

Emerson Alice B.

Ruth Fielding At Sunrise Farm; What Became of the Raby Orphans



Alice Emerson

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CHAPTER I – SWEET BRIARS AND SOUR PICKLES

The single gas jet burning at the end of the corridor was so dim and made so flickering a light that it added more to the shadows of the passage than it provided illumination. It was hard to discover which were realities and which shadows in the long gallery.

Not a ray of light appeared at any of the transoms over the dormitory doors; yet that might not mean that there were no lights burning within the duo and quartette rooms in the East Dormitory of Briarwood Hall. There were ways of shrouding the telltale transoms and – without doubt – the members of the advanced junior classes had learned such little tricks of the trade of being a schoolgirl.

At one door – and it was the portal of the largest “quartette” room on the floor – a tall figure kept guard. At first this figure was so silent and motionless that it seemed like a shadow only. But when another shadow crept toward it, rustling along the wall on tiptoe, the guard demanded, hissing:

“S-s-stop! who goes there?”

“Oh-oo! How you startled me, Madge Steele!”

“Sh!” commanded the guard. “Who goes there?”

“Why – why – It’s I.”

“Give the password instantly. Answer!” commanded the guard again, and with some vexation. “I isn’t anybody.”

“Oh, indeed? Let me tell you that *this* ‘I’ is somebody – according to the gym. scales. I gained three pounds over the Easter holidays,” said “Heavy” Jennie Stone, who had begun her reply with a giggle, but ended it with a sigh.

“Password, Miss!” snapped the guard, grimly.

“Oh! of course!” Then the fat girl whispered shrilly: “‘Sincerity – befriend.’ That is what ‘S. B.’ stands for, I s’pose. Sweetbriars! and I have a big bag of sour pickles to offset the cloying sweetness of the Sweetbriars,” chuckled Heavy. “Besides, they say that vinegar pickles will make you thin – ”

“I don’t need them for that purpose,” admitted the guard at the door, still in a whisper, but accepting the large, “warty” pickle Heavy thrust into her hand.

“Will make *me* thin, then,” agreed the other. “Let me in, Madge.”

The guard, sucking the pickle convulsively the while, opened the door just a little way. A blanket had been hung on a frame inside in such a manner that scarcely a gleam of lamplight reached the corridor when the door was open.

“Pass the Sweetbriar!” choked Madge, with her mouth full and the tears running down her cheeks. “My goodness, Jennie Stone! these pickles are right out of vitriol!”

“Sour, aren’t they?” chuckled Heavy. “I handed you a real one for fair, that time, didn’t I, Madge?”

Then she tried to sidle through the narrow opening, got stuck, and was urged on by Madge pushing her. With a bang – punctuated by a chorus of muffled exclamations from the girls already assembled – she tore away the frame and the blanket and got through.

“Shut the door, quick, guard!” exclaimed Helen Cameron.

“Of course, that would be Heavy – entering like a female Samson and tearing down the pillars of the temple,” snapped Mercy Curtis, the lame girl, in her sharp way.

“Please repair the damage, Helen,” said Ruth Fielding, who presided at the far end of the room, sitting cross-legged on one of the beds.

The other girls were arranged on the chairs, or upon the floor before her. There was a goodly number of them, and they now included most of the members of the secret society known at Briarwood Hall as the “S. B.’s.”

Ruth herself was a bright, brown-haired girl who, without possessing many pretensions to real beauty of feature, still was quite good to look at and proved particularly charming when one grew to know her well.

She was rather plump, happy of disposition, and with the kindest heart in the world. She made both friends and enemies. No person of real character can escape being disliked, now and then, by those of envious disposition.

Ruth Fielding succeeded, usually, in winning to her those who at first disliked her. And this, I claim, is a better gift than that of being universally popular from the start.

Ruth had come from her old home in Darrowtown, where her parents died, two years before, to the Red Mill on the Lumano River, where her great-uncle, Jabez Potter, the miller, was inclined at first to shelter her only as an object of his grudging charity. In the first volume of this series, however, entitled “Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill; Or, Jasper Parloe’s Secret,” the girl found her way – in a measure, at least – to the uncle’s crabbed heart.

Uncle Jabez was a just man, and he considered it his duty, when Helen Cameron, Ruth’s dearest friend, was sent to Briarwood Hall to school, to send Ruth to the same institution. In the second volume, “Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall; Or, Solving the Campus Mystery,” was related the adventures, friendships, rivalries, and fun of Ruth’s and Helen’s first term at the old school.

In “Ruth Fielding at Snow Camp; Or, Lost in the Backwoods,” was told the adventures of Ruth and her friends at the Camerons’ winter camp during the Christmas holidays. At the end of the first year of school, they all went to the seaside, to experience many adventures in “Ruth Fielding at Lighthouse Point; Or, Nita, the Girl Castaway,” the fourth volume of the series.

A part of that eventful summer was spent by Ruth and her chums in Montana, and the girl of the Red Mill was enabled to do old Uncle Jabez such a favor that he willingly agreed to pay her expenses at Briarwood Hall for another year. This is all told in “Ruth Fielding at Silver Ranch; Or, Schoolgirls Among the Cowboys.”

The girls returned to Briarwood Hall and in the sixth volume of the series, entitled “Ruth Fielding on Cliff Island; Or, The Old Hunter’s Treasure Box,” Ruth was privileged to help Jerry Sheming and his unfortunate old uncle in the recovery of their title to Cliff Island in Lake Tallahaska, while she and her friends had some thrilling and many funny adventures during the mid-winter vacation.

The second half of this school year was now old. The Easter recess was past and the girls were looking forward to the usual break-up in the middle of June. The hardest of the work for the year was over. Those girls who had been faithful in their studies prior to Easter could now take something of a breathing spell, and the S. B.’s were determined to initiate such candidates as had been on the waiting list for reception into the secrets of the most popular society in the school.

The shrouded door of the quartette room occupied by Ruth, Helen, Mercy, and Jane Ann Hicks, from Montana, was opened carefully again and again until the outer guard, Madge Steele, had admitted all the candidates and most of the members of the S. B. order who were expected.

Each girl was presented with at least half a big sour pickle from Heavy’s store; but really, the pickles had nothing to do with the initiation of the neophytes.

