

Hill Grace Brooks

The Corner House Girls' Odd Find



Grace Hill

The Corner House Girls' Odd Find

«Public Domain»

Hill G.

The Corner House Girls' Odd Find / G. Hill — «Public Domain»,

© Hill G.

© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER I – A FIND IN THE GARRET	5
CHAPTER II – “A PERFECTLY SAVAGE SANTA CLAUS”	10
CHAPTER III – DOROTHY’S BURGLAR	13
CHAPTER IV – THE FAMILY ALBUM – AND OTHER THINGS	15
CHAPTER V – NO NEWS FOR CHRISTMAS	17
CHAPTER VI – TREASURE TROVE	20
CHAPTER VII – “GOD REST YE, MERRIE GENTLEMEN”	23
CHAPTER VIII – WHERE IS NEALE O’NEIL?	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

Hill Grace Brooks

The Corner House Girls' Odd Find / Where they made it, and What the Strange Discovery led to

CHAPTER I – A FIND IN THE GARRET

The fireboard before the great chimney-place in the spacious dining room of the old Corner House in Milton had been removed by Uncle Rufus, and in the dusk of the winter's afternoon the black pit of it yawned, ogre-like, upon the festive room.

The shadows were black under the big tree, the tip of which touched the very high ceiling and which had just been set up in the far corner and not yet festooned. The girls were all busy bringing tinsel and glittering balls and cheery red bells and strings of pink and white popcorn, while yards and yards of evergreen "rope," with which to trim the room itself, were heaped in a corner.

It was the day but one before Christmas, and without the gaslight – or even the usual gas-log fire on the hearth – the dining room was gloomy even at mid-afternoon. Whenever Dot Kenway passed the black opening under the high and ornate mantel, she shuddered.

It was a creepy, delicious shudder that the smallest Corner House girl experienced, for she said to Tess, her confidant and the next oldest of the four sisters:

"Of course, I know it's the only way Santa Claus ever comes. But – but I should think he'd be afraid of – of rats or things. I don't see why he can't come in at the door; it'd be more respectful."

"I s'pose you mean respectable," sighed Tess. "But where would he hitch his reindeer? You know he has to tie them to the chimney on the roof."

"Why does he?" demanded the inquisitive Dot. "There's a perfectly good hitching post by our side gate on Willow Street."

"Who ever heard of such a thing!" exclaimed Tess, with exasperation. "Do you s'pose Santa Claus would come to the side door and knock like the old clo's man? You are the most ridiculous child, Dot Kenway," concluded Tess, with her most grown-up air.

"Say," said the quite unabashed Dot, reflectively, "do you know what Sammy Pinkney says?"

"Nothing very good, I am sure," rejoined her sister, tartly, for just at this time Sammy Pinkney, almost their next-door neighbor, was very much in Tess Kenway's bad books. "What can you expect of a boy who wants to be a pirate?"

"Well," Dot proclaimed, "Sammy says he doesn't believe there is such a person as Santa Claus."

"Oh!" gasped Tess, startled by this heresy. Then, after reflection, she added: "Well, when you come to think of it, I don't suppose there *is* any Santa for Sammy Pinkney."

"Oh, Tess!" almost groaned the smaller girl.

"No, I don't," repeated Tess, with greater confidence. "Ruthie says if we don't 'really and truly' believe in Santa, there isn't any – for us! And he only comes to good children, anyway. How could you expect Sammy Pinkney to have a Santa Claus?"

"He says," said Dot, eagerly, "that they are only make believe. Why, there is one in Blachstein & Mapes', where Ruth trades; and another in Millikin's; and there's the Salvation Army Santa Clauses on the streets –"

"Pooh!" exclaimed Tess, tossing her head. "They are only representations of Santa Claus. They're men dressed up. Why! little boys have Santa Claus suits to play in, just as they have Indian suits and cowboy suits."

“But – but is there really and truly a Santa Claus?” questioned Dot, in an awed tone. “And does he keep a book with your name in it? And if you don’t get too many black marks through the year do you get presents? And if you do behave too badly will he leave a whip, or something nasty, in your stocking? Say, Tess, do you s’pose ’tis *so*?”

That was a stiff one – even for Tess Kenway’s abounding faith. She was silent for a moment.

“Say! *do* you?” repeated the smallest Corner House girl.

“I tell you, Dot,” Tess said, finally, “I *want* to believe it. I just *do*. It’s like fairies and elves. We want to believe in them, don’t we? It’s just like your Alice-doll being alive.”

“Well!” exclaimed Dot, stoutly, “she’s just as good as alive!”

“Of course she is, Dottie,” said Tess, eagerly. “And so’s Santa Claus. And – and when we stop believing in him, we won’t have near so much fun at Christmas!”

Just then Agnes came in from the kitchen with a heaping pan of warm popcorn.

“Here, you kiddies,” she cried, “run and get your needles and thread. We haven’t near enough popcorn strung. I believe Neale O’Neil ate more than he strung last night, I never did see such a hungry boy!”

“Mrs. MacCall say it’s ’cause he’s growning,” said Dot, solemnly.

“He, he!” chuckled Agnes. “He should be ‘groaning’ after all he gobbled down last night. And I burned my finger and roasted my face, popping it.”

She set down the dish of flaky white puff-balls on a stool, so it would be handy for the little girls. Both brought their sewing boxes and squatted down on the floor in the light from a long window. Tess was soon busily threading the popcorn.

“What’s the matter with you, Dot Kenway?” she demanded, as the smallest Corner House girl seemed still to be fussing with her thread and needle, her face puckered up and a frown on her small brow. “You’re the slowest thing!”

“I – I believe this needle’s asleep, Tess,” wailed Dot, finally.

“Asleep?” gasped the other. “What nonsense!”

“Yes, ’tis – so now!” ejaculated Dot. “Anyway, I can’t get its eye open.”

A low laugh sounded behind them, and a tall girl swooped down on the floor and put her arms around the smallest Corner House girl.

“Let sister do it for you, honeybee,” said the newcomer. “Won’t the eye open? Well! we’ll make it – there!”

This was Ruth, the oldest of the four Kenway sisters. She was dark, not particularly pretty, but, as Tess often said, awfully good! Ruth had a smile that illuminated her rather plain face and won her friends everywhere. Moreover, she had a beautiful, low, sweet voice – a “mother voice,” Agnes said.

Ruth had been mothering her three younger sisters for a long time now – ever since their real mother had died, leaving Agnes and Tess and Dot, to say nothing of Aunt Sarah Maltby, in the older girl’s care. And faithfully had Ruth Kenway performed her duty.

Agnes was the pretty sister (although Tess, with all her gravity, promised to equal the fly-away in time) for she had beautiful light hair, a rosy complexion, and large blue eyes, of an expression most innocent but in the depths of which lurked the Imps of Mischief.

Little Dot was dark, like Ruth; only she was most lovely – her hair wavy and silky, her little limbs round, her eyes bright, and her lips as red as an ox-heart cherry!

The little girls went on stringing the popcorn, and Ruth and Agnes began to trim the tree, commencing at the very top. Nestling among the pointed branches of the fir was a winged cupid, with bow and arrow.

“That’s so much better than a bell. Everybody has bells,” said Agnes, from the step-ladder, as she viewed the cupid with satisfaction.

“It’s an awfully cunning little fat, white baby,” agreed Dot, from the floor. “But I should be afraid, if I were his mother, to let him play with bows-an’-arrows. Maybe he’ll prick himself.”

"We'll speak to Venus about that," chuckled Agnes. "Don't believe anybody ever mentioned it to her."

"Venus?" repeated Dot, gravely. "Why, that's the name of the lady that lives next to Uncle Rufus' Petunia. She couldn't be that little baby's mother for she's – oh! —*awful* black!"

"Aggie was speaking of another Venus, Dot," laughed Ruth. "Fasten those little candle-holders securely, Aggie."

"Sure!" agreed the second, and slangy, sister.

"I really wish we could light the whole room with candles, and not have the gas at all," Ruth said. "It would be much nicer. Don't you think so?"

"It would be scrumptious!" Aggie cried. "And you've got such a lot of those nice, fat, bayberry candles. Let's do it!"

"But there are not enough candlesticks."

"You can get 'em at the five-and-ten-cent store," proposed Tess, who favored that busy emporium, "because you can get such a lot for your money!"

"Goosey!" exclaimed Agnes. "We don't want *cheap* ones. How would they look beside those lovely old silver ones of Uncle Peter Stower's?" and she turned to look at the great candelabra on the highboy.

