

Hill Grace Brooks

The Corner House Girls Growing Up



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Hill Grace Brooks

The Corner House Girls Growing Up What Happened First, What Came Next. And How It Ended

CHAPTER I

ALL UP IN THE AIR

It all began because Tess Kenway became suddenly and deeply interested in aeroplanes, airships and "all sort of flying things," as Dot, the smallest Corner House girl, declared.

Perhaps one should modify that "suddenly"; for Tess had begun to think about flying – as a profession – as long ago as the winter before (and that was really a long time for a little girl of her age) when she had acted as Swiftwing the Hummingbird in the children's play of *The Carnation Countess*.

At any rate she said to Sammy Pinkney, who was almost their next door neighbor, only he lived "scatecornered" across Willow Street, that she wished she had an airship.

And there! "Scatecornered" must be explained too; it was an expression of Uncle Rufus' who was the Corner House girls' chief factotum and almost an heirloom in the family, for he had long served Uncle Peter Stower, who in dying had willed the beautiful old homestead in Milton to his four grand-nieces.

"Just what does 'scatecornered' mean, Uncle Rufus?" asked Dot, who delighted in polysyllables.

"Why, chile, 'scatecornered' am a pufficly good word, fo' I has used it all ma life. It's – er – well, it's sort of a short-cut for de meanin' of slantindicular an crisscrosswise; w'ich means dat it ain't straight an' ain't crooked, but sort o' – er – scatecornered. Dere, chile, now you knows."

"Yes, Uncle Rufus; thank you," said Dot, polite if she did feel rather dizzy after his explanation.

But it was with Tess, who was nearly two years older than Dot and thought herself vastly more grown up, and with Sammy Pinkney this story was begun, and one should stick to one's text.

"Yes," murmured Tess, "I wish I had an airship."

Sammy looked at her, rather awed. Lately he was beginning to feel a mite awed in Tess Kenway's company, anyway. She had always been a thoughtful child. Aunt Sarah Maltby declared she was uncanny and gave her the fidgets. Of late even the boy who desired to be a pirate found Tess puzzling.

"Huh! An airship? What would you do with it? Where would you keep it?" he finally demanded, his queries being nothing if not practical.

Really Tess had not addressed him directly. She had just audibly expressed a thought, and one that had long been in her mind in embryo. So she did not answer the neighbor boy, who was sitting beside her on the side stoop of the Corner House, rigging a self-whittled ship to sail in the horse-trough.

"You know very well it wouldn't go in the garage; and the toolshed and the henhouse – even Tom Jonah's house – are all too small. Huh! that's like a girl! Never look ahead to see what they'd do with an airship if somebody gave 'em one."

"Well, I don't s'pose anybody will," admitted Tess, with a sigh, having heard at least the last part of Sammy's speech.

"Anybody will *what*?" demanded Sammy, beginning to be somewhat confused, partly from not knowing what he himself had been saying.

"Give us an airship."

"I should say not!" ejaculated Sammy. "Why, Tess Kenway, an airship would cost 'most a million dollars!"

"Is that so?" she said, accepting Sammy's slight overestimate of the price of a flying machine quite placidly.

"And folks don't give away such presents. I should say not!" with scorn.

"Why, Neale O'Neil's Uncle Bill Sorber wants to give Dot and me a calico pony, and that must be worth a lot of money."

"Huh! What's a calico pony? Like one of these Teddy bears?" sniffed Sammy. "Stuffed with cotton?"

"No it isn't, Mr. Saucebox!" broke in Agnes Kenway, the second and prettiest of the Corner House girls, who had just come out on the porch to brush her sport coat and had overheard the boy's observation. "That calico pony is well stuffed with good oats and hay if it belongs to Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie. Neale's Uncle Bill feeds his horses till they are as fat as butter."

"Oh!" murmured Sammy. "A *real* pony?" and his eyes began to shine. He had owned a goat (it was now Tess' property) and he now possessed a bulldog. But he foresaw "larks" if the two smaller Corner House girls got a pony. The older ones often went out in the motor-car without Tess and Dot, and the suggestion of the pony may have been a roundabout way of appeasing the youngsters.

"But say!" the boy added, "why did you call it calico? That's what they make kids' dresses out of, isn't it?"

"Mine's gingham and I'm not a kid," declared Tess both promptly and with warmth.

"Aw, well, I didn't mean *you*," explained Sammy. "And why do they call a pony 'calico'?"

This was too much for Tess and she put it up to Agnes.

"Why – now," began the older sister, "you – you know what a calico cat is, Sammy Pinkney?"

"Ye-es," Sammy said it rather doubtfully, however. "That's like Miss Pettingill's got down the street, ain't it?"

"O-o!" cried Tess. "That's *all* colors, that old cat is!"

"It's sort of mottled and patchy. That's it – patchy!" declared Agnes, seizing the suggestion of "calico" and "patchwork" to make out her case.

"But," complained Tess, "I didn't think the pony would be as many colors as Miss Pettingill's cat. You know she calls *him* Rainbow."

"Why, the pony is only brown and white – or cream color," Agnes said with more confidence. "And maybe a little pink."

"Ho! ho!" snorted Sammy. "Now you are stringin' us. Who ever heard of a pink horse?"

Agnes went in without hearing this remark, and perhaps it was as well for Sammy Pinkney. Tess said severely:

"Our Agnes does not string people, Sammy. If she says the pony is pink, it is pink, you may be certain sure."

"And chocolate and cream color, too?" sniffed the boy. "Hum! I guess a pony as funny as that would be, could fly too. So you'll be fixed up all right, Tess Kenway."

"Dear me," sighed the little girl, coming back to their original topic of conversation. "I wish we *did* have something that would fly."

Now, secretly, Sammy was very fond of Tess. When he had had the scarlet fever that spring and early summer, his little neighbor with the serious face and dreamy look had been the most attentive friend one could ever expect to have.

She had called morning and night at his house to get the "bulletin" of his condition; and when he was up again and the house was what Dot Kenway had mentioned as "fumigrated," Tess had spent long hours amusing the boy until he could play out of doors again.

Besides, she had much to do with his accompanying the Corner House girls on their recent motoring trip, and Sammy's own mother said that that vacation journey had "made a new boy of Sammy."

This new boy, therefore, did not scorn to put his mind to the problem of Tess Kenway's distress. But an airship!

"I say, Tess," he said at last with some eagerness, "how'd one of them airmajigs be that father brought me home from the city once – only a bigger one?"

"What is an airmajig?" demanded Tess, her curiosity aroused if nothing more.

"Well, it's a dinky thing – pshaw! you remember. You stretched a wire, and then wound it up – "

"Wound up the wire?"

"Naw! Oh, jingo! The ship, I mean. It was run by a clock. And you hung it on the wire when it was wound."

"The clock?" asked Tess, still absent-mindedly.

"Oh! Je-ru-sa-lem! Girls don't know nothin' about mechanics," snarled Sammy. "What's the use!"

Tess asked in an apologetic voice, after a moment of silence:

"What happened, Sammy?"

"What happened to *what*?"

"The airmajig?"

"Why, it traveled right along the wire – hanging to it, you know," explained the little boy with more enthusiasm. "It would go as far as the wire was long. Why, I bet, Tess Kenway, that it would run from your house to mine. And it wiggled its wings just like a bird. And there was a tin man in it. But pshaw! that was just for kids. It was a toy. But a bigger one – "

"Oh, Sammy! big enough to carry us?" gasped Tess, clasping her hands.

"Er – well – now," hesitated Sammy, whose own imagination was hampered by a very practical streak in his character. "That would be some airship, wouldn't it? To carry us. It would have to be pretty big, and the wire'd have to be awful strong."

"Oh, it wouldn't be flying, then," sighed Tess.

"But say!" he exclaimed more eagerly, "couldn't we fly your dolls in it – yours and Dot's?"

"Oh!"

"That would be great!"

The screen door slammed behind them. "No," declared a serious and very decisive voice. "You sha'n't fly my Alice-doll like a kite, Sammy Pinkney. So there!"

