

FORRESTER IZOLA LOUISE

GREENACRE GIRLS

Izola Forrester
Greenacre Girls

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CHAPTER I

THE FINGER OF PROVIDENCE

"It does seem to me, folkses," said Kit warmly, "that when anyone is trying to write, you might be a little quiet."

The three at the end of the room heeded not the admonition. Doris was so interested that she had almost succeeded in reclining like a Roman maiden on the library table, trying to see over Helen's shoulder. Jean was drawing up the plan for action. The list of names lay before her, and she tapped her pencil on her nose meditatively as she eyed it.

"Now, listen, Jean," Helen proposed. "This would really be a novelty. Let's have a Cupid for postman and not give out our valentines until after the games. And just when we've got them all seated for supper have the bell ring, and a real postman's whistle blow, and enter Cupid!"

"It's too cold for wings," Doris interposed mildly.

"Oh, Dorrie, you goose. He'd be all dressed up beautifully. Buster Phelps is going to be Cupid, only we were going to have him sit in front of a Valentine box and just hand them out. We'll

put a little white suit on him with red hearts dangling all over him, and curl his hair angelically."

"You'd better have red heart favors too, Helen," Jean added; "something that opens and shuts, with something else inside for a surprise. And we'll put red crepe shades on all the electric bulbs. Could we get those, do you think, girls?"

"We can get anything if Dad and Mother are home by that time," answered Helen. The rest were silent. Kit, sitting at her mother's desk beside the wide bay window, looked up and frowned at the stuffed golden pheasant on top of the nearest bookcase. Outside snow was falling lightly. The view of the Sound was obscured. A pearly grayness seemed to be settling around the big house as if it were being cut off from the rest of the world by some magic spell.

"Hope Dad's feeling all right by now," Kit said suddenly, pushing back her thick, dark curls restlessly. "They sail from Sanibel Island the 8th. Wasn't it the 8th, Jean?"

"Oh, they'll be home in plenty of time," Jean exclaimed. "Here we all sit, having the silent mullygrumps when he's better. Mother said positively in her last letter that he had improved wonderfully the previous week."

Helen stared at the long leather couch on one side of the open fireplace. It was over four weeks since her father had lain on it. Throughout the winter there had been day after day of unremitting weakness following his breakdown, and somehow she could not help wondering whether the future held the same.

She rose quickly, shaking her head with defiance at the thought.

"Let's not worry, girls. If we all are blue when he comes, he'll have a relapse."

Then Jean spoke, anxiously, tenderly, – her big dark eyes questioning Kit.

"What about Mother?"

"We're all worried about Mother, Jean. It isn't just you at all," Kit spluttered. "But you can be just boiling inside with love and helpfulness, and still not go around with a face like that!"

"Like what?" demanded Jean haughtily.

"Don't fight, children, don't fight," Doris counseled, just as if she were the eldest instead of the youngest. "Remember what Cousin Roxy says about the tongue starting more fires than the heart can put out. You two scrap much more than Helen and I do."

"Well, I think," said Helen sedately, "that we ought to remember Mother just as Jean says. She's almost sick herself worrying over Dad, and there she is, away down in Florida with just the White Hen to talk to."

Jean smiled, thinking of the plump little trained nurse, Miss Patterson, so spick and span and placid that the girls had declared they expected her to cluck at any moment. They had nicknamed her the White Hen, and it surely suited her. Even though no Chantecler had arrived yet to claim her, she was the White Hen, – good-tempered, cheerful, attending strictly to business always, but not just what one might call a lovable companion.

"She's too chirpy for anyone who has responsibilities," Jean said.

"Note Jean when she has responsibilities," Kit proclaimed. "Jean's been playing Mrs. Atlas and carrying the rest of us around on her shoulders. And look at her! Where is the merry smile of old, fair sister?"

Jean smiled rather forlornly. It was true that she had shouldered most of the responsibility since they had been left alone. Cousin Roxana had arrived only a few days previous to the departure of Mrs. Robbins, and it had been rather a formidable task suddenly to assume a mother's place and run the home.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. "It's only that everything seems to be coming at once. The valentine party and Kit's special effusion for Lincoln's Birthday."

"Class symposium on 'Lincoln-the Man-the President-the Liberator'-" Kit ran it off proudly. "Little classics of three hundred words each. You just ought to see Billie Dunbar's, Jean. He's been boiling it down for a week from two thousand words, and every day Babbie Kane asks him how he's getting along. And you know how Billie talks! He just glowers and glooms and this morning he told her, 'It's still just sap.' He's a scream."

"Kit, don't," laughed Jean in spite of herself. "If you get ink spots on Mother's best suede desk pad, you'll find yourself a little classic."

Kit moved the ink well farther back as a slight concession, and suggested once more that the rest of the family try their level

best to keep still about their old party while she finished her symposium.

"You know," Helen began with a far-off look in her eyes, "I think we're awfully selfish, and I mean all of us, not just Kit."

"Thanking your royal highness," murmured Kit.

"Here's Dad coming back home after five weeks' absence, and we don't know really whether he's better or worse--"

"Helen, don't be a raven quothing things at us," pleaded Jean.

"But it's perfectly true. He needs rest above everything else, Miss Patterson told me so; and here we're planning for a party the minute he gets home."

"Dad says always to go right ahead and have a good time, that it makes him happier to know we are happy."

Kit frowned again. She had straight dark brows set above wide gray eyes, and her frown was somewhat portentous. At fifteen she was far more energetic than Jean at seventeen. No matter what fate might deliver to her she would always find a quick antidote for any manner of trouble. With her short curly hair, she seemed more like the boy of the family, like her father himself, cheery, optimistic, fond of all outdoor life. It was a saying in the Robbins family that Kit might neglect the weeds a bit in her special garden of life, but the general landscape effect would always be artistic and beautiful.

Privately, now that the family were facing a crisis, Kit felt far more competent to act as the head pro tem. than did Jean. The main trouble was, as Helen had said, that Kathleen needed

a brake to check her official impetus.

"Anyway, the invitations are all out now and Mother knows we're going to have the party because I wrote her all about it, and she sent back word that she didn't mind a bit so long as we had Cousin Roxy to steer us safely."

"But did you ask Cousin Roxy, Jean?"

"You ask her," said Jean. "She'd fly around the morning star if you asked her to, Helenita."

Helen thawed at once. The thought of their elderly and stately Cousin Roxana sailing blithesomely around in the early dawn circling the morning star, brought about an immediate resumption of friendly relations. It was the prerogative of sisters to scrap, Kit always held. Sometimes it was quite a satisfaction to say just what you thought in the bosom of your family, get it all off your mind, and know that the family loved you just the same. Under these circumstances, Kit was wont to chant feelingly:

"Oh, what was love made for, if 'twere not the same
Through joy and through torment, through sorrow and
shame.

I know not, I ask not, if guilt's in that heart,
But I know that I love thee, whatever thou art."

Therefore the mere mention of Cousin Roxana brought harmony and mirth into the strained atmosphere of the library.

It seemed as if a special dispensation of Fate had brought their elderly cousin down from her calm and well-ordered seclusion at

Gilead Center, Connecticut, just when they needed her most.

Usually she contented herself with sending the family useful and proper gifts on birthdays and at Christmas, but otherwise she did not manifest herself.

She was forty-seven, plump, serene, and still good to look upon, with her fluffy flaxen hair just beginning to look a trifle silvery, and a fine network of wrinkles showing around the corners of her eyes and mouth.

"Land alive, Elizabeth Ann," she had told Mrs. Robbins happily the moment she set foot inside the wide entrance hall at Shady Cove, "didn't I know you needed me?" And she laughed wholesomely. "I didn't plan to descend on you so sudden, but it looked as if it was the finger of Providence pointing the way, with Jerry down sick and you so sort of pindling yourself. Don't you fret a mite about my being put out. I'll stay here with the children and take care of things till you get back home."

