

Hill Grace Brooks

The Corner House Girls on a Tour



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Hill Grace Brooks

The Corner House Girls on a Tour / Where they went, what they saw, and what they found

CHAPTER I – A RED LETTER DAY INDEED

There was a deal of bustle and a twittering like an eager flock of sparrows in the big kitchen of the old Corner House, which stood facing Main Street in Milton, but with its long side and rear yard and garden running far back on Willow Street.

The four Kenway girls had the room all to themselves at this early hour on Saturday morning, for Mrs. MacCall and Aunt Sarah Maltby had not yet come downstairs, while Linda, the maid, had deserted the kitchen and pantry altogether for the time being.

Ruth, the eldest and most sedate of the sisters, was filling sandwiches at the dresser – and such a variety as there was of them!

Chicken, with mayonnaise and a lettuce leaf; pink ham cut thin and decorated with little golden dabs of mustard; peanut butter sandwiches; nut and cheese sandwiches, the filling nestling in a salad leaf, too; tuna fish, with narrow slices of red, red Spanish peppers decorating it; and of course sardines, carefully split and laid between soda crackers. What picnic lunch would be complete without sardines?

Agnes, the next oldest to Ruth and the beauty of the family, was slicing bread as exactly as though it were a problem in geometry and in such quantity that Tess declared it looked as though they were to feed an army.

Tess herself was seriously attending to the boiling of two dozen eggs in a big saucepan.

“Though why you need to watch ’em so closely I can’t see,” complained Agnes. “There are other things you might be doing when there is so *much* to do – goodness knows! Those eggs won’t get away.”

“No,” joined in Dot, the youngest of the Corner House girls, and quite seriously, too. “No. It isn’t like boiling lobsters.”

“Right, Dottums,” chuckled Agnes, recovering from her vexation immediately. “Eggs are an entirely different kind of shellfish.”

“Well,” said the little girl, explaining, “Mrs. Adams boiled some raw lobsters the other day, and one hopped right out of the pot on to the floor and started for the door – it really did!”

“Oo-ee!” gasped Tess, attracted for a moment from the bobbing eggs by this statement. “The poor thing!”

“Who’s a poor thing – Mrs. Adams?” asked Ruth, laughing gayly.

“Why, no,” said Tess, who was nothing if not tender-hearted. “The lobster.”

“Goodness!” exclaimed Agnes. “Do you s’pose it hurts a lobster to be boiled?”

“*Why* doesn’t it?” demanded Tess, promptly.

“Cause it has a shell,” ventured Dot.

“Why – because they always *do* boil them,” said Agnes, rather at a loss for an answer to Tess’ question.

“Sometimes they broil them,” said the oldest sister, smiling.

“Well, they’re used to it, anyway,” declared Agnes, with conviction.

“I – I don’t believe anybody could get used to being boiled,” observed Tess, slowly. “Look at Sammy Pinkney.”

“Where?” demanded Agnes, jumping. “I hope that horrid child isn’t coming over so early. I hoped we’d get away without having him around.”

“Oh, my!” murmured Dot. “You know he’s just got over the scarlet fever.”

“But he hasn’t got over being a nuisance,” declared the older girl.

“I didn’t mean that Sammy was really here – to look at,” explained the serious Tess. “I meant – I meant –”

“Well, what *did* you mean?” asked Agnes, who was inclined to be impatient.

“She meant, ‘consider Sammy,’ didn’t you, Tessie?” suggested Ruth, kindly.

“Why – yes.”

“Oh! Were you taking him for an example?” cried Agnes. “But Sammy hasn’t ever been boiled – although maybe he ought to have been.”

“No; he hasn’t been boiled,” said the serious Tess, still watching the eggs bobbing in the boiling water. “But he’s punished lots of times – at school, I mean. And he doesn’t seem to get used to it. He hollers just as loud now as the first time I ever heard him.”

“Did the lobster holler?” chuckled Agnes. “Did it, Dot?”

But Dot – who was not allowed to “mess in” with the lunch – had found another subject for consideration. She had been looking at Ruth, dexterously opening a second can of sardines. Now, when the cover was laid back and the oil drained off, the smallest girl pointed a dimpled finger at the contents of the can.

“What’s the matter, honey?” asked Ruth, smiling down at the serious face of the fairy-like Dot. “What is it?”

“Why, Ruthie,” said Dot, wonderingly, “I was only thinking if that middle fish wanted to turn over, what a lot of trouble it would have!”

Amid the laughter of the two older girls at this, the door banged open and a boy with a mop of flaxen hair – a regular “whitehead” and a football cut at that – burst into the room.

“My goodness me, girls! aren’t you ready yet?” he demanded. “And it’s half-past seven.”

“The eggs are,” Tess declared, the first to speak, for she had not been laughing.

“Well, then,” said the boy, “you and I, Tess, will just take the eggs and go.”

“What’s the matter, Neale O’Neil? Won’t your horse stand?” drawled Agnes, tossing her head.

“We would have been ready long ago if it had not been for you, Neale,” said Ruth, promptly.

“How’s that? I’ve been up since five. And the car’s right here at the side gate. Cracky! it’s a scrumptious auto, girls. I don’t believe there ever was a finer.”

“When our Mr. Howbridge does anything, he always does it right,” proclaimed Tess, giving up the guardianship of the eggs to Ruth. “And Mr. Howbridge had the car built for us.”

“But we wouldn’t ever have had it,” put in Dot, eager to tell all she knew, “if Mrs. Eland and Miss Pepperill hadn’t given us the money ’cause we found their Uncle Lemon Aden’s money.”

“Oh, goodness!” gasped Tess. “*Lem-u-el*, Dot!”

But Dot ignored the correction. “It was awfully nice of them to give us the car because we found the fortune in our garret.”

“Lots *you* did towards finding it,” chuckled Neale O’Neil.

“I’d like to know why I didn’t help find it!” cried the smallest Corner House girl, indignantly. “I saw it first – so there! I opened the book it was hid in and I thought it was pitchers.”

“Say! that isn’t getting us anywhere,” began the boy again. “Can’t you hurry? Just think! the first ride in your car!”

“Don’t remind me,” gasped Agnes, cutting a crooked slice. “My nerves are all jumping now like – like a *delightful toothache!*”

“Glory! listen to her,” laughed Neale. “But say, Miss Ruthiford *Ten*-ways, why do you say that it is my fault that you are not all ready?”

“Because we have to put up lunch enough to satisfy your appetite,” said Ruth, running cold water on the eggs from the open faucet.

“Well! I like that!” said Neale.

“I fancy you will, sonny,” said Agnes, looking at him slyly. “There are lots of goodies in it.”

“Now run and get your hats and wraps, children,” commanded Ruth seizing the last two slices of bread Agnes had cut. “That will do, Aggie. Leave a little bread for the folks to eat to-day while we’re gone. *That* basket is all packed, Neale, and you may take it out and put it in the tonneau.”

“Oh, my!” gasped Agnes, clasping her hands. “Doesn’t that sound fine?”

“What sounds fine!” asked her boy chum, surreptitiously putting the last crumb of a broken sandwich he had found into his mouth.

“The way Ruth said ‘tonneau.’ So – so *Frenchy* and *automobily!*”

“Why, Aggie!” gasped Tess, in amazement, before following Dot out of the kitchen, “you’re making up words just like Dot does.”

“I feel like making up words,” laughed Agnes, who had been “crazy for a car” for months and months! “We’ll all be talking about ‘tonneaus,’ and ‘carbureters,’ and ‘gas,’ and ‘wiring,’ and ‘differentials,’ and – ”

“And ‘equilaterals,’ and ‘isosceles triangles,’ and all that,” scoffed Neale. “You’ll know a hot lot about an automobile, Agamemnon.”

“Come, young man!” exclaimed Ruth, tartly, for she was very exact with boys, feeling sure that she did not approve of them – much, “suppose you take the basket out to the car – and these wraps – and this coffee – and the little nursery icebox with the milk bottles – and – ”

“Hold on! Hold on!” yelled Neale O’Neil. “What do you think I have – as many arms as a spider? I can’t do it all in one trip.”

“Well, you might make a beginning,” suggested Ruth. “Come, Aggie. Don’t moon there all day.”

“I’m not,” said her next youngest sister. “I’m thinking.”

“What’s the difference?” demanded Neale, filling his arms with several of the things indicated by Ruth and making for the door.

