

WIGGIN KATE SMITH

REBECCA OF
SUNNYBROOK FARM

Kate Wiggin

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm

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Kate Douglas Smith Wiggin Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm

TO MY MOTHER

Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;
Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;
A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

Wordsworth.

I "WE ARE SEVEN"

The old stage coach was rumbling along the dusty road that runs from Maplewood to Riverboro. The day was as warm as midsummer, though it was only the middle of May, and Mr. Jeremiah Cobb was favoring the horses as much as possible, yet never losing sight of the fact that he carried the mail. The hills were many, and the reins lay loosely in his hands as he lolled back in his seat and extended one foot and leg luxuriously over the dashboard. His brimmed hat of worn felt was well pulled over his eyes, and he revolved a quid of tobacco in his left cheek.

There was one passenger in the coach,—a small dark-haired person in a glossy buff calico dress. She was so slender and so stiffly starched that she slid from space to space on the leather cushions, though she braced herself against the middle seat with her feet and extended her cotton-gloved hands on each side, in order to maintain some sort of balance. Whenever the wheels sank farther than usual into a rut, or jolted suddenly over a stone, she bounded involuntarily into the air, came down again, pushed back her funny little straw hat, and picked up or settled more firmly a small pink sun shade, which seemed to be her chief responsibility,—unless we except a bead purse, into which she looked whenever the condition of the roads would permit, finding great apparent satisfaction in that its precious contents neither disappeared nor grew less. Mr. Cobb guessed nothing of these harassing details of travel, his business being to carry people to their destinations, not, necessarily, to make them comfortable on the way. Indeed he had forgotten the very existence of this one unnoteworthy little passenger.

When he was about to leave the post-office in Maplewood that morning, a woman had alighted from a wagon, and coming up to him, inquired whether this were the Riverboro stage, and if he were Mr. Cobb. Being answered in the affirmative, she nodded to a child who was eagerly waiting for the answer, and who ran towards her as if she feared to be a moment too late. The child might have been ten or eleven years old perhaps, but whatever the number of her summers, she had an air of being small for her age. Her mother helped her into the stage coach, deposited a bundle and a bouquet of lilacs beside her, superintended the "roping on" behind of an old hair trunk, and finally paid the fare, counting out the silver with great care.

"I want you should take her to my sisters' in Riverboro," she said. "Do you know Mirandy and Jane Sawyer? They live in the brick house."

Lord bless your soul, he knew 'em as well as if he'd made 'em!

"Well, she's going there, and they're expecting her. Will you keep an eye on her, please? If she can get out anywhere and get with folks, or get anybody in to keep her company, she'll do it. Good-by, Rebecca; try not to get into any mischief, and sit quiet, so you'll look neat an' nice when you get there. Don't be any trouble to Mr. Cobb.—You see, she's kind of excited.—We came on the cars from Temperance yesterday, slept all night at my cousin's, and drove from her house—eight miles it is—this morning."

"Good-by, mother, don't worry; you know it isn't as if I hadn't traveled before."

The woman gave a short sardonic laugh and said in an explanatory way to Mr. Cobb, "She's been to Wareham and stayed over night; that isn't much to be journey-proud on!"

"It WAS TRAVELING, mother," said the child eagerly and willfully. "It was leaving the farm, and putting up lunch in a basket, and a little riding and a little steam cars, and we carried our nightgowns."

"Don't tell the whole village about it, if we did," said the mother, interrupting the reminiscences of this experienced voyager. "Haven't I told you before," she whispered, in a last attempt at discipline,

"that you shouldn't talk about night gowns and stockings and—things like that, in a loud tone of voice, and especially when there's men folks round?"

"I know, mother, I know, and I won't. All I want to say is"—here Mr. Cobb gave a cluck, slapped the reins, and the horses started sedately on their daily task—"all I want to say is that it is a journey when"—the stage was really under way now and Rebecca had to put her head out of the window over the door in order to finish her sentence—"it IS a journey when you carry a nightgown!"

The objectionable word, uttered in a high treble, floated back to the offended ears of Mrs. Randall, who watched the stage out of sight, gathered up her packages from the bench at the store door, and stepped into the wagon that had been standing at the hitching-post. As she turned the horse's head towards home she rose to her feet for a moment, and shading her eyes with her hand, looked at a cloud of dust in the dim distance.

"Mirandy'll have her hands full, I guess," she said to herself; "but I shouldn't wonder if it would be the making of Rebecca."

All this had been half an hour ago, and the sun, the heat, the dust, the contemplation of errands to be done in the great metropolis of Milltown, had lulled Mr. Cobb's never active mind into complete oblivion as to his promise of keeping an eye on Rebecca.

Suddenly he heard a small voice above the rattle and rumble of the wheels and the creaking of the harness. At first he thought it was a cricket, a tree toad, or a bird, but having determined the direction from which it came, he turned his head over his shoulder and saw a small shape hanging as far out of the window as safety would allow. A long black braid of hair swung with the motion of the coach; the child held her hat in one hand and with the other made ineffectual attempts to stab the driver with her microscopic sunshade.

"Please let me speak!" she called.

Mr. Cobb drew up the horses obediently.

"Does it cost any more to ride up there with you?" she asked. "It's so slippery and shiny down here, and the stage is so much too big for me, that I rattle round in it till I'm 'most black and blue. And the windows are so small I can only see pieces of things, and I've 'most broken my neck stretching round to find out whether my trunk has fallen off the back. It's my mother's trunk, and she's very choice of it."

Mr. Cobb waited until this flow of conversation, or more properly speaking this flood of criticism, had ceased, and then said jocularly:—

"You can come up if you want to; there ain't no extry charge to sit side o' me." Whereupon he helped her out, "boosted" her up to the front seat, and resumed his own place.

Rebecca sat down carefully, smoothing her dress under her with painstaking precision, and putting her sunshade under its extended folds between the driver and herself. This done she pushed back her hat, pulled up her darned white cotton gloves, and said delightedly:—

"Oh! this is better! This is like traveling! I am a real passenger now, and down there I felt like our setting hen when we shut her up in a coop. I hope we have a long, long ways to go?"

"Oh! we've only just started on it," Mr. Cobb responded genially; "it's more 'n two hours."

"Only two hours," she sighed "That will be half past one; mother will be at cousin Ann's, the children at home will have had their dinner, and Hannah cleared all away. I have some lunch, because mother said it would be a bad beginning to get to the brick house hungry and have aunt Mirandy have to get me something to eat the first thing.—It's a good growing day, isn't it?"

"It is, certain; too hot, most. Why don't you put up your parasol?"

She extended her dress still farther over the article in question as she said, "Oh dear no! I never put it up when the sun shines; pink fades awfully, you know, and I only carry it to meetin' cloudy Sundays; sometimes the sun comes out all of a sudden, and I have a dreadful time covering it up; it's the dearest thing in life to me, but it's an awful care."

At this moment the thought gradually permeated Mr. Jeremiah Cobb's slow-moving mind that the bird perched by his side was a bird of very different feather from those to which he was accustomed in his daily drives. He put the whip back in its socket, took his foot from the dashboard, pushed his hat back, blew his quid of tobacco into the road, and having thus cleared his mental decks for action, he took his first good look at the passenger, a look which she met with a grave, childlike stare of friendly curiosity.

The buff calico was faded, but scrupulously clean, and starched within an inch of its life. From the little standing ruffle at the neck the child's slender throat rose very brown and thin, and the head looked small to bear the weight of dark hair that hung in a thick braid to her waist. She wore an odd little vizored cap of white leghorn, which may either have been the latest thing in children's hats, or some bit of ancient finery furbished up for the occasion. It was trimmed with a twist of buff ribbon and a cluster of black and orange porcupine quills, which hung or bristled stiffly over one ear, giving her the quaintest and most unusual appearance. Her face was without color and sharp in outline. As to features, she must have had the usual number, though Mr. Cobb's attention never proceeded so far as nose, forehead, or chin, being caught on the way and held fast by the eyes. Rebecca's eyes were like faith,—“the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Under her delicately etched brows they glowed like two stars, their dancing lights half hidden in lustrous darkness. Their glance was eager and full of interest, yet never satisfied; their steadfast gaze was brilliant and mysterious, and had the effect of looking directly through the obvious to something beyond, in the object, in the landscape, in you. They had never been accounted for, Rebecca's eyes. The school teacher and the minister at Temperance had tried and failed; the young artist who came for the summer to sketch the red barn, the ruined mill, and the bridge ended by giving up all these local beauties and devoting herself to the face of a child,—a small, plain face illuminated by a pair of eyes carrying such messages, such suggestions, such hints of sleeping power and insight, that one never tired of looking into their shining depths, nor of fancying that what one saw there was the reflection of one's own thought.

Mr. Cobb made none of these generalizations; his remark to his wife that night was simply to the effect that whenever the child looked at him she knocked him galley-west.

“Miss Ross, a lady that paints, gave me the sunshade,” said Rebecca, when she had exchanged looks with Mr. Cobb and learned his face by heart. “Did you notice the pinked double ruffle and the white tip and handle? They're ivory. The handle is scarred, you see. That's because Fanny sucked and chewed it in meeting when I wasn't looking. I've never felt the same to Fanny since.”

“Is Fanny your sister?”

“She's one of them.”

“How many are there of you?”

“Seven. There's verses written about seven children:—

“Quick was the little Maid's reply,
O master! we are seven!”

I learned it to speak in school, but the scholars were hateful and laughed. Hannah is the oldest, I come next, then John, then Jenny, then Mark, then Fanny, then Mira.”

“Well, that IS a big family!”

“Far too big, everybody says,” replied Rebecca with an unexpected and thoroughly grown-up candor that induced Mr. Cobb to murmur, “I swan!” and insert more tobacco in his left cheek.

“They're dear, but such a bother, and cost so much to feed, you see,” she rippled on. “Hannah and I haven't done anything but put babies to bed at night and take them up in the morning for years and years. But it's finished, that's one comfort, and we'll have a lovely time when we're all grown up and the mortgage is paid off.”

"All finished? Oh, you mean you've come away?"

"No, I mean they're all over and done with; our family 's finished. Mother says so, and she always keeps her promises. There hasn't been any since Mira, and she's three. She was born the day father died. Aunt Miranda wanted Hannah to come to Riverboro instead of me, but mother couldn't spare her; she takes hold of housework better than I do, Hannah does. I told mother last night if there was likely to be any more children while I was away I'd have to be sent for, for when there's a baby it always takes Hannah and me both, for mother has the cooking and the farm."

