

Hill Grace Brooks

The Corner House Girls Among the Gypsies



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Содержание

CHAPTER I – THE FRETTED SILVER BRACELET	5
CHAPTER II – A PROFOUND MYSTERY	9
CHAPTER III – SAMMY PINKNEY IN TROUBLE	13
CHAPTER IV – THE GYPSY TRAIL	16
CHAPTER V – SAMMY OCCASIONS MUCH EXCITEMENT	19
CHAPTER VI – THE GYPSY'S WORDS	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	25

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The Corner House Girls Among the Gypsies / How They Met, What Happened, and How It Ended

CHAPTER I – THE FRETTED SILVER BRACELET

If Sammy Pinkney had not been determined to play a “joey” and hooked back one of the garage doors so as to enter astride a broomstick with a dash and the usual clown announcement, “Here we are again!” all would not have happened that did happen to the Corner House girls – at least, not in just the way the events really occurred.

Even Dot, who was inclined to be forgiving of most of Sammy’s sins both of omission and commission, admitted that to be true. Tess, the next oldest Corner House girl (nobody ever dignified her with the name of “Theresa,” unless it were Aunt Sarah Maltby) was inclined to reflect the opinion regarding most boys held by their oldest sister, Ruth. Tess’s frank statement to this day is that it was entirely Sammy’s fault that they were mixed up with the Gypsies at all.

But —

“Well, if I’m going to be in your old circus,” Sammy announced doggedly, “I’m going to be a joey – or *nothin’*.”

“You know very well, Sammy, that you can’t be that,” said Tess reprovingly.

“Huh? Why can’t I? I bet I’d make just as good a clown as Mr. Sully Sorber, who is Neale’s half-uncle, or Mr. Asa Scruggs, who is Barnabetta’s father.”

“I don’t mean you can’t be a clown,” interrupted Tess. “I mean you can’t be just *nothing*. You occupy space, so you must be something. Our teacher says so.”

“Shucks!” ejaculated Sammy Pinkney. “Don’t I know that? And I wish you wouldn’t talk about school. Why! we’re only in the middle of our vacation, I should hope.”

“It seems such a long time since we went to school,” murmured Dot, who was sitting by, nursing the Alice-doll in her arms and waiting her turn to be called into the circus ring, which was the cleared space in the middle of the cement floor.

“That’s because all you folks went off cruising on that houseboat and never took me with you,” grumbled Sammy, who still held a deep-seated grouch because of the matter mentioned. “But ’tain’t been long since school closed – and it isn’t going to be long before the old thing opens again.”

“Why, Sammy!” admonished Tess.

“I just *hate* school, so I do!” vigorously announced the boy. “I’d rather be a tramp – or a Gypsy. Yes, I would.”

“Or a pirate, Sammy?” suggested Dot reflectively. “You know, me and you didn’t have a very nice time when we went off to be pirates. ’Member?”

“Huh!” grumbled Sammy, “that was because you was along. Girls can’t be pirates worth shucks. And anyway,” he concluded, “I’m going to be the joey in this show, or I won’t play.”

“It will be supper time and the others will be back with the car, so none of us can play if we don’t start in pretty soon,” Tess observed. “Dot and I want to practice our gym work that Neale O’Neil has been teaching us. But you can clown it all you want to, Sammy.”

“Well, that lets me begin the show anyway,” Sammy stated with satisfaction.

He always did want to lead. And now he immediately ran to hook back the door and prepared to make his entrance into the ring in true clowning style, as he had seen Sully Sorber do in Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie.

The Kenway garage opened upon Willow Street and along that pleasantly shaded and quiet thoroughfare just at this time came three rather odd looking people. Two were women carrying brightly stained baskets of divers shapes, and one of these women – usually the younger one – went into the yard of each house and knocked at the side or back door, offering the baskets for sale.

The younger one was black-eyed and rather pretty. She was neatly dressed in very bright colors and wore a deal of gaudy jewelry. The older woman was not so attractive – or so clean.

Loitering on the other side of the street, and keeping some distance behind the Gypsy women, slouched a tall, roughly clad fellow who was evidently their escort. The women came to the Kenway garage some time after Sammy Pinkney had made his famous “entrance” and Dot had abandoned the Alice-doll while she did several handsprings on the mattress that Tess had laid down. Dot did these very well indeed. Neale O'Neil, who had been trained in the circus, had given both the smaller Corner House girls the benefit of his advice and training. They loved athletic exercises. Mrs. McCall, the Corner House housekeeper, declared Tess and Dot were as active as grasshoppers.

The two dark-faced women, as they peered in at the open doorway of the garage, seemed to think Dot's handsprings were marvelously well done, too; they whispered together excitedly and then the older one slyly beckoned the big Gypsy man across the street to approach.

When he arrived to look over the women's heads it was Tess who was actively engaged on the garage floor. She was as supple as an eel. Of course, Tess Kenway would not like to be compared to an eel; but she was proud of her ability to “wriggle into a bow knot and out again” – as Sammy vociferously announced.

“Say, Tess! that's a peach of a trick,” declared the boy with enthusiasm. “Say! Lemme – Huh! What do *you* want?” For suddenly he saw the two Gypsy women at the door of the garage. The man was now out of sight.

“Ah-h!” whined the old woman cunningly, “will not the young master and the pretty little ladies buy a nice basket of the poor Gypsy? Good fortune goes with it.”

“Gee! who wants to buy a basket?” scoffed Sammy. “You only have to carry things in it.” The bane of Sammy Pinkney's existence was the running of errands.

“But they *are* pretty,” murmured Tess.

“Oh – oo! See that nice green and yellow one with the cover,” gasped Dot. “Do you suppose we've got money enough to buy that one, Tess? How nice it would be to carry the children's clothes in when we go on picnics.”

By “children” Dot meant their dolls, of which, the two smaller Corner House girls possessed a very large number. Several of these children, besides the Alice-doll, were grouped upon a bench in the corner of the garage as a part of the circus audience. The remainder of the spectators were Sandyface and her family. Sandyface was now a great, *great* grandmother cat, and more of her progeny than one would care to catalog tranquilly viewed the little girls' circus or rolled in kittenish frolic on the floor.

It sometimes did seem as though the old Corner House demesne was quite given up to feline inhabitants. And the recurrent appearance of new litters of kittens belonging to Sandyface herself, her daughters and granddaughters, had ceased to make even a ripple in the pool of Corner House existence.

This explanation regarding the dolls and cats is really aside from our narrative. Tess and Dot both viewed with eager eyes the particular covered basket held out enticingly by the old Gypsy woman.

Of course the little girls had no pockets in their gymnasium suits. But in a pocket of her raincoat which Tess had worn down to the garage over her blouse and bloomers, she found a dime and two pennies – “just enough for two ice-cream cones,” Sammy Pinkey observed.

“Oh! And my Alice-doll has eight cents in her cunning little beaded bag,” cried Dot, with sudden animation.

She produced the coins. But there was only twenty cents in all!

“I – I – What do you ask for that basket, please?” Tess questioned cautiously.

“Won’t the pretty little ladies give the poor old Gypsy woman half a dollar for the basket?”