“I was thinking,” said Agnes, quite seriously for her, “what a difference *this* is from what we were before we came to Milton and the old Corner House to live.”

Neale had gone out. Ruth looked at her with softer eyes. Ruth was not exactly pretty, but she had a very sweet face. Everybody said so. Now she looked her understanding at Agnes.

“I know, dear – I know,” she said, in her low, full, sweet voice. “This is like another world.”

“Or a dream,” said Agnes. “Do – do you suppose we’ll ever wake up, Ruthie, and find out it’s all been make-believe?”

Ruth laughed outright at that and went over and kissed her. “Don’t let your imagination run away with you,” the older sister said. “It is all real – very real indeed. What could be more real than an automobile – and of our very own?”

Dot came dancing into the room hugging a doll in her arms and cheerfully humming a school song.

“There!” exclaimed Agnes, coming out of the clouds, “I suppose that disreputable Alice-doll has got to go along. It does look awful.”

Dot stopped her song at once and her lips pouted.

“She *isn’t* dis – disreput’ble – she *isn’t!*” she cried, stormily. “She’s only sick. How would *you* like it, Aggie Kenway, if you’d been buried alive —*and* with dried apples – and had had your complexion spoiled?”

Dot was usually the most peaceful of mortals; but Agnes had touched a sore spot.

“Never mind; you shall take her, love,” Ruth said.

“I suppose if we want to go off on a real tour by and by – this coming vacation – Dot’ll have to lug that Alice-doll,” grumbled Agnes. “Suppose we meet nice people at some of the hotels we stop at, and other little girls have dolls? Dot’s will look as though she came from Meadow Street.” Meadow Street was in a poor section of Milton.

“I don’t care,” grumbled Dot; “she’s going.”

“She ought to go a hospital first,” declared Agnes.

“Who ought to go to a hospital?” demanded Neale, coming in again.

“My Alice-doll, Neale,” cried Dot, running to him, sure of sympathy – of a kind, at least.

“Well,” said the boy, “why not? If folks go to hospitals and get cured, why not dolls?”

“Oh, Neale O’Neil!” gasped Dot, hugging her cherished doll closer.

“Just think how nice Mrs. Eland was to folks in her hospital,” went on Neale, his eyes twinkling. “And Doctor Forsyth. A hospital is a mighty fine place.”

“But – but what would they do to my Alice-doll?” asked the smallest girl, seriously.

“Suppose they should give her a new complexion? Make her quite well again? Wouldn’t that be worth while?”

Dot held the really dreadful looking doll away from her and gazed with loving eyes upon the wreck of her former pink and white beauty.

“She is just as – as *dear* to me as ever she was,” she sighed. “But I s’pose her complexion is muddy – and her nose is flattened a little – and her lips aren’t red any more – and her eyes are washed out. But – but are you sure they won’t hurt her?”

“We’ll have to find a hospital where they agree not to hurt,” said Neale seriously.

“*Now* you’ve got yourself in a mess, Neale O’Neil,” whispered Agnes. “She’ll never let you rest.”

But the boy only grinned at her. Tess came back. Ruth brought the hats of Agnes and herself and their outer wraps. Everything that they could possibly need for the day’s outing was gathered together and taken out to the big, shiny, seven-passenger touring car that stood gloriously in the morning sunshine before the Willow Street door of the old Corner House.

Tom Jonah, the old Newfoundland dog, and the guardian of the premises, evidently desired to accompany the merry party; but Ruth vetoed that, although he might have ridden in the front seat with Neale.

“And I’m going to ride there myself,” declared Agnes, firmly. “I’ve got to learn to run this car right away. If Neale could learn, and get a license, *I* can. By the way, Neale, where is your license?”

“Oh, I’ve got it with me,” returned the boy. “D’ you want me to have it pasted on the back of my coat?”

“Tom Jonah must stay at home – and the kittens, too,” said Tess, looking at the troop of cats and kittens lingering about the side porch, waiting for their morning meal.

“And Billy Bumps,” added Dot, referring to the solemn old goat grazing on the drying green.

Uncle Rufus, the black factotum of the Corner House, came up from the garden, grinning widely at them.

“Don’ yo’ chillun run down nothin’ – nor run *up* nothin’ – w’ile yo’ is gone. I dunno ‘bout dat contraption. Ah hopes yo’ git back widout more’n a dozen laigs broke.”

“Goodness, Uncle Rufus!” cried Agnes. “What do you think we are – centipedes?”

“Dunno nottin’ ‘bout dem ‘er,” declared the old colored man, chuckling. “Don’t hab center-pigs in Virginny, whar I done come from. Dey uses razorbacks fo’ de mos’ part in makin’ po’k.”

The car started amid a gale of laughter at this. Mrs. MacCall waved her cap from an open second story window. Some of the neighbors took a deep interest in their departure, too. It was certainly a fact that the Corner House girls had suddenly become of much importance since it was known that they had a car.

Ruth and the others looked up at Aunt Sarah Maltby’s windows at the front of the house as the car jounced delightfully across the tracks on Main Street. But the old lady kept her curtains drawn. She would not even look out at them.

They sped along so easily, the strong springs and shock-absorbers taking the jar at the crossings, that even Ruth sighed ecstatically. Agnes murmured:

“*This* is life. Oh, Neale! it’s the most delightful way to travel.”

“Is it better than riding horses in a circus, Neale?” demanded Tess, from the tonneau.

Neale laughed. He had been circus born and bred, and the little girls still believed that such a life must be one round of pleasure and excitement. They never could understand why Neale had run away from Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie.

Suddenly Agnes, the volatile, thought of another thing. "Oh, me! Oh, my!" she cried. "What ever should we do?"

"Goodness! what's the matter with you now?" demanded her older sister.

"Suppose our auto should be stolen like Mr. Collinger's!"

"Don't say that, Aggie!" wailed Tess.

"They couldn't steal our auto," declared Dot, with emphasis.

"Why not?" asked Neale, curiously.

"Cause Tom Jonah wouldn't let 'em," said the smallest girl.

"Then we should have brought Tom Jonah with us," Agnes said. "We'll have to let him watch the car all the time."

"Mr. Collinger's car was taken right away from the front of the County Court House. Those thieves were bold," said Ruth. "I heard Mr. Howbridge say that there was something behind that affair. He doubts if the car was stolen by any common thieves."

"Common or uncommon," cried Agnes, "we don't want ours stolen!"

"Better set a watch at the garage door at night," chuckled Neale.

They were out in the country now and had entered a smooth, but "woody," road that passed through a rather thick forest. The road was very narrow in places and there were only a few houses along the track for some miles.

Suddenly they sighted just ahead a basket phaeton and a brown, fat pony hitched to it. Neale slowed down quickly, for the turnout was standing still. The driver was a middle-aged woman with a good many fussy looking ribbons in her bonnet and otherwise dressed quite gaily. The fat brown pony was standing still, flicking flies with his tail and wagging his ears comfortably. He was in the very middle of the road and by no possibility could the car be steered around the turnout.

The woman looked around at the car and its passengers and her face displayed a most exasperated expression.

"I don't know what you'll do!" she cried, in a rather shrill voice. "I can't make him budge. He's been standing here this way for fifteen minutes, and sometimes he balks for hours!"

CHAPTER II – WHAT MRS. HEARD HEARD

“Can’t you back, Neale?” asked Ruth Kenway, doubtfully. “We really don’t want to stay here all day.”

“Or wait upon the pleasure of a ridiculous beast like that,” snapped Agnes, more than a little exasperated herself.

The woman looked around again. She had a pleasant face, and Tess smiled at her. Tess knew that the lady must feel a good deal worse than *they* did about it.

“You don’t know how ridiculous he is,” said the woman, hopelessly. “He may start any minute; then again he may stay here until he gets hungry. And he’s only just eaten his breakfast.”

“He looks as if he’d live as long without eating as a camel can go without drinking,” chuckled Neale O’Neil.

“It’s no laughing matter,” protested Agnes. “We want to get somewhere.”

“You can’t want to get somewhere worse than *I* do, my dear,” said the woman, with a sigh. “And only think! I have sat behind this pony *hours and hours* during the past ten years.”

“Can’t – can’t he be cured?” asked Tess, doubtfully.

“He’s a real pretty pony, *I* think,” said Dot.

“‘Handsome is as handsome does,’ Mrs. Mac would say,” Ruth declared. “Is there no way of turning, Neale?” she repeated.

