

Speed Nell

Molly Brown's Freshman Days



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CHAPTER I

WELLINGTON

“Wellington! Wellington!” called the conductor.

The train drew up at a platform, and as if by magic a stream of girls came pouring out of the pretty stucco station with its sloping red roof and mingled with another stream of girls emptying itself from the coaches. Everywhere appeared girls, – leaping from omnibuses; hurrying down the gravel walk from the village; hastening along the University drive; girls on foot; girls on bicycles; girls running, and girls strolling arm in arm.

Few of them wore hats; many of them wore sweaters and short walking skirts of white duck or serge, and across the front of each sweater was embroidered a large “W” in cadet blue, the mystic color of Wellington University.

In the midst of a shouting, gesticulating mob stood Mr. Murphy, baggage master, smiling good naturedly.

“Now, young ladies, one at a time, please. We’ve brought down all the baggage left over by the 9.45. If your trunk ain’t on this train, it’ll come on the next. All in good time, please.”

A tall girl with auburn hair and deep blue eyes approached the group. There was a kind of awkward grace about her, the grace which was hers by rights and the awkwardness which comes of growing too fast. She wore a shabby brown homespun suit, a shade darker than her hair, and on her head was an old brown felt which had plainly seen service the year before.

But knotted at her neck was a tie of burnt-orange silk which seemed to draw attention away from the shiny seams and frayed hem and to cry aloud:

“Look at me. I am the color of a winter sunset. Never mind the other old togs.”

Surely there was something very brave and jaunty about this young girl who now pushed her way through the crowd of students and endeavored to engage the attention of the baggage-master.

“I think my trunk was on this train,” she said timidly. “I hope it is. It came from Louisville to Philadelphia safely, and when I re-checked it they told me it would be on this train.”

Now, Murphy, the baggage master, had his own peculiar method of conducting business, and it was strictly a partial and prejudiced one. If he liked the face of a student, he always waited on her first, regardless of how many other students were ahead of her; and, as he told his wife later, he “took a fancy to that overgrown gal from the fust.”

“I beg your pardon, but Mr. Murphy is engaged,” put in a haughty looking young woman with black eyes that snapped angrily.

“Now, Miss Judith,” said the baggage master, who knew many of the students by name, “don’t go fer to git excited. I ain’t made no promises to no one. It’s plain to see this here young lady is a newcomer, and, as sich, she gits my fust consideration.”

“Oh, please excuse me,” said the girl in shabby brown. “I’m not used to – I mean I haven’t traveled very much.”

Judith turned irritably away.

“I should think you hadn’t,” she said in a low voice, but loud enough to be overheard. “Freshies have a lot to learn and one is to respect their elders.”

The new girl put down her straw suit case and leaned against the wall of the station. She looked tired and there was a streak of soot across her cheek. The trip from Kentucky in this warm September

weather was not the pleasantest journey in the world. While she waited for Mr. Murphy to return with news of her trunk, her attention was claimed by two girls standing at her elbow who were talking cheerfully together.

"Yes," said one of them, a plump, brown-eyed girl with brown hair, a slightly turned-up nose and a humorous twitch to her lips, "I have a room at Queen's cottage. It's the best I could do unless I went into one of the expensive suites in the dormitories, and you know I might as well expect to take the royal suite on the Mauretania and sail for Europe as do that."

The other girl laughed.

"You'd be quite up to doing anything with your enterprising ways, Nance Oldham," she exclaimed.

"Oh, are you going to Queen's cottage?" here broke in the girl in shabby brown. "I'm there, too. My name is Molly Brown. I come from Kentucky. I feel awfully forlorn and homesick arriving at the University station without knowing a soul."

There was a kind of ringing note to Molly Brown's voice which made the other girls listen more closely.

"I wonder if she doesn't sing," thought Nance Oldham, giving her a quick, scrutinizing glance. "Yes, I am at Queen's cottage," she continued aloud, "but that's about all I can tell you. I feel like a greeny, too. We'll soon learn, I suppose. This is Miss Brinton, Miss Brown."

Caroline Brinton was rather a nondescript young person with dreamy eyes and an absent-minded manner. She came from Philadelphia, and she greeted the new acquaintance rather coldly.

"Your trunk ain't here, yet, Miss," called the baggage master. "Like enough it'll come on the 6.50."

Molly looked disturbed, while the black-eyed Judith standing nearby flashed a triumphant smile, as much as to say:

"It only serves you right for pushing in out of turn."

"What are we to do now?" she asked of her new friends, rather helplessly.

"Take the 'bus up to Wellington," said brisk Nance Oldham. "I know that much. There's one filling up now. We'd better hurry and get seats."

The three girls crowded into the long, narrow side-seated vehicle already half filled with students. Even at this early stage in their acquaintance, the bonds of loneliness and sympathy had drawn them together.

"I'm a stranger in a strange land," Molly Brown had confided to the listening ear of Nance Oldham. "I had made up my mind not to be homesick. I really didn't know what the feeling was like, because I have never had a chance to learn. But I know now it's a kind of an all-gone sensation. I suppose little orphans have it when they first go into an orphan asylum."

"Oh, you'll soon get over it," answered Nance. "It's because you live so far away. Kentucky, didn't you say?"

Molly nodded and looked the other way. The memory of an old brick house with broad piazzas and many windows blurred her vision for a moment. But she resolutely pressed her lips together and began to watch the passing scenery, as new and strange to her as the scenery in a foreign land.

The road leading to Wellington University skirted a pretty village and then plunged straight into the country between rolling meadow lands tinged a golden brown with the autumn sun. And there in the distance were the gray towers of Wellington, silhouetted against the sky like a mediæval castle.

Molly Brown clasped her hands and smiled a heavenly smile.

"Is that it?" she exclaimed rapturously.

"It must be," answered Nance, who also felt some quiet and reserved flutterings.

"It is," said Miss Brinton. "I came down to engage my room, so I know."

In the meantime, there was a busy conversation going on around them.

"I'm going to cut gym this year. It interferes too much," exclaimed a tiny girl with birdlike motions and intelligent, beady little eyes as bright and alert as the eyes of a little brown bird.

But evidently Molly was not the only person who had noticed this resemblance, for one of the students called out:

"Now, Jennie Wren, you must admit that gym never had any charms for you and it's a great relief to give it up."

"Of course she must," put in another girl. "The only exercise Jennie Wren ever takes is to hop about on the lawn and prune her feathers."

"Never!" cried Jennie Wren. "I never wear them, not even quills. I belong to the S. P. C. A."

"Is there much out-of-door life here?" asked Molly Brown, of a tall, somewhat older girl sitting opposite her.

"This new girl may have timid manners," thought Nance Oldham; "but she is not afraid to talk to strangers. I suppose that's the friendly Southern way. She hasn't been in Wellington a quarter of an hour and she has already made three friends, – Caroline and the station-master and me. And now she's getting on famously with that older girl. What I like about her is that she isn't a bit self-conscious and she takes it for granted everybody's going to be kind."

"Oh, yes, lots of it," the older girl was saying to Molly kindly. "If you have a taste for that kind of thing, you may indulge it to your heart's content. There is a splendid swimming pool attached to the gym, and there are golf links, of course. You know they are quite famous in this part of the world. Then, there are the tennis courts, and we'll still have some canoeing on the lake before the weather gets too cold and later glorious skating. Besides all that, there are perfectly ripping walks for miles around. The college has several Saturday afternoon walking clubs."

"But don't these things interfere with – with lectures?" asked Molly, who was really quite ignorant regarding college life, although she had passed her entrance examinations without any conditions whatever.

The older girl laughed pleasantly. She was not good looking, but she had a fine face and Molly liked her immensely.