The little girls lost hope. They were not allowed to break into their banks for any purpose without asking Ruth’s permission, and their monthly stipend of pocket money was very low.

“It is a very nice basket, little ladies,” said the younger Gypsy woman – she who was so gayly dressed and gaudily bejeweled.

“I know,” Tess admitted wistfully. “But if we haven’t so much money, how can we buy it?”

“Say!” interrupted the amateur joey, hands in pockets and viewing the controversy quite as an outsider. “Say, Tess! if you and Dot really want that old basket, I’ve got two-bits I’ll lend you.”

“Oh, Sammy!” gasped Dot. “A whole quarter?”

“Have you got it here with you?” Tess asked.

“Yep,” announced the boy.

“I don’t think Ruth would mind our borrowing twenty-five cents of you, Sammy,” said Tess, slowly.

“Of course not,” urged Dot. “Why, Sammy is just like one of the family.”

“Only when you girls go off cruising, I ain’t,” observed Sammy, his face clouding with remembrance. “*Then* I ain’t even a step-child.”

But he produced the quarter and offered it to Tess. She counted it with the money already in her hand.

“But – but that makes only forty-five cents,” she said.

The two Gypsy women spoke hissing to each other in a tongue that the children did not, of course, understand. Then the older woman thrust the basket out again.

“Take!” she said. “Take for forty-fi’ cents, eh? The little ladies can have.”

“Go ahead,” Sammy said as Tess hesitated. “That’s all the old basket is worth. I can get one bigger than that at the chain store for seven cents.”

“Oh, Sammy, it isn’t as bee-*you*-tiful as this!” gasped Dot.

“Well, it’s a basket just the same.”

Tess put the silver and pennies in the old woman’s clawlike hand and the longed-for basket came into her possession.

“It is a good-fortune basket, pretty little ladies,” repeated the old Gypsy, grinning at them toothlessly. “You are honest little ladies, I can see. You would never cheat the old Gypsy, would you? This is all the money you have to pay for the beautiful basket? Forty-fi’ cents?”

“Aw, say!” grumbled Sammy, “a bargain is a bargain, ain’t it? And forty-five cents is a good deal of money.”

“If – if you think we ought to pay more – ”

Tess held the basket out hesitatingly. Dot fairly squealed:

“Don’t be a ninny, Tessie Kenway! It’s ours now.”

“The basket is yours, little ladies,” croaked the crone as the younger woman pulled sharply at her shawl. “But good fortune goes with it only if you are honest with the poor old Gypsy. Good-bye.”

The two strange women hurried away. Sammy lounged to the door, hands in pockets, to look after them. He caught a momentary glimpse of the tall Gypsy man disappearing around a corner. The two women quickly followed him.

“Oh, what a lovely basket!” Dot was saying.

“I – I hope Ruth won’t scold because we borrowed that quarter of Sammy,” murmured Tess.

“Shucks!” exclaimed their boy friend. “Don’t tell her. You can pay me when you get some more money.”

“Oh, no!” Tess said. “I would not hide anything from Ruth.”

“You couldn’t, anyway,” said the practical Dot. “She will want to know where we got the money to pay for the basket. Oh, *do* open it, Tess. Isn’t it lovely?”

The cover worked on a very ingeniously contrived hinge. Had the children known much about such things they must have seen that the basket was worth much more than the price they had paid for it – much more indeed than the price the Gypsies had first asked.

Tess lifted the cover. Dot crowded nearer to look in. The shadows of the little girls’ heads at first hid the bottom of the basket. Then both saw something gleaming dully there. Tess and Dot cried out in unison; but it was the latter’s brown hand that darted into the basket and brought forth the bracelet.

“A silver bracelet!” Tess gasped.

“Oh, look at it!” cried Dot. “Did you *ever*? Do you s’pose it’s real silver, Tess?”

“Of course it is,” replied her sister, taking the circlet in her own hand. “How pretty! It’s all engraved with fret-work – ”

“Hey!” ejaculated Sammy coming closer. “What’s that?”

“Oh, Sammy! A silver bracelet – all fretted, too,” exclaimed the highly excited Dot.

“Huh! What’s that? ‘Fretted’? When my mother’s fretted she’s – Say! how can a silver bracelet be cross, I want to know?”

“Oh, Sammy,” Tess suddenly ejaculated, “these Gypsy women will be cross enough when they miss this bracelet!”

“Oh! Oh!” wailed Dot. “Maybe they’ll come back and want to take it and the pretty basket, Tess. Let’s run and hide ’em!”

CHAPTER II – A PROFOUND MYSTERY

Tess Kenway was positively shocked by her sister Dot's suggestion. To think of trying to keep the silver bracelet which they knew must belong to the Gypsy woman who had sold them the green and yellow basket, was quite a horrifying thought to Tess.

"How *can* you say such a thing, Dottie Kenway?" she demanded sternly. "Of course we cannot keep the bracelet. And that old Gypsy lady said we were honest, too. She could *see* we were. And, then, what would Ruthie say?"

Their older sister's opinion was always the standard for the other Corner House girls. And that might well be, for Ruth Kenway had been mentor and guide to her sisters ever since Dot, at least, could remember. Their mother had died so long ago that Tess but faintly remembered her.

The Kenways had lived in a very moderately priced tenement in Bloomsburg when Mr. Howbridge (now their guardian) had searched for and found them, bringing them with Aunt Sarah Maltby to the old Corner House in Milton. In the first volume of this series, "The Corner House Girls," these matters are fully explained.

The six succeeding volumes relate in detail the adventures of the four sisters and their friends – and some most remarkable adventures have they had at school, under canvas, at the seashore, as important characters in a school play, solving the mystery of a long-lost fortune, on an automobile tour through the country, and playing a winning part in the fortunes of Luke and Cecile Shepard in the volume called "The Corner House Girls Growing Up."

In "The Corner House Girls Snowbound," the eighth book of the series, the Kenways and a number of their young friends went into the North Woods with their guardian to spend the Christmas Holidays. Eventually they rescued the twin Birdsall children, who likewise had come under the care of the elderly lawyer who had so long been the Kenway sisters' good friend.

During the early weeks of the summer, just previous to the opening of our present story, the Corner House girls had enjoyed a delightful trip on a houseboat in the neighboring waters. The events of this trip are related in "The Corner House Girls on a Houseboat." During this outing there was more than one exciting incident. But the most exciting of all was the unexpected appearance of Neale O'Neil's father, long believed lost in Alaska.

Mr. O'Neil's return to the States could only be for a brief period, for his mining interests called him back to Nome. His son, however, no longer mourned him as lost, and naturally (though this desire he kept secret from Agnes) the boy hoped, when his school days were over, to join his father in that far Northland.

There was really no thought in the mind of the littlest Corner House girl to take that which did not belong to her. Most children believe implicitly in "findings-keepings," and it seemed to Dot Kenway that as they had bought the green and yellow basket in good faith of the two Gypsy women, everything it contained should belong to them.

This, too, was Sammy Pinkney's idea of the matter. Sammy considered himself very worldly wise.