“I don’t see how. We don’t want to scratch the car all up in those bushes and on those stumps. And if we back to where the road is wider we’ll have to back for half a mile.”

“A trolley car is lots better than an auto, then,” declared Dot, with conviction.

“Why, Dottie! how can you say that?” cried Tess, in utter disapproval.

“Cause if it gets stuck the motorman can go to the back end and run it just as well as at the front end,” said the smallest Corner House girl, promptly.

“Some kid that!” murmured Neale, while the others laughed. “Have you tried the whip, ma’am?” he asked of the woman in the basket phaeton.

“I’ve broken it on him,” confessed the woman, shaking her head. “He doesn’t even feel it. The flies bother him more than a whip. He is just the most tantalizing brute of a horse that ever was. Jonas! Get up!”

Jonas stood still. He merely flicked flies and wagged his ears. He was really the most peaceful animate object visible in the whole landscape.

The Corner House girls, since coming to Milton to live in the old dwelling that Uncle Peter Stower had left them at his death, had enjoyed many adventures, but few more ridiculous than this. Here they sat in their new, high-powered car, ready and anxious to spin over the country roads to their goal – a famous picnicking grounds fifty miles from Milton – and a little old fat brown pony, with a stubborn disposition and a cropped mane, held them up as certainly as though he had been a highway robber!

The four young Kenways – Ruth, Agnes, Tess and Dot – with Aunt Sarah Maltby (who really was only an “adopted” aunt) had been very poor indeed before Uncle Peter Stower had died and left the girls the bulk of his estate and a small legacy to Aunt Sarah.

Mr. Howbridge, the administrator of the estate and the girls’ guardian, had come to the Kenways’ poor tenement in the city where they lived, and had taken them to the old Corner House – quite an old mansion overlooking the Parade Ground in Milton, and supposed by some of the neighbors to be “haunted.”

How the girls laid the “garret ghost” and how they proved their right and title to Uncle Peter’s estate against the claims of a certain Mrs. Treble (known as “Mrs. Trouble” to the rather pert Agnes)

and her little girl, “Double-Trouble,” is told in the first volume of this series, entitled “The Corner House Girls.”

Afterward the little “Adamless Eden” on the corner of Willow and Main Streets is trespassed upon by a boy who has run away from a circus to get an education – Neale O’Neil. He proves to be a thoroughly likable boy, and even Ruth and Tess, who do not much approve of the opposite sex, are prone to like Neale.

In “The Corner House Girls at School” Neale becomes a fixture in the neighborhood, living with Mr. Con Murphy, the little old cobbler on the street back of the Stower place, and doing chores for the Corner House girls and other neighbors to help support himself while he attends school.

The girls extend their acquaintance widely during this first school year at Milton, and when summer comes they visit Pleasant Cove, where they befriend Rosa and June Wildwood, two Southern girls, and meanwhile have adventures galore along the shore. Indeed, “The Corner House Girls Under Canvas” introduces many new friends to both the girls themselves and to the reader, notable among whom is Tom Jonah, who, although only a dog, is a thorough gentleman.

The girls’ friendliness to all living creatures gathers about them, as is natural, a galaxy of pets, including a rapidly growing menagerie of cats, the dog in question, a goat, and (this is Agnes’ inclusion) Sammy Pinkney, the little boy who is determined to be a pirate when he grows up.

The fall following this summer vacation just mentioned, sees all the Corner House girls taking part in a play produced by the combined effort of the town schools. Their failures and successes in producing *The Carnation Countess* is interwoven with a mystery surrounding the punishment of Agnes and some of her fellow-classmates for an infraction of the rules – a punishment that promises at one time to spoil the play entirely. “The Corner House Girls in a Play” is interesting and it turns out happily in the end. One of the best things about it is the fact that three thousand dollars is raised by means of the play for the Women’s and Children’s Hospital, and Mrs. Eland, the matron, is able to retain her position in that institution.

Mrs. Eland and her sister, Miss Pepperill, who has been Tess Kenway’s school teacher, become very good friends of the Corner House girls. In the volume of the series immediately preceding this present narrative, entitled “The Corner House Girls’ Odd Find” the Kenways find an old, apparently worthless, album in the garret of the mansion – a treasure room which seems inexhaustible in its supply of mystery and amusing incidents.

This album seems to contain a lot of counterfeit money and bonds, which in the end prove to have been hidden in the Stower house by a miserly uncle of Mrs. Eland and Miss Pepperill, Mr. Lemuel Aden, who had died too suddenly to make a will or to tell of his hidden treasure – and the money and bonds are really perfectly good.

The four Kenway sisters, therefore, saw their friends, the hospital matron and the school teacher, made comfortably wealthy for life; and the beautiful, seven passenger touring car, with self-starter, “quick top,” and all the modern appurtenances of a good automobile, was the gift of the legatees of Mr. Lemuel Aden.

“But it might as well be a flivver,” said Agnes, in disgust, “if we’ve got to sit here all day and watch a fat brown pony whisk his tail.”

“I don’t see what I can do, my dear,” said the woman in the basket phaeton. “You can’t lead him, and you can’t push him, and I verily believe if you built a fire under him he’d just move up far enough to burn the cart, and stand there until his harness scorched him.”

Agnes giggled at that, and was her own jolly self again. “It’s up to you, Neale O’Neil,” she declared. “You’re the chauffeur and are supposed to make us go. Make us!”

“Get out and walk around the pony,” proposed Neale, grinning.

“And what about the car?”

“Do you think we could lift it over?” said Ruth, with scorn.

“Now, young man,” Agnes pursued, with gravity. “It is your duty to get us to Marchenell Grove. We’re still twenty-five or thirty miles away from it – ”

“My goodness!” exclaimed the lady in front. “Were you young folks going there?”

“We had an idea of doing so when we started, ma’am,” said Agnes, quickly.

“I should have gone there to-day, too – ”

“Not with that pony?” shrieked Agnes, clasping her hands.

“Why – no,” said the lady, smiling. “But if my nephew hadn’t lost his automobile he would have taken me. Oh, dear! Now I shall have to ride behind Jonas all the time.”

“You really don’t call this riding, do you, ma’am?” asked the irrepressible Agnes.

The woman laughed. She liked Agnes Kenway from the first, as almost everybody who met her did.

“I’m not riding fast just now, and that’s a fact,” she said, nodding her bonnet with its many bows. “Nor does Jonas take me over the roads very rapidly at his very best pace.”

Neale O’Neil had got slowly out of the car and now walked around to the head of the fat brown pony. The pony had blue eyes, and they were very mild. But he seemed to have no idea of going on and getting himself and his mistress out of the way of the automobile. Maybe he did not like automobiles.

“You see, my nephew bought a car and we let Jonas kick up his heels in the paddock. Oh! he’s lively enough when he wants to be – Jonas, I mean. But my nephew’s car was stolen day before yesterday – and he’s worried almost to death about it, poor man.”

“Oh!” cried Ruth, “who *is* your nephew, Madam?”

“Why, Philip Collinger is my nephew. He’s the county surveyor, you know. A very bright young man – if I do say it. But not bright enough to keep from having his auto stolen,” she added, ruefully.

Just then Agnes, who had been watching Neale O’Neil, called:

“What *are* you doing to that pony, Neale?”

The boy had rubbed the fat brown pony’s nose. He had lifted first one foot and then the other, going all around the pony to do so. He had patted his neck. Jonas had seemed rather to like these attentions. He still whisked flies calmly.

Now Neale reached over and took one of the pony’s ears in his hand, holding it firmly. To the other ear the boy put his lips and seemed to be whispering something privately to Jonas.

“What *are* you doing to that pony, Neale?” cried Agnes again.

“Mercy! what is the boy doing? Why, Jonas doesn’t pay any attention to me when I fairly yell at him. He’s deaf, I believe.”

And then the lady stopped, startled. The four Corner House girls all expressed their amazement with a united cry. Neale had taken the pony firmly by the bridle and was leading him quietly out of the middle of the road.

“For pity’s sake!” gasped the pony’s mistress, “I never saw the like of that before.”

Jonas seemed to have forgotten all about balking. He still wagged his ears to keep the flies away and whisked his tail industriously.

Neale, leading the pony, turned a corner in the lane, and there came upon a house. The lady had left the phaeton to speak to the girls more companionably. Neale tied the pony to the picket fence before the house, leaving the hitching strap long enough to allow the animal to graze.

