came over to Charlotte's side, where he examined the copper slab with attention. "Don't you believe that will pretty nearly fit the depression in the fireplace just above the shelf?"

Her interested look responded to his. "Why, I believe it will!" she answered.

"Who sent it?"

"We can't find out."

"No card? That's odd. But there may be something about it to show. It looks to me as if it had been made for that place. If it proves to fit, we can narrow the mystery down to the few people who have seen the new fireplace. Let's go over and try, shall we? Come on--everybody!"

Accordingly, the whole company streamed out across the lawn--Charlotte and Doctor Churchill, Celia, her pretty blond head shining in the October sunlight, Lanse and Jeff and Just, three stalwart fellows, ranging in ages from twenty-six to sixteen, Mr. and Mrs. Birch, the happy possessors of this happy clan.

They hurried up the two steps of the small front porch, into the brick house, and stampeded into the front room. They stopped opposite the fireplace, where Doctor Churchill was already triumphantly inserting the copper panel--for that is what it instantly became--in the long, horizontal depression in the fireplace.

"It fits to a hair!" he exclaimed, and a general murmur of approbation arose. Now that the odd gift was where it so clearly belonged, its peculiar beauty became evident even to the skeptical Jeff and Just.

The new fireplace was the heart of the little old house. Moreover, so cunningly had it been designed and built that it seemed to have been in its place from the beginning.

Doctor Churchill and Charlotte had made a certain distant field the object of many walks and drives, and had personally selected the "hardheads" of which the fireplace was constructed. A small bedroom, opening off the square little parlour, had had its partition removed, and in this alcove-like end of the room the fireplace had been built.

The effect was very good, and the resulting apartment, the only one on the lower floor which could be spared for general use, had become at once the place upon which Charlotte was concentrating most of her efforts, meaning to make it a room where everybody should wish to come.

The usual interruption of a summons for Doctor Churchill to the office in the wing sent the assembled company off again. Just as Charlotte was leaving the room, however--the last of all, because she could not bring herself to desert the joy of the copper panel in its setting of gray stone--Doctor Churchill hurriedly returned.

Seeing Charlotte alone and about to vanish, he ran after her and drew her back.

"I have to go right away, dear," he said. "But I want to look at the new gift alone with you a minute. It's really a fine addition, isn't it?"

"Oh, beautiful! In the firelight and the lamplight how that copper will gleam!"

"I wish we knew to whom we owe such a thought of us. I like the sentiment, too, don't you, Charlotte? I hope--do you know, it's one of my pleasantest hopes--that our home is going to be one that knows how to dispense hospitality. The real sort--not the sham."

Charlotte looked up at him and smiled.

"As if I need tell you what I wish!" he said, with gay tenderness. "You know every thought I have about it."

"We'll make people happy here," said Charlotte. "Indeed, I want to, Andy Churchill. This room--they shall find a welcome always--rich and poor. Especially--the poor ones."

"Especially the poor ones. Won't old Mrs. Wilsey think it's pleasant here? And Tom Brannigan--he'll be scared at first, but we'll show him it's a jolly place--Charlotte, I musn't get to dreaming day-dreams now, or I never can summon strength of purpose to wait another week. One week from to-day! What an age it seems!"

"Run and make your calls," advised Charlotte, laughing, as she escaped from him and hurried to the door. "The busier you keep, the shorter the time will seem."

The week went by at last. To the young man, one of a large family long

since scattered--many members of it, including both father and mother, in the old Virginia churchyard--the time could not come too soon. He had lived alone with his housekeeper almost four years now, and during nearly all that time he had been waiting for Charlotte.

She was considerably younger than he, and when he had been, after two years of acquaintance, allowed to betroth himself to her, he had been asked to wait yet another two years while she should "grow up a little more," as her wise father put it.

As for Charlotte herself, she still seemed to those who loved her at home hardly grown up enough at twenty-two to go to a home of her own.

Yet father and mother, brothers and sister, were all ready to acknowledge that those two years had resulted in the early budding of very sweet and womanly qualities; and nobody, watching Charlotte with her lover, could possibly fear for either that they were not ready for the great experiment.

The autumn leaves were bright, the white fall anemones were in blossom, when Charlotte's wedding-day came; and with leaves and anemones the little stone church was decorated.

Not an invitation of the customary sort had been sent out. But, as is usual in a comfortable, un-aristocratic suburb, the news that Doctor Churchill and Miss Charlotte Birch wanted everybody who knew and cared for them to come to the church and see them married had spread until all understood.

The result was that no one of Doctor Churchill's patients--and he had won a large and growing practice among all classes of people--felt left out or forgotten, and that, as the clock struck the hour of noon, the church was crowded to the doors with those who were real friends of the young people.

"Somehow I don't feel a bit like a bride," said Charlotte, looking, however, very much like one, as she stood in the centre of her mother's room in bridal array.

Four elegant male figures, two in frock coats, two in more youthful but equally festive attire, were surveying her with satisfaction.

Near by hovered Celia, the daintiest of maids of honour: Mrs. Birch, as charming as a girl herself in her pale gray silken gown: and little Ellen Donohue, a six-year-old protegee of the family, her hazel eyes wide with gazing at Charlotte, whom she hugged intermittently and adored without cessation.

"You don't feel like a bride, eh?" was Lanse's reply to Charlotte's statement. "Well, I shouldn't think you would--an infant like you. You look more suitable for a christening than for a marriage ceremony. Father's likely, when Doctor Elder asks who gives the bride away, to murmur, 'Charlotte Wendell,' thinking he's inquiring the child's name."

Charlotte threw him a glance, half-shy, half-merry. "As best man you should be saying complimentary things about your friend's choice."

"I am. The trouble is you're not old enough to enjoy being mistaken for a babe in arms."

"I don't think she looks like a child. I think she's the stunningest young woman I ever saw!" declared Just, with enthusiasm. "If her hair was done up on top of her head she'd be a regular queen."

Celia laughed. Her own beautiful blond locks were piled high, and the style became her. But Charlotte's dusky braids were prettier low on the white neck, in the girlish fashion in which they had long been worn, and Celia announced this fact with a loving touch on the graceful _coiffure_ her own hands had arranged for her sister.

"You can't improve her," she said. "She looks like our Charlotte, and that's just the way we want her to look. That's what Andy wants, too."

"Of course he does. And I can tell you, he looks like Andy," Lanse asserted. "Did you know he'd been making calls all the morning, the same as usual? Made 'em till the last minute, too. It isn't fifteen minutes since I saw his machine roll in. Hope he wasn't rattled when he wrote his prescriptions."

It was the Birches' custom to make as little as possible of family crises. Talk and laugh as lightly as they would, however, every one of them was watching Charlotte with anxiety, for it was the first break in the dear circle, and it seemed almost as if they could have better spared any other.

Yet Charlotte was going to live no farther away than next door--this was the comfort of the situation.

"Well, I must be off to look after my duties to the groom," Lanse announced presently, with a precautionary glance into his mother's mirror to make sure that not a hair of his splendour was disturbed. "I ought to have been with him before this, only my infatuation for the bride makes my case difficult. You've heard of these fellows who hang about another chap's girl till the last minute, doing the forsaken act. I feel something like that. Good luck, little girl. Keep cool, and trust Andy and Doctor Elder to get you safely married."

He stooped to kiss her, and Charlotte held him close for an instant. But he made the brotherly embrace a short one, comprehending that much of that sort of thing would be unsafe both for Charlotte and her family, and went gaily away to the house next door.

"Nerve good?" Lanse asked Doctor Churchill, an hour later as they waited in the vestry for the summons of the organ.

Doctor Churchill smiled. "Pretty steady," he answered. "Still--I'm aware something is about to happen."

Lanse eyed him affectionately.

"Do you know it's a good deal to me to be gaining three brothers by this day's work?" the doctor added; and Lanse felt a sudden lump in his throat, which he had to swallow before he could answer:

"I assure you we're feeling pretty rich, to-day, too, old fellow."

It was all over presently--a very simple, natural sort of affair, with the warm October sunlight streaming through the richly coloured windows

upon the figures at the altar, touching Celia's bright hair into a halo, and sending a ruby beam across the trailing folds of Charlotte's bridal gown.

There was no display of any sort. The whole effect was somehow that of a girl being married in the enclosing circle of her family, without thought of the hundreds of eyes upon her. A quiet wedding breakfast followed, at which Doctor Forester and his son, the latter lately returned from a long period of study abroad, were the only guests. Doctor Churchill's housekeeper, Mrs. Fields, although invited to be present as a guest insisted on remaining in the kitchen.

"Just as if," she said, when everybody in turn remonstrated with her, "when I've looked after that boy's food from the days when he ate nothing but porridge and milk, I was going to let anybody else feed him with his wedding breakfast!"

But this part of the business of getting married was also soon over. Doctor Churchill was to take his bride away for a month's stay in a little Southern resort among the mountains, dear to him by old association. It was the first vacation he had allowed himself during these four years of his practice, and his eyes had been sparkling as he planned it. They were sparkling again now, as he stood waiting for Charlotte to say good-bye and come away with him, but his face spoke his sympathetic understanding of those who were finding this the hardest moment which had yet come to them.

"Take care of her, Andy," was what, in almost the same words, they all more or less brokenly said to him at last; and to each and all he answered, in that way of his they loved and trusted, "I will."

From Andrew Churchill it was assurance enough.

* * * * *

CHAPTER II

"There! Doesn't that look like a 'Welcome Home'?"

Celia stood in the doorway and surveyed her handiwork. Mrs. Birch, from an opposite threshold, nodded, smiling.

"It does, indeed. You have given the whole house a festival air which will captivate Andy's heart the instant he sets eyes on it. As for our little Charlotte--"

She paused, as if it were not easy to put into words that which she knew Charlotte would think. But Celia went on gleefully:

"Charlotte will be so crazy with delight at getting home she will see everything through a blur at first. But when we have all gone away and left them here, then Charlotte will see. And she'll be glad to find traces of her devoted family wherever she looks."

She pointed from the little work-box on the table by the window, just

equipped and placed there by her mother's hand, to the book-shelf made and put up in the corner by Jeff. She waved her hand at a great wicker armchair with deep pockets at the sides for newspapers and magazines, which had been Mr. Birch's contribution to the living-room, and at the fine calendar which Just had hung by the desk. Her own offerings were the dressing-table furnishings up-stairs.

All these were by no means wedding gifts, but afterthoughts, inspired by a careful inspection of the details of Doctor Churchill's bachelor home, and the noting of certain gaps which only love and care would be likely to fill.

In four hours now the travellers would be at home, in time, it was expected, for the late dinner being prepared by Mrs. Hepzibah Fields.

For the present, at least, Mrs. Fields was to remain. "I've had full proof of Charlotte's ability to cook and to manage a house," Doctor Churchill had said, when they talked it over, "and I want her free this first year, anyway, to work with her brush and pencil all she likes, and to go about with me all I like."

Mrs. Fields, although a product of New England, had spent nearly half her life in Virginia, in the service of the Churchills. She had drawn a slow breath of relief when this decision had been made known to her, and had said fervently to Doctor Churchill:

"I expect I know how to make myself useful without being conspicuous, and I'm sure I think enough of both of you not to put my foot into your housekeeping. That child's worked pretty hard these four years since I've known her, and a little vacation won't hurt her."

So it had been settled, and Mrs. Fields was now getting up a dinner for her "folks," as she affectionately termed them, which was to be little short of a feast.

Charlotte had written that she and Andy wanted the whole family to come to dinner with them that first night. All day Celia and her mother had been busy getting the little house, already in perfect order, into that state of decorative cheer which suggests a welcome in itself. Now, with Just's offering of ground-pine, and Celia's scarlet carnations all about the room, a fire ready laid in the fireplace, and lamps and candles waiting to be lighted on every side, there seemed nothing to be desired.

"I suppose there's really not another thing we can do," said Celia.

"Absolutely nothing more, that I can see," agreed Mrs. Birch, taking up her wraps from the chair on which they lay. "You can run over and light up at the last minute. Really, how long it seems yet to seven o'clock!"

"Doesn't it? And how good it will be to get the dear girl back! Well, the first month has gone by, mother dear. The worst is over."

Celia spoke cheerfully, but her words were not quite steady. Mrs. Birch glanced at her.

"You've been a brave daughter," she said, with the quiet composure which Celia understood did not always cover a peaceful heart. "We shall all grow used to the change in time. I think sometimes we're not half thankful enough to have Charlotte so near."

"Oh, I think we are!" Celia protested.

"The children have had a beautiful month. Haven't their letters been--What's that?"

It was nothing more startling than the front door-bell, but this was so seldom rung at the bachelor doctor's house, where everybody who wanted him at all wanted him professionally at the office, that it sent Celia hastily and anxiously to the door. It was so impossible at this hour, when the travellers were almost home, not to dread the happening of something to detain them. At the same moment Mrs. Field put her head in at the dining-room door. "Land, I do hope it ain't a telegram!" she observed, in a loud whisper.

It was not a telegram. It was a pale-faced little woman in black, with two children, a boy and a girl, beside her. Celia looked at them questioningly.

"This is Doctor Churchill's, isn't it?" asked the stranger, with a hesitating foot upon the threshold. "Is he at home?"

"He is expected home--he will be in his office to-morrow," Celia answered, thinking this a new patient, and feeling justified in keeping Doctor Churchill's first evening clear for him if she could. But the visitor drew a sigh of relief, and came over the threshold, drawing her children with her. Celia gave way, but the question in her face brought the explanation:

"I reckon it's all right, if he's coming so soon. I'm his cousin, Mrs. Peyton. These are my children. I haven't seen Andrew since he was a boy at college, but he'll remember me. Are you--" She hesitated.

Mrs. Birch came forward. "We are the mother and sister of Mrs. Churchill," she said, and offered her hand. "Doctor Churchill was expecting you?"

"Well, maybe not just at this time," admitted the newcomer, without reluctance. "I didn't know I was coming myself until just as I bought my ticket for home. I happened to think I was within sixty miles of that place in the North where I knew Andrew settled. So I thought we'd better stop and see him and his new wife."

There was nothing to do but to usher her in. With a rebellious heart Celia led Mrs. Peyton into the living-room and assisted her and the children out of their wrappings. All sorts of strange ideas were occurring to her. It was within the bounds of possibility that these people were not what they claimed to be--she had heard of such things. She was unwilling to show them to Charlotte's pretty guest-room, to offer them refreshment, even to light the fire for them.

It was too bad, it was unbearable, that the home-coming for which she and her mother had made such preparation should be spoiled by the presence of these strangers. To be sure, if she was Andrew's cousin she was no stranger to him, yet Celia could not recollect that he had ever spoken of her, even in the most casual way.

But her hope that in some way this might prove to be a case of mistaken identity was soon extinguished. When she had slipped away to the

kitchen, at a suggestion from her mother that the guests should be served with something to eat, she found that information concerning Mrs. Peyton was to be had from Mrs. Fields.

"Peyton? For the lands' sake! Don't tell me she's here! Know her? I guess I do! Of all the unfortunate things to happen right now, I should consider her about the worst calamity. What is she? Oh, she ain't anything--that's about the worst I can say of her. There ain't anything bad about her--oh, no. Sometimes I've been driven to wish there was, if I do say it! She's just what I should call one of them characterless sort of folks--kind of soft and silly, like a silk sofy cushion without enough stuffing in it. Always talking, she is, without saying anything in particular. I don't know about the children. They were little things when I saw 'em last. What do you say they look like?"

"The girl is about fourteen, I should think," said Celia, getting out tray and napkins. "She's rather a pretty child--doesn't look very strong. The boy is quite a handsome fellow, of nine or ten. Oh, it's all right, of course, and I've no doubt Doctor Churchill will be glad to see any relatives of his family. Only--if it needn't have happened just to-day!"

"I know how you feel," said the housekeeper. "Here, let me fix that tray, Miss Celia; you've done enough. I suppose we've got to feed 'em and give 'em a room. Ain't it too bad to put them in that nice spare room? No, I don't believe the doctor'll be powerful pleased to see 'em, though I don't suppose he'll let on he ain't. Trouble is, she's a stayer--one of the visiting kind, you know. Mis' Churchill, doctor's mother, used to have her there by the month. _There_ was what you may call a genuine lady, Miss Celia. She'd never let a guest feel he wasn't welcome, and I guess Andy--I guess the doctor's pretty much like her. Well, well!"

Mrs. Fields sighed, and Celia echoed the sigh. Nevertheless, the little hint about Doctor Churchill's mother took hold.

Celia knew what Southern hospitality meant. If Mrs. Peyton had been accustomed to that, it must be a matter of pride not to let her feel that Northern homes were cold and comfortless places by comparison. By the time she had shown the visitors to Charlotte's guest-room, and had made up a bed for the boy on a wide couch there, Celia had worked off a little of her regret. Nevertheless, when Jeff and Just heard the news, their disgust roused her to fresh rebellion.

"I call that pretty nervy," Jeff declared, indignantly, "to walk in on people like this, without a word of warning! Nobody but an idiot would expect people just coming home from their honeymoon to want to find their house filled up with cousins."

"Oh, Andy's relatives'll turn up now," said Just, cynically. "People he never heard of. I'll bet he won't know this woman till he's introduced."

"Yes, he will. I've found her name on the list we sent announcements to," Celia said, dismally. "I didn't notice at the time, because there were ever so many friends of his, people in all parts of the world. 'Mrs. Randolph Peyton,' that's it."

"Hope Mr. Randolph Peyton'll get anxious to see her, and send for her to come home at once!" growled Jeff.

"She's in mourning. I presume she's a widow," was all the comfort Celia could give him.

"Then she'll stay all winter!" cried Just with such hopeless inflection that his sister laughed.

When she went over at half past six o'clock, to light the fire, she found the three visitors gathered in the living-room. She had hoped they might stay up-stairs at least until the first welcome had been given to Charlotte and Andrew. But it turned out that Mrs. Peyton had inquired of Mrs. Fields the exact hour of the expected arrival, and presumably had considered that since the Peytons represented Doctor Churchill's side of the house, their part in his welcome home was not to be gainsaid.

Mr. Birch, Jeff, Just, and Mrs. Birch with little Ellen, presently appeared. Lansing had gone back to his law school, but a great bunch of roses represented him. It had been Charlotte's express command that nobody should go to the station to meet the returning travellers, but that everybody should be in the little brick house to welcome them when they should drive up.

"Here they are! Here they are!" shouted Just, from behind a window curtain, where he had been keeping close watch on the circle of radiance from the nearest arc-light. There was a rush for the door. Jeff flung it open, and he and Just raced to the hansom which was driving up. The rest of the party crowded the doorway, Mrs. Peyton and Lucy and Randolph being of the group.

"How are you, everybody?" called Doctor Churchill's eager voice, as he and Charlotte ran up the walk to the door, Jeff and Just following. "Well, this is fine! Father--mother--Celia--my little Ellen--bless your hearts, but it's good to see you!"

How could anybody help loving a son-in-law like that? One would have thought they were indeed his own. While Charlotte remained wrapped in her mother's embrace, Doctor Churchill was greeting them all twice over, with apparently no eyes for the three he had not expected to see. For the moment it was plain that he had not recognized them, and supposed them to be strangers to whom he would presently be made known.