And lovely Elizabeth Ann, she who had been Betty all through her girlhood and graceful matronhood, had agreed thankfully. After a three months' siege of nursing her husband through a nervous breakdown, she was glad indeed to welcome the hearty assistance of Cousin Roxy.

"Let's put it right up to her now," Kit exclaimed. "I'd just as soon ask her if Helen's afraid."

Before the others could hold her back, she had slipped out of the library and was running up the stairs, two at a time, into the large sunny room at the south end of the house which Cousin

Roxy had chosen because from its windows she could look out over Long Island Sound. But at the door Kit stopped short. Over at the window stood Cousin Roxy, energetically wiping her eyes with a generous-sized plain linen handkerchief, and the end of her nose was red from weeping.

"Come in, child, come right in," she said hastily, as Kit backed away. "I'm glad you happened up. Come here to your old second cousin and comfort her. I feel as if all the waves and billows of David had washed over me."

Kit hurried over and wrapped her arms around the tall, self-sufficient figure.

"There, there, save the bones," laughed Cousin Roxana, through her tears. "You're just like your father; oh, dear me, Kit, your dear splendid father."

"What's the matter with Dad?" demanded Kit, swift to catch the connection between her cousin's tears and words. "Did you get a letter?"

In silence Cousin Roxana handed over a telegram. It was from Miss Patterson at Palm Beach. They were to stop there after leaving Sanibel Island on the west coast. Kit read it breathlessly:

"Mr. Robbins worse. Sailing 2nd."

"You know, Kit, they'd never do that if there hadn't been a turn for the worse." There was a break in Cousin Roxana's voice as she reached for the telegram. "I just wish that I had him up home safe in the room he used to have when he was a boy. He had measles the same time I did when my mother was alive. That's

your Aunt Charlotte, Kit, she that was Charlotte Peabody from Boston. But I always seemed to take after the Robbins' side 'stid of the Peabody, they said, and Jerry was just like own brother to me. I wish I had him away from doctors and trained nurses, and old Doctor Gallup tending him. I've seen him march right up to Charon's ferryboat and haul out somebody he didn't think was through living."

Kit stood with her hands clasped behind her head, looking down at the pines, their branches lightly crystallized with snow and ice. Somehow it didn't seem as if God could let her big, splendid father slip out of the world just when they all needed him so much. During all the months of illness, the girls had not grasped the seriousness of it. He only seemed weak and not himself. They knew he had had to give up his work temporarily, that he never went to the office in New York any more, that it was even an effort for him to give orders over the telephone, but they had taken these things as of little moment.

Perhaps only Jean had really gleaned the real import of her mother's anxious face, the steady daily visits of the nerve specialist, and, last of all, the consultation two days before they had left for the South.

Kit closed her eyes and wrinkled her face as if with a twinge of sharp pain. "It's going to be awful," she said softly, "just awful for Mother."

Cousin Roxana squared her ample shoulders unconsciously, and lifted her double chin in challenge to the worry that the next

few days might hold.

"It's more awful for you poor children and Jerry. We women folks are given special strength to bear just such trials; we've *got* to be strong."

But the tears came slowly, miserably to Kit's gray eyes. She pulled the curtains back, and looked out of the window to where the blue waters of Manhasset Bay were turning purple and violet in the gathering gloom of the late afternoon. The land looked desolate, and yet it was but a light snowfall. Down close to the bay some gulls rose and swept in a big half circle towards the other side of the inlet. Buster Phelps, running along the sidewalk towards home, waved up at her a big bunch of pussy willows.

"Spring's coming, Kit," he called riotously. "Just found some and they're 'most out!"

Kit waved back mechanically. Of course she must not break down and cry. Doris might do that, but she and Jean must be strong and brace up the two younger ones so they all could help their mother. Still the tears came. What was the use of spring if-

"Kit, aren't you ever coming down?" called Jean from the foot of the stairs.

"Right now," Kit answered. "You come too, please, Cousin Roxy. We need you fearfully to tell us what to do next."

"No, you don't," said Cousin Roxana calmly. "You don't need me any more than the earth needs me to tell it this snow's going away and the flowers will soon be blossoming. Just trust in the Lord, child. 'It may not be my way, and it may not be thy way,

but yet in His own way, the Lord will provide.' It's one thing to stand in the choir and sing that, and it's another to live up to it. The first thing you girls must do is learn how to meet your father with a smile."

CHAPTER II

THE MOTHERBIRD AND HER ROBINS

The next three days were ones of anxious waiting. All plans for the Valentine party had been abandoned, and after school hours the girls hung around Cousin Roxana feeling that she alone could help them bear the suspense. Jean occasionally stole away to her mother's room and looked around to be sure that everything was as she liked it best, and when she came out into the wide upper hall she usually met Kit and Doris stealing from their father's room, their eyes red from weeping.

Helen hunted the cosy corners and curled herself up like a forlorn kitten. Kit declared there wasn't a dry sofa cushion in the house.

"How about your own self?" Doris asked.

"I cry too, but not all the time. Jean and I are standing shoulder to shoulder with Cousin Roxy." Kit straightened her shoulders and stood in martial attitude. "We represent the-the ultima-what's the farthest beyond in Latin, Jean? Anyway that's what we represent, the beyondness in feminine efficiency."

"What does that mean, Kit?"

Kit patted the short bobbed curls on the head of the youngest "robin."

"Means that we've got to keep our heads no matter what happens."

Jean said little. Ever since she could remember, her mother had said to her, "You know I rely on you most, dear. You're mother's comforter."

It was a thought that always gave her fresh strength, to know how much her mother needed her. She was smaller than Kit, slender and with dark eyes, with a look in them that Doris said reminded her of the eyes of a deer.

"Jeanie, there's a Virginia fallow deer over in the Park that looks exactly like you," she would say soberly. "And so do all the squirrels when they keep still and stare at one sideways. You've got such sympathetic, interested, mellow eyes."

"Eyes can't be mellow, Dorrie," Jean laughed. "Try something else."

"Well, they are mellow just the same, – tender and nice, aren't they, Helen?"

And Helen would always agree that they were, tender like the eyes of Jeanne, the girl in the garden at Arles, listening to the voices.

But they were full of trouble now, as Jean hurried around the house, following Cousin Roxana's directions, and encouraging Tekla, the Hungarian cook, to stand at her post. Cousin Roxana really did herself proud, as she would have said, as director of preparations. Mr. Robbins' rooms were as immaculate and as clear of non-essentials as the deck of a battleship. Under her

orders the girls and Bertha, the second maid, worked faithfully; while Tekla regarded her with silent, wide-eyed admiration.

"We'd never have managed without you, Cousin Roxy," Jean declared when the final half-hour arrived, and they all gathered in the long living-room, listening for the hum of the car up the drive. Helen and Doris were together, arms entwined about each other's shoulders, on the wide window-seat. Kit paced back and forth restlessly, and Jean sat on the arm of her father's favorite chair before the open fireplace, her eyes watching the curling flames.

"Land, child, I don't see what you want to burn open fires for when you run a good furnace," Cousin Roxana had demurred. "Up home, I'd be only too glad of the furnace. I have to keep the kitchen stove going steady all day, and run one more in the sitting-room."

"I know it isn't necessary," Jean answered, sitting on the rug before the fire, her hands clasped around her knees, kiddie fashion, in spite of her seventeen years, "but it warms the cockles of your heart to watch an open fire. Don't you think so, Cousin Roxy?"