They turned to the dark, fairy-like little girl who had appeared fresh from her afternoon toilet at the hands of Mrs. MacCall, the old Scotch housekeeper who loved the Corner House girls as though they were her own.

Dot, as usual, clung tightly to the pink-faced, fair-haired doll which of all her "children" was her favorite. The Alice-doll had been through so many adventures, and suffered such peril and disaster, that Dot could scarcely bear that she should be out of her sight for fear some new calamity would happen to her.

Therefore Dot said quite firmly:

"No, Sammy Pinkney. You're not going to fly my Alice-doll. And I should think you'd be 'shamed, Tessie Kenway, to let him even talk about it."

"Aw, who's goin' to hurt your old doll?" growled Sammy.

"She's *not* an old doll, I'd have you know, Sammy Pinkney!" responded Dot, ready to argue the point with anybody. "She's just been made over. Didn't Neale O'Neil have her taken to the hospital? And didn't they make over her face just like society ladies get *theirs* done by a der – der-ma-olywog?"

"Mercy, child!" gasped Tess. "'Dermatologist' the word is. Ruth told us."

"And they bleached her hair," concluded the excited Dot. "So there! Lots of ladies have their hair bleached. It's quite fashioningble."

"Dot! Dot!" begged the purist, Tess, "do get your words right if you will use such long ones."

Dot haughtily overlooked any such interruptions. "So," said she, "you sha'n't make a kite out of my Alice-doll," and she hugged the child to her bosom with emphasis.

"It isn't a kite," explained Tess, indulgently. "Sammy was talking about airships. He had one that had a clock in it and it flew on a wire –"

"Oo-ee!" squealed Dot suddenly. "I 'member about that, Sammy Pinkney. And your mother said you shouldn't *ever* have such a contraption in the house again. It busted the parlor lamp."

"Oh, dear! I wish you'd say 'bursted,'" sighed her sister.

"But if it had been out of doors," Sammy grumbled, "where there weren't any lamps and things, it would have worked fine. I tell you, Tess, we could string it from your house to mine, and the carrier could be loaded up at one station and unloaded and loaded again at the other. Crickey, it would be fun!"

"But maybe Ruthie wouldn't let us do it," suggested Tess, beginning to be enamored of the boy's idea, yet having her doubts about the feasibility of the plan. "It would knock people's hats off."

"What would!" gasped Sammy.

"The wire – or the airship traveling back and forth."

"Oh, Je-ru-sa-lem," again exploded Sammy. "You wanted an airship, didn't you? 'Way up in the air – not so's you can reach it from the ground. Why, we'll string the wire from my bedroom window to one of the windows of the room you and Dot sleep in."

"Oh!" cried Dot, beginning to visualize the scheme now. "Just like the cash-carriers in the Five and Ten Cent Store."

"But Ruthie wouldn't let us, I'm afraid," murmured Tess, still doubtful.

"Let's ask her," said Sammy.

"Oh, let's!" cried Dot.

But when they hunted for Ruth, the eldest of the four Corner House girls, she was not to be found on the premises; and if the children had but known it just at that time Ruth Kenway was having an adventure of her own which was, later, to prove of immense interest to all the Corner House family.

CHAPTER II

THE OLD GENTLEMAN WITH THE GREEN UMBRELLA

Nobody had ever called Ruth Kenway pretty. That was, perhaps, because her next youngest sister, Agnes, was an acknowledged beauty. Everything is comparative.

Mrs. MacCall said that "handsome is as handsome does." Then, of course, in the minds of the other members of the Corner House family, Ruth was very beautiful indeed.

She had a lovely smile, and a low sweet, "mother" voice. She was, indeed, all the mother Dot had ever known; nor could Tess remember their "really-truly" mother very clearly.

Ruth had been calling on the other side of town. She went once a week without fail to have afternoon tea with Mr. Howbridge, their guardian and the administrator of the Stower estate, and this was the afternoon for that pleasant duty.

If there was anything of a serious nature to be talked over between the lawyer and the oldest Corner House girl, it was done in his pleasant library over the old silver tea service, where there were no "small pitchers with big ears."

"And so our moneys are growing, Ruth," Mr. Howbridge said thoughtfully, having ended the discussion of some minor point of business. He admired Ruth's good sense as well as her character, and so frequently discussed matters of business with her that he was not obliged by his oath of office to do.

"In a few months we shall have considerable cash on hand in the bank; and three and a half per cent. is small interest on a large sum of money. Somehow we must invest it."

Ruth's eyes twinkled. "I suppose you really *need* our advice, Mr. Howbridge? Of course, if you left it to the Corner House girls to invest it would probably bring in only a high percentage of enjoyment.

"Agnes would have a flock of automobiles. Tessie would spend it all on making other people happy. Dot would have an entire sanitarium devoted to the treatment of dolls."

"And you, my dear?" asked the lawyer, smiling.

"Ah, if you want my advice, Mr. Howbridge, you must do as all *your* clients have to do. You must give me a retainer," and she rose, laughing, to don her light coat.

"But I will keep my mind on it," she added. "Who knows? Perhaps some wise thought may fly my way. And all that money! It will really make a fine investment."

"Remember, you girls will expect your 'dots' out of the estate some day," chuckled Mr. Howbridge. "Your own dowry will come first, I presume, Ruth."

"Me? Get married? With the children so dependent upon me?" gasped the eldest Corner House girl. But she blushed warmly and averted her eyes from the shrewd gaze of the lawyer. "Now you are talking nonsense, Mr. Howbridge."

He let her go without comment. But to himself he murmured:

"I never knew it to fail. These girls who are determined to be spinsters are always the first to be caught in the coil of matrimony."

If Ruth's thoughts lingered upon such a ridiculous suggestion (ridiculous from her standpoint) after she left the lawyer's house, her expression of countenance did not show it. She walked cheerfully along the shaded street toward Milton's railroad station, for the old Corner House stood upon the corner of Willow and Main Streets, opposite the Parade Ground, quite on the other side of town.

She crossed the canal and was almost in sight of the station when she saw a tall figure ahead of her whose singular gait and old-fashioned manner of dress would have caused comment anywhere.

To wear a "stove-pipe" hat on a hot day like this, with a heavy, dark frock-coat and gray trousers, with his feet encased in overshoes, seemed to the casual observer rather ridiculous.

"Why," thought Ruth, "he looks as Seneca Sprague might if he were dressed up and going to his own wedding," and she laughed to think of that ridiculous possibility regarding one of the well-known characters of Milton.

This old gentleman was a stranger to her, Ruth was sure. Milton being a junction point of two railroads, there were often strangers about the railroad station waiting for connections on one or the other of the roads. This man must be, the girl thought, such a marooned passenger.

As he reached the edge of the shade cast by the trees on Pleasant Street and stepped into the glare of the open square about the railway station, he unfurled a huge umbrella and raised it to shield himself from the sun's glare. It was a most astonishing umbrella. The upper side was a faded green; the under side an age-yellowed white.

"Why," thought Ruth, "it must be an heirloom in his family."

Amused, she continued directly behind the old gentleman as he started to cross the four tracks which blotted the center of Milton. Accidents had happened more than once at this grade crossing, and the town councilmen had been in hot water with the taxpayers for some years regarding the changing of the railroad's level.

There were drop gates, but only one decrepit watchman here at Pleasant Street. Ruth always looked both ways when she started to cross the tracks. And at this time – or about this time – in the afternoon the so-called Cannon-Ball Express went through. That train did not even hesitate at Milton.

Quite as a matter of course, the girl halted when she came to the tracks and looked both east and west. A freight train was backing down past the station on the third track. The second track was open for passenger traffic. There was a growing roar from the west.

The old gentleman stopped and peered in that direction. He could easily have crossed ahead of the slow freight, but like Ruth he was doubtful regarding the growing clamor of the approaching express, although that fast-flier was not yet in sight at the curve.

"But it's coming!" murmured Ruth. "He mustn't cross!"

The old gentleman with the green umbrella had no intention of crossing ahead of the express; but Ruth heard him utter an impatient exclamation as he stepped back a little from proximity to the second track, the first track being merely a siding for shunted freight cars.

