

Speed Nell

Vacation with the Tucker Twins



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	12
CHAPTER IV	14
CHAPTER V	17
CHAPTER VI	21
CHAPTER VII	24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

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CHAPTER I

THE BEACH

My first impression of Willoughby Beach gave me keen disappointment. It was so sandy, so flat, and so absolutely shadeless. I longed for the green hills far away and in my heart felt I could not stand a month of the lonesome stretches of sand and the pitiless glare of the summer sun. It took great self-control and some histrionic ability for me to conceal my emotions from my enthusiastic hostesses.

The Tuckers had been coming to Willoughby for years and loved every grain of sand on the beach. They could hardly wait for the trolley from Norfolk to stop before they jumped out and raced down to the water's edge just to dabble their hands in the ocean.

"My gracious me! How I hate to grow up!" exclaimed Dum. "One year ago I would have had off my shoes and been in bliss by this time."

"Well, maybe you are too grown up to wade, but I'm not," declared Dee. "However, since Zebedee has trusted us to come down and open up the cottage, I fancy we had better go do it and get things ready for our guests."

We three girls were the fore-runners of the famous beach house-party that Mr. Jeffrey Tucker, father of the "Heavenly Twins," had promised to give us the winter before as reward of merit if we passed all of our exams at Gresham and got through the year without any very serious mishaps. Mishaps we had had in abundance, but not very serious ones, as all of us were alive to tell the tale; and Mr. Tucker, with his eternally youthful outlook on life, seemed to feel that a scrape that turned out all right was not such a terrible matter after all.

"Just so you can look me in the eye while you are telling me your troubles, it's all right," I have heard him say to his daughters.

The cottage proved to be very attractive. The lower floor was chiefly a large living room with French windows that opened upon three deep, shady verandas. A kitchen and bath rooms were in the rear. A staircase came down into the living room from a low-hung balcony that went around the four sides of the room. Doors from this balcony opened into dressing rooms and they in turn led to the sleeping porches. This style of architecture was new to me and very pleasing. There was a spaciousness to the living room with its high, raftered ceiling that appealed to me greatly. I have never been able to be happy in little, chopped-up rooms. The wood-work, rafters, roof and all, were stained a dark moss green, as were also the long mission dining table and the chairs and settles. At one end was a great fireplace made of rough, grey boulders, with heavy iron fire-dogs and fender. There was no attempt at ornamentation with the exception of several old blue platters and a tea pot on the high mantelpiece and a long runner of Japanese toweling on the table.

"Oh!" burst from us in chorus as we came through the hospitably open door. "Isn't it lovely?"

Just then there emerged from the kitchen a woman with a pail in one hand and broom in the other. Her long, pale face with the sandy hair drawn tightly back into a Mrs. Wiggs knot had no trace of welcome, but rather one of irritation.

"Well, land's sakes! You is greedy fer yo' rights. The fust of July don't mean the fust thing in the morning. The last tenants ain't been gone mor'n a hour an' here you come a-turn-in' up before I kin mor'n turn 'round."

"Well, everything looks lovely," said the tactful Dee.

"Y' aint seen it yet. It's right enough in this here room where I've done put in some licks, but that there kitchen is a mask of grease. These June tenants was jist a passel of boys and I can tell you they pretty near ripped things wide open. They had a triflin', no-'count black man fer cook and if ther' is one thing I hate more'n a nigger woman, it's a nigger man. Sometimes I think I will jist natchally refuse to rent my house to anybody that hires niggers."

"Your house!" escaped from Dum before she could stop herself.

"Yes, Miss, my house! Did you think I'd be cleaning up after a nigger in anybody's house but my own?"

"Then you are Mrs. Rand?" inquired Dee.

"The same! Did you think I might be Capt. Rand?"

"No'm; I – I – "

"You jist didn't expect to see a lady who owns a grand house like this workin' like any common person. Well, you are right, young lady. But if I didn't work like this, ther' wouldn't be no house to rent. Where's your brother?"

"Brother?"

"Yes; him what come down last winter to see after rentin' the house. He was a powerful likely young man. Me 'n Capt. Rand took to him from the first minute we clapt eyes on him. I'd a-knowledged you two were his sisters anywhere; and this other young lady," indicating me, "I reckon she's his girl, 'cause she sho ain't no kin."

The twins spluttered and I blushed but managed to put Mrs. Rand right as to the Tucker family, explaining to her that Mr. Tucker was the father of my friends and that I was merely a schoolmate who was invited to come to the beach on a visit.

"Well, you may be putting something over on me, as these wild June tenants used to call it. I can't believe that the young man who came down here is the paw of these strapping twins any more than I could believe that you are their maw. Maybe he sent his office boy." That made all of us laugh.

"We've been coming here for years, Mrs. Rand," said Dee. "It is strange we do not know each other. I can't remember ever seeing you before and you never saw us."

"Good reason! I never come here 'til this last fall, when Capt. Rand and I left Virginia Beach. He's been a lifesaver ever since he was a-put inter pants, but his jints is too stiff now. The Government has pensioned him but it looks like so long as we live near the old Life Saving Station that every time there is any cause for gittin' out the boats, Capt. Rand sees some good excuse why he's beholden to go 'long. So I jist up 'n' moved him away from temptation over inter these quiet waters. But when is that so-called paw of yourn comin'?"

"He will be along this evening with Miss Cox, our chaperone, and we want to get everything in order before he comes," said Dum.

"Well, that bein' the case, I'd better get a hump on and finish up the kitchen that greasy nigger left in such a state; and then I'll come right on up to the bedrooms. This lapping and slamming of tenants is right hard on me, but it is the only way I can get my fifteen per cent out of my investment."

"Did you plan the house yourself, Mrs. Rand?" questioned Dum. "It is so pretty."

"What, me? Do I look crazy? When I builds, I builds a house with a parlor and nice, tight bedrooms. I don't 'low the builder to waste no lumber on porches that's nothin' but snares fer lazy folks. I owns three houses over to Virginia Beach, as snug little homes as you ever seed; but somehow it looks like I can't git rich tenants fer 'em, in spite of they bein' on the water front. Rich folks what is got the money to sleep in nice, close bedrooms is all took to sleepin' out doors like tramps; an' when they is got all the time there is to set in the parlors and rock, they ain't content in the house but must take theyselves out in the wind and sun 'til they look like Injuns!

"No, sirree! I had a mortgage on this house an' foreclosed. It was built and owned by a architect from Norfolk. I had a chattel mortgage, too, so I got all his fixin's. I felt real sorry fer him. It looked like he loved the place as if'n it was his own flesh and blood. It is a strange, misshapen lookin' house

to me; but they do say if any of yo' children is afflicted, you loves 'em more'n all the others. I wanted to decoration this barn a little with some real fine pictures a lightnin' artist over to Hampton struck off for me while I waited, but the man took on so, jist like he thought I might a-been desecratin' the grave of his child! And he kinder made me promise to leave this room jist as it is with that common old blue chany on the mantel an' this strip of blue and white rag on the table. So that's how it comes to be so bare-like."

"We don't think it is bare, Mrs. Rand, but beautiful," said Dum reverently, and Dee took off her hat and held it just as I had seen her father do when a funeral was passing. "May we go upstairs and see the sleeping porches, and maybe we can help you some?"

"Snoop around all you've a mind to; but I wouldn't ask you to help. When I rents a furnished house I sees that it is turned over to tenants in apple-pie order, and if'n you'd 'a' come in the afternoon instid of morning you'd 'a' found it ship-shape."

"But we'd simply adore helping," urged Dee.

"All right, if you must you must! Here's a basket of clean sheets an' sich, an' here's clean bags fer the mattresses. I never asks one tenant to sleep on the same tick cover that the one before it used, certainly not when boys is been the fore-runners. These was likely boys if'n they was a leetle harum-scarum, but boys at the best is kinder goatish. Jist bundle up the s'iled bedclothes an' trun 'em down the steps, an then when you've buttoned up the mattresses in their clean covers make up the cots to suit your fancy. By that time I'll be up with my broom and rags." And Mrs. Rand bustled out to the kitchen to clean up after her abomination.