"Say! what's the matter with you, Tess Kenway? Of course that bracelet is yours – if you want it. Who's going to stop you from keeping it, I want to know?"

"But – but it must belong to one of those Gypsy ladies," gasped Tess. "The old lady asked us if we were honest. Of course we are!"

"Pshaw! If they miss it, they'll be back after that silver thing fast enough."

"But, Sammy, suppose they don't know the bracelet fell into this basket?"

"Then you and Dot are that much in," was the prompt rejoinder of their boy friend. "You bought the basket and all that was in it. They couldn't claim the *air* in that basket, could they? Well, then! how could they lay claim to anything else in the basket?"

Such logic seemed unanswerable to Dot's mind. But Tess shook a doubtful head. She had a feeling that they ought to run after the Gypsies to return to them at once the bracelet. Only, neither she nor Dot was dressed properly to run through Milton's best residential streets after the Romany people. As for Sammy —

Happily, so Tess thought, she did not have to decide the matter. Musically an automobile horn sounded its warning and the children ran out to welcome the two older Corner House girls and Neale O'Neil, who acted as their chauffeur on this particular trip.

They had been far out into the country for eggs and fresh vegetables, to the farm, in fact, of Mr. Bob Buckham, the strawberry king and the Corner House girls' very good friend. In these times of very high prices for food, Ruth Kenway considered it her duty to save money if she could by purchasing at first cost for the household's needs.

"Otherwise," this very capable young housewife asked, "how shall we excuse the keeping of an automobile when the up-keep and everything is so high?"

"Oh, *do*," begged Agnes, the flyaway sister, "*do* let us have something impractical, Ruth. I just hate the man who wrote the first treatise on political economy."

"I fancy it is 'household economy' you mean, Aggie," returned her sister, smiling. "And I warrant the author of the first treatise on that theme was a woman."

"Mrs. Eva Adam, I bet!" chuckled Neale O'Neil, hearing this controversy from the driver's seat. "It has always been in my mind that the First Lady of the Garden of Eden was tempted to swipe those apples more because the price of other fruit was so high than for any other reason."

"Then Adam was stingy with the household money," declared Agnes.

"I really wish you would not use such words as 'swipe' before the children, Neale," sighed Ruth who, although she was no purist, did not wish the little folk to pick up (as they so easily did) slang phrases.

She stepped out of the car when Neale had halted it within the garage and Agnes handed her the egg basket. Tess and Dot immediately began dancing about their elder sister, both shouting at once, the smallest girl with the green and yellow basket and Tess with the silver bracelet in her hand.

"Oh, Ruthie, what do you think?"

"See how pretty it is! And they never missed it."

"*Can't* we keep it, Ruthie?" This from Dot. "We paid those Gypsy ladies for the basket and all that was in it. Sammy says so."

"Then it must be true of course," scoffed Agnes. "What is it?"

"Well, I guess I know some things," observed Sammy, bridleing. "If you buy a walnut you buy the kernel as well as the shell, don't you? And that bracelet was inside that covered basket, like the kernel in a nut."

"Listen!" exclaimed Neale likewise getting out of the car. "Sammy's a very Solomon for judgment."

"Now don't you call me that, Neale O'Neil!" ejaculated Sammy angrily. "I ain't a pig."

"Wha – what! Who called you a pig, Sammy?"

"Well, that's what Mr. Con Murphy calls *his* pig – 'Solomon.' You needn't call me by any pig-name, so there!"

"I stand reproved," rejoined Neale with mock seriousness. "But, see here: What's all this about the basket and the bracelet – a two-fold mystery?"

"It sounds like a thriller in six reels," cried Agnes, jumping out of the car herself to get a closer view of the bracelet and the basket. "My! Where did you get that gorgeous bracelet, children?"

The beauty of the family, who loved "gew-gaws" of all kinds, seized the silver circlet and tried it upon her own plump arm. Ruth urged Tess to explain and had to place a gentle palm upon Dot's lips to keep them quiet so that she might get the straight of the story from the more sedate Tess.

“And so, that’s how it was,” concluded Tess. “We bought the basket after borrowing Sammy’s twenty-five cent piece, and of course the basket belongs to us, doesn’t it, Ruthie?”

“Most certainly, my dear,” agreed the elder sister.

“And inside was that beautiful fretted silver bracelet. And that – ”

“Just as certainly belongs to the Gypsies,” finished Ruth. “At least, it does not belong to you and Dot.”

“Aw shu-u-cks!” drawled Sammy in dissent.

Even Agnes cast a wistful glance at the older girl. Ruth was always so uncompromising in her decisions. There was never any middle ground in her view. Either a thing was right, or it was wrong, and that was all there was to it!

“Well,” sighed Tess, “that Gypsy lady *said* she knew we were honest.”

“I think,” Ruth observed thoughtfully, “that Neale had better run the car out again and look about town for those Gypsy women. They can’t have got far away.”

“Say, Ruth! it’s most supper time,” objected Neale. “Have a heart!”

“Anyway, I wouldn’t trouble myself about a crowd of Gypsies,” said Agnes. “They may have stolen the bracelet.”

“Oh!” gasped Tess and Dot in unison.

“You know what June Wildwood told us about them. And she lived with Gypsies for months.”

“Gypsies are not all alike,” the elder sister said confidently in answer to this last remark by Agnes. “Remember Mira and King David Stanley, and how nice they were to Tess and Dottie?” she asked, speaking of an incident related in “The Corner House Girls on a Tour.”

“I don’t care!” exclaimed Agnes, pouting, and still viewing the bracelet on her arm with admiration. “I wouldn’t run *my* legs off chasing a band of Gypsies.”

They were all, however, bound to be influenced by Ruth’s decision.

“Well, I’ll hunt around after supper,” Neale said. “I’ll take Sammy with me. You’ll know those women if you see them again, won’t you, kid?”

“Sure,” agreed Sammy, forgiving Neale for calling him “kid” with the prospect of an automobile ride in the offing.

“But – but,” breathed Tess in Ruth’s ear, “if those Gypsy ladies don’t take back the bracelet, it belongs to Dot and me, doesn’t it, Sister?”

“Of course. Agnes! do give it back, now. I expect it will cause trouble enough if those women are not found. A bone of contention! Both these children will want to wear the bracelet at the same time. Don’t *you* add to the difficulty, Agnes.”

“Why,” drawled Agnes, slowly removing the curiously engraved silver ornament from her arm, “of course they will return for it. Or Neale will find them.”

This statement, however, was not borne out by the facts. Neale and Sammy drove all about town that evening without seeing the Gypsy women. The next day the smaller Corner House girls were taken into the suburbs all around Milton; but nowhere did they find trace of the Gypsies or of any encampment of those strange, nomadic people in the vicinity.

The finding of the bracelet in the basket remained a mystery that the Corner House girls could not soon forget.

“It does seem,” said Tess, “as though those Gypsy ladies couldn’t have meant to give us the bracelet, Dot. The old one said so much about our being honest. She didn’t expect us to *steal* it.”

“Oh, no!” agreed Dot. “But Neale O’Neil says maybe the Gypsy ladies stole it, and were afraid to keep it. So they gave it to us.”