"Oh, you live on a farm, do ye? Where is it?—near to where you got on?"

"Near? Why, it must be thousands of miles! We came from Temperance in the cars. Then we drove a long ways to cousin Ann's and went to bed. Then we got up and drove ever so far to Maplewood, where the stage was. Our farm is away off from everywhere, but our school and meeting house is at Temperance, and that's only two miles. Sitting up here with you is most as good as climbing the meeting-house steeple. I know a boy who's been up on our steeple. He said the people and cows looked like flies. We haven't met any people yet, but I'm KIND of disappointed in the cows;—they don't look so little as I hoped they would; still (brightening) they don't look quite as big as if we were down side of them, do they? Boys always do the nice splendid things, and girls can only do the nasty dull ones that get left over. They can't climb so high, or go so far, or stay out so late, or run so fast, or anything."

Mr. Cobb wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and gasped. He had a feeling that he was being hurried from peak to peak of a mountain range without time to take a good breath in between.

"I can't seem to locate your farm," he said, "though I've been to Temperance and used to live up that way. What's your folks' name?"

"Randall. My mother's name is Aurelia Randall; our names are Hannah Lucy Randall, Rebecca Rowena Randall, John Halifax Randall, Jenny Lind Randall, Marquis Randall, Fanny Ellsler Randall, and Miranda Randall. Mother named half of us and father the other half, but we didn't come out even, so they both thought it would be nice to name Mira after aunt Miranda in Riverboro; they hoped it might do some good, but it didn't, and now we call her Mira. We are all named after somebody in particular. Hannah is Hannah at the Window Binding Shoes, and I am taken out of Ivanhoe; John Halifax was a gentleman in a book; Mark is after his uncle Marquis de Lafayette that died a twin. (Twins very often don't live to grow up, and triplets almost never—did you know that, Mr. Cobb?) We don't call him Marquis, only Mark. Jenny is named for a singer and Fanny for a beautiful dancer, but mother says they're both misfits, for Jenny can't carry a tune and Fanny's kind of stiff-legged. Mother would like to call them Jane and Frances and give up their middle names, but she says it wouldn't be fair to father. She says we must always stand up for father, because everything was against him, and he wouldn't have died if he hadn't had such bad luck. I think that's all there is to tell about us," she finished seriously.

"Land o' Liberty! I should think it was enough," ejaculated Mr. Cobb. "There wa'n't many names left when your mother got through choosin'! You've got a powerful good memory! I guess it ain't no trouble for you to learn your lessons, is it?"

"Not much; the trouble is to get the shoes to go and learn 'em. These are spandy new I've got on, and they have to last six months. Mother always says to save my shoes. There don't seem to be any way of saving shoes but taking 'em off and going barefoot; but I can't do that in Riverboro without shaming aunt Mirandy. I'm going to school right along now when I'm living with aunt Mirandy, and in two years I'm going to the seminary at Wareham; mother says it ought to be the making of me! I'm going to be a painter like Miss Ross when I get through school. At any rate, that's what I think I'm going to be. Mother thinks I'd better teach."

"Your farm ain't the old Hobbs place, is it?"

"No, it's just Randall's Farm. At least that's what mother calls it. I call it Sunnybrook Farm."

"I guess it don't make no difference what you call it so long as you know where it is," remarked Mr. Cobb sententiously.

Rebecca turned the full light of her eyes upon him reproachfully, almost severely, as she answered:—

"Oh! don't say that, and be like all the rest! It does make a difference what you call things. When I say Randall's Farm, do you see how it looks?"

"No, I can't say I do," responded Mr. Cobb uneasily.

"Now when I say Sunnybrook Farm, what does it make you think of?"

Mr. Cobb felt like a fish removed from his native element and left panting on the sand; there was no evading the awful responsibility of a reply, for Rebecca's eyes were searchlights, that pierced the fiction of his brain and perceived the bald spot on the back of his head.

"I s'pose there's a brook somewheres near it," he said timorously.

Rebecca looked disappointed but not quite dis-heartened. "That's pretty good," she said encouragingly. "You're warm but not hot; there's a brook, but not a common brook. It has young trees and baby bushes on each side of it, and it's a shallow chattering little brook with a white sandy bottom and lots of little shiny pebbles. Whenever there's a bit of sunshine the brook catches it, and it's always full of sparkles the livelong day. Don't your stomach feel hollow? Mine doest I was so 'fraid I'd miss the stage I couldn't eat my breakfast."

"You'd better have your lunch, then. I don't eat nothin' till I get to Milltown; then I get a piece o' pie and cup o' coffee."

"I wish I could see Milltown. I suppose it's bigger and grander even than Wareham; more like Paris? Miss Ross told me about Paris; she bought my pink sunshade there and my bead purse. You see how it opens with a snap? I've twenty cents in it, and it's got to last three months, for stamps and paper and ink. Mother says aunt Mirandy won't want to buy things like those when she's feeding and clothing me and paying for my school books."

"Paris ain't no great," said Mr. Cobb disparagingly. "It's the dullest place in the State o' Maine. I've druv there many a time."

Again Rebecca was obliged to reprove Mr. Cobb, tacitly and quietly, but none the less surely, though the reproof was dealt with one glance, quickly sent and as quickly withdrawn.

"Paris is the capital of France, and you have to go to it on a boat," she said instructively. "It's in my geography, and it says: 'The French are a gay and polite people, fond of dancing and light wines.' I asked the teacher what light wines were, and he thought it was something like new cider, or maybe ginger pop. I can see Paris as plain as day by just shutting my eyes. The beautiful ladies are always gayly dancing around with pink sunshades and bead purses, and the grand gentlemen are politely dancing and drinking ginger pop. But you can see Milltown most every day with your eyes wide open," Rebecca said wistfully.

"Milltown ain't no great, neither," replied Mr. Cobb, with the air of having visited all the cities of the earth and found them as naught. "Now you watch me heave this newspaper right onto Mis' Brown's doorstep."

Piff! and the packet landed exactly as it was intended, on the corn husk mat in front of the screen door.

"Oh, how splendid that was!" cried Rebecca with enthusiasm. "Just like the knife thrower Mark saw at the circus. I wish there was a long, long row of houses each with a corn husk mat and a screen door in the middle, and a newspaper to throw on every one!"

"I might fail on some of 'em, you know," said Mr. Cobb, beaming with modest pride. "If your aunt Mirandy'll let you, I'll take you down to Milltown some day this summer when the stage ain't full."

A thrill of delicious excitement ran through Rebecca's frame, from her new shoes up, up to the leghorn cap and down the black braid. She pressed Mr. Cobb's knee ardently and said in a voice choking with tears of joy and astonishment, "Oh, it can't be true, it can't; to think I should see

Milltown. It's like having a fairy godmother who asks you your wish and then gives it to you! Did you ever read Cinderella, or The Yellow Dwarf, or The Enchanted Frog, or The Fair One with Golden Locks?"

"No," said Mr. Cobb cautiously, after a moment's reflection. "I don't seem to think I ever did read jest those partic'lar ones. Where'd you get a chance at so much readin'?"

"Oh, I've read lots of books," answered Rebecca casually. "Father's and Miss Ross's and all the dif'rent school teachers', and all in the Sunday-school library. I've read The Lamplighter, and Scottish Chiefs, and Ivanhoe, and The Heir of Redclyffe, and Cora, the Doctor's Wife, and David Copperfield, and The Gold of Chickaree, and Plutarch's Lives, and Thaddeus of Warsaw, and Pilgrim's Progress, and lots more.—What have you read?"

"I've never happened to read those partic'lar books; but land! I've read a sight in my time! Nowadays I'm so drove I get along with the Almanac, the Weekly Argus, and the Maine State Agriculturist.—There's the river again; this is the last long hill, and when we get to the top of it we'll see the chimbleys of Riverboro in the distance. 'T ain't fur. I live 'bout half a mile beyond the brick house myself."

Rebecca's hand stirred nervously in her lap and she moved in her seat. "I didn't think I was going to be afraid," she said almost under her breath; "but I guess I am, just a little mite—when you say it's coming so near."

"Would you go back?" asked Mr. Cobb curiously.

She flashed him an intrepid look and then said proudly, "I'd never go back—I might be frightened, but I'd be ashamed to run. Going to aunt Mirandy's is like going down cellar in the dark. There might be ogres and giants under the stairs,—but, as I tell Hannah, there MIGHT be elves and fairies and enchanted frogs!—Is there a main street to the village, like that in Wareham?"

"I s'pose you might call it a main street, an' your aunt Sawyer lives on it, but there ain't no stores nor mills, an' it's an awful one-horse village! You have to go 'cross the river an' get on to our side if you want to see anything goin' on."

"I'm almost sorry," she sighed, "because it would be so grand to drive down a real main street, sitting high up like this behind two splendid horses, with my pink sunshade up, and everybody in town wondering who the bunch of lilacs and the hair trunk belongs to. It would be just like the beautiful lady in the parade. Last summer the circus came to Temperance, and they had a procession in the morning. Mother let us all walk in and wheel Mira in the baby carriage, because we couldn't afford to go to the circus in the afternoon. And there were lovely horses and animals in cages, and clowns on horseback; and at the very end came a little red and gold chariot drawn by two ponies, and in it, sitting on a velvet cushion, was the snake charmer, all dressed in satin and spangles. She was so beautiful beyond compare, Mr. Cobb, that you had to swallow lumps in your throat when you looked at her, and little cold feelings crept up and down your back. Don't you know how I mean? Didn't you ever see anybody that made you feel like that?"

Mr. Cobb was more distinctly uncomfortable at this moment than he had been at any one time during the eventful morning, but he evaded the point dexterously by saying, "There ain't no harm, as I can see, in our makin' the grand entry in the biggest style we can. I'll take the whip out, set up straight, an' drive fast; you hold your bo'quet in your lap, an' open your little red parasol, an' we'll jest make the natives stare!"

The child's face was radiant for a moment, but the glow faded just as quickly as she said, "I forgot—mother put me inside, and maybe she'd want me to be there when I got to aunt Mirandy's. Maybe I'd be more genteel inside, and then I wouldn't have to be jumped down and my clothes fly up, but could open the door and step down like a lady passenger. Would you please stop a minute, Mr. Cobb, and let me change?"