"Oh, no, you'll find there's plenty of time for everything you want to get in, because most things have their season, and most girls specialize, anyhow. A golf fiend is seldom a tennis fiend, and there are lots of walking fiends who don't like either."

Molly's liking for this big girl and her grave, fine face increased as the conversation progressed. She had a most reassuring, kindly manner and Molly noticed that the other girls treated her with a kind of deferential respect and called her "Miss Stewart." She learned afterward that Miss Stewart was a senior and a member of the "Octogons," the most coveted society in the University. She led in all the athletic sports, was quite a wonderful musician and had composed an operetta for her class and most of the music for the class songs. It was whispered also that she was very rich, though no one would ever have guessed this secret from Mary Stewart herself, who was careful never to allude to money and dressed very simply and plainly.

The omnibus now turned into the avenue which led to the college campus and there was general excitement of a subdued sort among the new girls and greetings and calls from the older girls as they caught glimpses of friends strolling on the lawn.

"Queen's Cottage," called the driver and Molly stood up promptly, shrinking a little as twenty pairs of eyes turned curiously in her direction.

Then the big girl leaned over and took her hand kindly.

"Won't you look me up to-morrow?" she said. "My name is Mary Stewart, and I stop at No. 16 on the Quadrangle. Perhaps I can help you get things straightened out a bit and show you the ropes."

"Oh, thank you," said Molly, with that musical ring to her voice which never failed to thrill her hearers. "It's awfully nice of you. What time shall I come?"

"I'll see you in Chapel in the morning, and we'll fix the time then," called Miss Stewart as Molly climbed out, dragging her straw telescope over the knees of the other passengers, followed by Nance Oldham, who had waited for her to take the initiative.

As the two girls stood watching the disappearing vehicle, they became the prey to the most extreme loneliness.

"I feel as if I had just left the tumbrel on the way to my execution," observed Molly, trying to laugh, although the corners of her mouth turned persistently down.

"But, anyway, I'm glad we are together," she continued, slipping her arm through Nance's. "Queen's Cottage does seem so remote and lonesome, doesn't it? Just a thing apart."

The two girls gazed uncertainly at the rather dismal-looking shingled house, stained brown and covered with a mantle of old vines which appeared to have been prematurely stripped of their foliage. It was somewhat isolated, at least it seemed so at first. The next house was quite half a block on and was a cheerful place, all stucco and red roof like the station.

"Well, here goes," Molly went on. "If it's Queen's, why then, so be it," and she marched up the walk and rang the front door bell, which resounded through the hall with a metallic clang.

"Shure, I'm after bein' wit' you in a moment," called a voice from above. "You're the new young ladies, I'm thinkin', and glad I am to see you."

There was the sound of heavy footsteps down the stairs and the door was opened by Mrs. Murphy, wife of the baggage master and housekeeper for Queen's Cottage. She was a middle-aged Irish woman with a round, good-natured face and she beamed on the girls with motherly interest as she ushered them into the parlor.

"Since ye be the fust comers, ye may be the fust choosers," she said; "and if ye be friends, ye may like to be roommates, surely, and that's a good thing. It's better to room with a friend than a stranger."

The two girls looked at each other with a new interest. It had not occurred to them that they might be roommates, but had not they already, with the swiftness peculiar to girls, bridged the gulf which separates total strangers, and were now on the very verge of plunging into intimate friendship? Would it not be better to seize this opportunity than to wait for other chances which might not prove so agreeable?

"Shall we not?" asked Molly with that charming, cordial manner which appeared to win her friends wherever she went.

"It would be a great relief," answered Nance, who was yet to learn the value of showing real pleasure when she felt it. Nevertheless, Nance, under her whimsical, rather sarcastic outer shell, had a warm and loyal heart.

Thus Molly Brown and Nance Oldham, quite opposites in looks and temperaments, became roommates during their freshman year at Wellington College and thus, from this small beginning, the seeds of a life-long friendship were sown.

The two girls chose a big sunny room on the third floor looking over a portion of the golf links. Molly liked it because it had blue wallpaper and Nance because it had a really commodious closet.

CHAPTER II

THEIR NEIGHBOR

Molly Brown was the youngest member of a numerous family of older brothers and sisters. Her father had been dead many years, and in order to rear and educate her children, Mrs. Brown had been obliged to mortgage, acre by acre, the fine old place where Molly and her brothers and sisters had been born and brought up. Every time anybody in the Brown family wanted to do anything that was particularly nice, something had to go, either a cow or a colt or a piece of land, according to the needs of the moment. A two-acre lot represented Molly's college education – two perfectly good acres of orchard.

"If you don't bring back at least one golden apple in return for all these nice juicy ones that are going for your education, Molly, you are no child of mine," Mrs. Brown had laughingly exclaimed when she kissed her daughter good-bye.

"I'll bring back the three golden apples of the Hesperides, mother, and make the family rich and happy," cried Molly, and from that moment the three golden apples became a secret symbol to her, although she had not decided in her mind exactly what they represented.

"But," as Molly observed to herself, "anybody who has had two acres of winter sweets, pippins and greenings spent on her, must necessarily engage to win a few."

Those two fruitful acres, however, while they provided a fund for an education, did not extend far into the margin and there was little left for clothes. That was perhaps one of the reasons why Molly had felt so disturbed about the delay in receiving her trunk.

"I can stand traveling in this old brown rag for economy's sake," she thought; "but I would like to put on the one decent thing I own for my first day at college. I was a chump not to have brought something in my suit case besides a blouse. However, what's done can't be undone," and she stoically went to work to remove the stains of travel and put on a fresh blue linen shirtwaist; while Nance Oldham, who had been more far-sighted, made herself spic and span in a duck skirt and a white linen blouse. She had little to say during the process of making her toilet, and Molly wondered if, after all, she would like a roommate so peculiarly reserved and whimsical as this new friend. She hoped there would be lots of nice girls in the house of the right sort, girls who meant business, for while Molly meant to enjoy herself immensely, she meant business decidedly, and she didn't want to get into a play set and be torn away from her studies. As these thoughts flitted through her mind she heard voices coming up the stairs.

"Now, Mrs. Murphy, I do hope you've got something really decent. You know, I hadn't expected to come back this year. I thought I would stay in France with grandmamma, but at the last moment I changed my mind, and I've come right here from the ship without engaging a thing at all. I'll take anything that's a single."

The voice had a spoiled, imperious sound, like that of a person in the habit of having her own way.

"I have a single, Miss, but it's a small one, and they do say you've got a deal of belongings."

"Let's see it. Let's see it, quick, Granny Murphy," and from the noise without our two young persons judged that this despotic stranger had placed her hands on Mrs. Murphy's shoulders and was running her along the passage.

"Now, you'll be giving me apoplexy, Miss, surely, with your goings-on," cried the woman breathlessly, as she opened the door next theirs.

"Who's in there? Two freshies?"

"Yes, Miss. They only just arrived an hour ago."

“Greenies from Greenville, Green County,” chanted the young woman, who did not seem to mind being overheard by the entire household. “Very well, I’ll take this little hole-in-the-wall. I won’t move any of my things in, except some books and cushions. And now, off wit’ yer. Here’s something for your trouble.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, Miss.”

The two girls seemed to hear the Irish woman being shoved out in the hall. Then the door was banged after her and was locked.

“Dear me, what an obstreperous person,” observed Nance. “I wonder if she’s going to give us a continuous performance.”

“I don’t know,” answered Molly. “She’ll be a noisy neighbor if she does. But she sounds interesting, living in France with her grandmamma and so on.”

Nance glanced at her watch.

“Wouldn’t you like to go for a stroll before supper? We have an hour yet. I’m dying to see the famous Quadrangle and the Cloisters and a few other celebrated spots I’ve heard about. Aren’t you?”