But now, as somebody moved aside and the light struck upon her, he caught the smile on Mrs. Peyton's face. He left off shaking Jeff's hand, and made a quick movement toward the little figure in black.

"Why, Cousin Lula!" he exclaimed.

Charlotte, at the moment hugging little Ellen with laughter and kisses, turned at the cry, and saw her husband greeting with great cordiality these strange people whom she, too, had supposed to be the guests of her mother.

"Charlotte," said Doctor Churchill, turning about, "this is my cousin, Mrs. Peyton, of Virginia--and her children."

Charlotte came forward, cordially greeted Mrs. Peyton and Lucy and Randolph, and led them into the living-room as if the moment were that of their arrival instead of her own.

"She has the stuff in her, hasn't she?" murmured Just to Jeff, as the two stood at one side of the fireplace.

"Could you ever doubt it?" returned Jeff, with as much emphasis as can be put into a mumbled retort. Jeff had been Charlotte's staunchest champion all his life.

"Ah, Fieldsy, but I'm glad to be back!" Doctor Churchill assured his housekeeper, in the kitchen, to which he had soon found his way. "We've had a glorious time down in the Virginia mountains, but this is home now, as it never was before, and it's great fun to be here. How are you? You're looking fine."

"And I'm feeling fine," assented Mrs. Fields, her spare face lighted into something like real comeliness by the pleasure in her heart. "Just one thing, Doctor Andy. I'm terrible sorry them relatives of yours happened along just now. If I'd gone to the door--well--I don't believe but I'd have seen my way clear to--"

Churchill shook his head, smiling. "No, Fieldsy, you know you wouldn't. Besides, Cousin Lula looks far from well, and she's had a lot of trouble. It's all right, you know. My, but this is a good dinner we have coming to us!"

He went off gaily. Mrs. Fields looked after him affectionately.

"Oh, yes, Andy Churchill, it's plain to be seen your heart's in the right place as much as ever it was, if you have got married," she thought.

"O Fieldsy,"--and this time it was Charlotte who invaded the kitchen and grasped the housekeeper's hands--"how good it seems to be back! But I can't realise a bit I'm at home over here, can you?"

"You'll soon get used to it, I guess, Mis' Churchill."

"Oh, and that sounds strange--from you!" declared Charlotte, laughing. "I'd begun to get a little bit used to it down in Virginia. If you don't say 'Miss Charlotte' once in a while to me I shall feel quite lost."

"I guess Doctor Churchill 'd have something to say about that, if I should. I don't believe but what he's terrible proud of that name."

It was certainly a name nobody seemed able to "get used to." Just called his sister by the new title once during the evening. They were at the table when he thus addressed her, and there followed a succession of comments.

"Don't you dare call her that when I'm round!" remarked Jeff.

"I actually didn't understand at first whom you meant," said Celia.

"I've not forgotten how long it took me to learn that my name was Birch," said Charlotte's mother, with a smile so bright that it covered the involuntary sigh.

"Is Aunty Charlotte my Aunty Churchill now?" piped little Ellen. Lucy and Randolph Peyton laughed.

"Of course, she is, dumpling, only you can keep on calling her Aunt Charlotte. And I'm your Uncle Andy. How do you like that?"

"Oh, I like that!" agreed Ellen, and edged her chair an inch nearer "Uncle Andy."

Dinner over, Celia bore Ellen home to bed. Charlotte suggested the same possibility for the Peyton children, but although it was nearing nine o'clock, both refused so decidedly that after a glance at their mother, who took no notice, Charlotte said no more.

Randolph grew sleepy in his chair, and Doctor Churchill presently took pity on him. He sat down beside the lad and told him a story of so intentionally monotonous a character that Randolph was soon half over the border. Then the doctor picked him up, and with the drooping head on his shoulder observed, pleasantly:

"This lad wants his bed, Cousin Lula. May I take him to it?"

Mrs. Peyton, engaged in telling Mr. Birch her opinion of certain Northern institutions she had lately observed, nodded absently. Doctor Churchill ascended the stairs, and Charlotte, slipping from the room, ran up ahead of him to get Randolph's cot in readiness.

"That's it, old fellow! Wake up enough to let me get your clothes off," Churchill bade the sleep-heavy child. "Can you find his nightclothes, Charlotte? Cousin Lula seems to have unpacked. That's it. Thank you! Now, Ran, you'll be glad to be in bed, won't you? Can you wake up enough to say your prayers, son? No? Well that's not altogether your fault," he said, softly, and smiled at Charlotte. "I think we'd better invite Lucy up, too, don't you?"

"Won't she--Mrs. Peyton--think we're rather cool?" Charlotte suggested, as they tucked the boy in.

"Not a bit. She'll be glad to have the job off her hands. The youngsters are tired, and ought to have been in bed an hour ago. Stay here, and I'll run down after Lucy."

On the stairs, as they descended, after Charlotte had seen Lucy to her quarters, they met Jeff.

"Been putting the kids to bed?" he questioned curiously, under his breath. "Well, you're great. Their mother doesn't seem much worried about it. She's quite a talker. Guess she didn't notice what happened. Say, I'm going. It's ten o'clock. You two ought to have a chance to look 'round without any more company to-night. Justin slipped off while you were up-stairs. Told me to say good-night. Father and mother are only waiting for a pause in your cousin's conversation long enough to throw in a word of their own before they get up." He made an expressive gesture.

"You know mother's invariable rule," he chuckled, "never to get up to go at the end of one of your guest's conversational sprints, but always to wait until you can interrupt yourself, so to speak. Well--I don't mean any disrespect to the lady from Virginia, Andy, but I'm afraid mother'll have to make an exception to that rule, or else remain for the night."

The three laughed softly, Charlotte's hand on her brother's shoulder, as

she stood on the step above him.

"You mustn't say any saucy things, Jeffy," said she, with a soft touch on his thick locks.

"I won't. I'm too tickled to have you back--both of you. We missed Fiddle pretty badly," he said to Doctor Churchill, "but we found time to miss you almost as much. There have been several times while you've been gone that I'd have welcomed the _chug_ of your runabout under my window, waking me up in the middle of the night."

"Thank you, old fellow!" said Doctor Churchill with a hand on Jeff's other shoulder. "That's mighty pleasant to hear."

In spite of Jeff's prediction, Mrs. Birch soon managed, in her own tactful way, to follow her sons home. Mrs. Peyton went up to her room at last, a cordial good night, following her from the foot of the stairs. Then Doctor Churchill drew his wife back into the living-room and closed the doors. He stood looking at Charlotte with eyes in which were mingled merriment and tenderness.

"It wasn't just as we planned it, was it, little girl?" he said. "But there's always this to fall back upon. People we want, and people we don't want so much, may be around us, to the right of us, and the left of us, but even so, nobody can ever--come between."

The door-bell rang.

"Oh, I hoped nobody would know you were home to-night!" cried Charlotte, the smile fading from her lips. Doctor Churchill went quickly to the door. A messenger boy with a telegram stood outside. The doctor read the dispatch and dismissed the boy. Then he turned to Charlotte.

"No, it's no bad news," he said, and came close. "It's just--can you bear up?--another impending guest! Charlotte, I've done a lot of talking about hospitality, and I meant it all. I certainly want our latch-string always out, but--_don't_ you think we rushed that copper motto into place just a bit too soon_?"

* * * * *

CHAPTER III

"Charlotte, what are we going to do? It turns out Lee has his sister with him!"

Mrs. Andrew Churchill, engaged in making up a fresh bed with linen smelling faintly of lavender, dropped her sheets and blankets and stood up straight. She gazed across the room at Andy, whose face expressed both amusement and dismay.

"Andy," said she, "haven't I somewhere heard a proverb to the effect that it never rains but it pours?"

"There's an impression on my mind that you have," said her husband. "You

are now about to have a practical demonstration of that same proverb. I wrote Lee, as you suggested after his second telegram, and this is his answer. He was detained by the illness of his sister Evelyn, who is with him. It seems she was at school up here in our state, but overworked and finally broke down, and he has come to take her home. But you see home for them means a boarding-house. The family is broken up, mother dead, father at the ends of the earth; and Lee has Evelyn on his hands. The worst of it is, he wants me to see her professionally, so I can't very well suggest that we're too full to entertain her."

"Of course you can't," agreed Charlotte, promptly. "But it means that we must find another room somewhere in the house. Of course mother would--but I don't want to begin right away to send extra guests over there."

"Neither do I," said Doctor Churchill. "Do you suppose we could put a cot into my private office for Lee? Then the sister could have this."

"How old is she?"

"Sixteen, he says."

"Oh, then this will do. And we can put a cot in your private office--after office hours. If Mr. Lee is an old friend he won't object to anything."

"You're a dear girl! And they won't stay long, of course--especially when they see how crowded we are. You'll like Thorne Lee, Charlotte; he's one of the best fellows alive. I haven't seen the sister since she was a small child, but if she's anything like her brother you'll have no trouble entertaining her, sick or well. All right! I'll answer Lee's letter, and say nothing about our being full-up."

"Of course not; that wouldn't be hospitality. When will they come?"

"In a day or two--as soon as she feels like travelling again."

"I'll be ready for her," and Charlotte gave him her brightest smile as he hurried off.

She finished her bed-making, put the little room set apart for her own private den into guest-room condition as nearly as it was possible to do with articles of furniture borrowed from next door, and went down to break the news to Mrs. Fields. She found that person explaining with grim patience to the Peyton children why they could not make candy in her kitchen at the inopportune hour of ten in the morning.

"But we always do at home!" complained Lucy, with a frown.

"Like as not you don't clear up the muss afterward, either," suggested Mrs. Fields, with a sharp look.

"Course we don't," Randolph asserted, with a curl of his handsome upper lip. "What's servants for, I'd like to know?"

"To make friends with, not to treat impolitely," said a clear voice behind the boy.

Randolph and Lucy turned quickly, and Mrs. Fields's face, which had

grown grim, softened perceptibly. Both children looked ready to make some tart reply to Charlotte's interpolation, but as their eyes fell upon her they discovered that to be impossible. How could one speak rudely when one met that kind but authoritative glance?

"This is Mrs. Fields's busiest time, you know," Charlotte said, "and it wouldn't do to bother her now with making candy. In the afternoon I'll help you make it. Come, suppose we go for a walk. I've some marketing to do."

"Ran can go with you," said Lucy, as Charlotte proceeded to make ready for the trip. "It's too cold for me. I'd rather stay here by the fire and read."

Charlotte looked at her. Lucy's delicate face was paler than usual this morning; she had a languid air.

"The walk in this fresh November breeze will be sure to make you feel ever so much better," said Charlotte. "Don't you think so, Cousin Lula?"

Mrs. Peyton looked up reluctantly from her embroidery.

"Why, I wouldn't urge her, Charlotte, if she doesn't want to go," she said, with a glance at Lucy, who was leaning back in a big chair with a discontented expression. "You mustn't expect people from the South to enjoy your freezing weather as you seem to. Lucy feels the cold very much."

Charlotte and Randolph marched away down the street together, the boy as full of spirits as his companion.

She had found it easy from the first to make friends with him, and was beginning, in spite of certain rather unpleasant qualities of his, to like him very much. His mother had done her best to spoil him, yet the child showed plainly that there was in him the material for a sturdy, strong character.

When Charlotte had made several small purchases at the market, she did not offer to give Randolph the little wicker basket she carried, but the boy took it from her with a smile and a proud air.

"Ran," said Charlotte, "just round this corner there's a jolly hill. I don't believe anybody will mind if we have a race down it, do you?"

It was a back street, and the hill was an inviting one. The two had their race, and Randolph won by a yard. Just as the pair, laughing and panting, slowed down into their ordinary pace, a runabout, driven by a smiling young man in a heavy ulster and cap, turned the corner with a rush. Amid a cloud of steam the motor came to a standstill.

"Aha! Caught you at it!" cried Doctor Churchill. "Came down that hill faster than the law allows. Get in here, both of you, and take the run out to the hospital with me. I shall not be there long. I've been out once this morning. This is just to make sure of a case I operated on two hours ago."

"Shall we, Ran?" asked Charlotte.

"Oh, let's!" said the boy, with enthusiasm. So away they went. The

result of the expedition came out later in the day. Before dinner the entire household was grouped about the fire, Doctor Churchill having just come in, after one of his busiest days.

"Been out to the hospital again, Cousin Andy?" Ran asked.

"Yes; twice since the noon visit."

"How was the little boy with the broken waist?"

"Fractured hip? Just about as you saw him. He's got to be patient a good while before he can walk again, and these first few days are hard. He asked me when you would come again."

"Oh, I'll go to-morrow!" cried Randolph, sitting up very straight on his cushion. "And I'll take him a book I've got, with splendid pictures."

"Good!" Doctor Churchill laid a hand on the boy's thick locks. "That will please him immensely."

Mrs. Peyton was looking at him with dismay. "Do I understand you have taken him to a hospital?" she asked.

Doctor Churchill nodded. "To the boys' surgical ward. Nothing contagious admitted to the hospital. It's a wonderful pleasure to the little chaps to see a boy from outside, and Ran enjoyed it, too, didn't you?"

"Oh, it was jolly!" said the boy.

"I shouldn't think that was exactly the word to describe such a spot," said Mrs. Peyton, and she looked displeased. "I think there are quite enough sad sights in the world for his young eyes without taking him into the midst of suffering. I should not have permitted it if you had consulted me."

It was true that Doctor Churchill possessed a frank and boyish face, wearing ordinarily an exceedingly genial expression; but the friendly gray eyes were capable of turning steely upon provocation, and they turned that way now. He returned his cousin's look with one which concealed with some difficulty both surprise and disgust.

"I took Ran nowhere that he would see any extreme suffering," he explained. "This ward contains only convalescents from various injuries and operations. The graver cases are elsewhere, and he saw nothing of those. A visit to this ward is likely to excite sympathy, it is true, but not sympathy of a painful sort. The boys have very good times among themselves, after a limited fashion, and I think Ran had a good time with them. How about it, Ran?"

"Oh, I did! I taught two of 'em to play waggle-finger. Their legs were hurt, but their hands were all right, and they could play waggle-finger as well as anybody. They liked it."

"Nevertheless, Randolph is of a very sensitive and delicate make-up," pursued his mother, "and I don't think such associations good for him. He moaned in his sleep last night, and I couldn't think what it could be."

"It couldn't have been the candy we made this afternoon, could it,

Cousin Lula?" Charlotte asked, in her gentlest way. A comprehending smile touched the corners of Doctor Churchill's lips.

"Why, of course not!" said Mrs. Peyton, quickly. "Candy made this afternoon--how absurd, Charlotte! It was last night his sleep was disturbed."

"But the hospital visit was this morning," Charlotte said. "I should think the one might as easily be responsible as the other."

Mrs. Peyton looked confused. "I understood you to say the visit to the hospital occurred yesterday," she said, with dignity, and Doctor Churchill smothered his amusement. "I certainly do not approve of taking children to such places," she repeated.

Charlotte adroitly turned the conversation into other channels, and nothing more was said about hospitals just then. Only the boy, when he had a chance, whispered in Doctor Churchill's ear:

"You just wait. I'll tease her into it."

His cousin smiled back at him and shook his head. "Teasing's a mighty poor way of getting things, Ran," he said. "Leave it to me."

Toward the end of the following day Jeff, crossing the lawn at his usual rapid pace, was hailed from Doctor Churchill's office door by Mrs. Fields. The housekeeper waved a telegram as he approached.

"Here, Mr. Jeff," said she. "Would you mind opening this? There ain't a soul in the house, and I don't want to take such a liberty, but it ought to be read. I make no manner of doubt it's from those extry visitors that are coming."

"Where are they all?" Jeff fingered the envelope reluctantly. "I don't like opening other people's messages."

"I don't know where they are, that's it. Doctor took Miss Charlotte and Ranny off after lunch in his machine, and Mis' Peyton and Lucy have gone to town with your mother. Doctor Andy wouldn't like it if his friends came without anybody to meet 'em."

Jeff tore open the dispatch. "The first two words will tell me, I suppose," he said. "Hello--yes, you're right! They'll be here on the five-ten. That's"--he pulled out his watch--"why, there's barely time to get to the station now! This must have been delayed. You say you don't know where anybody is?"

"Not a soul. Doctor usually leaves word, but he didn't this time."

"I'll telephone the hospital," and Jeff hurried to Doctor Churchill's desk. In a minute he had learned that the doctor had come and gone for the last time that day. He looked at Mrs. Fields.

"You'll have to go, Mr. Jeff," said she. "I know Doctor Andy's ways. He'd as soon let company go without their dinners as not be on hand when their train came in. He wasn't expecting the Lees till to-morrow."

"Of course," said Jeff, "I'll go, since there's nobody else. How am I to know 'em? Young man and sick girl? All right, that's easy," and he was

off to catch a car at the corner.

As he rode into town, however, he was rebelling against the situation. "This guest business is being overdone," he observed to himself. "These people are probably some more off the Peyton piece of cloth. An invalid girl lying round on couches for Fiddle to wait on--another Lucy, probably, only worse, because she's ill. Well, I'm not going to be any more cordial than the law calls for. I'll have to bring 'em out in a carriage, I suppose. She'll be too limp for the trolley."

He reached the station barely in time to engage a carriage before the train came in. He took up his position inside the gates through which all passengers must pass from the train-shed into the great station.

"Looking for somebody?" asked a voice at his elbow.

He glanced quickly down at one of his old schoolmates, Carolyn Houghton. "Yes, guests of the Churchills," he answered, his gaze instantly returning to the throng pouring toward him from the train. "Help me, will you? I don't know them from Adam. It's a man and his invalid sister, old friends of Andy's."

"There they are," said Carolyn, promptly, indicating an approaching pair.

Jeff laughed. "The sister isn't quite so antique as that," he objected, as a little woman of fifty wavered past on the arm of a stout gentleman.

"You said 'old' friends," retorted Carolyn. "Look, Jeff, isn't that she? The sister's being wheeled in a chair by a porter, the brother's walking beside her. They _look_ like Doctor Churchill's friends, Jeff."

"Think you can tell Andy's friends by their uniform?"

"You can tell anybody's intimate friends in a crowd--I mean the same kind of people look alike," asserted Carolyn, with emphasis. "These are the ones, I'm sure. I'll just watch while you greet them and then I'll slip off. I'm taking this next train. What a sweet face that girl has, but how delicate--like a little flower. She's a dear, I'm sure. The brother looks nice, too. They're the ones, I know. See, the brother's looking hard at us all inside the gates."

"Here goes, then. Good-by!" Jeff turned away to the task of making himself known to the strangers. But he was forced to admit that if Charlotte must meet another onslaught of visitors, these certainly did look attractive.

"Yes, I'm Thorne Lee," the young man answered, with a straight look into Jeff's eyes and a grasp of the outstretched hand as Jeff introduced himself. He motioned the porter to wheel the chair out of the pressing crowd.