“M-mm,” considered Tess. “But that doesn’t explain it at all. Even if they wanted to get rid of the bracelet, they need not have given it to us in such a lovely basket. Ruth says the basket is worth a whole lot more than the forty-five cents we paid for it.”

“It *is* awful pretty,” sighed Dot in agreement.

“Some day they will surely come back for the bracelet.”

“Oh, I hope not!” murmured the littlest Corner House girl. “It makes such a be-*you*-tiful belt for my Alice-doll, when it’s my turn to wear it.”

CHAPTER III – SAMMY PINKNEY IN TROUBLE

Uncle Rufus, who was general factotum about the old Corner House and even acted as butler on “date and state occasions,” was a very brown man with a shiny bald crown around three-quarters of the circumference of which was a hedge of white wool. Aided by Neale O’Neil (who still insisted on earning a part of his own support in spite of the fact that Mr. Jim O’Neil, his father, expected in time to be an Alaskan millionaire gold-miner), Uncle Rufus did all of the chores about the place. And those chores were multitudinous.

Besides the lawns and the flower gardens to care for, there was a good-sized vegetable garden to weed and to hoe. Uncle Rufus suffered from what he called a “misery” in his back that made it difficult for him to stoop to weed the small plants in the garden.

“I don’t know, Missy Ruth,” complained the old darkey to the eldest Corner House girl, “how I’s goin’ to get that bed of winter beets weeded – I dunno, noways. My misery suah won’t let me stoop down to them rows, and there’s a big patch of ’em.”

“Do they need weeding right now, Uncle Rufus?”

“Suah do, Missy. Dey is sufferin’ fo’ hit. I’d send wo’d for some o’ mah daughter Pechunia’s young ’uns to come over yere, but I knows dat all o’ them that’s big enough to work is reg’larly employed by de farmers out dat a-way. Picking crops for de canneries is now at de top-notch, Missy; and even Burnejones Whistler and Louise-Annette is big enough to pick beans.”

“Goodness me!” exclaimed Agnes, who overheard the old man’s complaint. “There ought to be kids enough around these corners to hire, without sending to foreign lands for any. They are always under foot if you *don’t* want them.”

“Ain’t it de truf?” chuckled the old man. “Usual’ I can’t look over de hedge without spyin’ dat Sammy Pinkney and a dozen of his crew. They’s jest as plenty as bugs under a chip. But now – ”

“Well, why not get Sammy?” interrupted Ruth.

“He ought to be of some use, that is sure,” added Agnes.

“Can yo’ put yo’ hand on dat boy?” demanded Uncle Rufus. “Nless he’s in mischief I don’t know where to look for him.”

“I can find him all right,” Agnes declared. “But I cannot guarantee that he will take the job.”

“Offer him fifty cents to weed those beet rows,” Ruth said briskly. “The bed I see is just a mat of weeds.” They had walked down to the garden while the discussion was going on. “If Sammy will do it I’ll be glad to pay the half dollar.”

She bustled away about some other domestic matter; for despite the fact that Mrs. McCall bore the greater burden of housekeeping affairs, Ruth Kenway did not shirk certain responsibilities that fell to her lot both outside and inside the Corner House.

After all was said and done, Sammy Pinkney looked upon Agnes as his friend. She was more lenient with him than even Dot was. Ruth and Tess looked upon most boys as merely “necessary evils.” But Agnes had always liked to play with boys and was willing to overlook their shortcomings.

“I got a lot to do,” ventured Sammy, shying as usual at the idea of work. “But if you really want me to, Aggie – ”

“And if you want to make a whole half dollar,” suggested Agnes, not much impressed by the idea that Sammy would weed beets as a favor.

“All right,” agreed the boy, and shooing Buster, his bulldog, out of the Corner House premises, for Buster and Billy Bumps, the goat, were sworn enemies, Sammy proceeded to the vegetable garden.

Now, both Uncle Rufus and Agnes particularly showed Sammy which were the infant beets and which the weeds. It is a fact, however, that there are few garden plants grown for human consumption that do not have their counterpart among the noxious weeds.

The young beets, growing in scattered clumps in the row (for each seed-burr contains a number of seeds), looked much like a certain weed of the lambs'-quarters variety; and this reddish-green weed pretty well covered the beet bed.

Tess and Dot had gone to a girls' party at Mrs. Adams', just along on Willow Street, that afternoon, so they did not appear to disturb Sammy at his task. In fact, the boy had it all his own way. Neither Uncle Rufus nor any other older person came near him, and he certainly made a thorough job of that beet bed.

Mrs. McCall "set great store," as she said, by beets – both pickled and fresh – for winter consumption. When Neale O'Neil chanced to go into the garden toward supper time to see what Sammy was doing there, it was too late to save much of the crop.

"Well, of all the dunces!" ejaculated Neale, almost immediately seeing what Sammy had been about. "Say! you didn't do that on purpose, did you? Or don't you know any better?"

"Know any better'n *what*?" demanded the bone-weary Sammy, in no mood to endure scolding in any case. "Ain't I done it all right? I bet you can't find a weed in that whole bed, so now."

"Great grief, kid!" gasped the older boy, seeing that Sammy was quite in earnest, "I don't believe you've left anything *but* weeds in those rows. It – it's a knock-out!"

"Aw – I never," gulped Sammy. "I guess I know beets."

"Huh! It looks as though you don't even know *beans*," chortled Neale, unable to keep his gravity. "What a mess! Mrs. McCall will be as sore as she can be."

"I don't care!" cried the tired boy wildly. "I saved just what Aggie told me to, and threw away everything else. And see how the rows are."

"Why, Sammy, those aren't where the rows of beets were at all. See! *These* are beets. *Those* are weeds. Oh, great grief!" and the older boy went off into another gale of laughter.

"I – I do-o-on't care," wailed Sammy. "I did just what Aggie told me to. And I want my half dollar."

"You want to be paid for wasting all Mrs. McCall's beets?"

"I don't care, I earned it."

Neale could not deny the statement. As far as the work went, Sammy certainly had spent time and labor on the unfortunate task.

"Wait a minute," said Neale, as Sammy started away in anger. "Maybe all those beet plants you pulled up aren't wilted. We can save some of them. Beets grow very well when they are transplanted – especially if the ground is wet enough and the sun isn't too hot. It looks like rain for to-night, anyway."

"Aw – I – "

"Come on! We'll get some water and stick out what we can save. I'll help you and the girls needn't know you were such a dummy."

"Dummy, yourself!" snarled the tired and over-wrought boy. "I'll never weed another beet again – no, I won't!"

Sammy made a bee-line out of the garden and over the fence into Willow Street, leaving Neale fairly shaking with laughter, yet fully realizing how dreadfully cut-up Sammy must feel.

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune seem much greater to the mind of a youngster like Sammy Pinkney than to an adult person. The ridicule which he knew he must suffer because of his mistake about the beet bed, seemed something that he really could not bear. Besides, he had worked all the afternoon for nothing (as he presumed) and only the satisfaction of having earned fifty cents would have counteracted the ache in his muscles.

Harried by his disappointment, Sammy was met by his mother in a stern mood, her first question being:

"Where have you been wasting your time ever since dinner, Sammy Pinkney? I never did see such a lazy boy!"