“And incidentally rub off a little of our greenness,” said Molly, recalling the words of the girl next door.

As the two girls closed the door to their room and paused on the landing, the door adjoining burst open and a human whirlwind blew out of the single room and almost knocked them over.

“I beg your pardon,” said Nance stiffly, giving the human whirlwind a long, cool, brown glance.

Molly, a little behind her friend, examined the stranger with much curiosity. She could not quite tell why she had imagined her to be a small black-eyed, black-haired person, when here stood a tall, very beautiful young woman. Her hair was light brown and perfectly straight. She had peculiarly passionate, fiery eyes of very dark gray, of the “smouldering kind,” as Nance described them later; her features were regular and her mouth so expressive of her humors that her friends could almost read her thoughts by the curve of her sensitive lips. Even in that flashing glimpse the girls could see that she was beautifully dressed in a white serge suit and a stunning hat of dull blue, trimmed with wings.

But instead of continuing her mad rush, which seemed to be her usual manner of doing things, the young woman became suddenly a zephyr of mildness and gentleness.

“Excuse my precipitate methods,” she said. “I never do things slowly, even when there’s no occasion to hurry. It’s my way, I suppose. Are you freshmen? Perhaps you’d like for me to show you around college. I’m a soph. I’m fairly familiar.”

Nance pressed her lips together. She was not in the habit of making friends off-hand. Molly, in fact, was almost her first experience in this kind of friendship. But Molly Brown, who had never consciously done a rude thing in her life, exclaimed:

“That would be awfully nice. Thanks, we’ll come.”

They followed her rather timidly down the steps. Across the campus the pile of gray buildings, in the September twilight, more than ever resembled a fine old castle. As they hastened along, the sophomore gave them each a quick, comprehensive glance.

“My name is Frances Andrews,” she began suddenly, and added with a peculiar intonation, “I was called ‘Frank’ last year. I’m so glad we are to be neighbors. I hope we shall have lots of good times together.”

Molly considered this a particular mark of good nature on the part of an older girl to two freshmen, and she promptly made known their names to Frances Andrews. All this time Nance had remained impassive and quiet.

Ten girls, arm in arm, were strolling toward them across the soft green turf of the campus, singing as in one voice to the tune of “Maryland, My Maryland”:

“Oh, Wellington, My Wellington,
Oh, how I love my Wellington!”

Suddenly Frances Andrews, who was walking between the two young girls, took them each firmly by the arm and led them straight across the campus, giving the ten girls a wide berth. There was so much fierce determination in her action that Molly and Nance looked at her with amazement.

“Are those seniors?” asked Nance, thinking perhaps it was not college etiquette to break through a line of established and dignified characters like seniors.

“No; they are sophomores singing their class song,” answered Frances.

“Aren’t you a sophomore?” demanded Nance quickly.

“Yes.”

“Curious she doesn’t want to meet her friends,” thought Molly.

But there were more interesting sights to occupy her attention just then.

They had reached the great gray stone archway which formed the entrance to the Quadrangle, a grassy courtyard enclosed on all sides by the walls of the building. Heavy oak doors of an antique design opened straight onto the court from the various corridors and lecture rooms and at one end was the library, a beautiful room with a groined roof and stained glass windows, like a chapel. Low stone benches were ranged along the arcade of the court, whereon sat numerous girls laughing and talking together.

Although she considered that undue honors were being paid them by having as guide this dashing sophomore, somehow Molly still felt the icy grip of homesickness on her heart. Nance seemed so unsympathetic and reserved and there was a kind of hardness about this Frances Andrews that made the warm-hearted, affectionate Molly a bit uncomfortable. Suddenly Nance spied her old friend, Caroline Brinton, in the distance, and rushed over to join her. As she left, three girls came toward them, talking animatedly.

“Hello, Jennie Wren!” called Frances gayly. It was the same little bird-like person who had been in the bus. “Howdy, Rosamond. How are you, Lotta? It’s awfully nice to be back at the old stand again. Let me introduce you to my new almost-roommate, Miss Brown,” went on Frances hurriedly, as if to fill up the gaps of silence which greeted them.

“How do you do, Miss Andrews,” said Jennie Wren, stiffly.

Rosamond Chase, who had a plump figure and a round, good-natured face, was slightly warmer in her greeting.

“How are you, Frankie? I thought you were going to France this winter.”

The other girl who had a turned-up nose and blonde hair, and was called “Peggy Parsons,” sniffed slightly and put her hands behind her back as if she wished to avoid shaking hands.

Molly was so shocked that she felt the tears rising to her eyes. “I wish I had never come to college,” she thought, “if this is the way old friends treat each other.”

She slipped her arm through Frances Andrews’ and gave it a sympathetic squeeze.

“Won’t you show me the Cloisters?” she said. “I’m pining to see what they are like.”

“Come along,” said Frances, quite cheerfully, in spite of the fact that she had just been snubbed by three of her own classmates.

Lifting the latch of a small oak door fitted under a pointed arch, she led the way through a passage to another oak door which opened directly on the Cloisters. Molly gave an exclamation of pleasure.

“Oh,” she cried, “are we really allowed to walk in this wonderful place?”

“As much as you like before six P. M.,” answered Frances. “How do you do, Miss Pembroke?”

A tall woman with a grave, handsome face was waiting under the arched arcade to go through the door.

“So you decided to come back to us, Miss Andrews. I’m very glad of it. Come into my office a moment. I want a few words with you before supper.”

“You can find your way back to Queen’s by yourself, can’t you, Miss Brown?” asked Frances. “I’ll see you later.”

And in another moment, Molly Brown was quite alone in the Cloisters. She was glad to be alone. She wanted to think. She paced slowly along the cloistered walk, each stone arch of which framed a picture of the grassy court with an Italian fountain in the center.

“It’s exactly like an old monastery,” she said to herself. “I wonder anybody could ever be frivolous or flippant in such an old world spot as this. I could easily imagine myself a monk, telling my beads.”

She sat down on a stone bench and folded her hands meditatively.

“So far, I’ve really only made one friend at college,” she thought to herself, for Nance Oldham was too reserved to be called a friend yet, “and that friend is Frances Andrews. Who is she? What is she? Why do her classmates snub her and why did Miss Pembroke, who belonged to the faculty, wish to speak with her in her private office?” It was all queer, very queer. Somehow, it seemed to Molly now that what she had taken for whirlwind manners was really a tremendous excitement under which Frances Andrews was laboring. She was trying to brazen out something.

“Just the same, I’m sorry for her,” she said out loud.

At that moment, a musical, deep-throated bell boomed out six times in the stillness of the cloisters. There was the sound of a door opening, a pause and the door closed with a clicking noise. Molly started from her reverie. It was six o’clock. She rushed to the door of antique design through which she had entered just fifteen minutes before. It was closed and locked securely. She knocked loudly and called:

“Let me out! Let me out! I’m locked in!”

Then she waited, but no one answered. In the stillness of the twilit courtyard she could hear the sounds of laughter and talking from the Quadrangle. They grew fainter and fainter. A gray chill settled down over the place and Molly looked about her with a feeling of utter desolation. She had been locked in the Cloisters for the night.

CHAPTER III

THE PROFESSOR

Molly beat and kicked on the door wildly. Then she called again and again but her voice came back to her in a ghostly echo through the dim aisles of the cloistered walk. She sat down on a bench and burst into tears.

How tired and hungry and homesick she was! How she wished she had never heard of college, cold, unfriendly place where people insulted old friends and they locked doors at six o'clock. The chill of the evening had fallen and the stars were beginning to show themselves in the square of blue over the Cloisters. Molly shivered and folded her arms. She had not worn her coat and her blue linen blouse was damp with dew.

"Can this be the only door into the Cloisters?" she thought after the first attack of homesick weeping had passed.

