

Maniates Belle Kanaris

David Dunne



Belle Maniates

David Dunne

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Maniates Belle Kanaris
David Dunne A Romance of the Middle West

To Milly and Gardner

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

Across lots to the Brumble farm came the dusty apparition of a boy, a tousle-headed, freckle-faced, gaunt-eyed little fellow, clad in a sort of combination suit fashioned from a pair of overalls and a woman's shirtwaist. In search of "Miss M'ri," he looked into the kitchen, the henhouse, the dairy, and the flower garden. Not finding her in any of these accustomed places, he stood still in perplexity.

"Miss M'ri!" rang out his youthful, vibrant treble.

There was a note of promise in the pleasant voice that came back in subterranean response.

"Here, David, in the cellar."

The lad set down the tin pail he was carrying and eagerly sped to the cellar. His fondest hopes were realized. M'ri Brumble, thirty odd years of age, blue of eye, slightly gray of hair, and sweet of heart, was lifting the cover from the ice-cream freezer.

"Well, David Dunne, you came in the nick of time," she said, looking up with kindly eyes. "It's just frozen. I'll dish you up some now, if you will run up to the pantry and fetch two saucers—biggest you can find."

Fleetly David footed the stairs and returned with two soup plates.

"These were the handiest," he explained apologetically as he handed them to her.

"Just the thing," promptly reassured M'ri, transferring a heaping ladle of yellow cream to one of the plates. "Easy to eat out of, too."

"My, but you are giving me a whole lot," he said, watching her approvingly and encouragingly. "I hope you ain't robbing yourself."

"Oh, no; I always make plenty," she replied, dishing a smaller portion for herself. "Here's enough for our dinner and some for you to carry home to your mother."

"I haven't had any since last Fourth of July," he observed in plaintive reminiscence as they went upstairs.

"Why, David Dunne, how you talk! You just come over here whenever you feel like eating ice cream, and I'll make you some. It's no trouble."

They sat down on the west, vine-clad porch to enjoy their feast in leisure and shade. M'ri had never lost her childish appreciation of the delicacy, and to David the partaking thereof was little short of ecstasy. He lingered longingly over the repast, and when the soup plate would admit of no more scraping he came back with a sigh to sordid cares.

"Mother couldn't get the washing done no-ways to-day. She ain't feeling well, but you can have the clothes to-morrow, sure. She sent you some sorghum," pointing to the pail.

M'ri took the donation into the kitchen. When she brought back the pail it was filled with eggs. Not to send something in return would have been an unpardonable breach of country etiquette.

"Your mother said your hens weren't laying," she said.

The boy's eyes brightened.

"Thank you, Miss M'ri; these will come in good. Our hens won't lay nor set. Mother says they have formed a union. But I 'most forgot to tell you—when I came past Winterses, Ziny told me to ask you to come over as soon as you could."

"I suppose Zine has got one of her low spells," said Barnabas Brumble, who had just come up from the barn. "Most likely Bill's bin gittin' tight agin. He—"

"Oh, no!" interrupted his sister hastily. "Bill has quit drinking."

"Bill's allers a-quittin'. Trouble with Bill is, he can't stay quit. I see him yesterday comin' down the road zig-zaggin' like a rail fence. Fust she knows, she'll hev to be takin' washin' to support him."

Sometimes I think 't would be a good idee to let him git sent over the road onct. Mebby 't would learn him a lesson—"

He stopped short, noticing the significant look in M'ri's eyes and the two patches of color spreading over David's thin cheeks. He recalled that four years ago the boy's father had died in state prison.

"You'd better go right over to Zine's," he added abruptly.

"I'll wait till after dinner. We'll have it early."

"Hev it now," suggested Barnabas.

"Now!" ejaculated David. "It's only half-past ten."

"I could eat it now jest as well as I could at twelve," argued the philosophical Barnabas. "Jest as leaves as not."

There were no iron-clad rules in this comfortable household, especially when Pennyroyal, the help, was away.

"All right," assented M'ri with alacrity. "If I am going to do anything, I like to do it right off quick and get it over with. You stay, David, if you can eat dinner so early."

"Yes, I can," he assured her, recalling his scanty breakfast and the freezer of cream that was to furnish the dessert. "I'll help you get it, Miss M'ri."

He brought a pail of water from the well, filled the teakettle, and then pared the potatoes for her.

"When will Jud and Janey get their dinner?" he asked Barnabas.

"They kerried their dinner to-day. The scholars air goin' to hev a picnic down to Spicely's grove. How comes it you ain't to school, Dave?"

"I have to help my mother with the washing," he replied, a slow flush coming to his face. "She ain't strong enough to do it alone."

"What on airth kin you do about a washin', Dave?"

"I can draw the water, turn the wringer, hang up the clothes, empty the tubs, fetch and carry the washings, and mop."

Barnabas puffed fiercely at his pipe for a moment.

"You're a good boy, Dave, a mighty good boy. I don't know what your ma would do without you. I hed to leave school when I wa'n't as old as you, and git out and hustle so the younger children could git eddicated. By the time I wuz foot-loose from farm work, I wuz too old to git any larnin'. You'd orter manage someway, though, to git eddicated."

"Mother's taught me to read and write and spell. When I get old enough to work for good wages I can go into town to the night school."

In a short time M'ri had cooked a dinner that would have tempted less hearty appetites than those possessed by her brother and David.

"You ain't what might be called a delikit feeder, Dave," remarked Barnabas, as he replenished the boy's plate for the third time. "You're so lean I don't see where you put it all."

David might have responded that the vacuum was due to the fact that his breakfast had consisted of a piece of bread and his last night's supper of a dish of soup, but the Dunne pride inclined to reservation on family and personal matters. He speared another small potato and paused, with fork suspended between mouth and plate.

"Mother says she thinks I am hollow inside like a stovepipe."

"Well, I dunno. Stovepipes git filled sometimes," ruminated his host.

"Leave room for the ice cream, David," cautioned M'ri, as she descended to the cellar.

The lad's eyes brightened as he beheld the golden pyramid. Another period of lingering bliss, and then with a sigh of mingled content and regret, David rose from the table.

"Want me to hook up for you, Mr. Brumble?" he asked, moved to show his gratitude for the hospitality extended.