Just then the door from the butler's pantry opened slowly and a grizzled, kinky head, with a shiny, brown, bald spot on top, was thrust into the room.

"I say, missie!" drawled the voice belonging to the ancient head, "is yo' done seen anyt'ing ob dat denim bag I has fo' de soiled napkins? Pechunia, she done comin' fo' de wash, an' I got t' collect togeddah all I kin fin' dis week. Dat fool brack woman," Uncle Rufus added with disgust, "won't do but dis one wash twill happen New Years – naw'm! She jes' got t' cel'brate, she say. Ma' soul! what's a po', miserble nigger woman got t' cel'brate fo' Ah asks ye?"

"Why, Uncle Rufus!" cried Agnes. "Christmas is a birthday that *everybody* ought to celebrate. And I'm sure Petunia has many things to make her happy."

"Just look at all her children!" put in Tess.

"Alfredia, and Jackson Montgomery Simms, and little Burne-Jones Whistler and Louise Annette," Dot began to intone, naming the roll of Petunia Blossom's piccaninnies.

"Don't! Stop!" begged Agnes, with her hands over her ears and sitting down on the top step of the ladder.

"Ma soul!" chuckled Uncle Rufus, "if chillens come lak' Chris'mus presents, all de rich w'ite folks would hab 'em an' de po' nigger folks would be habbin' wot de paper calls 'race sooincide' – sho' would!"

"I haven't seen the laundry bag, Unc' Rufus," said Ruth, deep in thought.

Here Dot spoke up. "I 'spect I know where it is, Unc' Rufus," she said.

"Wal! I 'spected some ob yo' chillen done had it."

"You know," said Dot, seriously, "my Alice-doll is real weakly. The doctors don't give me much 'couragement about her. Her lungs are weak – they have been, you know, ever since that awful Trouble girl buried her with the dried apples."

"Dat Lillie Treble. Ah 'members hit – sho!" chuckled Uncle Rufus, the Corner House girls' chief factotum, who was a tall, thin, brown old negro, round shouldered with age, but "spry and pert," as he said himself.

"And the doctors," went on Dot, waxing serious, and her imagination "working over time," as Neale O'Neil would have said, "say it's best for folks with weak lungs to sleep out of doors. So Neale's built her a sleeping porch outside one of the windows in our bedroom – Tess' and mine – and – and I used your napkin bag, Unc' Rufus, for a sleeping-bag for my Alice-doll! I couldn't find anything else that fitted her," confessed the smallest Corner House girl.

"Well! of all the children!" cried Agnes, having taken her hands down from her ears to hear this.

"You shouldn't have taken the bag without permission," Ruth gravely told Dot.

But Uncle Rufus chuckled over it to a great extent. "Nebber did see de beat of dese young-uns!" he gasped finally. "If yo' Uncle Peter was alive he sartain sho' would ha' laffed hisself up out'n hes sick-bed. Ma soul an' body! W'y didn't he know enough t' hab yo'uns yere in de ol' Corner House w'ile he was alive, 'stid o' waitin' till he was daid t' gib it t' yo'?"

He would have gone out chuckling, only Ruth called after him: "Unc' Rufus! Do you know if there are any more candlesticks around the house? Nice, heavy ones, I mean – good enough to put in the dining room here, and for company to see."

"Candlesticks, missie? I 'spect dere is," said the old negro man.

"Do you know where?" Ruth asked quickly.

"Bress yo', honey! I 'speck dey is up in de attic," he said. "I don' jes' know whar –"

"Oh, I know! I know!" cried Agnes, suddenly. "Over in that corner of the garret that we never cleaned, Ruth."

"Did we fail to clear up any part of the garret?" asked the older girl, doubtfully.

"The place Tommy Rooney hid in when he was the attic goat," Dot said solemnly.

"Ghost!" admonished Tess. "I do wish you'd get your words right, Dot Kenway."

"I remember seeing some old brass candlesticks there," Agnes went on to explain to Ruth. "They can be polished, I should think. They're all green now."

"Of course," said Ruth, cheerfully. "Let's go and look for them."

"Oh, I want to go!" cried Dot, at once.

"May we all go, sister?" asked Tess.

"Of course you may come, kiddies," said Agnes, hopping down from her perch.

They all trooped up the three flights of stairs to the huge garret, Dot leaving her "sleeping" needle sticking in a puff-ball of popcorn.

The front hall of the old Corner House, as Milton folk called the Stower homestead on the corner of Willow Street, opposite the Parade Ground, was two stories high.

Broad stairs, dividing when half way up into two separate flights, rose out of the middle of the reception hall, lined with its old-fashioned, walnut, haircloth furniture. A gallery ran all around the stair-well, off which opened the guest chambers of the house. Only one of these was in use. Aunt Sarah Maltby had it. Aunt Sarah was determined to have the best there was of everything.

The girls slept in rooms in one of the two ells, on this second floor. Above, in the third story of the same ell, slept Mrs. MacCall, their good Scotch housekeeper, and Linda, the Finnish girl. Uncle Rufus was stowed away in the other ell, in a little room he had occupied for almost twenty-six years. Uncle Rufus had been Uncle Peter Stower's only retainer for many, many years before the Kenway girls came to live at the old Corner House.

Up another flight of stairs, the girls trooped to the garret, that extended the entire length and breadth of the main portion of the house. This was their playroom on rainy days, and a storeroom of wonderful things. The Kenways had never entirely exhausted the wonders of this place.

Agnes led the way to the far corner, lamp in hand. There some Revolutionary uniforms hung from the low rafters. On a broken-legged chest of drawers, held up by a brick in place of the missing leg, stood a row of heavy brass candlesticks.

"And see here!" cried Agnes, snatching up a faded, fat, plush-covered volume, moth-eaten and shabby, from which Ruth had just removed two of the candlesticks. "What can this be? The family album, I declare!"

She flirted several of the leaves. Others stuck together. There seemed to be some kind of illustrations, or pictures, between the pages.

"Throw that dusty old thing down, Aggie," said Ruth, "and help me carry these heavy candlesticks. They are just the things."

"I'll help carry them," agreed her sister. "Here, Dottums. You can just about lug this old book. I want to look at it. I shouldn't wonder if it held daguerreotypes and silhouettes of all the Stowers since Adam."

"What are da – da-gert-o-tops and – and silly-hats, Aggie?" demanded Dot, toiling along at the end of the procession with the big book, as the four girls started down stairs again. "Are – are they those awful animals Ruth was reading about that used to in – infest the earth so long ago?"

"Oh, mercy me!" gasped Agnes, laughing. "Pterodactyls and the giant sloth! See what it means to tell these kids about the Paleozoic age and 'sich,' Ruthie! Yes, child. Maybe you'll find pictures in that old book of those 'critters,' as Mrs. Mac calls them."

Dot sat right down on the upper flight and spread the book out upon her small lap. She had heard just enough about the creatures of the ancient world to be vitally curious.

But there were no pictures of animals. Dot hurriedly turned the pages. In the back were engravings on green paper, stuck into the old book. The green slips of paper had pictures on them, but nothing that interested Dot.

"Pooh!" she thought to herself, did the smallest Corner House girl, "old money – that's all it is. Just like the money Mr. Howbridge gives Ruth every month to pay bills with. I s'pose it's money that's no good any more."

She shut the book, disappointed, and clattered down stairs after her sisters. Nobody else had time to look at the family album just then. Agnes tossed her "find" into a corner until some more convenient occasion for looking at it. She and Ruth got the metal cleaning paste and rags and a chamois, and began to polish the candlesticks. The smaller girls returned to the stringing of popcorn.

Suddenly they all stopped work. With upraised hands and astonished looks, the four listened for a repetition of the sound that had startled them.

It came again, immediately. It was in the chimney. There was a muffled shout, then a scratching and a scraping, coming rapidly down the brick-and-mortar tunnel.

"Oh! *Oh!* OH!" squealed Dot, in crescendo. "Santa Claus has come ahead of time!"

"If that's Santa Claus," declared Agnes, jumping up to run to the open fireplace, "he's missed his footing and is falling down the chimney!"

CHAPTER II – “A PERFECTLY SAVAGE SANTA CLAUS”

Mrs. MacCall put her head into the dining room just as the girls rushed to the chimney-place to see what the noise within it meant. The housekeeper asked:

“Did you girls see that little imp, Sam Pinkney? Linda says he came through the kitchen a while ago, and when he heard you had gone to the garret he went up the back stairs to find you.”

