

Speed Nell

The Carter Girls' Mysterious Neighbors



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CHAPTER I

EN ROUTE TO THE FARM

“How I hate being poor!” exclaimed Helen Carter, looking ruefully at her darned glove.

“Me, too!” echoed the younger sister, Lucy.

“Shh! Father will hear you,” admonished Douglas.

“Nobody can hear above the rattle of this horrid old day coach,” declared Helen. “There is something about the odor of a common coach that has spent its life hauling commuters from home to work – from work to home, that sickens me,” and Helen’s sensitive nostrils quivered in disgust.

“I’m sorry, dear; I know it is all so hard on you,” said Douglas.

“Not a bit harder on me than it is on you.”

“Not a bit!” from Lucy.

“I think it must be,” smiled Douglas. “I have an idea Nature did not intend me to ride in Pullmans. I am really just as comfortable in a day coach and I think they are lots more airy

and better ventilated. What do you think about it, Nan?"

"Oh, I like 'em – such interesting types," drawled Nan. "You get to your destination sooner, too, as the Pullman is always hitched onto the back end of the train."

"I can't see anything very interesting in commuters, I must say," laughed Helen, "but Nan was always easy to please."

"Yes, Nan is our philosopher," said Douglas.

"Well, since Lucy and I are to join the army of commuters it would be foolish of us not to find them interesting. Don't you remember Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby? If we find them interesting maybe they will return the compliment."

"Yes, and I remember Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, too," declared Douglas, exchanging a sly glance with Helen.

The two older sisters could not help seeing that a nice looking boy sitting across the aisle had already found something to interest him in the dreamy brown eyes of one courageous commuter to be. His own grey eyes were twinkling with merriment. Evidently the rattle of the despised coach had not drowned the conversation so far as he was concerned. He had made some pretense of studying, but Latin Comp. was deadly dull in comparison with the chatter of the Carter girls.

The Carters were *en route* to their winter quarters, chosen after much discussion and misgivings as the best place they could find for all concerned. The doctor had pronounced the ultimatum: Mr. Carter must be in the country for another year at least and he must have no business worries. He must live out-

of-doors as much as possible and no matter how perplexing the problems that in the natural course of events would arise in a household, they were not to be brought to the master of that household. As Mrs. Carter had determined many weeks before to play the rôle of a lily of the field, announcing herself as a semi-invalid, who was to be loved and cherished and waited on but not to be worried, it meant that Douglas, as oldest child, must be mother and father as well. Hers was the thankless task of telling her sisters what they must and must not do, and curbing the extravagance that would break out now and then in spots. Small wonder that it was the case, as, up to a few months before this, lavish expenditure had been the rule in the Carter family rather than the exception.

They had spent a wonderful summer running a week-end boarding camp on the side of a mountain in Albemarle County. It had been a remarkable thing for these young girls to have undertaken and accomplished, all untrained as they were. But when their father's nervous breakdown came and the realization that there was no more money in the family till, and none likely to be there unless they could earn it, right manfully they put their young shoulders to the wheel and with a long push and a strong push and a push all together they got their wagon, if not hitched to a star, at least moving along the highroad of life and making some progress.

Dr. George Wright, the nerve specialist who had undertaken Mr. Carter's cure, had been invaluable in their search for the

proper place in which to spend the winter, this winter that was to put the keystone in their father's recovery. Such a place was not easy to find, as it must be near enough to Richmond for Nan and Lucy to go to school. That was one time when Douglas put her foot down most emphatically. The two younger girls were quite willing to follow in their sister Helen's footsteps and "quiturate," but Douglas knew that they must be held to their tasks. She bitterly regretted her own inability to continue her education, as college had been her dream, and she also deplored the fact that Helen was not able to spend the one more year at school necessary for her graduation. As for Helen, not having to go to school was the one bright spot for her in the whole sordid business, at least she had boldly declared such was the case.

The winter was to be a busy one for Helen, as the home work was to fall to her share. Douglas, by a great piece of good luck, had obtained a place as teacher in a district school not far from the little farm that had been selected as the abiding place for the Carter family during that winter of 1916 and '17. The teacher who had been employed had been called away by private affairs, and Douglas had fallen heir to the position.

The train rocked and swayed and bumped on the illy-laid road-bed as our girls sped on to their destination. Mrs. Carter in a seat across the aisle had placed her tired head on her husband's shoulder. The poor little lady felt in her heart of hearts that all of this going to out-of-the-way country places to spend winter months was really absurd, but then it was absurd to be poor

anyhow, something she had not bargained for in her scheme of existence. She had said not a word, however, but had let Douglas and that stern Dr. Wright manage everything. She felt about as capable of changing the plans of her family as her youngest child, Bobby, might.