The stage driver good-naturedly pulled up his horses, lifted the excited little creature down, opened the door, and helped her in, putting the lilacs and the pink sunshade beside her.

"We've had a great trip," he said, "and we've got real well acquainted, haven't we?—You won't forget about Milltown?"

"Never!" she exclaimed fervently; "and you're sure you won't, either?"

"Never! Cross my heart!" vowed Mr. Cobb solemnly, as he remounted his perch; and as the stage rumbled down the village street between the green maples, those who looked from their windows saw a little brown elf in buff calico sitting primly on the back seat holding a great bouquet tightly in one hand and a pink parasol in the other. Had they been farsighted enough they might have seen, when the stage turned into the side dooryard of the old brick house, a calico yoke rising and falling tempestuously over the beating heart beneath, the red color coming and going in two pale cheeks, and a mist of tears swimming in two brilliant dark eyes.

Rebecca's journey had ended.

"There's the stage turnin' into the Sawyer girls' dooryard," said Mrs. Perkins to her husband. "That must be the niece from up Temperance way. It seems they wrote to Aurelia and invited Hannah, the oldest, but Aurelia said she could spare Rebecca better, if 't was all the same to Mirandy 'n' Jane; so it's Rebecca that's come. She'll be good comp'ny for our Emma Jane, but I don't believe they'll keep her three months! She looks black as an Injun what I can see of her; black and kind of up-an-comin'. They used to say that one o' the Randalls married a Spanish woman, somebody that was teachin' music and languages at a boardin' school. Lorenzo was dark complected, you remember, and this child is, too. Well, I don't know as Spanish blood is any real disgrace, not if it's a good ways back and the woman was respectable."

II REBECCA'S RELATIONS

They had been called the Sawyer girls when Miranda at eighteen, Jane at twelve, and Aurelia at eight participated in the various activities of village life; and when Riverboro fell into a habit of thought or speech, it saw no reason for falling out of it, at any rate in the same century. So although Miranda and Jane were between fifty and sixty at the time this story opens, Riverboro still called them the Sawyer girls. They were spinsters; but Aurelia, the youngest, had made what she called a romantic marriage and what her sisters termed a mighty poor speculation. "There's worse things than bein' old maids," they said; whether they thought so is quite another matter.

The element of romance in Aurelia's marriage existed chiefly in the fact that Mr. L. D. M. Randall had a soul above farming or trading and was a votary of the Muses. He taught the weekly singing-school (then a feature of village life) in half a dozen neighboring towns, he played the violin and "called off" at dances, or evoked rich harmonies from church melodeons on Sundays. He taught certain uncouth lads, when they were of an age to enter society, the intricacies of contra dances, or the steps of the schottische and mazurka, and he was a marked figure in all social assemblies, though conspicuously absent from town-meetings and the purely masculine gatherings at the store or tavern or bridge.

His hair was a little longer, his hands a little whiter, his shoes a little thinner, his manner a trifle more polished, than that of his soberer mates; indeed the only department of life in which he failed to shine was the making of sufficient money to live upon. Luckily he had no responsibilities; his father and his twin brother had died when he was yet a boy, and his mother, whose only noteworthy achievement had been the naming of her twin sons Marquis de Lafayette and Lorenzo de Medici Randall, had supported herself and educated her child by making coats up to the very day of her death. She was wont to say plaintively, "I'm afraid the faculties was too much divided up between my twins. L. D. M. is awful talented, but I guess M. D. L. would 'a' ben the practical one if he'd 'a' lived."

"L. D. M. was practical enough to get the richest girl in the village," replied Mrs. Robinson.

"Yes," sighed his mother, "there it is again; if the twins could 'a' married Aurelia Sawyer, 't would 'a' been all right. L. D. M. was talented 'nough to GET Reely's money, but M. D. L. would 'a' ben practical 'nough to have KEP' it."

Aurelia's share of the modest Sawyer property had been put into one thing after another by the handsome and luckless Lorenzo de Medici. He had a graceful and poetic way of making an investment for each new son and daughter that blessed their union. "A birthday present for our child, Aurelia," he would say,— "a little nest-egg for the future;" but Aurelia once remarked in a moment of bitterness that the hen never lived that could sit on those eggs and hatch anything out of them.

Miranda and Jane had virtually washed their hands of Aurelia when she married Lorenzo de Medici Randall. Having exhausted the resources of Riverboro and its immediate vicinity, the unfortunate couple had moved on and on in a steadily decreasing scale of prosperity until they had reached Temperance, where they had settled down and invited fate to do its worst, an invitation which was promptly accepted. The maiden sisters at home wrote to Aurelia two or three times a year, and sent modest but serviceable presents to the children at Christmas, but refused to assist L. D. M. with the regular expenses of his rapidly growing family. His last investment, made shortly before the birth of Miranda (named in a lively hope of favors which never came), was a small farm two miles from Temperance. Aurelia managed this herself, and so it proved a home at least, and a place for the unsuccessful Lorenzo to die and to be buried from, a duty somewhat too long deferred, many thought, which he performed on the day of Mira's birth.

It was in this happy-go-lucky household that Rebecca had grown up. It was just an ordinary family; two or three of the children were handsome and the rest plain, three of them rather clever, two industrious, and two commonplace and dull. Rebecca had her father's facility and had been his aptest pupil. She "carried" the alto by ear, danced without being taught, played the melodeon without knowing the notes. Her love of books she inherited chiefly from her mother, who found it hard to sweep or cook or sew when there was a novel in the house. Fortunately books were scarce, or the children might sometimes have gone ragged and hungry.

But other forces had been at work in Rebecca, and the traits of unknown forbears had been wrought into her fibre. Lorenzo de Medici was flabby and boneless; Rebecca was a thing of fire and spirit: he lacked energy and courage; Rebecca was plucky at two and dauntless at five. Mrs. Randall and Hannah had no sense of humor; Rebecca possessed and showed it as soon as she could walk and talk.

She had not been able, however, to borrow her parents' virtues and those of other generous ancestors and escape all the weaknesses in the calendar. She had not her sister Hannah's patience or her brother John's sturdy staying power. Her will was sometimes willfulness, and the ease with which she did most things led her to be impatient of hard tasks or long ones. But whatever else there was or was not, there was freedom at Randall's farm. The children grew, worked, fought, ate what and slept where they could; loved one another and their parents pretty well, but with no tropical passion; and educated themselves for nine months of the year, each one in his own way.

As a result of this method Hannah, who could only have been developed by forces applied from without, was painstaking, humdrum, and limited; while Rebecca, who apparently needed nothing but space to develop in, and a knowledge of terms in which to express herself, grew and grew and grew, always from within outward. Her forces of one sort and another had seemingly been set in motion when she was born; they needed no daily spur, but moved of their own accord—towards what no one knew, least of all Rebecca herself. The field for the exhibition of her creative instinct was painfully small, and the only use she had made of it as yet was to leave eggs out of the corn bread one day and milk another, to see how it would turn out; to part Fanny's hair sometimes in the middle, sometimes on the right, and sometimes on the left side; and to play all sorts of fantastic pranks with the children, occasionally bringing them to the table as fictitious or historical characters found in her favorite books. Rebecca amused her mother and her family generally, but she never was counted of serious importance, and though considered "smart" and old for her age, she was never thought superior in any way. Aurelia's experience of genius, as exemplified in the deceased Lorenzo de Medici led her into a greater admiration of plain, every-day common sense, a quality in which Rebecca, it must be confessed, seemed sometimes painfully deficient.

Hannah was her mother's favorite, so far as Aurelia could indulge herself in such recreations as partiality. The parent who is obliged to feed and clothe seven children on an income of fifteen dollars a month seldom has time to discriminate carefully between the various members of her brood, but Hannah at fourteen was at once companion and partner in all her mother's problems. She it was who kept the house while Aurelia busied herself in barn and field. Rebecca was capable of certain set tasks, such as keeping the small children from killing themselves and one another, feeding the poultry, picking up chips, hulling strawberries, wiping dishes; but she was thought irresponsible, and Aurelia, needing somebody to lean on (having never enjoyed that luxury with the gifted Lorenzo), leaned on Hannah. Hannah showed the result of this attitude somewhat, being a trifle careworn in face and sharp in manner; but she was a self-contained, well-behaved, dependable child, and that is the reason her aunts had invited her to Riverboro to be a member of their family and participate in all the advantages of their loftier position in the world. It was several years since Miranda and Jane had seen the children, but they remembered with pleasure that Hannah had not spoken a word during the interview, and it was for this reason that they had asked for the pleasure of her company. Rebecca, on the other hand, had dressed up the dog in John's clothes, and being requested to get the three

younger children ready for dinner, she had held them under the pump and then proceeded to "smack" their hair flat to their heads by vigorous brushing, bringing them to the table in such a moist and hideous state of shininess that their mother was ashamed of their appearance. Rebecca's own black locks were commonly pushed smoothly off her forehead, but on this occasion she formed what I must perforce call by its only name, a spit-curl, directly in the centre of her brow, an ornament which she was allowed to wear a very short time, only in fact till Hannah was able to call her mother's attention to it, when she was sent into the next room to remove it and to come back looking like a Christian. This command she interpreted somewhat too literally perhaps, because she contrived in a space of two minutes an extremely pious style of hairdressing, fully as effective if not as startling as the first. These antics were solely the result of nervous irritation, a mood born of Miss Miranda Sawyer's stiff, grim, and martial attitude. The remembrance of Rebecca was so vivid that their sister Aurelia's letter was something of a shock to the quiet, elderly spinsters of the brick house; for it said that Hannah could not possibly be spared for a few years yet, but that Rebecca would come as soon as she could be made ready; that the offer was most thankfully appreciated, and that the regular schooling and church privileges, as well as the influence of the Sawyer home, would doubtless be "the making of Rebecca."

III

A DIFFERENCE IN HEARTS

"I don't know as I cal'lated to be the makin' of any child," Miranda had said as she folded Aurelia's letter and laid it in the light-stand drawer. "I s'posed, of course, Aurelia would send us the one we asked for, but it's just like her to palm off that wild young one on somebody else."