“Sammy Pinkney!” chorused the two smallest Corner House girls.

“Well! it isn’t Santa then,” added Dot, with immense relief.

“It’s that imp, sure enough!” cried Agnes.

And just then a sooty bundle bounced down upon the hearth, to the unbounded amusement, if not amazement, of the Kenway sisters and Mrs. MacCall.

Ever since the Kenway girls had come to Milton and the old Corner House, Sammy Pinkney had been an abundant source of exasperation, amusement, and wonder to them all – especially to Tess and Dot.

Their coming to the Corner House, and all its attendant adventure and mystery, is chronicled in the first book of the series, entitled “The Corner House Girls.” The Kenways and Aunt Sarah Maltby had been very poor in the city where they had lived in a cheap tenement. All they had for support was a small pension. Aunt Sarah proclaimed always that when Peter Stower, of Milton, who was her half brother, died, “they would all be rich enough.” But that was only “talk,” so Ruth thought.

One day, however, Mr. Howbridge, a lawyer, came to see the orphans. He had been Uncle Peter’s man of business and was now administrator of the estate, Uncle Peter having died suddenly.

The lawyer told Ruth that he knew Uncle Peter had left a will making the Kenway girls his heirs-at-law – and leaving a very small legacy indeed to Aunt Sarah. But Uncle Peter was queer, and at the last had hidden the will. The lawyer said the Kenways must come and occupy the old Corner House in Milton until the will was found.

Aunt Sarah came with them of course. She considered herself very badly used, and acted as though she thought the best of everything in their new station in life should be hers. The Court made Mr. Howbridge the girls’ guardian, and the four sisters lived a rather precarious existence at the old Corner House for the first few months, for they were not at all sure that they were in their rightful place.

Indeed, when “the lady from Ypsilanti” with her little girl came along, and the lady claimed that she and Lillie were Uncle Peter’s rightful heirs, Ruth took them in and treated them kindly in the absence of Mr. Howbridge, fearing that the strangers might have a better claim upon the estate than themselves.

Finally this Mrs. Treble (whom Agnes called “Mrs. Trouble,” and her little girl, “Double Trouble”) aroused Aunt Sarah’s antagonism. To get them out of the house the queer old woman showed Ruth where Uncle Peter Stower had been wont to hide his private papers.

In this secret hiding place was the lost will. It established the rights of the Corner House girls to the estate and settled them firmly in the Stower homestead.

In the second volume of the series, “The Corner House Girls at School,” the girls extended the field of their acquaintance, entered the local schools, and became the friends, and finally the confidants, of Neale O’Neil, the boy who had run away away from Twomley & Sorber’s Herculean Circus and Menagerie, to get an education and “be like other boys.”

Neale was not the only person the Corner House girls befriended in this and the third book: “The Corner House Girls Under Canvas.” The latter story relates their adventures at Pleasant Cove, where they went for their vacation the second summer of their sojourn in the old Corner House, and

during which time they were the means of reuniting Rosa Wildwood, one of Ruth's schoolmates, to her sister, June, who had been living with a tribe of Gypsies.

Back again in the fall, and at school, Tess and Dot chance to meet Mrs. Eland, matron of the Women's and Children's Hospital, an institution doing excellent work in Milton, but not much appreciated by the townspeople at large. Tess quite falls in love with Mrs. Eland and is horrified to learn that the lonely woman is likely to lose her position, and the hospital to be closed, because of lack of funds.

Without any real idea of what she is accomplishing, Tess Kenway goes about talking to anybody and everybody of the hospital's need. She completely stirs up the town regarding the institution.

The schools take the matter up and the Board of Education approves a plan for the pupils to give a play for the benefit of the Women's and Children's Hospital. Each member of the Corner House quartette had a part in the play, and the performances of *The Carnation Countess* had but just been given during the fore part of this very Christmas week.

The narrative of these recent occurrences may be found in the fourth volume of the series, the story immediately preceding this one, called "The Corner House Girls in a Play." Three thousand dollars was raised for the hospital, and Mrs. Eland – Tess' "little gray lady" – is assured of the continuation of her situation as matron.

This fact is particularly happy at this time, for Mrs. Eland's sister, Miss Pepperill, Tess' school teacher, is ill, and Mrs. Eland is nursing her back to health. One reason for the decorating of the Corner House dining room is that the reunited sisters, Mrs. Eland and Miss Pepperill, have been invited to eat their Christmas dinner with the Corner House girls.

All this while the sooty bundle was lying on the brick hearth at the feet of the startled Corner House girls. As it squirmed, and the sooty dust arose from it, they saw that it was certainly alive.

It wore a long cloak and a hood, now of a sooty red, and trimmed with what was once white cotton-wool "fur." Leggings of the same material and trimming covered a pair of stout nether limbs; and upon these legs the little figure finally scrambled, revealing at last to the Kenway sisters and to Mrs. MacCall a face as black as any negro's.

"For pity's sake!" exclaimed the housekeeper. "What d' you call that, anyway?"

"It – it's Sammy," said Tess, boldly.

"If it is Santa Claus," said Ruth, smiling, "it is one that is not grown."

"It's a perfectly savage one," chuckled Agnes. "This must be a young Santa Claus in his wild and untamed state."

"He is unfamiliar with the best methods of descending folks' chimneys, that is sure," Ruth pursued. "I don't think this Santa Claus has learned his trade yet."

"And – and how black he is!" murmured Dot. "Are – are *all* Santa Clauses so black?"

"Aw, you girls make me sick!" growled the much abashed Santa Claus.

"I declare – he talks our language!" cried Agnes.

"Why, of course," said Tess, the literal. "He's in my class at school, you know."

"You think you are all so smart!" sneered Sammy Pinkney, and that sneer was something awful to behold. Dot fairly shuddered.

"You wait!" snarled Sammy. "When I run away and get to be a pirate, I'll – I'll – I'll –"

Sammy's emotion choked him for the moment. Mrs. MacCall sniffed; Ruth began to speak soothingly; Agnes giggled; Tess looked her disapproval of the savage young Santa Claus; while Dot, who had caught up the Alice-doll and squeezed her protectingly to her breast, gasped:

"Oh! Oh! Isn't he dreadful?"

Sammy's sharp ear evidently caught the smallest Corner House girl's whisper, for he rolled an approving eye in Dot's direction, and finally finished his fearsome peroration with true piratical savagery:

"I'll come back and I'll make every one of you walk the plank!"

“What ever that may mean,” murmured Agnes, quite weak from laughter. But as Sammy Pinkney started for the door she cried: “Oh, Sammy!”

“Well? What’s the matter?” growled the savage young Santa Claus.

“Tell us – do! How did you get in the chimney?” asked Agnes.

“The skylight was open when I followed you girls upstairs, so I got up on the roof and crawled in at the top of the chimbley. It was all right coming down, too,” said the young rascal, “till I got to the second story. There was irons in the chimbley for steps; but one was loose and fell out when I stepped on it. Then I – I slipped.”

He stalked out. Dot said ruminatively: “We’d better have that step fixed before to-morrow night, hadn’t we, Ruthie? Before Santa Claus comes, you know. He might fall and hurt himself.”

“Very true, Dottums,” declared Agnes, with a quickly serious face. “I’ll speak to Uncle Rufus about it.”

But Agnes must have forgotten, or else Uncle Rufus did not attend to the missing step in the chimney. At least, so Dot supposed when she awoke in the dark the very next morning and heard something going “thump-thumpity-thump” down the chimney again.

The smallest Corner House girl was not in the habit of waking up when it seemed still “the middle of the night,” and her small head was quite confused. She really thought it must be Christmas morning and that good Kris Kringle has suffered a bad fall.

“Oh-ee! if he’s brought Alice-doll her new carriage, it will be all smashed!” gasped Dot, and she slipped out of bed without disturbing Tess.

She shrugged on her little bathrobe and put her tiny feet into slippers. Somebody ought to go to see how bad a fall Santa Claus had – and see if all his presents were smashed. Dot really had forgotten that there was still another day before Christmas.

The little girl padded out of her room and along the hall to the front of the house. Nobody heard her as she descended the front stairs.

Dot came to the foot of the stairs, where a single dim gaslight flickered. She pushed open the dining room door.