There was a serious and helpful side to the society of the S. B.’s – as witness the password. Ruth, who was the most active member of the institution, realized, however, that the girls were so full of fun that they must have some way of expressing themselves out of the ordinary. Perhaps she had asked Mademoiselle Picolet, the French teacher, whose room was in this dormitory, and Miss

Scrimp, the matron, to overlook this present infraction of the rules, for it must be admitted that the retiring bell had rung half an hour before the gathering in this particular room.

“All here!” breathed Ruth, at last, and Madge was called in. The candidates were placed in the middle of the floor. Ann Hicks, the girl from Silver Ranch, was one of these. Ann had proved her character and made herself popular in the school against considerable odds, as related in the preceding volume. Now, the honor of being admitted into the secret society was added to the other marks of the school’s approval.

“Candidates,” said Ruth, addressing in most solemn tones the group of girls before her, “you are about to be initiated into the degree of the Marble Harp. As Infants, when you first entered the school, you were all made acquainted with the legend of the Marble Harp.

“The figure of *Harmony*, presiding over the fountain in the middle of the campus, was modeled by the sculptor from the only daughter of the man who originally owned Briarwood Park before it became a school. Said sculptor and daughter – in the most approved fashion of the present day school of romanticist authors – ran away with each other, were married without the father’s approval, and both are supposed to have died miserably in a studio-garret.

“The heart-broken father naturally left his cur-r-r-se upon the fountain, and it is said – mind you, this is hearsay,” added Ruth, solemnly, “that whenever anything of moment is about to transpire at Briarwood Hall, or any calamity befall, the strings of the marble harp held in the hands of *Harmony*, are heard to twang.

“Of course, as has been pointed out before, the fact that the harp is in the shape of a *lyre*, must be considered, too, if one is to accept this legend. But, however, and nevertheless,” pursued Ruth, “it has been decided that the candidates here assembled must join in the Mackintosh March, and, in procession, led by our Outer Guard and followed – not to say *herded*– by our Rear Guard, must proceed once around the campus, down into the garden, and circle the fountain, chanting, as you have been instructed, the marching song.

“All ready! You all have your mackintoshes, as instructed? Into them at once,” commanded Ruth. “Into line – one after the other. Now, Outer Guard!”

The lights were extinguished; the blanket at the door was removed; Madge Steele led the way and Heavy, as the Rear Guard, was last in the line. Shrouded in the hoods of the mackintoshes, scarcely one of the girls would have been recognized by any curious teacher or matron.

Ruth hopped down from the bed, and the remaining Sweetbriars ran giggling to the windows. It was a drizzly, dark night. The paths about the campus glistened, and the lamps upon the posts flickered dimly.

Out of the front door filed the procession; when they were far enough away from the buildings which surrounded the campus, they began the chant, based upon Tom Moore’s famous old song:

“The harp that once through Briarwood Hall
The soul of music shed,
Now hangs as mute o’er the campus fount
As though that soul were dead.”

Madge Steele, with her strong voice, led the chant. The girls, crowded at the open windows, began to giggle, for they could hear Heavy, at the end of the procession, sing out a very different verse.

“That rascal ought to be fined for that,” murmured The Fox, the sandy-haired girl next to Ruth.

“But, isn’t she funny?” gasped Helen, on the other side of the Chief of the S. B.’s.

“Oh, dear!” exclaimed Belle Tingley. “I hope Sarah Fish got there ahead of them. *Won’t* they be surprised when they get a baptism of a glass of water each from the fountain, as they go by?”

“They’ll think the statue has come to life, sure enough, if it doesn’t twang the lyre,” quoth Helen.

“They’ll get an unexpected ducking,” giggled Lluella Fairfax.

“It won’t hurt them,” Ruth said, placidly. “That’s why I insisted upon the mackintoshes.”

“It’s just as dark down there by the fountain as it can be,” spoke Helen, with a little shiver. “D’you remember, Ruthie, how they hazed us there when we were Infants?”

“Don’t I!” agreed her chum.

“If Sarah is careful, she can stand right up there against the statue and never be seen, while she can reach the water to throw it at the girls easily. There!” cried Belle. “They’re turning down the walk to the steps. I can see them.”

They all could see them – dimly. Like shadows the procession descended to the marble fountain, still chanting softly the refrain of the marching song. Suddenly a shriek – a very vigorous and startling sound – rang out across the campus.

“It’s begun!” giggled Belle.

But the sound was repeated – then in a thrilling chorus. Ruth was startled. She exclaimed:

“That wasn’t either of the candidates. It was Sarah who screamed. There! It is Sarah again. Something has happened!”

Something certainly had happened. There had been an unexpected fault somewhere in the initiation. The procession burst like a bombshell, and the girls scattered through the wet campus, utterly terrified, and screaming as they ran.

CHAPTER II – THE WILD GIRL

“Something awful must have occurred!” cried Helen Cameron.

Ruth did not remain at the window for more than a moment after seeing the girls engaged in the initiation disperse, and hearing their screams. She drew back from the crowding group and darted out of the room. Fortunately neither the French teacher, nor the matron, had yet been aroused. If the girls came noisily into the dormitory building, Ruth knew very well that “the powers that be” must of necessity take cognizance of the infraction of the rules.

The girl from the Red Mill sped down the broad stairway and out of the house. Some of the fastest runners among the frightened girls were already panting at the steps.

“Hush! hush!” commanded Ruth. “What is the matter? What has happened?”

“Oh! it’s the ghost!” declared one girl.

“So’s your grandmother’s aunt!” snapped another. “Somebody shoved Sarah into the water. It was no ghost.”

It was Madge Steele who last spoke, and Ruth seized upon the senior, believing she might get something like a sensible explanation from her.

“You girls go into the house quietly,” warned Ruth, as they scrambled up the stone steps. “Don’t you *dare* make a noise and get us all into trouble.”

Then she turned upon Madge, begging: “Do, *do* tell me what you mean, Madge Steele. *Who* pushed Sarah?”

“That’s what I can’t tell you. But I heard Sarah yelling that she was pushed, and she did most certainly fall right into the fountain when she climbed up there beside the statue.”

“What a ridiculous thing!” giggled Ruth. “Somebody played a trick on her. I guess she was fooled instead of the candidates being startled, eh?”

“I saw somebody – or something – drop off the other side of the fountain and run – I saw it myself,” declared Madge.

“Here comes Sarah,” cried Ruth, under her breath. “And I declare she *is* all wet!”

Sarah Fish was actually laughing, but in a hysterical way.

“Oh, dear me! was ever anything so ridiculous before?” she gasped.

“Hush! Don’t get Miss Picolet after us,” begged Madge.