She rose and began to search along the arcade which was now almost black. There were doors at intervals but all of them locked. She knocked on each one and waited patiently.

"Oh, heavens, let me get out of this place to-night," she prayed, lifting her eyes to the stars with an agonized expression. Suddenly, the high mullioned window under which she was standing, glowed with a light just struck. Then, someone opened a casement and a man's voice called:

"Is anyone there? I thought I heard a cry."

"I am," said Molly, trying to stifle the sobs that would rise in her throat. "I've been locked in, or rather out."

"Why, you poor child," exclaimed the voice again. "Wait a moment and I'll open the door."

There were sounds of steps along the passage; a heavy bolt was thrust back and a door held open while Molly rushed into the passage like a frightened bird out of the dark.

"It's lucky I happened to be in my study this evening," said the man, leading the way toward a square of light in the dark corridor. "Of course the night watchman would have made his rounds at eight, but an hour's suspense out there in the cold and dark would have been very disagreeable. How in the world did it happen?"

By this time they had reached the study and Molly found herself in a cozy little room lined from ceiling to floor with books. On the desk was a tray of supper. The owner of the study was a studious looking young man with kindly, quizzical brown eyes under shaggy eyebrows, a firm mouth and a cleft in his chin, which Molly had always heard was a mark of beauty in a woman.

"You must be a freshman?" he said looking at her with a shade of amusement in his eyes.

"I am," replied Molly, bravely trying to keep her voice from shaking. "I only arrived an hour or so ago. I – I didn't know they would lock –" She broke down altogether and slipping into a big wicker chair sobbed bitterly. "Oh, I wish – I wish I'd stayed at home."

"Why, you poor little girl," exclaimed the man. "You have had a beastly time for your first day at college, but you'll come to like it better and better all the time. Come, dry your eyes and I'll start you on your way to your lodgings. Where are you stopping?"

"Queen's."

"Suppose you drink some hot soup before you go. It will warm you up," he added kindly, taking a cup of hot bouillon from the tray and placing it on the arm of her chair.

"But it's your supper," stammered Molly.

"Nonsense, there's plenty more. Do as I tell you," he ordered. "I'm a professor, you know, so you'll have to obey me or I'll scold."

Molly drank the soup without a word. It did comfort her considerably and presently she looked up at the professor and said:

"I'm all right now. I hope you'll excuse me for being so silly and weak. You see I felt so far away and lonesome and it's an awful feeling to be locked out in the cold about a thousand miles from home. I never was before."

"I'm sure I should have felt the same in your place," answered the professor. "I should probably have imagined I saw the ghosts of monks dead and gone, who might have walked there if the Cloisters had been several hundreds of years older, and I would certainly have made the echoes ring with my calls for help. The Cloisters are all right for 'concentration' and 'meditation,' which I believe is what they are intended to be used for on a warm, sunny day; but they are cold comfort after sunset."

"Is this your study?" asked Molly, rising and looking about her with interest, as she started toward the door.

"I should say that this was my play room," he replied, smiling.

"Play room?"

"Yes, this is where I hide from work and begin to play." He glanced at a pile of manuscript on his desk.

"I reckon work is play and play is work to you," observed Molly, regarding the papers with much interest. She had never before seen a manuscript.

"If you knew what an heretical document that was, you would not make such rash statements," said the professor.

"I'm sure it's a learned treatise on some scientific subject," laughed Molly, who had entirely regained her composure now, and felt not the least bit afraid of this learned man, with the kind, brown eyes. He seemed quite old to her.

"If I tell you what it is, will you promise to keep it a secret?"

"I promise," she cried eagerly.

"It's the libretto of a light opera," he said solemnly, enjoying her amazement.

"Did you write it?" she asked breathlessly.

"Not the music, but the words and the lyrics. Now, I've told you my only secret," he said. "You must never give me away, or the bottom would fall out of the chair of English literature at Wellington College."

"I shall never, never tell," exclaimed Molly; "and thank you ever so much for your kindness to-night."

They clasped hands and the professor opened the door for her and stood back to let her pass.

Then he followed her down the passage to another door, which he also opened, and in the dim light she still noticed that quizzical look in his eyes, which made her wonder whether he was laughing at her in particular, or at things in general.

"Can you find your way to Queen's Cottage?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she assured him. "It's the last house on the left of the campus."

The next moment she found herself running along the deserted Quadrangle walk. Under the archway she flew, and straight across the campus – home.

It was not yet seven o'clock, and the Queen's Cottage girls were still at supper. A number of students had arrived during the afternoon and the table was full. There were several freshmen; Molly identified them by their silence and looks of unaccustomedness, and some older girls, who were chattering together like magpies.

"Where have you been?" demanded Nance Oldham, who had saved a seat for her roommate next to her own.

All conversation ceased, and every eye in the room was turned on blushing Molly.

"I – I've been locked up," she answered faintly.

"Locked up?" repeated several voices at once. "Where?"

"In the Cloisters. I didn't realize it was six o'clock, and some one locked the door."

Molly had been prepared for a good deal of amusement at her expense, and she felt very grateful when, instead of hoots of derision, a nice junior named Sallie Marks, with an interesting face and good dark eyes, exclaimed:

"Why, you poor little freshie! What a mediæval adventure for your first day. And how did you finally get out?"

"One of the professors heard me call and let me out."

"Which one?" demanded several voices at once.

"I don't know his name," replied Molly guardedly, remembering that she had a secret to keep.

"What did he look like?" demanded Frances Andrews, who had been unusually silent for her until now.

"He had brown eyes and a smooth face and reddish hair, and he was middle aged and quite nice," said Molly glibly.

"What, you don't mean to say it was Epiménides Antinous Green?"

"Who?" demanded Molly.

"Never mind, don't let them guy you," said Sallie Marks. "It was evidently Professor Edwin Green who let you in. He is professor of English literature, and I'll tell you for your enlightenment that he was nicknamed in a song 'Epiménides' after a Greek philosopher, who went to sleep when he was a boy and woke up middle-aged and very wise, and 'Antinous' after a very handsome Greek youth. Don't you think him good-looking?"

"Rather, for an older person," said Molly thoughtfully.

"He's not thirty yet, my child," said Frances Andrews. "At least, so they say, and he's so clever that two other colleges are after him."

"And he's written two books," went on Sally. "Haven't you heard of them – 'Philosophical Essays' and 'Lyric Poetry.'"

Molly was obliged to confess her ignorance regarding Professor Edwin Green's outbursts into literature, but she indulged in an inward mental smile, remembering the lyrics in the comic opera libretto.

"He's been to Harvard and Oxford, and studied in France. He's a perfect infant prodigy," went on another girl.

"It's a ripping thing for the 'Squib,'" Molly heard another girl whisper to her neighbor.

She knew she would be the subject of an everlasting joke, but she hoped to live it down by learning immediately everything there was to know about Wellington, and becoming so wise that nobody would ever accuse her again of being a green freshman.

Mrs. Maynard, the matron, came in to see if she was all right. She was a motherly little woman, with a gentle manner, and Molly felt a leaning toward her at once.

"I hope you'll feel comfortable in your new quarters," said Mrs. Maynard. "You'll have plenty of sunshine and a good deal more space when you get your trunks unpacked, although the things inside a trunk do sometimes look bigger than the trunk."

Molly smiled. There was not much in her trunk to take up space, most certainly. She had nicknamed herself when she packed it "Molly Few Clothes," and she was beginning to wonder if even those few would pass muster in that crowd of well-dressed girls.

"Oh, have the trunks really come, Miss Oldham?" she asked her roommate.

"Yes, just before supper. I've started unpacking mine."