Cousin Roxana sat in the low willow rocker, placidly knitting on a counterpane square of old-fashioned filet.

"We must all hope for the best," she said, beaming at the anxious faces. "Helen, for pity's sake stop that silent drizzling. If it should be the will of the Lord that your blessed father be taken, it isn't right for us to rebel and take on so, is it? I feel just as badly

as any of you." She took off her eyeglasses, that were always balanced half way down her nose, and ruminated, "Land, didn't I live with him for years after his mother died. That was your own grandmother, Helen Faunce Robbins. I've got her spinning-wheel up home in the garret still. But I always did say we made too much woe of the passing over of our dear ones. Why, it isn't any time at all before we're going along right after them. I do believe there's many a person been worried to death by weeping relations. Smile, girls, even if your hearts do ache, and cheer him up. Don't meet him with tears and fears. Jean, run and tell Tekla to keep an eye on that beef tea while I'm up here. It has to keep simmering. Kit, can't you keep still for a minute, or does it rest your mortal coil to keep it on the trot?"

So she cheered and encouraged them, and when the automobile rolled up to the veranda steps with Mr. and Mrs. Robbins and the spotless little White Hen, the children did their best to appear happy. Mr. Robbins, wrapped close in furs, waved to them, his lean, handsome face eager with home love and longing.

"Hello, my robins," he called to them. "Back to the nest. Roxy, God bless you, give me a hand. I'm still rather shaky."

They were all trying to kiss him at once, and Doris held one of his thin white hands close against her cheek. It did not require the look in their mother's beautiful eyes to warn them about being careful. Slender and stately, she stood behind him, smiling at them all. Surely in all the world there was nobody quite like

Mother, the girls thought, nobody who could be so tender and sweet and yet so gracious and queenlike.

"Why, he doesn't look nearly so bad as I expected," Cousin Roxana told her, kissing her in a motherly way. Somehow it seemed quite natural for all to pet and comfort the Motherbird, to try and shield her from the harsher side of life and make the sun shine for her always. Life had always run in smooth, flower-bordered canals of peace for Betty Robbins. Only the past three months had shown her the possibilities of trouble and sorrow, and even now they had only knocked at her door, not entered as unbidden guests.

"You mustn't tire him, girls," she told them warningly, as the nurse and Cousin Roxana assisted him upstairs, one step at a time, then a rest before the next. "He must have a chance to recover from the long journey."

"Land o' rest," Roxana called back happily, "I'm so relieved that you didn't have to bring him back on a stretcher I can hardly catch my breath."

"We're hopeful since he stood the journey so well," answered Mrs. Robbins. She leaned back in the big, cushioned willow chair that Doris always called "The Bungalow." Jean slipped off her cloak and Doris took her gloves. Helen knelt to put a fresh log on the fire and Kit hurried down after a tea tray. It was not fitting that the Queen Mother should receive service at the hands of hirelings. But when she returned she found a scene that might have baffled even Cousin Roxana. Helen and Doris knelt on the

floor beside the big chair, the tears running down their faces, and Jean hung over the back with her arms close around her mother.

"Mother darling," she begged. "Don't, don't cry so. Why, you're home, and we're all going to look after him, and be your helpers."

Helen sped up after Cousin Roxana, and presently she came bustling downstairs, flushed and efficient.

"Why, Elizabeth Ann," she cried, smoothing back her hair just as if she had been one of the girls. "Don't give way just when your strength should be tried and true."

"Please call me Betty," protested Mrs. Robbins, smiling even through her tears. "It sounds so formal for you to call me Elizabeth Ann. It always makes me feel like squaring my shoulders, Roxy."

"So you should, child," Roxana declared cheerily. "Betty's so sort of gaysome to my way of thinking and there's stability to Elizabeth Ann. Lord knows, you're going to need a lot of stability before you find the way out of this."

"I know I am." As she spoke the Motherbird held her brood close to her, Doris and Helen kneeling beside her and Jean and Kit on each side. She leaned back her head and smiled at them. It was such a lovely face, they thought. Nobody in all the world had quite the same look or air as Mother. Back from her low broad forehead waved thick brown hair. Doris loved to perch on the broad arm of the willow chair and search diligently for any gray hairs that dared to show themselves. If any were found,

they were promptly pulled out. Nine might come in the place of each, as Cousin Roxana said was highly probable according to tradition, but while they were few and far between, they were all eradicated, almost in indignation that Father Time should dare to assail, ever so gently, the splendid fortress of Mother's youth.

"Really, girls," Kit would say sometimes in her abrupt way, "I think Mother has the most interesting face I ever saw, and the most soulful eyes. They can be just as full of fun and mischief as Dorrie's, and then, again, just watch them when she feels sorry for anybody. It's worth while having a pain or something happen to you just to see her look that way."

She was looking "that way" at this moment as she smiled up at Cousin Roxana; just as though there was nothing too hard or too difficult in all the world for her to undertake.

"That's better," Cousin Roxy said comfortably. "Now you children take her up to her room and play you're maids of honor to the queen. I have to tend my broth and see how Jerry's coming along. Looks to me like rest and quiet and cheerful hearts will carry him through if anything will."

"Roxy!" There was a hidden note of tragedy in the Motherbird's voice. Nobody but the same unemotional Roxy knew how she longed to put her head right down on that ample bosom and have a good old-fashioned cry. "Roxy, the doctors say he'll never be any better."

"Fiddlesticks and pinwheels!" exclaimed Miss Robbins indignantly, with a toss of her head. "Lots they know about it. I

declare, sometimes I think the more you pay a doctor the less he can do for you and the bigger-sounding names he thinks up to call what may ail you. I certainly do wonder at the way they try to make folks think they've got a special little private telephone wire right up to the Death Angel's door. I never take any stock in them at all, Betty." It came out quite easily. "Give me castor oil, some quinine and calomel, and maybe a little arnica salve for emergencies, and I'll undertake to help anybody hang on to their mortal coils a little bit longer."

"But things seem to be near a crisis now."

"Let them." Cousin Roxana stood with arms akimbo, as if she were hurling defiance at somebody, and the girls fairly hung on her words. "If the soul never had trials, what would be the use of life? Put ye on the armor of faith, Betty Robbins, and hope for the best. As for you, Jean and Kit, and you too, Helen and Dorrie, if I find any of you looking down your noses, I declare I'll stick clothes-pins on them and fasten a smile to your lips with court plaster."

CHAPTER III

BREAKERS AHEAD

St. Valentine's Day came and went without the party. Once, and sometimes twice, a day the doctor's runabout turned into the broad pebbled driveway and the children went around with subdued voices and anxious faces. Even Tekla, down in her kitchen domain, wore an ominous expression, and told Cousin Roxana that she had dreamed three times of three black birds perching on the chimneys, which was a sure sign of death, anyone could tell you, in her own country.

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't," Roxy laughed back comfortably. "If I were you, Tekla, I'd take something for my liver and go to bed a mite earlier at night."

All the same, her own face looked worried when she entered the sick-room and looked down at Mr. Robbins' face on the pillows.

"It seems ridiculous for me to be lying here, Roxy," he would say to her, with the whimsical boyish smile she loved. "Why, there isn't anything the matter with me only I'm tired out. Machinery's a bit rusty, I guess."

"No, nothing special only that you can't eat or walk or sit up without keeling over." Her keen hazel eyes regarded him amusedly. "You know, Jerry Robbins, if it wasn't for Betty and

the girls, I'd trot you right back home with me."

He looked from her to the window. Jean had just brought in a bunch of daffodils in a slender Rookwood jar and had set them in the sunlight.

"You're not going soon, are you, Roxy?"

Roxana seated herself in the chair beside his bed. As she would have put it, there was a time for all things, and this seemed a propitious moment, for her to get something off her mind that had been weighing there for some time.