“Well, I want to know!” cried the woman, when the boy returned to the car. “How did you do that? What did you do to Jonas to make him change his mind?”

“This is Mrs. Heard, Neale,” said Ruth, smiling. “You sometimes *do* prove to be a smart boy. What did you do to him?”

Neale grinned broadly. He had been used to horses all his life and he knew a few tricks of the Gypsies and the horse-traders.

“I just told him something,” the boy said.

“Oo-ee!” cried Tess. “Did you really whisper to him?”

Neale nodded.

“*What* did you whisper to the pony?” asked Dot, wide-eyed.

Agnes snapped, thinking Neale was fooling her: “I don’t believe it!”

“Yes, I whispered to him,” said the boy, seriously.

“Oh, Neale!” remonstrated Ruth.

“Well! For all I ever heard!” exclaimed Mrs. Heard. “What did you whisper to that vexatious brute of a pony?”

“If I told what it was, that would spoil the charm,” said Neale, gravely.

“Nonsense!” ejaculated Agnes, flushing.

“Now you know that is ridiculous,” said Ruth, inclined to be exasperated with the boy as much as she had been with the pony.

“No. It is a fact,” said the boy, decidedly.

“Now, you know that isn’t so, Neale O’Neil!” cried Agnes.

“I assure you it is. Anyway, they say if you tell it – what you say – to anybody else, the horse will balk again right away. It’s a secret between him and the person – ”

“I never heard such a ridiculous thing in all my life,” gasped Mrs. Heard.

“I think you are not very polite, Neale,” said Ruth, quite sternly.

“Now see here!” cried the badgered boy, getting rather vexed himself. “I tell you I can’t tell you – ”

“You’re talking anything but English,” complained Agnes.

“Well, maybe I didn’t talk English into the pony’s ear,” retorted Neale, grinning suddenly again. “Anyway, the old Gyp who taught me that trick told me I must never say the words aloud, or to anybody who would not make proper use of the magic formula.”

“Oh, shucks!” exclaimed Agnes, in disgust. “Tell me. I’ll try it on Billy Bumps when *he* balks,” said Tess, in a small voice.

At that they all laughed and Neale got in behind the steering wheel again. The two older girls were much interested in Mrs. Heard and that woman was evidently pleased with the sisters.

“Why, yes; I ought to know you Corner House girls. Goodness knows I’ve heard enough about you – and my name being Heard, I heard a lot!” and she laughed. “But you see, I live away on this side of town, and don’t go to your church; so we have never met before.”

“I am sure the loss has been ours,” said Ruth, politely. “I hope your pony will not balk again to-day.”

“Goodness knows! He’ll balk if he takes a notion to. I don’t suppose what you whispered to him is guaranteed to be a permanent cure, is it, boy?” she asked Neale O’Neil.

“No, ma’am,” grinned the boy.

“And you expected to go to Marchenell Grove to-day, Mrs. Heard?” Ruth said, reflectively, looking at Agnes enquiringly although she spoke to the mistress of the fat brown pony.

“I had thought to. Philly Collinger was going to take me. But if he doesn’t recover his car he’ll not take me auto riding very soon again.”

“Well,” said Ruth, having received a nod of acquiescence from Agnes, “I don’t see why you shouldn’t go there to-day just the same. Won’t you come with us? There’s room in the car.”

“Goody! Of course she can!” cried Agnes, clapping her hands.

“I think that would be real nice,” agreed Tess.

Dot moved over at once to make room. “She can sit beside me and the Alice-doll,” she proclaimed.

“Well, I declare!” exclaimed Mrs. Heard, her face alight with pleasure at this united invitation. “You are just the nicest girls I ever met. I wonder if I’d better?”

“Of course,” said Ruth. “You can find some place to leave the pony. Or Neale can, I’m sure.”

“Why, I know these people right in the very next house,” said Mrs. Heard. “Indeed I expected to call there if Jonas ever got that far.”

Neale got briskly out of the car again. “I’ll go and unharness him,” he said, cheerfully. “You just find out where I shall put him. He’d rather have you ride in an automobile than drag you himself,” and he laughed.

“Did – did he *tell* you so, Neale, when you were talking with him?” asked Dot, in amazement. Then they all laughed.

CHAPTER III – WHAT MRS. HEARD TOLD

In ten minutes the Kenway car was moving again. Jonas had been put up at the barn of Mrs. Heard's friends, near which the pony had balked, and Neale soon whisked them out of sight of the place.

"This – this is just delightful," sighed Mrs. Heard. "Especially after sitting behind that brute of a pony. I *do* love an automobile."

"So do I!" Agnes cried. "I'd rather ride in this car than in a golden chariot – I know I would."

"I don't know how they run chariots, nowadays," said Neale, chuckling; "whether by horse-power or gas. But sometimes a car balks, you know."

"Not so often as that Jonas," declared Mrs. Heard. "I've been out with my nephew a lot. His is a nice car. I hope he'll find it."

"Why, of course the thieves will be apprehended," said Ruth. "What good are the police?"

"When it comes to autos," said Neale, slyly, "the police are mostly good for stopping you and getting you fined."

"Well, don't *you* dare drive too fast and get us fined, Neale O'Neil," ordered Ruth, sternly.

"No, ma'am," he returned. But Agnes whispered in his ear:

"I don't care how fast you run it, Neale. I love to go fast."

"You'll be a speed fiend, Aggie," he declared. "That's what you'll be."

"Oh! I want to drive. I must learn."

"You'll have to ask Mr. Howbridge about that," Neale told her.

"Oh!"

"Yes, ma'am! He told me that I shouldn't allow anybody to run the car but a properly qualified person."

"You don't mean it?" gasped the eager girl.

"That's right! A person with a license."

"I can't believe it, Neale O'Neil!" wailed Agnes. "How am I ever going to learn, then?"

"You'll have to go to the garage as I did and take lessons."

Agnes pouted over this. Mrs. Heard, meanwhile, was saying to Ruth:

"Yes, the stealing of my nephew's auto was an outrage. Politics in this county are most disgraceful. If we women voted –"

"But, Mrs. Heard! what have politics to do with your nephew's auto being stolen?" cried Ruth.

"Oh! it wasn't any ordinary thief, or perhaps thieves, who took his car. He is sure of that. You see, there are some politicians who want the plans and maps of the new road surveys his office has been making."

"What sort of maps are those?" asked Tess, who was listening. "Like those we have to outline in the geography?"

"They are not like those, chicken," laughed Ruth. "They are outlines – drawings. They show the road levels and grades. I guess you don't understand. Don't you remember those men who came the other day and looked through instruments on our sidewalk and measured with a long tape line, and all that?"

"Oh, yes," confessed Tess. "I saw them."

"Well, they were surveyors. And they were working for Mr. Collinger, I suppose," said Ruth.

"Oh!"

"I saw them, too," proclaimed Dot. "I thought they were photo – photographers. I went out there and stood with my Alice-doll right in front of one of those things on the three sticks."

"You did?" cried Agnes, who heard this. "What for, Dottums?"

“To get our picture taken,” said Dot, gravely. “And then I asked the man when it would be done and if we could see a picture.”

“Ho, ho!” laughed Neale O’Neil. “What did he say?”

“Why,” confessed the smallest Corner House girl, indignantly, “he said I’d be grown up – and so would Alice – before that picture was enveloped – ”

“Developed!” cried Tess.

“No. Enveloped,” said Dot, stoutly. “You always get photograph proofs in an envelope.”

Ruth and Mrs. Heard were laughing heartily. Agnes said, admiringly:

“You’re a wonder, Dot! If there is a possible way of fumbling a thing, you do it.”

The little girls were not likely to understand all that Mrs. Heard said about the disappearance of Mr. Collinger’s automobile – no more than Dot understood about the surveyor’s transit. But they listened.

“You understand, Miss Ruth,” said the aunt of the county surveyor, “that Phil Collinger is responsible for all those tracings and maps that are being made in this road survey.

“If it gets out just what changes are to be made in grades and routes through the county before the commission renders its report, there is a chance for some of these ‘pauper politicians,’ as Philly calls them, to make money.”

“I don’t see how,” said Agnes, putting her oar in. “What good would the maps do even dishonest people?”

“Because with foreknowledge of the highway commission’s determinations, men could go and get options upon property adjoining the highways that will be changed, and either sell to the county at a big profit or hold abutting properties for the natural rise in land values that will follow.”