It was true that he had wasted his time. But his sore muscles cried out against the charge that he was lazy.

He could not explain, however, without revealing his shame. To be ridiculed was the greatest punishment Sammy Pinkney knew.

“Aw, what do you want me to do, Maw? Work *all* the time? Ain’t this my vacation?”

“But your father says you are to work enough in the summer to keep from forgetting what work is. And look how grubby you are. Faugh!”

“What do you want me to do, Maw?”

“You might do a little weeding in our garden, you know, Sammy.”

“Weeding!” groaned the boy, fairly horrified by the suggestion after what he had been through that afternoon.

“You know very well that our onions and carrots need cleaning out. And I don’t believe you could even find our beets.”

“Beets!” Sammy’s voice rose to a shriek. He never was really a bad boy; but this was too much. “Beets!” cried Sammy again. “I wouldn’t weed a beet if nobody ever ate another of ’em. No, I wouldn’t.”

He darted by his mother into the house and ran up to his room. Her reiterated command that he return and explain his disgraceful speech and violent conduct did not recall Sammy to the lower floor.

“Very well, young man. Don’t you come down to supper, either. And we’ll see what your father has to say about your conduct when he comes home.”

This threat boded ill for Sammy, lying sobbing and sore upon his bed. He was too desperate to care much what his father did to him. But to face the ridicule of the neighborhood – above all to face the prospect of weeding another bed of beets! – was more than the boy could contemplate.

“I’ll run away and be a pirate – that’s just what I’ll do,” choked Sammy, his old obsession enveloping his harassed thoughts. “I’ll show ’em! They’ll be sorry they treated me so – all of ’em.”

Just who “em” were was rather vague in Sammy Pinkney’s mind. But the determination to get away from all these older people, whom he considered had abused him, was not vague at all.

CHAPTER IV – THE GYPSY TRAIL

Mr. Pinkney, Sammy's father, heard all about it before he arrived home, for he always passed the side door of the old Corner House on his return from business. He came at just that time when Neale O'Neil was telling the assembled family – including Mrs. McCall, Uncle Rufus, and Linda the maid-of-all-work – about the utter wreck of the beet bed.

"I've saved what I could – set 'em out, you know, and soaked 'em well," said the laughing Neale. "But make up your mind, Mrs. McCall, that you'll have to buy a good share of your beets this winter."

"Well! What do you know about that, Mr. Pinkney?" demanded Agnes of their neighbor, who had halted at the gate.

"Just like that boy," responded Mr. Pinkney, shaking his head over his son's transgressions.

"Just the same," Neale added, chuckling, "Sammy says you showed him which were weeds and which were beets, Aggie."

"Of course I did," flung back the quick-tempered Agnes. "And so did Uncle Rufus. But that boy is so heedless –"

"I agree that Sammy pays very little attention to what is told him," said Sammy's father.

Here Tess put in a soothing word, as usual: "Of course he didn't mean to pull up all your beets, Mrs. McCall."

"And I don't like beets anyway," proclaimed Dot.

"He certainly must have worked hard," Ruth said, producing a fifty-cent piece and running down the steps to press it into Mr. Pinkney's palm. "I am sure Sammy had no intention of spoiling our beet bed. And I am not sure that it is not partly our fault. He should not have been left all the afternoon without some supervision."

"He should be more observing," said Mr. Pinkney. "I never did see such a rattlebrain."

"The servant is worthy of his hire," quoted Ruth. "And tell him, Mr. Pinkney, that we forgive him."

"Just the same," cried Agnes after their neighbor, "although Sammy may know beans, as Neale says, he doesn't seem to know beets! Oh, what a boy!"

So Mr. Pinkney brought home the story of Sammy's mistake and he and his wife laughed over it. But when Mrs. Pinkney called upstairs for the boy to come down to a late supper she got only a muffled response that he "didn't want no supper."

"He must be sick," she observed to her husband, somewhat anxiously.

"He's sick of the mess he's made – that's all," declared Mr. Pinkney cheerfully. "Let him alone. He'll come around all right in the morning."

Meanwhile at the Corner House the Kenway sisters had something more important (at least, as they thought) to talk about than Sammy Pinkney and his errors of judgment. What Dot had begun to call the "fretful silver bracelet" was a very live topic.

The local jeweler had pronounced the bracelet of considerable value because of its workmanship. It did not seem possible that the Gypsy women could have dropped the bracelet into the basket they had sold the smaller Corner House girls and then forgotten all about it.

"It is not reasonable," Ruth Kenway declared firmly, "that it could just be a mistake. That basket is worth two dollars at least; and they sold it to the children for forty-five cents. It is mysterious."

"They seemed to like Tess and me a whole lot," Dot said complacently. "That is why they gave it to us so cheap."

"And that is the very reason I am worried," Ruth added.

"Why don't you report it to the police?" croaked Aunt Sarah Maltby. "Maybe they'll try to rob the house."

"O-oh," gasped Dot, round-eyed.

“Who? The police?” giggled Agnes in Ruth’s ear.

“Maybe we ought to look again for those Gypsy ladies,” Tess said. “But the bracelet is awful pretty.”

“I tell you! Let’s ask June Wildwood. She knows all about Gypsies,” cried Agnes. “She used to travel with them. Don’t you remember, Ruth? They called her Queen Zaliska, and she made believe tell fortunes. Of course, not being a real Gypsy she could not tell them very well.”

“Crickey!” ejaculated Neale O’Neil, who was present. “You don’t believe in that stuff, do you, Aggie?”

“I don’t know whether I do or not. But it’s awfully thrilling to think of learning ahead what is going to happen.”

“Huh!” snorted her boy friend. “Like the weather man, eh? But he has some scientific data to go on.”

“Probably the Gypsy fortune tellers have reduced their business to a science, too,” Ruth calmly said.

“Anyhow,” laughed Neale, “Queen Zaliska now works in Byburg’s candy store. Some queen, I’ll tell the world!”

“Neale!” admonished Ruth. “*Such* slang!”

“Come on, Neale,” said the excited Agnes. “Let you and me go down to Byburg’s and ask her about the bracelet.”

“I really don’t see how June can tell us anything,” observed Ruth slowly.

“Anyway,” Agnes briskly said, putting on her hat, “we need some candy. Come on, Neale.”

The Wildwoods were Southerners who had not lived long in Milton. Their story is told in “The Corner House Girls Under Canvas.” The Kenways were very well acquainted with Juniper Wildwood and her sister, Rosa. Agnes felt privileged to question June about her life with the Gypsies.

“I saw Big Jim in town the other day,” confessed the girl behind the candy counter the moment Agnes broached the subject. “I am awfully afraid of him. I ran all the way home. And I told Mr. Budd, the policeman on this beat, and I think Mr. Budd warned Big Jim to get out of town. There is some talk about getting a law through the Legislature putting a heavy tax on each Gypsy family that does not keep moving. *That* will drive them away from Milton quicker than anything else. And that Big Jim is a bad, bad man. Why! he’s been in jail for stealing.”

“Oh, my! He’s a regular convict, then,” gasped Agnes, much impressed.