We could hardly wait for her to get out of the room to have a good giggle. She was a type that was new to me. Dee declared that she was a real out and out "po' white" if she did own three houses at Virginia Beach and one at Willoughby, and got 15 per cent on her investments. Her dialect was, in some instances, like the coloured people's, but her voice was high and nasal and every sentence ended in a kind of whine. With our coloured friends the dropping of a "g" or "d" makes their speech soft and mellow, but with this so-called "poor white" it seemed to make it only dry and hard. Certainly Mrs. Rand's exterior was not very attractive, but there was a kind of frankness about her that I rather liked. I had an idea that she was going to prove a good and just landlady, which, after all, is very important when one is renting a furnished house for a month at the sea shore.

"Thank goodness, we are spared the lightning artist's pictures," sighed Dum. "Isn't this room wonderful?"

It had indeed the repose and calm of a forest. The light was soft and subdued after the glare of sand and water. The high, vaulted, unplastered ceiling with its heavy green beams and rafters made me think of William Morris's description of the hall of the Nibelungs when the eagles screamed in the roof-tree.

We carried the heavy basket of clean bed linen upstairs and made our way through the dressing rooms, which were little more than closets, to the spacious sleeping porches, overlooking the bay. We found the place in very good order, considering boys had been keeping bach there for a month, and it was not at all "goatish," as we had been led to expect to find it. On the first porch we discovered an old checked cap on a hook, and some discarded tennis shoes in a corner, under one pillow a wallet, rather fat with bank bills, and under another a large gold watch.

"Aren't boys the limit, though?" exclaimed Dee as she carefully placed the valuables in a drawer. "That means they'll be coming back for their treasures. Maybe we had better save the old hat and shoes, too;" which we did with as much care as we had shown the watch and wallet. We bundled up the bed clothes according to instructions and decided to visit the other porches and get rid of all the soiled linen before we commenced to make up the cots. There were three large porches, with two dressing rooms to each porch, and two small porches in the back, one of them, we fancied, intended for the servant and the other one for some person who preferred solitude to company, as there was room for only one bed on it.

This porch was the last one we visited and we found it in terrible disarray. There were clothes and shoes all over the floor and the bed was piled high with a conglomeration of sweaters, baseball suits and what not.

"My, what a mess!" I cried, being the first to enter. "And this is the room of all others to get in order, as I fancy Miss Cox, our chaperone, will occupy it."

"Yes, this would be best," said Dum. "She could have more privacy, and then, too, she would escape the morning sun. Here, you girls, catch hold of the corners of the sheet and let's take up all of this trash and 'trun' it down the steps and let Mrs. Rand sort it out."

We laid hold with a good will, but it proved to be very heavy, so heavy, in fact, that just as we got it off the bed, Dee let go her end and the contents fell to the floor with a resounding bump.

CHAPTER II

"SLEEPY."

The mass of bed clothes and sweaters and shoes went through a great upheaval, and an arm, encased in a striped pajama sleeve, was thrust forth. We did what girls always do, we screamed and then we giggled.

"Gee, it's hot!" came in muffled tones. "It's hard enough to be waked before daybreak but you fellows might at least wake me like gentlemen and not pull me out of bed, keeping up such an infernal cackling, too, sounding like a lot of fool girls."

Of course, the thing to do was to get out of the room, or rather off the porch, as fast as we could, but, as Dee and I were at the foot of the bed and the floor space was occupied by the squirming mass, we had no chance to make a graceful exit.

"Jump!" came in a sibilant whisper from Dum, and we got ready for a feat not very difficult for two girls as athletic as we were; but a fit of giggles attacked us and we were powerless to do anything but cling to each other in limp helplessness.

"I'm afraid we would step on it," I managed to squeak out through my convulsions.

"I just dare you to!" spluttered the owner of the arm, and a tousled head emerged and then a hot, fat, red face. It was a rather good-looking face in spite of the fact that it was swollen with sleep and crimson with heat and distorted with rage at having been "awakened before dawn." I never expect again in all my life to see anything half so ludicrous as that boy's expression when it dawned on him that the rude awakening was not the work of his erstwhile companions, but of a lot of "fool girls." His eyes, half shut with sleep and blinking with the glare of unexpected daylight, were blinded for a moment, but as Dee and I still clung to each other and giggled, the youth's eyes began to widen and the mouth, sullen from heavy slumber, formed itself into a panic-stricken O. His face had seemed as red as a face could get, but, no! It took on several shades more of crimson until it was really painful to behold. He did the wisest thing he could possibly have done under the circumstances: hid his head and burrowed deep under the cover.

"Now, jump!" cried Dum; and jump we did, clearing the hurdle in great shape, and then we raced down to Mrs. Rand to tell her of our ridiculous predicament.

"Well, land's sake! Don't that beat all? And you was fixin' to gather him up with the s'iled clothes! 'Twould 'a' served him right if'n you had a-trunned him down the steps and let him take his chanct with the la'ndry." And the old woman laughed until her Mrs. Wiggs knot came down and she had to put down her scrubbing brush and twist it up. "I'm about through here and I'll go up and 'ten' to him."

"Oh, Mrs. Rand, I am sure he is up by this time, and the poor fellow is embarrassed enough. Don't say anything to him," begged Dee.

"I ain't so sho 'bout that. I spec it's the one they call 'Sleepy,' an' if'n it is, he's mo'n apt to be gone back to bed," and she stalked like a grenadier up the steps to rout out poor "Sleepy."

Two boys came up on the piazza as we turned from viewing the now spotless kitchen, and, caps in hand, asked to see Mrs. Rand. They were what that lady would have called a "likely pair." Both were dressed in white flannels and had the unmistakable look of clean-living athletes.

Mrs. Rand's voice was heard from the balcony as she rapped sharply on the dressing-room door: "You, there! Git up! This ain't no tramps' hotel."

Then a growl came from the den as from a wounded, sore-headed bear.

"Sleepy!" gasped the boys, and they went off into roars of laughter in which we perforce joined them. "Not up yet!"

Mrs. Rand, coming down the steps from her valiant attack on the back sleeping porch, espied the laughing boys and renewed the offensive:

"Now what's bringing you here? This here cottage ain't yourn no longer. If'n youse after that fat sleepy-head up thar you is welcome to him, but what's the reason you didn't take him with you, I can't see."

"You see, Mrs. Rand, it's this way," said the taller of the two boys, approaching Mrs. Rand with an engaging smile. "We did wake up Sleepy and then piled all his clothes on top of him, thinking the weight and heat of them would make it impossible for him to sleep longer. We had to go get our tents pitched and provision our camp and we couldn't stay to see that our scheme worked. We are mighty sorry if it has caused you any trouble or annoyance."

"No trouble to me," and Mrs. Rand gave a snagged-tooth smile at the polite young man, "but it was some trouble for these young ladies; which no doubt is the reason, these young ladies, I mean, that t'other young fellow is so busy winking at me about, kinder specting me to hand out a interduction. Well, as I'm what you might call chaperoon 'til their paw comes, I'll favor you and make you acquainted;" which she did with stiff formality. The tall boy was named James Hart, and the other one, the winker, Stephen White, but he was never again to be known as Stephen, or even Steve, for on and after that first day of July he was known as "Wink." Boys are quick to give a nickname and slow to relinquish a joke on one of their companions.

"Mrs. Rand," said Wink, (I'll begin now to call these boys by the names we soon knew them by,) "we simply hate to be a nuisance to you and to these young ladies but we can't provision our camp for the reason that we have lost all our money. I was almost sure I had put the money in my pocket, but now that I can't find it, I am hoping maybe I left it here somewhere."

"No, you didn't, young man. Th' ain't no money loose 'round here," and Mrs. Rand got ready for battle.

"Oh, the wallet!" we cried in chorus, and Dee rushed upstairs and came down in a trice bearing the wallet, watch, old cap and shoes.