“What really happened?” demanded Ruth, eagerly.

“Why – I’ll tell you,” replied Sarah, whose gown clung to her as though it had been pasted upon her figure. “See? I’m just *soaked*. Talk about sprinkling those silly lambs of candidates! Why, *I* was immersed – you see.”

“But how?”

“I slipped over there before the procession started from these steps. I was watching the girls, and listening to them sing, and didn’t pay much attention to anything else.

“But when I dodged down into the little garden, I thought I heard a footstep on the flags. I looked all around, and saw nothing. Now I know the person must have already climbed up on the fountain and gotten into the shadow of the statue – just as I wanted to do.”

“Was there really somebody there?” demanded Madge.

“How do you think I got into the fountain, if not?” snapped Sarah Fish.

“Fell in.”

“I did not!” cried Sarah. “I was pushed.”

“Did She Fall, or Was She Pushed?” giggled Madge. “Sounds like a moving picture title.”

“You can laugh,” scoffed Sarah. “I wonder what you’d have done?”

“Got just as wet as you did, most likely,” said Ruth, calming the troubled waters. “Do go on, Sarah. So you really *saw* somebody?”

“And felt somebody. When I climbed up to get a footing beside the sitting figure, so that the girls would not see me, somebody shoved me – with both hands – right into the fountain.”

“That’s when you squalled?” asked Madge.

“Yes, indeed! And I rolled out of the fountain just as the – the person who pushed me, tumbled down off the pedestal and ran.”

“For pity’s sake!” ejaculated Ruth. “Do tell us who it was, Sarah.”

“Don’t you think I would if I could?” responded Sarah, trying to wring the water out of her narrow skirt.

Through the gloom appeared another figure – the too, too solid figure of Jennie Stone.

“Oh – dear – me! Oh – dear – me!” she panted. And then seeing Sarah Fish dripping there on the walk, Heavy fell upon the steps and giggled. “Oh, Sarah!” she gasped. “For once, your appearance fits your name, all right. You look like a fish out of its element.”

“Laugh – ”

“I have to,” responded Heavy.

“Well, if it were you – ”

“I know. I’d be floundering there in the water yet.”

“But tell me!” cried Ruth, under her breath. “Was it a girl who pushed you into the fountain, Sarah?”

“It wore skirts – I’m sure of that, at least,” grumbled Sarah.

“But it ran faster than any girl I ever saw run,” vouchsafed Heavy. “*Did* you see her just skimming across the campus toward the main building? Like the wind!”

“It must be one of our girls,” declared Madge.

“All right,” said Heavy. “But if so, it’s a girl I never saw run before. You can’t tell me.”

“You had better go in and get off your clothes, Sarah,” advised Ruth. Then she looked at Madge. Madge was one of the oldest girls at Briarwood. “Let’s go and see if we can find the girl,” Ruth suggested.

“I’m game,” cried Madge, as the other stragglers mounted the steps and disappeared behind the dormitory building door.

Both girls hurried down the walk under the trees to the main building. In one end of this Mrs. Tellingham and the Doctor had their abode. In the other end was the dining-room, with the kitchens and other offices in the basement. Besides, Tony Foyle, who was chief man-of-all-work about the Hall, and his wife, who was cook, had their living rooms in the basement of this building.

Ruth and Madge hoped to investigate the matter of the mysterious marauder without arousing the little old Irishman, but already they saw his lantern behind the grated window in the front basement, and, as the two girls came nearer, they heard him grumblingly unchain the door.

“Bad ‘cess to ‘em! I seen ‘em cavortin’ across the campus, I tell ye, Mary Ann! There’s wan of thim down here in the airy – ”

It was evident that the old couple had been aroused, and that Tony was talking to his wife, who remained in the bedchamber. Ruth seized Madge’s wrist and whispered in her ear:

“You run around one way, and I’ll go the other. There must be *somebody* about, for Tony saw her – ”

“If it *is* a girl.”

“Both Sarah and Heavy say it is. I’m not afraid,” declared Ruth, and she started off alone at once.

Madge disappeared around the corner. Ruth had darted into the heavily shaded space between the end of the main building and the next brick structure. There were no lights here, but there was a gas lamp on a post beyond the far corner, and before she was half way to it, she saw a shadow flit across the illuminated space about this post, and disappear behind a clump of snowball bushes.

Ruth ran swiftly forward, dodged around the other end of the clump of thick bushes, and suddenly collided with somebody who uttered a muffled scream. Ruth grabbed the girl by both shoulders and held on.

It was like trying to hold a wildcat. The girl, who was considerably smaller, and far sligher than Ruth, struggled madly to escape. She did not say a word at first, only straining to get away from Ruth's strong grip.

"Now stop! now wait!" panted Ruth. "I want to know who you are – "

The other tugged her best, but the girl of the Red Mill was very strong for her age, and she held on.

"Stop!" panted Ruth again. "If you make a noise, you'll bring old Tony here – and then you *will* be in trouble. I want to know who you are and what you were doing down there at the fountain – and why you pushed Sarah into the water?"

"And I'd like to push *you* in!" ejaculated the other girl, suddenly. "You let go of me, or I'll scratch you!"

"You can't," replied Ruth, firmly. "I'm holding you too tight."

"Then I'll bite you!" vowed the other.

"Why – you're a regular wild girl," exclaimed Ruth. "You stop struggling, or I'll shout for help, and then Tony will come running."

"D – don't give me away," gasped the strange girl, suddenly ceasing her struggles.

"Do you belong here?" demanded Ruth.

"Belong here? Naw! I don't belong nowheres. An' you better lemme go, Miss."

"Why – you *are* a strange girl," said Ruth, greatly amazed. "You can't be one of us Briarwoods."

"That ain't my name a-tall," whispered the frightened girl. "My name's Raby."

"But what were you doing over there at the fountain?"

"Gettin' a drink. Was *that* any harm?" demanded the girl, sharply. "I'd found some dry pieces of bread the cook had put on top of a box there by the back door. I reckoned she didn't want the bread, and *I* did."

"Oh, dear me!" whispered Ruth.

"And dry bread's dry eatin'," said the strange girl. "I had ter have a drink o' water to wash it down. And jest as I got down into that little place where I seed the fountain this afternoon – "

"Oh, my, dear!" gasped Ruth. "Have you been lurking about the school all that time and never came and asked good old Mary Ann for something decent to eat?"