Jeff explained about the delayed telegram. Mr. Lee presented him to the young girl in the chair, and Jeff looked down into a pair of hazel eyes which instantly claimed his sympathy, the shadows of fatigue lay on them so heavily. But Miss Evelyn Lee's smile was bright if fleeting, and she answered Jeff's announcement that he had a carriage waiting with so appreciative a word of gratitude that he found his preconceived antipathy to Doctor Churchill's guests slipping away.

So presently he had them in a carriage and bowling through the streets which led toward the suburbs. Thorne Lee sat beside his sister, supporting her, and talked with Jeff. By the time they had covered the long drive to the house Jeff was hoping Lee would stay a month.

The hazel eyes of Lee's young sister had closed and the lashes lay wearily sweeping the pale cheeks as the carriage drove up.

"Are we there?" Lee asked, bending over the slight figure. "Open your eyes, dear."

Jeff jumped out and ran to the house. He burst in upon Charlotte and Andy. "Your friends are here!" he shouted. "I had to meet 'em myself."

Doctor Churchill and Charlotte were at the door before the words were out of Jeff's mouth, and in a moment more Andy was lifting Evelyn Lee's light figure in his arms, thanking heaven inwardly as he did so for his young wife's wholesome weight. At the same moment words of eager, cheery welcome for his old friend were on his lips:

"Thorne Lee, I'm gladder to see you than anybody in the world! Miss Evelyn, here's Mrs. Churchill. She's not an old married woman at all--she's the dearest girl in the world. She's going to seem to you like one of your schoolfellows. Charlotte, here she is; take good care of her."

Thorne Lee stood looking on, a relieved smile on his lips as his old friend's wife took his sick little sister into her charge. It was not two minutes before he saw Evelyn, lying pale and mute on the couch, yet smiling up at Charlotte's bright young face.

Charlotte administered a cup of hot bouillon talking so engagingly meanwhile that Evelyn was beguiled into taking without protest the whole of the much-needed nourishment. Then he saw the young invalid carried off to bed, relieved of the necessity of meeting any more members of the household. He learned, as Charlotte slipped into the room after an hour's absence, that Evelyn had already dropped off to sleep. He leaned back in his chair with a long breath.

"What kind of a girl is this you've married, Andy?" he asked, with a smile and a look from one to the other. The three were alone, Mrs. Peyton and her children having gone out to some sort of entertainment.

"Just what she seems to be," replied Doctor Churchill, smiling back, "and a thousand times more."

"I might have known you would care for no other," Lee said. "And you two 'live in your house at the side of the road, to be good friends to man,'--if I may adapt those homely words."

"We haven't been at it very long, but we hope to realize an ambition of the sort. It doesn't take much philanthropy to welcome you."

"You can't think what a relief it is to me to get that little sister of mine under your wing, even for a few hours."

"Tell us all about her."

Lee had not meant to begin at once upon his troubles, but his friend drew him on, and before the evening ended the doctor and Charlotte had the whole long, hard story of Lee's guardianship of several young brothers and sisters, his struggle to get established in his profession and make money for their support, his many anxieties in the process, and this culminating trouble in the breakdown of the younger sister, just as he thought he had her safely established in a school where she might have a happy home for several years.

Lee stopped suddenly, as if he had hardly known how long he had been talking. "I'm a pleasant guest!" he said, regret in his tone. "I meant to tell you briefly the history of Evelyn's illness, and here I've gone on unloading all my burdens of years. What do you sit there looking so benevolent and sympathetic for, beguiling a fellow into making a weak-kneed fool of himself? My worries are no greater than those of millions of other people, and here I've been laying it on with a trowel. Forget the whole dismal story, and just give me a bit of professional advice about my little sister."

"Look here, old boy," said his friend, "don't go talking that way. You've done just what I was anxious you should do--given me your confidence. I can go at your sister's case with a better chance of understanding it if I know this whole story. And now I'm going to thank you and send you off to bed for a good night's sleep. To-morrow we'll take Evelyn in hand."

"Bless you, Andy! You're the same old tried and true," murmured Thorne Lee, shaking hands warmly.

Then Charlotte led him away up-stairs to see his sister, who had waked and wanted him. Stooping over her bed, he felt a pair of slender arms round his neck and heard her voice whispering in his ear:

"Thorny, I just wanted you to know that I think Mrs. Churchill is the dearest person I ever saw, and I'm going to sleep better to-night than I have for weeks."

"Thank God for that!" thought Lee, and kissed the thin cheek of the girl with brotherly fervor.

Down-stairs in the hall a few minutes later Andrew Churchill advanced to meet his wife, as she returned to him after ministering to Evelyn Lee's wants.

"Do you know," said he, looking straight down into her eyes as she came up to him, "those words of Stevenson's--though they always fit you--seem particularly applicable to you to-night?"

"Steel-true and blade-straight
The great artificer
Made my mate."

* * * * *

CHAPTER IV

"I think," said Doctor Churchill, leaning back in his office chair, with a mingling of the professional and the friendly in his air, "that we can get at the bottom of Evelyn's troubles without very much difficulty." He had just sent Evelyn back to Charlotte, after an hour in the office, during which he had subjected her to a minute and painstaking examination into the cause of her ill health. And now to her brother, anxiously awaiting his verdict, he spoke his mind.

"If you'll let me be very frank with you, Thorne," he said, "I'll tell you just what I think about Evelyn, and just what it seems to me is the proper course for us to take with her."

"Go ahead; it's exactly that I want," Lee declared. "I know well enough that my care of her has been seriously at fault."

"Never in intention," said Doctor Churchill, "only in the excess of your tenderness. Evelyn has lived in overheated rooms, with hot baths, insufficient exercise, and improper food. In the kindness of your heart you have been nourishing a little hot-house plant, and there's no occasion for surprise that it wilts at the first blast of ordinary air."

Lee looked dismayed.

"I'm mighty sorry, Andy," he said, remorsefully.

"Don't feel too badly," was his friend's reply. "After a winter with us Evelyn will be another girl."

"What?" Lee started in his chair. "Andy, what are you thinking about?"

"Just what I say. Charlotte and I have talked it all over. We've both taken an immense liking to Evelyn and we'd honestly enjoy having her here for the winter. It only remains for you to convince Evelyn herself that we are to be trusted, and to secure her promise that we may have our way with her from first to last, and the thing is done."

"You are sure that's really all there is to it? You're not keeping anything from me?"

"Not a thing. And I'm as sure as a man can well be. That's why I don't prescribe a sanatorium for her, or anything of that sort. All she needs is a rational, every-day life of the health-making kind, such as Charlotte and I can teach her--Charlotte even more effectively than I. Evelyn needs simply to build up a strong physical body; then these troublesome nerves will take care of themselves. Believe me, Thorne, it's refreshingly simple. I've not even a drug to suggest for your sister. She doesn't need any."

"But, Andy, it doesn't seem to me I can let Evelyn stay here with you all winter--the first winter of your married life. You two ought to be alone together."

"No. Charlotte and I haven't set out to go through life--even this first year of it--alone together. We are together, no matter how many we have about us. It will be only in the day's work if we keep Evelyn with us, and it's a sort of work that will pay pretty well, I fancy."

"It certainly will--in more than one kind of coin," and Lee gripped his

friend's hand.

So it was settled. Evelyn agreed so joyously to the plan that her brother's last doubt of its feasibility was removed, and he went away a day later with a heart so much lighter than the one he had brought with him that it showed in his whole bearing.

"God bless you and your sweet wife, Andy Churchill," he wrote back from his first stopping-place, and when Churchill showed the letter to Charlotte she said, happily:

"We'll make the copper motto come true with this guest, won't we? Evelyn will be a very pretty girl when she loses that fragile look. Her eyes and expression are beautiful. Do you know, she accepts everything I say as if I were the Goddess of Wisdom herself."

"Charlotte," said Mrs. Peyton, a few days later, coming hurriedly into Charlotte's own room, where that young woman was busy with various housewifely offices, "I've had a telegram. I'm so upset I don't know what to do. My sister is sick and her husband is away, and she's sent for me. I'm not able to do nursing--I'm not strong enough--but I don't see but that I must go."

"I'm very sorry your sister is ill," said Charlotte. "Tell me about her."

Mrs. Peyton told at length. "And what I'm to do with the children," she said, mournfully, "I don't know. Sister doesn't want them to come. But here I'm away up North and sister's out West, and the children couldn't go home alone. Besides, there's nowhere for them to go. I am their only home. Dear, dear, what shall I do?"

The front door-bell, ringing sharply, sent Charlotte down-stairs. At this moment she saw her husband coming up the street in his runabout. When Doctor Churchill ran into his office after a case of instruments he had forgotten, his wife cast herself into his arms, in such a state of emotion that he held her close, bewildered.

"What on earth is it, dear?" he asked. "Are you laughing or crying? Here, let me see your face."

"O Andy"--Charlotte would not let her face be seen--"it's Cousin Lula! She's--she's--oh, she's--_going away_!"

Churchill burst into smothered laughter. "It can't be you're crying," he murmured. "Charlotte, I don't blame you. Look up and smile. I know how you must be feeling. You've been a regular heroine all these weeks."

"I'm awfully ashamed," choked Charlotte, on his shoulder, "but, O Andy, what it will seem not to have to--oh, I mustn't say it, but--"

"I know, I know!" He patted her shoulder.

"Her sister is ill, in the West somewhere. She has to go to her at once. She wants the children to stay with us."

"She does!"

"Her sister doesn't want them there, and she can't send them home. Andy,

I wouldn't mind that so awfully. I'd almost like the chance to see what we could do with them."

"Well, don't answer definitely till I have time to talk it over with you and with her. I must go now."

They talked it over, together, and with Mrs. Peyton. The result of these conferences was that two days later that lady took her departure, leaving her children in the care of the Churchills.

"On one condition, Cousin Lula," Doctor Churchill had said to her with decision. "That you put them absolutely in our care and trust our judgment in the management of them."

Mrs. Peyton tried to make a few reservations. Her cousin would have none of them. At last she submitted, understanding well enough in her heart that Andrew Churchill would be the safest sort of a guardian for her children, and admitting to herself, if she did not to anybody else, that Charlotte would give them care of the sort which money cannot buy.

"That woman gone?" asked Jeff, coming into his sister Celia's room. "Well, I'm delighted to hear it. But I must say I think Charlotte's taken a good deal of a contract. I didn't mind so much about their agreeing to keep Evelyn Lee, for she's a mighty nice sort of a girl, and will make a still nicer one when she gets strong. But these Peyton youngsters--I certainly don't think taking care of them ought to have been on the bill. That idiot Lucy--" His expressive face finished the sentence for him.

Celia smiled. "I know. I feel as you do, and I think father and mother are a little anxious lest Charlotte has taken too much care on her shoulders. But Charlotte and Andy have set out to make everybody happy, and they're seizing every chance that offers. They're so enthusiastic about it one can't bear to dampen their ardour. The least we can do is to help them whenever we can."

Jeff made a wry face. "I don't mind assisting in the boy's education, but I draw the line at the girl. She's a silly. Why, she--" His face coloured with resentment. "It sounds crazy to say, but she does, for a fact, make eyes at every man or boy she sees."

Celia laughed. "I hadn't noticed. But she can't mean to, Jeff. She's only fifteen."

"That's the idiocy of it. She's only fifteen, but you watch her the next time any of us fellows come into the room. Just can tell you; he's in a chronic state of laugh over it. She thinks she's a beauty, and she thinks we're all impressed with the fact."

"She is pretty."

"I don't think so. I don't call any girl pretty who's so struck with herself that she can't get by a mirror without a glance and a pat of that big fluff of front hair. You don't catch Evelyn looking into a glass or acting as if she thought everybody was about to fall in love with her. I'm going to take her skating when she gets strong enough."

"That won't be for some time, I'm afraid. But she certainly is looking better already."

So she was. Charlotte had begun very gently with Evelyn, reducing the temperature of the daily bath only by a degree at a time, lessening the heat in the sleeping room, opening the windows for outside air an inch more each night, coaxing her out for a short walk of gradually increasing length each day, and generally luring her toward more healthful ways of living than those to which she had been accustomed.

Bedtime found Evelyn exceedingly weary, but it was healthful weariness, and she was beginning to be able to sleep.

A tinge of colour was growing in the pale cheeks, a brighter expression in the large eyes, and altogether the young guest was showing a gratifying response to the new methods.

"I think," said Charlotte to Evelyn one morning, when three weeks had gone by, "we shall have to celebrate your improvement by a little concert this evening. Would you like to hear the Birch-Churchill orchestra?"

"Orchestra? How lovely! Indeed I should!" cried Evelyn, with a display of enthusiasm quite unusual. "What do you play?"

"Strings. We're badly out of practice, but there are always a few old things we can get up fairly well at a minute's notice. The truth is, we haven't played together since long before my wedding-day, and I resolved the minute we were married we'd begin again. We will begin, this very night. I know they'll all be glad."

The performers did, indeed, show their pleasure by arriving early, flannel-shrouded instruments under their arms. Doctor Churchill came in just as they were tuning. Since Lanse had been away, Andy, who was something of a violinist had taken up Lanse's viola, and was now able to occupy his brother-in-law's place. Celia, however, had been chosen to fill the vacant role of leadership.

"The rest of us are only imitators," Jeff declared to Evelyn, as he stood near her, softly trying his strings. "Charlotte's the best, and Andy's very good indeed; but it's only Celia who goes to hear big music and sits with the tears rolling down her cheeks, while the rest of us are wondering what on earth it all means."

Evelyn, leaning back among the pillows of the wide couch, called Lucy softly, motioning her to a seat by her side.

Lucy came quickly, pleased by Evelyn's notice. She in her turn had been regarding Evelyn as a monopolist of everybody's attention and had made up her mind not to like her. But now she sank into the place by Evelyn's side, and accepted the delicate touch of Evelyn's hand on hers as recognition at last that here was another girl fit to make friends with.

"Don't they play well?" whispered Evelyn, as the music came to a sudden stop that Celia might criticise the playing of a difficult passage.

"She doesn't think so," called Just, softly, having caught the whisper. He indicated his elder sister. "She won't let me boom things with my viol the way I'd like to. What's the use of playing the biggest instrument if you can't make the biggest noise?"

"Solo, by the double-bass!" cried Andy; and the whole orchestra, except the first violin of the leader, burst into a boisterous rendering of a popular street song, in which Just sawed forth the leading part, while the others kept up a rattling staccato accompaniment. Evelyn and Lucy became breathless with laughter, and Mr. and Mrs. Birch, who had just slipped into the room, joined in the merriment.

"There you are," chuckled Jeff. "That's what you get when you give the donkey the solo part among the farmyard performers."

"He can sing as well as the peacock," retorted Just, with spirit.

"We were right in the middle of the '_Hungarian Intermezzo,'_" explained Celia to the newcomers. "I stopped them to tell them why they needed to look more carefully to their phrasing, and the children burst into this sort of thing. What shall I do with them?"

"It's a great relief to feel that they're not altogether grown up, after all," said Mr. Birch, helping himself to his favourite easy chair near the fireplace. "There are times when we feel a strong suspicion that we haven't any children any more. Moments like these assure us that we are mistaken. Go on with your '_Intermezzo,'_' but give us another nursery song before you are through."

"Nursery song! That's pretty good," said Jeff, in Just's ear, and that sixteen-year-old mumbled in reply, "I can throw you over my shoulder just the same."

"Boys, come! We're ready!" called Celia, and the music began again.

"Are you getting tired, dear?" asked Mrs. Birch of Evelyn, when the "_Intermezzo_" was finished, noting the flush on the delicate cheek. Evelyn looked up brightly.

"Not enough to hurt me. I'm enjoying it so! Aren't large families lovely? I was so much younger than my brothers and sisters that by the time I was old enough to care about having good times like this on winter evenings they were all away at school or married. We never had anything so nice as a family orchestra, either. I wish I could play something."

"How about the piano?" asked Charlotte, who sat near. Evelyn's flush grew pinker.

"I can play a little," she said. "But you don't need the piano."

"Yes, we do. A piano would add ever so much. Next time we'll have our practice at home, and give you a part."

Then she glanced at Lucy, and saw what might have been expected, a look of envy and discontent. "Is there anything you can play, Lucy?" she asked. "It would be very nice to have everybody in. Perhaps Ran could have a triangle."

"I play the piano," said Lucy.

"Oh, give Lucy the piano," Evelyn said, quickly,--also as might have been expected.

"We'll try you both," put in Doctor Churchill, "as they always do aspirants for such positions."

"I've had lessons from the best master in our state," said Lucy to Just.

"That so? Then you may win out," was his opinion. "But you can't be sure. Evelyn's not much of a bragger, but she seems to be a pretty well-educated girl."

"Just, be careful!" warned Charlotte, in his ear, as she drew him gently to one side. "I know you don't like her, but you must be considerate of her."

"I don't feel much like it."

"You know I want your help about Lucy." Charlotte had drawn him still farther away, so that she could speak with safety. "But you know, too, that snubbing isn't a way to get hold of anybody."

"It's the only way with conceited softies," began Just.

But Charlotte caught his hand and squeezed it. "No, it isn't. I'm sure she's worth being friends with, and if she can learn certain things you can teach her in the way of athletics, and reading, and all that, you can do her lots of good."

"Don't feel a bit like being a missionary!" growled Just. "Suppose I've got to try it, to please you. Evelyn's all right, isn't she?"

"Yes, she's a dear. I'm so glad we kept her. That makes me realise she's had quite enough excitement for to-night. I must carry her off to bed. Perhaps you'd all better--"

"No, you don't!" said Just, with a rebellious laugh. "Just because you've set up a sanatorium and a kindergarten you can't send your brothers off to bed at nine o'clock. I want a good visit with you after the infants and invalids are in bed."

"All right, big boy," promised Charlotte, rejoicing in the affectionate look he gave her.

She had been anxious that her marriage should in no way interfere with the old brotherly and sisterly relations, and it was a long time since she had had a confidential talk with her youngest brother. Jeff was always coming to her precisely as in the old days, with demands for interest and advice; but Just had seemed a little farther away.

So when she had seen the "infants and invalids" happily gone to rest, and after a quiet hour of family talk about the fireside had said good-night to all the others, Charlotte turned to Just with a look of welcome as fresh and inviting as if the evening had but now begun. Doctor Churchill had gone to make a bedtime call upon a patient critically ill, and the two were quite alone.

"This is jolly," said Just, settling himself on a couch pillow at her feet, his long legs stretched out to the fire, his head resting against his sister's knee. "Now I'm going to tell you everything that's happened to me since you were married. Not that there's anything wonderful to tell, or that I'm in any scrape, you know, but I'd like to feel I've got

my sister and that she cares--just as much as ever." He twisted his head about till he could look up into the warm, sweet face above him. "_Does_ she care as much as ever?"

It was an unusual demonstration from the big boy, now at the age when sisterly companionship is often despised, and Charlotte appreciated it. More than Justin Birch could understand was in her voice as her fingers rested upon his hair, but what she said gave him great satisfaction, although it was only a blithe:

"Just as much--and a little more, dear. Tell me the whole story. There's nothing I'd like so much to hear."

* * * * *

CHAPTER V

"Evelyn! Miss Evelyn Lee! Where are you?"