"I'll have to pretty quick. It looks like an early spring, Jerry, and there's a sight to do up there. Of course Hiram knows how things go as well as I do, but I've been away a month now, and I like to have the oversight of things. Men are menfolks after all, and you can't expect too much from them. I want to get the hay barn shingled, and some new hen runs set out before the little chicks begin to hatch, and all my berry canes need clearing out. You know that mass of blackberries along the stone wall in the clover patch below the lane-what's the matter, Jerry?"

He had closed his eyes as if in pain, and his hand closed suddenly over her own as it lay on the counterpane.

"It makes me homesick to hear you talk, Roxy."

Their glances met presently in a long look of sympathetic remembrance of the dear old times at Maple Lawn.

"If it were not for the girls," he went on slowly. "They are all at an age now when they need the advantages of being near the city."

"Well, I'm not so sure of that," answered Roxy dubiously. "I suppose you feel that you can do more for them down here, Jerry, and it is a sightly place to live, but you did pretty well yourself up at the old Frost District, didn't you?"

He smiled and nodded his head.

"I wonder what Betty would say to the Frost District school-house?" he asked. A vision of it arose out of the memories of the past, the little white school-house that stood at the crossroads, with rocky pastures rising high behind it, and the long white dusty road curving before it. He had been just a country boy, born and bred within a few miles of Maple Lawn at the old Robbins' homestead. He knew every cow path through the woods about Gilead Center, every big chestnut and hickory tree for five miles around, every fork and bend in the course of the wild little river that cut through the valley meadows. Somehow, in these days of weakness and fear that he was losing his grip on life, there had grown up a great yearning to be home again, to find himself back in the shelter of the mothering arms of the hills. They had always been the hills of rest to him as a boy. Over their margins the skyline had promised adventure and bold emprise, but now they beckoned to him to come back to peace and health.

"She isn't country bred, is she, Jerry?"

The question recalled him to the sick-room.

"No," he answered gently, "no, Betty's from California. I believe her people went out originally from New York State, but she herself was born in San Francisco. Later, she lived on her

father's ranch for a while in the Coronado Valley, but she was educated in the city. She doesn't know anything about farm life as we do."

Roxana's placid face looked nonplussed. California might just as well be Kamchatka, so far as her knowledge of it was concerned. It did seem rather too bad that Betty had come from such far-off stock, but still, she thought, a great deal could be excused in her on account of it, since it wasn't given to everybody to be born in New England.

"Would she mind it for just a summer, do you suppose?"

"It would have to be for a longer time than one summer, Roxy."

Something in his voice made her suspicious. The nurse had gone out for her daily airing down the shore road. Mrs. Robbins had walked out to meet the girls on their way from school, intending to accompany them to afternoon Lenten service at St. James's. A lone adventurous fly crept up the window curtain and Roxana promptly slapped him with a ready hand.

"Pesky thing," she said; then, "What did you say, Jerry?"

"I said that it would have to be for a longer time than just one summer. Things have not gone well with me for the past year. I haven't told Betty or the girls about it."

"You should have," said Roxy promptly. "It isn't fair to them not to share your sorrows with them as well as your joys. Partner, that's what it says, doesn't it? Partner of your joys and sorrows, you know, Jerry."

"Betty has never seemed to understand much about money matters so I did not want to worry her."

"Just like a man. So you broke your health down and landed here in bed trying to do it all yourself. Can I help you? How much money do you need to tide you over?"

He laughed unsteadily.

"Dear old Roxy. You'd give anyone your left ear if they needed it, wouldn't you? You don't understand how we live. It takes nearly every cent I earn to cover our current expenses. As long as I could keep well, it did not matter, but three months' illness shows breakers ahead. I am wondering what we are going to do, and I dread even speaking to Betty about it."

"Then let me do it," said Miss Robbins promptly. "I'd love to. Better yet, call a family council and talk things over if you are strong enough to do so. How long can you hold out here?"

"I'm not certain." He looked weary and bothered. "We only rent the place, as you know. The lease is up the first of May. It is \$1800 a year."

"You can buy a good farm up home for that, Jerry; house, barns, pasture, haylands, wood lots and all," said Roxana thoughtfully. "It's a nice place here, but it's fearfully extravagant."

"Do you think so, Roxy?" he smiled up at her with a glint of fun in his eyes like Kit's. "Betty and the girls want me to take over the estate below here along the ocean front at \$2500 a year because they like the ocean view and the private beach. It really is quite moderate too, considering we're on the North Shore."

Property on Long Island is expensive."

She looked out at the clean park-like territory around the large modern house. Winding drives swept in and out. Each residence stood in its own spacious grounds. High rock walls with ornamental entrance gates surrounded each one. There was an artificial pond where the children skated in whiter and the country club crowned the hill with golf links sloping away to the shore on the north.

Down in the ravine stood the artistic gray stone railroad station matching the real estate office over the way, and farther along were the village stores, the new High School of stucco and tile, and the two churches. Back and forth along the smooth highway slipped a never-ending line of motor cars coming and going like ants over an ant hill. Roxy turned her head towards the bed once more and asked:

"Would you rather do that than go up home with me?"

"It isn't what I'd rather do. It's what we may have to do unless I gain my old strength."

"You'll never get a mite better lying there worrying over unpaid bills and new ones stacking up. I'm going to talk to Betty."

He shook his head with a little smile of doubt.

"But it would never be fair to take them away from this sort of thing, Roxy. You don't understand. They have their church and their club work and their special studies. Jean has been taking up a course in Applied Design and Modeling, and Helen has her music. Kit's deep in school work and belongs to about five clubs

outside of that. Dorrie's about the only one disengaged, and she has a dancing class and the Ministering Children's League over at church. Betty's on more committees and things than I can count, and she believes that we owe it to the children to give them the best social environment that we can. Perhaps we can get along in some way. There's a little left at the bank."

"How much?" demanded Roxana uncompromisingly. "I mean, after you've paid up everything. I'll bet there isn't five thousand left."

"Five thousand! I doubt much whether there is one thousand. Don't tell Betty that. I have never bothered her about such things, and there are a few securities I might sell and realize on."

"And you think that you've been a good husband to her. Land alive, what are men made of! Here she stands a chance of being left alone in the world with four children to bring up and you've never bothered her about your business. The sooner you get to it, the better, I think." Roxana stood up and adjusted her eyeglasses resolutely. She had seen what he could not, Betty coming leisurely up the box-bordered walk, a loose cluster of yellow jonquils in her arms, and the girls following, all except Kit. "There they come now. I won't say anything till you do, Jerry."

Suddenly Kit's voice sounded at the door. Her short curls were rumpled and tousled, and her eyes wide with excitement, as she hugged a hot water bottle to her face.

"I've heard almost every word you said," she burst out. "I had neuralgia and stayed home this afternoon, and I've been asleep

in there on the couch. Please don't be sorry, Dad. I'll help you every blessed bit I can, and I think it would be glorious for us all to go up into the country."

She stopped as the door below, in the front entrance hall, banged and Doris came upstairs on a run, a herald of love and joy.

"Well, child, keep your mouth shut till we know where we're at," counseled Roxy quickly. "Go back and lie down. Here they come."

But Kit stood her ground, and Jean and Helen seemed to catch from her the fact that there was something unusual in the wind as they came in behind their Mother.

"It was a lovely walk," said Mrs. Robbins, drawing off her gloves as she sat down beside the bed and smiled at the patient. "We went down to look at the Dunderdale place, Jerry. It is simply lovely there even in winter. You can see the summer possibilities. I never saw so many shrubs and trees and such beautiful grouping. It made me think of our Californian places."