Bobby, who had spent the time on the train most advantageously, having made friends with the brakeman and conductor, was now sitting in an alert attitude, as his new friends had informed him that there were only five minutes more before they would reach Grantly, their destination. Going to the country was just what he wanted and he was preparing to have a glorious time with no restrictions as to clean face and hands. To be sure, he had heard that he was to go to school, but since Douglas was to be the teacher this fact was not disturbing him much.

The summer in the mountains had done much to develop this darling of the Carters. He no longer looked so much like an angel as when we were first introduced to the family. His curls were close cropped now and he was losing teeth faster than he was gaining them. If there could be such a thing as a snagged tooth angel perhaps that celestial being would resemble Bobby Carter; but I am sure if that angel could have thought up as much mischief in a week as Bobby could execute in an hour, he would have met the fate of Lucifer and been hurled from Heaven. It may be, though, that if Lucifer had possessed such eyes as this little boy he would have been forgiven and might still be in his happy home. It was an impossibility to harbor wrath against Bobby if

once you looked in his eyes. They were like brown forest pools. His sister Nan had the same eyes and the same long curling lashes. The shape and color of their eyes were inherited from their beautiful little mother, but the soulful expression that the children possessed was something that came from within and is not controlled by laws of heredity. Mrs. Carter's eyes if they reminded one of forest pools were certainly very shallow pools.

"At last!" as the brakeman called out their station, came with a sigh of relief from the whole family.

The station consisted of a platform and a little three-sided shed designed to shield the traveler from the weather, if the weather did not happen to arrive on the unprotected fourth side.

"They promised to meet us," said Douglas as she collected parcels and umbrellas, "but I don't see a sign of them."

"Maybe they are on the other side," suggested the hopeful Nan, peering through the window.

They weren't, however, nor anywhere in sight. Douglas and Helen looked at each other askance. The two older girls were the only ones in the family who had seen their future abode and they felt very responsible. This hitch of not being met was most disconcerting. They had felt if everything went off smoothly and well their choice of a home would be smiled upon. First, the day they moved must be good, and this day in October was surely perfect. The packing must be done without bustle and confusion, and that had been accomplished. They must have a good luncheon before leaving Richmond, and Miss Elizabeth

Somerville, who had invited them to her house, had feasted her cousins most royally, sending them forth with well-nourished bodies and peaceful minds in consequence. This was the first obstacle to their carefully laid plans. They were to learn that no plan depending in any particular on the coöperation of their landladies, the Misses Grant, would go through safely.

Miss Ella and Miss Louise Grant were joint owners of the small farm that the glib real estate agent had persuaded Dr. Wright and our girls was the one and only place in which the winter could be comfortably spent.

“Excellent air and water; close to schools and churches; neighborhood as good as to be found in Virginia, and what more could be said? House one of the old landmarks of the county; the view from the front porch quite a famous one; R. F. D. at yard gate; commuting distance from Richmond; roads excellent, as we have found on our way here.” They had motored out and certainly the roads had seemed very good.

The Misses Grant were all that was left of a large and at one time influential family. They lived in a great old mansion erected in the middle of what was at one time a vast estate but which had gradually shrunk through generations of mortgages until now it comprised about two thousand acres. The name of this old place was Grantly.

The farm that Helen and Douglas had rented for the year was only called a farm by courtesy, as it had in its holding only about ten acres. It had at one time been the home of the overseer of

Grantly when that aristocratic estate could boast an overseer. It was too humble an abode to have a name of its own, but our girls were determined to give it a name when they found out what would suit it. Now they stood on the platform of the tiny station and said in their hearts that such a place, belonging to such unreliable persons, deserved no name at all.

“Oh, I’m so sorry they haven’t sent to meet us. They told me if I would write to them they would have a carriage and a farm wagon here,” wailed Douglas.

“Why not walk?” suggested Mr. Carter. “A quarter of a mile is nothing.”

“Oh, do let’s walk!” exclaimed Lucy. “We can just leave the luggage here and get someone to come back for it.”

“All of you can walk,” came faintly from Mrs. Carter. “Just leave me here alone. I don’t fancy anything much will happen to me.”

“But Mumsy, only a quarter of a mile!” begged Lucy.

“Why, my child, I never expect to walk more than a few blocks again as long as I live.”

Mr. Carter looked pained and ended by staying with his wife while the four girls and Bobby trooped off to find someone to send for them.

“Why does Mother say she never expects to walk more than a few blocks again as long as she lives?” blurted out Lucy. “Is she sick? She looks to me like she’s getting fat.”

“Tell her that,” suggested Nan, “and I bet you she will find she

can walk a teensy little more than a few blocks.”

CHAPTER II

THE LANDLADIES AND A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

“This is a long quarter of a mile,” said Nan, trying to keep up with her more athletic sisters.

“The agent told us a quarter of a mile, but I reckon he meant as the crow flies. He did not allow for all the twistings and turnings of this lane,” laughed Helen.