“Pshaw!” said Neale. “They don’t call a man a convict unless he has been sent to the State prison, or to the Federal penitentiary. But that Big Jim looked to be tough enough, when we saw him down at Pleasant Cove, to belong in prison for life. Remember him, Aggie?”

“The children did not say anything about a Gypsy man,” observed his friend. “There were two Gypsy women.”

She went on to tell June Wildwood all about the basket purchase and the finding of the silver bracelet. The older girl shook her head solemnly as she said:

“I don’t understand it at all. Gypsies are always shrewd bargainers. They never sell things for less than they cost.”

“But they made that basket,” Agnes urged. “Perhaps it didn’t cost them so much as Ruth thinks.”

June smiled in a superior way. “Oh, no, they didn’t make it. They don’t waste their time nowadays making baskets when they can buy them from the factories so much cheaper and better. Oh, no!”

“Crackey!” exclaimed Neale. “Then they are fakers, are they?”

“That bracelet is no fake,” declared Agnes.

“That is what puzzles me most,” said June. “Gypsies are very tricky. At least, all I ever knew. And if those two women you speak of belonged to Big Jim’s tribe, I would not trust them at all.”

“But it seems they have done nothing at all bad in this case,” Agnes observed.

“Tess and Dot are sure ahead of the game, so far,” chuckled Neale in agreement.

“Just the same,” said June Wildwood, “I would not be careless. Don’t let the children talk to the Gypsies if they come back for the bracelet. Be sure to have some older person see the women and find out what they want. Oh, they are very sly.”

June had then to attend to other customers, and Agnes and Neale walked home. On the way they decided that there was no use in scaring the little ones about the Gypsies.

“I don’t believe in bugaboos,” Agnes declared. “We’ll just tell Ruth.”

This she proceeded to do. But perhaps she did not repeat June Wildwood’s warning against the Gypsy band with sufficient emphasis to impress Ruth’s mind. Or just about this time the older Corner House girl had something of much graver import to trouble her thought.

By special delivery, on this evening just before they retired, arrived an almost incoherent letter from Cecile Shepard, part of which Ruth read aloud to Agnes:

“... and just as Aunt Lorina is only beginning to get better! I feel as though this family is fated to have trouble this year. Luke was doing so well at the hotel and the proprietor liked him. It isn’t *his* fault that that outside stairway was untrustworthy and fell with him. The doctor says it is only a strained back and a broken wrist. But Luke is in bed. I am going by to-morrow’s train to see for myself. I don’t dare tell Aunt Lorina – nor even Neighbor. Neighbor – Mr. Northrup – is not well himself, and he would only worry about Luke if he knew... Now, don’t *you* worry, and I will send you word how Luke is just the minute I arrive.”

“But how can I help being anxious?” Ruth demanded of her sister. “Poor Luke! And he was working so hard this summer so as not to be obliged to depend entirely on Neighbor for his college expenses next year.”

Ruth was deeply interested in Luke Shepard – had been, in fact, since the winter previous when all the Corner House family were snowbound at the Birdsall winter camp in the North Woods. Of course, Ruth and Luke were both very young, and Luke had first to finish his college course and get into business.

Still and all, the fact that Luke Shepard had been hurt quite dwarfed the Gypsy bracelet matter in Ruth’s mind. And in that of Agnes, too, of course.

In addition, the very next morning Mrs. Pinkney ran across the street and in at the side door of the Corner House in a state of panic.

“Oh! have you seen him?” she cried.

“Seen whom, Mrs. Pinkney?” asked Ruth with sympathy.

“Is Buster lost again?” demanded Tess, poising a spoonful of breakfast food carefully while she allowed her curiosity to take precedence over the business of eating. “That dog always *is* getting lost.”

“It isn’t Sammy’s dog,” wailed Mrs. Pinkney. “It is Sammy himself. I can’t find him.”

“Can’t find Sammy?” repeated Agnes.

“His bed hasn’t been slept in! I thought he was just sulky last night. But he is *gone*!”

“Well,” said Tess, practically, “Sammy is always running away, you know.”

“Oh, this is serious,” cried the distracted mother. “He has broken open his bank and taken all his money – almost four dollars.”

“My!” murmured Dot, “it must cost lots more to run away and be pirates now than it used to.”

“Everything is much higher,” agreed Tess.

CHAPTER V – SAMMY OCCASIONS MUCH EXCITEMENT

"I do hope and pray," Aunt Sarah Maltby declared, "that Mrs. Pinkney won't go quite distracted about that boy. Boys make so much trouble usually that a body would near about believe that it must be an occasion for giving thanks to get rid of one like Sammy Pinkney."

This was said of course after Sammy's mother had gone home in tears – and Agnes had accompanied her to give such comfort as she might. The whole neighborhood was roused about the missing Sammy. All agreed that the boy never was of so much importance as when he was missing.

"I do hope and pray that the little rascal will turn up soon," continued Aunt Sarah, "for Mrs. Pinkney's sake."

"I wonder," murmured Dot to Tess, "why it is Aunt Sarah always says she 'hopes and prays'? Wouldn't just praying be enough? You're sure to get what you pray for, aren't you?"

"But what is the use of praying if you don't hope?" demanded Tess, the hair-splitting theologian. "They must go together, Dot. I should think you'd see that."

Mrs. Pinkney had lost hope of finding Sammy, however, right at the start. She knew him of course of old. He had been running away ever since he could toddle out of the gate; but she and Mr. Pinkney tried to convince themselves that each time would be the last – that he was "cured."

For almost always Sammy's runaway escapades ended disastrously for him and covered him with ridicule. Particularly ignominious was the result of his recent attempt, which is narrated in the volume immediately preceding this, to accompany the Corner House Girls on their canal-boat cruise, when he appeared as a stowaway aboard the boat in the company of Billy Bumps, the goat.

"And he hasn't even taken Buster with him this time," proclaimed Mrs. Pinkney. "He chained Buster down cellar and the dog began to howl. So mournful! It got on my nerves. I went down after Mr. Pinkney went to business early this morning and let Buster out. Then, because of the dog's actions, I began to suspect Sammy had gone. I called him. No answer. And he hadn't had any supper last night either."

"I am awfully sorry, Mrs. Pinkney," Agnes said. "It was too bad about the beets. But he needn't have run away because of *that*. Ruth sent him his fifty cents, you know."

"That's just it!" exclaimed the distracted woman. "His father did not give Sammy the half dollar. As long as the boy was so sulky last evening, and refused to come down to eat, Mr. Pinkney said let him wait for that money till he came down this morning. *He* thought Ruth was too good. Sammy is always doing something."

"Oh, he's not so bad," said the comforting Agnes. "I am sure there are lots worse boys. And are you sure, Mrs. Pinkney, that he has really run away this time?"

"Buster can't find him. The poor dog has been running around and snuffing for an hour. I've telephoned to his father."

"Who — *what*? Buster's father?"

"Mr. Pinkney," explained Sammy's mother. "I suppose he'll tell the police. He says – Mr. Pinkney does – that the police must think it is a 'standing order' on their books to find Sammy."