Jeff's shout rang up the stairs, and in obedience to its imperative summons Evelyn immediately appeared at the head.

"Yes, Mr. Jefferson Birch," she responded. "Is the house on fire?"

"Not a bit, but I'm anxious for your hearing. I've been roaring gently all over the house without a result, except to scare three patients in Andy's office. Won't you come down?"

She descended slowly, but she neither clung to the rail nor sat down to rest half-way, as she had done when she first came under the Churchill roof.

Her face was acquiring the soft bloom of a flower, her eyes were full of light and interest. She still looked slim and frail, but she was beginning to show signs of waxing health very pleasant to see for those who had grown as interested in her as if she were a young sister of their own.

"I've an invitation for you from Carolyn Houghton for an impromptu sleigh-ride to-night. Don't you suppose you can go? I'll take all sorts of care of you and see that you don't get too tired. You've met Carolyn; she's a jolly girl to know, and she told me to bring you if possible."

Evelyn dropped into a chair. "Oh, how I should love to go!" she said. "I never went on a sleigh-ride like that in my life. Do you go all together in a big load?"

"Yes--a regular prairie-schooner of a sleigh. Holds a dozen of us, packed like sardines, so nobody can get cold. We take hot soapstones and rugs and robes, and we go only twelve miles, to a farmhouse where we get a hot supper--oysters and hot biscuit and maple-syrup, and all sorts of good things. You must go."

"If I only could!" sighed Evelyn. "I'm so afraid they won't think I can."

"They will, if _you_ think you can," asserted Jeff. "You're up to it, aren't you? You needn't do a thing. Six of the crowd are going to give a little play. I'll get the load started home early, and we'll come back flying. Be here by midnight at the latest. It'll do you good, I know it will."

"O Mrs. Churchill!" breathed Evelyn, as Charlotte appeared from the hall.

"O Evelyn Lee!" answered Charlotte, smiling back at the eager face. "Yes, I heard most of it, Jeff, for I was coming down-stairs, and you weren't exactly whispering. It's an enticing plan, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. And it's magnificent weather for the affair. Not cold a bit and no wind; moonlight due if no clouds come up. Evelyn can't get cold. I'll keep her done up to the tip of her nose, and be so devoted nobody else will have a chance to worry her. Say she may go. Don't you see the disappointment would be worse for her than the trip?"

"You artful pleader, I'm not sure but it would. If Doctor Churchill agrees, Evelyn, I'll let you try it. On one condition, Jeff--that you really do get back by midnight. For a girl who has been put to bed for weeks at nine that's late enough."

Evelyn went about all day with a lighter step than her friends had yet seen her assume.

"Now remember, I trust her absolutely to your care," Charlotte said to Jeff that evening, as he appeared, his arms full of accessories for making his charge comfortable.

Evelyn, in furs and heavy coat, smiled at her escort. "I'm not a bit afraid," she said. "Oh, what a beautiful night! The moon is out. Is that the sleigh coming up the street now, with all those horns? What fun!"

"I want to put Miss Lee right in the middle of everything!" Jeff called out, as the sleighload stopped. "I'm particularly requested not to let a breath of frost strike her."

"Come on, here's just the spot," answered Carolyn Houghton, holding out a welcoming hand; and then the girl from the South, who had never known the sleighing-party of the North, found herself being whirled away over the road, to an accompaniment of youthful merriment, bursts of songs and tooting of horns.

Before it seemed possible the twelve miles of fine sleighing had been covered, and the old farmhouse, its door flung hospitably open at the sound of the horns, was invaded by the gay band.

Evelyn, in a quaint up-stairs bedroom, lighted by kerosene lamps and warmed by a roaring wood fire in an old-fashioned box stove, was attended by Carolyn Houghton, who was, as Jeff had said, a "jolly girl to know." Herself a blooming maid with black locks and carnation cheeks, Carolyn admired intensely Evelyn's auburn hair and fair complexion.

"Don't you think she's the dearest thing?" she whispered to a friend, as they descended the stairs. "There's something so soft and sweet and ladylike about her, as if nobody could be slangy or loud before her, you

know. Yet she isn't a bit dull; she just _sparkles_ when you get her interested and happy. I do want her to have a good time to-night."

There could be no doubt that Evelyn was having a good time. Everything pleased her, everybody interested her. It seemed to her that she had never seen such charming young people before.

The little play made her laugh till she was as flushed and gay as a child. Those with whom Evelyn showed herself so delighted became equally delighted with her, and before the evening was over she was feeling that she had always known these young friends, had forgotten that she had ever been an invalid, and was indeed "sparkling," as Carolyn Houghton had said, in a way that drew all eyes toward her in admiration.

Jeff, indeed, stared at her as if he had never seen her before.

"I'm sure this isn't hurting you a bit," he said in her ear, as the evening slipped on. "You must be feeling pretty well, for I've never seen you so jolly. I'm going to do the prescribing after this. I know what's good for little girls."

"I believe you do," Evelyn answered. "No, I'm not a bit tired. Why, is it almost eleven?"

"Yes, and time to go, if we live up to our promises. Seems a pity, doesn't it? But it doesn't pay to break your word, so as soon as you girls can get into your toggers we'll be off."

"Of course, we must keep our promise," agreed Evelyn, with decision, and straightway she went up-stairs for her wraps. The other girls followed more reluctantly.

"Goodness, girls, look out!" cried somebody from the window. "Did you ever see it so thick? The barns are just down there, where that glimmer is, but you can't see them at all."

"All the more fun," said another girl.

"We're pretty far out in the country, and the road's awfully winding. I hope we get home all right."

"Oh, nonsense!" said some one else, with great positiveness. "I should know the way with my eyes shut. Besides, it was as clear as a bell when we came. It can't have been snowing long enough to block things in the least."

They found it had done so however, when they descended to the sleigh. That vehicle had been brought close to the porch, that the girls might not have to walk through the deep snow. The air was so full of the whirling white particles that from the farther end of the sleigh one could barely see the horses.

"I declare, I don't feel just easy about you folks starting out," said the farmer whose guests they had been. "Better watch the road some careful, you driver. I suppose you know it pretty well."

"He doesn't, but I do!" called a tall youth from the driver's seat. "I'll keep him straight. We'll be all right. We're due home at midnight, and we'll be there, unless the roads are too heavy to keep the pace we

came in."

"No, sir, we can't ever keep the pace we come in," presently averred the man from the livery-stable, who was driving. "The road's pretty heavy. I declare, I don't know as I ever see snow so thick. Do I turn a little to the right here or do I keep straight ahead?"

"Straight ahead," answered the boy beside him, confidently. "I've been over this road a thousand times, and it doesn't bend to the right for half a mile yet."

"It's lucky you know," said the driver. "I'm all at sea already. Can't see the fences only now and then. I'd ha' swung off there, sure, if you hadn't said not."

As the rising wind began to whirl snowily about their ears and necks, the party turned up their coat-collars and tucked in their fur robes. The horses were plowing with increasing difficulty through the heavily drifted roads, and more than once their driver found himself obliged to make a long detour around a drift which had not been in the road when they first came over it. Moreover, in spite of the snow, the air seemed to have grown colder and to be acquiring a penetrating, icy quality which at last made Jeff declare to Evelyn:

"You may say you're not cold, but I'm going to insist on your letting me wrap this steamer rug round your shoulders, with the corner over your head, so. Now doesn't that keep off a lot of wind?"

"Indeed it does, thank you," admitted Evelyn, with a little shiver she could not quite conceal.

"You are cold!" Jeff said, anxiously.

"No colder than anybody else. Please don't worry about me."

But he did worry, and with reason. Indeed, although nobody was willing yet to admit it, the situation was becoming a little unpleasant. In spite of the stout confidence of the boy on the seat with the driver, others who were somewhat familiar with the road were beginning to question his leading.

"That clump of trees doesn't look natural just there," said one, standing up in the sleigh and trying to peer through the wall of snowflakes. "It's too near. It ought to be a hundred feet away."

"No. You're thinking we're farther back than we are," declared Neil Ward, from the front seat. "We're almost at the turn by the railroad."

"Why, we can't be! We haven't passed the Winters farm. I tell you, you're off the road."

"I think we are," agreed the driver, uneasily, pulling his cap farther over his snow-hung eyebrows. "I've been thinking so for quite a spell."

"We're all right. You people just keep cool!" cried Neil.

"No trouble about keeping cool in this blizzard!" growled somebody, and there was a general laugh.

One of the girls started a song, and they all joined cheerily in. A proposition to toot the horns, forgotten in the bottom of the sleigh, with a hope of attracting attention from some one, was adopted, and a hideous din followed, and was kept up till every one was weary--with no result.

All at once, without warning, the horses plunged heavily and solidly to their steaming shoulders into an undreamed-of ditch, and the sleigh stopped, well into the same hole.

"Will you admit now that we're off the road, Neil Ward?" cried some one, fiercely; and Neil, without contention but with evident chagrin, admitted it. There was no ditch that he was aware of within a mile of the highway.

Jeff drew the rugs tighter about Evelyn, then lifted a corner to peer in. "Don't be frightened, little girl. We'll get out of this all right," he said, as cheerfully as he could, although he was alarmed for her safety more than he would have dared to admit, even to himself.

The other girls were all strong, healthy specimens of young womanhood, presumably able to endure a good deal of cold and exposure without danger of serious harm. But this little sensitive plant! Jeff waited in suspense for her answer.

It came in a clear, sweet voice, without a particle of fright in it: "Of course we shall. And won't it be fun to tell about it afterward?"

"You're right, it will!" he responded, with enthusiasm. Inwardly he said, "You're a plucky one, all right." Then, with the other fellows, he leaped out of the sleigh, and went to trampling down the snow around the imprisoned horses.

* * * * *

Alone together, after Randolph and Lucy had gone to bed, Andrew and Charlotte passed the long evening. Charlotte was not willing to let Evelyn come home to a closed and silent house, so the two awaited her arrival.

"Why, Andy, it's snowing furiously!" said Charlotte, from the window, whither she had gone at the stroke of twelve. Doctor Churchill put down the book from which he had been reading aloud, and came to her side.

"So it is. Blowing, too. But it can't have been at it long or we should have noticed."

"I've been noticing the wind now and then for the last hour. I hope it's not grown cold. I wouldn't have anything happen to upset Evelyn's improvement for the world."

"Nothing will. They'll be home before the half-hour. Come back and listen to the rest of this chapter."

Charlotte came back, but as the quarter-hours went slowly by she became restless, and vibrated so continually between fireplace and window that Andy finally put away the book and kept her company.

"It's growing worse every minute." Charlotte's face was pressed close

against the frosty pane. "If they don't come by one it will look as if something had happened."

"Oh, they're at the irresponsible age. When they come they'll say, 'Why, we didn't dream it was so late!'"

"Jeff's not irresponsible when he gives a promise. He never breaks one," Charlotte answered, confidently.

"This storm would make the roads heavy. Even if they started on time, they would have to travel twice as slowly as when they went. Stop worrying, dear; it's not in character for you."

Charlotte closed her lips, but when the clock struck one her eyes spoke for her. "Evelyn is so delicate," they said, mutely, and Andy answered as if she had spoken.

"Evelyn is wrapped too heavily to be cold. Besides, they'll all take care of her. She won't come to any harm, I'm sure of it. They'll be here before half-past-one, I'm confident, and then we can antidote any chill she may have got."

But at half-past-one there was still no sign of the sleighing party. Moreover, the storm was steadily increasing; it had become what is known as a "blizzard." Even in the protected suburban street the drifts were beginning to show size, and the arc-light at the corner was almost lost to view through the downfall.

Charlotte turned to her husband with something like imperiousness in her manner, and met the same decision in his look. Before she could speak he said:

"Yes, I'll go to meet them. It does look as if they might be stalled somewhere. It's rather a lonely road till they reach the railroad, and it's possible they've missed the way."

He went to the telephone.

"Andy," cried Charlotte, following him, "order a double sleigh, please! I must go with you."

He turned and looked at her, hesitating. "It isn't necessary, dear. I'll go over and wake up Just, I think. We two will be--"

"I must go," she interrupted. "I couldn't endure to wait here any longer. And if Evelyn should be very much chilled she'll need me to look after her. Besides--"

He smiled at her. "You won't let me get lost in a snow-drift myself without you."

She nodded, and ran away to make ready. By the time the livery-stable had been awakened from its early morning apathy, and had sent round the double sleigh with the best pair of horses in its stalls, the party was ready.

Just, awakened by snowballs thrown in at his open window, had joyfully dressed himself. At the last moment Charlotte had thought of the automobile headlight, and this, hurriedly filled and lighted, streamed

out over the snow as the three jumped into the sleigh. All were warmly dressed, and Charlotte had brought many extra wraps, as well as a supply of medicines for a possible emergency of which she did not like to think.

"Julius Caesar, but this is a night!" came from between Just's teeth, as the sleigh reached the end of the suburban streets and made the turn upon the open country road. He clutched at his cap, pulling it still farther down over his ears. "What a change in six hours!"

"This is a straight nor'easter," answered Doctor Churchill, slapping hands already chilled, in spite of his heavy driving gloves. Then he turned his head. "Can't you keep well down behind us, Charlotte?" he called over his shoulder.

"I'm all right!" she called back. One had to shout to be heard in the roar of the wind.

After that nobody talked, except as Just from time to time offered to drive, to give Andrew's hands a chance to warm. That young man, however, would not give over the reins to anybody. It was not for nothing that he had been driving over this country, under all possible conditions of weather, for nearly five years.

When they had crossed the railroad which marked the end of the main highway between two towns and the beginning of the narrow side road which led off across country to the farmhouse of the sleighing party, conviction that the young people had been stalled somewhere on the great plain they were crossing became settled.

It was with the utmost difficulty that Doctor Churchill kept the road. Only the fact that the storm was showing signs of decreasing, and that now and then came moments when he could see more clearly the outlying indications of fence and tree and infrequent habitation assured him that he had not lost the way.

"Hark!" cried Charlotte, suddenly, as they plowed along.

For the instant the wind had lulled. Doctor Churchill stopped his horses, and the three held their breath to listen. After a brief interval came the faint, far toot of a horn. Then, away to the left, a light suddenly flashed, vanished, and flashed again.

"There they are!" cried three exultant voices.

"But how shall we get to them?" shouted Just, instantly alive with excitement. "Why, they're a mile away! There's no road over there, nor any houses. They're right out in the fields."

Then the sifting snow shut down again. The three looked at one another in the yellow glare from the automobile headlight.

* * * * *

CHAPTER VI

"Don't they see our light?" Charlotte asked, eagerly.

"I think perhaps they have seen it," Doctor Churchill answered, "and that's why they were blowing their horns. Probably some of them will start toward us. If they're not stuck, they'll begin to drive this way. I believe the thing to do will be for Charlotte to stay here in the sleigh, keeping the headlight pointed just to the left of that big tree--I noticed that was where the flash of their fire came--and for Just and me to start across the fields. I'll turn the horses with their backs to the wind and blanket them. Then--hold on, I've a better plan. Let's make a fire of our own. That will insure Charlotte's keeping warm."

"Everything's too wet," objected Just. "That crowd must have had a time getting green wood to burn."

"We can do it." Doctor Churchill was feeling among the robes at his feet. "I thought of it before we started, and put in a kerosene-can and some newspapers. Hatchet, too."

Just got out of the sleigh and waded away toward a thick growth of underbrush along the side of the road.

In ten minutes a roaring fire was leaping into the descending snowfall. A pile of brush and some broken fence-rails were left with Charlotte, the horses made as snug as possible, and then the two others jumped the fence and plunged off into the snow.

Guided by glimpses of the apparently fitful fire of the sleighing party, Doctor Churchill and Just made their way. Sometimes the course was comparatively free from drifts; again they had to wallow nearly to their waists.

"Confounded long way!" grunted Just. "Good thing we're both tough and strong. Except for Jeff, there aren't any athletes in the Houghton party."

"Don't I see somebody coming toward us?" Doctor Churchill asked, presently.

The snowfall was lightening again, and the small flame in the distance looked nearer. He put his hands to his mouth and gave a long, clear hail. He was answered by a similar one. Then followed a peculiar musical call, which Just, recognising, answered ecstatically.

"It's Jeff!" he shouted. "_Whoop!_ I'll bet he's glad to hear us!"

He was. He came plunging through the last big drift toward them, a snow-encrusted figure. "Well, well!" he cried, in tones of pleasure and relief. "I knew you'd come. Where are we, anyhow?"

"A mile off the road. Are you all right? I see you've got a fire. How's--"

"Evelyn's all right, I think. Since we managed the fire she's fairly warm again. Plucky as any girl in the crowd, and they're all plucky. How are we to get our load down to the road?"

"I brought ropes, and we've a strong pair back there. We'll go and get them, now that we know where you are. You go back to your party and prepare them to be rescued."

"No, Just can go to the camp, and I'll keep on with you."

Just, being entirely willing to accept the part of rescuer, plowed on through the big holes Jeff had left in his track. Doctor Churchill and Jeff made their way back to Charlotte.

"Yes, we had rather a bad time for a while," admitted Jeff, as he helped Andy make the horses ready to start. "We got pretty cold, and I thought we'd never make the fire go. Found the inside of an old stump at last, and got her started. Yes, all the girls looked after Evelyn--came pretty near smothering her. I don't believe she's taken cold. The snow's letting up. I can see our fire back there. No, we didn't see yours; we were just tooting on general principles. Evelyn insisted she caught a glimmer, and I started out to climb a tree to find out. I saw it then, for a minute, and was sure it was you. Keep this fire going, Charlotte. The storm may close down again, and we want to make straight tracks across the fields."

By the time they reached the camp in the fields both Jeff and Doctor Churchill were pretty well wearied. But they greeted the party there with an enthusiasm which matched the welcome they received.

The spirits of the whole company had risen with a jump the instant they had caught sight of Just, and now, with four horses to pull the ponderous sleigh through the drifts, the boys walking by its side and the girls tucked snugly in among the robes, the whole aspect of things was changed. The situation lost seriousness, and although each was prepared to make a thrilling tale of it for the various family circles when daylight came, nobody except Jeff really regretted the experience of the night. When they reached Charlotte and the smaller sleigh, there was a great chorus of explanations. She swiftly extracted Evelyn and took her in beside herself.

"Indeed, yes, I'm warm, Mrs. Churchill," protested the girl. Her voice showed that she was very tired, but her inflection was as cheerful as ever. With a hot soapstone at her feet, a hot-water bag in her lap and Charlotte's arm about her, she leaned back on the fur-clad shoulder beside her and rejoiced. One thing was certain. She had had a real Northern good time, with an exciting ending, and she was quite willing to be tired.

With the wind at their backs and the fall of snow nearly ceased, the party was not a great while in getting back to town. The clocks were striking five when Charlotte, having put her charge to bed, and fed her with hot food and spicy, steaming drinks, administered the last pat and tuck. "Now you're not to open your eyes and stir until four o'clock this afternoon," she admonished her, with decisive tenderness. "Then if you're very good, you may get up and dress in time for dinner."

"I'll be good, Mrs. Churchill," promised Evelyn, smiling rather faintly. She fell asleep almost before the door closed.