"My, what a relief!" sighed Wink. "I am supposed to be the careful member of the crowd, so they intrusted me with all the funds, and this is the way I behaved. Your watch, Jim! I fancy your great-grandfather would turn in his grave if he knew how careless you were. And old Rags left his cap and shoes! I am glad I wasn't the only forgetter."

"Well, I'm a-thinking, young men, that it's a good thing this here cottage is owned by a respectable woman an' the July tenants is what they is, or you'd be minus some prop'ty. That there Sleepy up there come mighty near being bundled up in the s'iled linen an' sent to the la'ndry, an' if'n these young ladies hadn't a-been what they is yo' camp never would 'a' been provisioned. But now I must git to work an' clear out that there upstairs," and Mrs. Rand betook herself to the regions above.

"Please tell us about Sleepy," begged Jim Hart. "Did he get mixed up with the laundry?" But the Tuckers and I felt that poor Sleepy had had embarrassment enough and were mum as to our experience with him that morning.

"Come on, Jim, let's go up and see him. Maybe he is too shy to come out," and the two boys went up two steps at a time to rout out their embarrassed friend.

The bird had flown. There was no trace of the poor fat boy. The clothes which had filled the room were gone; the boy was gone; and only a hole in the sand below gave silent witness to his manner of flight.

"Well, poor Sleepy, if he hasn't jumped off the porch and gone, bag and baggage! He almost dug a well in the process of going. That was some jump, I can tell you," and Jim and Wink came down in a broad grin.

"What is Sleepy's real name?" I asked.

"George Massie, a perfectly good name, and he is the best old fellow in the world, especially when he is asleep, which he is on long stretches. In fact, most of the time, except in football season,

and then you bet he is awake and up and doing. He is on the University Eleven and is sure to be captain next year," answered Jim.

I was rather glad to hear of his prowess in football as it meant that the poor, sleepy boy could take care of himself if his companions teased him too much in their anxiety to hear what had occurred. A centre rush on a college eleven does not have to submit to much teasing.

"We are certainly obliged to you ladies for your kindness in finding our belongings, and when we get our camp in order we hope you will come to see us. We understand there is to be quite a party of you," said Wink, preparing to depart.

"Yes, besides Miss Cox, our chaperone, there are to be two more girls with us for the whole month and our father is to bring down week-end parties from Richmond. We are to have some boys for part of the time but we can't stand them as steady things," blundered Dum.

"Well, come on, Jim, we don't want to get in bad the first thing. To become popular with this young lady we must make ourselves scarce," and they went gaily off, while we returned to assist Mrs. Rand until our luggage arrived. When it came, we unpacked at once, and then were ready for the lunch which we had brought with us from Richmond.

We had a busy afternoon visiting the little shops, laying in our housekeeping supplies and interviewing the swarm of hucksters and fish mongers that sprang up like magic the moment the word had gone forth that a new tenant had arrived. Our cook was not to come until the next day so we were very cautious in ordering, being well aware of our limitations in the culinary art. Dum wanted to have baked, stuffed red snapper the first night because Zebedee was so fond of it, but Dee and I vetoed it and we got Spanish mackerel to broil instead.

"We simply live on fish at the beach. I hope you like it, Page," said Dee, "because you fare pretty badly down here if you don't."

"Of course I do; and I am going to eat a lot of it so I can become fishy and learn to swim. It is a terrible mortification to me that I can't swim."

"Why, honey, Zebedee can teach you in one lesson, just so you are not timid," and Dee put her arm around me. "There is certainly nothing to be ashamed of. You could hardly have learned to swim in your grandfather's hat-tub."

CHAPTER III

OUR FIRST NIGHT AT THE BEACH

By the time Mr. Tucker and Miss Cox arrived, late that evening, Tweedles and I felt as though we had been keeping house for years. Mrs. Rand had the cottage in apple-pie order and had taken herself off, very much concerned for fear we were not going to have a good supper for "that there so-called 'paw'." But we did have a very good one by careful division of labour. Dum set the table and looked after the butter and ice water; Dee attended to the coffee, baked potatoes and salad; and to my lot fell the broiling of the fish and toasting of the bread.

We had had a long and eventful day and very tired and hungry were the three of us when the trolley from Norfolk finally arrived with Miss Cox and Mr. Tucker, also tired and hungry and very dirty after a trip on a soft coal train. Miss Cox had come all the way from the mountains of Albemarle on a local train and she seemed to be about all in; but she declared that supper and bed would make her over and we must not worry about her.

"It would be a pretty piece of business for me to come down here as a chaperone and then be a baby," she said.

"Well, a baby is about as good a chaperone as one could want," laughed Mr. Tucker; "and now, Jinny, I am going to insist upon your being a baby for a few days until you get yourself all rested up. We appreciate your coming to us more than we can tell you and one and all mean to wait on you."

"We do, indeed, Miss Cox, and I bid to bring your breakfast up to your room," said Dee.

"And I bid to unpack for you," put in Dum.

"And I – I – I don't know what I will do for you, but please let me help some," I begged.

"Oh, people, people! Don't be too good to me or I'll cry," and Miss Cox gave a wan smile. She had been tutoring all during the month of June, beginning just as soon as her labours were over at Gresham; and having had no rest at all she was in a state of exhaustion pitiable to behold. I believe her nerves would have snapped if it had not been for that timely trip to the beach.

"Well, I call this a pretty good supper for three girls just turning sixteen to get up all by their lonesomes," said Mr. Tucker, giving a sigh of complete satisfaction as he got out a cigar for an after-dinner smoke.

"Page did all the real cooking," tweedled the twins.

"Why, Dee, you cooked the potatoes and the coffee, and Dum did a million other things that are much more tedious than cooking. I love to cook but I hate the scullery part." Then I was sorry I had said that because they utterly refused to let me help wash the dishes and I felt like an awful shirker.

Miss Cox was escorted to her sleeping porch which she pronounced "Heaven." It presented a different appearance than it had in the morning when poor Sleepy had been concealed in the soiled linen like a modern Falstaff (not that we seemed much like the Merry Wives of Windsor).

"Now stay in bed in the morning so I can bring your breakfast up to you," begged Dee.

"And don't dare to unpack yourself, but let me do it," demanded Dum.

"I hope the mantle of Sleepy will fall on you, Miss Cox, and you will slumber as peacefully as he did," said I, lowering the striped awning to keep the early morning light from waking the poor, tired lady.

"Well, good night to all of you. I only hope I can get undressed before I fall asleep."

It was a wondrous night, and since the girls would not let me help with the dishes, I accepted Mr. Tucker's invitation to stroll on the beach with him while he finished his cigar. How pleasant the night was after the terrible glare of the day! For the first time I began to feel that the beach was going to be what I had dreamed it to be. The sun had set but there was a soft afterglow.

"And in the Heavens that clear obscure,
So softly dark and darkly pure,
Which follows the decline of day,
As twilight melts beneath the moon away,"

quoted Mr. Tucker. "I am afraid you are pretty tired, too, Page. You do not seem to have your usual spirits. I bet a horse I know what it is! You are disappointed in Willoughby Beach."

"Oh, please don't think it, Mr. Tucker – "

"I don't think it, I just know it. You must not feel bad about it. Everybody always is disappointed in it at first, and then in a few days wonders how he could have been anything but in love with it. You question now how anyone could be contented without trees or grass, and in a week's time you wonder what is the good of trees and grass, anyhow. I know today you felt like old Regulus when his captors cut off his eyelids and exposed him to the sun. You'll get used to the sun, too, and even scorn a hat as Tweedles do."

I was really embarrassed at Mr. Tucker's divining my feelings as he did, but it was no new thing, as he often seemed to be able to guess my thoughts. I, too, often found that I had thought out something just as he was in the act of giving voice to it. I *had* been desperately disappointed in the beach. The great stretches of unbroken sand, the cloudless sky and a certain flatness everywhere had given me a sensation of extreme heaviness and dreariness; but now that the blessed darkness had come and I no longer had to scrooch up my eyes, I began to feel that it was not such a stale, flat, unprofitable place after all. And it was certainly very pleasant out there, pacing up and down on the sand with Mr. Tucker, who treated me just like one of his daughters in a way but at the same time gave me a feeling that he thought I was quite grown-up enough to be talked to and listened to. He had called me "Miss Page" at first, but now that he had dropped the "Miss" and I was just plain Page I seemed more of a companion to him than before.