“Why, yes, Dave; wish you would. My back is sorter lame to-day. Land o’ livin’,” he commented after David had gone to the barn, “but that boy swallowed them potatoes like they wuz so many pills!”

“Poor Mrs. Dunne!” sighed M’ri. “I am afraid it’s all she can do to keep a very small pot boiling. I am glad she sent the sorghum, so I could have an excuse for sending the eggs.”

“She hain’t poor so long as she hez a young sprout like Dave a-growin’ up. We used to call Peter Dunne ‘Old Hickory,’ but Dave, he’s second-growth hickory. He’s the kind to bend and not break. Jest you wait till he’s seasoned onct.”

After she had packed a pail of ice cream for David, gathered some flowers for Ziny, and made out a memorandum of supplies for Barnabas to get in town, M’ri set out on her errand of mercy.

The “hooking up” accomplished, David, laden with a tin pail in each hand and carrying in his pocket a drawing of black tea for his mother to sample, made his way through sheep-dotted pastures to Beechum’s woods, and thence along the bank of the River Rood. Presently he spied a young man standing knee-deep in the stream in the patient pose peculiar to fishermen.

“Catch anything?” called David eagerly.

The man turned and came to shore. He wore rubber hip boots, dark trousers, a blue flannel shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat. His eyes, blue and straight-gazing, rested reminiscently upon the lad.

“No,” he replied calmly. “I didn’t intend to catch anything. What is your name?”

“David Dunne.”

The man meditated.

“You must be about twelve years old.”

“How did you know?”

“I am a good guesser. What have you got in your pail?”

“Which one?”

“Both.”

“Thought you were a good guesser.”

The youth laughed.

“You’ll do, David. Let me think—where did you come from just now?”

“From Brumble’s.”

“It’s ice cream you’ve got in your pail,” he said assuredly.

“That’s just what it is!” cried the boy in astonishment, “and there’s eggs in the other pail.”

“Let’s have a look at the ice cream.”

David lifted the cover.

“It looks like butter,” declared the stranger.

“It don’t taste like butter,” was the indignant rejoinder. “Miss M’ri makes the best cream of any one in the country.”

“I knew that, my young friend, before you did. It’s a long time since I had any, though. Will you sell it to me, David? I will give you half a dollar for it.”

Half a dollar! His mother had to work all day to earn that amount. The ice cream was not his—not entirely. Miss M’ri had sent it to his mother. Still—

“T will melt anyway before I get home,” he argued aloud and persuasively.

“Of course it will,” asserted the would-be purchaser.

David surrendered the pail, and after much protestation consented to receive the piece of money which the young man pressed upon him.

“You’ll have to help me eat it now; there’s no pleasure in eating ice cream alone.”

“We haven’t any spoons,” commented the boy dubiously.

“We will go to my house and eat it.”

“Where do you live?” asked David in surprise.

“Just around the bend of the river here.”

David's freckles darkened. He didn't like to be made game of by older people, for then there was no redress.

"There isn't any house within two miles of here," he said shortly.

"What'll you bet? Half a dollar?"

"No," replied David resolutely.

"Well, come and see."

David followed his new acquaintance around the wooded bank. The river was full of surprises to-day. In midstream he saw what looked to him like a big raft supporting a small house.

"That's my shanty boat," explained the young man, as he shoved a rowboat from shore. "Jump in, my boy."

"Do you live in it all the time?" asked David, watching with admiration the easy but forceful pull on the oars.

"No; I am on a little fishing and hunting expedition."

"Can't kill anything now," said the boy, a derisive smile flickering over his features.

"I am not hunting to kill, my lad. I am hunting old scenes and memories of other days. I used to live about here. I ran away eight years ago when I was just your age."

"What is your name?" asked David interestedly.

"Joe Forbes."

"Oh," was the eager rejoinder. "I know. You are Deacon Forbes' wild son that ran away."

"So that's how I am known around here, is it? Well, I've come back, to settle up my father's estate."

"What did you run away for?" inquired David.

"Combination of too much stepmother and a roving spirit, I guess. Here we are."

He sprang on the platform of the shanty boat and helped David on board. The boy inspected this novel house in wonder while his host set saucers and spoons on the table.

"Would you mind," asked David in an embarrassed manner as he wistfully eyed the coveted luxury, "if I took my dishful home?"

"What's the matter?" asked Forbes, his eyes twinkling. "Eaten too much already?"

"No; but you see my mother likes it and she hasn't had any since last summer. I'd rather take mine to her."

"There's plenty left for your mother. I'll put this pail in a bigger one and pack ice about it. Then it won't melt."

"But you paid me for it," protested David.

"That's all right. Your mother was pretty good to me when I was a boy. She dried my mop of hair for me once so my stepmother would not know I'd been in swimming. Tell her I sent the cream to her. Say, you were right about Miss M'ri making the best cream in the country. It used to be a chronic pastime with her. That's how I guessed what you had when you said you came from there. Whenever there was a picnic or a surprise party in the country she always furnished the ice cream. Isn't she married yet?"

"No."

"Doesn't she keep company with some lucky man?"

"No," again denied the boy emphatically.

"What's the matter? She used to be awfully pretty and sweet."

"She is now, but she don't want any man."

"Well, now, David, that isn't quite natural, you know. Why do you think she doesn't want one?"

"I heard say she was crossed once."

"Crossed, David? And what might that be?" asked Forbes in a delighted feint of perplexity.

"Disappointed in love, you know."

“Yes; it all comes back now—the gossip of my boyhood days. She was going with a man when Barnabas’ wife died and left two children—one a baby—and Miss M’ri gave up her lover to do her duty by her brother’s family. So Barnabas never married again?”

“No; Miss M’ri keeps house and brings up Jud and Janey.”

“I remember Jud—mean little shaver. Janey must be the baby.”

“She’s eight now.”

“I remember you, David. You were a little toddler of four—all eyes. Your folks had a place right on the edge of town.”

“We left it when I was six years old and came out here,” informed David.

Forbes’ groping memory recalled the gossip that had reached him in the Far West. “Dunne went to prison,” he mused, “and the farm was mortgaged to defray the expenses of the trial.” He hastened back to a safer channel.