"Or an Italian garden, Mother dear," Jean added eagerly. "Why, Dad, it's exactly like some of Parrish's pictures, don't you know; tall poplars over here, and then a hedge effect and a low Roman seat tucked in every once in a while. Why, it's just as cheap as can be."

"You'd enjoy the garden so this summer, and there are enclosed sleeping porches, and an inner court like a patio garden. The garage is small, but it will do if we don't get a new car this

year."

Right here Cousin Roxana sniffed, a real, unmistakable sniff. She was a believer in quick action. If you had anything to do, the quicker you did it and got over it the better, she always said. So now she raised her head as they all looked at her, and sprang her bolt right out of a clear sky.

"You won't get a new car this year, Betty, my dear, and you're not going to move into any two-thousand-five-hundred-dollars-a-year bungalow, either. I'm going to take the whole lot of you to Gilead Center, and see if Jerry can't get his health back up in those blessed hills of rest."

CHAPTER IV

THE QUEEN'S PRIVY COUNCIL

There was a queer silence, fraught with suspense for each person in the room. Mrs. Robbins looked down at the wearied face lying back on the white pillows with a startled expression in her usually calm eyes. Instinctively both her hands reached for his and held them fast, while Jean laid her own two down on her mother's shoulders as if she would have given her strength for this new ordeal.

"You mean for a little visit, don't you, Cousin Roxy?" she asked eagerly.

"No, I don't, Jeanie. I mean for good and all, or at least until your father has time to get well, and that can't be done in a few days."

"But Doctor Roswell says he's gaining every day," Mrs. Robbins said. She waited for some reassuring answer, her eyes almost begging for one, but Cousin Roxana was not to be dismayed.

"Jerry, tell what the doctor said to us this morning. Not that I take much stock in him, but he may be on the right track."

"Nothing special, Motherbird and robins all," smiled back Mr. Robbins; "only it appears that I am to be laid up in the dry dock for repairs for a long while, and the sinews of war won't stand

the vacation expenses if we stay where we are now."

"I wouldn't try to talk about it, dear, before the children," began Mrs. Robbins, quick to avoid anything that savored of trouble or anxiety. "We must not worry. There will be some way out of it."

"There is," Cousin Roxy went on serenely. "If ever the finger of Providence pointed the way, it's doing it now. I say you'd better move right out of this kind of a place where expenses are high and you can't afford anything at all. This is a real crisis, Elizabeth Ann." She spoke with more decision as she saw Jean pat her mother comfortingly. "It has got to be met with common sense. When the bread winner can't work and there's a nestful of youngsters to bring up and feed and clothe, it's time to sit up and take notice, and count all of your resources."

"How would it do for you to take Father up home with you for a rest, Cousin Roxy?" Jean suggested, stepping into the awkward breach as she always did. "Then we could let Annie and Rozika go, and just keep Tekla to do the cooking and washing. And when he came back we'd have all the moving over, and it would be the prettiest time of the year along in late August."

Mrs. Robbins' face brightened at the suggestion.

"Or we might even renew the lease here, Jerry. The house is very pleasant after all, and we could get along with it if it were all done over this spring."

Mr. Robbins looked up at Cousin Roxana's countenance with whimsical helplessness, and she answered the appeal.

"Now, look here," she said with decision and finality. "You'd better put the idea of staying here right out of your mind, Betty. The winds of circumstance have blown your nest all to smithereens, and if you're the right sort of a motherbird, you'll start right in building a fresh one where it's safer. I think your way lies over the hills to Gilead Center. You can pay all your bills here, sell off a lot of heavy furniture, and move up there this spring. For you can't stay here. There's hardly enough money to see you through as it is. I'm going to help you along a bit until you get your new start."

"Not money enough," said Mrs. Robbins as though she could not comprehend such an idea. "But we couldn't think of going up there and all living with you, Cousin Roxy."

"You're not going to," answered Roxana. "Thank the Lord, I live in a land where houses and food are cheap and there's room for everybody. We don't tack a brass door-plate on a rock pile like I saw there in New York, Betty, and call it a residence at about ten dollars a minute to breathe. I've been telling Jerry you'd better rent a farm near me, and settle down on it."

"But Roxy-" Mrs. Robbins hesitated.

"Oh, Mother, do it, do it," came in a quick outburst from Kit, standing back against the wall. "It would be perfectly dandy for all of us and would do Dad a world of good!"

"We wouldn't mind a bit. We'd love it, wouldn't we, Dorrie?" Helen squeezed Doris's hand to be sure she would answer in the affirmative. "We'd all help you."

Doris was silent, still too bewildered at the outlook to express an opinion.

"I shouldn't mind for myself, but we must think of the girls—their schooling and what environment means at their age. I suppose Jean could be left at school."

"Thought she was all through school," came from Cousin Roxana.

"I am, only I've been taking lessons in town this winter in a special course, arts and crafts, you know, and next fall I was going into the regular classes at the National Academy of Design."

"What for, child?" Roxy's gray eyes twinkled behind her glasses. "Going to be an artist?"

"Not exactly pictures," Jean answered with dignity. "Conventionalized designs."

"Well, whatever it is, I guess it will hold over for a year while you go up to the country and learn to keep house. Kit here can go to High School. It's seven miles away, but our young folks drive down and put up their horses at Tommy Burke's stable in East Pomfret, and take the trolley over from there. It's real handy."

Kit's eyes signaled to Jean, and Jean's to Helen and Doris. A fleeting vision of that "handy" trip to High School in the dead of winter appeared before them. Kit had a ridiculous way of expressing utter despair and astonishment. She would open her eyes widely, inflate her cheeks, and look precisely like Tweedledee in "Through the Looking-Glass." Doris emitted a low but irrepressible giggle under the strain.

"I think," Mrs. Robbins said hurriedly, "that we might manage if we had a little roadster."

"Rooster?" repeated Cousin Roxy in surprise.

Kit and Doris departed suddenly into the outer hall.

"No, roadster; a runabout that either Jean or I could learn to run. Don't they have them, Jerry, with adjustable tops, one for passengers, one for delivering goods, and so on?"

"Doubtless one for ploughing and harrowing likewise, Betty," Cousin Roxana said merrily. "I guess you'll jog along behind a good, sensible horse for a while. Remember Ella Lou, Jerry? She's fifteen years old and just as perky as ever. I always have to hold her down at the railroad crossing."

"What do you think of it, dear?" asked Mr. Robbins, looking longingly up at the face of the Motherbird. "It would be a great comfort and relief to me to get back to those old hills of rest, but it doesn't seem fair to you or the children. The sacrifice is too great. They do need the right kind of environment, as you say. Suppose we left Jean at least, where she could keep up her studies, and perhaps put Kit into a good private school. Then I might go up home with Roxy, and you and the two younger girls could go out to California to Benita Ranch--"

But Mrs. Robbins laid her fingers on his lips.

"You're not going to banish us to Benita Ranch. If you think it is the best thing to do, Jerry, we'll all go with you. Remember, 'Whither thou goest, I will go. Where thou lodgest, I will lodge--'"

Helen laid her hand over Jean's, and they stepped out softly.

Their mother had slipped down on her knees beside the bed, and even Cousin Roxana had gone over to the window to pretend she was looking out at the Sound. The girls fled downstairs to the big music-room back of the library. It had been their special shelter and gathering place ever since they had lived there. Kit and Doris were already there, deep into an argument about the entire situation.

"I don't think it's right to move up there," Helen said, judicially. "We may not like it at all, and there we'd be just the same, planted, and maybe we never could get out of it, and we'd grow old and look just like Cousin Roxy and talk like her and everything."