Tweedles soon came racing out, having finished the dish washing.

"We didn't wipe 'em, but scalded 'em and let 'em dreem. Dee broke two cups – I broke a saucer!" exclaimed Dum. "It's entirely too lovely a night to waste indoors."

"So it is, but it is also a mighty good night for sleeping and I think all of us had better turn in pretty early," said Mr. Tucker.

"Oh, not yet, Zebedee!" tweedled the girls, "we are not a bit sleepy. You are always wanting people to go to bed before they are ready." And with that they flopped themselves down on the sand, Dum with her head on my knee and Dee with hers on her father's shoulder and in one minute they were fast asleep.

"Now what are we going to do with these babies, Page?"

"I hate to wake them but they will be sure to catch cold," I replied. And so wake them we had to and lead them stumbling to the cottage and up the steps to the east porch, where they were with difficulty persuaded to go through what they considered, in their sleepy state, to be the unnecessary formality of undressing.

I had been sleeping pretty well for almost sixteen years but after that first night at Willoughby Beach on a sleeping-porch, I knew that I had never really realized what sleep meant. No matter how many windows you may have open in your bedroom, it is still a room, and no matter how much you may protect a porch, it is still out-of-doors. We were in bed by nine o'clock and we were asleep almost before we were in bed, and while my sleep was perfectly dreamless I was, in a measure, conscious of a delicious well being, *a sentiment de bien être*. All through the night I was rocked in this feeling and I was then and there reconciled to the beach, flatness, glare and all. A place that had such sleep-giving powers was one to be loved and not scorned, and forthwith I began to love it.

CHAPTER IV

BUBBLES

The sun finds an east porch very early in the morning and five o'clock was late enough to sleep, anyhow, when one has gone to bed at nine. Tweedles and I had many duties to perform and we were glad enough to be up and doing.

"Me for a dip in the briny, before I grapple with the day!" exclaimed Dum. That sounded good to Dee and me, so we all piled into our bathing suits. I felt rather strange in mine and very youthful, never before having had one on. Father and I had had several nice trips together but we had always gone to some city and had never taken in a seaside resort. I had a notion I was going to like the water and almost knew I would not be afraid. I determined to look upon the ocean as just a large-sized hat-tub.

"Hadn't we better start the kitchen fire before we go out, Dum?" I asked.

"I'm not Dum! I'm Dee! Dum's gone to peek at Zebedee to see if he is awake." For the first time in my acquaintance with the Tucker Twins I found myself at a loss to tell them apart. Of course it was Dee. The eyes were grey and there was a dimple in her chin, but the bathing cap concealed her hair and forehead; and, after all, the colour of the twins' hair and the way it grew on their foreheads were the chief points of difference. Their eyes were exactly the same shape if they were of different colours, and a difference that you had to stare at to find out was not much of a difference after all.

Dum came back to announce that Zebedee was awake and would join us in a moment, so we raced down to the kitchen, careful not to make any noise and wake up poor Miss Cox. We started the fire and put on the tea kettle and, as an afterthought, I went back and filled the Marion Harland percolator, putting in plenty of coffee. The morning was rather chilly and I knew that when we got back from our dip, coffee would not go amiss.

"Front door wide open! What kind of a locker-up are you, Zebedee, anyhow?" chided Dum.

"Well, I could have sworn I shut it last night and locked it. In fact, I can swear it."

"Well, if we had burglars they didn't burgle any. The pure German silver is all intact and the blue tea-pot is still on the mantelpiece. Come on, I'll race you to the water's edge," and Dum and Zebedee were off like two children, while Dee and I followed.

"Someone's out ahead of us," said Zebedee, pointing to a head far out in the bay. "Some swimmer, too! Just look how fast he's going!" The swimmer was taking long, even strokes and was shooting through the water like a fish.

How I did envy that swimmer! I felt very slim and very shy as I walked gingerly to the water's edge and let the waves creep up on my feet and ankles. The Tuckers wanted to stay with me but I would not hear of it. I knew that they were longing to get out into deep water and I have always had a wholesome dread of being a nuisance. They plunged in and were off like a school of porpoise, one minute under water and the next leaping high into the air. They seemed to be truly amphibious animals while I felt very much of an earthworm. I walked out in the bay up to my chin and then decided that I would try to swim back, although I had no more idea of how a body went to work to swim than to fly.

I lay down on the water and felt my feet rising to the surface and then a panic seized me, and such another struggling and splashing and gurgling as I was guilty of! My head went under and my feet refused to leave the surface. I thought I would surely drown, although I knew perfectly well I was not beyond my depth. Foolish poetry flashed into my brain:

"You are old, Father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white,

And yet you incessantly stand on your head —
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,
"I feared it might injure the brain;
But now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
I do it again and again."

From that I went on with Clarence's dream:

"O Lord! methought what pain it was to drown!
What dreadful noise of waters in mine ears!
What sights of ugly death within mine eyes!
Methought I saw a thousand fearful wrecks;
A thousand men that fishes gnawed upon;
Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
All scattered in the bottom of the sea,
Some lay in dead men's skulls; and in those holes
Where eyes did once inhabit there were crept
(As 'twere in scorn of eyes) reflecting gems,
That wooed the slimy bottom of the deep,
And mocked the dead bones that lay scattered by.

... but still the envious flood
Kept in my soul and would not let it forth
To seek the empty, vast and wandering air;
But smothered it within my panting bulk,
Which almost burst to belch it in the sea."

All this time that my brain was busy in this absurd way, my legs and arms were busy, too, and just when I got to the last line, quoted above, I felt a strong hand on the back of my bathing suit and I was pulled from the briny deep.

"Why, Page, why are you making a little submarine of yourself? You scared me to death, child. I was way out in the bay when I looked back to see what you were up to and not a sign of your precious little head could I see, nothing but bubbles to mark the spot where my dear little friend had gone down. But oh, such big bubbles! I thought you had ventured out beyond your depth, and here it is not much more than four feet of water," and Zebedee held me up while I spluttered and gurgled. Only the night before Zebedee had demanded that I should stop calling him Mr. Tucker, so now I was to think of him and speak of him as Zebedee. I had been thinking of him as Zebedee for a long time and it was very easy to stop calling him by the formal name of Mr. Tucker.

"Lend me a handkerchief!" I demanded just as soon as I could stop spluttering enough to speak, and then we both burst out laughing, as naturally he did not have one.

"I tell you what you do, little girl, you trot on up to the house and get into dry clothes, and I'll collect those water dogs as soon as I can and we will join you. I don't approve of staying in the water too long in the early morning, certainly not on the first day at the beach. The morning swim should be nothing more than a dip."

"Well, that's all mine was," and I scrambled out. My wet suit felt very heavy but my body felt light and there was a delicious tingle all over me as the morning air, a little cooler than the water,

struck me. I raced to the cottage and into the downstairs bathroom – which had an outside entrance – where we had put our bath gowns so we would be able to drop our wet suits there. It took me only a few minutes to rub down and get into some dry clothes (thanks to middy blouses, which were surely invented for girls in a hurry). I was dressed and in the kitchen before Zebedee was able to collect his water dogs. The coffee was in a state of perfection, and glad indeed was I for a cup of the beverage which shares with tea the quality of cheering without inebriating.

The oven to the little range was piping hot so I made so bold as to stir up a pan of batter bread, Mammy Susan's kind with lots of eggs, and I then proceeded to set the table for breakfast.

"See here, this is a shame for you to be slaving so!" exclaimed Zebedee. "I simply won't have it – but gee, what a grand smell of coffee! You don't mean you've got some all made?" and he came through the living room and back into the kitchen in his wet suit, although he was the one who had made the rule the night before that bathers must enter from the rear and leave their wet suits in the bathrooms. I hadn't the heart to remind him; besides, I knew Tweedles would take great joy in doing so. I gave him a cup of steaming coffee and then made him hurry off to get into his clothes by letting him have a peep at my batter bread, which was behaving as batter bread should when it is made with plenty of eggs and the oven is piping hot – that is, it was rising like an omelette and a delicate brown was appearing over the surface.