"Huh! mebbe she'd a drove me off. Or mebbe she'd done worse to me," said the other, quickly. "They beat me again day 'fore yesterday – "

"Who beat you?" demanded Ruth.

"Them Perkinses. Now! don't you go for to tell I said that. I don't want to go back to 'em – and their house ain't such a fur ways from here. If that cook – or any other grown folk – seen me, they'd want to send me back. I know 'em!" exclaimed the girl, bitterly. "But mebbe you'll be decent about it, and keep your mouth shut."

"Oh! I won't tell a soul," murmured Ruth. "But I'm so sorry. Only dry bread and water – "

"Huh! it'll keep a feller alive," said this strangely spoken girl. "I ain't no softie. Now, you lemme go, will yer? My! but you *are* strong."

"I'll let you go. But I do want to help you. I want to know more about you —*all* about you. But if Tony comes – "

"That's his lantern. I see it. He's a-comin'," gasped the other, trying to wriggle free.

"Where will you stay to-night?" asked Ruth, anxiously.

"I gotter place. It's warm and dry. I stayed there las' night. Come! you lemme go."

"But I want to help you – "

"'Twon't help me none to git me cotched."

“Oh, I know it! Wait! Meet me somewhere near here to-morrow morning – will you? I’ll bring some money with me. I’ll help you.”

“Say! ain’t you foolin’?” demanded the other, seemingly startled by the fact that Ruth wished to help her.

“No. I speak the truth. I will help you.”

“Then I’ll meet you – but you won’t tell nobody?”

“Not a soul?”

“Cross yer heart?”

“I don’t do such foolish things,” said Ruth. “If I say I’ll do a thing, I will do it.”

“All right. What time’ll I see you?”

“Ten o’clock.”

“Aw-right,” agreed the strange girl. “I’ll be across the road from that path that’s bordered by them cedar trees – ”

“The Cedar Walk?”

“Guess so.”

“I shall be there. And will you?”

“Huh! I kin keep my word as well as you kin,” said the girl, sharply. Then she suddenly broke away from Ruth and ran. Tony Foyle came blundering around the corner of the house and Ruth, much excited, slipped away from the brush clump and ran as fast as she could to meet Madge Steele.

“Oh! is that you, Ruth?” exclaimed the senior, when Ruth ran into her arms. “Tony’s out. We had better go back to bed, or he’ll report us to Mrs. Tellingham in the morning. I don’t know where the strange girl could have gone.”

Ruth did not say a word. Madge did not ask her, and the girl of the Red Mill allowed her friend to think that her own search had been quite as unsuccessful. But, as Ruth looked at it, it was not *her* secret.

CHAPTER III – SADIE RABY’S STORY

Ruth did not sleep at all well that night. Luckily, Helen had nothing on *her* mind or conscience, or she must have been disturbed by Ruth’s tossing and wakefulness. The other two girls in the big quartette room – Mercy Curtis and Ann Hicks – were likewise unaware of Ruth’s restlessness.

The girl of the Red Mill felt that she could take nobody into her confidence regarding the strange girl who said her name was Raby. Perhaps Ruth had no right to aid the girl if she was a runaway; yet there must be some very strong reason for making a girl prefer practical starvation to the shelter of “them Perkinses.”

Bread and water! The thought of the child being so hungry that she had eaten discarded, dry bread, washed down with water from the fountain in the campus, brought tears to Ruth’s eyes.

“Oh! I wish I knew what was best to do for her,” thought Ruth. “Should I tell Mrs. Tellingham? Or, mightn’t I get some of the girls interested in her? Dear Helen has plenty of money, and she is just as tender-hearted as she can be.”

Yet Ruth had given her promise to take nobody into her confidence about the half-wild girl; and, with Ruth Fielding, “a promise was a promise!”

In the morning, there was soon a buzz of excitement all over the school regarding the strange happening at the fountain on the campus. One girl whispered it to another, and the tale spread like wildfire. However, the teachers and the principal did not hear of the affair.

Ruth’s lips, she decided, were sealed for the present regarding the mysterious girl who had pushed Sarah Fish into what Heavy declared was “her proper element.” The wildest and most improbable stories and suspicions were circulated before assembly hour, regarding the Unknown.

There was so much said, and so many questions asked, in the quartette room where Ruth was located, that she felt like running away herself. But at mail time Madge Steele burst into the dormitory “charged to the muzzle,” as The Fox expressed it, with a new topic of conversation.

“What do you think, girls? Oh! what do you think?” she cried. “We’re going to live at Sunrise Farm.”

“Ha! you ask us a question and answer it in the same breath,” said Mercy, with a snap. “Now you’ve spilled the beans and we don’t care anything about it at all.”

“You *do* care,” declared Madge. “I ask *you* first of all, Mercy. I invite every one of you for the last week in June and the first two weeks of July at Sunrise Farm – ”

“Oh, wait!” exclaimed Mary Cox, otherwise “The Fox.” “Do begin at the beginning. I, for one, never heard of Sunrise Farm before.”

“I – I believe *I* have,” said Ruth slowly. “But I don’t suppose it can be the same farm Madge means. It is a big stock farm and it’s not many miles from Darrowtown where I – I used to live once. *That* farm belonged to a family named Benson – ”

“And a family named Steele owns it now,” put in Madge, promptly. “It’s the very same farm. It’s a big place – five hundred acres. It’s on a big, flat-topped hill. Father has been negotiating for the other farms around about, and has gotten options on most of them, too. He’s been doing it very quietly.

“Now he says that the old house on the main farm is in good enough shape for us to live there this summer, while he builds a bigger house. And you shall all come with us – all you eight girls – the Brilliant Octette of Briarwood Hall.

“And Bob will get Helen’s brother, and Busy Izzy; and Belle shall invite her brothers if she likes, and – ”

“Say! are you figuring on having a standing army there?” demanded Mercy.

“That’s all right. There is room. The old garret has been made over into two great dormitories – ”

“And you’ve been keeping all this to yourself, Madge Steele?” cried Helen. “What a nice girl you are. It sounds lovely.”

“And your mother and father will wish we had never arrived, after we’ve been there two days,” declared Heavy. “By the way, do they know I eat three square meals each day?”

“Yes. And that if you are hungry, you get up in your sleep and find the pantry,” giggled The Fox.

“Might as well have all the important details understood right at the start,” said Heavy, firmly.

“If you’ll all say you’ll come,” said Madge, smiling broadly, “we’ll just have the lov-li-est time!”