"Oh, my!" giggled Agnes, who was sure to appreciate the comical side of the most serious situation. "I should think the policemen would be so used to looking for Sammy that they would pick him up anywhere they chanced to see him with the idea that he was running away."

"Well," sighed Mrs. Pinkney, "Buster can't find him. There he lies panting over by the currant bushes. The poor dog has run his legs off."

"I don't believe bulldogs are very keen on a scent. Our old Tom Jonah could do better. But of course Sammy went right out into the street and the scent would be difficult for the best dog to follow. Do you think Sammy went early this morning?"

"That dog began to howl soon after we went to bed. Mr. Pinkney sleeps so soundly that it did not annoy him. But I *knew* something was wrong when Buster howled so.

"Perhaps I'm superstitious. But we had an old dog that howled like that years ago when my grandmother died. She was ninety-six and had been bedridden for ten years, and the doctors said of course that she was likely to die almost any time. But that old Towser *did* howl the night grandma was taken."

"So you think," Agnes asked, without commenting upon Mrs. Pinkney's possible trend toward superstition, "that Sammy has been gone practically all night?"

"I fear so. He must have waited for his father and me to go to bed. Then he slipped down the back stairs, tied Buster, and went out by the cellar door. All night long he's been wandering somewhere. The poor, foolish boy!"

She took Agnes up to the boy's room – a museum of all kinds of "useless truck," as his mother said, but dear to the boyish heart.

"Oh, he's gone sure enough," she said, pointing to the bank which was supposed to be incapable of being opened until five dollars in dimes had been deposited within it. A screw-driver, however, had satisfied the burglarious intent of Sammy.

She pointed out the fact, too, that a certain extension bag that had figured before in her son's runaway escapades was missing.

"The silly boy has taken his bathing suit and that cowboy play-suit his father bought him. I never did approve of that. Such things only give boys crazy notions about catching dogs and little girls with a rope, or shooting stray cats with a popgun.

"Of course, he has taken his gun with him and a bag of shot that he had to shoot in it. The gun shoots with a spring, you know. It doesn't use real powder, of course. I have always believed such things are dangerous. But, you know, his father —

"Well, he wore his best shoes, and they will hurt him dreadfully, I am sure, if he walks far. And I can't find that new cap I bought him only last week."

All the time she was searching in Sammy's closet and in the bureau drawers. She stood up suddenly and began to peer at the conglomeration of articles on the top of the bureau.

"Oh!" she cried. "It's gone!"

"What is it, Mrs. Pinkney?" asked Agnes sympathetically, seeing that the woman's eyes were overflowing again. "What is it you miss?"

"Oh! he is determined I am sure to run away for good this time," sobbed Mrs. Pinkney. "The poor, foolish boy! I wish I had said nothing to him about the beets – I do. I wonder if both his father and I have not been too harsh with him. And I'm sure he loves us. Just think of his taking *that*."

"But what is it?" cried Agnes again.

"It stood right here on his bureau propped up against the glass. Sammy must have thought a great deal of it," flowed on the verbal torrent. "Who would have thought of that boy being so sentimental about it?"

"Mrs. Pinkney!" begged the curious Agnes, almost distracted herself now, "*do* tell me what it is that is missing?"

"That picture. We had it taken – his father and Sammy and me in a group together – the last time we went to Pleasure Cove. Sammy begged to keep it up here. And – now – the dear child – has – has carried – it – away with him!"

Mrs. Pinkney broke down utterly at this point. She was finally convinced that at last Sammy had fulfilled his oft-repeated threat to "run away for good and all" – whether to be a pirate or not, being a mooted question.

Agnes comforted her as well as she could. But the poor woman felt that she had not taken her son seriously enough, and that she could have averted this present disaster in some way.

"She is quite distracted," Agnes said, on arriving home, repeating Aunt Sarah's phrase. "Quite distracted."

"But if she is extracted," Dot proposed, "why doesn't she have Dr. Forsyth come to see her?"

"Mercy, Dot!" admonished Tess. "*Distracted*, not *extracted*. You do so mispronounce the commonest words."

"I don't, either," the smaller girl denied vigorously. "I don't mispernounce any more than you do, Tess Kenway! You just make believe you know so much."

"Dot! Mispernounce! There you go again!"

This was a sore subject, and Ruth attempted to change the trend of the little girls' thoughts by suggesting that Mrs. McCall needed some groceries from a certain store situated away across town.

"If you can get Uncle Rufus to harness Scalawag you girls can drive over to Penny & Marchant's for those things. And you can stop at Mr. Howbridge's house with this note. He must be told about poor Luke's injury."

"Why, Ruthie?" asked little Miss Inquisitive, otherwise Dot Kenway. "Mr. Howbridge isn't Luke Shepard's guardian, too, is he?"

"Now, don't be a chatterbox!" exclaimed the elder sister, who was somewhat harassed on this morning and did not care to explain to the little folk just what she had in her mind.

Ruth was not satisfied to know that Cecile had gone to attend her brother. The oldest Kenway girl longed to go herself to the resort in the mountains where Luke Shepard lay ill. But she did not wish to do this without first seeking their guardian's permission.

Tess and Dot ran off in delight, forgetting their small bickerings, to find Uncle Rufus. The old colored man, as long as he could get about, would do anything for "his chillun," as he called the four Kenway sisters. It needed no coaxing on the part of Tess and Dot to get their will of the old man on this occasion.

Scalawag was fat and lazy enough in any case. In the spring Neale had plowed and harrowed the garden with him and on occasion he was harnessed to a light cart for work about the place. His main duty, however, was to draw the smaller girls about the quieter streets of Milton in a basket phaeton. To this vehicle he was now harnessed by Uncle Rufus.

"You want to be mought' car'ful 'bout them automobiles, chillun," the old man admonished them. "Dat Sammy Pinkney boy was suah some good once in a while. He was a purt' car'ful driber."

"But he's a good driver *now*— wherever he is," said Dot. "You talk as though Sammy would never get back home from being a pirate. Of course he will. He always does!"

Secretly Tess felt herself to be quite as able to drive the pony as ever Sammy Pinkney was. She was glad to show her prowess.

Scalawag shook his head, danced playfully on the old stable floor, and then proceeded to wheel the basket phaeton out of the barn and into Willow Street. By a quieter thoroughfare than Main Street, Tess Kenway headed him for the other side of town.

"Maybe we'll run across Sammy," suggested Dot, sitting sedately with her ever-present Alice-doll. "Then we can tell his mother where he is being a pirate. She won't be so extracted then."

Tess overlooked this mispronunciation, knowing it was useless to object, and turned the subject by saying:

"Or maybe we'll see those Gypsies."

"Oh, I hope not!" cried the smaller girl. "I hope we'll never see those Gypsy women again."

For just at this time the Alice-doll was wearing the fretted silver bracelet for a girdle.

CHAPTER VI – THE GYPSY’S WORDS

That very forenoon after the two smallest girls had set out on their drive with Scalawag a telegram came to the old Corner House for Ruth.

As Agnes said, a telegram was “an event in their young sweet lives.” And this one did seem of great importance to Ruth. It was from Cecile Shepard and read:

“Arrived Oakhurst. They will not let me see Luke.”