"Thank goodness. I've got an old ham and a hickory nut cake and some beaten biscuits and pickles and blackberry jam in mine, and I can hardly wait to see if anything has broken loose on my clothes, such as they are."

Nance Oldham opened her eyes wide.

"I've always heard that Southern people were pretty strong on food," she said, "and this proves it."

"Wait until you try the hickory nut cake, and you won't be so scornful," answered Molly, somehow not liking this accusation regarding the appetites of her people.

"Did I hear the words 'hickory nut cake' spoken?" demanded Frances Andrews, who apparently talked to no one at the table except freshmen.

"Yes, I brought some. Come up and try it to-night," said Molly hospitably.

"That would be very jolly, but I can't to-night, thanks," said Frances, flushing.

And then Molly and Nance noticed that the other sophomores and juniors at the table were all perfectly silent and looking at her curiously.

"I hope you'll all come," she added lamely, wondering if they were accusing her of inhospitality.

"Not to-night, my child," said Sally Marks, rising from the table. "Thank you, very much."

As the two freshmen climbed the stairs to their room a little later, they passed by an open door on the landing.

"Come in," called the voice of Sally. "I was waiting for you to pass. This is my home. How do you like it?"

"Very much," answered the two girls, really not seeing anything particularly remarkable about the apartment, except perhaps the sign on the door which read "Pax Vobiscum," and would seem to indicate that the owner of the room had a Christian spirit.

"Your name is 'Molly Brown,' and you come from Kentucky, isn't that so?" asked Sally Marks, taking Molly's chin in her hand and looking into her eyes.

"And yours?" went on the inquisitive Sally, turning to Molly's roommate.

"Is Nance Oldham, and I come from Vermont," finished Nance promptly.

"You're both dears. And I am ever so glad you are in Queens. You won't think I'm patronizing if I give you a little advice, will you?"

"Oh, no," said the two girls.

"You know Wellington's full of nice girls. I don't think there is a small college in this country that has such a fine showing for class and brains. But among three hundred there are bound to be some black sheep, and new girls should always be careful with whom they take up."

"But how can we tell?" asked Nance.

"Oh, there are ways. Suppose, for instance, you should meet a girl who was good-looking, clever, rich, with lots of pretty clothes, and all that, and she seemed to have no friends. What would you think?"

"Why, I might think there was something the matter with her, unless she was too shy to make friends."

"But suppose she wasn't?" persisted Sally.

"Then, there would surely be something the matter," said Nance.

"Well, then, children, if you should meet a girl like that in college, don't get too intimate with her."

Sally Marks led them up to their own room, just to see how they were fixed, she said.

Later, when the two girls had crawled wearily into bed, after finishing the unpacking, Molly called out sleepily:

"Nance" – she had forgotten already to say Miss Oldham – "do you suppose that nice junior could have meant Miss Andrews?"

"I haven't a doubt of it," said Nance.

"Just the same, I'm sorry for the poor thing," continued Molly. "I'm sorry for anybody who's walking under a cloud, and I don't think it would do any harm to be nice to her."

"It wouldn't do her any harm," said Nance.

"Epiménides Antinous Green," whispered Molly to herself, as she snuggled under the covers. The name seemed to stick in her memory like a rhyme. "Funny I didn't notice how young and handsome he was. I only noticed that he had good manners, if he did treat me like a child."

CHAPTER IV

A BUSY DAY

The next day was always a chaotic one in Molly's memory – a jumble of new faces and strange events. At breakfast she made the acquaintance of the freshmen who were staying at Queen's Cottage – four in all. One of these was Julia Kean, "a nice girl in neutral tints," as Molly wrote home to her sister, "with gray eyes and brown hair and a sense of humor." She came to be known as "Judy," and formed an intimate friendship with Molly and Nance, which lasted throughout the four years of their college course.

"How do you feel after your night's rest?" she called across the table to Molly in the most friendly manner, just as if they had known each other always. "You look like the 'Lady of the Sea' in that blue linen that just matches your eyes." She began looking Molly over with a kind of critical admiration, narrowing her eyes as an artist does when he's at work on a picture. "I'd like to make a poster of you in blue-and-white chalk. I'd put you on a yellow, sandy beach, against a bright blue sky, in a high wind, with your dress and hair blowing –" And with eyes still narrowed, she traced an imaginary picture with one hand and shaped her ideas with the other.

Molly laughed.

"You must be an artist," she said, "with such notions about posing."

"A would-be one, that's all. 'Not yet, but soon,' is my motto."

"That's a bad motto," here put in Nance Oldham. "It's like the Spanish saying of '*Hasta mañana*.' You are very apt to put off doing things until next day."

Julia Kean looked at her reproachfully.

"You've read my character in two words," she said.

"Why don't you introduce me to your friends, Judy?" asked a handsome girl next to her, who had quantities of light-brown hair piled on top of her head.

"I haven't been introduced myself," replied Judy; "but I never could see why people should stop for introductions at teas and times like this. We all know we're all right, or else we wouldn't be here."

"Of course," said Frances Andrews, who had just come in, "why all this formality, when we are to be a family party for the next eight months? Why not become friends at once, without any preliminaries?"

Sally Marks, who had given them the vague yet meaningful warning the night before, appeared to be absorbed in her coffee cup, and the other two sophomores at the table were engaged in a whispered conversation.

"Nevertheless, I will perform the introductions," announced Judy Kean. "This is Miss Margaret Wakefield, of Washington, D. C.; Miss Edith Coles, of Rhode Island; Miss Jessie Lynch, of Wisconsin, and Miss Mabel Hinton, of Illinois. As for me, my name is Julia Kean, and I come from – nowhere in particular."

"You must have had a birthplace," insisted that accurate young person, Nance Oldham.

"If you could call a ship a birthplace, I did," replied Judy. "I was born in mid-ocean on a stormy night. Hence my stormy, restless nature."

"But how did it happen?" asked Molly.

"Oh, it was all simple enough. Papa and mamma were on their way back from Japan, and I arrived a bit prematurely on board ship. I began life traveling, and I've been traveling ever since."

"You'll have to stay put here; awhile, at least," said Sally Marks.

"I hope so. I need to gather a little moss before I become an habitual tramp."

"Hadn't we better be chasing along?" said Frances Andrews. "It's almost time for chapel."

No one answered and Molly began to wonder how long this strange girl would endure the part of a monologist at college. For that was what her attempts at conversation seemed to amount to. She admired Frances's pluck, at any rate. Whatever she had done to offend, it was courageous of her to come back and face the music.

Chapel was an impressive sight to the new girls. The entire body of students was there, and the faculty, including Professor Edwin Green, who gave each girl the impression he was looking at her when he was really only gazing into the imaginary bull's-eye of an imaginary camera, and saw not one of them. Molly decided his comeliness was more charm than looks. "The unknown charm," she wrote her sister. "His ears are a little pointed at the top, and he has brown eyes like a collie dog. But it was nice of him to have given me his soup," she added irrelevantly, "and I shall always appreciate it."

After chapel, when Molly was following in the trail of her new friends, feeling a bit strange and unaccustomed, some one plucked her by the sleeve. It was Mary Stewart, the nice senior with the plain, but fine face.

"I'll expect you this evening after supper," she said. "I'm having a little party. There will be music, too. I thought perhaps you might like to bring a friend along. It's rather lonesome, breaking into a new crowd by one's self."

It never occurred to Molly that she was being paid undue honors. For a freshman, who had arrived only the afternoon before, without a friend in college, to be asked to a small intimate party by the most prominent girl in the senior class, was really quite remarkable, so Nance Oldham thought; and she was pleased to be the one Molly chose to take along.

The two girls had had a busy, exciting day. They had not been placed in the same divisions, B and O being so widely separated in the alphabet, and were now meeting again for the first time since lunch. Molly had stretched her length on her couch and kicked off her pumps, described later by Judy Kean as being a yard long and an inch broad.