“But we’ll have to write home for permission,” Lluella Fairfax ventured.

“Of course we shall,” chimed in Helen.

“Then do so at once,” commanded the senior. “You see, this will be my graduation party. No more Briarwood for me after this June, and I don’t know what I shall do when I go to Poughkeepsie next fall and leave all you ‘Infants’ behind here – ”

“*Infants!* Listen to her!” shouted Belle Tingley. “Get out of here!” and under a shower of sofa pillows Madge Steele had to retire from the room.

Ruth slipped away easily after that, for the other girls were gabbling so fast over the invitation for the early summer vacation, that they did not notice her departure.

This was the hour she had promised to meet the strange girl in whom she had taken such a great interest the night before – it was between the two morning recitation hours.

She ran down past the end of the dormitory building into the head of the long serpentine path, known as the Cedar Walk. The lines of closely growing cedars sheltered her from observation from any of the girls’ windows.

The great bell in the clock tower boomed out ten strokes as Ruth reached the muddy road at the end of the walk. Nobody was in sight. Ruth looked up and down. Then she walked a little way in both directions to see if the girl she had come to meet was approaching.

“I – I am afraid she isn’t going to keep her word,” thought Ruth. “And yet – somehow – she seemed so frank and honest – ”

She heard a shrill, but low whistle, and the sound made her start and turn. She faced a thicket of scrubby bushes across the road. Suddenly she saw a face appear from behind this screen – a girl’s face.

“Oh! Is it you?” cried Ruth, starting in that direction.

“Cheese it! don’t yell it out. Somebody’ll hear you,” said the girl, hoarsely.

“Oh, dear me! you have a dreadful cold,” urged Ruth, darting around the clump of brush and coming face to face with the strange girl.

“Oh, *that* don’t give me so much worry,” said the Raby girl. “Aw – My goodness! Is that for *me*?”

Ruth had unfolded a paper covered parcel she carried. There were sandwiches, two apples, a piece of cake, and half a box of chocolate candies. Ruth had obtained these supplies with some difficulty.

“I didn’t suppose you would have any breakfast,” said Ruth, softly. “You sit right down on that dry log and eat. Don’t mind me. I – I was awake most all night worrying about you being out here, hungry and alone.”

The girl had begun to eat ravenously, and now, with her mouth full, she gazed up at her new friend’s face with a suddenness that made Ruth pause.

“Say!” said the girl, with difficulty. “You’re all right. I seen you come down the path alone, but reckoned I’d better wait and see if you didn’t have somebody follerin’ on behind. Ye might have give me away.”

“Why! I told you I would tell nobody.”

“Aw, yes – I know. Mebbe I’d oughter have believed ye; but I dunno. Lots of folks has fooled me. Them Perkinses was as soft as butter when they came to take me away from the orphanage. But now they treat me as mean as dirt – yes, they do!”

“Oh, dear me! So you haven’t any mother or father?”

“Not a one,” confessed the other. “Didn’t I tell you I was took from an orphanage? Willie and Dickie was taken away by other folks. I wisht somebody would ha’ taken us all three together; but I’m mighty glad them Perkinses didn’t git the kids.”

She sighed with present contentment, and wiped her fingers on her skirt. For some moments Ruth had remained silent, listening to her. Now she had for the first time the opportunity of examining the strange girl.

It had been too dark for her to see much of her the night before. Now the light of day revealed a very unkempt and not at all attractive figure. She might have been twelve – possibly fourteen. She was slight for her age, but she might be stronger than she appeared to Ruth. Certainly she was vigorous enough.

She had black hair which was in a dreadful tangle. Her complexion was naturally dark, and she had a deep layer of tan, and over that quite a thick layer of dirt. Her hands and wrists were stained and dirty, too.

She wore no hat, raw as the weather was. Her ragged dress was an old faded gingham; over it she wore a three-quarter length coat of some indeterminate, shoddy material, much soiled, and shapeless as a mealsack. Her shoes and stockings were in keeping with the rest of her outfit.

Altogether her appearance touched Ruth Fielding deeply. This Raby girl was an orphan. Ruth remembered keenly the time when the loss of her own parents was still a fresh wound. Supposing no kind friends had been raised up for her? Suppose there had been no Red Mill for her to go to? She might have been much the same sort of castaway as this.

“Tell me who you are – tell me all about yourself – do!” begged the girl of the Red Mill, sitting down beside the other on the log. “I am an orphan as well as you, my dear. Really, I am.”

“Was you in the orphanage?” demanded the Raby girl, quickly.

“Oh, no. I had friends – ”

“You warn’t never a reg’lar orphan, then,” was the sharp response.

“Tell me about it,” urged Ruth.

“Me an’ the kids was taken to the orphanage just as soon as Mom died,” said the girl, in quite a matter-of-fact manner. “Pa died two months before. It was sudden. But Mom had been sickly for a long time – I can remember. I was six.”

“And how old are you now?” asked Ruth.

“Twelve and a half. They puts us out to work at twelve anyhow, so them Perkinses got me,” explained the child. “I was pretty sharp and foxy when we went to the orphanage. The kids was only two and a half – ”

“Both of them?” cried Ruth.

“Yep. They’re twins, Willie and Dickie is. An’ awful smart – an’ pretty before they lopped off their curls at the orphanage. I was glad Mom was dead then,” said the girl, nodding. “She’d been heart-broke to see ’em at first without their long curls.

“I dunno now – not rightly – just what’s become of ’em,” went on the girl. “Mebbe they come back to the orphanage. The folks that took ’em was nice enough, I guess, but the man thought two boys would be too much for his wife to take care of. She was a weakly lookin’ critter.

“But the matron always said they shouldn’t go away for keeps, unless they went together. My goodness me! they’d never be happy apart,” said the strange girl, wagging her head confidentially. “And they’re only nine now. There’s three years yet for the matron to find them a good home. Ye see, folks take young orphans on trial. I wisht them Perkinses had taken *me* on trial and then had sent me back. Or, I wisht they’d let the orphans take folks on trial instead of the other way ’round.”

“Oh, it must be very hard!” murmured Ruth. “And you and your little brothers had to be separated?”

“Yep. And Willie and Dickie liked their sister Sade a heap,” and the girl suddenly “knuckled” her eyes with her dirty hand to wipe away the tears. “Huh! I’m a big baby, ain’t I? Well! that’s how it is.”

“And you really have run away from the people that took you from the orphanage, Sadie?”