“I understand what an option is,” said Ruth. “It is a small sum which a man pays down on a place, with the privilege of buying it at a stated price within a given length of time.”

“You talk just like a judge, Ruthie,” giggled Agnes. “For my part I don’t understand it at all. But I’m sorry Mr. Collinger lost his car.”

“And it was stolen so boldly,” said Neale, shaking his head.

“But why did they steal the car, Mrs. Heard?” demanded Ruth, sticking to the main theme. “What has that to do with the surveyors’ maps?”

“Why,” said the lady, slowly, “they must have seen Philly come out of the court house and throw a package into the car. He covered it with a robe. They knew – or supposed they knew – that he carried the maps around with him. He could not even trust the safe in his office. It’s no better than a tin can and could be opened with a hammer and chisel.”

“Oh, my!” exclaimed Agnes, interested again. “So they stole the car to get the maps? Just like a moving picture play, isn’t it?”

“Maybe it is,” sighed the lady. “But it is quite serious for Philly – whether they got the maps or not.”

“Oh! *Didn’t* they?” cried Ruth.

“That – that he won’t say,” said Mrs. Heard, shaking her head. “I’m sure *I* don’t know. Philly Collinger can be just as close-mouthed as an oyster – and so I tell him.

“But everybody thinks the maps were in that package he put in the car before he ran across the street to get a bite of lunch. And I’m pretty sure that he isn’t worried all *that* much over the stealing of his car. Though goodness knows when he can ever afford to buy another. The salary of surveyor in this county isn’t a fortune.

“So, there it is,” said Mrs. Heard. “The car’s gone, and I guess the maps and data are gone with it. Somebody, of course, hired the two scamps that took it to do the trick – ”

“Oh, were there two?” asked Neale, who had been running the car slowly again in order to listen.

“Yes. They were seen; but nobody supposed they were stealing the car, of course.”

“What kind of men were they? How did they look?” asked Agnes.

“What do you want to know for, Miss Detective?” chuckled Neale.

“So as to be on the watch for them. If I see one of them about our car, I shall make a disturbance,” announced the beauty, with decision.

“I don’t know much about them,” admitted Mrs. Heard, laughing with the others over Agnes’ statement. “But one was a young man with a fancy band on his straw hat and yellow freckles on his face. I believe he had a little mustache. But he might shave that,” she added, reflectively.

“And change the band on his hat,” whispered Neale to Agnes, his eyes dancing.

“Never mind about his hat-band, Neale O’Neil!” cried Agnes, standing up suddenly in a most disconcerting way. “What *is* that ahead?”

Neale promptly shut off the power and braked. Agnes was greatly excited, and she pointed to a place in the road not many yards in advance.

The way was narrow, with rocky fields on either side approached by rather steep banks. Indeed, the road lay through what might well be called a ravine. It was the worst piece of road, too (so the guidebook, said), of any stretch between Milton and Marchenell Grove.

As the car stopped, Neale saw what Agnes had seen. Right across the way – directly in front of the automobile – lay something long and iridescent. It was moving.

“Oh!” shrieked Agnes again. “It’s a snake – a horrid, great, big snake!”

“Well, what under the sun did you make me stop for?” demanded the boy. “I’d have gone right over it.”

“That would have been cruel, boy,” declared Mrs. Heard, from behind.

“Cruel? Huh! It’s a rattler,” returned Neale.

“Oh, Neale! It’s never!” gasped Agnes, not meaning to be impolite.

“A rattler, Neale?” asked Ruth. “Are you sure?”

“What’s a rattler?” asked Dot, composedly. “Is it what they make baby’s rattles out of?”

“Mercy, no!” shivered Tess. “Neale means it’s a rattlesnake.”

“Oh! I don’t like *them*,” declared Dot, immediately picking up the Alice-doll, of which she always first thought in time of peril.

“What shall we do?” demanded Ruth.

“Can’t he drive around it?” asked Mrs. Heard, rather excitedly. “I don’t believe at all in hurting *any* dumb animal – not even a snake or a spider.”

“How about breaking the whip on old Jonas?” whispered Neale to Agnes.

But his girl friend was all of a shiver. “*Do* get around it, Neale,” she begged.

“Can’t. The road’s too narrow,” declared the boy, with promptness. “And I am bound to run over the thing if it doesn’t move out of the way. I can’t help it.”

“Wait!” cried Mrs. Heard. “Get out and poke it with a stick.”

“Why, Mrs. Heard!” exclaimed Ruth, “do you realize that a rattlesnake is deadly poison? I wouldn’t let Neale do such a thing.”

“Besides being a suffragist,” declared Mrs. Heard, firmly, “I am a professing and acting member of the S.P.C.A. I cannot look on and see a harmless beast – it is not doing anything to us – wantonly killed or injured.”

“Good-*night!*” murmured Neale.

Just then the snake – and it was a big fellow, all of six feet long – seemed to awaken. Perhaps it had been chilled by the coolness of the night before; it was lethargic, at any rate.

It lifted its head, whirled into the very middle of the road, and faced the automobile defiantly. In a moment it had coiled and sprung its rattle. The whirring sound, once heard, is never to be mistaken for any other.

“Oh, dear! what shall we do?” gasped Agnes. “If you try to run over it, it may get into the car – or something,” said Ruth.

The roadway was narrower here than it had been back where the brown pony had held the party up. This first trip in their automobile seemed to be fraught with much adventure for the Corner House girls and Neale O'Neil.

CHAPTER IV – SALERATUS JOE

Neale O'Neil knew very well that he could not satisfy everybody – least of all the rattlesnake.

Mrs. Heard did not want her S.P.C.A. sensibilities hurt; Agnes wanted him to drive on; Ruth wished him to dodge the coiled rattler. As for getting out and “coaxing it to move on” with a stick, Neale had no such intention.

He tried starting slowly to see if the serpent would be frightened and open the way for the passage of the car. But the rattler instantly coiled and sprang twice at the hood. The second time it sank its fangs into the left front tire.

“Cricky!” gasped Neale. “They say you swell all up when one of those things injects poison into you; but I don't believe that tire will swell any more than it is.”

“Don't make fun!” groaned Agnes. “Suppose it should jump into the car?”

“If we only had a gun,” began Neale.

“Well, I hope you haven't, young man,” cried Mrs. Heard. “I'm deadly afraid of firearms.”

“Don't get out of the car, Neale,” begged Agnes, clasping her hands.

“Try to back away from it,” suggested Ruth.

The smaller girls clung to each other (Dot determinedly to the Alice-doll, as well), and, although they did not say much, they were frightened. Tess whispered:

“Oh, dear me! I'm 'fraid enough of the wriggling fish-worms that Sammy digs in our garden. And this snake is a hundred times as big!”

“And fish-worms don't shoot people with their tongues, do they?” suggested Dot.

Just at that very moment, when the six-foot rattler had coiled to strike again, there was a rattling and jangling of tinware from up the road. There was a turn not far ahead, and the young folks could not see beyond it.

“Goodness me!” exploded Agnes, “what's coming now?”

“Not another rattlesnake, I bet a cent – though it's some rattling,” chuckled Neale O'Neil.

The heads of a pair of horses then appeared around the turn. They proved to be drawing a tin-peddler's wagon, and over this rough piece of driveway the wash-boilers, dishpans, kettles, pails, and a dozen other articles of tin and agate-ware, were making more noise than the passage of a battery of artillery.

Some scientists have pointed out that snakes – some snakes, at least – seem to be hard of hearing. That could not have been so with the big rattlesnake that had held up the Kenways and their automobile.

Before the Jewish peddler on the seat of the wagon could draw his willing horses to a halt, the snake swiftly uncoiled and wriggled across the road and into the bushes. All that was left to mark his recent presence was a wavy mark in the dust.

“Vat's the madder?” called the peddler. “Ain't dere room to ged by?”

“Sure,” said the relieved Neale. “Let me back a little and you pull out to the right, and we'll be all right. We were held up by a snake.”

The Jew (he was a little man with fiery hair and whiskers, and he had a narrow-brimmed derby hat jammed down upon his head), seemed to study over this answer of the boy for fully a minute. Then, as Neale was steering the automobile slowly past his rig, he leaned sidewise and asked, with a broad smile:

“I say, mister! Vat did you say stopped you?”

“A snake,” declared Neale, grinning.