"You remember we said that Rebecca or even Jenny might come, in case Hannah couldn't," interposed Jane.

"I know we did, but we hadn't any notion it would turn out that way," grumbled Miranda.

"She was a mite of a thing when we saw her three years ago," ventured Jane; "she's had time to improve."

"And time to grow worse!"

"Won't it be kind of a privilege to put her on the right track?" asked Jane timidly.

"I don't know about the privilege part; it'll be considerable of a chore, I guess. If her mother hain't got her on the right track by now, she won't take to it herself all of a sudden."

This depressed and depressing frame of mind had lasted until the eventful day dawned on which Rebecca was to arrive.

"If she makes as much work after she comes as she has before, we might as well give up hope of ever gettin' any rest," sighed Miranda as she hung the dish towels on the barberry bushes at the side door.

"But we should have had to clean house, Rebecca or no Rebecca," urged Jane; "and I can't see why you've scrubbed and washed and baked as you have for that one child, nor why you've about bought out Watson's stock of dry goods."

"I know Aurelia if you don't," responded Miranda. "I've seen her house, and I've seen that batch o' children, wearin' one another's clothes and never carin' whether they had 'em on right sid' out or not; I know what they've had to live and dress on, and so do you. That child will like as not come here with a passel o' things borrowed from the rest o' the family. She'll have Hannah's shoes and John's undershirts and Mark's socks most likely. I suppose she never had a thimble on her finger in her life, but she'll know the feelin' o' one before she's ben here many days. I've bought a piece of unbleached muslin and a piece o' brown gingham for her to make up; that'll keep her busy. Of course she won't pick up anything after herself; she probably never see a duster, and she'll be as hard to train into our ways as if she was a heathen."

"She'll make a dif'rence," acknowledged Jane, "but she may turn out more biddable 'n we think."

"She'll mind when she's spoken to, biddable or not," remarked Miranda with a shake of the last towel.

Miranda Sawyer had a heart, of course, but she had never used it for any other purpose than the pumping and circulating of blood. She was just, conscientious, economical, industrious; a regular attendant at church and Sunday-school, and a member of the State Missionary and Bible societies, but in the presence of all these chilly virtues you longed for one warm little fault, or lacking that, one likable failing, something to make you sure she was thoroughly alive. She had never had any education other than that of the neighborhood district school, for her desires and ambitions had all pointed to the management of the house, the farm, and the dairy. Jane, on the other hand, had gone to an academy, and also to a boarding-school for young ladies; so had Aurelia; and after all the years that had elapsed there was still a slight difference in language and in manner between the elder and the two younger sisters.

Jane, too, had had the inestimable advantage of a sorrow; not the natural grief at the loss of her aged father and mother, for she had been content to let them go; but something far deeper. She was engaged to marry young Tom Carter, who had nothing to marry on, it is true, but who was sure to have, some time or other. Then the war broke out. Tom enlisted at the first call. Up to that time Jane had loved him with a quiet, friendly sort of affection, and had given her country a mild emotion of the same sort. But the strife, the danger, the anxiety of the time, set new currents of feeling in motion. Life became something other than the three meals a day, the round of cooking, washing, sewing, and church going. Personal gossip vanished from the village conversation. Big things took the place of trifling ones,—sacred sorrows of wives and mothers, pangs of fathers and husbands, self-denials, sympathies, new desire to bear one another's burdens. Men and women grew fast in those days of the nation's trouble and danger, and Jane awoke from the vague dull dream she had hitherto called life to new hopes, new fears, new purposes. Then after a year's anxiety, a year when one never looked in the newspaper without dread and sickness of suspense, came the telegram saying that Tom was wounded; and without so much as asking Miranda's leave, she packed her trunk and started for the South. She was in time to hold Tom's hand through hours of pain; to show him for once the heart of a prim New England girl when it is ablaze with love and grief; to put her arms about him so that he could have a home to die in, and that was all;—all, but it served.

It carried her through weary months of nursing—nursing of other soldiers for Tom's dear sake; it sent her home a better woman; and though she had never left Riverboro in all the years that lay between, and had grown into the counterfeit presentment of her sister and of all other thin, spare, New England spinsters, it was something of a counterfeit, and underneath was still the faint echo of that wild heart-beat of her girlhood. Having learned the trick of beating and loving and suffering, the poor faithful heart persisted, although it lived on memories and carried on its sentimental operations mostly in secret.

"You're soft, Jane," said Miranda once; "you allers was soft, and you allers will be. If 't wa'n't for me keeping you stiffened up, I b'lieve you'd leak out o' the house into the dooryard."

It was already past the appointed hour for Mr. Cobb and his coach to be lumbering down the street.

"The stage ought to be here," said Miranda, glancing nervously at the tall clock for the twentieth time. "I guess everything 's done. I've tacked up two thick towels back of her washstand and put a mat under her slop-jar; but children are awful hard on furniture. I expect we sha'n't know this house a year from now."

Jane's frame of mind was naturally depressed and timorous, having been affected by Miranda's gloomy presages of evil to come. The only difference between the sisters in this matter was that while Miranda only wondered how they could endure Rebecca, Jane had flashes of inspiration in which she wondered how Rebecca would endure them. It was in one of these flashes that she ran up the back stairs to put a vase of apple blossoms and a red tomato-pincushion on Rebecca's bureau.

The stage rumbled to the side door of the brick house, and Mr. Cobb handed Rebecca out like a real lady passenger. She alighted with great circumspection, put the bunch of faded flowers in her aunt Miranda's hand, and received her salute; it could hardly be called a kiss without injuring the fair name of that commodity.

"You needn't 'a' bothered to bring flowers," remarked that gracious and tactful lady; "the garden 's always full of 'em here when it comes time."

Jane then kissed Rebecca, giving a somewhat better imitation of the real thing than her sister. "Put the trunk in the entry, Jeremiah, and we'll get it carried upstairs this afternoon," she said.

"I'll take it up for ye now, if ye say the word, girls."

"No, no; don't leave the horses; somebody'll be comin' past, and we can call 'em in."

"Well, good-by, Rebecca; good-day, Mirandy 'n' Jane. You've got a lively little girl there. I guess she'll be a first-rate company keeper."

Miss Sawyer shuddered openly at the adjective "lively" as applied to a child; her belief being that though children might be seen, if absolutely necessary, they certainly should never be heard if she could help it. "We're not much used to noise, Jane and me," she remarked acidly.

Mr. Cobb saw that he had taken the wrong tack, but he was too unused to argument to explain himself readily, so he drove away, trying to think by what safer word than "lively" he might have described his interesting little passenger.

"I'll take you up and show you your room, Rebecca," Miss Miranda said. "Shut the mosquito nettin' door tight behind you, so 's to keep the flies out; it ain't flytime yet, but I want you to start right; take your passel along with ye and then you won't have to come down for it; always make your head save your heels. Rub your feet on that braided rug; hang your hat and cape in the entry there as you go past."

"It's my best hat," said Rebecca

"Take it upstairs then and put it in the clothes-press; but I shouldn't 'a' thought you'd 'a' worn your best hat on the stage."

"It's my only hat," explained Rebecca. "My every-day hat wasn't good enough to bring. Fanny's going to finish it."

"Lay your parasol in the entry closet."

"Do you mind if I keep it in my room, please? It always seems safer."

"There ain't any thieves hereabouts, and if there was, I guess they wouldn't make for your sunshade, but come along. Remember to always go up the back way; we don't use the front stairs on account o' the carpet; take care o' the turn and don't ketch your foot; look to your right and go in. When you've washed your face and hands and brushed your hair you can come down, and by and by we'll unpack your trunk and get you settled before supper. Ain't you got your dress on hind sid' foremost?"

Rebecca drew her chin down and looked at the row of smoked pearl buttons running up and down the middle of her flat little chest.

"Hind side foremost? Oh, I see! No, that's all right. If you have seven children you can't keep buttonin' and unbuttonin' 'em all the time—they have to do themselves. We're always buttoned up in front at our house. Mira's only three, but she's buttoned up in front, too."

Miranda said nothing as she closed the door, but her looks were at once equivalent to and more eloquent than words.

Rebecca stood perfectly still in the centre of the floor and looked about her. There was a square of oilcloth in front of each article of furniture and a drawn-in rug beside the single four poster, which was covered with a fringed white dimity counterpane.

Everything was as neat as wax, but the ceilings were much higher than Rebecca was accustomed to. It was a north room, and the window, which was long and narrow, looked out on the back buildings and the barn.

It was not the room, which was far more comfortable than Rebecca's own at the farm, nor the lack of view, nor yet the long journey, for she was not conscious of weariness; it was not the fear of a strange place, for she loved new places and courted new sensations; it was because of some curious blending of uncomprehended emotions that Rebecca stood her sunshade in the corner, tore off her best hat, flung it on the bureau with the porcupine quills on the under side, and stripping down the dimity spread, precipitated herself into the middle of the bed and pulled the counterpane over her head.

In a moment the door opened quietly. Knocking was a refinement quite unknown in Riverboro, and if it had been heard of would never have been wasted on a child.

Miss Miranda entered, and as her eye wandered about the vacant room, it fell upon a white and tempestuous ocean of counterpane, an ocean breaking into strange movements of wave and crest and billow.

"REBECCA!"

The tone in which the word was voiced gave it all the effect of having been shouted from the housetops.

A dark ruffled head and two frightened eyes appeared above the dimity spread.

"What are you layin' on your good bed in the daytime for, messin' up the feathers, and dirtyin' the pillers with your dusty boots?"

Rebecca rose guiltily. There seemed no excuse to make. Her offense was beyond explanation or apology.

"I'm sorry, aunt Mirandy—something came over me; I don't know what."

"Well, if it comes over you very soon again we'll have to find out what 't is. Spread your bed up smooth this minute, for 'Bijah Flagg 's bringin' your trunk upstairs, and I wouldn't let him see such a cluttered-up room for anything; he'd tell it all over town."

When Mr. Cobb had put up his horses that night he carried a kitchen chair to the side of his wife, who was sitting on the back porch.

"I brought a little Randall girl down on the stage from Maplewood to-day, mother. She's kin to the Sawyer girls an' is goin' to live with 'em," he said, as he sat down and began to whittle. "She's that Aurelia's child, the one that ran away with Susan Randall's son just before we come here to live."

"How old a child?"