“Miss M’ri was foolish to spoil her life and the man’s for fancied duty,” he observed.

David bridled.

“Barnabas couldn’t go to school when he was a boy because he had to work so she and the other children could go. She’d ought to have stood by him.”

“I see you have a sense of duty, too. This county was always strong on duty. I suppose they’ve got it in for me because I ran away?”

“Mr. Brumble says it was a wise thing for you to do. Uncle Larimy says you were a brick of a boy. Miss Rhody says she had no worry about her woodpile getting low when you were here.”

“Poor Miss Rhody! Does she still live alone? And Uncle Larimy—is he uncle to the whole community? What fishing days I had with him! I must look him up and tell him all my adventures. I have planned a round of calls for to-night—Miss M’ri, Miss Rhody, Uncle Larimy—”

“Tell me about your adventures,” demanded David breathlessly.

He listened to a wondrous tale of western life, and never did narrator get into so close relation with his auditor as did this young ranchman with David Dunne.

“I must go home,” said the boy reluctantly when Joe had concluded.

“Come down to-morrow, David, and we’ll go fishing.”

“All right. Thank you, sir.”

With heart as light as air, David sped through the woods. He had found his Hero.

CHAPTER II

David struck out from the shelter of the woodland and made his way to his home, a pathetically small, rudely constructed house. The patch of land supposed to be a garden, and in proportion to the dimensions of the building, showed a few feeble efforts at vegetation. It was not positively known that the Widow Dunne had a clear title to her homestead, but one would as soon think of foreclosing a mortgage on a playhouse, or taking a nest from a bird, as to press any claim on this fallow fragment in the midst of prosperous farmlands.

Some discouraged looking fowls picked at the scant grass, a lean cow switched a lackadaisical tail, and in a pen a pig grunted his discontent.

David went into the little kitchen, where a woman was bending wearily over a washtub.

"Mother," cried the boy in dismay, "you said you'd let the washing go till to-morrow. That's why I didn't come right back."

She paused in the rubbing of a soaped garment and wrung the suds from her tired and swollen hands.

"I felt better, David, and I thought I'd get them ready for you to hang out."

David took the garment from her.

"Sit down and eat this ice cream Miss M'ri sent—no, I mean Joe Forbes sent you. There was more, but I sold it for half a dollar; and here's a pail of eggs and a drawing of tea she wants you to sample. She says she is no judge of black tea."

"Joe Forbes!" exclaimed his mother interestedly. "I thought maybe he would be coming back to look after the estate. Is he going to stay?"

"I'll tell you all about him, mother, if you will sit down."

He began a vigorous turning of the wringer.

The patient, tired-looking eyes of the woman brightened as she dished out a saucer of the cream. The weariness in the sensitive lines of her face and the prominence of her knuckles bore evidence of a life of sordid struggle, but, above all, the mother love illumined her features with a flash of radiance.

"You're a good provider, David; but tell me where you have been for so long, and where did you see Joe?"

He gave her a faithful account of his dinner at the Brumble farm and his subsequent meeting with Joe, working the wringer steadily as he talked.

"There!" he exclaimed with a sigh of satisfaction, "they are ready for the line, but before I hang them out I am going to cook your dinner."

"I am rested now, David. I will cook me an egg."

"No, I will," insisted the boy, going to the stove.

A few moments later, with infinite satisfaction, he watched her partake of crisp toast, fresh eggs, and savory tea.

"Did you see Jud and Janey?" she asked suddenly.

"No; they were at school."

"David, you shall go regularly to school next fall."

"No," said David stoutly; "next fall I am going to work regularly for some of the farmers, and you are not going to wash any more."

Her eyes grew moist.

"David, will you always be good—will you grow up to be as good a man as I want you to be?"

"How good do you want me to be?" he asked dubiously.

A radiant and tender smile played about her mouth.

"Not goodygood, David; but will you always be honest, and brave, and kind, as you are now?"

"I'll try, mother."

“And never forget those who do you a kindness, David; always show your gratitude.”

“Yes, mother.”

“And, David, watch your temper and, whatever happens, I shall have no fears for your future.”

His mother seldom talked to him in this wise. He thought about it after he lay in his little cot in the sitting room that night; then his mind wandered to Joe Forbes and his wonderful tales of the West. He fell asleep to dream of cowboys and prairies. When he awoke the sun was sending golden beams through the eastward window.

“Mother isn’t up,” he thought in surprise. He stole quietly out to the kitchen, kindled a fire with as little noise as possible, put the kettle over, set the table, and then went into the one tiny bedroom where his mother lay in her bed, still—very still.

“Mother,” he said softly.

There was no response.

“Mother,” he repeated. Then piercingly, in excitement and fear, “Mother!”

At last he knew.

He ran wildly to the outer door. Bill Winters, fortunately sober, was driving slowly by.

“Bill!”

“What’s the matter, Dave?” looking into the boy’s white face. “Your ma ain’t sick, is she?”

David’s lips quivered, but seemed almost unable to articulate.

“She’s dead,” he finally whispered.

“I’ll send Zine right over,” exclaimed Bill, slapping the reins briskly across the drooping neck of his horse.

Very soon the little house was filled to overflowing with kind and sympathetic neighbors who had come to do all that had to be done. David sat on the back doorstep until M’ri came; before the expression in his eyes she felt powerless to comfort him.

“The doctor says your mother died in her sleep,” she told him. “She didn’t suffer any.”

He made no reply. Oppressed by the dull pain for which there is no ease, he wandered from the house to the garden, and from the garden back to the house throughout the day. At sunset Barnabas drove over.

“I shall stay here to-night, Barnabas,” said M’ri, “but I want you to drive back and get some things. I’ve made out a list. Janey will know where to find them.”

“Sha’n’t I take Dave back to stay to-night?” he suggested.

M’ri hesitated, and looked at David.

“No,” he said dully, following Barnabas listlessly down the path to the road.

Barnabas, keen, shrewd, and sharp at a bargain, had a heart that ever softened to motherless children.

“Dave,” he said gently, “your ma won’t never hev to wash no more, and she’ll never be sick nor tired agen.”