“It is a very pretty walk, anyhow, and I’m glad we are not so close to the track because of Bobby,” said the philosophic Nan.

“Shucks! You needn’t be a-thinkin’ I can’t find my way back to that old station,” said that young hopeful. “I wisht it was barefoot time and I would wade in that branch.”

They were crossing a pretty little stream that intersected the road. Of course Bobby took occasion to slip off the stepping-stones and get his foot wet.

“S’long as one is wet I reckon I might as well get th’ other one wet, too,” and he stepped boldly into the stream. “Squish! Squish! Ain’t this a grand and glorious feeling?”

“Oh, Bobby!” chorused his sisters.

“Tain’t gonter make no diffunce! My ’ployer says sech things as this toughen kids.”

Bobby always called Dr. Wright his employer, as it had been

his habit to go with that young physician while he was making his professional calls, his duties being to hold out his arm when they were turning corners or preparing to stop; and to sit in the car and guard his 'ployer's property from the depredations of hoodlums and micks.

"I don't think some kids need toughening," said Nan, trying to look severe.

"Yes'n I gotter joke on you, too! They was a pretty near grown-up boy on the train wanted to know what yo' name was. I was jawin' the inductor an' the boy comed and plunked hissef down by me an' he axed me what was my name and where I was a-gointer, an' was all'n you my aunts or what. He was so busy a-findin' out he come near a-missing his gettin' off place. He lives jus' befo' our gettin' off place."

"Oh, that must have been the good-looking boy sitting opposite us, just behind Mother and Father! You noticed him, Douglas, didn't you?" asked Helen.

"Well, he wasn't a-noticin' you much," proceeded the *enfant terrible*. "He wanted mostly to know what was Nan's name an' where she went to school."

"Surely you didn't tell him!" blushed Nan.

"Sho' nix! I told him yo' name was Lizajane an' you was a-clerkin' in the five an' ten."

"Oh, Bobby!"

Nobody could help laughing at the saucy youngster, and his sisters were ever inclined to find him amusing and altogether

delightful in spite of his outrageousness. Their laughter rang out clear and infectious. First they laughed at Bobby and then they laughed for the pure joy of laughing. Douglas forgot her burdens and responsibilities; Helen forgot how she hated to be poor; Nan forgot that the quarter of a mile she was going to have to trudge twice a day to join the army of commuters was much nearer half a mile and she was not a very energetic girl; Lucy had nothing to forget or regret, being only thirteen with a perfect digestion. For the moment all of them forgot the nerve-worn father and the hypochondriacal mother waiting so forlornly at the station with the luggage piled so hopelessly at one end.

In the midst of their gale of laughter they heard the hum of a motor and the toot of a horn. A large touring car came swerving around the curve in the road.

“That’s him now!” cried the delighted Bobby.

It was no other than the boy on the train. He stopped his car and with crimson face began to stammer forth unintelligible words.

“Excuse me! – but – that is a – you see I – Oh, hang it all! er – my name is William – Will – Billy Sutton.”

“Oh, he’s plum nutty an’ thinks he’s Billy Sunday – Billy Nut Sunday!” and Bobby danced gleefully in his squishy shoes.

“Bobby! Behave yourself!” said Douglas, trying to swallow the laugh she was in the midst of.

“We was jes’ a-talkin’ about you,” said Bobby, with his most disarming smile.

“About me?” and the young fellow choked his engine.

“Yes, I was a-tellin’ – ”

But here Helen took her little brother in hand. Helen could usually manage him better than any of the others. She whispered some mysterious something to him which quickly sobered him.

“I don’t want you to think I am impertinent or interfering, but your little brother told me on the train coming out that your mother and father were both ill – ”

“Yes, I told him they were likely to die mos’ any time.”

“And I heard at the post-office at Preston, where I live, that you have rented the farm from the Misses Grant; also that those ladies were not expecting you until tomorrow – ”

“But I wrote we would be there today, Wednesday!” exclaimed Douglas.

“That doesn’t make a bit of difference to Miss Ella and Miss Louise Grant,” laughed the boy. “They never get anything straight because they discuss every subject so thoroughly that they are all mixed up before they get through. Anyhow, they did not meet you, and if you don’t think I am pushing or forward or something – ”

“Butinsky!” suggested Bobby, but Helen slipped her hand over his pert little mouth.

“Thank you for that word – butinsky – why, I should like the privilege of going after your mother and father and bringing all the luggage my car will hold.”

“Oh, you are too kind!” chorused the girls.

“Let me take all of you first to the farm.”

“We must go by Grantly to let the ladies know we are here,” suggested Douglas.

“They are both of them at the farm. I saw them as I came by.”

“Did you tell them we had come?”

“No! They were sure to let me know it was none of my business, and, as I was fully aware of the fact, I just drove on by, hoping to be of more service to you in this way.”