"I wish you would tell me your receipt for making friends, Molly," exclaimed Nance. "You are really a perfect wonder. Don't you find it troublesome to be so nice to so many people?"

"I'd find it lots harder not to be nice," answered Molly. "Besides, it's a rule that works both ways. The nicer you are to people, the nicer they are to you."

"But don't you think lots of people aren't worth the effort and if you treat them like sisters, they are apt to take advantage of it and bore you afterwards?"

Molly smiled.

"I've never been troubled that way," she said.

"Now, don't tell me," cried Nance, warming to the argument, "that that universally cordial manner of yours doesn't bring a lot of rag-tags around to monopolize you. If it hasn't before, it will now. You'll see."

"You make me feel like the leader of Coxey's Army," laughed Molly; "because, you see, I'm a kind of a rag-tag myself."

Her eyes filled with tears. She was thinking of her meagre wardrobe. Nance was silent. She was slow of speech, but when she once began, she always said more than she intended simply to prove her point; and now she was afraid she had hurt Molly's feelings. She was provoked with herself for her carelessness, and when she was on bad terms with herself she appeared to be on bad terms with everybody else. Of course, in her heart of hearts, she had been thinking of Frances Andrews, whom she felt certain Molly would never snub sufficiently to keep her at a distance.

The two girls went about their dressing without saying another word. Nance was coiling her smooth brown braids around her head, while Molly was looking sorrowfully at her only two available dresses for that evening's party. One was a blue muslin of a heavenly color but considerably darned, and the other was a marquisette, also the worse for wear. Suddenly Nance gave a reckless toss of her hair brush in one direction and her comb in another, and rushed over to Molly, who was gazing absently into the closet.

"Oh, Molly," she cried impetuously, seizing her friend's hand, "I'm a brute. Will you forgive me? I'm afraid I hurt your feelings. It's just my unfortunate way of getting excited and saying too much. I never met any one I admired as much as you in such a short time. I wish I did know how to be charming to everybody, like you. It's been ground into me since I was a child not to make friends with people unless it was to my advantage, and I found out they were entirely worthy. And it's a slow process, I can tell you. You are the very first chance acquaintance I ever made in my life, and I like you better than any girl I ever met. So there, will you say you have forgiven me?"

"Of course, I will," exclaimed Molly, flushing with pleasure. "There is nothing to forgive. I know I'm too indiscriminate about making friends. Mother often complained because I would bring such queer children out to dinner when I was a child. Indeed, I wasn't hurt a bit. It was the word 'rag-tag,' that seemed to be such an excellent description of the clothes I must wear this winter, unless some should drop down from heaven, like manna in the desert for the Children of Israel."

Without a word, Nance pulled a box out from under her couch and lifted the lid. It disclosed a little hand sewing machine.

"Can you sew?" she asked.

"After a fashion."

"Well, I can. It's pastime with me. I'd rather make clothes than do lots of other things. Now, suppose we set to work and make some dresses. How would you like a blue serge, with turn-over collar and cuffs, like that one Miss Marks is wearing, that fastens down the side with black satin buttons?"

"Oh, Nance, I couldn't let you do all that for me," protested Molly. "Besides, I haven't the material or anything."

"Why don't you earn some money, Molly?" suggested Nance. "There are lots of different ways. Mrs. Murphy, the housekeeper, was telling me about them. One of the girls here last year actually blacked boots – but, of course, you wouldn't do anything so menial as that."

"Wouldn't I?" interrupted Molly. "Just watch me. That's a splendid idea, Nance. It's a fine, honorable labor, as Colonel Robert Wakefield said, when his wife had to take in boarders."

Molly slipped on the blue muslin.

"It really doesn't make any difference what she wears," thought Nance, looking at her friend with covert admiration. "She'd be a star in a crazy quilt."

The two girls hurried down to supper. Molly was thoughtful all through that conversational meal. Her mind was busy with a scheme by which she intended to remove that unceasing pressure for funds which bade fair to be an ever-increasing bugbear to her.

No. 16 on the Quadrangle turned out to be a very luxurious and comfortable suite of rooms, consisting of quite a large parlor, a little den or study and a bedroom. Mary Stewart met them at the door in such a plain dress that at first Molly was deceived into thinking it was just an ordinary frock until she noticed the lines. And in a few moments Nance took occasion to inform her that simplicity was one of the most expensive things in the world, which few people could afford, and furthermore that Mary Stewart's gray, cottony-looking dress was a dream of beauty and must have come from Paris.

There were six or seven other girls in the crowd, including that little bird-like, bright-eyed creature they called "Jennie Wren," whose real name was Jane Wickham. The only other girl they knew was Judith Blount, who had been so snubby to Molly the day before about the luggage.

All these girls were musical, as the freshmen were soon to learn, and belonged to the College Glee Club.

"What a pretty room!" exclaimed Molly to her hostess, after she had been properly introduced and enthroned in a big tapestry chair, in which she unconsciously made a most delightful and colorful picture.

"I'm glad you like it. I have some trouble keeping it from getting cluttered up with 'truck,' as we call it. It's about like Hercules trying to clean the Augean Stables, I think, but I try and use the den for an overflow, and only put the things I'm really fond of in here. That helps some."

"They are certainly lovely," said the young freshman, looking wistfully at the head of "The Unknown Woman," between two brass candlesticks on the mantel shelf. On the bookshelves stood "The Winged Victory," and hanging over the shelves on the opposite side of the room was an immense photograph of Botticelli's "Primavera." The only other pictures were two Japanese prints and the only other furniture was a baby grand piano and some chairs. It was really a delightfully empty and beautiful place, and Molly felt suddenly strangely crude and ignorant when she recalled the things she had intended to do to her part of the room at Queen's Cottage toward beautifying it. She was engaged in mentally clearing them all out, when a voice at her elbow said:

"Are you thinking of taking the vows, Miss Brown?"

It was Judith Blount, who had drawn up a chair beside her's. There was something very patronizing and superior in Miss Blount's manner, but Molly was determined to ignore it, and smiled sweetly into the black eyes of the haughty sophomore.

"Taking what vows?" she asked.

"Why, I understood you had become a cloistered nun."

Molly flushed. So the story was out. It didn't take long for news to travel through a girl's college.

"I wasn't cloistered very long," she answered. "And the only vow I took was never to be caught there again after six o'clock."

"How did you like Epiménides? I hear he's made a great joke of it," she continued, without waiting for Molly to answer. "He's rather humorous, you know. Even in his most serious work, it will come out."

"I don't think there was much to joke about," put in Molly, feeling a little indignant. "I was awfully forlorn and miserable."

"The real joke was that he called you 'little Miss Smith,'" said Judith.

Molly's moods reflected themselves in her eyes just as the passing clouds are mirrored in two blue pools of water. A shadow passed over her face now and her eyes grew darker, but she kept very quiet, which was her way when her feelings were hurt. Then Mary Stewart began to play on the piano, and Molly forgot all about the sharp-tongued sophomore, who, she strongly suspected, was trying to be disagreeable, but for what reason for the life of her Molly could not see.

Never before had she heard any really good playing on the piano, and it seemed to her now that the music actually flowed from Mary's long, strong fingers, in a melodious and liquid stream. Other music followed. Judith sang a gypsy song, in a rich contralto voice, that Molly thought was a little coarse. Jennie Wren, who could sing exactly like a child, gave a solo in the highest little piping soprano. Two girls played on mandolins, and Mary Stewart, who appeared to do most things, accompanied them on a guitar. Then came supper, which was rather plain, Molly thought, and consisted simply of tea and cookies. "I suppose it's artistic not to have much to eat," her thoughts continued, but she made up her mind to invite Mary Stewart to supper before the old ham and the hickory nut cake were consumed by hungry freshmen.