“Oy, oy! And that it iss yedt to drive one of them so benzine carts? No! Mein horses iss petter. They are not afraid of snakes.”

He still sat, without starting his team, thinking the surprising matter over, when the automobile turned the curve in the road and struck better going.

“Well!” ejaculated Agnes, “I only hope he stays there till that snake comes out of the bushes again and climbs into his cart.”

“My! how disagreeable you can be,” returned Neale, laughing. “I don’t believe you’ll get your wish, however.”

“I’m glad we didn’t run over that snake,” declared Mrs. Heard, nodding her head. “I’m opposed to killing any dumb creature.”

“Then,” suggested Dot, earnestly, “you must be like Mr. Seneca Sprague.”

“Me? Like Seneca Sprague?” gasped the lady, yet rather amused. “I like that!”

“Why, how can that be, Dot?” asked Ruth, rather puzzled herself, for Seneca Sprague was a queer character who was thought by most Milton people to be a little crazy.

“Why, he’s a vegetablearian. And Mrs. Heard must be,” announced Dot, confidently, “if she doesn’t believe in killing dumb beasts.”

“There’s logic for you!” exclaimed Neale. “Score one for Dot.”

The lady laughed heartily. “I suppose I ought to be a ‘vegetablearian’ if I’m not,” she said. “I dunno as I could worship beasts the way some of the ancients did; but I don’t believe in killing them unnecessarily.”

“I know about some of the animal gods and goddesses the Greeks and Egyptians used to worship,” ventured Tess, who had not taken much part in the conversation of late. “Did any of them worship snakes, do you s’pose?”

“I believe some peoples did,” Ruth told her.

“Oh, I know about gods and goddesses,” cried Dot, eagerly. “Our teacher read about them – or, *some* of them – only yesterday, in school.”

“Well, Miss Know-it-all,” said Agnes, good-naturedly, “what did you learn about them?”

“I – I remember ‘bout one named Ceres,” said the smallest Corner House girl, with corrugated brow, trying to remember what she had heard read.

“Well, what about her?” asked Agnes, encouragingly.

“What was Ceres the goddess of, honey?” pursued Ruth, as Dot still hesitated.

“Why – why she was the goddess of dressmaking,” declared the child, with sudden conviction.

“Oh, oh, oh!” ejaculated Neale, under his breath.

“For goodness sake! where did you get *that* idea?” demanded Ruth, while Agnes and Mrs. Heard positively could not keep from laughing, and Tess looked at her smaller sister with something like horror. “Why – Dot Kenway!” she murmured.

“She is, too!” pouted Dot. “My teacher said so. She said Ceres was the goddess of ‘ripping and sewing.’ Now, isn’t that dressmaking?”

“Oh, cricky!” gasped Neale, and swerved the car to the left in his emotion.

“Do be careful, Neale!” squealed Agnes.

“Yes. You’ll have us into something,” warned Ruth.

“Then put ear-muffs on me,” groaned the boy. “That child will be the death of me yet. ‘Sowing and reaping’ – ‘ripping and sewing’ – wow!”

“Humph!” observed Agnes. “You needn’t be the death of *us* if she does say something funny. *Do* keep your mind on what you are about, Neale.”

But Neale O’Neil was a careful driver. He was a sober boy, anyway, and would never qualify in the joy-riding class, that was sure.

The remainder of the ride to Marchenell Grove was a jolly and enjoyable one. They all liked Mrs. Heard more and more as they became better acquainted with her. She seemed to know just how to get along with young folk, and despite her stated suffragist and S.P.C.A. proclivities, even Neale pronounced her “good fun.”

The Grove was a very popular resort, and very large. Perhaps it was just as well that Mrs. Heard was with the girls, for unexpectedly a situation developed during the day that might have been really unpleasant had not an older person – like the good and talkative lady – been with them.

There was a large party of picnickers that had come together and that made one end of the grounds very lively. There was an orchestra with them and they usurped the dancing pavilion. Not that Ruth or Agnes would have danced here; neither Mr. Howbridge nor Mrs. MacCall would have approved; nor did Mrs. Heard countenance dancing in such a public place. But after they had all been out in boats on the river, and had eaten their lunch, and enjoyed the swings, and strolled through the pleasant paths of the Grove, it was only natural that the two older Kenways should wish to see the dancing. They had no idea that the crowd about the pavilion was rowdyish.

Neale was busy with the car in preparation for their return to Milton. The little girls were watching him at work, and Mrs. Heard was resting in the car, too. So Ruth and Agnes went alone down to the pavilion.

“Dear me,” sighed Agnes. “I really wish we *could* have just one spin on the floor – just us two. That music makes my feet fairly *itch*.”

“You will have to possess your soul with patience – or else scratch your poor little feet,” laughed her sister. “To think of your wanting to dance *here*! I am afraid all these people – especially the boys – are not nice.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want to dance with *them*,” pouted Agnes. “Only with you. I just love to dance to this piece the orchestra is playing.”

“Save it till next week’s school dance,” laughed Ruth. “Oh!”

Her startled ejaculation was brought out by the appearance of a strange young man at her elbow. He was really not a nice looking fellow at all, his face was unpleasantly freckled, and the corners of his lips and the ends of the first three fingers of his right hand were stained deeply by the use of cigarettes.

“Aft’noon!” said this stranger, affably. “Want a whirl? The floor’s fine – come on in.”

Agnes, who was much more timid in reality than she usually appeared, shrank from the fellow, trying to draw Ruth with her.

“Let the kid wait for us,” suggested the freckled young man, leering good-naturedly enough at Agnes, and probably not at all aware that he was distasteful to the Kenway girls. “We can have one whirl.”

“I am much obliged to you,” Ruth said, rather falteringly. “I would rather not.”

“Aw, say – just a turn. Don’t throw me down,” said the fellow, his eyes becoming suddenly hard and the smile beginning to disappear from his face.

“No, thank you. Neither my sister nor I wish to dance here,” said Ruth, growing bolder – and more indignant.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know how to dance?” growled the freckled one.

“I don’t tell you anything, but that we do not wish to dance,” and Ruth tried to turn away from him.

The fellow stepped directly in their path. They were just on the fringe of loiterers about the pavilion. Agnes clapped a hand upon her lips to keep from screaming.

“Aw, come on,” said the fellow, laying a detaining hand upon Ruth’s arm.

Then something very unexpected, but very welcome, happened. Mrs. Heard, seeing a hand’s breadth of cloud in the sky and fearing a thunder storm, had sent Neale O’Neil scurrying for the girls. He came to the spot before this affair could go any farther.

“Hullo!” he exclaimed, sharply. “What’s this?”

“This – this gentleman,” said Ruth, faintly, “offers to dance with me, but I tell him ‘no.’”

“What are *you* butting in for, kid?” demanded the freckled young fellow, thrusting his jaw forward in an ugly manner. But he took his hand from Ruth’s arm.

Neale said to the girls, quite quietly though his eyes flashed:

“Mrs. Heard wants you to come back to the car at once. Please hurry.”

“Say! I don’t get you,” began the rough again.

“You will in a moment,” Neale shot at him. “Go away, girls!”

Agnes did not want to go now; but Ruth saw it would be better and she fairly dragged her sister away.

“Neale will be hurt!” moaned Agnes, all the way to the car. “That awful rowdy has friends, of course.”

What really happened to Neale the girls never knew, for he would not talk about it. Trained from his very babyhood as an acrobat, the ex-circus boy would be able to give a good account of himself if it came to fisticuffs with the freckled-faced fellow. Although the latter was considerably older and taller than Neale, the way he had lived had not hardened his muscles and made him quick of eye and foot or handy with his fists.

Perhaps Neale did not fight at all. At least he came back to the car without a mark upon him and without even having had his clothes ruffled. All he said in answer to the excited questions of the girls was:

“That’s a fellow called Saleratus Joe. You can tell why – his face with all those yellow freckles looks like an old fashioned saleratus biscuit. He belongs in Milton. I’ve seen him before. He isn’t much better than a saloon lounge.”

“Goodness me!” exclaimed Mrs. Heard. “Saleratus Joe is one of the fellows who my nephew thinks stole his automobile. I must tell him that we saw the fellow. Perhaps the car can be traced after all.”

“Through Saleratus Joe?” said Neale O’Neil. “Well – maybe.”