The girls and Bobby piled into the car assisted by the boy, who handed them in with pleasing gallantry. By adroit manœuvring he managed to get Nan in front, although the irrepressible did squeeze in, too.

“I must sit in front so I can poke out my arm. Maybe you is huntin’ a shover. I’m Dr. Wright’s shover in town an’ up’n the mountings. He don’t mind my having two jobs in off times when he ain’t a-needin’ me.”

“Well, then, I’ll employ you right now,” said Billy Sutton, solemnly.

“I think maybe it is in order for us to introduce ourselves,” said Douglas. “This is Helen Carter; and this, Nan; and this, Lucy; I am Douglas; and Bobby has already been noticed enough.”

Hands were shaken and then they started gaily off.

“It seems a long quarter of a mile from the station to the farm, but maybe it is because I am lazy,” said Nan, who was unfeignedly glad of a lift.

“Who said it was only a quarter of a mile? It is exactly three

quarters.”

Two minutes brought them to the farm gate, where Billy deposited the occupants of the back seat. It was decided that Nan and Bobby were to go on to the station with their new friend and benefactor and explain him to Mr. and Mrs. Carter.

“Oh, Douglas, isn’t the place sweet? Lucy, don’t you like it?” asked Helen as they opened the big gate that led from the road into the lawn of their new abode.

“Great! It looks so romantical.”

“I was so afraid it wasn’t going to be as nice as we thought it was because the real estate agent was so glib and rattled on so he confused us. I was afraid he had hypnotized us into liking it. But it is lovely,” and Douglas breathed a great sigh of relief.

Indeed it was lovely; lovelier, I fancy, than the real estate agent dreamed. The lawn was spacious, with soft rolling contours and a few great trees, some of them centuries old. In the front a mighty oak stood guard at one corner and an elm at another. Nearer the house a straight young ash and a willow oak divided the honors. At one side of the quaint old house a great mock orange had established a precedent for mock oranges and grown into a tree, just to show what a mock orange is capable of when not confined to the limitations of a hedge. Its trunk was gnarled and twisted and because of careful pruning of lower branches it had grown like a huge umbrella with limbs curving out from the parent stem and almost touching the ground all around.

“What a grand place to play house and tell secrets!” thought

Lucy, regretting that thirteen years old, almost fourteen, was too great an age to indulge in dolly tea parties.

A grove of gum trees glorified the back yard with their brilliant October foliage. There never was such a red as the gum tree boasts and these huge specimens were one blaze of color. The trunks had taken on a hoary tone that contrasted pleasantly with the warm tints of the leaves.

The yard contained about four acres enclosed by a fence that had been covered entirely by honeysuckle, and even then a few blossoms were making the air fragrant. In the back there were several rather tumble-down outhouses, but these, too, were covered with honeysuckle as though by a mantle of charity.

The house had been added to from time to time as the race of overseers had felt the need. These additions had been made with no thought of congruity or ornamentation, but since utility had been the ruling thought the outcome was on the whole rather artistic. The original house, built in the first years of the nineteenth century, had a basement dining-room, a large chamber over this and two small, low-ceilinged attic rooms. Later a shed room had been built at one side in the back, then a two-story addition had reared itself next to that with no apparent connection with the main house, not even a family resemblance. This two-storied "lean-to" was known always as "the new house," although it had been in existence some threescore years. There were two rooms and two halls in this addition and it had a front porch all its own. The old house also boasted a front porch, with

a floor of unplanned boards and posts of rough cedar. But who minds cedar pillars when Washington's bower has done its best to cover them up? As for unplanned boards with cracks between: what a good place to sweep the dirt!

The green blinds were open all over the house and windows were raised. As our girls stood on the lawn drinking in the beauty and peace of the scene they heard loud and angry voices proceeding from the basement window.

"Louise Grant, you are certainly foolish! Didn't I tell you they wouldn't be coming down here yesterday? Here you have littered up this place with flowers and they will all be faded by tomorrow. I have told you a million times I read the letter that Douglas Carter wrote and she said distinctly she was coming on Thursday." This in a loud, high, commanding tone as though the speaker was determined to be heard. "You needn't put your hands over your ears! I know you can hear me!"

"That's all right, Ella Grant," came in full contralto notes; "just because they didn't come yesterday is no sign they did not say they were coming that day. I read the note, too, and if you hadn't have been so quick to burn it I guess I could prove it. Those flowers are not doing anybody any harm and I know one thing – they smell a sight better than that old carbolic you are so fond of sprinkling around."

"I thought I heard the three train stop at the crossing," broke in the high, hard voice.

"No such thing! I noticed particularly."

“Nonsense! You were so busy watching that Sutton boy racing by in his car that you didn’t even know it was train time. What John Sutton means by letting that boy drive that car I can’t see. He isn’t more than fourteen – ”

“Fourteen! Ella Grant, you have lost your senses! He is twenty, if he is a day. I remember perfectly well that he was born during the Spanish war.”