It was the first leaven to his loss, and he held tight to the horny hand of his comforter. After Barnabas had driven away there came trudging down the road the little, lithe figure of an old man, who was carrying a large box. His mildly blue, inquiring eyes looked out from beneath their hedge of shaggy eyebrows. His hair and his beard were thick and bushy. Joe Forbes maintained that Uncle Larimy would look no different if his head were turned upside down.

“David,” he said softly, “I’ve brung yer ma some posies. She liked my yaller roses, you know. I’m sorry my laylocks are gone. They come early this year.”

“Thank you, Uncle Larimy.”

A choking sensation warned David to say no more.

“Things go ’skew sometimes, Dave, but the sun will shine agen,” reminded the old man, as he went on into the house.

Later, when sundown shadows had vanished and the first glimmer of the stars radiated from a pale sky, Joe came over. David felt no thrill at sight of his hero. The halo was gone. He only remembered with a dull ache that the half dollar had brought his mother none of the luxuries he had planned to buy for her.

“David,” said the young ranchman, his deep voice softened, “my mother died when I was younger than you are, but you won’t have a stepmother to make life unbearable for you.”

The boy looked at him with inscrutable eyes.

“Don’t you want to go back with me to the ranch, David? You can learn to ride and shoot.”

David shook his head forlornly. His spirit of adventure was smothered.

“We’ll talk about it again, David,” he said, as he went in to consult M’ri.

“Don’t you think the only thing for the boy to do is to go back with me? I am going to buy the ranch on which I’ve been foreman, and I’ll try to do for David all that should have been done for me when I, at his age, felt homeless and alone. He’s the kind that takes things hard and quiet; life in the open will pull him up.”

“No, Joe,” replied M’ri resolutely. “He’s not ready for that kind of life yet. He needs to be with women and children a while longer. Barnabas and I are going to take him. Barnabas suggested it, and I told Mrs. Dunne one day, when her burdens were getting heavy, that we would do so if anything like this should happen.”

Joe looked at her with revering eyes.

“Miss M’ri, you are so good to other people’s children, what would you be to your own!”

The passing of M’ri’s youth had left a faint flush of prettiness like the afterglow of a sunset faded into twilight. She was of the kind that old age would never wither. In the deep blue eyes was a patient, reflective look that told of a past but unforgotten romance. She turned from his gaze, but not before he had seen the wistfulness his speech had evoked. After he had gone, she sought David.

“I am going to stay here with you, David, for two or three days. Then Barnabas and I want you to come to live with us. I had a long talk with your mother one day, and I told her if anything happened to her you should be our boy. That made her less anxious about the future, David. Will you come?”

The boy looked up with his first gleam of interest in mundane things.

“I’d like it, but would–Jud?”

“I am afraid Jud doesn’t like anything, David,” she replied with a sigh. “That’s one reason I want you—to be a big brother to Janey, for I think that is what she needs, and what Jud can never be.”

The boy remembered what his mother had counseled.

“I’ll always take care of Janey,” he earnestly assured her.

“I know you will, David.”

Two dreary days passed in the way that such days do pass, and then David rode to his new home with Barnabas and M’ri.

Jud Brumble, a refractory, ungovernable lad of fifteen, didn’t look altogether unfavorably upon the addition to the household, knowing that his amount of work would thereby be lessened, and that he would have a new victim for his persecutions and tyrannies.

Janey, a little rosebud of a girl with dimples and flaxen curls, hung back shyly and looked at David with awed eyes. She had been frightened by what she had heard about his mother, and in a vague, disconnected way she associated him with Death. M’ri went to the child’s bedside that night and explained the situation. “Poor Davey is all alone, now, and very unhappy, so we must be kind to him. I told him you were to be his little sister.”

Then M’ri took David to a gabled room, at each end of which was a swinging window—“one for seeing the sun rise, and one for seeing it set,” she said, as she turned back the covers from the spotless white bed. She yearned to console him, but before the mute look of grief in his big eyes she was silent.

“I wish he would cry,” she said wistfully to Barnabas, “he hasn’t shed a tear since his mother died.”

No sooner had the sound of her footsteps ceased than David threw off his armor of self-restraint and burst into a passion of sobs, the wilder for their long repression. He didn't hear the patter of little feet on the floor, and not until two mothering arms were about his neck did he see the white-robed figure of Janey.

"Don't cry, Davey," she implored, her quivering red mouth against his cheek. "I'm sorry; but I am your little sister now, so you must love me, Davey. Aunt M'ri told me so."

CHAPTER III

The lilac-scented breeze of early morning blowing softly through the vine-latticed window and stirring its white draperies brought David to wakefulness. With the first surprise at the strangeness of his surroundings came a fluttering of memory. The fragrance of lilacs was always hereafter to bring back the awfulness of this waking moment.

He hurriedly dressed, and went down to the kitchen where M'ri was preparing breakfast.

"Good morning, David. Janey has gone to find some fresh eggs. You may help her hunt them, if you will."

Knowing the haunts of hens, he went toward the currant bushes. It was one of those soft days that link late spring and dawning summer. The coolness of the sweet-odored air, the twitter of numberless dawn birds, the entreating lowing of distant cattle—all breathing life and strength—were like a resurrection call to David.

On the east porch, which was his retreat for a smoke or a rest between the intervals of choring and meals, Barnabas sat, securely wedged in by the washing machine, the refrigerator, the plant stand, the churn, the kerosene can, and the lawn mower. He gazed reflectively after David.

"What are you going to hev Dave do to help, M'ri?"

M'ri came to the door and considered a moment.

"First of all, Barnabas, I am going to have him eat. He is so thin and hungry looking."

Barnabas chuckled. His sister's happiest mission was the feeding of hungry children.

After breakfast, when Janey's rebellious curls were again being brushed into shape, M'ri told David he could go to school if he liked. To her surprise the boy flushed and looked uncomfortable. M'ri's intuitions were quick and generally correct.

"It's so near the end of the term, though," she added casually, as an afterthought, "that maybe you had better wait until next fall to start in."

"Yes, please, Miss M'ri, I'd rather," he said quickly and gratefully.

When Janey, dinner pail in hand and books under arm, was ready to start, David asked in surprise where Jud was.