"Prithee, maiden, have a care what thou sayest," Kit expostulated. "Our fair cousin hath a way, 'tis true, but she is a power in the land, and her voice is heard in the councils of the mighty. I wish I had half her common sense."

"I hate common sense," Jean cried passionately. "I know it's right and we must do the best thing, but, girls, did you see Mother's face? It was simply tragic. Dad's been a country boy, and he's going back home where he knows all about everything and loves it, but Mother's so different. She's like a queen."

"Marie Antoinette had an excellent dairy, and Queen Charlotte raised a prize brand of pork, my dear," Kit answered. Perched upon the long music stool, she beamed on the disconsolate ones over on the long leather couch. "I think Mother's a perfect darling, but she's a good soldier too, and she'll

go, you see if she doesn't. And it won't kill any of us. I don't see why you can't hammer copper and brass, and cut out leather designs in a woodshed just as well as you can in a studio. The really great mind should rise superior to its environment."

"Let's tell Kit that the first time she scraps over dishwashing," Doris said. "I didn't hear anything about Tekla going along, did you, Jean?"

Kit turned around and drummed out a gay strain of martial music on the piano keys, while she sang:

"Oh, it has to be done, and it's got to be done,
If I have to do it myself."

"You'll do your share all right, Kathleen Mavourneen, and when the gray dawn is breaking at that," laughed Jean. "Farm life's no joke, and really, while I wouldn't disagree with Dad and Cousin Roxy about it, I think that those who have special gifts--"

"Meaning our darling eldest sister," quoth Kit.

"-- Should not waste their time doing what is not their forte. It takes away the work from those who can't do the other things."

Jean's pointed chin was raised a bit higher in her earnestness, but Kit shook her head.

"You're going to walk the straight and narrow path up at Gilead Center under Cousin Roxy's eagle eye just the same, Jean. It's no good kicking against the pricks. I don't mind so much leaving this place, but we'll miss the girls awfully."

"And the church," added Helen, who was in the Auxiliary Girls' Choir. "We're going to miss that. I wonder if there is a church up there."

"I see where Kit steps off the basket ball team and learns how to run a lawn mower," Kit remarked. "Also, there will be no Wednesday evening dancing class, Helenita, for your princesslike toes to trip at."

"I wish we could all move back to town and see if we couldn't do something there to earn money," Jean said. "One of the girls in the art class found a position designing wall paper the other day, and another one decorates lacquered boxes and trays. When the fortunes of the house suddenly crash, the humble but still genteel family usually take in paying guests, or do ecclesiastical embroidery, don't they?"

"Don't be morbid, Jean," Kit wagged an admonishing finger at her from the stool where she presided, "We'll not take in any boarders at all. I see myself waiting on table this summer at some hillside farm retreat for aged, and respectable females. If we've got to work, let's work for ourselves in the Robbins' commonwealth."

"And if it has to be, let's not fuss and make things harder for Mother," Doris put in.

"How about Dad?" Kit demanded. "Seems to me that he's got the hardest part to bear. It's bad enough lying there sick all the time, without feeling that you're dragging the whole family after you and exiling them to Gilead Center."

"It's too funny, girls," Jean said all at once, her eyes softening and her dimples showing again. "Just the minute anyone of us takes Dad's part, some one springs up and gives a yell for Mother, and vice versa. I think we're the nicest, fairest, most loyal old crowd, don't you? We won't be lonesome up there so long as we have ourselves, – you know we won't, – and if things are slow, then we'll start something."

"Will we? Oh, won't we?" Kit cried. She twirled around to the keys again, and started up an old darky melody.

"Crept to de chicken coop on my knees,
Ain't going ter work any more.
Thought Ah heard a chicken sneeze,
Ain't going ter work any more.

"Balm of Gilead! Balm of Gilead!
Balm, Balm, Balm, Balm,
Ain't going ter work any more, Ah tole yer.
Balm of Gilead! Balm of Gilead!
Balm, Balm, Balm, Balm,
Ah ain't going ter work any more."

"That's better," Jean said, with a sigh of relief. "We've got to pull all together, and make the best of things. Dad's sick, and the Queen Mother's worried to death. Let's be the Queen's Privy Council and act accordingly."

CHAPTER V

KIT REBELS

Cousin Roxy departed for Gilead Center, Connecticut, the following Monday.

"I'd take you with me, Jerry, and the nurse too, if it were spring," she said, "but the first of March we get some pretty bad spells of weather, and it's uncertain for anybody in poor health. You stay here and cheer up and get stronger, and gradually break camp. If you need any help, let me know."

It was harder breaking camp than any of them realized. They had lived six years at Shady Cove, near Great Neck on Long Island. Before that time, there had been an apartment in New York on Columbia Heights. As Kit described it with her usual graphic touch: "Bird's-eye Castle, eight stories up. Fine view of the adjacent clouds and the Palisades. With an opera glass on clear days, you could also see the tops of the Riverside 'buses.'"

It had seemed almost like real country to the girls when they had left the city behind them and moved to Shady Cove. Doris had the measles that year, and the doctor had ordered fresh air and an outdoor life for her, so the whole family had benefited, which was very thoughtful and considerate of Dorrie, the rest said.

But now came the problem of winnowing out what Cousin

Roxana would have called the essential things from the luxuries.

"Dear me, I had no idea we had so many of the pomps and vanities of this wicked world," Jean said regretfully, one day. There were sixteen rooms in the big home, all well furnished. Reception-room, library, music-room, and dining-room, with Tekla's domain at the back. Upstairs was a big living-room and plenty of bedrooms, with three maids' rooms in the third story.

At the top of the broad staircase over the sun-parlor was a wide sleeping-porch. In the cold weather this was enclosed and heated, and the girls loved it. Broad cushioned seats like cabin lockers surrounded it on three sides, and here they could sit and talk with the sun fairly pelting them with warmth and light. Here they sat overhauling and sorting out hampers and bags and bureau drawers of "non-essentials."

"I can't find anything more of mine that I'm willing to throw away," said Doris flatly, stuffing back some long strips of art denim into a box. "I want that for a border to something, and I'll need it fearfully one of these days. What's a luxury anyway?"

"Makes me think of Buster Phelps," Helen remarked. "Last night when I went over to tell Mrs. Phelps that we couldn't be in the Easter festival, Buster was just having his dinner, and he wanted more of the fig soufflé. His mother told him he mustn't gorge on delicacies. So Buster asked what a delicacy was anyway, and he said some day he was going to have a whole meal made of delicacies. Isn't that lovely?"

"Don't throw away any pieces at all, girls," Jean warned.

"Cousin Roxy says we'll need them all for rag carpets."

"You can buy rag rugs and carpets anywhere now," said Helen.

"Yes, oh, Princess, and at lovely prices too. We folks who are going to live at Gilead Center, will cut and sew our own, roll them in nice fat balls, and hand them over to old Pa Carpenter up at Moosup, to be woven into the real thing at fifteen cents a yard. It'll last for years, Cousin Roxy says. When you get tired of it, you boil it up in some dye, and have a new effect. I like the old hit-and-miss best."

Kit regarded her elder sister in speechless delight.

"Jean Robbins, you're getting it!" she gasped. "You're talking exactly like Cousin Roxy."

"I don't care if I am," answered Jean blithely. "It's common sense. Save the pieces."

"She who erstwhile fluttered her lily white hands over art nouveau trifles light as air," murmured Kit. "I marvel."

She looked down at the garden. Windswept and bare it was in the chill last days of February. Yet there was a hint of spring about it. A robin was perched near the little Japanese tea house they had all enjoyed so much, with its wistaria vines and stone lantern. Leading from it to the hedged garden at the back was a pergola over a flagged walk.