“Certainly! That was just fourteen years ago.”

The girls couldn’t help laughing. It happened that it was eighteen years since the Spanish war, as our history scholar, Lucy, had just learned. That seemed to be the way the sisters hit the mark: one shooting far in front, one far behind.

“We had better knock,” whispered Helen, “or they will begin to break up the china soon.”

She accordingly beat a rat-tat on the open front door of the old house.

“Someone is knocking!” exclaimed the contralto.

“Not at all! It’s a woodpecker,” put in the treble.

One more application of Helen’s knuckles and treble was convinced.

“That time it was a knock,” she conceded.

There was a hurrying and scurrying, a sound of altercation on the stairs leading from the basement to the front hall.

“Why do you try to go first? You know perfectly well I can go faster than you can, and here you have started up the steps and I can’t get by. You fat – ”

“If you can go so much faster, why didn’t you start up the steps first?” panted the contralto.

“Don’t talk or you’ll never get up the steps! Save your wind for climbing.”

The bulky form of Miss Louise hove in sight and over her shoulder the girls could see the stern countenance of her long, slim sister. How could two such different looking persons be born of one mother? Miss Louise was all breadth and no height; Miss Ella, all height and no breadth. Miss Louise was dark of complexion, with coal-black hair streaked with grey; Miss Ella was a strawberry blonde with sandy hair streaked with grey. Age that brought the grey hair seemed about the only thing they had in common, except, of course, the estate of Grantly. That had been willed to them by their father with a grim humor, as he must have been well aware of their idiosyncrasies. They were to hold the property together with no division, the one who survived to inherit the whole.

“Well!” said Miss Ella over the shoulder of her sister, who refused to give her right of way but who was silenced for the moment by shortness of breath. “Why did you come today when you wrote you were coming to-morrow?”

“I did not write I was coming tomorrow,” said Douglas, smiling in spite of herself.

“There! What did I tell you?” panted Miss Louise. “You said Tuesday, didn’t you, honey?” with ingratiating sweetness.

“No, Miss Grant, I said Wednesday.”

The incident was closed. The wrangling sisters had no more to say on the subject except to apologize for not having them met. It was explained that Billy Sutton had gone to get Mr. and Mrs. Carter, but the trunks must be sent for. Quite humbly Miss Ella went to get her farmhand to hitch up the mules to drive to the station, while Miss Louise showed the girls over the house.

Everything was in beautiful order and shining with cleanliness. The white pine floors were scrubbed until they reminded the girls of biscuit boards, and very lovely did the bright rag rugs look on these floors. The furniture was very plain with the exception of an occasional bit of fine old mahogany. A beautiful old highboy was not too proud to stay in the same room with a cheap oak dresser, and in the basement dining-room a handsome mahogany table democratically mingled with split-bottom chairs.

Miss Louise had put flowers everywhere for their reception the day before and the whole house was redolent of late roses and mignonette and citronella. An occasional whiff of carbolic acid and chloride of lime gave evidence of the indomitable practicality of Miss Ella.

Miss Louise proved very sweet and kindly when not in her sister's presence and later on the girls found Miss Ella to be really very agreeable. Both ladies seemed to be bent on showing kindness and consideration to their tenants to make up for the mistake about their day of arrival.

Mr. and Mrs. Carter could not help thinking that the place their daughters had chosen for them to spend the winter was

pretty. As they rolled up in Billy's car the quaint house and beautiful lawn certainly presented a most pleasing aspect, and their handsome daughters were an added loveliness to the landscape as they hurried to meet their parents.

"Ah, this is great!" exclaimed Mr. Carter, taking a deep breath of the pure fresh air. "I think I shall have to have a cow and some pigs and do some fall plowing besides. Eh, Helen? You and I are to be the stay-at-homes. What do you think?"

"I think what you think, Daddy," answered Helen, smiling happily over her father's show of enthusiasm. Dr. Wright had told her that with returning healthy nerves would come the enthusiasm that before his illness had seemed to be part of Robert Carter's make-up.

"How do you like it, Mumsy?" asked Douglas as she drew her arm through her mother's.

"Very nice, I am sure, but I think it would be wiser for me to go to bed now. I am not very strong and if I can give up before I drop it would be less trouble for my family," and Mrs. Carter took on a most plaintive accent. "A little tea and toast will be all I want for my supper."

"Oh now, it will be too bad for you to go to bed," said Miss Ella. "We were planning to have all of you come up to Grantly for supper."

She and Miss Louise seemed to have agreed for once on the propriety of having their tenants to supper.

"The count is coming," said Miss Louise, with a sentimental

note in her full voice.

“The count! Who is the count?” asked Mrs. Carter with some show of animation and interest.