He was so close to the oldest Corner House girl now that she could view his countenance easily without appearing to be curious. But she was curious about the old gentleman. However, being Ruth Kenway, she would not have shown this in any way to ruffle his feelings; for, despite her own youth, Ruth had mothered her three orphaned sisters for so long that she was more sedate and thoughtful than most girls of her age.

Just at this moment the Cannon-Ball Express came tearing into view, shrieking its warning for the Pleasant Street crossing. The old gentleman was standing too near the rails, in Ruth's opinion. She involuntarily put forth her hand and seized hold of his coat. He turned to glare upon the freshly dressed, sweet-looking girl beside him with what would have been an audible grunt of disapproval had the oncoming train not made such a noise and with a look that caused her to drop her hand immediately.

His face was a marvelous network of wrinkles; he wore amber dust-goggles; his mouth was a grim slit in his brown face, like the trap of a letter-box. It did not seem possible that any one could look on Ruth Kenway's sweet face with such a grim and unkind expression on the countenance. But the man turned from her with no softening in his look.

The express was now fairly upon them. The suction of such a rapidly flying train is considerable. And that huge umbrella made the accident unescapable.

The train shrieked by. Ruth herself felt the wind of it, and her skirts blew around her body tightly.

The blast got beneath the big umbrella, and Ruth saw the old gentleman seize hold upon the handle with both hands. The umbrella bellied and creaked. The last car whisked past, and within the cyclone of flying sand and gravel which followed it the unfortunate old gentleman was caught.

Clinging to his umbrella, which was really the cause of all his trouble, he whirled like a dervish across the second track in the wake of the express, and stumbling, went to his knees between that set of rails and the third track, on which the freight train was backing slowly toward them.

Had he put the umbrella down he would have been all right. But his stubborn character was displayed to the full by his still gripping the unwieldy thing and, like "Old Grindstone George," hanging on to the handle. He staggered to his feet, the umbrella quite hiding the coming freight train from his view, and stumbled a pace forward, directly toward the third track.

Ruth, with a startled scream, forgetting self, ignoring the man's former scowls and harshness, sprang forward and again seized the old gentleman's coat, this time with firmness and a determination not to allow herself to be repulsed.

While Ruth Kenway is struggling to save this stranger from accident and probable death, it is a good time to turn back and give those readers who are making the acquaintance of the Corner House girls for the first time in this present volume a little sketch of who these girls are and of their adventures and pleasures as set forth in the previous volumes of this series.

In the first book of the series, entitled "The Corner House Girls," the sisters are introduced as living in a larger city and in very poor circumstances. Their father and mother being dead, Ruth had to manage for the family on a very small pension from the Government. Aunt Sarah Maltby, who was peculiar in more ways than one, was a liability instead of an asset to the family.

This queer old woman was always expecting that a large fortune would be left to her when Mr. Peter Stower, of Milton, should die. Mr. Stower had quarreled with all his relatives. Especially had he quarreled with his half-sister Sarah. Nevertheless, Aunt Sarah believed his money and the old homestead would come to her.

Instead, Mr. Stower willed it all to the four Kenway girls, making Mr. Howbridge the administrator of the estate and the guardian of the girls. Therefore, Miss Sarah Maltby was still a pensioner on the bounty of the Corner House girls, and the fact perhaps made her more crabbed of temper than she otherwise might have been.

Having settled down in the old Corner House to live, with Mrs. MacCall as housekeeper and Uncle Rufus as man of all work, the girls next took up the matter of education, as related in "The Corner House Girls at School." The four sisters got acquainted with their new environment and made new friends and a few enemies. Particularly they became chummy with Neale O'Neil, the boy who had run away from a circus to get an education. Neale became a fixture in the neighborhood, living with Mr. Con Murphy, the cobbler, on the street back of the Corner House. He became Agnes Kenway's particular and continual boy chum.

During the summer vacation Ruth and her sisters went to Pleasant Cove where they thoroughly enjoyed themselves and had adventures galore, as told in the third volume, entitled "The Corner House Girls Under Canvas."

As has been already mentioned, the sisters had parts in the school play *The Carnation Countess*, the following winter. Tess was Swiftwing, the Hummingbird, and Dot, a busy, busy bee, a part that the smallest Corner House girl acted to perfection. Agnes, who had a bent for theatricals, was immensely successful as Innocent Delight, and Ruth, of course, did her part well. In "The Corner House Girls in a Play," the fourth volume, these adventures and incidents are detailed.

"The Corner House Girls' Odd Find" made two of their very dearest friends wealthy, and incidentally brought to the sister what Agnes had longed for more than "anything else in the whole world" – a touring car. In that they took a long trip, as related in "The Corner House Girls on a Tour." On that journey, but recently completed, Neale O'Neil had accompanied the sisters to drive the car. Mrs. Heard, a good friend, had been their chaperon, and Sammy Pinkney, the boy who was

determined to be a pirate, was what Neale termed "an excrescence on the touring party" during the exciting trip.

Ruth Kenway had been thinking of something that had occurred during their automobile trip just before spying the old gentleman with the green umbrella. She had that very day received a letter from Cecile Shepard, whom, with her brother Luke, the Corner House girls had met during their tour. And Ruth hoped that Cecile would spend a week at the old Corner House before going back in September to the preparatory school which she attended.

But now the old man's peril, her own alarm and her desire to save the stranger's life, drove all other thoughts out of the girl's mind.

CHAPTER III

THE AERIAL TRAMWAY

He might have gone right under the wheels of the backing freight train – that queer looking old gentleman – umbrella and all! Ruth Kenway dragged him back, and the train rumbled past them so near that the umbrella scraped along the sides of the box-cars.

"What under the sun's the matter with you, girl?" snapped the old man.

He turned on her so angrily, and furled the huge umbrella with such emphasis, that Ruth was quite startled, although she had thought that this time she would be prepared for any outbreak of irritation or displeasure on his part. She backed away from him, and as other people who had seen the incident came crowding about, the girl slipped away and crossed the tracks hurriedly when the freight train had gone by.

But the one-armed flagman and other railroad employees let the old gentleman understand beyond peradventure that he had barely escaped a dreadful accident. He had been about to step directly in the path of the backing freight train.

"My, my, my!" he exclaimed at last, "'tisn't possible!"

"It just is possible!" retorted the one-armed flagman. "One minute more and you'd've been ground to powder like as not if it hadn't been for that there girl. Some spunk, she's got."

"Some quick thinkin' she done!" exclaimed another of the employees. "Man alive, you wouldn't have no head on your shoulders right now if she hadn't knowed what to do at once and done it instanter. No siree!"

"My! my! my!" said the old gentleman again. "That girl then saved my life! Possibly saved me from a worse fate – to live on through the years maimed and mutilated."

Just then the train for which the old gentleman was waiting came in sight and soon drew up at the Milton station.

"Then I really owe that girl an apology," he went on. "Who is she? Does she live here!" he asked one of the bystanders.

"Sure she lives here."

"Well, I can't stop to-day. I've got to hurry. But I shall look her up the next time I come this way. Oh, yes indeed, I shall look her up! For a girl she certainly showed good sense."

"I don't know whether she did or not," scoffed the man to whom he spoke, but under his breath. "You don't look as though you were such a lot of use in the world, if you ask me. I bet you're a Tartar!"

Ruth Kenway, however, did not expect to be thanked. The old gentleman with the green umbrella passed out of her mind for the time being before she reached home. And there she found the assembled young folks in the throes of a discussion regarding Tess and Sammy's proposed aerial tramway.

"*Do* call it 'tramway,'" begged Agnes. "It sounds so awfully English, don't you know!"

"It sounds so awfully foolish, don't you know," said Neale O'Neil, who had come over the fence from Mr. Con Murphy's yard and sat on the stoop regaling himself upon a summer apple he had picked on his way. "Have a summer sweetnin', Ag?"

"I do wish you would call her by her right name, Neale," said Ruth, sharply, for she did not approve of Neale's slang.