As she did so, there sounded the faint clink, clink, clink of metal against metal. A spotlight flashed and roved around the room – touching ceiling and walls and floor in its travels. But it did not reveal her figure just inside the door.

She saw no good Kris Kringle standing on the hearth, with his bag of toys. Nothing but a broken brick lay there – probably loosened by Sammy Pinkney in his course down the chimney-well the previous afternoon.

There was a shadowy figure – she could not see its face – stooping over a cloth laid upon the floor; and upon that cloth was stacked much of the choice old silver which Uncle Rufus always packed away so carefully after using in the locked safe in the butler’s pantry.

CHAPTER III – DOROTHY'S BURGLAR

Dot Kenway had heard about burglars. That is, she knew there were such people. Just why they went about “burgling,” as she herself phrased it, the smallest Corner House girl did not understand.

But she thought, with a queer jumping at her heart, that she had found a “really truly” burglar now.

He was just putting their very best sugar-bowl on the top of the pile of other silver, and she expected to see him tie up the cloth by its four corners preparatory to taking it away.

Dot really did not know what she ought to do. Of course, she might have screamed for Ruth; but then, she knew that Ruthie would be awfully scared if she did.

Why, Tess, even, would be scared if she came across a burglar! Dot was quite sure of that; and she felt happy to know that she was really not so scared as she supposed she would have been.

The burglar did not seem any more fearful in appearance than the iceman, or the man who took out the ashes, or the man who came to sharpen the knives and had a key-bugle —

Oh! and maybe burglars carried something to announce their calling, like other tradesmen. The junkman had a string of bells on his wagon; the peanutman had a whistle on his roaster; the man who mended tinware and umbrellas beat a shiny new tin pan as he walked through Willow Street —

“Oh!” ejaculated the curious Dot, right out loud, “do you use a whistle, or a bell, or *anything*, in your business, please?”

My goodness! how that man jumped! Dot thought he would fall right over backward, and the round ray of the spotlight in his hand shot up to the ceiling and all about the room before it fell on Dot, standing over by the hall door.

“Well, I’ll be jiggered!” gasped the man, in utter amazement. “Wha – what did you say, miss?”

He was not really a man, after all. Dot saw by his lean face that he was nothing more than a half grown boy. So every little bit of fear she had felt for the burglar departed. He could not really be a journeyman burglar – only an apprentice, just learning his trade. Dot became confidential at once, and came closer to him.

“I – I never met anybody in your business before,” said the smallest Corner House girl. “If you please, do you only come into folks’s houses at night?”

“Huh!” croaked the young man, hoarsely. “Seems ter me we’re workin’ both night an’ day at this season. I never did see it so hard on a poor feller before.”

“Oh, my!” exclaimed Dot. “Do you have busy seasons, and slack seasons, like the peddlers?”

“I should say we did, miss,” agreed the other, still in a complaining tone.

“My! What makes this time of year a busy one?” demanded the inquisitive Dorothy.

“The frost, miss.”

“The frost?” repeated the little girl, quite puzzled.

“Yes, miss. The frost catches folks napping, as ye may say.”

Dot puzzled over that for a moment, too. Did folks sleep harder when it was frosty and dark out-of-doors, than in summer? The young man stood and watched her. It must be rather embarrassing to be interrupted in the midst of a burglary.

“Don’t – don’t mind me,” said Dot, politely. “Don’t let me stop your work.”

“No, miss. I’m a-waiting for my boss,” said the other.

There! Dot had known he must be only an apprentice burglar – he was so young.

“Then – then there’s more of you?” she asked.

“More of *me*? No, ma’am,” said the amazed young man. “You see all there is of me. I never was very husky – no, ma’am.”

He seemed to be a very diffident burglar. He quite puzzled Dot.

“Don’t – don’t you ever get afraid in your business?” she asked. “I should think you would.”

"Yep. I'm some afraid when I wipe a joint," admitted the young man. "Ye see, I ain't used to the hot lead, yet."

Dot thought over that answer a good while. Of course, she could not be expected to understand the professional talk of burglars – never having associated with that gentry. What "wiping a joint" meant she could not imagine; and what burglars did with hot lead was quite as puzzling.

"I – I suppose your boss is a journeyman burglar?" queried the little girl, at last.

"Wha-at!" gasped the young man. Then he grinned hugely. "That's what some of his customers calls him, miss," he agreed.

"Don't – don't you think there is some danger in your staying here alone?" asked Dot. "Suppose Uncle Rufus should come down stairs and catch you?"

"Hullo! who's Uncle Rufus?" asked the young man.

"Why – why, he's Uncle Rufus. He works for us – "

"Oh! he's the colored man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, he *is* down," said the young man, coolly. "He let us in. We had to come early, 'cause we've got so much work to do, and we didn't get through at Pinkney's till nine o'clock last night."

"At Pinkney's?" cried Dot, as the young man yawned. "Did – did you burgle Sammy's house, too?"

"What d'ye mean – 'burgle'?" asked the young man, biting off the yawn and staring again at Dot.

"I beg your pardon," said Dot, gently. "But – but what do you call it?"

Just then the door of the butler's pantry opened and Uncle Rufus looked in.

"Dat oddah plumber done come, young man," he said. "Dis ain't no time in de mawnin' – 'fo' six o'clock – t' come t' folks's houses nohow t' mend a busted watah-pipe – nossir! Yuh got all ob dem silber pieces out ob de safe?"

"They're all out, Uncle," said the young man.

"Whuffo' dey run dat pipe t'rough de silber closet, I dunno," complained the old darkey. "I use t' tell Mistah Peter Stowah dat it was one piece of plain foolishness. What if de bat'room *is* ober dis closet – "

He disappeared, his voice trailing off into silence, and the young man followed him. Dot was left breathless and rather abashed. Then the young man was not a burglar after all; he was only a plumber!

She crept back to bed, and said nothing to anybody about her early morning visit to the lower floor. But the young man told Uncle Rufus, and Uncle Rufus, chuckling hugely, told Mrs. MacCall.

"I'd like to know, for goodness' sake, what you would have done if it had been a really truly burglar, Dot Kenway?" Agnes demanded, when the story was repeated at the breakfast table.

"I'd have given him my silver knife and fork and mug, and asked him to go away without waking up Ruthie," declared the smallest Corner House girl, having thought it all out by that time.

"I believe you would – you blessed child!" cried Ruth, jumping up to kiss her.

"But suppose it had been Santa Claus?" Tess murmured, "and you had disturbed him filling our stockings?"

"Pooh!" said Dot. "If he'd felled down the chimbley like that brick, he wouldn't have been filling stockings."

CHAPTER IV – THE FAMILY ALBUM – AND OTHER THINGS

The day before Christmas was the busiest day of all. The dressing of the tree must be finished and the trimming and festooning of the big dining room completed. Neale O'Neil came over early to help the Corner House girls. He was a slim, rosy-cheeked, flaxen-haired boy, as agile as a monkey, and almost always smiling.

Ruth and Agnes would not hear to his helping trim the tree; but it was Neale's agility that made it possible for the rope of green to be festooned from the heavy ceiling cornices. Uncle Rufus was much too stiff with rheumatism for such work.

"Well! boys are some good, you must admit," Agnes said to Ruth, for the oldest Corner House girl was inclined to be a carping critic of the "mere male."

"All right. If he's so awfully useful, just let him clear up all this mess on the carpet, and then dust the rugs. Mercy, Agnes!" exclaimed Ruth, "what a lot of this green stuff there is all over the floor."

"Yes, I know," admitted Agnes.

"And there is other rubbish, too. Look at this old book you brought down from the attic and flung in the corner."

Ruth picked it up. It was heavy, and she carried it over to the broad window-seat on which she sat to open the "family album," as Agnes had called it.

The latter and Neale, having brought in basket and broom, began to gather up the litter. Ruth became very still at the window with the old volume in her lap. The smaller girls were out of the room.

"What's in the old thing – pictures?" asked Agnes of her elder sister.

"Ye – yes, pictures," Ruth said hesitatingly.

"Must be funny ones," chuckled Neale, "by the look of her face."

Ruth did look serious as she sat there, turning the pages of the big, old volume. Had the others noticed particularly they would have seen that the countenance of the oldest Corner House girl had become very pale.

It was so when Mrs. MacCall looked in and said to her: "Oh, Ruth! I do wish you'd come out here and see what that Sammy Pinkney's brought. I dunno whether to laugh, to scream, or to spank him!"

"I'll be there in a moment, Mrs. Mac," Ruth said nervously, jumping up and closing the book.