"You must feel a load off your shoulders," Just observed to Jeff, as the two made ready for slumber for the brief time remaining before breakfast and the school and college work which would then claim them both.

"I do. But if Evelyn comes out all right I shall be glad I took her. I tell you that girl's a mighty good sort."

"I wish Lucy was like her. What do you think I'm in for? Our class reception is for Friday night, at the head-master's house. Doctor Agnew's daughters have met Lucy, and I'm sure she gave 'em a hint to invite her to come with me. Anyhow, they've done it, and of course I've got to take her."

"Oh, well, a fellow has to be civil to a lot of girls he doesn't particularly admire. Lucy's not so bad. She's rather pretty--when she's feeling amiable--and she certainly dresses well."

Jeff's assertion in the matter of Lucy's appearance was proved true. When Just, on Friday evening, marched across to the other house, inwardly raging at his fate, he had an agreeable surprise. As he stood by the fireplace with Charlotte, Lucy came down-stairs and floated in at the door. Just stopped in the middle of a sentence and stared.

Being really a very pretty girl, and feeling, at the present moment, the height of fluttering expectation, her face was illumined into an attractiveness that was quite a revelation to her friends. For the first time Lucy felt herself to be in the centre of things, and it made another girl of her. In addition, the evening frock she wore was so charming in style and colouring that it contributed not a little to the general effect.

Altogether, Just experienced quite a revulsion of feeling in regard to the painful duty before him, and came forward to assist Lucy into her long coat with considerable alacrity and cheerfulness.

"Oh, I do love parties so," she declared, as they hurried along the streets. "I'm not used to being so dull as I've been here. It seems to me that you have mighty few doings for young people. I don't call candy-pulls and fudge parties real _parties_."

"Probably you won't call this to-night a real party, then. There's never much that's exciting at Doctor Agnew's. He always has an orchestra playing, and we walk round and talk, and usually somebody does something to entertain us--a reading or songs. Maybe you won't think it's as festive as you expect."

"Oh, well, I reckon it will be a nice change," said she, with quite unexpected good humour.

In the dressing-room Chester Agnew, the son of the head-master, came up to Just with an expression of mingled pleasure and chagrin.

"Awfully glad to see you, Birch," he said, "I suppose you noticed that we have no music going to-night. It's a shame, isn't it? Lindmann's men have been delayed by a freight wreck on the P. & Q. They were coming home from a wedding down the line somewhere, and telephoned us they couldn't get out here before midnight. We've tried to get some other music, but everything's engaged somewhere."

"Too bad, but it's no great matter," Just replied, comfortably. "We can worry along without the orchestra."

"No, you can't. Mother's plans for to-night were for a series of national dances, in costume, by sixteen of the juniors, and that's all up without the music."

"Why won't the piano do?"

"We haven't a piano in the house. Yes, I know, but it was Helena's, and when she was married in November she took it with her. Father hasn't bought a new one yet, because the other girls don't play. Now do you see? You're in for the stupidest evening you've had this winter, for it's too late to get anybody here to do any sort of entertaining."

"That is too bad," admitted Just, thinking of Lucy, and finding himself caring a good deal that she should not think the affair dull. He walked along the hall with Chester to the point where he should meet Lucy, thinking about the situation. Then an idea popped into his head.

"Isn't your telephone in that little closet off the dining-room?" he asked.

"Yes. Want to use it?"

"Yes. Take Lucy down, will you? You know her. I've just thought of something."

Just slipped down to the dining-room. He carefully closed the door of the closet and called up Doctor Churchill. To him he rapidly explained the situation and the remedy which had occurred to him. Doctor Churchill's voice came back to him in a tone of amused surprise.

"Why, Just, do you think we could carry it through decently? We don't know the music at all. Oh, play our own and make it fit? What sort will do--ordinary waltzes and two-steps? I shouldn't mind helping them out, of course, if I thought we could manage it. Better than nothing? Well--possibly. Better consult Mrs. Agnew before we do anything rash."

Just ran up the rear staircase and down the front one. He found Chester and whispered his plan. Interrupting Chester's eager gratitude, he asked for somebody who could tell him what music would be needed.

"Mother's receiving, and so are the girls. Carolyn Houghton will know, I think. She's been at the rehearsals. I'll get her."

"Well, are you going to leave me to myself much longer?" Lucy inquired, reproachfully, as Just waited silently beside her for Carolyn.

"Why, I'm awfully sorry," he said, remembering his duties, which in the excitement of the moment he realised he was forgetting. "I hope you'll excuse me, but I've got to help the Agnews out if I can." And he hurriedly told her his plan. She stared at him in astonishment.

"You don't mean you would come and take the place of a hired orchestra for a reception?" she cried, under her breath.

It was Just's turn to stare. Then he straightened shoulders which were already pretty square. "Would you mind telling me why not? That is, provided we can do it well enough."

"I think it's a mighty queer thing to do," insisted Lucy, with

disapproval.

Carolyn Houghton appeared and beckoned Just and Chester out into the hall. Lucy followed, not liking to be left alone. Everybody seemed to be forgetting her, although Chester had turned, and said cordially, "That's right, Miss Lucy! Come and help us plan."

Carolyn lost no time. "It's fine of you," she said eagerly. "Yes, I'm sure you can do it. Not one person in fifty will know whether the tunes you play are national or not. Something quaint and queer for the Hungarian, and jiggy and gay for the Irish. Castanets in the Spanish dance--have you them?"

"Young Randolph Peyton can work those," began Just, looking at Lucy.

She frowned. "Really, I don't believe you'd better have him in it," she said, with such an air that Carolyn glanced at her in amazement, and Chester coughed and turned away.

"Oh, very well!" Just answered, instantly. "You can do 'em yourself, then, Ches."

"All right," said Chester. "There is a big screen of palms and ferns for the orchestra," he explained, with satisfaction, to Lucy. "Nobody'll know who's performing, anyhow."

"Oh!" said Lucy.

Carolyn had soon convinced Just that the little home orchestra could undertake the music without much fear of failure.

"Of course there's a chance that the change may put the dancers out, yet I don't think so. I noticed it was rather simple music, and they're so well drilled they're not very dependent on the music. Anyhow, people will be too interested in the costumes and the steps to notice whether the music is strictly appropriate. As long as you give them something in precisely the right time, I don't believe the change will bother them. I can coach you on that."

"All right," and Just hurried back to the telephone.

Within three-quarters of an hour he had them all there, a laughing crew, ready for what struck them as a frolic for themselves. Chester Agnew carried the instruments behind the screen, and managed to slip the members of the new orchestra one by one from the dining-room doorway to the shelter of the palms without anybody's being the wiser. In ten minutes more soft music began to steal through the crowded rooms.

"The orchestra has come, after all," said Mrs. Agnew to her husband, in the front room. Her voice breathed relief.

He nodded satisfaction. "So I hear. I don't know how they managed it, but I accept the fact without question."

"Do you think it's always safe to do that?" queried his son Chester, coming up in time to hear.

"Accept facts without question? What else can you do with facts?"

"But if they should turn out not to be facts?"

"In this case I have the evidence of my ears," returned the learned man, comfortably, and Chester walked away again, his eyes dancing.

"Nobody can tell you from Lindmann," he whispered, behind the screen, during an interval.

"That's good. Hope the delusion keeps up. We don't feel much like Lindmann," returned Churchill, hastily turning over a pile of music. "Get your crowd to talking as loud as it can--then we're comparatively safe. Where's the second violin part of 'King Manfred'? Look out, Just--you hit my elbow twice with your bow-arm last time. These quarters are a bit--There you are, Charlotte. Now take this thing slow, and look to your phrasing. All ready!"

The costume dances did not come until after supper. By that time the Churchills and Birches, behind the screen, had settled down to steady work. During supper a violin, with the 'cello and bass, carried on the music, while Doctor Churchill, Celia and Carolyn Houghton planned a substitute programme for the dances.

In two cases they found the original music familiar; in most of the others it proved not very difficult to adapt other music. The leaders of the dances were told that whatever happened they were to carry through their parts without showing signs of distress.

"It's a pretty big bluff," murmured Jeff, leaning back in his chair and mopping a perspiring brow. "Phew-w. but it's hot in here! I expect to see several of those crazy dances go all to pieces on our account. That Highland Fling! Mind you keep up a ripping time on that. It ought to be piped, not stringed."

Nevertheless, in spite of a good deal of perturbation on the part of both dancers and orchestra, the entertainment went off well enough to be applauded heartily. Certain numbers, notably the South Carolina breakdown, the Irish jig, and the minuet of Washington's time, "brought down the house," presumably because the music fitted best and bothered the dancers least.

When it was over, the musicians expected to escape before they were found out, thinking the fun would be the greater if the Agnews did not learn to whom they were indebted until later. But young Chester Agnew defeated this. He instructed half-a-dozen of his friends, and as the final strains were coming to a close, these boys laid hold of the wall of palms and pulled it to pieces. The musicians, laughing and protesting, were shown to the entire company.

A great murmur of surprise was followed by a burst of applause and laughter, in the midst of which Doctor and Mrs. Agnew hurried to the front, followed by their daughters, who had already discovered the truth, but had been warned by their brother to keep quiet about it.

"My dear friends!" exclaimed the head-master. "Is it possible that it is you who have filled the gap so successfully? Well, really, what shall we say to such kindness?"

"Mrs. Churchill--Doctor Churchill--Miss Birch--all of you," Mrs Agnew was saying, in her surprise, "what a very lovely thing to do! It has

been too kind of you. We appreciate it more than we can tell you. You must come out at once and have some supper."

"The evening would have been spoiled without you!" cried Jessica Agnew, and Isabel said the same thing. Chester was loud in his praises, and indeed, the orchestra received an ovation which quite overwhelmed it. It went out to supper presently, escorted by at least twenty young people.

"Here, come and sit by me, Lucy," invited Just, in good humour at the success of his plan. "You can keep handing me food as I consume it. I never was so starved in my life. Well, have you had a good time? Sorry I had to desert you, but I've no doubt the others introduced you round and saw that you weren't neglected."

"I think Chester Agnew is one of the handsomest boys I ever met," whispered Lucy. "Hasn't he the loveliest eyes? He was just devoted to me."

Just turned, his mouth full of chicken _pate_, and regarded her with interest. "Yes, his eyes are wonders," he agreed, his own twinkling. "Full of soul, and all that, you mean? Yes, they are, though I never noticed it till you pointed it out."

Lucy looked at him suspiciously.

"He liked my dress," she went on.

"Did, eh? Ches must be coming on. Never knew him to notice a girl's dress before."

"I saw him looking at it,"--Lucy's tone was impressive--"and asked if he liked pink. He said it was his favourite colour."

"H'm! I must take lessons of Ches."

"He looked at me so much I was awfully embarrassed," said Lucy, under her breath, with drooping eyes.

Just favoured her with another curious glance. "Maybe he's never seen just your kind before," he suggested. "Lucy, by the time you're twenty you'll be quite an old hand at this society business, won't you?"

"What makes you think so?" she asked, not sure whether to be gratified or not.

"Oh, your small talk is so--well, so--er--interesting. A fellow always likes to hear about another fellow--about his eyes, and so on."

"Oh, you mustn't be jealous," said Lucy, with a glance which finished Just. He choked in his napkin, and turned his attention to Carolyn Houghton, on his other side.

But when he went to bed that night he once more gave vent to his feelings on the subject of his sister's guest.

"Jeff," said he, "if a girl has absolutely no brains in her head, what do you suppose occupies the cavity?"

"Give it up," returned Jeff, sleepily.

"I think it must be a substance of about the consistency of a marshmallow," mused Just, thoughtfully. "I detest marshmallows," he added, with some resentment.

"Oh, go to bed!" murmured Jeff.

* * * * *

CHAPTER VII

"Nobody at home, eh? Well, I'm sorry. I wanted to see somebody very much. And there's no one at the other house, either. I'm away so much I see altogether too little of these people, Mrs. Fields." Thus spoke Doctor Forester of the city--the old friend and family counselor of both Birches and Churchills.

His son Frederic--who had managed since his return from study abroad to see much more of the Birch household than his father--was watching the conversation on the door-step from his position in the driver's place on Doctor Forester's big automobile, which stood at the curb. It was a cool day in May, and a light breeze was blowing.

"I don't know but Miss Evelyn's in the house somewhere," admitted Mrs. Fields. "But I don't suppose you'd care to see her?"

"Miss Evelyn? Why, certainly I should! Please ask her to come down."

So presently Evelyn was at the door, her slender hand in the big one of the distinguished gentleman of whom she stood a little in awe.

"All alone, Miss Evelyn?" said Doctor Forester. "Then suppose you get your hat and a warm jacket and come with us. Fred and I expected to pick up whomever we found and take them for a little run down to a certain place on the river."

Such an invitation was not to be resisted. Doctor Churchill and Charlotte were at the hospital; Randolph was with them, visiting his friends and proteges among the convalescent boys. Lucy had gone to town with the Birches, and nobody knew where Jeff and Just might be.

"Suppose you sit back in the tonneau with me," Doctor Forester suggested. "Fred likes to be the whole thing on the front seat there."

He put Evelyn in and tucked her up. "Wearing a cap? That's good sense. It spoils my fun to take in a passenger with all sails spread. Hello, son, what are you stopping for? Oh, I see!"

It was Celia Birch beside whom the motor was bringing up with such a sudden check to its speed. She had appeared at the corner of the street and had instantly presented to the quick vision of Mr. Frederic Forester a good and sufficient reason for coming to a stop.

"Please come with us!" urged that young man, jumping out. "We've been to the house for you."

Celia put her hand to her head, "Just as I am?" she asked.

"Just as you are. That little _chapeau_ will stay on all right. If it doesn't I'll lend you my cap. Will you keep me company in front? Father has appropriated Miss Evelyn behind there."

Celia mounted to the seat, and they were off through the wide streets, and presently away in the country, spinning along at a rate much faster than either passenger realised. The machine was a fine one, operating with so little fuss and fret that the speed it was capable of attaining was not always appreciated.

"Oh, this is glorious, isn't it, Evelyn?" cried Celia, over her shoulder.

Doctor Forester glanced from her to the young girl on the seat beside him, smiling at both. "I'm glad you put your trust in the chauffeur so implicitly. It took me some time to get used to him, but he proves worthy of confidence. I wouldn't drive my own machine a block--never have. Yes, it's delightful to go whirling along over the country in this way. I suppose you don't know where I'm taking you?"

"I don't think we much care," Celia answered, and Evelyn nodded. Both were pink-cheeked and bright-eyed with the delight of the motion.

The doctor did not explain where they were going until they had nearly reached their destination. They had passed many fine country places all along the way, and had reached a fork in the river. The broad road leading on up the river was left behind as they turned to the left, following the windings of the smaller stream.

The character of the houses along the way had changed at once. They had become comfortable farmhouses, with now and then a place of more modern aspect.

"This is the sort of thing I prefer," Doctor Forester announced, with satisfaction. "I wouldn't give a picayune to own one of those castles, back there. But down here I'm going to show you my ideal of comfort."

Fred turned in at a gateway and drove on through orchards and grove to a house behind the trees on the river bank.

"Doesn't that look like home?" exclaimed the doctor, as they alighted. "Well, it is home! I bought it yesterday, just as it stands. Nothing fine about it, outside or in. I wanted it to run away to when I'm tired. I'm not going to tell anybody about it except---"

"Except every one he meets," Fred said, gaily, to Celia, leading her toward the wide porch overlooking the river, about which the May vines were beginning to cluster profusely. "He can't keep it a secret. I may as well warn you he's going to invite you and the whole family out here for a fortnight in June. So if you don't want to come you have a chance to be thinking up a reasonable excuse."

"As if we could want one! What a charming plan for us! Does he really mean to include all of us?"

"Every one, under both roofs. I assure you it's a jolly plan for us, and

"I'm holding my breath till I know you'll come."

"What a lovely rest it will be for Charlotte!" murmured Celia, thinking at once, as usual, of somebody else. "She won't own it, but she's really had a pretty hard winter."

"So I should imagine, for the first year of one's married life. I'm afraid I couldn't be as hospitable as she and her husband--not all at once, you know. Do you think it's paid?"

"What? Having the three through the winter?" Celia glanced at Evelyn, who at the other end of the long porch with Doctor Forester was gazing with happy eyes out over the sunlit river. "Oh, I'm sure Charlotte and Andy would both say so. In Evelyn's case I think there's no doubt about it. From being a delicate little invalid she's come to be the healthy girl you see there. Not very vigorous yet, of course, but in a fair way to become so, Andy thinks."

"Yes, I can see," admitted Forester, thoughtfully. "But those other youngsters--"

Celia laughed. It was easy to think well of everybody out here in this delicious air and in the company of people she thoroughly liked. Even Lucy Peyton seemed less of an infliction.

"Little Ran has certainly improved very much," she said, warmly. "And even Lucy--"

"Has Lucy improved?" Forester looked at her with a quizzical smile. "The last time I saw her I thought she was rather going backward. I met her by accident in town one day. Charlotte was shopping, and Lucy was waiting. She rushed up to me as to a long lost friend. She practically invited me to invite herself and Charlotte to lunch with me--she somewhat grudgingly included Charlotte. I was rather taken off my feet for an instant. Charlotte heard, and came up. I wish you could have seen the expression on the face of Mrs. Andrew Churchill! I don't know which felt the more crushed, Lucy or I. I assure you I was anxious to take them both to lunch after that, Mrs. Andrew had made it so clearly impossible."

"The perversity of human desires," laughed Celia. "Poor Lucy! Charlotte won't stand the child's absurd affectations."

"Come here, and listen to my plan!" called Doctor Forester, unable to wait longer to unfold it. So for the next half-hour the plan was discussed in all its bearings.

Celia proposed at once that they keep it a secret from Charlotte until the last possible moment, and this was agreed upon. Then Evelyn suggested, a little shyly, that it also remain unknown to Jeff. He was to be graduated from college about the middle of June, was very busy and hurried, and might appreciate the whole thing better when Commencement was out of the way. It was finally decided that the party should come down to "The Banks" upon the evening of Jeff's Commencement Day, and that to him and Charlotte the whole arrangement should be a complete surprise.

The date was only three weeks ahead, and Celia and Evelyn, Mrs. Birch and the others, found plenty to do in getting ready for the outing, to

say nothing of seeing that neither Charlotte nor Jeff made other engagements for the period.

"No, no, let's not get in our camping so early in the season. It'll be all over too soon, then," argued Just with his brother. Upon Just devolved the task of heading Jeff off for those prospective two weeks. "Besides, I've an idea Lanse may prefer July or August."

"If you'd been boning for examinations the way I have," retorted Jeff, "your one idea would be to get off into the wilderness just as soon as your sheepskin was fairly in your hands. I don't see why you argue against going in June. You were eager enough for it a week ago."

"Oh, not so awfully eager. I----"

"You were in a frenzy to go. And I haven't cooled off, if you have."

"He's hopeless," Just confided to Evelyn. "His granite mind is set on going camping in June, and I can't get him off it. If you've any little tricks of persuasiveness all your own now's your time to try 'em on him. He'll spoil the whole thing."