"'Bout ten, or somewhere along there, an' small for her age; but land! she might be a hundred to hear her talk! She kep' me jumpin' tryin' to answer her! Of all the queer children I ever come across she's the queerest. She ain't no beauty—her face is all eyes; but if she ever grows up to them eyes an' fills out a little she'll make folks stare. Land, mother! I wish 't you could 'a' heard her talk."

"I don't see what she had to talk about, a child like that, to a stranger," replied Mrs. Cobb.

"Stranger or no stranger, 't wouldn't make no difference to her. She'd talk to a pump or a grind-stun; she'd talk to herself ruther 'n keep still."

"What did she talk about?"

"Blamed if I can repeat any of it. She kep' me so surprised I didn't have my wits about me. She had a little pink sunshade—it kind o' looked like a doll's amberill, 'n' she clung to it like a burr to a woolen stockin'. I advised her to open it up—the sun was so hot; but she said no, 't would fade, an' she tucked it under her dress. 'It's the dearest thing in life to me,' says she, 'but it's a dreadful care.' Them 's the very words, an' it's all the words I remember. 'It's the dearest thing in life to me, but it's an awful care!' "—here Mr. Cobb laughed aloud as he tipped his chair back against the side of the house. "There was another thing, but I can't get it right exactly. She was talkin' 'bout the circus parade an' the snake charmer in a gold chariot, an' says she, 'She was so beautiful beyond compare, Mr. Cobb, that it made you have lumps in your throat to look at her.' She'll be comin' over to see you, mother, an' you can size her up for yourself. I don' know how she'll git on with Mirandy Sawyer—poor little soul!"

This doubt was more or less openly expressed in Riverboro, which, however, had two opinions on the subject; one that it was a most generous thing in the Sawyer girls to take one of Aurelia's children to educate, the other that the education would be bought at a price wholly out of proportion to its intrinsic value.

Rebecca's first letters to her mother would seem to indicate that she cordially coincided with the latter view of the situation.

IV REBECCA'S POINT OF VIEW

Dear Mother,—I am safely here. My dress was not much tumbled and Aunt Jane helped me press it out. I like Mr. Cobb very much. He chews but throws newspapers straight up to the doors. I rode outside a little while, but got inside before I got to Aunt Miranda's house. I did not want to, but thought you would like it better. Miranda is such a long word that I think I will say Aunt M. and Aunt J. in my Sunday letters. Aunt J. has given me a dictionary to look up all the hard words in. It takes a good deal of time and I am glad people can talk without stopping to spell. It is much easier to talk than write and much more fun. The brick house looks just the same as you have told us. The parlor is splendid and gives you creeps and chills when you look in the door. The furniture is elegant too, and all the rooms but there are no good sitting-down places except in the kitchen. The same cat is here but they do not save kittens when she has them, and the cat is too old to play with. Hannah told me once you ran away with father and I can see it would be nice. If Aunt M. would run away I think I should like to live with Aunt J. She does not hate me as bad as Aunt M. does. Tell Mark he can have my paint box, but I should like him to keep the red cake in case I come home again. I hope Hannah and John do not get tired doing my chores.

Your affectionate friend
Rebecca.

P. S. Please give the piece of poetry to John because he likes my poetry even when it is not very good. This piece is not very good but it is true but I hope you won't mind what is in it as you ran away.

This house is dark and dull and dreer
No light doth shine from far or near
Its like the tomb.

And those of us who live herein
Are most as dead as serra-fim
Though not as good.

My guardian angel is asleep
At least he doth no vigil keep

Ah! woe is me!

Then give me back my lonely farm
Where none alive did wish me harm
Dear home of youth!

P. S. again. I made the poetry like a piece in a book but could not get it right at first. You see "tomb" and "good" do not sound well together but I wanted to say "tomb" dreadfully and as serra-fim are always "good" I couldn't take that out. I have

made it over now. It does not say my thoughts as well but think it is more right. Give the best one to John as he keeps them in a box with his birds' eggs. This is the best one.

SUNDAY THOUGHTS

BY

REBECCA ROWENA RANDALL

This house is dark and dull and drear
No light doth shine from far or near
Nor ever could.

And those of us who live herein
Are most as dead as seraphim
Though not as good.

My guardian angel is asleep
At least he doth no vigil keep
But far doth roam.

Then give me back my lonely farm
Where none alive did wish me harm,
Dear childhood home!

Dear Mother,—I am thrilling with unhappyness this morning. I got that out of Cora The Doctor's Wife whose husband's mother was very cross and unfeeling to her like Aunt M. to me. I wish Hannah had come instead of me for it was Hannah that was wanted and she is better than I am and does not answer back so quick. Are there any peaces of my buff calico. Aunt J. wants enough to make a new waste button behind so I wont look so outlandish. The stiles are quite pretty in Riverboro and those at Meeting quite ellergant more so than in Temperance.

This town is stilish, gay and fair,
And full of wellthy riches rare,
But I would pillow on my arm
The thought of my sweet Brookside Farm.

School is pretty good. The Teacher can answer more questions than the Temperance one but not so many as I can ask. I am smarter than all the girls but one but not so smart as two boys. Emma Jane can add and subtract in her head like a streak of lightning and knows the speling book right through but has no thoughts of any kind. She is in the Third Reader but does not like stories in books. I am in the Sixth Reader but just because I cannot say the seven multiplication Table Miss Dearborn threttens to put me in the baby primer class with Elijah and Elisha Simpson little twins.

Sore is my heart and bent my stubborn pride,
With Lijah and with Lisha am I tied,

My soul recoyles like Cora Doctor's Wife,
Like her I feer I cannot bare this life.

I am going to try for the speling prize but fear I cannot get it. I would not care but wrong speling looks dreadful in poetry. Last Sunday when I found seraphim in the dictionary I was ashamed I had made it serrafim but seraphim is not a word you can guess at like another long one outlandish in this letter which spells itself. Miss Dearborn says use the words you CAN spell and if you cant spell seraphim make angel do but angels are not just the same as seraphims. Seraphims are brighter whiter and have bigger wings and I think are older and longer dead than angels which are just freshly dead and after a long time in heaven around the great white throne grow to be seraphims.

I sew on brown gingham dresses every afternoon when Emma Jane and the Simpsons are playing house or running on the Logs when their mothers do not know it. Their mothers are afraid they will drown and Aunt M. is afraid I will wet my clothes so will not let me either. I can play from half past four to supper and after supper a little bit and Saturday afternoons. I am glad our cow has a calf and it is spotted. It is going to be a good year for apples and hay so you and John will be glad and we can pay a little more morgage. Miss Dearborn asked us what is the object of eddication and I said the object of mine was to help pay off the morgage. She told Aunt M. and I had to sew extra for punishment because she says a morgage is disgrace like stealing or smallpox and it will be all over town that we have one on our farm. Emma Jane is not morgaged nor Richard Carter nor Dr. Winship but the Simpsons are.

Rise my soul, strain every nerve,
Thy morgage to remove,
Gain thy mother's heartfelt thanks
Thy family's grateful love.

Pronounce family QUICK or it won't sound right
Your loving little friend
Rebecca

Dear John,—You remember when we tide the new dog in the barn how he bit the rope and howled I am just like him only the brick house is the barn and I can not bite Aunt M. because I must be grateful and eddication is going to be the making of me and help you pay off the morgage when we grow up. Your loving

Becky.

V WISDOM'S WAYS

The day of Rebecca's arrival had been Friday, and on the Monday following she began her education at the school which was in Riverboro Centre, about a mile distant. Miss Sawyer borrowed a neighbor's horse and wagon and drove her to the schoolhouse, interviewing the teacher, Miss Dearborn, arranging for books, and generally starting the child on the path that was to lead to boundless knowledge. Miss Dearborn, it may be said in passing, had had no special preparation in the art of teaching. It came to her naturally, so her family said, and perhaps for this reason she, like Tom Tulliver's clergyman tutor, "set about it with that uniformity of method and independence of circumstances which distinguish the actions of animals understood to be under the immediate teaching of Nature." You remember the beaver which a naturalist tells us "busied himself as earnestly in constructing a dam in a room up three pair of stairs in London as if he had been laying his foundation in a lake in Upper Canada. It was his function to build, the absence of water or of possible progeny was an accident for which he was not accountable." In the same manner did Miss Dearborn lay what she fondly imagined to be foundations in the infant mind.

Rebecca walked to school after the first morning. She loved this part of the day's programme. When the dew was not too heavy and the weather was fair there was a short cut through the woods. She turned off the main road, crept through uncle Josh Woodman's bars, waved away Mrs. Carter's cows, trod the short grass of the pasture, with its well-worn path running through gardens of buttercups and white-weed, and groves of ivory leaves and sweet fern. She descended a little hill, jumped from stone to stone across a woodland brook, startling the drowsy frogs, who were always winking and blinking in the morning sun. Then came the "woody bit," with her feet pressing the slippery carpet of brown pine needles; the "woody bit" so full of dewy morning, surprises,—fungous growths of brilliant orange and crimson springing up around the stumps of dead trees, beautiful things born in a single night; and now and then the miracle of a little clump of waxen Indian pipes, seen just quickly enough to be saved from her careless tread. Then she climbed a stile, went through a grassy meadow, slid under another pair of bars, and came out into the road again having gained nearly half a mile.

How delicious it all was! Rebecca clasped her Quackenbos's Grammar and Greenleaf's Arithmetic with a joyful sense of knowing her lessons. Her dinner pail swung from her right hand, and she had a blissful consciousness of the two soda biscuits spread with butter and syrup, the baked cup-custard, the doughnut, and the square of hard gingerbread. Sometimes she said whatever "piece" she was going to speak on the next Friday afternoon.

"A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers,
There was lack of woman's nursing, there was dearth of
woman's tears."

How she loved the swing and the sentiment of it! How her young voice quivered whenever she came to the refrain:—

"But we'll meet no more at Bingen, dear Bingen on the Rhine."

It always sounded beautiful in her ears, as she sent her tearful little treble into the clear morning air. Another early favorite (for we must remember that Rebecca's only knowledge of the great world of poetry consisted of the selections in vogue in school readers) was:—

"Woodman, spare that tree!
Touch not a single bough!
In youth it sheltered me,
And I'll protect it now."