"Oh, he has gone long ago. He thinks he is too big to walk with Janey."

David quietly took the pail and books from the little girl.

"I'll take you to school, Janey, and come for you this afternoon."

"We won't need to git no watch dog to foller Janey," said Barnabas, as the children started down the path.

"David," called M'ri, "stop at Miss Rhody's on your way back and find out whether my waist is finished."

With proudly protective air, David walked beside the stiffly starched little girl, who had placed her hand trustfully in his. They had gone but a short distance when they were overtaken by Joe Forbes, mounted on a shining black horse. He reined up and looked down on them good-humoredly.

"Going to school, children?"

"I am. Davey's just going to carry my things for me," explained Janey.

"Well, I can do that and carry you into the bargain. Help her up, David."

Janey cried out in delight at the prospect of a ride. David lifted her up, and Joe settled her comfortably in the saddle, encircling her with his arm. Then he looked down whimsically into David's disappointed eyes.

"I know it's a mean trick, Dave, to take your little sweetheart from you."

"She's not my sweetheart; she's my sister."

"Has she promised to be that already? Get up, Firefly."

They were off over the smooth country road, Forbes shouting a bantering good-by and Janey waving a triumphant dinner pail, while David, trudging on his way, experienced the desolate feeling of the one who is left behind. Across fields he came to the tiny, thatched cottage of Miss Rhody Crabbe, who stood on the crumbling doorstep feeding some little turkeys.

“Come in, David. I suppose you’re after M’ri’s waist. Thar’s jest a few stitches to take, and I’ll hev it done in no time.”

He followed her into the little house, which consisted of a sitting room “with bedroom off,” and a kitchen whose floor was sand scoured; the few pieces of tinware could be used as mirrors. Miss Rhody seated herself by the open window and began to ply her needle. She did not sew swiftly and smoothly, in feminine fashion, but drew her long-threaded needle through the fabric in abrupt and forceful jerks. A light breeze fluttered in through the window, but it could not ruffle the wisp-locked hair that showed traces of a water-dipped comb and was strained back so taut that a little mound of flesh encircled each root. Her eyes were bead bright and swift moving. Everything about her, to the aggressively prominent knuckles, betokened energy and industry. She was attired in a blue calico shortened by many washings, but scrupulously clean and conscientiously starched. Her face shone with soap and serenity.

Miss Rhody’s one diversion in a busy but monotonous life was news. She was wretched if she did not receive the latest bulletins; but it was to her credit that she never repeated anything that might work harm or mischief. David was one of her chosen confidants. He was a safe repository of secrets, a sympathetic listener, and a wise suggester.

“I’m glad M’ri’s hevin’ a blue waist. She looks so sweet in blue. I’ve made her clo’es fer years. My, how I hoped fer to make her weddin’ clo’es onct! It wuz a shame to hev sech a good match spiled. It wuz too bad she hed to hev them two chillern on her hands—”

“And now she has a third,” was what David thought he read in her eyes, and he hastened to assert: “I am going to help all I can, and I’ll soon be old enough to take care of myself.”

“Land sakes, David, you’d be wuth more’n yer keep to any one. I wonder,” she said ruminatingly, “if Martin Thorne will wait for her till Janey’s grewed up.”

“Martin Thorne!” exclaimed David excitedly. “Judge Thorne? Why, was he the one—”

“He spent his Sunday evenings with her,” she asserted solemnly.

In the country code of courtships this procedure was conclusive proof, and David accepted it as such.

“He wuz jest plain Lawyer Thorne when he wuz keepin’ company with M’ri, but we all knew Mart wuz a comin’ man, and M’ri wuz jest proud of him. You could see that, and he wuz sot on her.”

Her work momentarily neglected, Rhody was making little reminiscent stabs at space with her needle as she spoke.

“T wuz seven years ago. M’ri wuz twenty-eight and Mart ten years older. It would hev ben a match as sure as preachin’, but Eliza died and M’ri, she done her duty as she seen it. Sometimes I think folks is near-sighted about their duty. There is others as is queer-sighted. Bein’ crossed hain’t spiled M’ri though. She’s kep’ sweet through it all, but when a man don’t git his own way, he’s apt to curdle. Mart got sort of tart-tongued and cold feelin’. There wa’n’t no reason why they couldn’t a kep’ on bein’ friends, but Mart must go and make a fool vow that he’d never speak to M’ri until she sent him word she’d changed her mind, so he hez ben a-spitin’ of his face ever sence. It’s wonderful how some folks do git in their own way, but, my sakes, I must git to work so you kin take this waist home.”

This was David’s first glimpse of a romance outside of story-books, but the name of Martin Thorne evoked disturbing memories. Six years ago he had acted as attorney to David’s father in settling his financial difficulties, and later, after Peter Dunne’s death, the Judge had settled the small estate. It was only through his efforts that they were enabled to have the smallest of roofs over their defenseless heads.

“Miss Rhody,” he asked after a long meditation on life in general, “why didn’t you ever marry?”

Miss Rhody paused again in her work, and two little spots of red crept into her cheeks.

“Tain’t from ch’ice I’ve lived single, David. I’ve ben able to take keer of myself, but I allers hed a hankerin’ same as any woman, as is a woman, hez fer a man, but I never got no chanst to meet men folks. I wuz raised here, and folks allers hed it all cut out fer me to be an old maid. When a woman onct gets that name fixt on her, it’s all off with her chances. No man ever comes nigh her, and she can’t git out of her single rut. I never could get to go nowhars, and I wa’n’t that bold kind that makes up to a man fust, afore he gives a sign.”

David pondered over this wistful revelation for a few moments, seeking a means for her seemingly hopeless escape from a life of single blessedness, for David was a sympathetic young altruist, and felt it incumbent upon him to lift the burdens of his neighbors. Then he suggested encouragingly:

“Miss Rhody, did you know that there was a paper that gets you acquainted with men? That’s the way they say Zine Winters got married.”