"Dear me! 'What's in a name?' to quote the Immortal Bard," drawled the youth.

"A good deal sometimes," chuckled Agnes, who did not much mind having her name shortened. "Wait till I look up in my scrap book the name of that special cheese which is made by the Swiss for use in Passion Play week. It's got all the letters of the alphabet in it *twice*."

"Never mind looking it up," advised Ruth, quickly.

"No," said Neale. "We'll take your word for there being something in it. An odoriferous odor, I bet, if it's like most of those fancy cheeses."

"Why," said Tess, reprovingly, "I thought we were talking about my airship line."

"Back to the mines, men! there'll be no strike to-day!" quoted Agnes. "It's up to you, Neale. Sammy and Tess have originated the idea. All you have to do is to find the materials and do the work."

"If Ruth says we may," added Tess, without at all appreciating her sister's sarcasm.

"Why, there's no harm, I suppose. A basket to pull across the street? Does your mother say you may, Sammy?"

"Oh, yes, Ruth," declared the boy. "I just ran and asked her."

"What did she say?"

"We-ell," Sammy admitted slowly, "she was busy cutting out something on the dining-room table and her mouth was full of pins. I had to ask her two or three times before she seemed to hear me."

"And then what did she say?" insisted Ruth, with suspicion, knowing both Sammy and his mother pretty well.

"Why, she said: 'If you will only go out and stop bothering me for an hour I don't care *what* you do.' So, ain't that saying I can?" demanded Sammy.

"I should say she had given you *carte blanche*," chuckled Neale, while the older Corner House girls laughed.

"I think you may go as far as to get the wire, pulleys, and other things needed," Ruth said. "I will ask Sammy's mother myself when she is not so strenuously engaged."

Dot listened to this and gazed after the departing older sister in something like awe.

"What is it, Dottums?" asked Agnes, chucking the little fairy-like child under her soft chin.

"Oh, our Ruth does talk so beautifully," sighed the smallest Corner House girl. "What does 'strain – strain-u-ous-ly' mean, Aggie?"

"Exactly that," laughed her sister. "Mrs. Pinkney certainly was working under a 'strain.' You have hit the meaning of 'strenuously' better even than Mr. Dick."

"Who is Mr. Dick?" demanded Dot, the unappeasable.

"The man who knows everything," said Neale, throwing away the core of his apple and strolling to the gate on his way to the hardware store to purchase the materials for the Aerial tramway.

"The dictionary, goosey," said Tess in explanation to Dot. "Don't you know yet what they mean when they are joking us?"

"I only wanted to *know*," said Dot rather grieved.

"Never mind," said Sammy, being left alone with the two smaller girls. "Let 'em laugh. We won't get mad at 'em till that wire's up and the car is running all right."

Oh, Sammy Pinkney was a practical lad.

Dot, unable long to keep any exciting happening or interest to herself, was disseminating the news of the proposed "airship line" throughout the Corner House household. Uncle Rufus, the brown black-man, who was working just then in the garden, was vastly astonished.

"Ma 'Lantic Ocean!" he gasped. "What will dese yere chillun be doin' next, I want to know! Puttin' up a trolley line, is they, fo' airships? Who ever heard de like?"

"Oh, air-re-ro-planes!" said Dot, having heard a new word and rather liking the rolling syllables of it. "Air-re-ro-planes are getting very common, so Aggie says. There is going to be one at the County Fair. Why, people will be riding in them just like trolley cars, pretty soon!"

"Ma goodness! No!" ejaculated the old man. "I don't want to wake up on dat day when dat dere comes to pass. Lookut, chile! If de airships was a steamin' around over our haid, we'd nebber be sure of our lives. Why, dey'd be throwin' over ashes, and de cooks would be emptyin' garbage pails over de rails like dey does aboard steamships. Wouldn't be no sharks dere to gobble down de leavin's – no, ma'am! On'y birds. And folks aboard would be droppin' t'ings out'n de airship. An' w'en a man

fell overboard – ma mercy, chile! he'd come down plump on you' haid, mebbe! No, ma'am, dey won't never 'low it," and the old negro shook his head seriously.

These perfectly good objections to the practicability of airship flying impressed the smallest Corner House girl deeply. She intended to return to talk to Sammy and Tess about it; but on her way, as she came along the path next to the Willow Street fence, she suddenly saw Sammy's bandy-legged bulldog charging across the street, probably in search of his young master. The dog had slipped his chain in some way and being a ferocious-looking beast at best, it was no wonder that pedestrians gave him a wide berth.

Suddenly Dot, inside the fence, heard a stifled cry of fear outside the fence. Looking up from her Alice-doll she saw a woman clinging to the fence pickets as though she contemplated climbing the barrier to escape the dog; and the dog was standing before her wagging his stump of a tail slightly and showing two formidable rows of teeth while he "laughed" at her perturbation.

"Oh, don't be afraid of Sammy's dog," advised Dot. "He won't bite you."

"He won't bite?" demanded the woman, who was evidently of a nervous disposition. "What's he got all those teeth for? He doesn't bite?"

"Oh – oh, no, ma'am. He only nibbles."

Then she called the dog and the woman went on, relieved. But when her fright was past she probably confessed to herself that the smallest Corner House girl certainly had originality of ideas.

Dot would not let the bulldog into the yard, for he would have at once sought out Billy Bumps, the goat, to tease him. He and Billy were sworn and deadly enemies.

Sammy and Tess had disappeared. So, still feeling the necessity for discussing the airship matter with somebody, Dot went upstairs to Aunt Sarah's room.

Aunt Sarah Maltby was forever engaged in sewing or in fancy work; and, to tell the truth, Dot was not much interested in needlework. She was often seized upon by Aunt Sarah, however, and made to sit down to sew patchwork.

"Every little girl, when I was a little girl, had to learn to use her needle," declared the spinster. "When I was your age, Dorothy Kenway, I had pieced half a block bedquilt and was learning to do feather-stitching."

"Yes ma'am," said Dot, politely. "It must have been very int'resting." But she did not care for such amusement herself. On this occasion, before she could even broach the airship matter, Aunt Sarah seized upon a fault that Dot had not even noticed before.

"Look here!" exclaimed Aunt Sarah. "What have you done to your stocking?"

"I – I – I'm wearing it," confessed Dot, startled, but looking down at her neat little shins in their white hose.

"Wearing them! You're wearing them *out*!" ejaculated Aunt Sarah, pointing to a hole that Dot could not possibly see, for it was behind her. "And those stockings were put on fresh this afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am," admitted Dot, for it was of no use to argue with Aunt Sarah.

"When I was your age," (a favorite expression of Aunt Sarah's) "I darned my own stockings. And you don't even know what needles are for!"

"Oh, yes I do, please, Auntie. They're to make the talking machine play!" declared Dot, frightened by Aunt Sarah's manner into most unusual perversity. She was usually a gentle, obedient child.

Aunt Sarah was in no mood to listen to anything about airships after that; and Dot took her first lesson in darning, there and then. The old lady and the little girl came down to dinner that evening in a rather sober frame of mind, for the occasion had been wearing upon both of them.

The evening meal at the old Corner House was usually, however, a cheering event. Mrs. MacCall held sway at one end of the long table in the huge dining-room, while Aunt Sarah sat at the foot. The girls held places on either side, and if they had guests the latter were scattered between the Corner House girls and made to feel at home.

The table here was, in the truest sense, an "extension table." Uncle Rufus who, in a bobtail coat, white vest and spats, acted as butler, lengthened the table or shortened it, according to the number to be served.

Damask and bright silver and glass made the board attractive. The old-fashioned furniture as well as the table service were the special care of the old negro. His pride and his delight were in the years he had served at the old Stower table.

When the family was alone it is a fact that Uncle Rufus considered himself privileged to join in the children's conversation. And this made the meal no less enjoyable, for Uncle Rufus added nothing, if he did not add joy, to the occasion.

"I never lets ma feelin's flow, as some folks does," he chanced to observe. "Tears don't wash a body's face nowhar's near as good as soap an' watah – no, ma'am!"