“Betcher! So would you. Mis’ Perkins is awful cross, an’ he’s crosser! I got enough – ”

“Wouldn’t they take you back at the orphanage?”

“Nope. No runaways there. I’ve seen other girls come back and they made ’em go right away again with the same folks. You see, there’s a Board, or sumpin’; an’ the Board finds out all about the folks that take away the orphans in the first place. Then they won’t never own up that they was fooled, that Board won’t. They allus say it’s the kids’ fault if they ain’t suited.”

Suddenly the girl jumped up and peered through the bushes. Ruth had heard the thumping of horses’ hoofs on the wet road.

“My goodness!” gasped Sadie Raby. “Here’s ol’ Perkins hisself. He’s come clean over this road to look for me. Don’t you tell him – ”

She seized Ruth’s wrist with her claw-like little hand.

“Don’t you be afraid,” said Ruth. “And take this.” She thrust a closely-folded dollar bill into the girl’s grimy fingers. “I wish it was more. I’ll come here again to-morrow – ”

The other had darted into the woods ere she had ceased speaking. Somebody shouted “Whoa!” in a very harsh voice, and then a heavy pair of cowhide boots landed solidly in the road.

“I see ye, ye little witch!” exclaimed the harsh voice. “Come out o’ there before I tan ye with this whip!” and the whip in question snapped viciously as the speaker pounded violently through the clump of bushes, right upon the startled Ruth.

CHAPTER IV – “THEM PERKINSES”

It was a fact that Ruth crouched back behind the log, fearful of the wrathful farmer. He was a big, coarse, high-booted, red-faced man, and he swung and snapped the blacksnake whip he carried as though he really intended using the cruel instrument upon the tender body of the girl, whose figure he had evidently seen dimly through the bushes.

“Come out ’o that!” he bawled, striding toward the log, and making the whiplash whistle once more in the air.

Ruth leaped up, screaming with fear. “Don’t you touch me, sir! Don’t you dare!” she cried, and ran around the bushes out in to the road.

The blundering farmer followed her, still snapping the whip. Perhaps he had been drinking; at least, it was certain he was too angry to see the girl very well until they were both in the road.

Then he halted, and added:

“I’ll be whipsawed if that’s the gal!”

“I am *not* the girl – not the girl you want – poor thing!” gasped Ruth. “Oh! you are horrid – terrible – ”

“Shut up, ye little fool!” exclaimed the man, harshly. “You know where Sade is, then, I’ll be bound.”

“How do you know – ?”

“Ha! ye jest the same as told me,” he returned, grinning suddenly and again snapping the whip. “You can tell me where that runaway’s gone.”

“I don’t know. Even if I did, I would not tell you, sir,” declared Ruth, recovering some of her natural courage now.

“Don’t ye sass me – nor don’t ye lie to me,” and this time he swung the cruel whip, until the long lash whipped around her skirts about at a level with her knees. It did not hurt her, but Ruth cringed and shrieked aloud again.

“Stop yer howling!” commanded Perkins. “Tell me about Sade Raby. Where’s she gone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Warn’t she right there in them bushes with you?”

“I shan’t tell you anything more,” declared Ruth.

“Ye won’t?”

The brute swung the blacksnake – this time in earnest. It cracked, and then the snapper laid along the girl’s forearm as though it were seared with a hot iron.

Ruth shrieked again. The pain was more than she could bear in silence. She turned to flee up the Cedar Walk, but Perkins shouted at her to stand.

“You try ter run, my beauty, and I’ll cut ye worse than that,” he promised. “You tell me about Sade Raby.”

Suddenly there came a hail, and Ruth turned in hope of assistance. Old Dolliver’s stage came tearing along the road, his bony horses at a hand-gallop. The old man, whom the girls of Briarwood Hall called “Uncle Noah,” brought his horses – and the Ark – to a sudden halt.

“What yer doin’ to that gal, Sim Perkins?” the old man demanded.

“What’s that to you, Dolliver?”

“You’ll find out mighty quick. Git out o’ here or you’ll git into trouble. Did he hurt you, Miss Ruth?”

“No-o – not much,” stammered Ruth, who desired nothing so much as to get way from the awful Mr. Perkins. Poor Sadie Raby! No wonder she had been forced to run away from “them Perkinses.”

“I’ll see you jailed yet, Sim, for some of your meanness,” said the old stage driver. “And you’ll git there quick if you bother Mis’ Tellingham’s gals – ”

"I didn't know she was one 'o them tony school gals," growled Perkins, getting aboard his wagon again.

"Well, she is – an' one 'o the best of the lot," said Dolliver, and he smiled comfortably at Ruth.

"Huh! whad-she wanten be in comp'ny of that brat 'o mine, then?" demanded Perkins, gathering up his reins.

"Oh! are you hunting that orphanage gal ye took to raise? I heard she couldn't stand you and Ma Perkins no longer," Dolliver said, with sarcasm.

"Never you mind. I'll git her," said Perkins, and whipped up his horses.

"Oh, dear, me!" cried Ruth, when he had gone. "What a terrible man, Mr. Dolliver."

"Yah!" scoffed the old driver. "Jest a bag of wind. Mean as can be, but a big coward. Meanes' folks around here, them Perkinses air."

"But why were they allowed to have that poor girl, then?" demanded Ruth.

"They went a-fur off to git her. Clean to Harburg. Nobody knowed 'em there, I s'pose. Why, Ma Perkins kin act like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, if she wants to. But I sartainly am sorry for that poor little Sade Raby, as they call her."

"Oh! I do pity her so," said Ruth, sadly.

The old man's eyes twinkled. Old Dolliver was sly! "Then ye *do* know suthin' about Sade – jes' as Perkins said?"

"She was here just now. I gave her something to eat – and a little money. You won't tell, Mr. Dolliver?"

"Huh! No. But dunno's ye'd oughter helped a runaway. That's agin' the law, ye see."

"Would the law give that poor girl back to those ugly people?"

"I s'pect so," said Dolliver, scratching his head. "Ye see, Sim Perkins an' his wife air folks ye can't really go agin' – not *much*. Sim owns a good farm, an' pays his taxes, an' ain't a bad neighbor. But they've had trouble before naow with orphans. But before, 'twas boys."

"I just hope they all ran away!" cried Ruth, with emphasis.

"Wal – they did, by golly!" ejaculated the stage driver, preparing to drive on.