When Emma Jane Perkins walked through the "short cut" with her, the two children used to render this with appropriate dramatic action. Emma Jane always chose to be the woodman because she had nothing to do but raise on high an imaginary axe. On the one occasion when she essayed the part of the tree's romantic protector, she represented herself as feeling "so awful foolish" that she refused to undertake it again, much to the secret delight of Rebecca, who found the woodman's role much too tame for her vaulting ambition. She reveled in the impassioned appeal of the poet, and implored the ruthless woodman to be as brutal as possible with the axe, so that she might properly put greater spirit into her lines. One morning, feeling more frisky than usual, she fell upon her knees and wept in the woodman's petticoat. Curiously enough, her sense of proportion rejected this as soon as it was done.

"That wasn't right, it was silly, Emma Jane; but I'll tell you where it might come in—in Give me Three Grains of Corn. You be the mother, and I'll be the famishing Irish child. For pity's sake put the axe down; you are not the woodman any longer!"

"What'll I do with my hands, then?" asked Emma Jane.

"Whatever you like," Rebecca answered wearily; "you're just a mother—that's all. What does YOUR mother do with her hands? Now here goes!"

"Give me three grains of corn, mother,
Only three grains of corn,
'T will keep the little life I have
Till the coming of the morn."

This sort of thing made Emma Jane nervous and fidgety, but she was Rebecca's slave and hugged her chains, no matter how uncomfortable they made her.

At the last pair of bars the two girls were sometimes met by a detachment of the Simpson children, who lived in a black house with a red door and a red barn behind, on the Blueberry Plains road. Rebecca felt an interest in the Simpsons from the first, because there were so many of them and they were so patched and darned, just like her own brood at the home farm.

The little schoolhouse with its flagpole on top and its two doors in front, one for boys and the other for girls, stood on the crest of a hill, with rolling fields and meadows on one side, a stretch of pine woods on the other, and the river glinting and sparkling in the distance. It boasted no attractions within. All was as bare and ugly and uncomfortable as it well could be, for the villages along the river expended so much money in repairing and rebuilding bridges that they were obliged to be very economical in school privileges. The teacher's desk and chair stood on a platform in one corner; there was an uncouth stove, never blackened oftener than once a year, a map of the United States, two black-boards, a ten-quart tin pail of water and long-handled dipper on a corner shelf, and wooden desks and benches for the scholars, who only numbered twenty in Rebecca's time. The seats were higher in the back of the room, and the more advanced and longer-legged pupils sat there, the position being greatly to be envied, as they were at once nearer to the windows and farther from the teacher.

There were classes of a sort, although nobody, broadly speaking, studied the same book with anybody else, or had arrived at the same degree of proficiency in any one branch of learning. Rebecca in particular was so difficult to classify that Miss Dearborn at the end of a fortnight gave up the attempt altogether. She read with Dick Carter and Living Perkins, who were fitting for the academy; recited arithmetic with lispng little Thuthan Thimpton; geography with Emma Jane Perkins, and

grammar after school hours to Miss Dearborn alone. Full to the brim as she was of clever thoughts and quaint fancies, she made at first but a poor hand at composition. The labor of writing and spelling, with the added difficulties of punctuation and capitals, interfered sadly with the free expression of ideas. She took history with Alice Robinson's class, which was attacking the subject of the Revolution, while Rebecca was bidden to begin with the discovery of America. In a week she had mastered the course of events up to the Revolution, and in ten days had arrived at Yorktown, where the class had apparently established summer quarters. Then finding that extra effort would only result in her reciting with the oldest Simpson boy, she deliberately held herself back, for wisdom's ways were not those of pleasantness nor her paths those of peace if one were compelled to tread them in the company of Seesaw Simpson. Samuel Simpson was generally called Seesaw, because of his difficulty in making up his mind. Whether it were a question of fact, of spelling, or of date, of going swimming or fishing, of choosing a book in the Sunday-school library or a stick of candy at the village store, he had no sooner determined on one plan of action than his wish fondly reverted to the opposite one. Seesaw was pale, flaxen haired, blue eyed, round shouldered, and given to stammering when nervous. Perhaps because of his very weakness Rebecca's decision of character had a fascination for him, and although she snubbed him to the verge of madness, he could never keep his eyes away from her. The force with which she tied her shoe when the lacing came undone, the flirt over shoulder she gave her black braid when she was excited or warm, her manner of studying,—book on desk, arms folded, eyes fixed on the opposite wall,—all had an abiding charm for Seesaw Simpson. When, having obtained permission, she walked to the water pail in the corner and drank from the dipper, unseen forces dragged Seesaw from his seat to go and drink after her. It was not only that there was something akin to association and intimacy in drinking next, but there was the fearful joy of meeting her in transit and receiving a cold and disdainful look from her wonderful eyes.

On a certain warm day in summer Rebecca's thirst exceeded the bounds of propriety. When she asked a third time for permission to quench it at the common fountain Miss Dearborn nodded "yes," but lifted her eyebrows unpleasantly as Rebecca neared the desk. As she replaced the dipper Seesaw promptly raised his hand, and Miss Dearborn indicated a weary affirmative.

"What is the matter with you, Rebecca?" she asked.

"I had salt mackerel for breakfast," answered Rebecca.

There seemed nothing humorous about this reply, which was merely the statement of a fact, but an irrepressible titter ran through the school. Miss Dearborn did not enjoy jokes neither made nor understood by herself, and her face flushed.

"I think you had better stand by the pail for five minutes, Rebecca; it may help you to control your thirst."

Rebecca's heart fluttered. She to stand in the corner by the water pail and be stared at by all the scholars! She unconsciously made a gesture of angry dissent and moved a step nearer her seat, but was arrested by Miss Dearborn's command in a still firmer voice.

"Stand by the pail, Rebecca! Samuel, how many times have you asked for water to-day?"

"This is the f-f-fourth."

"Don't touch the dipper, please. The school has done nothing but drink this afternoon; it has had no time whatever to study. I suppose you had something salt for breakfast, Samuel?" queried Miss Dearborn with sarcasm.

"I had m-m-mackerel, j-just like Reb-b-becca." (Irrepressible giggles by the school.)

"I judged so. Stand by the other side of the pail, Samuel."

Rebecca's head was bowed with shame and wrath. Life looked too black a thing to be endured. The punishment was bad enough, but to be coupled in correction with Seesaw Simpson was beyond human endurance.

Singing was the last exercise in the afternoon, and Minnie Smellie chose Shall we Gather at the River? It was a baleful choice and seemed to hold some secret and subtle association with the

situation and general progress of events; or at any rate there was apparently some obscure reason for the energy and vim with which the scholars shouted the choral invitation again and again:—

"Shall we gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river?"

Miss Dearborn stole a look at Rebecca's bent head and was frightened. The child's face was pale save for two red spots glowing on her cheeks. Tears hung on her lashes; her breath came and went quickly, and the hand that held her pocket handkerchief trembled like a leaf.

"You may go to your seat, Rebecca," said Miss Dearborn at the end of the first song. "Samuel, stay where you are till the close of school. And let me tell you, scholars, that I asked Rebecca to stand by the pail only to break up this habit of incessant drinking, which is nothing but empty-mindedness and desire to walk to and fro over the floor. Every time Rebecca has asked for a drink to-day the whole school has gone to the pail one after another. She is really thirsty, and I dare say I ought to have punished you for following her example, not her for setting it. What shall we sing now, Alice?"

"The Old Oaken Bucket, please."

"Think of something dry, Alice, and change the subject. Yes, The Star Spangled Banner if you like, or anything else."

Rebecca sank into her seat and pulled the singing book from her desk. Miss Dearborn's public explanation had shifted some of the weight from her heart, and she felt a trifle raised in her self-esteem.

Under cover of the general relaxation of singing, votive offerings of respectful sympathy began to make their appearance at her shrine. Living Perkins, who could not sing, dropped a piece of maple sugar in her lap as he passed her on his way to the blackboard to draw the map of Maine. Alice Robinson rolled a perfectly new slate pencil over the floor with her foot until it reached Rebecca's place, while her seat-mate, Emma Jane, had made up a little mound of paper balls and labeled them "Bullets for you know who."

Altogether existence grew brighter, and when she was left alone with the teacher for her grammar lesson she had nearly recovered her equanimity, which was more than Miss Dearborn had. The last clattering foot had echoed through the hall, Seesaw's backward glance of penitence had been met and answered defiantly by one of cold disdain.

"Rebecca, I am afraid I punished you more than I meant," said Miss Dearborn, who was only eighteen herself, and in her year of teaching country schools had never encountered a child like Rebecca.

"I hadn't missed a question this whole day, nor whispered either," quavered the culprit; "and I don't think I ought to be shamed just for drinking."

"You started all the others, or it seemed as if you did. Whatever you do they all do, whether you laugh, or miss, or write notes, or ask to leave the room, or drink; and it must be stopped."

"Sam Simpson is a copycoat!" stormed Rebecca "I wouldn't have minded standing in the corner alone—that is, not so very much; but I couldn't bear standing with him."

"I saw that you couldn't, and that's the reason I told you to take your seat, and left him in the corner. Remember that you are a stranger in the place, and they take more notice of what you do, so you must be careful. Now let's have our conjugations. Give me the verb 'to be,' potential mood, past perfect tense."

"I might have been
Thou mightst have been
He might have been

"We might have been
You might have been
They might have been."

"Give me an example, please."

"I might have been glad
Thou mightst have been glad
He, she, or it might have been glad."

"'He' or 'she' might have been glad because they are masculine and feminine, but could 'it' have been glad?" asked Miss Dearborn, who was very fond of splitting hairs.

"Why not?" asked Rebecca

"Because 'it' is neuter gender."

"Couldn't we say, 'The kitten might have been glad if it had known it was not going to be drowned'?"

"Ye—es," Miss Dearborn answered hesitatingly, never very sure of herself under Rebecca's fire; "but though we often speak of a baby, a chicken, or a kitten as 'it,' they are really masculine or feminine gender, not neuter."

Rebecca reflected a long moment and then asked, "Is a hollyhock neuter?"

"Oh yes, of course it is, Rebecca"

"Well, couldn't we say, 'The hollyhock might have been glad to see the rain, but there was a weak little hollyhock bud growing out of its stalk and it was afraid that that might be hurt by the storm; so the big hollyhock was kind of afraid, instead of being real glad'?"