CHAPTER V – DOT’S AWFUL ADVENTURE

Altogether that first run in their automobile was pronounced a jolly success by the Corner House girls. The return journey from Marchenell Grove was without incident.

“If we had only become acquainted with Mrs. Heard the trip would have been more than worth while,” declared Ruth, who was seldom as enthusiastic about a new acquaintance as she was about the aunt of the county surveyor. “She is coming to see us soon.”

Agnes was more interested in another thing, and she confided in Neale.

“Do you really suppose, Neale,” she asked, “that the awful fellow who spoke to Ruth is one of those who stole Mr. Collinger’s auto?”

“Saleratus Joe?” chuckled the boy.

“Hasn’t he any other name? It sounds like – like the Wild West in the movies, or something like that.”

“They only call him that for fun,” explained Neale O’Neil. “And whether he helped get away with the surveyor’s machine or not, I’m sure I don’t know.”

“But can’t you *guess*?” cried Agnes, in exasperation.

“What’s the use of guessing?” returned her boy chum. “That won’t get you anywhere. You’re a poor detective, Aggie.”

“Don’t make fun,” complained Agnes, who was very much excited about the automobile robbery. They had just got their car, and she had longed for it so deeply that she was beginning to be worried for fear something would happen to it.

“Shut Tom Jonah into the garage at night,” Neale suggested. “I warrant no thieves will take it.”

Mr. Howbridge, while he was about it, had had a cement block garage built on the rear of the Stower premises facing Willow Street, for the housing of the Corner House girls’ motor car.

“Mr. Collinger’s auto was stolen right on the street,” said Agnes, doubtfully.

“That’s the worst of these flivvers,” retorted Neale, with a grin. “People are apt to come along and pick ’em up absent-mindedly and go off with them. Say! have you heard the latest?”

“What about?” asked Agnes, dreamily.

“About the flivver. Do you know what the chickens say when one of ’em goes by?”

“No,” declared the girl.

“Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!” mimicked the boy.

Agnes giggled. Then she said: “But Mr. Collinger’s wasn’t one of those cheap cars. It *was* a runabout; but it cost him a lot of money.”

“But that freckled-faced young man, Neale —*do* you suppose he could be the one Mrs. Heard said was seen driving the stolen car away from the court house?”

“Why, how should *I* know?” demanded Neale. “I’m no seventh son of a seventh son.”

“I wish we had seen a constable out there in the grove and had had him arrested.”

“What for? On what charge?” cried Neale, wonderingly.

“Why, because he spoke to Ruth and me. Then he could be held while his record was looked up. Maybe Mr. Collinger could have recovered his car by that means.”

“Cricky!” ejaculated the boy. “You’ve been reading the police court reports in the newspapers, I believe, Aggie.”

“Well! that’s what they do,” declared the girl, confidently.

“Maybe so. But you couldn’t have had the fellow arrested for speaking to you. You shouldn’t have been around the dance floor if you wanted to escape that. But, perhaps that freckled rascal *is* one of the thieves, and maybe he can be traced. Mrs. Heard will tell her nephew and he will attend to it – no fear!”

“But it would be just great, Neale, if we could do something toward recovering the car and getting the thieves arrested,” said Agnes who, as Neale often said, if she went into a thing, went into it all over!

They had not much time just then, however, to give to the mystery of the county surveyor’s lost automobile. Final examinations were coming on and the closing of school would be the next week but one.

Even Dot was busy with school work, although she was not very far advanced in her studies; and during these last few days she was released from her classes in the afternoon earlier than the other Corner House girls.

Sometimes she walked toward Meadow Street, which was across town from the Corner House and in a poorer section of Milton, with some of her little school friends before coming home; and so she almost always met Sammy Pinkney loafing along Willow Street on returning.

Sammy did not go to school this term. Scarlet fever had left this would-be pirate so weak and pale that the physician had advised nothing but out-of-doors for him until autumn.

Sammy, in some ways, was a changed boy since his serious illness. He was much thinner and less robust looking, of course; but the changes in him were not all of a physical nature. For one thing, he was not so rough with his near-neighbors, the Corner House girls. They had been very kind to him while he was ill, and his mother was always singing their praises. Besides, the other boys being in school, Sammy was lonely and was only too glad as a usual thing to have even Dot to talk to or play with.

Dot was a little afraid of Sammy, even now, because of his past well-won reputation. And, too, his reiterated desire to be a pirate cast a glamor over his character that impressed the smallest Corner House girl.

One day she met him on Willow Street, some distance from the old Corner House. He was idly watching a man across the street who was moving along the sidewalk in a very odd way indeed.

The Kenways had lived in a very poor part of Bloomingsburg before coming to Milton, and there had been saloons in the neighborhood; but Dot had been very small, and if she had seen such a thing as an intoxicated man she had forgotten it. Near the Corner House there were no saloons, although the city of Milton licensed many of those places. Dot had not before seen a man under the influence of liquor.

This unfortunate was not a poorly dressed man. Indeed, he was rather well appareled and normally might have been a very respectable citizen. But he was staggering from side to side of the walk, his head hanging and his stiff derby hat – by some remarkable power – sticking to his head, although it threatened to fall off at every jerk.

“Why – ee!” gasped the smallest Corner House girl, “what ever is the matter with that poor man, Sammy Pinkney, do you suppose?”

Sammy, trying to wrap his limbs about a fire-plug in emulation of a boa-constrictor, jerked out: “Brick in his hat!”

“Oh! *What?*” murmured the puzzled Dot, eyeing the poor man wonderingly and clasping the Alice-doll closer.

Sammy grinned. He was a tantalizing urchin and loved to mystify the innocent Dot.

“He’s carrying a brick in his hat,” he repeated, with daring.

“Why – why – Doesn’t he *know* it?” demanded the little girl.

“I guess nobody’s told him yet,” chuckled Sammy.

At that moment the intoxicated man just caught his hat from tumbling off by striking it with the palm of one hand and so settling it well down upon his ears again.

“Oh, my!” murmured the startled Dot. “It came pretty near falling out, didn’t it?”

“He, he!” snickered Sammy.

“Do you suppose he *wants* to carry that brick in his hat?” asked Dot, seriously. “I shouldn’t think he would.”

“He don’t know he’s got it,” said Sammy.

“Why doesn’t somebody tell him?” demanded Dot. “The poor man! He’ll surely fall down.”

Sammy still snickered. Somebody should have spanked Sammy, right then and there!

“I don’t care!” exclaimed Dot, more and more disturbed, “it doesn’t seem nice – not at all. I think you ought to tell him, Sammy.”

“Not me!”

“Well – ” Dot looked all around. There was nobody else in sight just then. Willow Street was quite deserted.

“If you won’t, then I must,” declared the little girl, shouldering the obligation pluckily and starting across the street.

“Aw, Dot! Let him alone,” muttered Sammy.

The young rascal was suddenly startled. He began to wonder what would happen to him if his mother learned that he had been trying to fool Dot Kenway in any such way as this.

“Come back!” he called after her.

“Sha’n’t!” declared Dot, who could be stubborn when she wanted to be.

“Say! that man won’t listen to you,” insisted Sammy.

Dot kept right on. The man had halted, and was clinging to a tree box, his head hanging down. His face was very much flushed and his eyes were glassy.

“But I s’pose,” thought Dot, “if *I* was carrying a brick in my hat it would make *me* sick, too.”

“Mister!” she said to the man, stopping in the gutter and looking up at him.

“Huh? What’s matter?” asked the man. His head jerked up and he looked all around to see who had spoken to him.

“Mister,” said Dot, earnestly, “I – I hope you’ll ‘scuse me, but there’s a brick in your hat. Sammy Pinkney says so. And I think if you take it out you’ll feel ever so much better.”

Sammy heard her. He actually grew pale, and, casting a startled glance around him, he ran. He ran all the way home, for he could not imagine what the man would say or do to Dot. Sammy was not a very brave boy.

The unfortunate man looked down at Dot, finally having discovered her whereabouts, with preternatural gravity.

“Say – little girl – say that ‘gain, will you?” he said, slowly.

Dot quite innocently repeated it. The man carefully removed his hat and looked into it. Then he turned it over and shook it. Nothing, of course, fell to the ground.

“‘Tisn’t there. You fooled yourself. I thought so,” muttered the man.

And then he leaned so far over that he dropped the hat in the gutter.

“You must be dreadful sick,” Dot said to him, her little heart touched by his appearance.