"Write your brother Lansing to tell Jeff to put it off on his account," suggested Evelyn.

"That won't do, unfortunately, for Lanse has been uncertain about going all the time."

"I'll try to think of something," promised Evelyn.

She had a chance before the day was over. Jeff appeared, late in the afternoon, and invited her to take a walk with him.

"I'll tell you what I want," he said, as they went along. "Let's go down by the old bridge at the pond, and if there's nobody about I'd like to have you do me the favour of listening while I spout my class-day oration. Would you mind?"

"I shall be delighted," answered Evelyn, and this program was carried out accordingly. Down behind the willows Jeff mounted a prostrate log and gave vent to a vigorous and sincere discourse.

"Splendid!" cried his audience, as he finished. "If you do it half as well as that it will be a great success."

"Glad you think so." Jeff descended from the log with a flushed brow and an air of relief. "I'm not the fellow for class orator, I know, but I'm it, and I don't want to disgrace the crowd. Pretty down here, isn't it?"

"Beautiful. It makes me very blue to think of leaving it--as if I oughtn't to be simply thankful I could be here so long. It was lovely of your sister and brother to insist on my staying when my brother Thorne had to go to Japan so suddenly."

"You're not going soon?" Jeff looked dismayed.

"Two weeks after your Commencement," said Evelyn. "My brother's ship should be in port by the last of June, and I want to surprise him by being at home when he reaches there. I shall leave here the minute he

gets into San Francisco."

"Oh, that's too bad. I'd forgotten there was any such thing as your going away. You seem--why, you seem one of us, you know!" declared Jeff, as if there could be no stronger bond of union.

"Oh, thank you--it's good of you to say so. You've all been so kind I can't half tell you how I appreciate it. We'll have to make the most of June, I think," said Evelyn, smiling rather wistfully, and looking away across the little pond.

"I should say so. We'll have every sort of lark we can think of the minute Commencement's--Oh, I was going camping after that--but I'll put it off. Just was arguing that way only this morning, but I saw no good reason for waiting, then. Now, I do."

"I'm sorry to have you put it off," protested Evelyn, with art. "Hadn't you better go on with your plans, if they're all made? Of course I should be sorry, but--"

"Oh, I'll put it off!" said Jeff, decidedly, with the very human wish to do the thing he need not do.

So it was settled. Commencement came rapidly on, bringing with it the round of festivals peculiar to that season. Jeff insisted on the presence of his entire family at every event, and for a week, as Charlotte said, it seemed as if they all lived in flowered organdies and white gloves.

"I'm really thankful this is the last," sighed Celia, coming over with her mother and Just to join the party assembling for the final great occasion on the Churchill's porch. "Evelyn, how dear you look in that forget-me-not frock! And that hat is a dream."

"Well, people, we must be off. When it's all over, let's come out here on the porch in the dark and luxuriate." Charlotte drew a long breath as she spoke.

"That will be a rest," agreed Celia, with a private pinch of Evelyn's arm, and Lucy and Randolph giggled.

The younger two had been let into the secret only within the last twenty-four hours, fears being entertained that they might not be safe repositories of mystery. Celia gave them a warning look as she passed them, and kept them away from Charlotte during the car ride into the city.

"How well the dear boy looks!" whispered his family, one to another, as the class filed into the University chapel in cap and gown. They were in a front row, where Jeff could look down at them when he should come upon the stage for his diploma.

There was not the slightest possibility of his looking either there or anywhere else. His oration had been delivered on class day, and his remaining part in the exercises of graduation was to listen respectfully to the distinguished gentlemen who took part, and to watch with interested eyes the conferring of many higher degrees before it was time for himself and his class to receive the sonorous Latin address which ended by bestowing upon them the title of Bachelor of Arts.

It was a proud moment, nevertheless, and many hearts beat high when it came. Down in that row near the front father and mother, brothers and sisters and friends, watched a certain erect figure as if there were no others worth looking at--as all over the hall other affectionate eyes watched other youthful, manly forms.

Jeff had worked hard for his degree, being not by nature a student, like his elder brother Lansing, but fonder of active, outdoor life than of books. He had been incited to deeds of valour in the classroom only by the grim determination not to disgrace the family traditions or the scholarly ancestors to whom he had often been pointed back.

"Thank heaven it's over!" exulted Jeff, with his classmates, when, after the last triumphant speech of the evening, the audience was dismissed to the strains of a rejoicing orchestra.

"Say, fellows, I'm going to bolt. Hullo, Just! Ask Evelyn for me if she won't go home flying with me in the Houghton auto--Carolyn's just sent me word."

"That will be just the thing," whispered Celia to Evelyn, when the message came. "Go with him, but don't let him stop at the Houghtons'. Whisper it to Carolyn, and see that he's safely on the porch with you when we get there."

Evelyn nodded and disappeared with Just, who took her to his brother.

"Now we're off," murmured Jeff, as he and Evelyn followed Carolyn and her brother out through a side entrance. "What a night! What a moon! My, but it feels good to be out in the open air after that pow-wow in there!"

They had half an hour to themselves in the quiet of the moonlit porch before the others, coming by electric car, could reach home.

They filled the time by sitting quietly on the top step, Jeff in the subdued mood of the young graduate who sees, after all, much to regret in the coming to an end of the years of getting ready for his life-work. He was, besides, not a little wearied by the final examinations, preparation for his part in Commencement, and the closing round of exercises. Evelyn, herself somewhat fatigued, leaned back against the porch pillar and gladly kept silence.

Before the others came Jeff spoke abruptly. "It isn't everybody who knows when to let a fellow be an oyster," he said, gratefully. "But I'm getting over the oyster mood now, and feel like talking. Do you know, you're going to leave an awful vacancy behind you when you go?"

"Oh, no," Evelyn answered. "There are so many of you, and you have such good times together, you can't mind much when a stranger goes away."

"Call yourself that?" Jeff laughed. "Well I assure you we don't. You're too thoroughly one of us--in the way of liking the things we like and despising the things we despise. Hullo, here come the people! It was rather stealing a march on them to race home in an auto and let them follow by car, wasn't it?' Let's go make 'em some lemonade to cheer their souls."

"All right." Evelyn was wondering if this would give her the necessary chance to change her dress, when the big Forester automobile rounded the corner and rolled up to the curb, just as the party from the car reached the steps. Behind it followed a second car of still more ample dimensions.

"I've come to take the whole party for a moonlight drive down the river!" called Frederic Forester. "Go take off those cobweb frocks and put on something substantial. I'll give you ten minutes. I've the prettiest sight to show you you've seen this year."

"I believe I'm too tired and sleepy to go," said Charlotte to Andy, as he followed her up-stairs. "This week of commencing has about finished me. Can't you excuse me to Fred? You go with them, if you like."

"I don't like, without you." Doctor Churchill was divesting himself of white cravat and collar. "I know you're worn out, dear, but I think the ride will brace you up. It's hot in the house to-night; it will be blissfully cool out on the river road. Besides, Forester would be disappointed. It isn't every night he comes for us with a pair of autos.

"If I were going all alone with you in the runabout--" sighed Charlotte, with a languor unusual to her.

"I know, I'd like that better myself. But you needn't talk on this trip--there are enough to keep things lively without you. You shall sit next your big boy, and he'll hold your hand in the dark," urged Doctor Churchill, artfully.

"On that condition, then," and Charlotte rose from among the pillows, where she had sunk.

There was certainly something very refreshing about the swift motion in the June air. Leaning against her husband's shoulder, Charlotte began to rest.

It had been a busy week, the heat had been of that first unbearable high temperature of mid-June with which some seasons assault us, and young Mrs. Churchill had felt her responsibilities more heavily than ever before. As the car flew down the river road she shut her eyes.

"Why, where are we turning in?" Charlotte opened her eyes. She had been almost asleep, soothed by the cool and quiet.

"Look ahead through the trees," Doctor Churchill said in her ear, and Charlotte sat up.

She saw on the river bank, far ahead, a low house with long porches, hung thickly with Chinese lanterns. Each window glowed with one of the swinging globes, and long lines of them stretched off among the trees. At one side gleamed two white tents, and in front of these burned bonfires.

"What is it? It must be a lawn party. But we're not dressed for it!" murmured Charlotte, her eyes wide open now.

Just then a tremendous shout from the automobile in front rang through the grove. Their own car ran up to the steps, where stood Doctor Forester and John Lansing Birch under the lanterns, both dressed from

head to foot in white.

"Welcome to 'The Banks!'" the doctor cried. "Charlotte, my dear, why this expression of amazement? You've only come to my house party, my woods party, my river party--for a fortnight--all of you. Will you stay, or are you going to sit staring down at us with those big black eyes forever?"

"I think I'll stay," said Charlotte, happily, slipping down from the car into her brother's outstretched arms. "O Lanse! O Lanse! It's good to see you. _What_ a surprise!"

* * * * *

CHAPTER VIII

Charlotte swung herself up into the runabout as Doctor Churchill paused for her at the gateway of "The Banks." She had met him here at six o'clock every day since they came, and this was the seventh day.

It was impossible for him to get through his round of work earlier, but he was enjoying his evenings and nights in the country with a zest almost sufficient to make up for the daytime hours he missed.

Charlotte, however, although she joined merrily in all that went on through the day, was never so happy as when this hour arrived, and dressed in cool white for the evening, she could slip away and walk slowly down this winding road through the orchard and the grove to the gateway. Here she waited in a shady nook for the first puff of the coming motor. The moment she heard it she sprang out into the roadway, and stood waving her handkerchief in response to a swinging cap far up the road.

Then came the nearer salutation, the quick climb into the small car, assisted by the grip of Andy's hand, and the eager greeting of two pairs of eyes.

"Do you know this outing is doing you a world of good already?" said Doctor Churchill, noting with approval the fresh colour in Charlotte's face.

"I know it is. I didn't realise that I needed it a bit until I actually found myself here, with nothing to do except rest and play. It's doing everybody good. You should have heard the plans at breakfast to-day. Although it's been so hot, nobody has been idle a minute. I've been fishing all day with Lanse and Fred and Celia. Andy, do you know what I think? I admit I didn't think it till Lanse put it into my head, but I believe he's right. Fred----"

"Is going to want Celia? Of course. That was a foregone conclusion from the start."

"Andy Churchill, you weren't so discerning as all that, when not even I thought it was serious with either of them! Celia's had so many admirers, and turned them all aside so coolly--and Mr. Frederic Forester

is such an accomplished person at paying attentions--how could I think it meant anything? But Lanse insists Celia is different from what she ever was before, and I don't know but he's right."

"To be sure he's right. Next to you, I never saw a more attractive young person than Celia. What a charming colour you have, child! To be sure, you have burned the tip of that small Greek nose a very little, but I find even that adorable. Charlotte, stop pinching my arm. If you're half as glad to have me get here as I am to arrive, you're pretty happy. I laid stern commands on Mrs. Fields not to telephone, unless it were a matter of absolute necessity, so I'm pretty sure of not being disturbed."

They found supper laid on the piazza, and enjoyed it with keen appetites. Afterward they spent an hour drifting on the river, followed by a long and delightful evening on the lawn at the river bank. Celia and Lanse picked the strings of violin and viola, and the others sang. Doctor Forester, in his white clothes lay stretched on a rustic seat, and professed himself to be having "the time of his life."

"I don't think the rest of us are far behind you," declared Lanse. "If you people had been digging away at law in a hot old office you'd think this was Paradise."

Evelyn, looking out over the moonlit river, drew a little sigh which she meant nobody to hear, but Jeff divined it, and whispered, under cover of an extravaganza from Just in regard to the night, the company, and the occasion, "You're coming again next summer, you know. And all winter we'll write about it--shall we?"

"Do you think you will have time to write?" she asked.

"Have time! I should say I would make time," he murmured. "Think I'm going to stand having this sort of thing cut off short? I guess not--unless--you're the one who hasn't time. And even then I don't think I could be kept from boring you with letters."

"I shall certainly want to hear what you all are doing," she answered.

She was thinking about this plan when she went up-stairs to bed an hour later. Jeff had stopped her at the foot of the stairs to say, "I'd just like a good secure promise from you about that letter-writing. I'll enjoy the time that's left a lot better if I know it isn't coming to a regular jumping-off place at the end. Will you promise to write regularly?"

She paused on the bottom step, where she was just on a level with the straightforward dark eyes, half boy's, half man's, which met hers with the clear look of good comradeship. There was no sentimentality in the gaze, but undeniably strong liking and respect. She answered in Jeff's own spirit:

"I promise. I really shouldn't know how to do without hearing about your plans and the things that happen to you. I'm not a very good letter-writer, but I'll try to tell you things that will interest you."

"Good! I'm no flowery expert myself, but I fancy we can write as we talk, and that's enough for me. Good-night! Happy dreams."

"Good-night!" she responded, and went on up-stairs, turning to wave at Jeff from the landing, as he stood in the doorway, preparing to go out to the tents where he and Just, Doctor Forester, Frederic and Lanse were spending these dry June nights.

Evelyn went on to the odd old bedroom under the gable, where she and Lucy were quartered together. She found Lucy lying so still that she thought her asleep, and so made ready for bed with speed and quiet, remembering that Lucy had been first to come in, and imagining her tired with the day's sports.

Evelyn herself did not go at once to sleep. There were too many pleasant things to think of for that; and although her eyes began to close at last, she was yet, at the end of half an hour, awake, when Lucy stirred softly beside her and sat up in bed. After a moment the younger girl slipped out to the floor, using such care that Evelyn thought her making unusual and kindly effort not to disturb her bedfellow.

After a little, as Lucy did not return, Evelyn opened her eyes and looked out into the moonlight. Lucy was dressing, so rapidly and noiselessly that Evelyn watched her, amazed.

She was on the point of asking if the girl were ill when she observed that Lucy was putting on the delicate dress and gay ribbons she had worn during the evening, and was even arranging her hair. Something prompted Evelyn to lie still, for in all the winter's association she had never grown quite to trust Lucy or to like her ways.

More than any one else, however, she herself had won the other girl's liking, and had come to feel a certain responsibility for her. So when Lucy, after making wholly ready, had stolen to the door, let herself out, and closed it silently behind her, Evelyn sprang out of bed.

Perhaps Lucy simply could not sleep, she said to herself, and had gone down to sit on the lower porch, or lie in one of the hammocks swinging under the trees. The night was exceedingly warm, even the usual cooling breath from the river being absent.

"That's all there is of it," said Evelyn, reassuringly, to herself, although at the same time she felt uneasiness enough to send her out into the hall to a gable window over the porch, which commanded a view of the camp. Nothing stirring was to be seen, except the dwindling flame of the evening camp-fire, burned every night for cheer, not for warmth. Evelyn crept to a side window. As she reached it a white figure could be seen hurrying away through the orchard.

Back in her room, Evelyn dressed with as much haste as Lucy had done, if with less care. Instead of the white frock of the evening, however, she put on a dark blue linen, for she was sure that she must follow Lucy and discover what this strange departure, stealthily made at midnight, could mean.

She went down to the front door. The moment she opened it a tall figure started up from one of the long lounging chairs there, and Jeff's voice said softly, "Charlotte?"

"No, it's Evelyn," she whispered back. "Don't be surprised. I thought everybody in the camp was asleep."

"I wasn't sleepy, and thought I'd lounge here till I was. What's the matter? Anybody sick?"

"No. I'm just going for a little walk."

"Walk? At this hour? Can't you sleep? But you mustn't go and walk alone, you know. I'll go with you."

She did not want to tell him, but she saw no other way.

"It's Lucy," she explained hurriedly. "She's dressed and gone out somewhere, and I can't think why. It frightened me, and I'm going to follow her."

"No, you stay here and I'll follow. Which way did she go? What can she be up to? That girl's a queer one, and I've thought so from the first."

"No, no! There's some explanation. It may be she walks in her sleep, you know--though I'm sure she's never done it this winter. Let me go, Jeff; she'll get too far. She took the path toward the river. Oh, if it _should_ be sleep-walking----"

"I guess it's not sleep-walking." Jeff's tone was skeptical.

But Evelyn had started away at a run, and Jeff was after her. The two hastened along with light, noiseless steps. At the bottom of the path, on the very brink of the river, was an old summer-house, looking out over the water. It was a favourite retreat, for the boat-house and the landing were but a rod away, and after a row on the river the shaded summer-house was a pleasant place in which to linger.

"Hush!" breathed Evelyn, stopping short as they neared the summer-house.

They advanced with caution, and presently, as they drew within speaking distance of the little structure, they saw a white-clad figure emerge from it and stand just outside. Jeff drew Evelyn quickly and silently into the shelter of a cluster of hemlocks.

After a space the dip of oars lightly broke the stillness of the night, and soon a row-boat pulled quietly into view, with one dark figure outlined against the gleam of the moonlit water. Evelyn caught a smothered sound from Jeff, whether of recognition or of displeasure she could not tell. She felt her own pulses throbbing with excitement and anxiety.

The stranger pulled in to the landing, noiselessly shipped his oars, jumped out and made fast. Lucy came cautiously down to the wharf, and against the radiance of the moonlight on the river the two behind the trees could see the greeting.

The slight, boyish figure which met Lucy had a familiar look to Jeff, but he could not tell with any certainty whose it might be. That it was youthful there could be no question. Even in the dim light the diffidence of both boy and girl could be plainly observed.

"Young idiots!" exploded Jeff, between his teeth, as the two they were watching sat down side by side on the steps of the boat-landing, where only their heads were visible to the watchers--heads decidedly close together. Then he bent close to Evelyn's ear and whispered, "Come

farther back with me, and we'll decide what to do."

With the utmost caution the two made their retreat. At a safe distance Jeff halted, and said rapidly, "I think the best thing will be for you to go back to bed and to sleep--if you can. At any rate, don't let her know that you hear her come in. I'll come back here and mount guard. I won't let them see me. I'll take care that Lucy gets safely back to the house, and I won't interfere unless she attempts to go off in the boat with him or do some fool thing like that. You needn't worry. They aren't going to run away and get married. She's just full of sentimental nonsense, and thinks it romantic and grown-up to steal out in the night to meet some idiot of a boy--you can see that's all he is by his build. Probably somebody we know, don't you think that's the best plan?"

"Yes, for to-night," agreed Evelyn, in a troubled whisper. "I feel as if I ought to talk to her when she comes in, though."

"If you do you'll just make her angry. The thing is to let her go uncaught until we can think what to do. Little simpleton!"

"I'll do as you say, but--don't be hard on her, Jeff. She's just silly; she hasn't been brought up like your sisters."

"Or like you," thought Jeff, as he watched the figure before him flit away toward the house. He followed at a distance, till he saw the door close on Evelyn; then he went back to his post.

The next morning, as he and Evelyn walked down the road through the apple-orchard toward the gateway, to open the rural-delivery mail-box, which stood just outside the gate, Jeff told Evelyn what he had found out.

"Nothing more serious than a simple case of spoon," he said, with an expression at which Evelyn might have laughed if she had not felt so disturbed. "The boy turned out to be our next neighbour here. They've made another appointment for to-night. He thinks it a great lark--probably will brag about it to all the boys. He's got to eat his little dish of humble pie, too. Evelyn, I've a plan. Will you trust me to carry it out to-night?"