"And if you see this poor girl, you won't tell anybody, will you, Mr. Dolliver?" pleaded Ruth.

"I jes' sha'n't see her," said the man, his little eyes twinkling. "But you take my advice, Miss Fielding – don't *you* see her, nuther!"

Ruth ran back to the school then – it was time. She could not think of her lessons properly because of her pity for Sadie Raby. Suppose that horrid man should find the poor girl!

Every time Ruth saw the red welt on her arm, where the whiplash had touched her, she wondered how many times Perkins had lashed Sadie when he was angry. It was a dreadful thought.

Although she had promised Sadie to keep her secret, Ruth wondered if she might not do the girl some good by telling Mrs. Tellingham about her. Ruth was not afraid of the dignified principal of Briarwood Hall – she knew too well Mrs. Grace Tellingham's good heart.

She determined at least that if Sadie appeared at the end of the Cedar Walk the next day she would try to get the runaway girl to go with her to the principal's office. Surely the girl should not run wild in the woods and live any way and how she could – especially so early in the season, for there was still frost at night.

When Ruth ran down the long walk between the cedar trees the next forenoon at ten, there was nobody peering through the bushes where Sadie Raby had watched the day before. Ruth went up and down the road, into the woods a little way, too – and called, and called. No reply. Nothing answered but a chattering squirrel and a jay who seemed to object to any human being disturbing the usual tenor of the woods' life thereabout.

"Perhaps she'll come this afternoon," thought Ruth, and she hid the package of food she had brought, and went back to her classes.

In the afternoon she had no better luck. The runaway did not appear. The food had not been touched. Ruth left the packet, hoping sadly that the girl might find it.

The next morning she went again. She even got up an hour earlier than usual and slipped out ahead of the other girls. The food had been disturbed – oh, yes! But by a dog or some “varmint.” Sadie had not been to the rendezvous.

Hoping against hope, Ruth Fielding tacked a note in an envelope to the log on which she and Sadie had sat side by side. That was all she could do, save to go each day for a time to see if the strange girl had found the note.

There came a rain and the letter was turned to pulp. Then Ruth Fielding gave up hope of ever seeing Sadie Raby again. Old Dolliver told her that the orphan had never returned to “them Perkinses.” For this Ruth might be thankful, if for nothing more.

The busy days and weeks passed. All the girls of Ruth’s clique were writing back and forth to their homes to arrange for the visit they expected to make to Madge Steele’s summer home – Sunrise Farm. The senior was forever singing the praises of her father’s new acquisition. Mr. Steele had closed contracts to buy several of the neighboring farms, so that, altogether, he hoped to have more than a thousand acres in his estate.

“And, don’t you *dare* disappoint me, Ruthie Fielding,” cried Madge, shaking her playfully. “We won’t have any good time without you, and you haven’t said you’d go yet!”

“But I can’t say so until I know myself,” Ruth told her. “Uncle Jabez – ”

“That uncle of yours must be a regular ogre, just as Helen says.”

“What does Mercy say about him?” asked Ruth, with a quiet smile. “Mercy knows him fully as well, and she has a sharp tongue.”

“Humph! that’s odd, too. She doesn’t seem to think your Uncle Jabez is a very harsh man. She calls him ‘Dusty Miller,’ I know.”

“Uncle Jabez has a prickly rind, I guess,” said Ruth. “But the meat inside is sweet. Only he’s old-fashioned and he can’t get used to new-fashioned ways. He doesn’t see any reason for my ‘traipsing around’ so much. I ought to be at the mill between schooltimes, helping Aunt Alvira – so he says. And I am afraid he is right. I feel condemned – ”

“You’re too tender-hearted. Helen says he’s as rich as can be and might hire a dozen girls to help ‘Aunt Alvira’.”

“He might, but he wouldn’t,” returned Ruth, smiling. “I can’t tell you yet for sure that I can go to Sunrise Farm. I’d love to. I’ve always heard ’twas a beautiful place.”

“And it is, indeed! It’s going to be the finest gentleman’s estate in that section, when father gets through with it. He’s going to make it a great, big, paying farm – so he says. If it wasn’t for that man Caslon, we’d own the whole hill all the way around, as well as the top of it.”

“Who’s that?” asked Ruth, surprised that Madge should speak so sharply about the unknown Caslon.

“Why, he owns one of the farms adjoining. Father’s bought all the neighbors up but Caslon. *He* won’t sell. But I reckon father will find a way to make him, before he gets through. Father usually carries his point,” added Madge, with much pride in Mr. Steele’s business acumen.

Uncle Jabez had not yet said Ruth could go with the crowd to the Steeles’ summer home; Aunt Alvira wrote that he was “studyin’ about it.” But there was so much to do at Briarwood as the end of the school year approached, that the girl of the Red Mill had little time to worry about the subject.

Although Ruth and Helen Cameron were far from graduation themselves, they both had parts of some prominence in the exercises which were to close the year at Briarwood Hall. Ruth was in a quartette selected from the Glee Club for some special music, and Helen had a small violin solo part in one of the orchestral numbers.

Not many of the juniors, unless they belonged to either the school orchestra or the Glee Club, would appear to much advantage at graduation. The upper senior class was in the limelight – and Madge Steele was the only one of Ruth's close friends who was to receive her diploma.

"We who aren't seniors have to sit around like bumps on a log," growled Heavy. "Might as well go home for good the day before."

"You should have learned to play, or sing, or something," advised one of the other girls, laughing at Heavy's apparently woebegone face.

"Did you ever hear me try to sing, Lluella?" demanded the plump young lady. "I like music myself – I'm very fond of it, no matter how it sounds! But I can't even stand my own chest-tones."

Preparations for the great day went on apace. There was to be a professional director for the augmented orchestra and he insisted, because of the acoustics of the hall, upon building an elevated extension to the stage, upon which to stand to conduct the music.

"Gee!" gasped Heavy, when she saw it the first time. "What's the diving-board for?"

"That's not a diving-board," snapped Mercy Curtis. "It's the lookout station for the captain to watch the high C's."

The bustle and confusion of departure punctuated the final day of the term, too. There were so many girls to say good-bye to for the summer; and some, of course, would never come back to Briarwood Hall again – as scholars, at least.

In the midst of the excitement Ruth received a letter in the crabbed hand of dear old Aunt Alvira. The old lady enclosed a small money order, fearing that Ruth might not have all the money she needed for her home-coming. But the best item in the letter beside the expression of Aunt Alvira's love, was the statement that "Your Uncle Jabe, he's come round to agreeing you should go to that Sunrise Farm place with your young friends. I made him let me hire a tramping girl that came by, and we got the house all rid up, so when you come home, my pretty, all you got to do is to visit."