Then she glanced at Agnes and Neale, seized the volume in her arms, and instead of going out through the butler's pantry after Mrs. MacCall, she crossed the front hall to the sitting room at the rear of the house.

"I like *that!*" cried Agnes. "Why! I found that old album myself; and I haven't had a chance to look into it yet."

Ruth was only a moment in the sitting room. Then she ran to the kitchen and out upon the cold porch, where Sammy Pinkney, done up in the folds of a huge red comforter like a boa-constrictor suffering from scarlet fever, stood, holding a cage-trap in one mittened hand.

"What do you know about this?" demanded Mrs. MacCall, spectacles on nose and eyeing the contents of the round trap in alarm and disgust.

Uncle Rufus was chuckling hugely in the background. Sandyface, the mother cat, was arching her back and purring pleadingly about Sammy's sturdy legs.

"What are they?" demanded Ruth.

"Mice," grunted Sammy, gruffly. "For Tess' cats. They like 'em, don't they? But my mother says I've got to bring the trap back."

“What’s to be done with a boy like that?” demanded Mrs. MacCall. “Being kicked to death with grasshoppers would be mild punishment for him, wouldn’t it? What’s to be done with eight mice?”

“One kitten will have to go without,” said Dot, the literal, as she and Tess joined the party on the porch.

“Come on, now! You gotter let ’em out. I gotter have the trap,” was Sammy’s gruff statement. He saw that his present was not entirely appreciated by the human members of the Corner House family, whether the feline members approved or not.

“Oh, I’ll call the family!” cried Dot, and raised her voice in a shrill cry for “Spotty, Almira, Popocatepetl, Bungle, Starboard, Port, Hard-a-Lee and Mainsheet!” She was breathless when she had finished.

Cats came from all directions. Indeed, they seemed to appear most mysteriously from the ground. Big cats and little cats, black cats and gray cats, striped cats and spotted cats.

“If there were any more of them they’d eat us out of house and home,” declared Mrs. MacCall.

“But Almira isn’t here!” wailed Dot. “Oh, Ruthie! don’t let him open the cage till Almira comes. *She* wants a chance to catch a mouse.”

“I believe you children are little cannibals!” exclaimed the housekeeper. “How *can* you? Wanting those cats to catch the poor little mice!”

“D’you want ’em for pets?” demanded Sammy, grinning at the housekeeper.

“Ugh! I hate the pests!” cried Mrs. MacCall.

“Do find Almira, Ruthie,” begged Dot.

“I gotter take this cage back,” said Sammy. “Can’t fool here all day with a parcel of girls.”

“But Almira – ”

But Ruth had gone into the woodshed. She peered into the corners and all around the barrels. Suddenly she heard a cat purring – purring hard, just like a mill!

“Where are you, Almira?” she asked, softly.

“Purr! purr! purr!” went Almira – oh, *so* loud, and *so* proudly!

“What is it, Almira?” asked Ruth. “There! I see you – down in that corner. Why, you’re on Uncle Rufus’ old coat! Oh! *What’s this?*”

The eight mice had been caught by the other cats and killed. Tess came to the woodshed door.

“Oh, Ruth,” she asked, “has anything happened to Almira?”

“I should say there had!” laughed the oldest Corner House girl.

“Oh! what is it?” cried Dot, running, too, to see.

“Santa Claus came ahead of time – to Almira, anyway,” declared Ruth. “Did you ever see the like? You cunning ‘tittle s’ings! Look, children! Four tiny, little, black kittens.”

“Oh-oh-ee!” squealed Tess, falling right down on her knees to worship. But Dot looked gravely at the undisturbed Sandyface, rubbing around her feet.

“Goodness me, Sandyface, you’re a grandmother!” she said.

CHAPTER V – NO NEWS FOR CHRISTMAS

Almira's addition to the Corner House family was not the only happening which came on this eventful day to fill the minds and the hearts of the Kenway sisters.

Ruth went around with a very serious face, considering the holiday season and all that she and Agnes and Tess and Dot had to make them joyful. Nor was her expression of countenance made any more cheerful by some news bluff Dr. Forsyth gave her when he stopped, while on his afternoon round of calls, to leave four packages marked "Ruth," "Agnes," "Tess" and "Dot."

"Not to be opened till to-morrow, mind," said the doctor. "That's what the wife says. Now, I must hurry on. I've got to go back to the hospital again to-night. I've a bothersome patient there."

"Oh! Not Miss Pepperill?" Ruth cried, for the red-haired school teacher and the matron of the hospital, her sister, were to be the guests of the Corner House girls on the morrow.

Dr. Forsyth took off his hat again and frowned into it. "No," he said, "not her – not now."

"Why, Doctor! what do you mean? Isn't she getting on well?"

"Well? No!" blurted out the physician. "She doesn't please me. She doesn't get back her strength. Her nerves are jumpy. I hear that she was considered a Tartar in the schoolroom. Is that right?"

"Ask Tommy Pinkney," smiled Ruth. "I believe she was considered strict."

"Humph! yes. Short tempered, sharp tongued, children afraid of her, eh?"

"I believe so," admitted Ruth.

"Good reason for that," said the doctor, shaking his head. "Her nerves are worn to a frazzle. I'm not sure that it isn't a teacher's disease. It's prevalent among 'em. The children just wear them out – if they don't take things easily."

"But, Miss Pepperill?"

"I can't get her on her pins again," growled the doctor.

"Oh, Doctor! Can't she come over here with her sister to-morrow?"

"Yes, she'll come in my machine," said the good physician, putting on his hat once more. "What I am talking about is her lack of improvement. She stands still. She makes no perceptible gain. She talks about going back to teaching, and all that. Why, she is no more fit to be a teacher at present than I am fit to be an angel!"

Ruth smiled up at him and patted his burly shoulder. "I am not so sure that you are not an angel, Doctor," she said.

"Yes. That's what they tell me when I've pulled 'em out of trouble by the very scruff of their necks," growled Dr. Forsyth. "Other times, when I am giving them bad tasting medicine, they call me anything but an angel," and he laughed shortly.

"But now – in this case – she's not a bad patient. She can't help her nerves. They have gotten away from her. Out of control. She's not fit to go back to her work – and won't be for a couple of years."

"Oh!" cried Ruth, with pain. She knew what such a thing meant to the two sisters at the hospital. It was really tragic. Mrs. Eland's salary was small, and Miss Pepperill was not the person to wish to be a burden upon her sister. "The poor thing!" Ruth added.

"She ought to have a year – perhaps two – away from all bothersome things," said Dr. Forsyth, preparing to go. "I'd like to have her go away, and her sister with her for a time, to some quiet place, and to a more invigorating climate. And *that* – well, we doctors can prescribe such medicine for our rich patients only," and Dr. Forsyth went away, shaking his head.

Ruth said nothing to the other girls about this bad report upon Miss Pepperill's condition. They all were interested in Mrs. Eland's sister – more for Mrs. Eland's sake, it must be confessed, than because of any sweetness of disposition that had ever been displayed by the red-haired school teacher.

The two women had lived very unhappy lives. Left orphans at an early age, they were separated, and Miss Pepperill was brought up by people who treated her none too kindly. She was trained as a teacher and had never married; whereas Mrs. Eland was widowed young, had become a nurse, and finally had come to be matron of the Milton Women's and Children's Hospital in the very town where her sister taught school.

The coming together of the sisters, after Miss Pepperill was knocked down by an automobile on the street, seemed quite a romance to the Corner House girls, and they had been vastly interested for some weeks in the affairs of the matron and the school teacher.

The little girls, Tess and Dot, were too much excited over what the eve of Christmas, and the day itself should bring forth, to be much disturbed by even Ruth's grave face.

When they ate dinner that night, in the light of the candles, it seemed as though they ate in a fairy grotto. The big dining room was beautifully trimmed, the lights sparkled upon the newly polished silver and cut glass, a beautiful damask tablecloth was on the board, and the girls in their fresh frocks and ribbons were a delight to the eye.

Dot could not keep her eyes off the open fireplace. Branches of pine had now been set up in the yawning cavern of brick; but plenty of room had been left for the entrance of a Santa Claus of most excellent girth.

"Dot's expecting another Santa – or a burglar – to tumble down the chimney at any moment," laughed Agnes.

"Let us hope he won't be a plumber," said Ruth, smiling gravely. "Another plumber's bill at Christmas would extract all the joy from our festivities."