"It must be eaten hot, so you had better hurry," I said as I put the sliced bacon in the frying pan and then cracked ice for the cantaloupe.

"All right, Mammy Susan, I'll show you what a lightning change artist I can be. I know I can beat Tweedles. They are still in the bathroom. By the way, do you know who the swimmer was we saw out in the bay? None other than our chaperone, Miss Jinny Cox! I just knew I had locked the door. You see, Jinny opened it. She has decided not to let anybody wait on her, after all. Tweedles are quite disconsolate. They have been planning to be so unselfish and here Jinny is refusing to be ill, and here you are, the honored guest, cooking breakfast on this, our first morning at the beach." He started up the steps but came down again, and, taking me impulsively by both hands, he exclaimed: "I am mighty glad you did not succeed in drowning yourself in four feet of water, little friend. You made very beautiful bubbles but I am going to teach you how to swim before the week is out."

CHAPTER V

BLANCHE

"Who is to go over to Norfolk with me to meet the guests, also the cook lady from Keysville?" demanded Zebedee as he scraped the very last vestige of batter bread sticking to the sides of the pan. Annie Pore and Mary Flannagan, our schoolmates, were to arrive on a James River boat and our much needed cook on the train.

The cook was a great niece of Mammy Susan's dead husband, who was being educated at an industrial school for coloured boys and girls. I had never seen her, but Mammy Susan had been rather impressed by what she had heard of the girl and it was because of her recommendation that the Tuckers had determined to employ her.

"She's got good Afgan blood in her," declared Mammy, "but th' aint no tellin' what schoolin' is done did to'ds spilin' of her."

We were willing to gamble on the good "Afgan" blood and now we were to meet the girl, Blanche Johnson by name. I had written her telling her exactly what train to take and to be sure to pin a red bow on her left shoulder as a means of identification.

"Page must go because she did so much work this morning, besides getting most drowned," and Dum got up from the devastated breakfast table and began clearing off the dishes.

"And Miss Cox must go –"

"Why don't you all go?" put in Zebedee. "Leave these stupid old dishes for the lily fair Blanche."

"Oh, Jeffry Tucker, never!" exclaimed Miss Cox. "If she found us with dirty dishes she would think we like 'em dirty and give 'em to us for the rest of the time. No, you girls go on with your irresponsible parent and I will stay and do this little dab of dish washing. I don't want to go to Norfolk. In fact, I never do want to go to Norfolk." I detected a slight trembling of her lip and a painful flush on her countenance, but as she turned away quickly I thought I was the only person who had noticed it.

"But I can't allow you to do so much, Jinny," objected Zebedee.

"Well, we've got at least fifteen minutes before the trolley leaves. Let's all of us turn in and get it done before the time is up," and I set the example by grabbing the batter bread pan from Zebedee, who was trying to find just one more crumb. "Come on and help. I'll make you some more this evening for supper."

Such another bustling and hurrying as then went on! The dishes were already scraped by the voracious swimmers, so there was nothing to do but plunge them into the hot, soapy water where Miss Cox officiated with a dish mop, and then into the rinse water. Dee was ready with a tea towel and Dum put them away, while I put butter and milk in the refrigerator and wiped off the table. Zebedee stood around in everybody's way doing what he called "head work."

"If it takes one lone chaperone one hour to do the dishes, how long will it take her to do them with the assistance of one learned gentleman and three charming young ladies, when two of them are twins and the other one the most famous blower of bubbles in the world? Answer, teacher!"

"Just twelve minutes by the clock, and it would have been only ten if the learned gentleman had not made us walk around him so much," laughed Miss Cox. "Now off with you or you'll have to run for your car. Don't worry about me. I may go back to sleep."

The boat was in when we reached Norfolk but the girls had been instructed to stay aboard until we got there. We could see dear old Mary Flannagan's red head as we put foot on the pier and as soon as she saw us she began to crow like chanticleer. What fun it was to see these girls again!

We were a strangely assorted quintette. The Tucker twins, Annie Pore, Mary Flannagan and I; but our very difference made us just that much more congenial. The twins were not a bit alike in disposition. Dum, – Virginia, – was artistic, sometimes a trifle moody, very impulsive and hot-

tempered but withal the most generous and noble-minded person I knew, quite like her father in lots of ways. Dee, – Caroline, – was more practical and even-tempered with a great deal of tact prompted by her kind heart, the tenderest heart in all the world, that took in the whole animal kingdom from elephants to ants.

Annie Pore, our little English friend, had developed so since our first meeting that she seemed hardly the same person who had sat so forlornly in the station in Richmond only ten short months before.

She had lost the timid, nervous look and was growing more beautiful every day. She had had thirty days of such growing since I had last beheld her and she had made good use of her time. I had a feeling the minute I saw her that perhaps she had come to some more satisfactory understanding with her father. In fact, she must have, since he had permitted her to join the house party at Willoughby Beach.

Mary Flanagan was the same old Mary, red head, freckled face, bunchy waist and all; but there never was a more good-natured, merry face than Mary's. Her blue eyes had a twinkle in them that was better than mere beauty and her frequent laughs disclosed a set of perfectly clean, white teeth. On the whole, Mary was not so very homely and to us, her best friends, she was almost beautiful.

As for me, Page Allison, I was just a girl, neither beautiful nor ugly, brilliant nor stupid; but I was still as determined as I had been on that morning in September when I started out from Bracken for boarding school, not to rest until I had made a million friends. I had made a pretty good start and I intended to keep it up.

"Well, we are glad to see you!" exclaimed Zebedee, shaking hands with both girls at once as he met them on the gangway. "I hope your father is well, Miss Annie, and is favourably considering joining us for a week end at Willoughby."

"I don't know, Mr. Tucker, what he will do," answered Annie, smiling; "he enjoyed seeing you so much that I shall not be astonished if he takes you at your word and comes to visit you."

That was the most wonderful conquest ever made! Zebedee had been down to Price's Landing and deliberately captivated the stiff, unbending Englishman, Mr. Arthur Ponsonby Pore. I asked him to tell me about it and he answered quite simply in the words of Cæsar: "Veni! Vidi! Vici!" Why, Page, the man is peculiar but he is more lonesome than anything else. All I did was to treat him like a human being and take for granted he would treat me the same way, and sure enough he did. And here is poor little Annie, to show the wisdom of taking it for granted that a man is going to be kind. I asked him to let her come to the house party as though he would of course be delighted to give his daughter this pleasure, and he complied with the greatest cordiality."

After seeing to the girls' trunks and transferring them to the baggage trolley for Willoughby Beach (and this time Annie, having a neat, new little trunk which she called a "box," was not embarrassed by the bulging telescope she had taken to Gresham), we then went to the station to await the arrival of the precious cook.

"S'pose she doesn't come!" wailed Dum.

"Well, if it would mean more of Page's batter bread, I shan't mind much," declared Zebedee as the train puffed in.

"Look for a girl with a red bow on her shoulder," said I, peering at every passenger who got out of the coloured coach. There were many as there was an excursion to Ocean View and a picnic given by "The Sons and Daughters of the Morning." The dusky crowd swarmed by, laden with boxes and baskets of lunch, all of them laughing and happy and any of them looking as though she might be a good cook, but not one of them was Blanche. Red there was in abundance but never in the form of a bow on the left shoulder. Red hats, red cravats, red parasols passed us by, and even a stair-steps row of six little nigs in rough-dry white dresses with all of their pigtails tightly "wropped" with red string and a big red bow of ten-cent store ribbon on top of each happy, woolly head, – and still no Blanche.

"Ah, I see visions of more and more batter bread of the Page brand," murmured Zebedee. "I'm going to purchase a big baking dish so you can mix up twice as much."