"And I *will* visit with her – the unselfish old dear!" Ruth told herself. "Dear me! how very, very good everybody is to me. But I am afraid poor Uncle Jabez wouldn't be so kind if he wasn't influenced by Aunt Alvira."

CHAPTER V – “THE TRAMPING GAL”

The old clock that had hung in the Red Mill kitchen from the time of Uncle Jabez Potter’s grandfather – and that was early time on the Lumano, indeed! – hesitatingly tolled the hour of four.

Daybreak was just behind the eastern hills. A light mist swathed the silent current of the river. Here and there, along the water’s edge, a tall tree seemed floating in the air, its bole and roots cut off by the drifting mist.

“Oh, it is very, very beautiful here!” sighed Ruth Fielding, kneeling at the open window and looking out upon the awakening world – as she had done many and many another early morning since first she was given this little gable-windowed room for her very own.

The sweet, clean, cool air breathed in upon her bare throat and shoulders, revealed through the lace trimming of her night robe. Ruth loved linen like other girls, and although Uncle Jabez gave her spending money with a rather niggardly hand, she and Aunt Alvirah knew how to make the pennies “go a long way” in purchasing and making her gowns and undergarments.

There lay over a chair, too, a pretty, light blue, silk trimmed crepe-cloth kimona, with warm, fur-edged slippers to match, on the floor. The moment she heard Uncle Jabez rattle the stove-shaker in the kitchen, Ruth slipped into this robe, and thrust her bare feet into the slippers. Her braids she drew over her shoulders – one on either side – as she hurried out of the little chamber and down the back stairs.

She had arrived home from Briarwood the night before. For more than eight months she had seen neither Uncle Jabez nor Aunt Alvirah; and she had been so tired and sleepy on her arrival that she had quickly gone to bed. She felt as though she had scarcely greeted the two old people.

Uncle Jabez was bending over the kitchen stove. He always looked gray of face, and dusty. The mill-dust seemed ground into both his clothes and his complexion.

The first the old man knew of her presence, the arms of Ruth were around his neck.

“Ugh-huh?” questioned the old man, raising up stiffly as the fire began to chatter, the flames flashing under the lids, and turned to face the girl who held him so lovingly. “What’s wanted, Niece Ruth?” he added, looking at her grimly under his bristling brows.

Ruth was not afraid of his grimness. She had learned long since that Uncle Jabez was much softer under the surface than he appeared. He claimed to be only just to her; but Ruth knew that his “justice” often leaned toward the side of mercy.

Her mother, Mary Potter, had been the miller’s favorite niece; when she had married Ruth’s father, Uncle Jabez had been angry, and for years the family had been separated. But when Uncle Jabez had taken Ruth in “just out of charity,” old Aunt Alvirah had assured the heartsick girl that the miller was kinder at heart than he wished people to suppose.

“He don’t never let his right hand know what his left hand doeth,” declared the loyal little old woman who had been so long housekeeper for the miller. “He saved me from the poorhouse – yes, he did! – jest to git all the work out o’ me he could – to hear him tell it!

“But it ain’t so,” quoth Aunt Alvirah, shaking her head. “He saw a lone ol’ woman turned out o’ what she’d thought would be her home till she come to death’s door. An’ so he opened his house and his hand to her. An’ he’s opened his house and hand to *you*, my pretty; and who knows? mebbe ’twill open wide his heart, too.”

Ruth had been hoping the old man’s heart *was* open, not only to her, but to the whole world. She knew that, in secret, Uncle Jabez was helping to pay Mercy Curtis’s tuition at Briarwood. He still loved money; he always would love it, in all probability. But he had learned to “loosen up,” as Tom Cameron expressed it, in a most astonishing way. One could not honestly call Uncle Jabez a miser nowadays.

He was miserly in the outward expression of any affection, however. And that apparent coldness Ruth Fielding longed to break down.

Now the girl, all flushed from her deep sleep, and smiling, lifted her rosy lips to be kissed. “I didn’t scarcely say ‘how-do’ to you last night, Uncle,” she said. “Do tell me you’re glad to see me back.”

“Ha! Ye ain’t minded to stay long, it seems.”

“I won’t go to Sunrise Farm if you want me here, Uncle Jabez,” declared Ruth, still clinging to him, and with the same smiling light in her eyes.

“Ha! ye don’t mean that,” he grunted.

He knew she did. His wrinkled, hard old face finally began to change. His eyes tried to escape her gaze.

“I just *love* you, Uncle,” she breathed, softly. “Won’t – won’t you let me?”

“There, there, child!” He tried for a moment to break her firm hold; then he stooped shamefacedly and touched her fresh lips with his own.

Ruth nestled against his big, strong body, and clung a moment longer. His rough hand smoothed her sleek head almost timidly.

“There, there!” he grumbled. “You’re gittin’ to be a big gal, I swow! And what good’s so much schoolin’ goin’ ter do ye? Other gals like you air helpin’ in their mothers’ kitchens – or goin’ to work in the mills at Cheslow. Seems like a wicked waste of time and money.”

But he did not say it so harshly as had been his wont in the old times. Ruth smiled up at him again.

“Trust me, Uncle,” she said. “The time’ll come when I’ll prove to you the worth of it. Give me the education I crave, and I’ll support myself and pay you all back – with interest! You see if I don’t.”

“Well, well! It’s new-fashioned, I s’pose,” growled the old man, starting for the mill. “Gals, as well as boys, is lots more expense now than they used ter be to raise. The ‘three R’s’ was enough for us when I was young.

“But I won’t stop yer fun. I promised yer Aunt Alviry I wouldn’t,” he added, with his hand upon the door-latch. “You kin go to that Sunrise place for a while, if ye want. Yer Aunt Alviry got a trampin’ gal that came along, ter help her clean house.”

“Oh! and isn’t the girl here now?” asked Ruth, preparing to run back to dress.

“Nope. She’s gone on. Couldn’t keep her no longer. And my! how that young ’un could eat! Never saw the beat of her,” added Uncle Jabez as he clumped out in his heavy boots.

Ruth heard more about “that trampin’ girl” when Aunt Alvirah appeared. Before that happened, however, the newly returned schoolgirl proved she had not forgotten how to make a country breakfast.

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