"Oh! What will Mr. Howbridge say when he sees the bill?" queried Agnes, round-eyed, for she stood somewhat in awe of their very dignified guardian.

"I don't much care what he'll say," said Ruth, recklessly. "Only I wish he were going to be with us to-morrow as he was at Thanksgiving. But he will not be back until long past New Year's."

Before they rose from the table the doorbell began to ring and Uncle Rufus hobbled out to answer it and to receive mysterious packages addressed to the various members of the family. These gifts were heaped in the sitting room, and Tess and Dot were not even allowed a peep at them.

Neale came over and lit up the tree, to the delight of the little girls. The Creamer girls from next door came in to see it, and so did Margaret and Holly Pease from down Willow Street.

Sammy Pinkney had been told he could come; but the red comforter and the hoarse voice had not been for nothing. Mrs. Pinkney sent over word that Sammy had such a cold that she was forced to put him to bed. He was feverish, too; so his Christmas Eve was spent between blankets.

"Oh! I'm so sorry for Sammy," Dot said, feasting her eyes upon the glittering tree. "I know he won't ever see anything so pretty as this."

"Not if he turns pirate, he won't," Tess agreed severely. "I think likely his being sick is a punishment for his saying that there isn't any Santa Claus."

The visiting little girls went home and Tess and Dot were sent off to bed. Not that they were sleepy – oh, no, indeed! They declared that they positively could *not* sleep – and then were in the Land of Nod almost before their heads touched the pillow.

Ruth kissed them both after she had heard their prayers, and then tiptoed out of the room. Downstairs was suppressed laughter and much running about. Agnes and Neale were beginning to tie the presents on the tree, and to fill the stockings hung on a line across the chimney-place.

Everybody – even Uncle Rufus – had hung up a stocking for Santa Claus to fill with goodies. It had cost infinite labor and urging to get Aunt Sarah to put her stocking in evidence for Kris Kringle; but there it was, a shapeless white affair with unbleached foot and top.

Mrs. MacCall's hung next – rather a natty looking black stocking, if the truth were known – one of a pair, the mate to which had long since been eaten by Billy Bumps, the goat.

Then came the girls' stockings in one-two-three-four order, like a graduated course of bamboo "bells." Then followed one of Neale's golf stockings, which he had brought because it held more than a sock, with Linda's coarse red woollen hose and Uncle Rufus' huge gray yarn sock at the end.

It was great fun to fill the hose and to tie the wonderfully curious packages on the tree and heap them underneath it. Neale was to get all his presents at the Corner House; so that added to the confusion. There was a special corner in the sitting room where Neale's gifts had been hidden; and there he was supposed not to look.

Then Agnes had to go into the kitchen while her presents were being unearthed and properly hung. Last of all, Ruth retired, leaving Agnes and Neale to hang those gifts which the Good Saint had brought the eldest sister. Ruth was tired, for she had worked hard; so she went to sleep and had no idea how long her sister sat up, when Neale went home, or at what hour Mrs. MacCall locked the house and went up to bed.

Agnes and Neale had something besides the hanging of Ruth's presents to interest them. The former found the big, old family album hidden behind the sewing machine in the sitting room. She sat down with Neale to look it over.

CHAPTER VI – TREASURE TROVE

“Why! Did you ever!” gasped Agnes Kenway.

“Thought you said it was a family photograph album!” said Neale O’Neil.

With their heads close together they were looking into the moth-eaten and battered book Agnes had found in the old Corner House garret. On turning the first page a yellowed and time-stained document met their surprised gaze.

There was a picture engraved upon the document, true enough. Such an ornate certificate, or whatever it might be, Agnes or Neale had never even seen before.

“The Pittsburg & Washington Railroad Co.,” read Neale, slowly. “Whew! Calls for a thousand dollars – good at any bank.”

“Sandbank, I guess it means,” giggled Agnes.

But Neale was truly puzzled. “I never saw a bond before, did you, Aggie?”

“A bond! What kind of a bond?”

“Why, the kind this is supposed to be.”

“Why, is it a bond?”

“Goodness! you repeat like a parrot,” snapped Neale.

“And you’re as polite as a – a pirate,” declared Agnes.

“Well, did you ever see anything like this?”

“No. And of course, it isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on. You know very well, Neale, that people don’t leave money around – loose – like *this*!”

“This isn’t money; it only calls for money,” said the boy.

“I guess it never called very loud for it,” giggled Agnes.

“Must be stage money, then,” laughed Neale. “Hi! here’s more of it.”

He had turned a leaf. There was another of the broad, important looking documents pasted in the old book.

“And good for another thousand dollars!” gasped Agnes.

“Phony – phony,” chuckled Neale, meaning that the certificates were counterfeit.

“But just see how good they look,” Agnes said wistfully.

“And dated more than sixty years ago!” cried Neale. “There were green-goods men in those days, eh? Hello! here’s another.”

“Why, we’re millionaires, Neale,” Agnes declared. “Oh! if it were only real we’d have an automobile.”

“This is treasure trove, sure enough,” her boy chum said.

“What’s that?”

“Whatever you find that seems to belong to nobody. I suppose this has been in the garret for ages. Hard for anybody to prove property now.”

“But it’s not *real*!”

“Yes – I know. But, if it were – ?”

“Oh! if it were!” repeated the girl.

“Wouldn’t that be bully?” agreed the boy. But he was puzzling over the mortgage bonds of a railroad which, if it had ever been built at all, was probably now long since in a receiver’s hands, and the bonds declared valueless.

“And all for a thousand apiece,” Neale muttered, turning the pages of the book and finding more of the documents. “Cracky, Aggie, there’s a slew of them.”

“But shouldn’t they be made out to somebody? Oughtn’t somebody’s name to be on them?” asked Agnes, thoughtfully.

"No, guess not. These must be unregistered bonds. I expect somebody once thought he was awfully rich with all this paper. It totes up quite a fortune, Aggie."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Agnes. "I guess it's true, Neale: The more you have the more you want. When we were so poor in Bloomingburg it seemed as though if we had a dollar over at the end of the month, we were rich. Now that we have plenty – all we really need, I s'pose – I wish we were a little bit richer, so that we could have an auto, Neale."

"Uh-huh!" said Neale, still feasting his eyes on the engraved bonds. "Cracky, Aggie! there's fifty of 'em."

"Goodness! Fifty thousand dollars?"

"All in your eye!" grinned Neale. "What do you suppose they ever pasted them into a scrap-book for?"

"That's just it!" cried Agnes.

"What's just it?"

"A scrap-book. I didn't think of it before. They made this old album into a scrap-book."

"Who did?" demanded the boy, curiously.

"Somebody. Children, maybe. Maybe Aunt Sarah Maltby might tell us something about it. And it will be nice for Tess and Dot to play with."

"Huh!" grunted Neale.

"Of course that's it," added the girl, with more assurance. "It's a scrap-book – like a postcard album."

"Huh!" grunted Neale again, still doubtful.

"When Mrs. MacCall was a little girl, she says it was the fad to save advertising cards. She had a big book full."

"Well – mebbe that's it," Neale said grudgingly. "Let's see what else there is in the old thing."

He began to flirt the pages toward the back of the book. "Why!" he exclaimed. "Here's some real stage money. See here!"

"Oh! oh!"

"Doesn't it look good?" said Neale, slowly.

"Just as though it had just come from the bank. What is it – Confederate money, Neale? Eva Larry has a big collection of Confederate bills. Her grandfather brought it home after the Civil War."

"Oh! these aren't Confederate States bills – they're United States bills. Don't you see?" cried Neale.

"Oh, Neale!"

"But you can bet they are counterfeit. Of course they are!"

"Oh, dear!"

"Silly! Good money wouldn't be allowed to lie in a garret the way this was. Somebody'd have found it long ago. Your Uncle Peter, or Unc' Rufus – or *somebody*. What is puzzling me is why it was put in a scrap-book."

"Oh! they're only pasted in at the corners. There's one all loose. For ten dollars, Neale!"

"Well, you go out and try to spend it, Aggie," chuckled her boy chum. "You'd get arrested and Ruth would have to bail you out."

"It's just awful," Agnes declared, "for folks to make such things to fool other folks."

"It's a crime. I don't know but you can be punished for having the stuff in your possession."

"Goodness me! Then let's put it in the stove."

"Hold on! Let's count it, first," proposed Neale, laughing.