"Look, there is a girl coming back! Could that be Blanche?" and Dee pointed to a very fat, good-looking, brown-skinned girl, dressed in the very latest and most extreme style of that summer. She wore a very tight skirt of black and white silk with stripes about an inch and a half broad, slit up over a flounced petticoat of royal purple. Her feet, substantial, to say the least, were encased in white canvas shoes with purple ties, and purple cotton stockings were stretched to their utmost over her piano legs (I mean the old square pianos), stretched so tight, in fact, that they took on the gloss of silk. A lavender crêpe de Chine blouse very much open, exposing her capacious chest, and a purple straw hat trimmed with black roses, perched on top of a towering, shiny pompadour, completed the colour scheme. Pinned on her left shoulder was an artificial orchid with a purple bow. In her hand she carried a huge basket covered with a newspaper.

"Are you Blanche Johnson?" I questioned.

"I was about to propound the same inquisition to you when I seen you approaching I," she answered with a mincing manner. "I am consigned to the kind ospices of Mr. Tucker and Miss Page Allison, a young lady who has been since infantry under the jurisprudence of Mrs. Susan Black, my great arnt once removed by intermarriage."

"Well, Blanche, I am Miss Page Allison and this is Mr. Tucker, and Mr. Tucker's daughters, Miss Virginia and Miss Caroline. We came very near missing you as we were looking for the red bow, pinned on your left shoulder."

"Well, now, Miss Page, it was very disappointenting for me not to be compliable to your requisition, but I belong to an uplifting club at my school and one of our first and most important relegations is that the mimbers must never do nothing nigrified. An' they have decided that the unduly bedizenment of yourself in red garments is the first and foremost nigrification of the race. Hence, therefore, I resolutioned to trust that my kind frinds would indemnify me with this orchard."

"And so we have, Blanche, and now we will go take the electrics for Willoughby," and Zebedee, his face crimson from suppressed merriment, led the way to the car line, while Blanche kept up a steady fire of polite talk.

"There was another reason for my abandonment of the red bow, Miss Page, and that was that I am in kinder sicond mournin' for the disease of my only brother's offspring."

"Oh, I am sorry, Blanche! How old was the child? Was it a boy or girl?"

"Well, it wa'nt to say any age, as the angel was borned daid, and as for the slight differentiation in sex, I was so woeful I done forgot to arsk my po' bereaved brother whether it were the fair sex or the inversion."

"Well, if the little thing had to die, it must have been a relief for your brother to know it had never lived."

"No'm, no'm! 'Twould a been a gret comfort if'n it had lived a while. You see Mandy, Jo's wife, is sickly and her offspring is cosequentially sickly and Jo always has heretoforth been able to collect a little insuriance on his prodigy by bein' very promptitude in the compilation of the policies. Yes! Yes! Po' Jo! I felt that it was the least I could do to show respec' for his great bereavement by puttin' on the traps of woefulness," and she smoothed with pride her striped skirt and looked with evident admiration at her fearfully and wonderfully clad feet.

"How old does a child have to be to collect insurance?" I asked.

"Well, some companies is agreeable to the acceptance of infantry at a very tinder age and will pay at their disease if the contracting parties can prove there ain't no poultry play."

"Poultry play?" I gasped.

"Yes'm, poultry play! That is to say, foul play. You see, Miss Page, one of our club relegations is to use the word with the most syllabubs as we seem to feel more upliftable. And poultry sounds much mo' elegant than jis' foul."

I was bursting for a laugh but had to hold in, while all of those bad girls with the disgraceful Zebedee pretended to see something in a shoe shop window that was sufficiently funny to keep them in a gale of mirth.

CHAPTER VI

A ROMANCE

As we waited for our car, a very pleasant looking man, seemingly much older than Zebedee, glanced at our crowd rather curiously (and Blanche was enough to make anyone glance at us curiously) and then his face lit up as he recognized Zebedee. He hastened to his side and grasped him by the hand, exclaiming:

"Jeffrey Tucker! I'm glad to see you! What are you doing in Norfolk?"

"Well, I'm getting out of it as fast as I can on my way down to Willoughby. Have taken a cottage down there for a month, – let me introduce you to my girls and their friends."

The gentleman was Mr. Robert Gordon, a classmate of Zebedee's at the University. He was not really more than a year or so older than Zebedee, but his hair and moustache were iron grey and his fine eyes were tired and sad looking. He had been for years teaching at a school in South Carolina but had recently been given the chair of English at a college in Norfolk.

"You must come over and stay with us, Bob. The girls can tell you what heaps of room we have."

"Oh, heaps and heaps!" tweedled the twins.

"Make it this evening, Bob, and stay over Sunday. You are your own master this time of year surely, while I have to go back to the grind on Monday. I'll get my holiday a little later on, however. Now come on! I want you to know my girls and my girls to know you."

"I have a great mind to take you up," and Mr. Gordon looked admiringly at the twins. "I can hardly believe they are yours, Jeff. Yes, I'll come this evening."

"Good boy! That's the way to talk. We will expect you before supper. By the way," whispering, "this is our new cook we are taking out. I hope she won't scare you off. We've got an old friend of yours out there, too, Jinny Cox, –"

"I really think, Jeff, I had better not come this evening," stammered Mr. Gordon, turning quite pale and showing extreme agitation. "I – I –"

"Now look here, Bob, you have accepted and we are going to expect you." The trolley arrived just then and we hurriedly got aboard while Zebedee shouted hospitable imprecations on the head of his old friend if he should fail to keep his word. "That was a strange way for Bob Gordon to behave," he said, sinking into the seat by me. "First he said he would come and seemed delighted and then when I cracked a joke about our poor, dear Blanche, he suddenly decided he had better not come. While poor, dear Blanche is certainly some dresser, she is very clean looking and has a good face, and I can't see anything about her to make a man behave as Bob did."

Zebedee always thereafter spoke of Blanche as "poor, dear Blanche," and there was something so ludicrous in his way of saying it that for the entire month we were at the beach and ever after, in fact, when our vacation of that July was mentioned, he could set all of us in a perfect gale by his "poor, dear Blanche."

I looked at Zebedee in amazement. He really seemed to think that it was Blanche who had made Mr. Gordon turn so pale and stammer so strangely. Men are funny animals. Here was Zebedee, a "so-called paw" of girls as old as I was, a man of the world and a newspaper man with a nose for news that was unsurpassed in the South, so my father thought, and still he had not had the intuition to see that his friend Bob had turned pale when he found Miss Cox was with us. I could have wagered anything that all the girls knew what was the matter, even Blanche. I said nothing to Zebedee, feeling perhaps that it would be a little unkind to Miss Cox to give voice to my convictions to a mere man, but I was dying to get with one of the girls and see if the subject would not be immediately broached.

Zebedee went out on the back platform to smoke and Dee made a dive for his seat. "Page, I'm dying to find out if you noticed Mr. Gordon's agitation over Miss Cox's being with us!"

"Surely I did!"

"Oh, isn't it exciting? And didn't she blush, though, when she said she never wanted to go to Norfolk?" So Dee had noticed that, too. "Dum thought it was because she had had some kind of love affair there three years ago and could not bear the place and all around it, but I kind of hoped maybe it was because the man lived there still. I wonder if he will come and if we had better warn her. I am so afraid she will run away if she finds out he is coming, and then the romance cannot be completed."

"Well, I think we had better keep out of it altogether and let your respected parent put his foot in it, which he is sure to do. He thinks Mr. Gordon held back because of Blanche's appearance."

"He doesn't! Well, of all the stupids! Got his start, too, as what he calls 'a gum-shoe reporter' doing detective work on his paper. If I had no more insight into human nature than that, I'd take to cracking rock as a profession," and Dee sniffed scornfully. She agreed with me that we would say nothing to Zebedee as it wouldn't be quite fair to our sex to gossip with a man about a love affair.

Annie and Mary had been as quick to see the possible romance as we had been, so we had to tell them of Miss Cox's agitation when Norfolk was mentioned, and one and all we pitied poor Zebedee's masculine blindness. We had always liked Miss Cox, but now we had a tenderness for her that amounted to adoration. Our surmises were many as to the reason for her separation from her lover.