She looked at him. In her face was written a concern for Lucy so tender that Jeff adored her for it. At the same time he hastened to assure her that it was needless.

"If you merely talk with her I don't think that will do it," he said, decidedly. "She's been with you all winter, has seen just how a girl should behave,"--he did not know what a thrill of happiness this bluntly sincere compliment gave his hearer--"and she hasn't taken it in a bit. She needs something to bring her to her senses. I'd rather not tell you my plan, for if you can assure her afterward that you weren't in it, you can do her more good than if she's as provoked at you as she's sure to be at me. But I give you my word of honour I'll not do a thing to frighten her, or play any fool practical jokes. I'll have to let Just into the secret, I think, but nobody else. Will you trust me?"

"Of course, I will," said the girl, quickly. "On just one condition, Jeff. Think of her as if she were your own sister, and don't--don't----"

"Be 'as funny as I can'? No, I won't."

Evelyn observed Lucy all that day with understanding, and found herself longing to warn the girl that her foolishness was about to meet with its punishment. She noted with sorrow the strangely excited look in the young eyes, the light, half-hysterical laugh, the changing colour in the pretty face. Lucy's promise of beauty had never seemed to her so characterless, or her words so empty of sense.

She found her in a corner of their room, reading a worn novel by a certain author whose very name she had been taught to regard as a synonym for vapidty and sentimentalism of the most highly flavoured sort, and she could not keep back a quick exclamation at sight of it. Lucy looked up with a frown and a flush.

"I suppose you think it's terrible to read novels," she said, pettishly flirting the leaves. "Well, I don't."

"Dear, it's not 'novels' that I've been taught to despise, but the sort of novel that writer writes. I don't know anything about them myself, but I saw my brother Thorne once put that one you're reading in the stove and jam on the cover, as if he were afraid it would get out. Do you wonder I don't like to see Lucy Peyton reading it?" asked Evelyn gently, with her cheek against the other girl's.

"He must be a terrible Miss Nancy, then," said Lucy, defiantly. "There's not a thing in it that couldn't be in a Sunday-school book. The heroine is the sweetest thing."

"If she is she won't mind your putting her down and coming out for a walk with me," answered Evelyn, with a smile which might have captivated Lucy if she had seen it. But the younger girl got up and flung away out of the room, murmuring that she did not feel like walking, and would take herself and her book where they would not bother people.

Evelyn looked after her with a little sigh, and owned that Jeff might be right in thinking that mere gentle argument with Lucy would have scant effect on a head full of nonsense or a heart whose love for the sweet and true had had far too little development.

Half an hour before the time set for the rendezvous at the summer-house that night Jeff and Just walked down the path, shoulder to shoulder, talking under their breath. Just, being younger, was even more deeply interested than his brother in the prospective encounter, and received his final instructions with ill-concealed glee.

"All right!" he gurgled. "I'm to give him a good scare, in the shape of a lecture--with a thrashing promised if he cuts up any more. He's to give his word, on pain of a lot of things, not to give any of this little performance of his away to a soul. Then he's to be forbidden the premises while Miss Peyton is on them. I understand."

"Well, now, look here," warned Jeff. "I give you leave, but, mind you, I trust your discretion, too. You never can tell what these Willie-boys will do. Dignity's your cue. Be stern as an avenging fate, but don't get to cuffing him round and batting him with language just because you're bigger. You----"

"Look here," expostulated Just, aggrieved, "you picked me out for this job; now leave it to me. I'll have the boy saying 'sir' to me before I

get through."

Just ran down to the boat-house, got out a slim craft, launched it, and was about rowing away when he bethought himself of something. He pulled in to the landing, made fast his painter, and ran like a deer up to the house. He was back in five minutes.

"Don't believe I'll go by boat, after all," he whispered to Jeff, standing in the summer-house door. "It might be simpler not to have a boat to bother with. I'll just leave the _Butterfly_ tied there, and put her up when I get back."

He was off before Jeff could reply. Jeff started toward the boat to put it up, but stopped, considering.

Lucy would think it that of her admirer, and would be all the more sure to keep her appointment. He left it as it was, swinging lightly on the water, six feet out. It was a habit of Just's to moor a boat at the length of her painter, to prevent her bumping against the rough old landing.

Lucy, coming swiftly down the path fifteen minutes later, saw the boat and hastened her steps. She did not observe that this was a slimmer, longer craft than the boat George Jarvis was using. She reached the landing and looked about. Of course he was in the summer-house. She went to it, her skirts, which she had of late been surreptitiously lengthening, held daintily in her hand.

As she came close, a figure appeared in the doorway. Before she could be frightened by the realisation that it was not Jarvis's slender young frame which confronted her, Jeff accosted her in the mildest tones imaginable:

"It's only Jefferson Birch. Don't be scared. Fine night, isn't it?"

"Y-yes," stammered Lucy, in dismay. She stood still, her skirts gathered close, as if she were about to run.

"Don't go. Out for a stroll? So am I," said Jeff, pleasantly, as if midnight promenades were the accustomed thing at "The Banks." "Won't you sit down?"

There were seats outside the summer-house as well as within, and he motioned toward one of them.

"No, thank you. I think I'll go back," said Lucy, and her voice trembled.

"Why, you've only just come! Why not stay a while and have a visit with me? You must have been intending to stay."

"Oh, no!" said Lucy, eagerly, and stopped short, listening. What if George Jarvis should come round the corner at any moment? She must get Jeff away with her. "Won't you walk along up to the house with me? I only came down to see if I'd left something in the summer-house."

Jeff had planned what he would say to her, but at this his disgust got the better of him. "Lucy," said he--and his voice had changed from lightness to gravity--"don't you mind a bit _saying what isn't true_?"

* * * * *

CHAPTER IX

"What do you mean, Jefferson Birch, by saying such a thing?" Lucy's tone was one of mingled anger and fright.

"I mean," said Jeff, coolly, "that if coming down here to meet George Jarvis were what you were proud of doing, you wouldn't try to cover it up. Do you know, Lu, I'm tremendously sorry you find any fun in a thing like that."

"Dear me,"--Lucy tried hard to assume her usual self-confident manner--"Who appointed you guardian of young ladies?"

"The trouble is--well--you're not a young lady yet. You're only a girl. If you were a real grown-up young lady there'd be nothing I could do about your stealing out at this late hour to meet a young man except to laugh and think my own thoughts. But since you're only a girl--"

"You can insult me!" Lucy was very near tears now--angry, mortified tears.

"I don't mean to insult you, and I think you know that. If anybody has insulted you it's the boy who asked you to meet him here. He must have been the one to propose it, of course, and you thought it would be fun. Lu, when I found this out I should have gone straight to my sister Charlotte and told her to come and meet you here instead of myself, if I hadn't known how it would disappoint her. She would have taken it to heart much more seriously than you can realise. She's entertained you all winter and spring, and the responsibilities of looking after you and Ran have been heavy on her shoulders. She's tried hard to give you a good time, too."

Lucy turned and walked deliberately away down the path toward the boat-landing.

"I'm bungling it," thought Jeff, uncomfortably, and stood still, waiting. "Perhaps I ought to have let Evelyn tackle the business, after all."

Lucy walked out upon the landing, where the Butterfly swung lazily in the wash of the current. Suddenly, quite without warning, she ran the length of the little pier and leaped for the boat. It had looked an easy distance, but as she made the jump she realised too late that the interval of water between pier and boat was wider than it had looked in the moonlight. With a scream and a splash she went down, and an instant later Jeff, dashing down the pier, saw only a widening circle gleaming faintly on the water.

He flung off his coat, tore off his low shoes, and waited. The river-bottom shelved suddenly just where the pier ended, and the depth was fully twenty feet. Moment after moment went by while he watched breathlessly for the appearance of the girl at the surface. The current

was strong a few feet out, and his gaze swept the water for some distance. When he caught sight of the break in the surface which told him what he wanted, it was even farther down-stream than he had calculated.

"I mustn't risk this alone," he thought, quickly, and gave several ringing shouts for Just, whom he knew to be only two or three hundred yards up-shore. Then he made his plunge, swimming furiously to get below the place where the girl's white-clad form had risen, that he might be at hand when his chance came again.

The current helped him, and so did the moonlight on the water. It was in the very centre of a glinting spot of light that Lucy came to the surface the second time. Before she had sunk out of sight Jeff had her by the skirts, and was working desperately to get her head above water. She was struggling with all her fierce young strength, crazed with fright and suffocation, and she continually dragged him under in her blind attempts to pull herself up by him.

When he could get breath he shouted again, and after what seemed to him an age, there came a response from two directions. Just running along the river bank, and Doctor Churchill, plunging down the hill, saw, and were coming to the rescue.

"Hold on! Hold on! I'm coming!" both shouted as they ran.

Doctor Churchill, having the easier course, reached the bank first. Being clad only in his pajamas, he was unburdened by superfluous clothing. With a long leap he was in the water, and with a half-dozen vigorous strokes he had reached Jeff's elbow.

"Let go! I've got her!" he cried, and Jeff, spluttering and breathing hard, attempted to let go.

But Lucy still fought so desperately that it was no easy matter to get her clutch away from Jeff's clothing. By this time, however, Just was also in the water, and the three soon had the girl under control.

"Keep quiet! You're all right! Let us take you in!" called Doctor Churchill to the struggling, strangling little figure. So in a minute more they had her on the bank.

"Why, it's Lucy!" Doctor Churchill cried in astonishment, as he dropped upon his knees beside her and fell to work.

"Yes, it's Lucy!" panted Jeff.

But there was no chance just then for explanations. For the next ten minutes he and Just were kept busy obeying peremptory orders. As under Andy's directions they silently and anxiously worked over the young form upon the grass, they were feeling intensely grateful that the necessary skill had been so close at hand. But until the doctor's satisfied "She's coming out all right!" gave them leave, neither dared draw a good breath for himself.

Just was wondering what he and Jeff were to say, but his brother was heaping reproaches upon himself, and sternly holding Jeff Birch responsible for the whole unfortunate affair.

By the time Lucy was herself again and able to breathe without distress, Evelyn had come flying down the path---the only other person roused by the distant shouts. It had been a day full of active sports, and everybody was sleeping the sleep of the weary. Even Charlotte had not been roused by Andy's departure.

Just ran to the house for blankets; Evelyn, at Doctor Churchill's direction, followed him to prepare a steaming hot drink for Lucy; and presently they had her in her bed, warm and dry, although much exhausted by her experience in the waters of the river, which were cold even on a June night. Doctor Churchill had insisted on calling Charlotte, but Evelyn had begged him to arouse nobody else, and after one look into her face he had agreed.

At last, Lucy having dropped off to sleep under the soothing influence of the hot beverage, the others gathered quietly in a lower room. The three wet ones had acquired dry if informal garments, and a council had been asked for by Evelyn.

"It's entirely my fault," began Jeff, promptly, and he plunged into a brief but graphic account of the accident.

"It's not in the least your fault," Evelyn interrupted, at last, as Jeff came to a pause with a repetition of his self-condemnation. "It's mine, if anybody's. I should have taken the whole thing to Mrs. Churchill at once, instead of trying to keep it quiet."

"My meeting her down there alone was entirely my plan," began Jeff again; but this time it was his sister Charlotte who interrupted.

"Neither of you is in the least to blame, my dears," she said, smiling on them both. "You had the best of motives, and the plan might have worked out well but for the child's sudden mad idea of jumping into that boat. I suppose she meant to row away."

"She didn't stop to cast off--she couldn't have got away before I should have been in the boat, too," objected Jeff.

"That simply shows how out of her head with excitement she was. But that's all over. She mercifully wasn't drowned"--a little involuntary shiver passed over the speaker--"and we'll hope for no serious consequences. The thing now is to think how to act when she wakes in the morning."

"I should say treat the whole thing for what it is, a childish escapade. Show her the silliness of it, and then let it drop," said Doctor Churchill.

Charlotte looked at him appealingly.

"Lucy and Ran go home next week," she said, slowly. "I hoped--I wanted so much to send Lucy away with--I can't express it--a little bit higher ideals than any she has known before. I thought we were succeeding; she has seemed more considerate and less fault-finding."

"She certainly has," Evelyn agreed quickly, and the two looked at each other. There was an instant's silence; then Just spoke:

"How do you know but you'll find her quite a different proposition when

she wakes up? A plunge like that is a sobering sort of experience, I should say, for a girl who can't swim. She may be the meekest thing on earth after this. If it does her as much good as a lively dressing down did George Jarvis, she's likely to be a changed girl."

They could not help smiling at the satisfaction in the boy's voice. "He may be right," admitted Doctor Churchill.

"At any rate, if Lucy isn't ill to-morrow let's tell nobody what has happened. The poor child certainly doesn't need any more humiliation just at present, and I'd like to spare her all I can." Charlotte spoke decidedly.

They agreed to this. Evelyn went to her place beside Lucy, planning an affectionate greeting when the younger girl should wake; and Charlotte, when she fell asleep, dreamed of Lucy until morning.

It was quite a different Lucy who met them all in the morning. She showed no ill effects except a slight languor, and when Charlotte had established her in a hammock on the porch, she lay there with a quiet, sober face, which showed that she had been doing some thinking.

When Jeff approached with his most deferential manner to inquire after her welfare, she astonished him by saying more simply and sweetly than he had dreamed possible:

"I want to tell you I won't forget what you did for me last night. I was foolish, I suppose. I--I didn't think what I was doing was any harm, but I--"

She choked a little and felt for her handkerchief. Jeff grasped her hand. He had a warm heart, and he had not got over the thought of how he should have felt if he had not been able to rescue the girl he had attempted to lecture. His answer to Lucy was very gentle:

"We'll never think of it again. I'm awfully thankful it all ended well. If you'll forgive me for frightening you, I'll say that I'm sure you're really a sensible little girl, and I shan't lie awake nights worrying over your taking midnight strolls."

His tone was not priggish, and his smile was so bright that Lucy took heart of grace, and said, earnestly, "You needn't. I don't want any more," and buried her face in her pillow.

But it was not to cry, for Evelyn came by. Jeff called to her, and between them they soon had Lucy smiling. Before the day was over she had had a little talk with Charlotte, in which the young married woman came nearer to the heart of the girl than she had ever succeeded in doing before, and Lucy had learned one or two simple lessons she never forgot.

"But it's the first and last time I ever attempt the education of the young girl," declared Jeff, solemnly, to Evelyn, that afternoon, as they gathered armfuls of old-fashioned June roses for the decoration of the porch.

"Don't feel too badly. Lucy is going to value your respect very much after this, and I think you'll be able to give it to her. A girl who has no older brother misses a great deal, I think. I don't know what I should have done without mine," answered Evelyn, reaching up to pull at

a pink cluster far above her head.

"Let me get that for you," and Jeff's long arm easily grasped the spray and drew it down to her. "Well, I owe a lot to my sisters, that's sure."

With quite a knightly air he cut the fairest bud at hand, and gave it to her, saying quietly, "You wouldn't like it if I said anything soft and sentimental, but you won't mind if I tell you that you seem to me a lot like that bud there--that's going to blossom some day."

He knew it pleased her, for the ready colour told him so. But she answered lightly:

"As yet I'm quite content to be only a bud. Your sister Celia is the opening rose. Isn't she lovely? Here's one just like her. Take it to her and tell her I said so, will you?"

She plucked the rose and motioned to where Celia was coming alone along the orchard road, Frederic Forester having just left her for a hasty trip to town. Jeff laughed, took the rose and the message, and brought back Celia's thanks. Evelyn met him with her full basket, and the rose-picking was over.

"She says to tell you you're a flatterer, but being a woman, she likes it--and you," said Jeff, taking her basket away.

Doctor Forester's party had lasted eight days now, and his guests were planning how to make the most of the time remaining, when Doctor Churchill came spinning out in the middle of a Thursday morning with a letter. Mrs. Peyton had sent word that Randolph and Lucy were to meet her in a distant city, thirty-six hours' ride away. From there the trio were to proceed to their home.

"They will have to leave this evening in order to make it," Doctor Churchill announced. "This letter has barely allowed time--a little characteristic of Cousin Lula which I remember of old. She has an idea that time and tide--if they wait for no man--can sometimes be prevailed upon to change their schedule on account of a woman."

Upon hearing the news Lucy burst into tears. She did not want to go, she did not want to go so soon--more than all, she was afraid to go alone.

"Undoubtedly some one can be found who is going the same way," the letter read, easily, "and in any case, you can put them in charge of the railroad officials, who will see that they make no mistakes. I cannot possibly afford to come so far for them."

"Why can't Evelyn go now, too?" pleaded Lucy, as she and Evelyn, Charlotte and Celia were being conveyed on a rapid run home by Frederic Forester. It had been decided necessary for all feminine hands to fall to work, to accomplish the packing in time to get the young people off at nine that evening.

"Evelyn doesn't go until next Tuesday, and this is only Thursday," Charlotte answered, promptly.

"Five days isn't much difference," urged Lucy mournfully. "And when Evelyn's going right over the same road almost to our home, I should think she'd like to go when we do, if it did cut off a little. She's

been here all winter."

"So have you, Lu, and you don't want to go," Charlotte reminded her.

She did not say that nobody could bear to think of Evelyn's departure any sooner than was absolutely necessary, for it was not possible honestly to say the same about Lucy. But when they reached the house, and Charlotte had run up to her room to exchange her dress for a working frock, Evelyn came to her and softly closed the door. Evelyn had persuaded herself that she ought to accompany the others.

"It isn't as if Lucy were a different sort of girl," she argued--against her own wishes, for she longed to stay more than she dared to own. "But nobody knows how she might behave--if anybody tried to get to know her--somebody she oughtn't to know. And besides, she's afraid. It really doesn't matter. I can use the extra time getting things ready for Thorne. Please don't urge me, Mrs. Churchill. It won't be a bit easier next week."

Gentle as she was, Charlotte had learned that when Evelyn made up her mind that she ought to do a thing, it was as good as done. So presently Evelyn, too, was packing, her smiles at the remonstrances of Charlotte and Celia very sweet, her heart very heavy.

"Well, dear, I've telephoned the others at 'The Banks,'" said Charlotte, coming into Evelyn's room, having just left Lucy in an ecstatic condition over the decision. "You should have heard the dismay. Jeff and Just have already started home on their wheels, to prevent your going by main force."

This was literally true. From Doctor Forester down to his youngest guest had come regret and remonstrance. Finally, however, Doctor Forester, having called up Evelyn herself, and been persuaded that she was sure she was right, had fallen to planning what could be done to make the girl's leave-taking a pleasant one for her to remember.

After a little an idea seized him. He chuckled to himself, and fell to telephoning again. He had Doctor Churchill on the wire, then Charlotte, Celia and his son Frederic, who had remained at the Birches', finally the railway-station, the Pullman office, and a certain official of whom he was accustomed to ask favours and get them granted.

"Good-by, Mrs. Fields!" said Evelyn Lee, coming out upon the back porch, where the doctor's housekeeper was resting after a busy day's work. "I shall never forget how good you've been to me, and I hope you won't forget me."