Aside from the natural shock that the telegram itself furnished, Cecile’s declaration that she was not allowed to see her brother was bound to make Ruth Kenway fear the worst.

“Oh!” she cried, “he must be very badly hurt indeed. It is much worse than Cecile thought when she wrote. Oh, Agnes! what shall I do?”

“Telegraph her for particulars,” suggested Agnes, quite practically. “A broken wrist can’t be such an awful thing, Ruthie.”

“But his back! Suppose he has seriously hurt his back?”

“Goodness me! That would be awful, of course. He might grow a hump like poor Fred Littleburg. But I don’t believe that anything like that has happened to Luke, Ruthie.”

Her sister was not to be easily comforted. “Think! There must be something very serious the matter or they would not keep his own sister from seeing him.” Ruth herself had had no word from Luke since the accident.

Neither of the sisters knew that Cecile Shepard had never had occasion to send a telegram before and had never received one in all her life.

But she learned that a message of ten words could be sent for thirty-two cents to Milton, so she had divided what she wished to say in two equal parts! The second half of her message, however, because of the mistake of the filing clerk at the telegraph office in Oakhurst, did not arrive at the Corner House for several hours after the first half of the message.

Ruth Kenway meanwhile grew almost frantic as she considered the possible misfortune that might have overtaken Luke Shepard. She grew quite as “extracted” – to quote Dot – as Mrs. Pinkney was about the absence of Sammy.

“Well,” Agnes finally declared, “if I felt as you do about it I would not wait to hear from Mr. Howbridge. I’d start right now. Here’s the time table. I’ve looked up the trains. There is one at ten minutes to one – twelve-fifty. I’ll call Neale and he’ll drive you down to the station. You might have gone with the children if that telegram had come earlier.”

Agnes was not only practical, she was helpful on this occasion. She packed Ruth’s bag – and managed to get into it a more sensible variety of articles than Sammy Pinkey had carried in his!

“Now, don’t be worried about *us*,” said Agnes, when Ruth, dressed for departure, began to speak with anxiety about domestic affairs, including the continued absence of the little girls. “Haven’t we got Mrs. McCall – and Linda? You *do* take your duties so seriously, Ruth Kenway.”

“Do you think so?” rejoined Ruth, smiling rather wanly at the flyaway sister. “If anything should happen while I am gone – ”

“Nothing will happen that wouldn’t happen anyway, whether you are at home or not,” declared the positive Agnes.

Ruth made ready to go in such a hurry that nobody else in the Corner House save Agnes herself realized that the older sister was going until the moment that Neale O’Neil drove around to the front gate with the car. Then Ruth ran into Aunt Sarah’s room to kiss her good-bye. But Aunt Sarah had always lived a life apart from the general existence of the Corner House family and paid little attention to what her nieces did save to criticise. Mrs. McCall was busy this day preserving – “up tae ma eyen

in wark, ma lassie” – and Ruth kissed her, called good-bye to Linda, and ran to the front door before any of the three actually realized what was afoot.

Agnes ran with her to the street. At the gate stood a dark-faced, brilliantly dressed young woman, with huge gold rings in her ears, several other pieces of jewelry worn in sight, and a flashing smile as she halted the Kenway sisters with outstretched hand.

“Will the young ladies let me read their palms?” she said suavely. “I can tell them the good fortune.”

“Oh, dear me!” exclaimed Agnes, pushing by the Gypsy. “We can’t stop to have our fortunes told now.”

Ruth kept right on to the car.

“Do not neglect the opportunity of having the good fortune told, young ladies,” said the Gypsy girl shrewdly. “I can see that trouble is feared. The dark young lady goes on a journey because of the threat of *ill* fortune. Perhaps it is not so bad as it seems.”

Agnes was really impressed. Left to herself she actually would have heeded the Gypsy’s words. But Ruth hurried into the car, Neale reached back and slammed the tonneau door, and they were off for the station with only a few minutes to catch the twelve-fifty train.

“There!” ejaculated Agnes, standing at the curb to wave her hand and look after the car.

“The blonde young lady does not believe the Gypsy can tell her something that will happen – and in the near future?”

“Oh!” exclaimed Agnes. “I don’t know.” And she dragged her gaze from the car and looked doubtfully upon the dark face of the Gypsy girl which was now serious.

The latter said: “Something has sent the dark young lady from home in much haste and anxiety?”

The question was answered of course before it was asked. Any observant person could have seen as much. But Agnes’s interest was attracted and she nodded.

“Had your sister,” the Gypsy girl said, guessing easily enough at the relationship of the two Corner House girls, “not been in such haste, she could have learned something that will change the aspect of the threatened trouble. More news is on the way.”

Agnes was quite startled by this statement. Without explaining further the Gypsy girl glided away, disappearing into Willow Street.

Agnes failed to see, as the Gypsy quite evidently did, the leisurely approach of the telegraph messenger boy with the yellow envelope in his hand and his eyes fixed upon the old Corner House.

Agnes ran within quickly. She was more than a little impressed by the Gypsy girl’s words, and a few minutes later when the front doorbell rang and she took in the second telegram addressed to Ruth, she was pretty well converted to fortune telling as an exact science.

Sammy Pinkney had marched out of the house late at night, as his mother suspected, lugging his heavy extension-bag, with a more vague idea of his immediate destination than was even usual when he set forth on such escapades.

To “run away” seemed to Sammy the only thing for a boy to do when home life and restrictions became in his opinion unbearable. It might be questioned by stern disciplinarians if Mr. and Mrs. Pinkney had properly punished Sammy after he had run away the first few times, the boy would not have been cured of his wanderlust.

Fortunately, although Sammy’s father was stern enough, he very well knew that this desire for wandering could not be beaten out of the boy. Merely if he were beaten, when he grew big enough to fend for himself in the world, he would leave home and never return rather than face corporal punishment.

“I was just such a kid when I was his age,” admitted Mr. Pinkney. “My father licked me for running away, so finally I ran away when I was fourteen, and stayed away. Sammy has less reason for

leaving home than I had, and he'll get over his foolishness, get a better education than I obtained, and be a better man, I hope, in the end. It's in the Pinkney blood to rove."

This, of course, while perhaps being satisfactory to a man, did not at all calm Sammy's mother. She expected the very worst to happen to her son every time he disappeared; and as has been shown on this occasion, the boy's absence stirred the community to its very dregs.

Had Mrs. Pinkney known that after tramping as far as the outskirts of the town, and almost dropping from exhaustion, Sammy had gone to bed on a pile of straw in an empty cow stable, she would have been even more troubled than she was.

Sammy, however, came to no harm. He slept so soundly in fact on the rude couch that it was mid-forenoon before he awoke – stiff, sore in muscles, clamorously hungry, and in a frame of mind to go immediately home and beg for breakfast.

He had more money tied up in his handkerchief, however, than he had ever possessed before when he had run away. There was a store in sight at the roadside not far ahead. He hid his bag in the bushes and bought crackers, ham, cheese, and a big bottle of sarsaparilla, and so made a hearty if not judicious breakfast and lunch.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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