“He is a nobleman who has settled in our neighborhood,” said Miss Ella in a matter-of-fact tone, as though noblemen were the rule rather than the exception in her life.

“Maybe it would be possible for me to take a short rest and come to Grantly,” said Mrs. Carter, with a quickening in her pretty eyes.

At mention of the count, Billy Sutton pretended to be much occupied with his engine, but Nan noticed a slight curl on his lip as he bent over the wheel.

CHAPTER III

THE COUNT

“Isn’t it fine not to have to bother about supper?” said Helen, as she and Douglas were attempting to get some order out of the chaos of trunks that had been brought from the station and systematically put in the wrong place by the good-natured, shambling, inefficient darky who served as factotum to the Misses Grant.

Helen and Douglas had decided to take one attic room in the old house for their bedroom; Bobby was to have the other; the large chamber below them was to serve as family sitting-room; Nan and Lucy were to have the upstairs room in the new house; Mr. and Mrs. Carter the lower room; the shed room was to serve as guest chamber when needed; the dining-room was in the basement. Over the outside kitchen was another extremely low attic room that was to be the servant’s bedroom, when they got her. This room was accessible from the kitchen by a flight of primitive chicken steps, that is, accessible to the young and agile.

The two servants the Carters had had at the week-end camp had been eager to come with them to the country, but Douglas and Helen had decided that they were expensive luxuries, and as much as they hated to part with them, had determined to have a country girl, accustomed to less wages than Susan, and

to do without a manservant in place of the faithful, if high-priced, Oscar. Dr. Wright had insisted that some chores were indispensable for Mr. Carter, such as chopping wood, carrying water, etc., and that gentleman was eager to assist wherever he could.

“Surely you are not going to dress up to go out to supper this evening,” said Douglas, as Helen shook out a pretty little old-rose dinner gown, a leftover from the time when the Carters purchased clothes for every occasion and for every passing style and season.

“I am going to dress suitably, but I don’t call it dressing up,” said Helen, hunting for the stockings to match the gown. “I think Father is well enough for me to wear silk stockings this evening,” she said a little wistfully. We all remember that in the first throes of agony over her father’s nervous breakdown Helen had taken an oath not to wear silk stockings until he was well. “What do you think, Douglas?”

“Of course, you goose, just so you don’t have to buy the stockings,” laughed Douglas. “I am going to wear what I have on, I can tell you that. There is a lot to do to get the beds made up and the house ready to sleep in, and I have no idea of unpacking my own trunk until tomorrow,” and Douglas unlocked the trunk that held the bed linen.

“Oh, Douglas, please put on your grey *crêpe de chine*! I’ll get it out for you and find your stockings and everything,” begged Helen. “I don’t think it is very respectful to our hostesses for you

not to be suitably dressed.”

“Is it altogether our hostesses you are thinking about?” teased Douglas.

“Whom else should I consider?”

“How about the count?”

“Well, naturally I can’t help thinking some about a nobleman,” declared Helen frankly. “Do you fancy he is young or old, rich or poor, handsome or ugly? I am wild to see him.”

“I can’t imagine. They didn’t even say what he was a count of. I hope he is not German. I must say I’d hate to put on my best dress for a German count,” laughed Douglas.

“Why, Douglas, I wouldn’t be so biased as all that. As long as our country is neutral, I don’t think it is fair for us to take such a stand. I’d rather dress up for a German count than – than – a Russian anarchist or maybe an Australian Bushman.”

“Well, I am not pining to dress up for anybody, but if I must, I must. How about Mumsy?”

“She has already got out her black lace and is going to wear her pearls. She is trying to persuade Father into his tuxedo but I fancy he will rebel.”

“Mercy on us! I thought we would never have to dress in this out-of-the-way spot,” sighed Douglas.

“Well, I for one am glad to have a chance to dress. It seems to me we have been khakied to death all summer, and I believe people deteriorate when they stay in the same old clothes year in and year out. I could wish my old-rose had another width in

it. Skirts are much broader this fall. The sleeves are quite right, though, – sleeves haven't changed much."

Poor Helen! It was a keen misery to her not to be in the latest style. She had a natural taste for dress and the tendency to overrate the importance of clothes had been fostered in her by her frivolous mother. Douglas, on the other hand, had a tendency to underrate the value of dress and her inclination was to be rather careless of her attire.

After much scrabbling and stirring up of trunks the whole family was dressed in what Mrs. Carter and Helen considered suitable garments, with the exception of Mr. Carter, who could not be coerced into a dinner coat.

"I can't think that a quiet supper in the country with two old ladies who are renting us the overseer's cottage could possibly call for formal dressing. Of course, you women know best what you want to wear, and very handsome all of you look I am sure, but you must excuse me."