"Maybe there was insanity in the family," suggested Mary.

"Perhaps she had a very stern father who scorned her lover," and Annie blushed that her mind should run on stern fathers.

"I believe it was just a matter of spondulix," said the practical Dee.

"Oh, no! surely not!" exclaimed Dum. "I don't believe Miss Cox is the kind of woman to give up a man because he is poor. I believe it was because she thought she was so homely."

"Well, he must have been a pretty poor stick of a lover if he could not persuade her that she was beautiful. I'd hate to think that of Mr. Gordon. Maybe he gave her up because he was poor. School teaching is 'mighty po' pickin's,' as Mammy Susan says."

"Well, I hope they won't keep us waiting very long, because I'm simply dying to know," sighed Dum.

This conversation was held after we got back to the beach and were installing the guests in their quarters. We had decided to sleep, all five of us, on one porch, as it was so much more fun. It made the cots come rather close together but that made giggling and whispering just so much simpler.

Miss Cox had had a pleasant morning, she declared, and had the table all set for luncheon with tempting viands thereon. We had brought a supply of delicacies from Schmidt's in Richmond and I had a fine ham, cooked by Mammy Susan's own method, which I produced from my trunk as a surprise for Zebedee, so "poor, dear Blanche" did not have to officiate at this meal but could spend her time getting her sleeping porch in order and unpacking her huge basket of clothes.

We had been rather concerned about how a sleeping porch would be looked on by the cook, but she set our minds at rest with great tact.

"Yes'm, I is quite customary to air in my sleeping department. At school the satinary relegations is very strengulous and we are taught that germcrobels lurks in spots least inspected. And now I will take off my begalia of travel and soon will be repaired to be renitiated into the hysterics of domestic servitude." And we were going to have to listen to this talk for a whole month and keep straight faces or perhaps lose the services of "poor, dear Blanche"!

"I simply can't stand it!" exploded Dum as soon as she got out of earshot. "It will give me apoplexy."

Luncheon was a merry meal that day as Zebedee was in an especially delightful mood and Mary Flannagan had many funny new stories to tell. She was an indefatigable reader of jokes and could reel them off by the yard, but all the time our romantic souls were atremble to see how Miss Cox would take the news of the proposed visit of her one-time lover. We half hoped and half feared that

Zebedee would mention the fact that he had extended this invitation to Mr. Gordon, and perhaps she might faint. We did not want her to faint, but if she did faint we hoped we would be there to see it. We kept wondering why Zebedee did not tell her and finally quite casually he asked:

"Where do you think we had better put Gordon, Jinny?"

"Gordon? Gordon who?"

"Why, Bob Gordon! Didn't the girls tell you he is coming out to stay over Sunday?"

"No – we – we – you – we thought – " but no one ever found out what we did think nor did we find out what Miss Cox thought of the return of her supposed lover, for just at this juncture Blanche came into view ready for the "hysterics of domestic servitude." In taking off her "begalia of travel" she had also removed the large, shiny pompadour and disclosed to view a woolly head covered with little tight "wropped" plaits. She had on a blue checked long-sleeved apron made by what is known as the bungalow pattern, her expression was quite meek and she looked very youthful and rather pathetic. I realized that her vast amount of assurance had come entirely from her fine clothes, and now that she had taken them off she was nothing more nor less than a poor, overgrown country darkey who had been sent to school and taught a lot of stuff before she had any foundation to put it on. It turned out later that she could neither read nor write with any ease, and all of her high-sounding, mispronounced words she had gathered from lectures she had attended in the school. She was suffering from this type of schooling as I would have suffered had I gone straight from Bracken to college without getting any training at Gresham.

The effect was so startling, to see this girl whom we had left only a few minutes ago arrayed in all her splendor, now looking for all the world like a picked chicken, that Miss Cox and her romance were for the moment forgotten and all our energies were taken up in trying to compose our countenances. Then Mary Flannagan swallowed a sardine whole and had to be well thumped, and by that time Miss Cox was able to control her voice (if she had ever lost control of it), and she asked, in a most matter-of-fact way, questions about the expected guest; and if her colour was a little heightened, it might have been Blanche who had caused it. Were we not all of us as red as roses?

CHAPTER VII

OH, YOU CHAPERONE!

Dum and Dee were to take turns keeping house but I had a steady job as the Advisory Board and we hoped to manage without worrying Miss Cox. The girls had tossed up to find out who should begin, and Dee had first go, which meant breaking in Blanche. We were glad to see that she seemed to understand dish washing and that she moved rapidly considering her size and shape.

"Now, Blanche," said Dee with a certain pardonable importance, "my father is to have a guest this evening and we want to have a very nice supper, so you must tell us what are the dishes you can make best."

"Well, Miss Tucker, I is had great successfulness with my choclid cake and blue mawngé."

"Oh, I did not mean dessert but the substantial part of the supper," gasped Dee. Blanche was always making us gasp, as she was so unexpected.

"Well, as for that my co'se is not took up many things as yit, but I is mastered the stuffin' of green peppers and kin make a most appetizement dish. Up to the presence, the the'ry of domesticated silence has been mo' intrusting to me than the practization."

Dee looked forlornly to me for help and indeed I felt it was time for the Advisory Board to step in.

"Blanche," I said, rather sternly, "did you ever cook any before you went to school?"

"Cook? Of co'se I did, Miss Page. I'se been a-cookin' ever sence I could take a ask cake out'n the fire 'thout burnin' myse'f up."

"Good! Now see here, Blanche, we want you to cook for us the way you cooked before you ever went to school. Just forget all about domestic science and cook."

"Don't you want no choclid cake an' no blue mawngé?"

"Not tonight," said Dee gently as Blanche's countenance was so sad. "We want some fried fish and some batter bread and perhaps some hot biscuit or waffles. There are some beautiful tomatoes in the refrigerator and some lettuce and we can have peaches and cream for dessert."

"'Thout no cake?"

"Well, I tell you what you can do," said the tender-hearted Dee. "You can make us a chocolate cake for Sunday dinner if your supper turns out well this evening."

"Oh, thank you, Miss Tucker. I is got so much sentiment fer cake. Now which do you choose to have, biscuit or waffles?"

We thought biscuit would be best to start Blanche on and after cautioning her to call us if she was in doubt about anything, we left her to work her own sweet will.

Her own sweet will turned out to be a pretty good one and we were wise to leave her to it. I did get out in the kitchen just in time to keep her from putting sugar in the batter bread, something she had picked up in school from her Northern teachers. I thought it best to take the batter bread in my own hands after that, and to Zebedee's great comfort, made it until I felt sure Blanche could do it as well as I could.

Zebedee and I were on the porch waiting for supper and Mr. Gordon to arrive, while Dee went out to put the finishing touch to her housekeeping. Dum and the two other girls had strolled in the direction of the trolley to meet the guest whom we rather expected to come on the next car. Miss Cox had not yet made her appearance after the second dip we had had that day.

"Have you known Mr. Gordon very long?" I queried.

"Ever since our first year at the University. He's a bully good fellow but awfully queer in a way. Used to be very quick-tempered, but I fancy all these years of teaching have rather toned down

his temper. Jinny Cox used to be a perfect pepper pot; but temper and teaching don't go very well together and she is as mild as a May morning now."

"Did Miss Cox know Mr. Gordon very well in those old days?"

"Why, bless me if I remember. We all of us ran in a crowd. As well as I can recall, it seems to me that Bob Gordon and Jinny Cox were always rowing about one thing or another. You see I was so in love with my little Virginia that all I can remember of those days is just what touched us," and Zebedee wiped his eyes, which had filled with tears as they always did when he spoke of his little wife who had lived such a short time. "I do kind of half remember that one day we spent at Montecello on a picnic when it rained cats and dogs, Jinny and Bob had such a row they could not go back together although he was her escort. That was the time Jinny and I made up the tune and danced the Lobster Quadrille," and Zebedee was laughing before he had quite dried his tears, as was the way with all the Tuckers. "Bob left the University soon after that, – some financial difficulties at home because his father had lost his fortune, – and then I believe old Bob got a job in a district school and has been teaching ever since – Look here, Page, do you know I believe my soul Bob and Jinny were engaged then! I have a kind of half memory that my little Virginia told me they were, on the way home from Montecello. Well, if I'm not an ass! Why, it was not poor, dear Blanche, after all, that was scaring off Gordon, but Jinny Cox! Well, well!"