“Yes, and look what she drawed!” she scoffed. “Bill! I don’t know how they’d live if Zine hadn’t a-gone in heavy on hens and turkeys. She hez to spend her hull time a-traipsin’ after them turkeys, and thar ain’t nuthin’ that’s given to gaddin’ like turkeys that I know on, less ’t is Chubbses’ hired gal. No, David, it’s chance enough when you git a man you’ve knowed allers, but a stranger! Well! I want to know what I’m gittin’. Thar, the last stitch in M’ri’s waist is took, and, David, you won’t tell no one what I said about Mart Thorne and her, nor about my gittin’ merried?”

David gave her a reproachful look, and she laughed shamefacedly.

“I know, David, you kin keep a secret. It’s like buryin’ a thing to tell it to you. My, this waist’ll look fine on M’ri. I jest love the feel of silk. I’d ruther hev a black silk dress than—”

“A husband,” prompted David slyly.

“David Dunne, I’ll box yer ears if you ever think again of what I said. I am allers a-thinkin’ of you as if you wuz a stiddy grown man, and then fust thing I know you’re nuthin’ but a teasin’ boy. Here’s the bundle, and don’t you want a nutcake, David?”

“No, thank you, Miss Rhody. I ate a big breakfast.”

A fellow feeling had prompted David even in his hungriest days to refrain from accepting Miss Rhody’s proffers of hospitality. He knew the emptiness of her larder, for though she had been thrifty and hard-working, she had paid off a mortgage and had made good the liabilities of an erring nephew.

When David returned he found Miss M’ri in the dairy. It was churning day, and she was arranging honey-scented, rose-stamped pats of butter on moist leaves of crisp lettuce.

“David,” she asked, looking up with a winning smile, “will you tell me why you didn’t want to go to school?”

The boy’s face reddened, but his eyes looked frankly into hers.

“Yes, Miss M’ri.”

“Before you tell me, David,” she interposed, “I want you to remember that, from now on, Barnabas and I are your uncle and aunt.”

“Well, then, Aunt M’ri,” began David, a ring of tremulous eagerness in his voice, “I can read and write and spell, but I don’t know much about arithmetic and geography. I was ashamed to start in at the baby class. I thought I’d try and study out of Jud’s books this summer.”

“That’s a good idea, David. We’ll begin now. You’ll find an elementary geography in the sitting room on the shelf, and you may study the first lesson. This afternoon, when my work is done, I’ll hear you recite it.”

David took the book and went out into the old orchard. When M’ri went to call him to dinner he was sprawled out in the latticed shadow of an apple tree, completely absorbed in the book.

“You have spent two hours on your first lesson, David. You ought to have it well learned.”

He looked at her in surprise.

“I read the whole book through, Aunt M’ri.”

“Oh, David,” she expostulated, “that’s the way Barnabas takes his medicine. Instead of the prescribed dose after each meal he takes three doses right after breakfast—so as to get it off his mind and into his system, he says. We’ll just have one short lesson in geography and one in arithmetic each day. You mustn’t do things in leaps. It’s the steady dog trot that lasts, and counts on the long journey.”

When David was on his way to bring Janey from school that afternoon he was again overtaken by Joe Forbes.

“Dave, I am going to Chicago in a few days, and I shall stop there long enough to buy a few presents to send back to some of my friends. Here’s my list. Let me see, Uncle Larimy, a new-fangled fishing outfit; Barnabas, a pipe; Miss M’ri—guess, Dave.”

“You’re the guesser, you know,” reminded David.

“It’s a new kind of ice-cream freezer, of course.”

“She’s going to freeze ice to-night,” recalled David anticipatively.

“Freeze ice! What a paradoxical process! But what I want you to suggest is something for Miss Rhody—something very nice.”

“What she wants most is something you can’t get her,” thought David, looking up with a tantalizing little smile. Then her second wish occurred to him.

“I know something she wants dreadfully; something she never expects to have.”

“That is just what I want to get for her.”

“It’ll cost a lot.”

Joe disposed of that consideration by a munificent wave of the hand.

“What is it?”

“A black silk dress,” informed the boy delightedly.

“She shall have it. How many yards does it take, I wonder?”

“We can ask Janey’s teacher when we get to school,” suggested the boy.

“So we can. I contrived to find out that Janey’s heart is set on a string of beads—blue beads. I suppose, to be decent, I shall have to include Jud. What will it be?”

“He wants a gun. He’s a good shot, too.”

They loitered on the way, discussing Joe’s gifts, until they met Janey and Little Teacher coming toward them hand in hand. David quickly secured the pail and books before Joe could appropriate them. He wasn’t going to be cut out a second time in one day.

“Miss Williams,” asked the young ranchman, “will your knowledge of mathematics tell me how many yards of black silk I must get to make a dress, and what kind of fixings I shall need for it?”

“You don’t have to know,” she replied. “Just go into any department store and tell them you want a dress pattern and the findings. They will do the rest.”

“Shopping made easy. You shall have your reward now. My shanty boat is just about opposite here. Suppose the four of us go down to the river and have supper on board?”

Little Teacher, to whom life was a vista of blackboards dotted with vacations, thought this would be delightful. A passing child was made a messenger to the farm, and they continued their way woodward to the river, where the shanty boat was anchored. Little Teacher set the table, Joe prepared the meal, while David sat out on deck, beguiling Janey with wonderful stories.

“This seems beautifully domestic to a cowboy,” sighed Joe, looking around the supper table, his gaze lingering on Little Teacher, who was dimpling happily. Imaginative David proceeded to weave his third romance that day, with a glad little beating of the heart, for he had feared that Joe might be planning to wait for Janey, as the Judge was doubtless waiting for M’ri.

The children went directly home after supper, Joe accompanying Little Teacher. Despite the keenness of David’s sorrow the day had been a peaceful, contented one, but when the shadows began to lengthen to that most lonesome hour of lonesome days, when from home-coming cows comes the sound of tinkling bells, a wave of longing swept over him, and he stole away to the orchard. Again, a soft, sustaining little hand crept into his.

“Don’t, Davey,” pleaded a caressing voice, “don’t make me cry.”

CHAPTER IV

Outside of the time allotted for the performance of a wholesome amount of farm work and the preparation of his daily lessons, David was free for diversions which had hitherto entered sparingly into his life. After school hours and on Saturdays the Barnabas farm was the general rendezvous for all the children within a three-mile radius. The old woods by the river rang with the gay treble of childish laughter and the ecstatic barking of dogs dashing in frantic pursuit. There was always an open sesame to the cookie jar and the apple barrel.