"It seems to me that with such a voice as yours you must sing, Miss Brown," here broke in Mary Stewart. "Will you please oblige the company?"

"I wouldn't like to sing after all this fine music," protested Molly. "Besides, I don't know anything but darky songs."

"The very girl we want for our Hallowe'en Vaudeville," cried Jennie Wren. "What do you use, a guitar or a piano?"

"Either, a little," answered Molly, blushing crimson; "but I haven't any more voice than a rabbit."

"Fire away," cried Jennie Wren, thrusting a guitar into her hands.

Molly was actually trembling with fright when she found herself the center of interest in this musical company.

"I'm scared to death," she announced, as she faintly tuned the guitar. Then she struck a chord and began:

"Ma baby loves shortnin',
Ma baby loves shortnin' bread;
Ma baby loves shortnin',
Mammy's gwine make him some shortnin' bread."

Before she had finished, everybody in the room had joined in. Then she sang:

"Ole Uncle Rat has come to town,
To buy his niece a weddin' gown,
OO-hoo!"

"A quarter to ten," announced some one, and the next moment they had all said good-night and were running as fast as their feet could carry them across the campus, "scuttling in every direction like a lot of rats," as Judith remarked.

"Lights out at ten o'clock," whispered Nance breathlessly, as they crept into their room and undressed in the dark. It was very exciting. They felt like a pair of happy criminals who had just escaped the iron grasp of the law.

When Molly Brown dropped into a deep and restful sleep that night, she never dreamed that she had already become a noted person in college, though how it happened, it would be impossible to say. It might have been the Cloister story, but, nevertheless, Molly – overgrown child that she may have seemed to Professor Green – had a personality that attracted attention wherever she was.

CHAPTER V

THE KENTUCKY SPREAD

"Molly, you look a little worried," observed Nance Oldham, two days before the famous spread was to take place, it having been set for Friday evening.

Molly was seated on her bed, in the midst of a conglomerate mass of books and clothes, chewing the end of a pencil while she knitted her brows over a list of names.

"Not exactly worried," she replied. "But, you know, Nance, giving a party is exactly like some kind of strong stimulant with me. It goes to my head, and I seem to get intoxicated on invitations. Once I get started to inviting, I can't seem to stop."

"Molly Brown," put in Nance severely, "I believe you've just about invited the whole of Wellington College to come here Friday night. And because you are already such a famous person, everybody has accepted."

"I think I can about remember how many I asked," she replied penitently. "There are all the girls in the house, of course."

"Frances Andrews?"

Molly nodded.

"And all the girls who were at Miss Stewart's the other night."

"What, even that girl who makes catty speeches. That black-eyed Blount person?"

"Yes, even so," continued Molly sadly. "I really hadn't intended to ask her, Nance, but I do love to heap coals of fire on people's heads, and besides, I just told you, when I get started, I can't seem to stop. When I was younger, I've been known to bring home as many as six strange little girls to dinner at once."

"The next time you give a party," put in Nance, "we'd better make out the list beforehand, and then you must give me your word of honor not to add one name to it."

"I'll try to," replied Molly with contrition, "but it's awfully hard to take the pledge when it comes to asking people to meals, even spreads."

The two girls examined the list together, and Molly racked her brains to try and remember any left-outs, as she called them.

"I'm certain that's all," she said at last. "That makes twenty, doesn't it? Oh, Nance, I tremble for the old ham and the hickory nut cake. Do you think they'll go round? Aunty, she's my godmother, is sending me another box of beaten biscuits. She has promised to keep me supplied. You know, I have never eaten cold light bread in my life at breakfast, and I'd just as soon choke down cold potatoes as the soggy bread they give us here. But beaten biscuit and ham and home-made pickles won't be enough, even with hickory nut cake," she continued doubtfully.

"I have a chafing dish. We can make fudge; then there's tea, you know. We can borrow cups and saucers from the others. But we'll have to do something else for their amusement besides feed them. Have you thought of anything?"

"Lillie and Millie," these were two sophomores at Queen's, "have a stunt they have promised to give. It's to be a surprise. And Jennie Wren has promised to bring her guitar and oblige us with a few selections, but, oh, Nance, except for the eatin', I'm afraid it won't be near such a fine party as Mary Stewart's was."

"Eatin's the main thing, child. Don't let that worry you," replied Nance consolingly. "I think I have an idea of something which would interest the company, but I'm not going to tell even you what it is."

Nance had a provoking way of keeping choice secrets and then springing them when she was entirely ready, and wild horses could not drag them out of her before that propitious moment.

On Friday evening the girls began to arrive early, for, as has been said, Molly was already an object of interest at Wellington College, and the fame of her beaten biscuits and old ham had spread abroad. Some of the guests, like Mary Stewart, came because they were greatly attracted toward the young freshman; and others, like Judith Blount, felt only an amused curiosity in accepting the invitation. As a general thing, Judith was a very exclusive person, but she felt she could safely show her face where Mary Stewart was.

"This looks pretty fine to me," observed that nice, unaffected young woman herself, shaking hands with Molly and Nance.

"It's good of you to say so," replied Molly. "Your premises would make two of our's, I'm thinking."

"But, look at your grand buffet. How clever of you! One of you two children must have a genius for arrangement."

The study tables had been placed at one end of the room close together, their crudities covered with a white cloth borrowed from Mrs. Murphy, and on these were piled the viands in a manner to give the illusion of great profusion and plenty.

"It's Molly," laughed Nance; "she's a natural entertainer."

"Not at all," put in Molly. "I come of a family of cooks."

"And did your cook relatives marry butlers?" asked Judith.

Molly stifled a laugh. Somehow Judith couldn't say things like other girls. There was always a tinge of spite in her speeches.

"Where I come from," she said gravely, "the cooks and butlers are colored people, and the old ones are almost like relatives, they are so loyal and devoted. But there are not many of those left now."

The room was gradually filling, and presently every guest had arrived, except Frances Andrews.

"We won't wait for her," said Molly to Lillie and Millie, the two inseparable sophomores, who now quietly slipped out. Presently, Nance, major domo for the evening, shoved all the guests back onto the divans and into the corners until a circle was formed in the centre of the room. She then hung a placard on the knob of the door which read:

MAHOMET, THE COCK OF THE EAST,

VS

CHANTECLER, THE COCK OF THE WEST

There was a sound of giggling and scuffling, the door opened and two enormous, man-sized cocks entered the room. Both fowls had white bodies made by putting the feet through the sleeves of a nightgown, which was drawn up around the neck and over the arms, the fullness gathered into the back and tied into a rakish tail. A Persian kimono was draped over Mahomet to represent wings and a tightly fitting white cap with a point over the forehead covered his head. His face was powdered to a ghastly pallor with talcum and his mouth had been painted with red finger-nail salve into a cruel red slash across his countenance. Chantecler was of a more engaging countenance. A small red felt bedroom slipper formed his comb and a red silk handkerchief covered his back hair. The two cocks crowed and flapped their wings and the fight began, amid much laughter and cheering. Twice Chantecler was almost spurred to death, but it was Mahomet's lot to die that evening, and presently he expired with a terrible groan, while the Cock of the West placed his foot on Mahomet's chest and crowed a mighty crow, for the West had conquered the East.

That was really the great stunt of the evening, and it occupied a good deal of time. Molly began carving the ham, which she had refused to do earlier, because a ham, properly served, should appear first in all its splendid shapely wholeness before being sliced into nothingness. Therefore she now proceeded to cut off thin portions, which crumbled into bits under the edge of the carving knife borrowed from Mrs. Murphy. But the young hostess composedly heaped it upon the plates with pickle and biscuit, and it was eaten so quickly that she had scarcely finished the last serving before the plates were back again for a second allowance.