I couldn't help smiling in rather a superior way and Zebedee exclaimed:

"I believe you knew it all the time," but just then the girls returned, bringing Mr. Gordon with them and what I knew or did not know had to keep for another time.

Mr. Gordon was very much spruced up and did not look nearly so old and tired as he had in the morning. His light grey suit and hat were in excellent taste, setting off his iron-grey hair and moustache, and on the whole his appearance was so distinguished that we were more thrilled than ever at the thought of just how Miss Cox was going to treat him.

I fancy there is no human so romantic as a sixteen-year-old girl and here were five girls all in the neighbourhood of sixteen and all simply bubbling over with sentimentality. Miss Cox came out on the porch and there we stood fully prepared for any outburst. We all of us noted that Miss Cox looked remarkably well in a blue and white lawn that showed off her really very good figure to perfection. I had long ago found out that Miss Cox was not so very homely, after all. To be sure her face was rather crooked, and her smile very twisted, but her head was well set, and her hair thick and glossy, and her figure athletic and graceful.

"Hello, Bob!"

"Hello, Jinny!" and that was all! They shook hands in quite a matter-of-fact way.

"I believe we were mistaken," whispered Dum to me.

"Wait and see," I cautioned, "they could not fall on each other's necks right before all of us."

"Maybe not, but they need not greet each other like long lost fish," grumbled Dum.

But I knew very well if they had been nothing at all to each other but just acquaintances who had not met for about seventeen years, they would have had some conventional remarks to make and not just said "Hello!"

At this crucial moment poor, dear Blanche appeared announcing supper:

"Your repast is reserved, Miss Tucker," and in we went to a very good meal. Blanche had evidently found it no trouble to forget what she had learned at school in the way of domestic science and she had cooked as good a Virginia supper as one could wish. The Hampton spots were done to a turn; the biscuit were light and fluffy, and as I had seen to the batter bread, if I do say it who shouldn't, it was about perfect.

Mr. Gordon may have been suffering with lovesickness of seventeen years' standing, but he certainly proved himself a good trencher knight.

"All of you have some excuse for appetites as I wager anything you have been in the water twice today, but I have no excuse except that the food is so good and I am so tired of boarding," said

our guest as he helped himself to another fluffy biscuit that poor, dear Blanche was handing around with an elegant air like a duchess at a tea.

"Well, we did go in twice today, although it is supposed to be a bad thing to do. Somehow I never can resist it myself and naturally I don't expect the girls to resist what I can't myself," said Zebedee.

"How was the water; pretty warm?"

"Oh, fine this morning before breakfast but rather brillig this afternoon," answered Dum.

"Brillig?"

"Yes, brillig! Don't you know your Alice?"

"'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe."

And then a strange thing happened. Before Dum got half through her quotation Miss Cox's face was suffused with blushes, and Mr. Gordon first looked pained and then determined and when he answered he spoke to Dum but he looked at Miss Cox.

"Well, I don't know my Alice as well as I might, but I have read it and re-read it and think it a most amusing book. I don't remember that strange verse, however, – Do you know, Miss Dum, I used to be such a silly ass as to think there was nothing amusing in Alice in Wonderland, and once a long time ago I fell out with the very best friend I ever had in the world because I said the Lobster Quadrille was the kind of thing that no one but a child could find anything funny in? And she thought differently, and before we knew it we were at it hammer and tongs, and both of us said things we did not really mean (at least I did not mean them) – "

"Neither did I, Bob," said Miss Cox, frankly. I certainly liked Miss Cox for the way she spoke. She was what Tweedles calls a "perfect gentleman."

"And what is more, Jinny, the Lobster Quadrille is my favourite poem now," and Mr. Gordon looked very boyish, "or it might be unless you think the charming bit Miss Dum has just recited is better."

"How do you like this?" said Dum, rather bent on mischief I fancied:

"In winter when the fields are white,
I sing this song for your delight —

In spring, when woods are getting green,
I'll try and tell you what I mean.

In summer, when the days are long,
Perhaps you'll understand the song.

In autumn, when the leaves are brown,
Take pen and ink and write it down.

I sent a message to the fish:
I told them, 'This is what I wish.'

The little fishes of the sea,
sent an answer back to me.

The little fishes' answer was,
'We cannot do it, Sir, because – '

I sent to them again to say,
'It will be better to obey.'

The fishes answered with a grin,
'Why, what a temper you are in!'

I told them once, I told them twice;
They would not listen to advice.

I took a kettle, large and new,
Fit for the deed I had to do.

My heart went hop, my heart went thump;
I filled the kettle at the pump.

Then someone came to me and said,
'The little fishes are in bed.'

I said to him, I said it plain,
'Then you must wake them up again.'

I said it very loud and clear;
I went and shouted in his ear.

But he was very stiff and proud;
He said, 'You need not shout so loud!'

And he was very proud and stiff,
He said, 'I'll go and wake them, if – '

I took a corkscrew from the shelf;
I went to wake them up myself.

And when I found the door was locked,
I pulled and pushed and kicked and knocked.

And when I found the door was shut,
I tried to turn the handle, but – "'

Dum recited this poem with fervor and great elocutionary effects and simply convulsed the crowd. The whole thing was said directly to Mr. Gordon and the naughty girl seemed to have some personal meaning when she said, "My heart went hop, my heart went thump," and when she ended up with a hopeless wail, "I tried to turn the handle, but – ," Mr. Gordon actually went to Miss Cox, as we arose from the supper table, drew her hand within his arm and deliberately led her out on the beach, and in plain hearing of all of us, said:

"The door isn't shut for good, is it, Jinny?"

And we heard her answer: "No, Bob, not if you 'pull and push and kick and knock.'"

Well, Bob certainly did "pull and push and kick and knock." I have never imagined a more persistent lover. He seemed to be trying to catch even for all he had lost in those seventeen years. He told Zebedee that after the foolish quarrel he and Miss Cox had had on that wet, wet picnic, he had been called home by the financial disaster of his father, and while he knew he had been hard-headed in the affair, he felt she had been unreasonable, too, in demanding that he should agree with her about the absurd poem in Alice in Wonderland; and so had left the University without trying to right matters. Then when he had realized the tremendous difficulty his family was in, and found that not only would he have to go immediately to work but that his mother and sister would be dependent on his exertions, he felt that it was on the whole best that he and Miss Cox should separate. The engagement was already broken and he went off to his long and up-hill work saddened and forlorn; and Miss Cox, rather embittered by the experience, feeling that she had been hasty and exacting but too proud to make a move towards a reconciliation, had spent all the long years in vain regrets.

"Well, I hope they will be very happy," sighed Dum when we were discussing the matter while we lay on our closely packed cots the first night of Mr. Gordon's visit. "It does seem terribly unromantic for the separation to have been caused by the Lobster Quadrille."

"It might have been a permanent separation if it had been just plain lobster, 'specially in cans," said funny Mary Flanagan.

"Didn't Miss Cox look sweet in that blue dress? I thought she was almost pretty but maybe it was the love-light in her eyes," sentimentalized Annie Pore.

"Isn't it a pity they are so old?" deplored Dee. "His hair is real grey."

"It's trouble that has done it," said Mary. "I wondered, Dum, you didn't get off that verse on him about the voice of the lobster. Maybe that would have been too personal:

"'Tis the voice of the lobster, I heard him declare,
'You have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair.'
As a duck with his eyelids, so he with his nose,
Trims his belt and his buttons and turns out his toes.'

It would have been rather personal because Mr. Gordon's hair does look rather sugared and certainly Miss Cox has baked him pretty brown."

"What do you s'pose your Cousin Park Garnett would say, Page, if she knew that our chaperone for the house party had gone and got herself as good as engaged the very second evening?" laughed Dee.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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