Miss Dearborn looked puzzled as she answered, "Of course, Rebecca, hollyhocks could not be sorry, or glad, or afraid, really."

"We can't tell, I s'pose," replied the child; "but *I* think they are, anyway. Now what shall I say?"

"The subjunctive mood, past perfect tense of the verb 'to know.'"

"If I had known
If thou hadst known
If he had known

"If we had known
If you had known
If they had known.

"Oh, it is the saddest tense," sighed Rebecca with a little break in her voice; "nothing but IFS, IFS, IFS! And it makes you feel that if they only HAD known, things might have been better!"

Miss Dearborn had not thought of it before, but on reflection she believed the subjunctive mood was a "sad" one and "if" rather a sorry "part of speech."

"Give me some more examples of the subjunctive, Rebecca, and that will do for this afternoon," she said.

"If I had not loved mackerel I should not have been thirsty;" said Rebecca with an April smile, as she closed her grammar. "If thou hadst loved me truly thou wouldst not have stood me up in the corner. If Samuel had not loved wickedness he would not have followed me to the water pail."

"And if Rebecca had loved the rules of the school she would have controlled her thirst," finished Miss Dearborn with a kiss, and the two parted friends.

VI

SUNSHINE IN A SHADY PLACE

The little schoolhouse on the hill had its moments of triumph as well as its scenes of tribulation, but it was fortunate that Rebecca had her books and her new acquaintances to keep her interested and occupied, or life would have gone heavily with her that first summer in Riverboro. She tried to like her aunt Miranda (the idea of loving her had been given up at the moment of meeting), but failed ignominiously in the attempt. She was a very faulty and passionately human child, with no aspirations towards being an angel of the house, but she had a sense of duty and a desire to be good,—respectably, decently good. Whenever she fell below this self-imposed standard she was miserable. She did not like to be under her aunt's roof, eating bread, wearing clothes, and studying books provided by her, and dislike her so heartily all the time. She felt instinctively that this was wrong and mean, and whenever the feeling of remorse was strong within her she made a desperate effort to please her grim and difficult relative. But how could she succeed when she was never herself in her aunt Miranda's presence? The searching look of the eyes, the sharp voice, the hard knotty fingers, the thin straight lips, the long silences, the "front-piece" that didn't match her hair, the very obvious "parting" that seemed sewed in with linen thread on black net,—there was not a single item that appealed to Rebecca. There are certain narrow, unimaginative, and autocratic old people who seem to call out the most mischievous, and sometimes the worst traits in children. Miss Miranda, had she lived in a populous neighborhood, would have had her doorbell pulled, her gate tied up, or "dirt traps" set in her garden paths. The Simpson twins stood in such awe of her that they could not be persuaded to come to the side door even when Miss Jane held gingerbread cookies in her outstretched hands.

It is needless to say that Rebecca irritated her aunt with every breath she drew. She continually forgot and started up the front stairs because it was the shortest route to her bedroom; she left the dipper on the kitchen shelf instead of hanging it up over the pail; she sat in the chair the cat liked best; she was willing to go on errands, but often forgot what she was sent for; she left the screen doors ajar, so that flies came in; her tongue was ever in motion; she sang or whistled when she was picking up chips; she was always messing with flowers, putting them in vases, pinning them on her dress, and sticking them in her hat; finally she was an everlasting reminder of her foolish, worthless father, whose handsome face and engaging manner had so deceived Aurelia, and perhaps, if the facts were known, others besides Aurelia. The Randalls were aliens. They had not been born in Riverboro nor even in York County. Miranda would have allowed, on compulsion, that in the nature of things a large number of persons must necessarily be born outside this sacred precinct; but she had her opinion of them, and it was not a flattering one. Now if Hannah had come—Hannah took after the other side of the house; she was "all Sawyer." (Poor Hannah! that was true!) Hannah spoke only when spoken to, instead of first, last, and all the time; Hannah at fourteen was a member of the church; Hannah liked to knit; Hannah was, probably, or would have been, a pattern of all the smaller virtues; instead of which here was this black-haired gypsy, with eyes as big as cartwheels, installed as a member of the household.

What sunshine in a shady place was aunt Jane to Rebecca! Aunt Jane with her quiet voice, her understanding eyes, her ready excuses, in these first difficult weeks, when the impulsive little stranger was trying to settle down into the "brick house ways." She did learn them, in part, and by degrees, and the constant fitting of herself to these new and difficult standards of conduct seemed to make her older than ever for her years.

The child took her sewing and sat beside aunt Jane in the kitchen while aunt Miranda had the post of observation at the sitting-room window. Sometimes they would work on the side porch where the clematis and woodbine shaded them from the hot sun. To Rebecca the lengths of brown gingham

were interminable. She made hard work of sewing, broke the thread, dropped her thimble into the syringa bushes, pricked her finger, wiped the perspiration from her forehead, could not match the checks, puckered the seams. She polished her needles to nothing, pushing them in and out of the emery strawberry, but they always squeaked. Still aunt Jane's patience held good, and some small measure of skill was creeping into Rebecca's fingers, fingers that held pencil, paint brush, and pen so cleverly and were so clumsy with the dainty little needle.

When the first brown gingham frock was completed, the child seized what she thought an opportune moment and asked her aunt Miranda if she might have another color for the next one.

"I bought a whole piece of the brown," said Miranda laconically. "That'll give you two more dresses, with plenty for new sleeves, and to patch and let down with, an' be more economical."

"I know. But Mr. Watson says he'll take back part of it, and let us have pink and blue for the same price."

"Did you ask him?"

"Yes'm."

"It was none o' your business."

"I was helping Emma Jane choose aprons, and didn't think you'd mind which color I had. Pink keeps clean just as nice as brown, and Mr. Watson says it'll boil without fading."

"Mr. Watson 's a splendid judge of washing, I guess. I don't approve of children being rigged out in fancy colors, but I'll see what your aunt Jane thinks."

"I think it would be all right to let Rebecca have one pink and one blue gingham," said Jane. "A child gets tired of sewing on one color. It's only natural she should long for a change; besides she'd look like a charity child always wearing the same brown with a white apron. And it's dreadful unbecoming to her!"

"'Handsome is as handsome does,' say I. Rebecca never'll come to grief along of her beauty, that's certain, and there's no use in humoring her to think about her looks. I believe she's vain as a peacock now, without anything to be vain of."

"She's young and attracted to bright things—that's all. I remember well enough how I felt at her age."

"You was considerable of a fool at her age, Jane."

"Yes, I was, thank the Lord! I only wish I'd known how to take a little of my foolishness along with me, as some folks do, to brighten my declining years."

There finally was a pink gingham, and when it was nicely finished, aunt Jane gave Rebecca a delightful surprise. She showed her how to make a pretty trimming of narrow white linen tape, by folding it in pointed shapes and sewing it down very flat with neat little stitches.

"It'll be good fancy work for you, Rebecca; for your aunt Miranda won't like to see you always reading in the long winter evenings. Now if you think you can baste two rows of white tape round the bottom of your pink skirt and keep it straight by the checks, I'll stitch them on for you and trim the waist and sleeves with pointed tape-trimming, so the dress'll be real pretty for second best."

Rebecca's joy knew no bounds. "I'll baste like a house afire!" she exclaimed. "It's a thousand yards round that skirt, as well I know, having hemmed it; but I could sew pretty trimming on if it was from here to Milltown. Oh! do you think aunt Mirandy'll ever let me go to Milltown with Mr. Cobb? He's asked me again, you know; but one Saturday I had to pick strawberries, and another it rained, and I don't think she really approves of my going. It's TWENTY-NINE minutes past four, aunt Jane, and Alice Robinson has been sitting under the currant bushes for a long time waiting for me. Can I go and play?"

"Yes, you may go, and you'd better run as far as you can out behind the barn, so 't your noise won't distract your aunt Mirandy. I see Susan Simpson and the twins and Emma Jane Perkins hiding behind the fence."

Rebecca leaped off the porch, snatched Alice Robinson from under the currant bushes, and, what was much more difficult, succeeded, by means of a complicated system of signals, in getting Emma Jane away from the Simpson party and giving them the slip altogether. They were much too small for certain pleasurable activities planned for that afternoon; but they were not to be despised, for they had the most fascinating dooryard in the village. In it, in bewildering confusion, were old sleighs, pungs, horse rakes, hogsheads, settees without backs, bed-steads without heads, in all stages of disability, and never the same on two consecutive days. Mrs. Simpson was seldom at home, and even when she was, had little concern as to what happened on the premises. A favorite diversion was to make the house into a fort, gallantly held by a handful of American soldiers against a besieging force of the British army. Great care was used in apportioning the parts, for there was no disposition to let anybody win but the Americans. Seesaw Simpson was usually made commander-in-chief of the British army, and a limp and uncertain one he was, capable, with his contradictory orders and his fondness for the extreme rear, of leading any regiment to an inglorious death. Sometimes the long-suffering house was a log hut, and the brave settlers defeated a band of hostile Indians, or occasionally were massacred by them; but in either case the Simpson house looked, to quote a Riverboro expression, "as if the devil had been having an auction in it."

Next to this uncommonly interesting playground, as a field of action, came, in the children's opinion, the "secret spot." There was a velvety stretch of ground in the Sawyer pasture which was full of fascinating hollows and hillocks, as well as verdant levels, on which to build houses. A group of trees concealed it somewhat from view and flung a grateful shade over the dwellings erected there. It had been hard though sweet labor to take armfuls of "stickins" and "cutrounds" from the mill to this secluded spot, and that it had been done mostly after supper in the dusk of the evenings gave it a still greater flavor. Here in soap boxes hidden among the trees were stored all their treasures: wee baskets and plates and cups made of burdock balls, bits of broken china for parties, dolls, soon to be outgrown, but serving well as characters in all sorts of romances enacted there,—deaths, funerals, weddings, christenings. A tall, square house of stickins was to be built round Rebecca this afternoon, and she was to be Charlotte Corday leaning against the bars of her prison.

It was a wonderful experience standing inside the building with Emma Jane's apron wound about her hair; wonderful to feel that when she leaned her head against the bars they seemed to turn to cold iron; that her eyes were no longer Rebecca Randall's but mirrored something of Charlotte Corday's hapless woe.

"Ain't it lovely?" sighed the humble twain, who had done most of the labor, but who generously admired the result.