"Now, dere's ma daughter, Pechunia: She'd ruther cry dan eat and at *dat* you kin see by her size she don't starb herself. She suttently does love to attend fun'ral's an' sech social gadderin's whar dey kin sit down an' tell 'bout haw good de remains was 'fore de Grim Reaper come an' reaped 'em."

Uncle Rufus sniffed. "Dat foolish brack woman! She b'longs right now to so many buryin' sassities dat if she done gits buried by all of 'em when she dies, 'twill take more'n *one* day to hol' her fun'ral, an' dat's a fac'!"

"Ya-as! Pechunia does love to mo'n. She'd a made a moughty good wife fo' Jeremiah. 'Twas so when her mammy died. I done suffered as much as any widder-man ought to t'rough her mammy dyin'. Ya-as, ma'am. But I tell you what 'tis, honey; 'tain't no use to keep worritin' and worritin' about anyt'ing dat's done an' gone – not fo'ever.

"Her mammy was dead, an' if I'd been let, ma mind would ha' kinda chirked up a bit after a w'ile. But dat brack gal would jes' as soon break down right in de middle of dinner – ef she'd et 'nuff herse'f – an' bust out sobbin' 'bout her mammy. It got so I was prospectin' 'round fo' sumpin to t'row at her haid! I sure was.

"An' de fussin', and de mo'nin' dresses and bunnits, an' de circus-shows she had to hab to show she was properly sorry 'cause her mammy had gone. Ma soul!"

Suddenly Uncle Rufus began to chuckle his mellow chuckle and they knew the point of his story was at hand.

"She done want to write to all de rel'tives an' friends scattered about de fo'ty p'int's of the compass 'bout her mammy's bein' tuk away. Dis was a mighty fur time back, chillen; but Pechunia was jes as foolish den as she is now."

But Uncle Rufus by no means monopolized the conversation at dinner that evening. Tess was so full of the aerial tramway that she would have built it and rebuilt it forty times, so Agnes said, if they had not begged her to stop. Dot was too depressed to think of much but darning. Ruth, however, had an amusing tale to tell.

She described the queer looking old gentleman with the green umbrella and told quite energetically of the adventure at the railroad crossing.

"My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. MacCall, "you might have been hurt yourself. What a start I'd have had had I seen you. And no man would be worth your getting hurt, ma lassie."

"Quite right," croaked Aunt Sarah from the other end of the table. Her opinion of men in general coincided with Mrs. MacCall's remark. The old Corner House was a good deal of an Adamless Eden. But now Agnes suggested something that was quite sure to break up the usual order of the household arrangements.

"If you and Aunt Sarah dislike men so," she asked Mrs. MacCall, laughing, "what are you going to do when Cecile Shepard and her brother come? When will they arrive, Ruth!"

"On Monday, I expect," said the older sister. "But I am sure Aunt Sarah won't mind Luke Shepard any more than she does Neale – or Sammy."

"Who says I don't mind that Neale O'Neil?" snapped the old woman. "All boys are a nuisance. And this Shepard is nothing more than a boy, is he?"

"Oh, he's quite grown up," said Agnes. "He's entering his junior year at college."

"And he owns a tin-peddler's wagon," added Dot, as though that fact surely added to Luke Shepard's dignity and importance.

"Hoh!" sniffed Aunt Sarah, "you girls do mix up with the strangest people! I never see your beat! A tin peddler and his sister."

"But Mrs. Heard, who went with us on our motor trip, liked and approved of the Shepards," Ruth said quietly. "I think they are very plucky, too – orphans, with a very small income, and helping to pay for their education by traveling with a peddler's outfit in summer and letting the team and route out to another peddler during the winter. And Cecile is lovely."

"How about Luke?" asked Agnes slyly, and had the satisfaction of seeing her older sister blush.

Just then there was a crash on the side porch and in a moment Neale's glowing face was thrust through the pantry door.

"Eating, folks? I'll have to hustle or Mr. Con Murphy will eat my share and his own, too. There! I've brought all the hardware for that aerial tramway. It's on the porch. Let Tom Jonah watch it to-night, and we'll rig it in the morning."

CHAPTER IV

SCHOOL IN THE OFFING

Neale O'Neil, trained as an acrobat, had never lost his suppleness and skill in trapeze work and other gymnastics since leaving Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie. There was a fine gymnasium at the Milton high school which he attended, and Neale had made his mark in the gymnasium work as well as in the studies he loved.

It was no trick at all for him to put up the wire attachments to make the aerial tramway altogether to the satisfaction of Tess and Dot and Sammy Pinkney. Before evening the following day the wire was stretched and in place, the pulleys rigged, and the wire basket, which was used as the car, was traveling back and forth briskly from the window of Sammy's bedroom to one of the windows of the large room in the east ell of the old Corner House where Tess and Dot slept and had their dolls and playthings.

With lengths of clothesline to pull the wire car back and forth, it was easy for the children to manipulate it. And the car was roomy enough and strong enough to hold almost anything they might wish to send between the two houses.

Of course, it was not exactly an airship of any kind. But for the time Tess Kenway, who was usually modestly satisfied with what was done for her, was perfectly delighted with the arrangement.

As for Dot, she was so pleased, that she felt compelled to sit right down in the middle of the drying green beneath the wire, clasping the Alice-doll close to her breast, and gaze up at the car going back and forth as Sammy and Tess manipulated it.

"Oh! it's delightful!" gasped the little girl, quoting one of Agnes' favorite expressions.

When Sammy came down and looked over the fence at her he said:

"Say, Dot, let's give your dolls a ride."

"Sam-my Pink-ney!" shrilled Dot vigorously. "If you ever try to ride my Alice-doll or any of her sisters in that car up there I'll – I'll never speak to you again!"

And she was so much in earnest and seemed so near to tears that Sammy hastily gave his word of honor – as a man and a pirate – never to treat the dolls to such an aerial trip.

Mabel Creamer, who lived next door on Main Street, wheeled her little brother over to Willow Street to view the wonder of the aerial tramway. When she heard that Dot and Tess would not allow their dolls to be used as passengers in the aerial car, she offered to put Bubby up there.

"Why, Mabel!" gasped Tess. "S'pose he should fall out?"

"Oh," Mabel replied coolly, "he wouldn't hurt himself. He rolled all the way down the cellar stairs yesterday and didn't do a thing to himself – only broke the cat's dish, 'cause he landed on it."

"That's some tough baby," pronounced Neale; but after Mabel had wheeled Bubby away Tess confided to Neale that she knew why the Creamer's youngest was so "tough."

"Why, you know," Tess said earnestly, "almost everything that could happen to a baby has happened to him. Mabel hates to take care of him, and she is always forgetting and leaving him to tumble out of the carriage, or into something babies aren't supposed to get into."

"And 'member when he got carried away in the hamper by the laundryman?" broke in Dot. "If it hadn't been for our Agnes following in Joe Eldred's motor car, Bubby might have been washed and ironed and brought back to Mrs. Creamer just as flat as a pancake!"

"That's the capsheaf," chuckled Neale O'Neil. "Bubby Creamer is certainly a wonderful kid. What do you say, Aggie?" for the older girl had just appeared, ready dressed for a shopping excursion.

"Silk-wool to mend my sweater; pins – two kinds; pearl buttons for Dot's waists; a celluloid thimble for Linda; a pair of hose for Mrs. Mac – extra tops; Aunt Sarah's peppermints for Sunday

service; lace for Ruthie's collar; hair ribbons for Tessie; a *love* of a waist I saw at Blackstein & Mape's! and – "

"Help! Help!" cried Neale, breaking in at last. "And you expect *me* to accompany you on a shopping trip, Aggie, when you've all those feminine folderols to buy?"

"Why not?" demanded Agnes, making innocent eyes. "I want you to carry my packages."

"All right. But you'll hitch me out in front of the store to a hitching post like any other beast of burden," returned Neale, following in her footsteps out of the side gate.

This was a Saturday. Ruth had said that if they were to have company all the following week and school was to open a week from Monday, they had all better get out their school books on this evening and begin to get familiar with the studies they were to go back to so soon.