Neale was turning the leaves carefully and counting. Past the tens, the pages were filled with twenty dollar bills. Then came several pages of fifties. Then hundred dollar notes. In one case – which brought a cry of amazement to Agnes' lips – a thousand dollar bill faced them from the middle of a page.

“Oh! goodness to gracious, Neale!” cried the Corner House girl. “What does it mean?”

Neale, with the stub of a pencil, was figuring up the “treasure” on the margin of a page.

“My cracky! look here, Aggie,” he cried, as he set down the last figure of the sum. “That’s what it is!”

The sum was indeed a fortune. The boy and girl looked at each other, all but speechless. If this were only good money!

“And it’s only good for the children to play with,” wailed Agnes.

Neale’s face grew very red and his eyes flashed. He closed the book fiercely. “If I had so much money,” he gasped, “I’d never have to take a cent from Uncle Bill Sorber again as long as I lived, I could pay for my own education – and go to college, too!”

“Oh! Neale! couldn’t you? And if it were *mine* we’d have an auto,” repeated Agnes, “and a man to run it.”

“Pooh! *I* could learn to run it for you,” proposed Neale. But it was plain by the look on his face that he was not thinking of automobiles.

“Say! don’t let’s give it to the kids to play with – not yet,” he added.

“Why not?”

“I – I don’t know,” the boy said frankly. “But don’t do it. Let me take the book.”

“Oh, Neale! you wouldn’t try to pass the money?” gasped Agnes.

“Huh! think I’m a chump?” demanded the boy. “I want to study over it. Maybe I’ll show the bonds to somebody. Who knows – they may still be of some small value.”

“We – ell – of course, the money – ”

“That’s phony – sure!” cried Neale, hastily. “But bonds sometimes are worth a little, even when they are as old as these.”

“No-o,” sighed Agnes, shaking her head. “No such good luck.”

“But you don’t mind if I take the book?” Neale urged.

“No. But do take care of it.”

So Neale took the old scrap-book home under his arm, neither he nor Agnes suspecting what trouble and worriment would arise from this simple act.

CHAPTER VII – “GOD REST YE, MERRIE GENTLEMEN”

There was a whisper in the corridor, a patter of softly shod feet upon the stair.

Even Uncle Rufus had not as yet arisen, and it was as black as pitch outside the Corner House windows.

The old dog, Tom Jonah, rose, yawning, from his rug before the kitchen range, walked sedately to the swinging door of the butler's pantry, and put his nose against it. The whispering and pattering of feet was in the front hall, but Tom Jonah's old ears were sharp.

The sounds came nearer. Tess and Dot were coming down to see what Santa Claus had left them. Old Tom Jonah whined, put both paws to the door, and slipped through. He bounded through the second swinging door into the dining room just as the two smallest Corner House girls, with their candle, entered from the hall.

“Oh, Tom Jonah!” cried Tess.

“Merry Christmas, Tom Jonah!” shouted Dot, skipping over to the chimney-place. Then she squealed: “Oh-ee! He *did* come, Tess! Santa Claus has been here!”

“Well,” sighed Tess, thankfully, “it's lucky Tom Jonah didn't bite him.”

Dot hurried to move a chair up to the hearth, and climbed upon it to reach her stocking. The tree was in the shadow now, and the children did not note the packages tied to its branches.

Dot unhooked her own and her sister's stockings and then jumped down, a bulky and “knobby” hose under each arm.

“Come on back to bed and see what's in them,” proposed Tess.

“No!” gasped Dot. “I can't wait – I really can't, Tess. I just feel as though I should faint.”

She dropped right down on the floor, holding her own stocking clasped close to her breast. There her gaze fell upon a shiny, smart-looking go-cart, just big enough for her Alice-doll, that had been standing on the hearth underneath the place where her stocking had hung.

“Oh! *oh!* OH!” shrieked Dot. “I know I shall faint.”

Tess was finding her own treasures; but Tess could never enjoy anything selfishly. She must share her joy with somebody.

“Oh, Dot! Let's show the others what we've got. And Ruthie and Aggie ought to be down, too,” she urged.

“Let's take our stockings upstairs and show 'em,” Dot agreed.

She piled her toys, helter skelter, into the doll wagon. “My Alice-doll *must* see this carriage,” she murmured, and started for the door. Tess followed with her things gathered into the lap of her robe. Tom Jonah paced solemnly after them, and so the procession mounted the front stairs – Dot having some difficulty with the carriage.

Ruth heard them coming and called out “Merry Christmas!” to them; but Agnes was hard to awaken, for she had been up late. The chattering and laughter finally aroused the beauty, and she sat up in bed, yawning to the full capacity of her “red, red cavern with its fringe of white pearls all around.”

“Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!” they all shouted at her.

“Oh – dear – me! Merry Christmas!” returned Agnes. “But why be so noisy about it?”

“Come over here, Miss Lazybones,” cried Ruth, “and see what Santa Claus has brought the children.”

“What's that?” demanded Agnes, as she hopped out of bed. “Who's going down the back stairs?”

"Linda," said Ruth. "Can't you tell those clod-hopper shoes she wears? I wonder if everybody in Finland wears such footgear?"

"Maybe she's going to look at *her* stocking," Tess said. "I hope she likes the handkerchiefs I monogrammed for her."

But before long the pungent smell of freshly ground coffee came up the back stairway and assured the girls that the serving maid was at work.

"Why so ear – ear – ear-ly?" yawned Agnes, again. "Why! it's still pitch-dark."

Uncle Rufus was usually the first astir in the Corner House and Linda was not noted for early rising. But now the girls heard the stairs creak again – this time under Mrs. MacCall's firm tread.

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Mac!" they all shouted.

The smiling Scotchwoman came to the door with her bedroom candle in her hand.

"Indeed, I hope 'twill be a merry ain for my fower sweethearts," she said. "Your Mrs. Mac must have a kiss from ever' ain o' ye," and she proceeded to take toll from the quartette.

"Ye make ma heart glad juist wi' the looks o' ye," she added. "And there's many and many a lonely heart beside mine ma Corner House bairns have made to rejoice. I thank God for ye, ma dearies."

Mrs. MacCall always spoke more broadly when she was moved by sentiment. She wiped her glasses now and prepared to descend to the kitchen when suddenly a chorus of voices broke out below the bedroom windows, in the side yard toward Willow Street.

"Hech, now! what have we here?" cried the housekeeper, going smartly to the window and throwing up the shade and then the sash. The sound poured in – a full chorus of fresh young voices singing a Christmas carol.

"Cover yersel's, ma dearies," advised Mrs. MacCall, "and leesten."

"Oh, oh!" whispered Agnes, fairly hugging herself as she sat upon the bed with her feet drawn up. "It's just as though we lived in a castle – and had a moat and drawbridge and fiefs –"

"Oh," interposed Dot. "That's Mr. Joe Maroni strumming his guitar. I've heard him before."

"Why!" gasped Ruth. "It's the children from Meadow Street."

She ran to the window to peer out. It was a very cold morning, and there was only a narrow band of crimson, pink, and saffron light along the eastern horizon.

She could easily distinguish the sturdy Italian with his guitar which he touched so lightly in accord with the children's voices. There were fully a dozen of the little singers – German and Italian, Jew and Gentile – singing the praise of Christ our Lord in an old Christmas carol.

A bulky figure in the background puzzled Ruth at first; but when a hoarse voice commanded: "Now sing de Christ-childt song – coom! Ein – zwei – drei!" she recognized Mrs. Kranz, the proprietor of the delicatessen store.

The lustily caroling children were some of the Maronis, Sadie Goronofski and her half-brothers and sisters, and other children of the tenants in the Meadow Street property from which the Corner House girls collected rents.

"Oh, my!" murmured Agnes again. "Isn't it *great*? We ought to throw them largesse –"

"What's that, Aggie?" demanded Dot. "It – it sounds like a kind of cheese. Mr. Maroni sells it."

"No, no!" gasped Tess. "That's gorgonzola – I asked Maria. And – it – smells!"

"Goosey!" laughed Agnes. "Largesse is money. Rich folks used to throw it to the poor."

"My!" observed Dot. "I guess they don't do it now. Poor folks have to work for money."

"It's just dear of them to come and serenade us," Ruth declared. "But it's so cold! Do call them in to get warm, Mrs. Mac."

Already the housekeeper was scurrying downstairs. She had routed out Linda early to make coffee against this very emergency, for Mrs. MacCall had known that the Corner House girls were to be serenaded on Christmas morning.