"I hate to have to take it down," said Alice, "it's been such a sight of work."

"If you think you could move up some stones and just take off the top rows, I could step out over," suggested Charlotte Corday. "Then leave the stones, and you two can step down into the prison to-morrow and be the two little princes in the Tower, and I can murder you."

"What princes? What tower?" asked Alice and Emma Jane in one breath. "Tell us about them."

"Not now, it's my supper time." (Rebecca was a somewhat firm disciplinarian.)

"It would be ellegant being murdered by you," said Emma Jane loyally, "though you are awful real when you murder; or we could have Elijah and Elisha for the princes."

"They'd yell when they was murdered," objected Alice; "you know how silly they are at plays, all except Clara Belle. Besides if we once show them this secret place, they'll play in it all the time, and perhaps they'd steal things, like their father."

"They needn't steal just because their father does," argued Rebecca; "and don't you ever talk about it before them if you want to be my secret, partic'lar friends. My mother tells me never to say hard things about people's own folks to their face. She says nobody can bear it, and it's wicked to shame them for what isn't their fault. Remember Minnie Smellie!"

Well, they had no difficulty in recalling that dramatic episode, for it had occurred only a few days before; and a version of it that would have melted the stoniest heart had been presented to every girl in the village by Minnie Smellie herself, who, though it was Rebecca and not she who came off victorious in the bloody battle of words, nursed her resentment and intended to have revenge.

VII

RIVERBORO SECRETS

Mr. Simpson spent little time with his family, owing to certain awkward methods of horse-trading, or the "swapping" of farm implements and vehicles of various kinds,—operations in which his customers were never long suited. After every successful trade he generally passed a longer or shorter term in jail; for when a poor man without goods or chattels has the inveterate habit of swapping, it follows naturally that he must have something to swap; and having nothing of his own, it follows still more naturally that he must swap something belonging to his neighbors.

Mr. Simpson was absent from the home circle for the moment because he had exchanged the Widow Rideout's sleigh for Joseph Goodwin's plough. Goodwin had lately moved to North Edgewood and had never before met the urbane and persuasive Mr. Simpson. The Goodwin plough Mr. Simpson speedily bartered with a man "over Wareham way," and got in exchange for it an old horse which his owner did not need, as he was leaving town to visit his daughter for a year, Simpson fattened the aged animal, keeping him for several weeks (at early morning or after nightfall) in one neighbor's pasture after another, and then exchanged him with a Milltown man for a top buggy. It was at this juncture that the Widow Rideout missed her sleigh from the old carriage house. She had not used it for fifteen years and might not sit in it for another fifteen, but it was property, and she did not intend to part with it without a struggle. Such is the suspicious nature of the village mind that the moment she discovered her loss her thought at once reverted to Abner Simpson. So complicated, however, was the nature of this particular business transaction, and so tortuous the paths of its progress (partly owing to the complete disappearance of the owner of the horse, who had gone to the West and left no address), that it took the sheriff many weeks to prove Mr. Simpson's guilt to the town's and to the Widow Rideout's satisfaction. Abner himself avowed his complete innocence, and told the neighbors how a red-haired man with a hare lip and a pepper-and-salt suit of clothes had called him up one morning about daylight and offered to swap him a good sleigh for an old cider press he had layin' out in the dooryard. The bargain was struck, and he, Abner, had paid the hare-lipped stranger four dollars and seventy-five cents to boot; whereupon the mysterious one set down the sleigh, took the press on his cart, and vanished up the road, never to be seen or heard from afterwards.

"If I could once ketch that consarned old thief," exclaimed Abner righteously, "I'd make him dance,—workin' off a stolen sleigh on me an' takin' away my good money an' cider press, to say nothin' o' my character!"

"You'll never ketch him, Ab," responded the sheriff. "He's cut off the same piece o' goods as that there cider press and that there character and that there four-seventy-five o' yourn; nobody ever see any of 'em but you, and you'll never see 'em again!"

Mrs. Simpson, who was decidedly Abner's better half, took in washing and went out to do days' cleaning, and the town helped in the feeding and clothing of the children. George, a lanky boy of fourteen, did chores on neighboring farms, and the others, Samuel, Clara Belle, Susan, Elijah, and Elisha, went to school, when sufficiently clothed and not otherwise more pleasantly engaged.

There were no secrets in the villages that lay along the banks of Pleasant River. There were many hard-working people among the inhabitants, but life wore away so quietly and slowly that there was a good deal of spare time for conversation,—under the trees at noon in the hayfield; hanging over the bridge at nightfall; seated about the stove in the village store of an evening. These meeting-places furnished ample ground for the discussion of current events as viewed by the masculine eye, while choir rehearsals, sewing societies, reading circles, church picnics, and the like, gave opportunity for the expression of feminine opinion. All this was taken very much for granted, as a rule, but now and then some supersensitive person made violent objections to it, as a theory of life.

Delia Weeks, for example, was a maiden lady who did dressmaking in a small way; she fell ill, and although attended by all the physicians in the neighborhood, was sinking slowly into a decline when her cousin Cyrus asked her to come and keep house for him in Lewiston. She went, and in a year grew into a robust, hearty, cheerful woman. Returning to Riverboro on a brief visit, she was asked if she meant to end her days away from home.

"I do most certainly, if I can get any other place to stay," she responded candidly. "I was bein' worn to a shadder here, tryin' to keep my little secrets to myself, an' never succeedin'. First they had it I wanted to marry the minister, and when he took a wife in Standish I was known to be disappointed. Then for five or six years they suspicioned I was tryin' for a place to teach school, and when I gave up hope, an' took to dressmakin', they pitied me and sympathized with me for that. When father died I was bound I'd never let anybody know how I was left, for that spites 'em worse than anything else; but there's ways o' findin' out, an' they found out, hard as I fought 'em! Then there was my brother James that went to Arizona when he was sixteen. I gave good news of him for thirty years runnin', but aunt Achsy Tarbox had a ferretin' cousin that went out to Tombstone for her health, and she wrote to a postmaster, or to some kind of a town authority, and found Jim and wrote back aunt Achsy all about him and just how unfortunate he'd been. They knew when I had my teeth out and a new set made; they knew when I put on a false front-piece; they knew when the fruit peddler asked me to be his third wife—I never told 'em, an' you can be sure HE never did, but they don't NEED to be told in this village; they have nothin' to do but guess, an' they'll guess right every time. I was all tuckered out tryin' to mislead 'em and deceive 'em and sidetrack 'em; but the minute I got where I wa'n't put under a microscope by day an' a telescope by night and had myself TO myself without sayin' 'By your leave,' I begun to pick up. Cousin Cyrus is an old man an' consid'able trouble, but he thinks my teeth are handsome an' says I've got a splendid suit of hair. There ain't a person in Lewiston that knows about the minister, or father's will, or Jim's doin's, or the fruit peddler; an' if they should find out, they wouldn't care, an' they couldn't remember; for Lewiston 's a busy place, thanks be!"

Miss Delia Weeks may have exaggerated matters somewhat, but it is easy to imagine that Rebecca as well as all the other Riverboro children had heard the particulars of the Widow Rideout's missing sleigh and Abner Simpson's supposed connection with it.

There is not an excess of delicacy or chivalry in the ordinary country school, and several choice conundrums and bits of verse dealing with the Simpson affair were bandied about among the scholars, uttered always, be it said to their credit, in undertones, and when the Simpson children were not in the group.

Rebecca Randall was of precisely the same stock, and had had much the same associations as her schoolmates, so one can hardly say why she so hated mean gossip and so instinctively held herself aloof from it.

Among the Riverboro girls of her own age was a certain excellently named Minnie Smellie, who was anything but a general favorite. She was a ferret-eyed, blond-haired, spindle-legged little creature whose mind was a cross between that of a parrot and a sheep. She was suspected of copying answers from other girls' slates, although she had never been caught in the act. Rebecca and Emma Jane always knew when she had brought a tart or a triangle of layer cake with her school luncheon, because on those days she forsook the cheerful society of her mates and sought a safe solitude in the woods, returning after a time with a jocund smile on her smug face.

After one of these private luncheons Rebecca had been tempted beyond her strength, and when Minnie took her seat among them asked, "Is your headache better, Minnie? Let me wipe off that strawberry jam over your mouth."

There was no jam there as a matter of fact, but the guilty Minnie's handkerchief went to her crimson face in a flash.

Rebecca confessed to Emma Jane that same afternoon that she felt ashamed of her prank. "I do hate her ways," she exclaimed, "but I'm sorry I let her know we 'spected her; and so to make up, I gave her that little piece of broken coral I keep in my bead purse; you know the one?"

"It don't hardly seem as if she deserved that, and her so greedy," remarked Emma Jane.

"I know it, but it makes me feel better," said Rebecca largely; "and then I've had it two years, and it's broken so it wouldn't ever be any real good, beautiful as it is to look at."

The coral had partly served its purpose as a reconciling bond, when one afternoon Rebecca, who had stayed after school for her grammar lesson as usual, was returning home by way of the short cut. Far ahead, beyond the bars, she espied the Simpson children just entering the woody bit. Seesaw was not with them, so she hastened her steps in order to secure company on her homeward walk. They were speedily lost to view, but when she had almost overtaken them she heard, in the trees beyond, Minnie Smellie's voice lifted high in song, and the sound of a child's sobbing. Clara Belle, Susan, and the twins were running along the path, and Minnie was dancing up and down, shrieking:—

"What made the sleigh love Simpson so?"
The eager children cried;
'Why Simpson loved the sleigh, you know,'
The teacher quick replied."

The last glimpse of the routed Simpson tribe, and the last flutter of their tattered garments, disappeared in the dim distance. The fall of one small stone cast by the valiant Elijah, known as "the fighting twin," did break the stillness of the woods for a moment, but it did not come within a hundred yards of Minnie, who shouted "Jail Birds" at the top of her lungs and then turned, with an agreeable feeling of excitement, to meet Rebecca, standing perfectly still in the path, with a day of reckoning plainly set forth in her blazing eyes.

Minnie's face was not pleasant to see, for a coward detected at the moment of wrongdoing is not an object of delight.

"Minnie Smellie, if ever—I—catch—you—singing—that—to the Simpsons again—do you know what I'll do?" asked Rebecca in a tone of concentrated rage.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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