"At least, we would better see if we all remember our A B C's," she said dryly. "You, Sammy, after being out so long last term because of the scarlet fever, will have to make up some studies if you wish to keep up with your class."

"Don't care whether I keep up or not," growled Sammy. "I just hate school. Every time I think of it I feel like going right off and being a pirate, without waiting to learn navigation."

For Mr. Pinkney, who was a very wise man, had explained to Sammy that there was scarcely any use in his thinking of being a pirate if he could not navigate a ship. And navigation, he further explained, was a form of mathematics that could only be studied after one had graduated from high school and knew all about algebra.

Nevertheless, Sammy appreciated the fact that he was included in Ruth's invitation and could bring his books over to the Corner House sitting-room where the girls and Neale O'Neil were wont to study almost every week-day night during the school year.

Neale usually took supper at the Corner House on Saturday evenings and, considering the way he came back from the shopping expedition laden with bundles, he certainly deserved something for "the inner man," as he himself expressed it. A truly New England Saturday night supper was almost always served by Mrs. MacCall – baked beans, brown bread and codfish cakes.

And pudding! Mrs. MacCall was famous for her "whangdoodle pudding and lallygag sauce" – a title she had given once to cottage pudding and its accompanying dressing to satisfy little folks' teasing questions as to "what is *that*?" Neale O'Neil was very fond of this delicacy.

As he passed his plate for a second helping on this occasion he quoted with becoming reverence: "The woman that maketh a good pudding is better than a tart reply."

"But Mrs. Adams made a tart once," observed Dot seriously, "and instead of sifting powdered sugar on it she got hold of her sand-shaker, and when she gave Margaret Pease and me each a piece it grittled our teeth so we couldn't eat it. So then," concluded Dot, "she found out what she had done."

"If she'd given it to Sammy Pinkney," Tess said morosely, "I guess he'd have eaten it right down and never said a word. I saw him drop his bread and butter and 'lasses on the ground once, and he picked it right up and ate it. He said the ground was clean!"

"No wonder Sammy's such a gritty little chap," chuckled Neale.

"Well," Mrs. MacCall said cheerfully, and with her usual optimism, "it's an old saying that everybody has to eat a peck of dirt before he dies."

"So 'tis, Mrs. MacCall," Aunt Sarah rejoined from her end of the table, and with a scornful sniff. "But I want to know whose dirt I'm eating. That Sammy Pinkney is nothing but a little animal."

This puzzled Dot somewhat, and she whispered to Ruth: "Ruthie, are *good* little boys, then, vegetables!"

"No, dear," the elder sister said, smiling while the others laughed. "Both bad little boys and good little boys, as well as girls, are human beings."

"And," said Tess soberly, trying to recall something she had learned in the past, "there isn't any difference between bad girls and bad boys, only the boys are of the male sex and the girls are of the feline sex."

At that statement there was a burst of laughter.

"You certainly said something that time, Tess," declared Neale. "For if there is anything more feline than a girl that's mad – "

"Nothing like that, Neale O'Neil," interrupted Agnes quickly. "You would better sing pretty small, young man. Remember you are outnumbered."

"Yes," said Tess sedately, "you haven't even Sammy here now to take your part, you know, Neale."

"True for you, Tessie," agreed Neale. "I am in an infinitesimal minority."

Dot's eyes opened wide as these long words sounded from the boy's lips, and she gulped just as though she were swallowing them down for digestion. Agnes' eyes twinkled as she asked the smallest girl:

"Did you get those two, honey?"

"Don't make fun of her," admonished Ruth, aside.

"Well," sighed Dot, soberly, "I do hope I'll get into big words in the reading book this next term. I love 'em. Why! Tess is awfully far ahead of me; she can spell words in four cylinders!"

And that closed the evening meal with a round of laughter that Dot did not understand.

CHAPTER V

THE SHEPARDS

"Just think!" Agnes said to Ruth. "For the first time since we came to live at the old Corner House and call it our owniest own, we are going to have real visitors. Oh, dear, me, Ruth, I wish we could have week-end parties, and dances, and all sorts of society things. I do!"

"Mercy, Agnes! And you with your hair in plaits?"

"Whose fault is that, I'd like to know," responded the beauty a bit sharply. "I'm the only girl in my set who doesn't put her hair up. Myra Stetson has worn hers up for a year – "

"She keeps house for her father and has not attended school for six months," Ruth reminded her.

"Well, Eva Larry puts hers up when her mother has company. And Pearl Howard – "

"Never mind the catalog of your friends, dear," put in Ruth, quietly. "We know you are a much abused little girl. But your hair in plaits you'd better wear for a while yet.

"As for week-end parties and the like, I will speak to Mr. Howbridge and perhaps we can give some parties this winter."

"With the kids in them!" grumbled Agnes. "I want real grown-up parties."

"Let us wait till we are really grown up for them," and the elder sister laughed.

"Goodness! you are grown up enough, Ruth Kenway," Agnes declared. "You might be married at your age. Mrs. Mac says she was."

"Hush!" exclaimed Ruth, almost shocked by such a suggestion. "You do get the most peculiar ideas in your head, Aggie."

"There's nothing peculiar about marrying," said the other girl saucily. "I'm sure everybody's 'doing it.' It's quite the proper thing. You know, as the smallest member of the catechism class replied to the question: 'What is the chief end of woman?' 'Marriage!' And 'tis, too," concluded the positive Agnes.

"Do talk sensibly. But to return. Cecile and her brother visiting us is really the first time we'll have entertained guests – save Mrs. Treble and – "

"Oh, Mrs. Trouble and Double Trouble, or Barnabetta Scruggs and her father, don't count," Agnes hastened to say. "*They* were only people we took in. But the Shepards are real guests. And I'm so glad you decided upon giving them two of the big front rooms, Ruthie. Those guest rooms that Uncle Peter had shut up for so many years are just beautiful. There aren't such great rooms, or such splendid old furniture in Milton, as we have."

"We have much to be thankful for," said Ruth placidly.

"We've a lot to be proud of," amended Agnes. "And our auto! My! Think of us poor little miserable Kenways cutting such a dash."

"And yet you were just now longing for more nice things," pointed out Ruth.

"That's my fatal ambition," sighed her sister. "I am a female – No! A *feline*– as Tess says – Napoleon. I long for more worlds to conquer like Alexander. I dream of great things like Sir Humphrey Davy and Newton. I – "

"Do be feminine in your comparisons, if not feline," suggested Ruth, laughing. "Speak of great women, not of great men."

"Oh, indeed! Why, pray? Boadicea? Queen Elizabeth? Joan of Arc – "

"Oh I know who *she* was," declared Dot, who had been listening, open-eyed and open-mouthed, to this harangue of the volatile sister. "She was Noah's wife – and he built a big boat, and put horses and bears and pigs and goats on it so they wouldn't be drowned – and dogs and cats. And they were fruitful and multiplied and filled the earth – "

"Oh, oh, oh!" shrieked Agnes. "That child will be the death of me! Where does she pick up her knowledge of scriptural history?"

"I guess," said Ruth, kissing the pouting lips of Dot, who did not always take kindly to being laughed at, "that our old Sandyface must have been one of those cats Noah had. She has found four more little blind kittens somewhere. And what we shall do about it, I do not know."

Dot and Tess ran squealing to the shed to see the new members of the Corner House family, while Neale said, chuckling:

"It's a regular *catastroph*e, isn't it? Better fill the motor car with feline creatures and let Aggie and me chase around through the country, dropping cats at farmers' barns."

"Never!" proclaimed Agnes. "We mean to keep on good terms with all the farmers about Milton. We can't have them coming out and stopping us when we go by and demanding pay for all the hens you run over, Neale O'Neil."

"Never yet ran over but one hen," declared the boy quickly. "And she was an old cluck hen – the farmer said so. He thought he really ought to pay me for killing her. And she made soup at that."

"Come, come, come, children!" admonished Ruth. "Let us get out the books and see if we have quite forgotten everything we ever knew."