The four sisters dressed hastily and ran down to greet their little friends from Meadow Street, as well as Mrs. Kranz and Joe Maroni. The latter had brought “the leetla padrona,” as he called Ruth, his usual offering of a basket of fruit. Mrs. Kranz kissed the Kenway girls all around, declaring:

“Posies growing de garten in iss nodt so sweet like you kinder. Merry, merry Christmas!”

While the carol singers drank cups of hot coffee the Corner House girls brought forth the presents they had intended to send over to Meadow Street later in the day, but now could give in person to each child.

The choristers went away with merry shouts just at sunrise, and then Dot and Tess insisted that the family should troop into the dining room to take down the rest of the stockings.

Breakfast this morning was a “movable feast” and lasted till nine o’clock. Nobody expected to eat any luncheon; indeed, Mrs. MacCall declared she could not take the time to prepare any.

“You bairns must tak’ a ‘bit in your fistie,’ as we used to say, and be patient till dinner time,” she said.

Dinner was to be early. Mrs. Eland and Miss Pepperill came in the doctor’s automobile soon after noon, and Tess and Dot were at once engaged in entertaining these guests in the sitting room.

It was a real blessing to the little Corner House girls, for it kept them out of the dining room, where they could not keep their eyes off the heavily laden tree, the fruit of which must not be touched until after dinner.

Neale O’Neil had, of course, come over for his stocking and had expressed his gratitude to his friends at the old Corner House. But, as Ruth had been glum the day before, so Neale was silent now. Agnes became quite angry with him and sent him home in the middle of the forenoon.

“And you needn’t come to dinner, sir —*nor afterward*— if you can’t have a Christmas smile upon your face,” she told him, severely.

It was while the preparations for dinner were in full progress, that Ruth heard voices on the side porch. Rather, a voice, resonant and commanding which said:

“Hear ye! hear ye! hear ye! I proclaim good tidings to all creatures. Come! gather around me and list to my word. I bear gifts, frankincense and myrrh – ”

“Goodness me!” cried Agnes. “That’s Seneca Sprague. And look at the cats!”

The girls ran out upon the porch to see a tall, thin, gray-haired man, his abundant hair sweeping his shoulders, dressed in a flapping linen duster and with list slippers on his feet – a queer enough costume indeed for a sharp winter’s day. But Seneca Sprague was never more warmly clad than this, and had been known to plod barefooted through snowdrifts.

“Your humble servant, Miss Ruth,” said the queer old man, doffing the straw hat and bowing low, for he held the oldest Corner House girl in much deference. “I came to bring you good cheer and wish you a multitude of blessings. Verily, verily, I say unto you, they that give of their substance to the poor shall receive again a thousand fold. May your cup of joy be full to overflowing, Miss Ruth.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sprague,” replied the girl, gravely, for she made it a rule never to laugh at the “prophet,” as he was called, and who people said was demented upon religious subjects.

“Thank you for your good wishes,” said Ruth. “And what have you brought the cats?”

For Sandyface and all her progeny had come to meet the prophet and were purring about him and otherwise showing much pleasure. Even Almira had left her young family in the woodshed to come to meet Mr. Seneca Sprague.

From a side pocket of his duster Seneca brought forth a packet. He broke off a little of the pressed herb in the packet and sprinkled it on the stoop. The cats fairly scrambled over each other for a chance to eat some of the catnip, or to roll in it.

They did not quarrel over it. Indeed, the intoxicating qualities of their favorite herb gave the cats quite a Christmas spirit.

Mrs. MacCall brought a shallow pan of milk and some more of the herb was sprinkled in it by the old prophet. The kittens – Starboard, Port, Hard-a-lee and Mainsheet – lapped this up eagerly.

"It's very kind of you to bring the catnip, Mr. Sprague," Ruth said. "Won't you come in and taste Agnes' Christmas cake? She is getting to be a famous cake baker."

"With pleasure," said the queer old man.

After Seneca Sprague's old hut on the river dock was burned at Thanksgiving, and the Corner House girls had found him a room in one of their tenements to live in, he had become a frequent visitor at the old Corner House. Ruth would have ushered him into the sitting room where Mrs. Eland and her sister were; but Seneca shrank from that.

"I am not a society man – nay, verily," quoth the prophet. "The sex does not interest me."

"But it is only Mrs. Eland and her sister, who are our guests to-day for dinner," Ruth said, as she led him into the dining room, while Agnes sped to get the cake.

"Ha! Those Aden girls," said Seneca, referring to the hospital matron and the red-haired school teacher by their family name. "I remember Lemuel Aden well – their uncle. A hard man was Lemuel – a hard man."

"I believe he must have been a very wicked man," declared Agnes, coming back with a generous slice of cake, and overhearing this. "See how he let people think that his brother was dishonest, while *he* pocketed money belonging to the clients of Mrs. Eland's father. Oh! we know all about it."

"Ah!" said Seneca again, tasting the cake. "Very delicious. I know that you put none of the fat of the accursed swine in your cake as some of these women around here do."

"Lard, he means," whispered Ruth, for Seneca followed the rabbinical laws of the Jews and ate no pork.

"Lemuel Aden was a miser," the prophet announced. "He was worse than your uncle, Peter Stower," he added bluntly. "All three of us went to school together. They were much older than I, of course; but I came here to the Corner House to see Peter at times. And I was here when Lem Aden came last."

"We know about that, too," Agnes said, with some eagerness. "Did – did Uncle Peter really turn him out, and did he wander over into Quoharie Township, and die there in the poorhouse?"

Seneca was silent for a minute, nibbling at the cake thoughtfully. "It comes upon my mind," he said at last, "that Peter Stower was greatly maligned about that matter. Peter was a hard man, but he had soft spots in him. He was a great sinner, in that he ate much meat – which is verily against the commandment. For I say unto you – "

"But how about Mr. Lemuel Aden and Uncle Peter?" interrupted Ruth, gently; for the old prophet was likely to switch off on some foreign topic if not shrewdly guided in his speech.

"Ah! Lemuel Aden came back here to Milton when he was an old man. Not so old in years, perhaps; but old in wickedness, and aged beyond his years by his own miserliness. We had heard he was rich, but he declared he had nothing – had lost everything in speculation; and he said all he possessed was in the old carpetbag he brought.

"Peter Stower took him in," Seneca continued. "But Lemuel was a dirty old man and made that colored man a lot of trouble. It was thought by everybody that Lemuel Aden had even more wealth than Peter Stower; but nobody ever knew of his spending a penny. Peter said he had money; and so finally turned him out."

"How long did he stay here at the old Corner House?" asked Ruth.

"Verily he would have remained until his end; but Peter became angry with him and threatened to hand him over to the town authorities. They quarreled harshly – I was here at the time. The colored man must have heard much of the quarrel, too," Seneca proceeded.

"I went away in the midst of it. Peace dwelleth with me – yea, verily. I am not a man of wrath. Later I learned that Lemuel Aden went away cursing Peter Stower, and he was never more seen again in Milton."

"But was he poor?" Ruth asked. "Did Uncle Peter turn him out to suffer?"

Seneca Sprague shook his head. "Nay; I would not charge that to Peter Stower's account," he said. "It was believed by everybody, as I say, that Lemuel had much money hidden away. Peter Stower said he knew it."

"Just the same, he died in the Quoharie poorhouse," Agnes cried, quickly.

"He would have been cared for here in Milton by the authorities had he asked help. Peter Stower and Lemuel Aden were both misers. It was said of them that each had the first dollar he ever earned."

"Dear me!" Ruth said, as the old prophet concluded. "If Mr. Aden did have money at any time, it is too bad Mrs. Eland can't find it. She and her sister need it now, if ever they did," and she sighed, thinking of Dr. Forsyth's report upon Miss Pepperill's condition.

CHAPTER VIII – WHERE IS NEALE O’NEIL?

Christmas Day wore away toward evening. A number of the young friends of the Corner House girls ran in to bring gifts and to wish Ruth and Agnes and Tess and Dot a Merry Christmas. Many of them, too, stayed for a moment to speak to Mrs. Eland and Miss Pepperill. The interest aroused by the recently performed play at the Opera House for the benefit of the Women’s and Children’s Hospital had awakened interest likewise in “the little gray lady” and her sister.

“I never was so popular before with the school children of Milton,” the latter said, rather tartly. “I’d better be run down by an automobile about once a year.”

“Oh, that would be dreadful!” Tess exclaimed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.