“Yes – that’s it. Sick. That’s it,” he mumbled.

This was a really awful adventure for little Dot Kenway.

“I’m going to get you a glass of water,” she said. “Your face is so red. You *are* sick, I can see.”

He said nothing, but blinked at her. Perhaps he did not at first quite understand. Dot turned to cross the street toward the store on the corner. Then she turned back.

“Will you please hold my Alice-doll while I go for the water?” she asked the man. “Do be very careful with her – please.”

“Sure!” said the man, good-naturedly.

“You’ll truly, truly be very careful of her?”

“Sure will,” repeated the unfortunate.

So, after she had placed the doll carefully in his arms, the little girl tripped away on her errand of mercy. The man sat down on the curb and held it. It might have been a laughable situation – only no thinking person could have laughed.

The man nursed the doll as tenderly as Dot would have done herself. He rocked to and fro on the curb, hugging the battered doll and looking down at it earnestly.

Nobody had yet noticed the incident – save Sammy Pinkney; and Sammy Pinkney had run away.

Dot was bold in the cause of any one in need, if she was not bold for herself. She asked for the glass of cold water and obtained it. She brought it carefully back to the man on the curbstone, holding the glass in both her dimpled hands.

His face was still very red, but his eyes were no longer glassy. He looked at the child with a shamed expression slowly dawning in his countenance, and his eyes were moist with tears.

“You’d better take your doll, little girl, and get away from me,” he said, but not roughly.

“Oh, no,” said Dot, determinedly. “I must help you. I know you must be very sick. You ought to see our Dr. Forsyth. He could make you well quick, I know.”

“I guess *you* can cure me as quickly as a doctor,” said the man, hanging his head. “I – I had a little girl like you once.”

“Now drink some of this,” urged Dot, without noticing the man’s last remark, and offering the glass of water.

He took it in a trembling hand and raised it to his lips. The little girl reached for the Alice-doll, but watched him carefully.

“Don’t spill it,” she said, “and don’t drink it all. I think if I put some on your face you’d feel better.”

Immediately she produced a diminutive handkerchief, folded just as it had been ironed, and when she took back the glass, she dipped the bit of muslin in the water remaining in it.

Then with tender hand she wiped his hot face; and she wiped away two big tears, too, that started down his cheeks. She was still engaged in thus playing the Good Samaritan when a swiftly moving motor car coming through Willow Street was suddenly brought to a stop beside them.

There was a thin, wiry fellow at the steering wheel. The goggles he wore half disguised him. In the tonneau sat a fat, prosperous looking man smoking a big, black cigar.

“That’s him, ain’t it, Joe?” asked the fat man, nodding toward the man sitting on the curbstone.

“Yep. That’s him,” rejoined the chauffeur.

“Hey, Mr. Maynard!” exclaimed the fat man. “Get up and get in here. I want to talk to you.”

The fast sobering man looked up, saw the speaker, and did not look particularly pleased. He tried to rise. Although his brain was fast clearing, his limbs were still wobbly.

“Get out and boost him in here,” said the fat man, in a low tone to the chauffeur.

The latter hopped out. He came quickly to the aid of Mr. Maynard, and pushed little Dot Kenway rudely aside. The man still held the doll.

“Say! you don’t want that thing!” muttered the chauffeur, and he seized the doll and flung it disdainfully upon the ground.

Dot uttered a scream of terror. At that moment Agnes and Neale O’Neil, the latter carrying the girl’s schoolbooks, came around the corner.

CHAPTER VI – THE BIG TOUR IS PLANNED

Mr. Maynard, as the fat man had called Dot's new acquaintance, grumbled something or other at the chauffeur because of his treatment of the Alice-doll; but he was not yet quite himself and the fellow merely laughed and urged Maynard toward the car. The fat man laughed, too.

"Come on, Mr. Maynard. We'll take you home," said the big man, holding open the door of the tonneau.

Just as Neale O'Neil and Agnes reached the spot, the chauffeur pushed Maynard in and stepped quickly into his own place.

"Say! what did you do to this little girl?" demanded Neale, with some heat, addressing the chauffeur.

The fellow did not answer; neither did the big man; and Maynard had tumbled into a seat without a word. Dot had already picked up her doll; it was not hurt. The car started and rolled away.

"The mean thing!" exclaimed Neale. "Don't cry, Dot."

"I – I'm not going to," sobbed the smallest Corner House girl. "I don't b'lieve they'll be kind to that man. He's awful sick."

"Who is?" asked Neale quickly, exchanging glances with Agnes.

"That man they took away. I got him a drink of water. But Sammy Pinkney told a story 'bout him."

"What did Sammy say?" asked Agnes, but her attention scarcely on what Dot was saying.

The little girl told her. "But he was sick. I know it. I got him a drink of water. He wasn't carrying a brick at all."

Neale had grinned faintly; but his face was quickly sober again.

"I know who that Mr. Maynard is," he said. "He used to work in the court house. I believe he was in Mr. Collinger's office – and he was a real nice man once."

"Why, he is now," cried Dot, listening with very sharp ears. "Only he is sick."

"Perhaps you are right, Dottie," agreed Neale, still gravely, but speaking to Agnes. "Anyhow, he lost his wife and then his little girl. He's gone all to pieces, they say. It's an awfully sad case. And do you know who that big man is?"

"No," said Agnes, still unnoticing and gazing after the disappearing car.

"That's Jim Brady. He's a ward leader on the other side of town. He's very powerful in politics –"

"Oh, Neale!" cried Agnes, suddenly, seizing her friend's arm.

"Hul-lo! What's the matter?" asked Neale.

"Do you know who that fellow was that drove the car? Did you see him?"

"No-o. I didn't notice him much. He had dust goggles on –"

"I know! I know!" cried the excited girl. "They concealed his face a good deal. But I saw the freckles."

"The freckles?" repeated Neale, wonderingly.

"Yes. Of course. It was that freckled fellow who spoke to Ruth that day."

"Not Joe Dawson?" cried the boy.

"Yes. If that's his real name. Oh, Neale! Let's have him arrested."

"Cricky!" ejaculated the surprised youth. "Arrest your aunt!"

Agnes burst out laughing at that – serious as she was. "Aunt Sarah Maltby certainly did not steal Mr. Collinger's motor car," she said.

"Well. We don't know that Saleratus Joe did," grinned Neale. "Come on home. Don't cry any more, Dot. Just the same I would like to punch that fellow who threw down your doll."

"Can't we find out who he is – all about him?" demanded Agnes.

“Maybe. That Mr. Maynard knows him, I s’pose. I could ask him. I used to clean Mr. Maynard’s yard and sidewalks for him. I’ll see,” promised Neale O’Neil.

When the trio reached the Corner House that day, however, they found a subject afoot that put out of Neale’s and Agnes’ minds for the time being all thought of the stealing of Mr. Collinger’s car. And yet the county surveyor’s aunt had something to do with this very interesting topic under discussion.

Mrs. Heard was present, having a neighborly cup of tea with Mrs. MacCall, who was quite as much a friend of the family as she was housekeeper. Mr. Howbridge had chanced to drop in as well, and Ruth had arrived home ahead of the other Corner House girls.

“Oh, Aggie!” cried Ruth, running out of the sitting room where tea was being served, Uncle Rufus having rolled the service table in there at Mrs. MacCall’s request. “Just guess!”

“Going to have rice waffles for supper,” put in Neale, with a cheerful grin.

“That boy!” said the oldest girl, scornfully.

“What *has* happened?” demanded Agnes, excitedly. Ruth was seldom given to exuberance of speech or action, and she was plainly stirred up now.

“He says we can do it!”

“Huh?” grunted Neale, staring.

“Who says we can do what?” demanded Agnes, her blue eyes almost as wide as saucers. “How you talk, Ruth Kenway!”

“It will be most delightful, I am sure,” said the older girl, more composedly. “We shall all enjoy it. And Mrs. Heard has agreed to act as chaperone, for Mrs. MacCall *can’t* go, and you know how Aunt Sarah Maltby feels about the auto.”

“Oh! I see,” grumbled Neale. “A glimmer of intelligence reaches my brain. You are talking about the trip in the auto after school closes.”

“Is that it?” cried Agnes, clasping her hands. “Oh, Ruthie!”

“That is it, my dear! Mr. Howbridge just spoke about it himself. He has known Mrs. Heard for years, you see, and he thinks she would be just the nicest person in the world to go with us.”

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