"That's what I say!" exclaimed Bobby, putting his hands in his pockets and trying to balance himself with his feet very far apart. "Me'n Father certainly do nachelly hate clean clothes. When I gits to be growed up, I'm gonter be a barefoot tramp an' ain't never gonter wash nor nothin'." Bobby was still smarting and indignant from the polishing Helen had seemed to think the occasion demanded, especially concentrating on his long-suffering ears.

"Sometimes I wisht I hadn't never had my curls cut off. Folks

weren't near so 'ticular 'bout my yers when I had curls. They kinder hid 'em."

"But, Bobby, when you are going to have supper with a count you must be very carefully dressed," explained Lucy. "Counts are not just common persons like us."

"I thank you I'm no common person," drawled Nan. "I'm a good American and fit to dine with any count living. That's the way Douglas and I feel. We wouldn't have changed our dresses if Mother and Helen hadn't made such a point of it."

"Good for you, Nan!" and her father put his arm around her. "Of course you must dress as your mother sees fit, but don't, for goodness' sake, think a man, because he is a count or even a king, must be treated differently from any other gentleman of your acquaintance."

They were on their way to Grantly, only about five minutes' walk from the farmhouse. The sun had set in a blaze of glory but already the great October moon was doing her best to take his place. There was a hint of frost in the air and our Carters were bringing their appetites with them to grace the board of their hospitable landladies.

"I do hope Miss Ella and Miss Louise won't quarrel all the time," whispered Helen as they approached the imposing mansion.

"They remind me of the blue and white seidlitz powders," said Douglas: "bound to sizzle when you mix 'em. They are so mild and gentle when they are apart and the minute they get together

– whiz!”

Mrs. Carter cast a triumphant glance at her husband as they entered the parlor at Grantly. The Misses Grant were dressed in rustling black silk with old lace berthas and cuffs, and the gentleman who sprang to his feet, bringing his heels together with a click as he bowed low, was attired in a faultlessly fitting dress suit.

Helen’s questions were answered by one glance at this distinguished stranger; certainly he was young and handsome; the chances were that he was also not poor. That cut of dress suit did not go with poverty, nor did the exquisite fineness of his linen. Douglas’s question of his nationality remained to be solved. “Count de Lestis” did not give the girls a clue to the country from which this interesting person hailed.

“He does not look German,” Douglas said to herself. “He is too dark and too graceful.”

She breathed a sigh of relief that her grey crêpe de chine had not been donned in honor of a German, count or no count. When she saw that the Misses Grant evidently considered their suppers worthy to be dressed up for, she was glad she had listened to the dictates of Helen.

That young lady was looking especially charming in the old-rose gown, in spite of the fact that the skirt did not flare quite enough. Helen had a way of wearing her clothes and of arranging her hair that many a dame at Palm Beach or Newport would have given her fortune to possess.

Mrs. Carter always was at her best in a parlor and now her beauty shone resplendent, framed in black lace and pearls. Her gracious manner and bearing marked her as one whose natural place was in society. Her gift was social and it did seem a great waste that such a talent should have to be buried under the bushel of an overseer's cottage in an out-of-the-way spot in the country, with a once prosperous husband to do the chores and a maid-of-all-work, chosen because of her cheapness and not her worth.

The Misses Grant smiled their approval over the appearance of their guests. The fact that they were two quarrelsome old sisters farming on a dwindling estate did not lessen their importance in their own eyes, and they always felt that the dignity of Grantly demanded ceremonial dressing for the evening meal.

The sisters showed no marks of having toiled through the entire afternoon to prepare the feast that they were to set before their guests. Disagreeing as they did on every subject, food was not exempt. If Miss Ella decided to make an angel's food cake, Miss Louise must make a devil's food cake; if one thought the whites of eggs left from the frozen custard would be well to use in a silver cake, the other simultaneously determined to have apple float, requiring whites of eggs, and then the yolks must be converted into golden cake. The consequence was that their supper table groaned with opposing dishes. Each one pressed upon the guests her own specialty, and if it so happened that Miss Ella had to serve some dish of Miss Louise's concocting, she would do it with a deprecating air as though she were helping you

to cold poison; and if Miss Louise perforce must hand you one of Miss Ella's muffins, she would shake her head mysteriously as though to warn you against them.

One thing was apparent from the beginning and that was that the count was a good mixer. His English was perfect, except for an occasional suggestion of an interchange of b and p, and also a too great stress on his s. He was a brilliant conversationalist but had the wit not to be a monologueist. He had done much traveling for a man under thirty and had lived in so many places that it made him a real citizen of the world. Evidently he had the Misses Grant charmed. From the moment that he bought Weston, a fine old estate in the neighborhood, and came into their county to settle, the old ladies had taken him to their hearts. They seemed in danger of agreeing on the subject of this fascinating young man's charms. However, they found something to quarrel about even in this stranger: Miss Ella thought his mouth was his best feature, while Miss Louise insisted that his eyes were.