They gathered around the sitting-room lamp, Sammy Pinkney having appeared. Mrs. MacCall joined them with her mending, as she loved to do in the evenings. And the Corner House study hour was inaugurated for the fall with appropriate ceremonies of baked apples on the stove and a heaping plate of popcorn in the middle of the table.

"I can study so much better when I'm chewing something," Agnes admitted.

Dot was soon nodding and Mrs. MacCall from her low rocking chair observed:

"I think little folks had better go to bed with the chickens – eh, my lassie!"

"No, Mrs. Mac; I don't want to," complained the sleepy Dot. "I've got a bed of my own."

"I'll go with her," said Tess, knowing that her little sister did not like to retire alone, even if she might object to the company of chickens.

Really, none of them studied much on this evening; but they had a happy time. All, possibly, save Sammy. The thought of going to school once again made that embryo pirate very despondent.

"'Tain't that I wouldn't like to go with the fellers, and play at recess, and hear the organ play in the big hall, and spin tops on the basement play-room floor, and all *that*," grumbled Sammy. "But they do try to learn us such perfectly silly things."

"What silly things?" demanded Agnes with amusement.

"Why, all 'bout 'rithmetic. Huh! Can't a feller count on his fingers? What were they given us for, I'd like to know?" demanded this youthful philosopher.

"Ow! ow!" murmured Neale, vastly amused.

"Huh!" went on Sammy. "Last teacher I had – mine and Tessie's – was all the time learning us maxims, and what things meant; like *love*, and *charity* and *happiness*. She was so silly, she was!"

"That Iky Goronofsky is the thick one," added Sammy, with a grin of recollection. "When she was trying to make us kids understand the difference between the meaning of those three words he couldn't get it into his head. So she gave him three buttons, one for love, one for charity and one for happiness, and made him take 'em home to study."

"What did he do with them!" asked Neale, interested.

"Why, when she asked Iky the next time about love, charity and happiness, he didn't know any more than he did before," said Sammy, with disgust. "Where's your buttons, Iky?" she asks him, and Iky hauls out two of 'em.

"'There's love, Miss Shipman, and there's charity,' says Iky, 'but my mother sewed happiness on my waist this morning.' Did you ever hear of such a dunce as that kid?" concluded Sammy, with disgust.

Sunday was always a busy day, if a quiet one, at the old Corner House. Everything had been done to prepare for the expected guests; but several times Agnes had to enter the two big rooms which were to be devoted to the use of Cecile Shepard and her brother, just for the sake of making sure that all was right and ready.

In just what style the Shepards lived Agnes did not know. That they were very well-mannered and were plainly used to what is really essential to cultivated people, the Corner House girls were sure.

The visitors were not wealthy, however; far from it. They had but a single relative – a maiden aunt – and with her they made their home when they were not at school or off on peddling trips with a van and team of horses.

Cecile and Luke arrived before noon on Monday. Neale drove Ruth and Agnes down to the station in the car to meet the visitors.

"Oh, this is just scrumptious!" the second sister declared, with a sigh. "To think that the Kenways would ever arrive at the point where they can drive to the station in their own car for guests – "

"Oh, squash!" ejaculated Neale, with disgust. "She's getting to be what Uncle Rufus calls uppity. There'll be no living in the same town with my Lady pretty soon."

"It is all right," Ruth said seriously, for she did not approve of Neale any more than she could help – that was not her policy with boys. "It is perfectly proper to be glad that our circumstances have improved."

"Oh, crickey!" snorted Neale. "You girls have got up in the world, that's a fact. But I've come down. Uncle Bill Sorber wanted me to be a ground and lofty tumbler."

The sisters laughed, and what might have been a bit of friction was escaped. Even Ruth had to admit that the ex-circus boy was the best-natured person they knew.

Well, the Shepards arrived. Cecile and Luke were just as glad to see Neale as they were to see the Corner House girls.

Luke, sitting in the seat beside Neale on the way up town, whispered to him: "Isn't she sweeter than ever? I declare! I never knew so nice a girl."

"Huh?" grunted Neale, and glared at his companion for a moment, forgetting that a chauffeur should keep both eyes on his business when running a car in a crowded street.

"Say! were you trying to climb into that coal cart or only fooling?" gasped Luke, who although several years older than Neale had none of his experience as an automobile driver.

"What did you say?" asked Neale, with his eyes looking ahead again.

"Were you trying to get into that coal cart or – "

"Aw, no! About Aggie Kenway."

"Why – why I didn't say anything about her," Luke replied. "Oh! I spoke of Miss Ruth. Isn't she a splendid girl?"

"Oh! Yes! Ruth! Some!" was the way Neale agreed with this statement of the visitor.

CHAPTER VI

NAMING THE NEW BABY

Luke Shepard was a very friendly person who was bound to make himself beloved by the entire Corner House family. Unless, perhaps, Aunt Sarah Maltby refused to melt before the sunshine of his smile. He was a handsome fellow, too – curly brown hair, a good brown and red complexion, well chiseled features, brown eyes set wide apart, and lips that laughed above a well molded and firm-looking chin.

Cecile was his antithesis – sprightly and small-framed, roguish of look and behavior, without an iota of hoidenishness about her. She was inordinately fond of her brother, and she could not understand how the Corner House girls had managed to get on so many years without one boy, at least, in the family.

"Of course, you've got Neale," she said to Ruth and Agnes after they had reached the house.

"And there's Sammy Pinkney," Tess put in gravely. "I'm sure he's quite as much trouble to us as a real brother could be."

At this there was a burst of uncontrollable laughter.

The little girls were fond of Luke Shepard, however. He had been very nice to them on that adventurous occasion when they had met him and his sister on the automobile tour; and on coming to the old Corner House for this visit he had not forgotten Tess and Dot. To the former he had brought a lovely, imaginative, beautifully bound story book, "full of gods and gondolas," Dot said with awe.

To Dot herself he most tactfully presented a doll. Not a doll to take the place in any way of the beloved Alice-doll. No. Luke was too wise a youth for that. But it was a new baby nevertheless that Dot was bound to be proud of.

"Oh," cried Tess, "a boy baby, Dot! And you never had a real boy baby before!"

"Or such a nice looking one, at any rate," Agnes suggested.

Dot, smiling "big," clasped the manly looking little manikin in its neat sailor suit and cap. She really was too pleased for speech for a minute or two. Then she said:

"I'm real glad you came to see us, Mr. Luke. I was glad before. Now I'm glad *twice*."

"You can't beat that kid," said Neale admiringly.

But the arrival of the new doll-baby put upon the smaller Corner House girls – especially upon Dot – a duty that was always taken seriously. The naming of either new dolls or new pets usually needed the heedful attention of the entire Corner House family.

The children of Sandyface, and her grandchildren, were usually an enormous care upon the little girls in this way. To name so many cats, and name them appropriately, had been in the past a matter of no little moment.

Now that Sandyface had found four more eyeless, mewling little mites, only the coming of the sailor-baby, as Dot called Luke Shepard's present, made the two little girls agree to Neale's suggestion regarding the naming of the new kittens.

They were christened briefly and succinctly: "One, Two, Three and Four."

"For we really are too busy, and company in the house, too," said Tess earnestly, "to worry over Sandyface's new family. She *might* have waited until some other time to find those kittens."

On that first evening of the Shepards' visit there was much ado about the name for the baby. The whole family took more or less interest in it, and suggestions galore were showered upon the anxious young mother regarding the sailor-baby.

Neale suggested that a ballot-box be arranged and that everybody write his suggestions upon slips of paper and deposit them in the box. Then Dot might be allowed to put in her hand, mix up the slips, and draw one. That name must be the sailor-baby's cognomen.

But there was too great a hazard in this to attract the smallest Corner House girl; for Aunt Sarah had already gravely suggested Zerubbabel.

"And suppose," Dot whispered, "she should write that on a paper (do you s'pose such an ugly name can be spelled!) and I should draw that out first thing! Why, a name like that would – would make an invalid of the poor child all his life!"

Therefore when, on Tuesday, the Corner House girls and their guests went for a ride in the automobile, the momentous decision regarding the new baby's name was still to be made.