David suffered the common fate of all in having a dark cloud. Jud was the dark cloud, and his silver lining had not yet materialized.

In height and physical strength Jud was the superior, so he delighted in taunting and goading the younger boy. There finally came a day when instinctive self-respect upheld David in no longer resisting the call to arms. Knowing Barnabas' disapproval of fighting, and with his mother's parting admonition pricking his conscience, he went into battle reluctantly and half-heartedly, so the fight was not prolonged, and Jud's victory came easily. Barnabas, hurrying to the scene of action, called Jud off and reprimanded him for fighting a smaller boy, which hurt David far more than did the pummeling he had received.

"What wuz you fighting fer, anyway?" he demanded of David.

"Nothing," replied David laconically, "just fighting."

"Jud picks on Davey all the time," was the information furnished by the indignant Janey, who had followed her father.

"Well, I forbid either one of you to fight again. Now, Jud, see that you leave Dave alone after this."

Emboldened by his easily won conquest and David's apparent lack of prowess, Jud continued his jeering and nagging, but David set his lips in a taut line of finality and endured in silence until there came the taunt superlative.

"Your mother was a washerwoman, and your father a convict."

There surged through David a fierce animal hate. With a tight closing of his hardy young fist, he rushed to the onslaught so swiftly and so impetuously that Jud recoiled in fear and surprise. With his first tiger-like leap David had the older boy by the throat and bore him to the ground, maintaining and tightening his grip as they went down.

"I'll kill you!"

David's voice was steady and calm, but the boy on the ground underneath felt the very hairs of his head rising at the look in the dark eyes above his own.

Fortunately for both of them Barnabas was again at hand.

He jerked David to his feet.

"Fightin' again, are you, after I told you not to!"

"It was him, David, that began it. I never struck him," whimpered Jud, edging away behind his father.

"Did you, David?" asked Barnabas bluntly, still keeping his hold on the boy, who was quivering with passion.

"Yes."

His voice sounded odd and tired, and there was an ache of bafflement in his young eyes.

"What fer? What did he do to make you so mad?"

"He said my mother was a washerwoman and my father a convict! Let me go! I'll kill him!"

With a returning rush of his passion, David struggled in the man's grasp.

"Wait, Dave, I'll tend to him. Go to the barn, Jud!" he commanded his son.

Jud quailed before this new, strange note in his father's voice.

“David was fighting. You said neither of us was to fight. ’T ain’t fair to take it out on me.”

Fairness was one of Barnabas’ fixed and prominent qualities, but Jud was not to gain favor by it this time.

“Well, you don’t suppose I’m a-goin’ to lick Dave fer defendin’ his parents, do you? Besides, I’m not a-goin’ to lick you fer fightin’, but fer sayin’ what you did. I guess you’d hev found out that Dave could wallop you ef he is smaller and younger.”

“He can’t!” snarled Jud. “I didn’t have no show. He came at me by surprise.”

Barnabas reflected a moment. Then he said gravely:

“When it’s in the blood of two fellers to fight, why thar’s got to be a fight, that’s all. Thar won’t never be no peace until this ere question’s settled. Dave, do you still want to fight him?”

A fierce aftermath of passion gleamed in David’s eyes.

“Yes!” he cried, his nostrils quivering.

“And you’ll fight fair? Jest to punish—with no thought of killin’?”

“I’ll fight fair,” agreed the boy.

“I’ll see that you do. Come here, Jud.”

“I don’t want to fight,” protested Jud sullenly.

“He’s afraid,” said David gleefully, every muscle quivering and straining.

“I ain’t!” yelled Jud.

“Come on, then,” challenged David, a fierce joy tugging at his heart.

Jud came with deliberate precision and a swing of his left. He was heavier and harder, but David was more agile, and his whole heart was in the fight this time. They clutched and grappled and parried, and finally went down; first one was on top, then the other. It was the wage of brute force against elasticity; bluster against valor. Jud fought in fear; David, in ferocity. At last David bore his oppressor backward and downward. Jud, exhausted, ceased to struggle.

“Thar!” exclaimed Barnabas, drawing a relieved breath. “I guess you know how you stand now, and we’ll all feel better. You’ve got all that’s comin’ to you, Jud, without no more from me. You can both go to the house and wash up.”

Uncle Larimy had arrived at the finish of the fight.

“What’s the trouble, Barnabas?” he asked interestedly, as the boys walked away.

The explanation was given, but they spoke in tones so low that David could not overhear any part of the conversation from the men following him until, as they neared the house, Uncle Larimy said: “I was afeerd Dave hed his pa’s temper snoozin’ inside him. Mebby he’d orter be told fer a warnin’.”

“I don’t want to say nuthin’ about it less I hev to. I’ll wait till the next time he loses his temper.”

David ducked his head in the wash basin on the bench outside the door. After supper, when Barnabas came out on the back porch for his hour of pipe, he called his young charge to him. Since the fight, David’s face had worn a subdued but contented expression.

“Looks,” thought Barnabas, “kinder eased off, like a dog when he licks his chops arter the taste of blood has been drawed.”

“Set down, Dave. I want to talk to you. You done right to fight fer yer folks, and you’re a good fighter, which every boy orter be, but when I come up to you and Jud I see that in yer face that I didn’t know was in you. You’ve got an orful temper, Dave. It’s a good thing to hev—a mighty good thing, if you kin take keer of it, but if you let it go it’s what leads to murder. Your pa hed the same kind of let-loose temper that got him into heaps of trouble.”

“What did my father do?” he asked abruptly.

Instinctively he had shrunk from asking his mother this question, and pride had forbidden his seeking the knowledge elsewhere.

“Some day, when you are older, you will know all about it. But remember, when any one says anything like what Jud did, that yer ma wouldn’t want fer you to hev thoughts of killin’. You see, you

fought jest as well—probably better—when you hed cooled off a mite and hed promised to fight fair. And ef you can't wrestle your temper and down it as you did Jud, you're not a fust-class fighter."

"I'll try," said David slowly, unable, however, to feel much remorse for his outbreak.

"Jud'll let you alone arter this. You'd better go to bed now. You need a little extry sleep."