"Forget you!" ejaculated Mrs. Fields, her spare, strong hand grasping tight the slender one held out to her. "Well, there ain't much danger of that, nor of anybody else's forgetting you. I've been about as pleased as the doctor and Miss Charlotte to see you pick up. You don't look like the same girl that came here last fall."

"I'm sure I don't feel much like her. Ever so much of it is certainly due to your good cooking, Mrs. Fields."

"It's so hard to take leave of you all," said Evelyn, on the porch, where the others were assembled. "I'd almost like to slip away without a word--only that would look so ungrateful. And I'm the most grateful girl

alive."

"You needn't say good-by to me," said Doctor Forester, "for I'm going as far as Washington with you." He smiled at the joy which flashed into her face.

"Oh, are you really?" she cried.

"You needn't say good-by to me, either," said Frederic Forester, as she turned to him, standing next to his father, "for I'm going, too,"

"I think I'll go along," said Doctor Churchill.

"Will you take me?" Charlotte was smiling at Evelyn's bewildered face.

"If Charlotte goes, I shall, too," supplemented Celia.

Evelyn looked at them. Surely enough, although in the hurry she had not noticed it before, they were all in travelling dress. She had known they had meant to go as far as the city station with her; she saw now that they were fully equipped for the journey. And Washington was nearly twenty hours away!

"You dear people!" murmured Evelyn, and rather blindly cast herself into Mrs. Birch's outstretched arms.

There was only one thing lacking to her peace of mind. Jeff had not appeared to bid her good-by. Charlotte observed that Evelyn's voice trembled a little when she said, "Where's Jeff? Will you tell him good-by for me?"

Charlotte answered, "He won't fail, dear. He'll surely be at the station."

But when they reached the station no Jeff was there. Nobody seemed to notice, for the men of the party were busy looking after various details of the trip. Celia was explaining to Evelyn and Lucy how it had all come about.

"Doctor Forester was so upset and sorry over your going," she said, "that he went to thinking up excuses to go along. He remembered an important medical convention in Washington, and persuaded Andy that he could get away for the three days' session. Then he invited Charlotte and me, and convinced Mr. Frederic that he ought to go, too. We were only too willing, so here we are."

"It's the loveliest thing that could happen," said Evelyn, and tried hard not to let her eyes wander to the doors of the station.

She had not seen Jeff since early in the afternoon, when, after hot argument, he had at last given up trying to persuade her that she need not go until the coming Tuesday. To Just only, however, as he carried her little travelling bag on board the train for her, did she say a word.

"Please tell Jeff for me," she said in his ear, as he established her in the designated section of the sleeping-car, "that I felt very badly not to say good-by to him. But give him my best remembrance, and say that I'm sure he must have been kept from coming by something he couldn't

help."

"Of course he must have been," agreed Just, heartily, feeling like pitching into his delinquent brother with both fists for bringing that hurt little look into the hazel eyes below him. "He'll probably turn up just as your train gets under headway, and then he'll be the maddest fellow you ever saw. Hullo, I'll bet that messenger boy is looking for you!" as he saw Frederic Forester pointing a blue-capped carrier of a florist's box toward Evelyn. He went forward, claimed the box, and brought it back to Evelyn.

She peeped within, saw a great cluster of roses, and drew out a card. "Of course it's Jeff's?" queried Just, anxiously, and he felt immense relief when Evelyn nodded.

"Well, I'm off!" Just gripped her hand as the train began to move. "Good-by! I'm mighty sorry to have you go," and with lifted hat, and a hasty farewell to Lucy and Randolph, he was gone.

Evelyn smiled at him from the window, as he ran down the platform waving at her, but her heart was still heavy. It was very good of Jeff to send the flowers, but she would rather have had one hearty grasp of his friendly hand than all the roses in his Northern state.

* * * * *

CHAPTER X

"Well, I consider myself pretty lucky to have secured four sections all together on this train," said Doctor Forester, with satisfaction, as he and Andrew Churchill and Frederic retired to the smoking-room while their berths were being made up.

"Why, what are we slowing down for out here?" Frederic glanced out of the window. "This is West Weston, isn't it? Yes--we're off again. Some official, probably."

A door slammed and a tall figure hurried through the passage, looked in at the smoking-room, and turned back. "Hullo!" said a familiar voice, and Jeff's laughing face beamed in upon them.

"Well, well, did you hold up the train?" they cried.

"Thought you'd come along, too, did you?" asked Doctor Forester. "Good! Glad to have you. I thought it was odd you weren't round to see us off. Go and surprise the girls. They're just back there, waiting for their berths."

Jeff hurried eagerly away. A moment later Evelyn, standing in the aisle beside Charlotte, felt a touch on her arm. She looked up, and met Jeff's eyes smiling down at her.

"Did you think I'd let you go like that?" he said in her ear.

"I'm afraid I thought you had," she admitted, grown happy in an instant.

"You see, I had an appointment with a man in West Weston on some work I've been doing for him. After I heard this plan of Doctor Forester's I had only just time to catch a train and get out there. He kept me so long I missed the train that would have brought me back in time to see you off, so I telephoned Chester Agnew to get the flowers for me and write a card. That was when I was afraid I might not make connections at all. But when this man I went to see--he's a railroad man--heard what train I'd wanted to make, he offered to stop it for me. Then it just came into my mind that I'd join the party, even without an invitation. Tell me you're not sorry--won't you?"

"Of course I'm not." She allowed him one of her frank looks, and he smiled back at her.

"We'll have a great day to-morrow," he prophesied. "They'll put on a Pullman with an observation rear in the morning, and if the weather holds we'll camp out there for the day. We don't get into Washington till three in the afternoon, and the scenery all the way down will be fine. I suppose I'll have to go off now and let you be tucked up. Please get up bright and early in the morning, will you?"

It was a merry party which entered the dining-car the next morning the moment the first summons came. The day had risen bright and clear as a June day could be, and everybody was in a hurry to get out on the observation platform.

Doctor Forester, sitting opposite Charlotte and Andy at one table, glanced across at the rest of the party, on the opposite side of the car, and said in a low voice:

"This is literally a case of speeding the parting guest, isn't it? Captain John Rayburn got you into something of a scrape when he sent you that copper inscription over your fireplace, didn't he? He didn't realise that the 'ornaments' it brought you in November would have to be conveyed away by force in June. It was the only way to give you an interval when you should, for the first time in the history of your married life, have no guests at all."

Charlotte and Andrew were staring at him in amazement.

"Uncle Ray?" cried Charlotte, under her breath. "Was he the one? Did you know it all the time, Doctor Forester?"

"Yes, I knew it all the time" he owned. "In fact, Captain Rayburn wrote to me after he had heard of the fireplace. You sent him a photograph of it, didn't you?"

"So we did," Doctor Churchill answered. "We took it the day the fireplace was finished, I'd forgotten it completely, but I remember now. We thought he'd be interested, because something he once said about the ideal fireplace had put the idea into our heads of collecting the stones ourselves. So he wrote all the way from Denmark to have that made?"

"He had it made there, and wrote me for the measurements. He expressed it to me, and I repacked it and sent it to you," chuckled Doctor Forester. "He was determined to puzzle you completely."

"He certainly succeeded. Did he give you leave to tell at this

particular date?"

"It was left to my discretion after the first six months, provided you had had any guests. I thought the time was ripe, and you'd earned your diploma. All that worries me is that you may find a fresh instalment of ornaments when you get back. The motto strikes me as a sort of uncanny provider of them." The others laughed. Charlotte glanced across at Evelyn.

"It has paid," she said softly. Andy nodded. "It certainly has. All the thanks we shall need will be in Thorne Lee's letter, after he has seen his little sister."

"I rather think it's paid with the others, too," Doctor Forester added. "Anyhow, you've certainly done your part."

Out on the back of the train Charlotte found Lucy at her elbow. She looked into the girl's face, and discovered the blue eyes to be full of tears. "Why, Lu, dear!" she said, softly.

"Mrs. Churchill"--Lucy was almost crying--"I just can't bear to think it's the last day! I wish--oh, I wish--I lived with you!"

"Do you, dear? That's very pleasant," and Charlotte drew her close, feeling more warmth toward Lucy than the girl had yet inspired. "But don't be blue."

"I can't help it. It's almost ten o'clock now, and at three we shall be going away from you all."

"No, you won't," Charlotte whispered in her ear. "It was to have been a surprise, but I think you'll enjoy it more to know. Only don't tell Evelyn. Doctor Forester has telegraphed your mother and received her answer. You're not to go till to-morrow night at six, and we're to have twenty-eight hours together in Washington."

"Oh! _Oh_!" Lucy almost screamed, so that the others looked around at her and smiled. "Oh, I do think Doctor Forester and you are just the nicest people I ever knew!"

Doctor Forester's secret was not very well kept, after all. Lucy whispered the good news to Jeff, and he could not forbear telling it to Evelyn just as the train was drawing out of Baltimore. His own spirits had been drooping as time went on, but the reprieve of a day sent them up with a bound.

"The question is what we shall do with our time," said Doctor Forester, looking round at his party in the hotel parlour, where he had taken them. "Speak up, everybody. We can divide our forces if necessary. Is there anybody here who hasn't been here before?"

Lucy and Randolph seemed to be the only ones not more or less familiar with the capital. On hearing this, Doctor Forester declared that he should himself take them to as many of the most interesting places as possible.

"Whatever we do to-night, I vote for the trip down the Potomac to Mount Vernon in the morning," said Doctor Churchill, promptly. "We'll get back in plenty of time for Evelyn's train, and there certainly isn't a better

way to put in the time than that."

This was heartily agreed upon, and the remainder of the day was used in various ways, not more than two of which, it may be remarked, were alike. Charlotte smiled meaningly at her husband as she watched Celia and Fred Forester, having proceeded half-way across Lafayette Park with Jeff and Evelyn, leave the two at a cross-path, and walk briskly off by themselves.

"That's certainly a sure thing, isn't it?" said he.

"No question of it, I think."

"Are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly. I haven't seen very much of Fred since he--and we--grew up, but if he's his father's son----"

"He is, I think," said Doctor Churchill, confidently. "And the doctor likes it, I'm sure. There's satisfaction in his face whenever he looks at them. In fact, I can't help thinking he planned both the house party and this trip with a view of bringing them together all he could."

"Dear Celia--if she's just half as happy as she deserves to be----"

"She will be. She loves to travel, hasn't had half enough of it, and he'll take her round the world. I haven't had a chance to tell you that he's going to India in the fall, in some important capacity. He received the appointment just yesterday."

"Really?" Charlotte looked thoughtful. "Celia--in India! Andy----"

"Does that startle you? I don't imagine it's for any long stay, but as a matter of some scientific investigations. Here, don't go to looking sober. I shall be sorry I told you."

Charlotte smiled and answered brightly that it was not a thing to look sober over. Nevertheless, her thoughts were much with her sister. The next morning, as the party found their places on the little steamer which was to take them down the river to Mount Vernon, she found herself watching Celia more closely than she had meant to do, in the anxiety to discover if the trip to India was really imminent.

"Isn't Mount Vernon a fascinating spot?" asked Evelyn, as she and Jeff walked up the long, ascending road from pier to house together. "I've never forgotten my first visit. I lived in Washington's times in my dreams for weeks afterward. I never saw it at this season of the year. The garden must be in its prime now."

"Let's go and see it first," responded Jeff, quickly. "I don't remember much about it. My two visits here have all been spent in the house."

So while the others rambled through the quaint and interesting rooms, Jeff and Evelyn made their way to the box-bordered paths of Lady Washington's garden, and wandered about there in the warm June sunshine. It grew so hot after a while that they betook themselves to the lawn and banks overlooking the river, and sat there talking, as they watched the waters of the Potomac.

"What are you going to do when you get home?" asked Jeff, somewhat suddenly.

"Put our rooms in order," Evelyn responded, promptly.

"All by yourself?"

"We live in the same house with a lovely little woman, the wife of a former Confederate general. I shall be with her until Thorne comes."

"I suppose you've lots of friends of your own age?" Jeff observed.

"Not as many as I ought to have. You see, I've lived very quietly with my brother for six years now, except for the time I spent at a girls' school in Baltimore. Since I came home from there I've not been very strong, and Thorne has kept me very quiet, until he sent me North to school last fall."

"You're so well now you'll be going about a lot. Any young people in the house with you? It's a boarding-house, isn't it?"

"Yes, a small one. There are no young people in it except Mrs. Livingstone's son."

"How old a fellow?"

"Twenty-one, I believe."

"I suppose you're great friends with him?" said Jeff suspiciously.

Evelyn looked at him quickly and laughed, flushing a little. "Why, we're naturally very good friends," she said.

"Evelyn," said Jeff, sitting up straight again, "I'm absolutely bursting to tell you some news, and I can't seem to lead up to it. I've got to bring it out flat. The only thing I'm anxious about is whether it's going to be as good news to you as it is to me."

She looked at him with a quickening of her pulses, his expression had become so very eager. "Please don't keep me in suspense," she begged.

"Well"--Jeff did his best to speak coolly, as if the matter were really of no great importance, after all--"you know it's been a question with me all along as to just what I was going to do when I got out of college. I wanted tremendously to get to work, and a lot of the usual things didn't seem to appeal to me at all. I haven't enough of a scientific turn to go into any of the engineering courses. I didn't care for a mercantile berth. In fact, while my brother Lanse has had his future cut out for him since he was fourteen, and Just, at sixteen, is body and soul in for electrical engineering, I've been the family problem. Father's had the sense not to assert his wishes for a moment. He saw from the start, I suppose, that the family traditions were not for me--I could never begin by studying law and end by wearing the ermine, as a lot of my grandfathers and uncles have done. So--"

Jeff paused and drew a long breath. He had been looking off down the river as he talked, but now he brought his eyes back to Evelyn's face, and his spirits leaped exultantly as he saw with what eager attention she was listening.

"You really care to hear all this, don't you?" he asked, happily, and went on before she could do more than nod. "Well, the short of it is that through Doctor Forester I got to know a friend of his who is a railroad magnate--the real thing--and to please the doctor he seemed to take an interest in me. He's offered me a position in one of his offices, provided I take a year to study practical railroading first. Of course I'm only too glad to do that. And now I'm coming to the point of the whole thing. When my year is up, that office where I'm to begin to work up in the railroad business is"--he paused dramatically, watching his hearer's face, as his own, in spite of himself, broke into a smile--"in your own city, Evelyn Lee!"

If he had had any lingering doubt that this might not be as good news to Evelyn as he wanted it to be, his fears were put to rout.

"O Jeff!" she said, quite breathlessly, and the happy colour surged into her face. "Why, that's almost too good to be true!"

"Is it? You're a trump for saying so. Jupiter! I feel like standing up and shouting. The thing has been sure since that afternoon I went to Weston, but I didn't mean to tell you of it in this crazy boy fashion, but write it to you quite calmly after you got home. But--it wouldn't keep."

"I shouldn't think it would. Besides, it's so much nicer to hear it now, when it makes it----"

She stopped abruptly, and jumped up. Jeff leaped to his feet also.

"Makes it--what?" he asked, eagerly.

"Why--it's such a pleasant place to hear good news in."

"That wasn't what you were going to say."

"We ought to go back to the house." She began to move slowly away. Jeff followed.

"I'd like to hear the end of that sentence," he urged, as they walked up the grassy slope to the house in the clear sunlight.

She laughed a little, but shook her head. She was looking very sweet in her brown travelling dress, her russet hair shaded by a wide brown hat with captivating curving outlines. Jeff looked at her dainty profile and realised that the hour for separation was coming fast.

"Anyhow, I know what I _wish_ you were going to say,"--he was striding close by her side--"and I can certainly say it if you can't. Telling you that I'm coming to work near you next year makes it easier for me to say good-by now. And that's--well--that's going to be a bit tough."

Evelyn walked on a few steps in silence. Then she turned and spoke softly over her shoulder. There was not a touch of coquetry in her simple manner, yet it had an engaging quality all its own.

"That's what I wanted to say, Jeff."

"Thank you," he responded. "I'll not forget that," and his tone told

that he appreciated the little concession.

It seemed but the briefest possible space of time before they had gone over the house, had been hurried back to the landing by emphatic toots from the small excursion steamer, and were off for the city again. The trip back up the river was finished also before it seemed hardly begun. All too soon for anybody the three young travellers were on their train, and Doctor Churchill and Fred Forester had taken leave of them and were out on the platform, ready to jump off. Jeff had lingered till the last.

"Good-by, Lucy! Good-by, Ran!" he said, and gave each a hearty grip and smile. Then his hand clasped Evelyn's, his eyes said things his lips would not have ventured to speak, and his hand wrung hers with a fervour which made it sting. Then he went away without a backward look, as if he must get the parting quickly over.

Outside the train, however, he turned with the others, and as the train rolled slowly out of the station, and Evelyn strained her eyes to see the group of her friends waving affectionately to her from the platform, the last face upon which her gaze rested wore the strong, loyal, eloquent look of Jefferson Birch.

* * * * *

"Home again," said Andrew Churchill, as he set his latch-key in the door of the brick house four days later. "Fieldsy must be away, or she would have answered."

They hurried through the house. It was in absolute order, but empty. On the office desk was a note in the housekeeper's awkward hand:

"If you should come to-night, I've had to go to take care of a sick woman, will be back in the morning, you will find everything cooked up."

Doctor Churchill read it with a laugh. "Charlotte, we're actually alone in our own house. Let's run over to the other house and embrace them all round, and then come back and see how it feels over here."

So they went across the lawn.

"We shall be delighted to have you stay with us, my dears," said Mrs. Birch, after the greetings.

"Mother Birch," said her son-in-law, with air affectionate hand on her shoulder, "not even you can charm us out of our own house to-night. Do you know that we're all alone--that not even Fieldsy is over there? Charlotte's going to get dinner, and I'm to help her with the clearing up, and then we're going to sit on our porch. Of course we shall be constantly looking down the street for a messenger boy with a telegram announcing the coming of our next guest, but until he comes--"

Everybody laughed at the expressive breath he drew.

"Go, you dear children," said Mrs. Birch, and the rest joined in warmly.

"I'll sit on our doorstone with a rifle, and pick off the visitors as they come up the street!" cried Just, as the two went off.

"Don't shoot to kill!" Doctor Churchill called back, gaily. Then the

door closed on the pair.

When the happy little dinner was over, the dishes put away, and Charlotte had slipped on a cool frock in which to spend the warm summer evening, she went out to find her husband lying comfortably in the hammock behind the vines, his hands clasped under his head. The twilight was just slipping into evening, and the breath of unseen roses was sweet upon the shadows.

Charlotte drew a chair close to her husband's side and sat down.

"After all, Andy," said she, as they fell to talking of the past year, "I wouldn't have had it different. One thing is certain--out of our three guests we entertained at least one angel unawares."

"Yes, and I like to think that perhaps the others are none the worse for staying with us," Andrew Churchill answered, thoughtfully. "I'm glad we did it, glad it's over, and shall be glad to have other people come to see us--by and by. But--I want a good long honeymoon first. Is that your mind?"

"Yes," she answered fervently, smiling.

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