The garage was of reddish fieldstone, and like the house covered with woodbine. A tall hedge of California privet enclosed the grounds, with groups of shrubbery here and there. Memories of all the fun which they had enjoyed in the past

six years passed through her mind. There had been lawn fêtes and afternoon teas, croquet parties and tennis tournaments. She hugged her knees, rocking back and forth anxiously.

"What is it, Kit?" asked Jean, mildly. Jean was the first to have an emotional storm over the inevitable, but once it was over, she always settled down to making the best of things, while Kit gloomed and raged inwardly, and felt all manner of premonitory doubts.

"Wonder what we'll really find to do there all the time. I don't want to be a merry milkmaid, do you?"

"If it would help Dad and Mother, yes."

"Certainly, certainly. You don't quoth 'Nevermore,' do you? You're a chirruping raven. We'd all walk from here to Gilead Center on our left ears if it would help Dad and Mother, but the fact that we'd do it wouldn't make it any easier, would it?"

"Don't be savage, Kit," said Helen.

"Who's savage?" demanded Kit haughtily. "I'm just as ready to face this thing as anyone. If it were a small town up in the wilds, even, I wouldn't mind, but it just isn't anything but country."

Jean tapped the end of her nose thoughtfully with her thimble.

"What is Gilead Center then? Isn't that a town?"

"No, it isn't. It's a hamlet. Trolley seven miles away, post office five. There used to be a post office there when the mail-wagon made the trip over, but they needed the building to keep the hearse in, so it's gone."

"You're making that up, Kit," severely.

"I'm not," protested Kit. "You can ask Cousin Roxy. Nobody ever dies up there. They just fade away, and the hearse is seldom needed and was in the way. There are only nine houses in the village proper, one store, one church, and one school. Her house is a mile outside the village, so where will we be?"

"Is it on the map?" asked Doris hopefully.

"Some maps. Township maps. This morning Mother and I were looking up how to get there. You've got your choice of two routes and each one's worse than the other, and more of it."

"Kit, you're crawfishing."

Kit swept by the remark, absorbed in her own forebodings.

"You can reach this spot by land or sea. Cousin Roxy says that it takes five hours for anybody to extricate oneself after one is really there. You can take a boat to New London, ride up to Norwich, transfer to a trolley and trundle along for another hour, then hire a team at Tommy Burke's stable in East Pomfret, and drive an hour and a half more up through the hills. Or you can take a Boston Express up to Willimantic, and hop on a side line from there. A train runs twice a day--"

"What road, Kit?" asked Helen. They leaned around her, fascinated at her sudden acquisition of knowledge.

"Any road you fancy. Central Vermont up to Plainfield, or Providence line over to South Pomfret. There's South Pomfret and East Pomfret and Pomfret Green and Pomfret Station. It really doesn't seem to matter which way you go so long as it lands you at one of the Pomfrets. And Pomfret is five miles from

Gilead Center, Plainfield is seven miles, Boulderville is-

"Oh, please, Kit, stop it," Jean cried, with both hands over her ears. "We'll motor over anyway-"

"Didn't you hear that Dad's going to sell the machine?" Helen whispered. It would never do to let a hint of regret reach beyond the sleeping porch circle. "The Phelps are going to buy it. Buster told me so."

"I knew it before," Jean said quite calmly, going on with her sorting of pieces. "Dad says it will pay nearly all moving expenses and keep us for months. What else could he do? There'd be nobody to run it, would there? Anyway I want a horse to ride, don't you, Kit? Can't you see us all in a joyous cavalcade riding adown the woodland way? I'm Guenevere." With laughing lips, and happy eyes she quoted:

"All in the boyhood of the year
Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenevere
Rode to covert of the deer."

"Plenty of deer up there, Cousin Roxy says. We all can go hunting."

"Never mind the deer. We won't be doing that at all. Mother says Tekla can't possibly go and we're going to do our own housework. Isn't it queer, when a father breaks down, it just seems as if a home caves in."

"Well, it doesn't do any such thing, Helen," responded Kit stolidly. "It may seem to, but it doesn't. Even if we are going

to live five miles from nowhere with the eye of Cousin Roxana forever resting upon us, there'll be lots of fun ahead. What's that about the world making a pathway to your door? I'm going to be famous some day and there'll be a nice little sheep path leading from New York up to Gilead Center, worn by the feet of faithful pilgrims."

"It's so nice having one genius in the family," Jean answered, leaning her chin on one hand. "Now I don't mind leaving the house behind, or the machine, or anything like that. But it's the people I like best that I can't take up with me. Who will we know there, I wonder?"

"Human beings anyhow," Helen stated. "We'll make hosts of new friends. Besides, lots of the girls have promised to visit us. Think of Mother, girls. She's breaking away from everything she likes best. And you know that we're just girls after all, with all our lives ahead of us, so we may have a chance to escape some time; but Mother can't look forward, she is just cutting herself off from everything."

"Just listen to dear old Lady Diogenes." Kit reached down and gave the slender figure a good all-around hug. "How do you know she's losing what she loves best? Don't you remember that old Druid poem in Tennyson about the people calling for a sacrifice and they asked which was the king's dearest? Supposing Dad had died right here. What would he have missed? His country club, his golf, his town club, his business, and his business friends. Mother loses about the same, the country club and golf club, the

church, and the social study club. They'll never settle down to real farm life, Jean. It's just impossible. You can't take a family of-of-"

"Peacocks? Bulfinches? Canaries?" suggested Doris.

"No, I should say park swans," Kit said. "That's what we are out here, – park swans swimming around on an artificial lake, living on an artificial island in a little artificial swan house, swimming around and around, preening our feathers and watching to see what people think of us. You can't take park swans and put them right out into the country, and expect them to make the barnyard a howling success all at once."

"Kit, dear old goose," Jean interposed, "we're not park swans or any such thing. We're just robins, and robins are robins whether they build in a park catalpa or a country rock maple. We'll just migrate, build a new nest, and behave ourselves. Not because we like to, but because it's our nature to, being, as I said before, just robins."

CHAPTER VI

WHITE HYACINTHS

It had been decided to leave Kit and Jean behind to finish their schooling. They could board at the Phelps' home next to Shady Cove along the shore road, but both girls begged to go with the family.

"Why don't you stay?" advised Helen. "You'll escape all of the moving and settling and ploughing."

"We don't want to escape anything," said Kit firmly. "It isn't any fun being left behind with the charred remains."

"Oh, Kit, don't call them that; it's grewsome," begged Doris.

"I don't care. I feel grewsome when I think of being left behind. How do you suppose we'd feel to walk past the Cove and not see any of the rest of you around."

"It's better than being cut right bang off in the middle of everything," replied Helen, with one of her rare explosions. Whenever wrath decided to perch for a minute on her flaxen hair, it always delighted the other girls. Kit said it was precisely like watching a kitten arch its back and scold. "Everything," she repeated tragically. "I can't finish a single thing and I know I'll never pass, being switched off to goodness knows what sort of a school."

"Let's not grouch anyway," counseled Jean. "Mother's getting

thinner every day. As long as it's got to be, tighten your belts and face the enemy. Right about face! Forward! March!"

"I do wish that Kit wouldn't be so happy about things that make you just miserable."

Kit danced away down the hallway warbling sweetly:

"Gondolier, row, row!

Gondolier, row, row!

'Tis a pretty air I do declare,

But it haunts a body so."

"You're an old tease, Kit," Jean admonished in her very best big-sister style. "Please keep away from that crate of perishable matter. Mother's just promised me that we can go with the rest, only I'm going up first with Dad and Miss Patterson."