M'ri came into his room when he was trying to mend a long rent in his shirt. He flushed uncomfortably when her eye fell on the garment. She took it from him.

"I'll mend it, David. I don't wonder that your patience slipped its leash, but—never fight when you have murder in your heart."

When she had left the room, Janey's face, pink and fair as a baby rose, looked in at the door.

"It's very wicked to fight and get so mad, Davey."

"I know it," he acknowledged readily. It was useless trying to make a girl understand.

There was a silence. Janey still lingered.

"Davey," she asked in an awed whisper, "does it feel nice to be wicked?"

David shook his head non-committally.

CHAPTER V

The rather strained relations between Jud and David were eased the next day by the excitement attending the big package Barnabas brought from town. It was addressed to David, but the removal of the outer wrapping disclosed a number of parcels neatly labeled, also a note from Joe, asking him to distribute the presents.

David first selected the parcel marked "Janey" and handed it to her.

"Blue beads!" she cried ecstatically.

"Let me see, Janey," said M'ri. "Why, they're real turquoises and with a gold clasp! I'll get you a string of blue beads for now, and you can put these away till you're grown up."

"I didn't tell Joe what to get for you, Aunt M'ri; honest, I didn't," disclaimed David, with a laugh, as he handed the freezer to her.

"We'll initiate it this very day, David."

David handed Barnabas his pipe and gave Jud a letter which he opened wonderingly, uttering a cry of pleasure when he realized the contents.

"It's an order on Harkness to let me pick out any rifle in his store. How did he know? Did you tell him, Dave?"

"Yes," was the quiet reply.

"Thank you, Dave. I'll ride right down and get it, and we'll go to the woods this afternoon and shoot at a mark."

"All right," agreed David heartily.

The atmosphere was now quite cleared by the proposed expenditure of ammunition, and M'ri experienced the sensation as of one beholding a rainbow.

David then turned his undivided attention to his own big package, which contained twelve books, his name on the fly-leaf of each. Robinson Crusoe, Swiss Family Robinson, Andersen's Fairy Tales, Arabian Nights, Life of Lincoln, Black Beauty, Oliver Twist, A Thousand Leagues under the Sea, The Pathfinder, Gulliver's Travels, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and Young Ranchers comprised the selection. His eyes gleamed over the enticing titles.

"You shall have some book shelves for your room, David," promised M'ri, "and you can start your library. Joe has made a good foundation for one."

His eyes longed to read at once, but there were still the two packages, marked "Uncle Larimy" and "Miss Rhody," to deliver.

"I can see that Uncle Larimy has a fishing rod, but what do you suppose he has sent Rhody?" wondered M'ri.

"A black silk dress. I told him she wanted one."

"Take it right over there, David. She has waited almost a lifetime for it."

"Let me take Uncle Larimy's present," suggested Jud, "and then I'll ask him to go shooting with us this afternoon."

David amicably agreed, and went across fields to Miss Rhody's.

"Land sakes!" she exclaimed, looking at the parcel. "M'ri ain't a-goin' to hev another dress so soon, is she?"

"No, Miss Rhody. Some one else is, though."

"Who is it, David?" she asked curiously.

"You see Joe Forbes sent some presents from Chicago, and this is what he sent you."

"A calico," was her divination, as she opened the package.

"David Dunne!" she cried in shrill, piping tones, a spot of red on each cheek. "Just look here!" and she stroked lovingly the lustrous fold of shining silk.

“And if here ain’t linings, and thread, and sewing silk, and hooks and eyes! Why, David Dunne, it can’t be true! How did he know—David, you blessed boy, you must have told him!”

Impulsively she threw her arms about him and hugged him until he ruefully admitted to himself that she had Jud “beat on the clutch.”

“And say, David, I’m a-goin’ to wear this dress. I know folks as lets their silks wear out a-hangin’ up in closets. Don’t get half as many cracks when it hangs on yourself. I b’lieve as them Episcopals do in lettin’ yer light shine, and I never wuz one of them as b’lieved in savin’ yer best to be laid out in. Oh, Lord, David, I kin jest hear myself a-rustlin’ round in it!”

“Maybe you’ll get a husband now,” suggested David gravely.

“Mebby. I’d orter ketch somethin’ with this. I never see sech silk. It’s much handsomer than the one Homer Bisbee’s bride hed when she come here from the city. It’s orful the way she wastes. Would you b’lieve it, David, the fust batch of pies she made, she never pricked, and they all puffed up and bust. David, look here! What’s in this envylope? Forever and way back, ef it hain’t a five-doller bill and a letter. I hain’t got my glasses handy. Read it.”

“Dear Miss Rhody,” read the boy in his musical voice, “silk is none too good for you, and I want you to wear this and wear it out. If you don’t, I’ll never send you another. I thought you might want some more trimmings, so I send you a five for same. Sincerely yours, Joe.”

“I don’t need no trimmin’s, excep’ fifty cents for roochin’s.”

“I’ll tell you what to do, Miss Rhody. When you get your dress made we’ll go into town and you can get your picture taken in the dress and give it to Joe when he comes back.”

“That’s jest what I’ll do. I never hed my likeness took. David, you’ve got an orful quick mind. Is Joe coming home? I thought he callated to go West.”

“Not until fall. He’s going to spend the summer in his shanty boat on the river.”

“I’ll hurry up and get it made up afore he comes. Tell me what he sent all your folks.”

“Joe’s a generous boy, like his ma’s folks,” she continued, when he had enumerated their gifts. “I am glad fer him that his pa and his stepmother was so scrimpin’. David, would you b’lieve it, in that great big house of the Forbeses thar wa’n’t never a tidy on a chair, and not a picter on the wall! It was mighty lucky for Joe that his stepmother died fust, so he got all the money.”

David hastened home and sought his retreat in the orchard with one of his books. M’ri, curious to know what his selection had been, scanned the titles of the remaining eleven volumes.

“Well, who would have thought of a boy’s preferring fairy tales!”

David read until dinner time, but spent the afternoon with Uncle Larimy and Jud in the woods, where they received good instruction in rifle practice. After supper he settled comfortably down with a book, from which he was recalled by a plaintive little wail.

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