During the hot fudge and hickory nut cake course, the door opened and a Scotch laddie, kilted and belted in the most approved manner entered the room. His knees were bare, he wore a little Scotch cap, a black velvet jacket and a plaidie thrown over one shoulder. But the most perfect part of his get-up was his miniature bagpipe, which he blew on vigorously, and presently he paused and sang a Scotch song.

"Nance!" cried several of the Queen's Cottage girls, for it was difficult to recognize the quiet young girl from Vermont in this rakish disguise.

In the midst of the uproar there was a loud knock on the door.

"Come in," called Molly, a little frightened, thinking, perhaps, the kindly matron had for once rebelled at the noise they were making.

Slowly the door opened and an old hag stepped into the room. She was really a terrible object, and some of the girls shrieked and fell back as she advanced toward the jolly circle. Her nose was of enormous length, and almost rested on her chin, like a staff, like the nose of "The Last Leaf on the Tree." Also, she had a crooked back and leaned heavily on a stick. On her head was a high pointed witch's cap. She wore black goggles, and had only two front teeth. The witch produced a pack of cards which she dexterously shuffled with her black gloved hands. Then she sat down on the floor, beckoning to the girls to come nearer.

"Half-a-minute fortune for each one," she observed in a muffled, disguised voice, but it was a very fulsome minute, as Judy remarked afterward, for what little she said was strictly to the point.

To Judith Blount she said:

"English literature is your weak point. Look out for danger ahead."

This seemed simple enough advice, but Judith flushed darkly, and several of the girls exchanged glances. Molly, for some reason, recalled what Judith had said about Professor Edwin Green.

Many of the other girls came in for knocks, but they were very skillful ones, deftly hidden under the guise of advice. To Jennie Wren the witch said:

"Be careful of your friends. Don't ever cultivate unprofitable people."

To Nance Oldham she said:

"You will always be very popular – if you stick to popular people."

It was all soon over. Molly's fortune had been left to the last. The strange witch had gone so quickly from one girl to another that they had scarcely time to take a breath between each fortune.

"As for you," she said at last, turning to Molly, "I can only say that 'kind hearts are more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman blood,' and by the end of your freshman year you will be the most popular girl in college."

"Who are you?" cried Molly, suddenly coming out of her dream.

"Yes, who are you?" cried Judith, breaking through the circle and seizing the witch by the arm.

With a swift movement the witch pushed her back and she fell in a heap on some girls who were still sitting on the floor.

"I will know who you are," cried Jennie Wren, with a determined note in her high voice, as she grasped the witch by the arm, and it did look for a moment as if the Kentucky spread were going to end in a free-for-all fight, when suddenly, in the midst of the scramble and cries, came three raps on the door, and the voice of the matron called:

"Young ladies, ten o'clock. Lights out!"

The girls always declared that it was the witch who had got near the door and pushed the button which put out every light in the room. At any rate, the place was in total darkness for half a minute, and when Molly switched the lights on again for the girls to find their wraps the witch had disappeared.

In another instant the guests had vanished into thin air and across the moonlit campus ghostly figures could be seen flitting like shadows over the turf toward the dormitories, for there was no time to lose. At a quarter past ten the gates into the Quadrangle would be securely locked.

Nance lit a flat, thick candle, known in the village as “burglar’s terror,” and in this flickering dim light the two girls undressed hastily.

Suddenly Molly exclaimed in a whisper:

“Nance, I believe it was Frances Andrews who dressed up as that witch, and I’m going to find out, rules or no rules.”

She slipped on her kimono and crept into the hall. The house was very still, but she tapped softly on Frances’ door. There was no answer, and opening the door she tiptoed into the room. A long ray of moonlight, filtering in through the muslin curtains, made the room quite light. There was a smell of lavender salts in the air, and Mollie could plainly see Frances in her bed. A white handkerchief was tied around her head, as if she had a headache, but she seemed to be asleep.

“Frances,” called Molly softly.

Frances gave a stifled sob that was half a groan and turned over on her side.

“Frances,” called Molly again.

Frances opened her eyes and sat up.

“Is anything the matter?” she asked.

Molly went up to the bedside. Even in the moonlight she could see that Frances’ eyes were swollen with crying.

“I was afraid you were ill,” whispered Molly. “Why didn’t you come to the spread?”

“I had a bad headache. It’s better now. Good night.” Molly crept off to her room.

Was it Frances, after all, who had broken up her party?

Molly was inclined to think it was not, and yet —

“At any rate, we’ll give her the benefit of the doubt, Nance,” she whispered.

But there were no doubts in Nance’s mind.

CHAPTER VI

KNOTTY PROBLEMS

"I tell you things do hum in this college!" exclaimed Judy Kean, closing a book she had been reading and tossing it onto the couch with a sigh of deep content.

"I don't see how you can tell anything about it, Judy," said Nance severely. "You've been so absorbed in 'The Broad Highway' every spare moment you've had for the last two days that you might as well have been in Kalamazoo as in college."

"Nance, you do surely tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," said Judy good naturedly. "I know I have the novel habit badly. It's because I had no restraint put upon me in my youth, and if I get a really good book like this one, I just let duty slide."

"Why don't you put your talents to some use and write, then?" demanded Nance, who enjoyed preaching to her friends.

"Art is more to my taste," answered Judy.

"Well, art is long and time is fleeting. Why don't you get busy and do something?" exclaimed the other vehemently. "What do you intend to be?"

Judy had a trick of raising her eyebrows and frowning at the same time, which gave her a serio-comic expression and invested her most earnest speeches with a touch of humor. But she did not reply to Nance's question, having spent most of her life indulging her very excellent taste without much thought for the future.

"What do you intend to be?" she asked presently of Nance, who had her whole future mapped out in blocks: four years at college, two years studying languages in Europe, four years as teacher in a good school, then as principal, perhaps, and next as owner of a school of her own.

"Why, I expect to teach languages," said Nance without a moment's hesitation.

"Of course, a teacher. I might have known!" cried Judy. "You've commenced already on me – your earliest pupil!"

"Teacher, teacher, why am I so happy, happy, happy,
In my Sunday school?"

She broke off with her song suddenly and seized Nance's hand.

"Please don't scold me, Nance, dear. I know life isn't all play, and that college is a serious business if one expects to take the whole four years' course. I've already had a warning. It came this morning. It's because I've been cutting classes. And I have been entirely miserable. That's the reason I've been so immersed in 'The Broad Highway.' I've been trying to drown my sorrows in romance. I know I'm not clever – "

"Nonsense," interrupted the other impatiently. "You are too clever, you silly child. That's what is the matter with you, but you don't know how to work. You have no system. What you really need is a good tutor. You must learn to concentrate – "

"Concentrate," laughed Judy. "That's something I never could do. As soon as I try my thoughts go skylarking."

"How do you do it?"

"Well, I sit very still and dig my toes into the soles of my shoes and my finger nails into the palms of my hands and say over and over the thing I'm trying to concentrate on."

The girls were still laughing joyously when Molly came in. Her face wore an expression of unwonted seriousness, and she was frowning slightly. Three things had happened that morning which worried her considerably.

The first shock came before breakfast when she had looked in her handkerchief box where she kept her funds promiscuously mixed up with handkerchiefs and orris root sachet bags and found one crumpled dollar bill and not a cent more. There was a kind of blind spot in Molly's brain where money was concerned, little of it as she had possessed in her life. She never could remember exactly how much she had on hand, and change was a meaningless thing to her. And now it was something of a blow to her to find that one dollar must bridge over the month's expenses, or she must write home for more, a thing she did not wish to do, remembering the two acres of apple orchard which had been sunk in her education.

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