It had been decided to send Mr. Robbins up before the moving, so he could have a week or two of rest at Maple Lawn, Cousin Roxana's home. The latter was diligently sending down descriptions of adjacent farms and all sorts of home possibilities, but none seemed to fit the bill, as she said. Either there was too much land, or not enough, or it was too far from the village or not far enough, or too much room, or not room enough.

"For pity's sake," Kit said one night, after all the family had suggested various styles in nests, "let's all tent out and do summer light housekeeping. We'll never find just what we want, – never, Mumsie. Jean wants a rose garden and a sun dial. I want golf links, or at least a tennis court, even if we remove the hay fields.

Helen wants wistaria arbors and a very large vine-covered porch. Doris wants a dog, four cats, a hive of bees, a calf, and a pony. You want a house facing south, far back from the road, barn not too near, dry cellar, porch, century-old elms for shade, good well, sink in house, and option of purchase, not over ten dollars a month."

"What do you want, Dad?" asked Jean. It was one of her father's "good" days, when he was able to sit up in his big Morris chair before the fire in the upstairs living-room, and be one of the circle with them.

"Peace and rest," smiled Mr. Robbins.

"Me too," Kit agreed, kneeling beside his chair and rubbing her head up and down his arm. "Dad and I are going to seek gracious peace the livelong day under some shady chestnut tree."

"Dad may, but you won't, Kathleen," Jean laughingly prophesied. "It's going to be the commonwealth of home."

"Wish we were going to an island," Helen said wistfully. "I've always felt as if I could do wonders with an island."

"Anybody could. There's some chance for imagination to work on an island, but what can you do with a farm in Gilead Center?" Kit looked like a pensive parrot, head on one side, eyes half closed in melancholy anticipation. "Darling, precious old Dad here doesn't know a blessed thing about farming-"

"Now, Kit, go easy," Mr. Robbins chided. "Seneca farmed and so did Ovid. It's all in the way you look at things."

"Under the greenwood tree,' you know, Kit," added Jean.

"Yes, and that ends with a fatal warning too," Kit rejoined mournfully, "'While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.'"

"We'll all be keeling pots, Kathleen. It's the Robbins' destiny. You know, Dad, I thought all along that Tekla would go with us. I thought she'd feel hurt if we didn't take her, after she'd been telling us girls all these fairy tales about her native land where she loved to milk twenty cows at three A.M. I thought she'd simply leap at the chance of rural delights, and now she isn't going along with us at all. She says she won't go anywhere unless there are street pianos and moving pictures."

Jean's face was deliciously comical as she recounted the backsliding of Tekla, and Helen chanted softly:

"Knowest thou the land, Mignon?"

"You can laugh all you want to, but it's a serious proposition, Helenita. If Tekla deserts, we'll all have to pitch in. The Nest expects that every robin will do its duty."

"Oh, I don't believe it's going to be nearly as bad as we expect," Mrs. Robbins said happily, as she passed through the room with her pet cut glass candlesticks in her hands. "We're facing the summer, remember, girls, and I can't help but think that Cousin Roxana will be a regular bulwark of strength to all of us."

By the second week in March word came from the family's bulwark that she thought the weather was mild enough for Mr. Robbins and Miss Patterson to attempt the trip. Accordingly, the

first section of the caravan set out on its exodus to the promised land, as Kit called it.

"It does seem, Mother dear," Jean said at the last minute, "as if Kit ought to go with them, and let me stay down here to help you close up things."

"I'd rather have you with your Father." Mrs. Robbins laid her hands on Jean's slender shoulders tenderly. "If I can't be with him, I'd rather have the little first mate. Remember how he used to call you that, when you were only Doris's size?"

"Well, I feel terribly grown up now, Mother. Seventeen is really the dividing line. You begin to think of everything in a more serious way, don't you know. When I look at Kit and Helen sometimes, it seems years and years since I felt the way they do, so sort of irresponsible."

"Poor old grandma," Mrs. Robbins laughed, as she kissed her. "We'll make some nice little lace caps for you with lavender bows. Maybe Cousin Roxy'll let you pour tea."

Jean had to laugh too, seeing the comic side of her aged feeling, but it was true that she felt a new sense of responsibility when they left New York City for Gilead Center. The Saturday following their departure, the first carload of household goods left Shady Cove. It had been a difficult task, weeding out the necessities from the luxuries, as Kit expressed it. Many a semi-luxury had been slipped in by the girls on the plea that Father might need it, or would miss it. Kit had managed to save the entire library outfit intact on this excuse: three bookcases,

leather couch, two wide leather arm-chairs, and the flat-topped mahogany desk.

"Books and pictures are necessities," she declared firmly, saving an old steel engraving of Touchstone and Audrey in the Forest of Arden. "This, for instance, has always hung over the little black walnut bookcase, hasn't it? Could we separate them? I guess not. In it goes, Helen, and see that you handle it with care. There's one thing that we can take up with us, and no slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune can get it away from us, either, and that's atmosphere. Even if we have to live in a well-shingled, airy barn, we can have atmosphere."

"Don't laugh, Dorrie," Helen admonished, as Doris dove into a mass of pillows. "Kit doesn't mean that sort of atmosphere. She means--"

"I mean living in a garden of white hyacinths. Miss Carruthers, our teacher at the art class, told us a story the other day about Mahomet and his followers. He told them if they only had two pence, to spend one for a loaf of bread to feed the body, and the other for white hyacinths to feed the soul. That's why I want all our own beloved things around us, don't you know, Mother dear? Just think of Dad's face if we can blindfold him, lead him into a lovely sunny room up there, take off the bandage, and let him find himself right in his own library just as he had it down here!"

"And as long as he's going to stay in bed, or lie on a lounge, he'll never know what the rest of the house is like," added Doris.

"But he's not going to stay in bed, we hope," answered the

Motherbird, catching the youngest robin in her arms for a quick kiss. "That's why we're going up there, to get him out into the sunlight as soon as possible, so he'll get quite well again."

Kit passed down the stairs completely covered with the burden which she bore.

"I've got all the portières, table covers, couch covers, scarfs and doilies," she called. "We may have to turn the attic into a cosy corner before we get through. It's all in the effect, isn't it, Mumsie?"

"I'm sorry that Dad sold the machine, that's all," Helen remarked. Helen was the far-sighted one of the family. "Talbot Pearson says he knows we could have gotten fifteen hundred for it just as easy as not. His mother told him it was worth every penny of fifteen hundred, and Dad let it go for eight hundred just because he liked the Phelpses."

"Helen, dear, eight hundred cash is worth more than fifteen hundred promised," Mrs. Robbins said, smiling over at her. "And the machine is last year's model. I'm glad with all my heart that Mr. Phelps bought it, because they've been wanting one very much, and the children will get so much enjoyment out of it."

The girls looked down at her admiringly, almost gloatingly, as she sat back contentedly in the low wicker arm-chair in the sunny bay-window.

"Mother, you're a regular darling, truly you are," Kit exclaimed. "You're so big and fine and sympathetic that you make us feel like two cents sometimes when we've been selfish."

Why do you look so happy when everything's going six ways for Sunday?"

Mrs. Robbins held up a letter that Doris had just brought upstairs to her.

"Cousin Roxana writes that Father stood the trip well and has slept every night since they reached Maple Lawn. Isn't that worth all the automobiles in the world?"

The eight hundred dollars in cash had been a helpful addition to their bank account. During the past few weeks, the girls had learned what it meant to consider money, something they had never given a thought to before. While they had never been rich, there had always been an abundance of everything they wanted, with never a suggestion of retrenching on expenses until now. Once they understood the situation, however, they all seemed to enjoy helping to solve the family problem. For several days Doris had appeared to have something on her mind. Finally, she came in smiling, and opened her hand, disclosing a ten dollar bill. Kit fell gracefully over into a chair.

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