There was no room for Sammy in the car on this occasion, and he was left behind to seek his own amusement with the aerial tramway. And as matters turned out he certainly was busy with that arrangement before the automobile party returned.

However, even Tess forgot all things aerial in the enjoyment of the ride. The car ran smoothly, the day was fine, and not even a "cluck hen" crossed their path. So there was not the smallest thing to mar their pleasure.

Luke rode in front with Neale; and the three older girls were so much interested in their own chatter that they scarcely thought of Tess and Dot. But they, too, were exceedingly busy with their particular affairs.

What interested them most of all through the drive was the naming of the sailor-baby. Dot sat with the Alice-doll in her arms, of course; but the new doll was hugged up very close to her side upon the seat.

"He is really a very pretty doll for a boy doll," Tess observed. "You really should have a very pretty name for him."

"I know," agreed the anxious mother. "But all the nice names seem to have been used up. Wha – what do you think of 'Brandywine,' Tessie?"

"Goodness! The name of that avenue we just passed? Why, Dot!" ejaculated the horrified older sister. "That's a *nawful* name! And we're temp'rance."

"Yes. It is kind of liquorish, I s'pose," admitted Dot. "But it sounds different. Tom, and Edgar, and Wilfred, and Feodor, and St. John, and Clarence, and Montmorency, and Peter, and Henry, and Vanscombe, and Michael, and all those others, have been used over and over again in naming babies," Dot said with seriousness. "You know we've heard of somebody, or know somebody, named by all of those names. Oh, Tess!" she ejaculated suddenly, "look there!"

The automobile party were just passing Mr. Stout's big tobacco barn. One leaf of the main door was open and hooked back and Dot was pointing eagerly to some large black letters painted upon the inside of this door.

"What a pretty name that is!" she whispered to Tess, excitedly. "'Nosmo'! Did you ever hear of it before?"

"No-o, Dottie, I never did," her sister agreed slowly. "'Nosmo' sounds kind of funny, doesn't it? I – I never heard of a boy called that."

"Well, Tess Kenway!" cried her little sister indignantly, "isn't that just what we want? A boy's name that hasn't ever been used on a boy before?"

"That's so, Dottie," agreed the more cautious Tess. "That *is* so. No boy has had it and spoiled it by being bad." Tess' opinion of the genus boy was governed largely by the attitude Ruth seemed to hold toward all boyhood.

"It's brand new," declared Dot, christening the sailor-baby on the spot, and without bell, book, or candle. "Nosmo Kenway. Isn't that nice? He's so cute, too!" and she seized the new doll and pressed her red lips to the sailor-boy's highly flushed cheek.

"Nosmo Kenway," murmured Tess. "Oughtn't he to have a middle name?"

"Oh, well," said Dot. "We can give him that afterward – if we find a good one. But middle names don't really count, after all."

The merry party of automobilists ran out as far as Mr. Bob Buckham's – the strawberry man, as they called him – a very good friend of theirs. Mrs. Buckham was confined to her chair and the Corner House girls always took her flowers or something nice when they called at the farm-house.

The Kenways and Neale went in to see the invalid for a minute, leaving Cecile and Luke Shepard alone in the car. The keen-eyed girl suddenly leaned forward and tapped her brother on the arm.

"Hul-lo!" he said, waking from a day-dream.

"Penny for your thoughts, Luke?" she suggested.

"Worth more than that, Sis."

"I know. They were about Ruth Kenway," and Cecile laughed, although her eyes were anxious.

"Witch!" exclaimed Luke, flushing a little.

"Beware, young man!" his sister said, shaking an admonitory finger.

"Beware of the dog?" queried Luke with a smile.

"Just so, Boy. There is a dog. A big one in the path."

"Why, Sis, I don't believe Ruth Kenway has ever even *thought* of a boy – "

"As you are thinking of her?" his sister broke in softly. "No. I think she is perfectly 'heart whole and fancy free.' And so ought you to be, Luke."

"Well, she's such a sweet girl," he declared, his eyes shining.

"She certainly is."

"Then what have you against my – my liking her?"

"There is nothing I'd like better in this world, Luke," his sister declared earnestly, "than to see you happy in the friendship of such a girl as Ruth."

"Then – "

"Remember Neighbor," Cecile said, earnestly.

"Oh, bother Neighbor!" muttered Luke.

"No. You would not like to see him bothered. And he is a very good friend of yours. He can and will help you get a start in the world after you have finished at college. His aid may mean ten years' advantage to you."

"Do you suppose I care what Neighbor does with his money?" demanded Luke, hotly.

"No. Not for just what the money would bring you," she agreed. "But think! What have you to offer Ruth Kenway if you should come to the point where you might ask her to engage herself to you? We're just as poor as Job's turkey after it was picked to the bones!"

"I know it, Sis," groaned the young fellow.

"And without Neighbor's help you may have a long and hard struggle getting anywhere," Cecile said gravely.

"Too true, Sis."

"Well – then – "

The Kenways and Neale O'Neil reappeared. The visiting brother fell silent. Luke Shepard scarcely had a word to say during the remainder of the automobile ride.

CHAPTER VII

A FELINE FUROR

Returning to town, the automobile party passed Stout's tobacco barn again and when it came in sight Dot eagerly began to explain to the older girls how and where she had found a name for the sailor-baby that Luke Shepard had given her.

"That is a real pretty name I think," said Ruth, absently. "And quite new I am sure."

Agnes demanded again where the smallest Corner House girl had seen the name, 'Nosmo' painted. "Why!" she exclaimed, "it says 'king' – that's what is painted on that door, children."

"Oh, but, Sister!" exclaimed Tess. "*That* is the other half of the big door. They've shut the half that was open when we rode along before and opened the other one." But Agnes was not listening to this explanation. She had turned back to Ruth and Cecile.

Dot was eagerly repeating something over and over to herself. Tess turned to demand what it was.

"Oh, Tessie!" the smallest Corner House girl cried, "that sounds b-e-a-u-ti-ful!"

"What does?" demanded her sister.

"I've just the nicest middle name for this sailor-baby," and she hugged her new possession again.

"What is it?" asked the interested Tess.

"Nosmo King Kenway. Isn't that nice?" eagerly cried the little girl. "It's – it's so 'ristocratic. Don't you think so, Tess?"

Tess repeated the full name, too. It did sound rather nice. The oftener you said it the better it sounded. And – yet – there was something a wee bit peculiar about it. But Tess was too kind-hearted to suggest anything wrong with the name, as long as Dot liked it so much. And she had found it all her very own self!

"I wonder what Sammy will say to *that*," murmured Dot placidly. "I guess he'll think it is a nice name, won't he?"

"Well, if he doesn't it won't make any difference," Tess said loftily.

Just at that time, however, (though quite unsuspected by the Corner House girls) Sammy Pinkney had his mind quite filled with other and more important matters.

Since his long illness in the spring Sammy had remained something of a stranger to his oldtime boy friends. Of course, as soon as he got into school again and associated with the boys of his own class once more, he would get back into the "gang" as he called it. He was not a boy to be gibed because he played with girls so much.

However, habit brought him to the side gate of the Corner House on this afternoon, whether the little girls were at home or not. He was so often in and out of the house that neither Mrs. MacCall nor Linda paid much attention to him; for although Sammy Pinkney was as "full of mischief as a chestnut is of meat" (to quote Mrs. MacCall) he never touched anything about the house that was not his, nor wandered into the rooms upstairs, save the one from the window of which the aerial tramway was strung to the window of his own bedroom "scatecornered" across Willow Street.

His aim was the window of the little girls' big playing and sleeping room now, for the wire basket chanced to be fastened at this end of the line. He had it in his mind to pull the basket over to his own house, fill it there with some sort of cargo, and draw it back and forth, amusing himself by imagining that he was loading a ship from the dock.

"Or, maybe," Sammy ruminated, "I'll have the old ship wrecked, and the lifesavers will put out the life buoy; and we'll bring the passengers ashore. Crickey! that'll be just the thing. I'll save 'em all from drownin' – that's what I'll do!"

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