Of course the Carters were one and all dying to know more about him: Who was he? What was his nationality? Why had he settled in America? Where were his people? Did he have a family?

He seemed to be equally curious about them. Why should city people of such breeding and beauty come and live in a little tumbledown shack in the country? He had merely been told by the Misses Grant that the tenants who had just moved into the little farmhouse were to have supper with them, when

these visions of loveliness burst upon him. He couldn't decide which one of the sisters was the most attractive. Douglas was the most beautiful with her titian hair and clear complexion, not ruined by the summer out-of-doors as her mother had feared. But Helen – there was a piquancy about Helen that was certainly very fetching; her brown hair was so beautifully arranged at exactly the right and becoming angle; her little head was so gracefully set on her athletic shoulders; her bearing was so gallant; – certainly Helen was very attractive. Then there was Nan with her soft loveliness, her great eyes now shining with excitement and now dreaming some entrancing dream. She was only sixteen but there was something about her countenance that gave promise of great cleverness. Lucy was growing more like Helen and much of Helen's charm was hers, although the child had strong characteristics all her own.

While Count de Lestis was deciding which one of the sisters was most attractive, he did the extremely tactful and suitable thing of addressing his remarks to their mother, not forgetting to give the hostesses a full share of attention. Mr. Carter, who since his illness had been inclined to be very quiet, was drawn into the conversation and held his own with his old time power. Little wonder that his daughters were grateful to this interesting stranger who had this effect on their beloved father.

The young man told them he was Hungarian and had bought the estate of Weston with a view to entering into intensive farming.

“Then you are not Prussian!” exclaimed Douglas. “Oh, I am so glad!”

“Ah!” and his handsome eyes flashed for a moment. Then he looked amused. “And why are you so glad?”

“Why, of course anyone would be glad,” and Douglas blushed. “Who would want to have a Prussian for a neighbor?”

“Do you dislike them so much then?”

“I hate them!”

“And you, too?” turning to Helen.

“I am trying to remain neutral as our president has asked us to. I don’t feel so terribly Anglo-Saxon as my sister.”

Of course this started the question of the war, which was in the minds of everybody. Count de Lestis rather surprised Mr. Carter by his frank announcement concerning his connection with Berlin.

“I, no doubt, would be fighting with the Central Powers if I had not committed political suicide four years ago.”

“And how was that?”

“I wrote a book in which I made a plea for a democratization of Austria-Hungary. In it I intimated that the Hohenzollerns had no right to dictate to the universe. I was requested to leave the country. I was then living in Vienna, making short trips to my estate, which lies partly in Austria and partly in Hungary. Now there is danger of my entire possessions being confiscated.”

“Oh, but when Germany is finally whipped you can come into your own again,” asserted Douglas. “The outcome is merely a

matter of time.”

“And so Germany is to be whipped?” his eyes flashing again.

“Of course,” said Douglas simply.

“And why of course?”

“Because God’s in his Heaven,” whispered Nan, but the count heard her.

“Yes, but whose God?”

“The God of Justice and of Right.”

“How about the God of Might?”

“There is no such God,” and this time Douglas’s eyes did some flashing.

“I believe the United States will intervene before so very long,” said Mr. Carter as he and the count strolled out on the veranda to enjoy their cigars. The older man was enjoying his talk with this young foreigner. He looked forward with pleasure to seeing much of him, since Weston was only about three miles from the farm. They made plans to do some shooting together, as the open season was only a week off.

When de Lestis learned that Mr. Carter was an architect he asked him to visit him at his earliest convenience at Weston to advise with him concerning the restoration of the old house to its original grandeur.

“I’m not supposed to be doing any work for at least a year,” sighed Mr. Carter, “but I might look it over and tell you what I think and then recommend a suitable architect to take it in hand.”

Douglas and Helen had a talk with Miss Louise on the subject

of a country girl to come to them as maid of all work.

“They are all of them thoroughly trifling,” declared that lady in her soft round voice, “but this creature we have has a sister who could come to you. I beg of you not to give her any more wages than ours receives, as in that case we should have to go up.”

“Certainly not,” said Douglas. “Just tell us what that is.” But on learning that it was only seven dollars a month, the girls felt that it was no wonder the creatures were thoroughly trifling.

“Did she cook this wonderful supper?” asked Helen.

“No, indeed! Ella and I always cook everything we eat and this Tempy washes the dishes and cleans.”

“But we want someone to cook. Do you think I might train the sister?”

“Well, I have heard you can train monkeys but I have never seen it done,” laughed the fat old lady. “Come with me now and we can speak to Tempy about her sister Chloe.”

They found Tempy in the pantry, peacefully sleeping in the midst of the unwashed dishes. Not in the least abashed at being caught napping, she waked up and told Helen that no doubt Chloe would be pleased fur ter come. She promised to fetch her on the morrow.

“I will pay her just what the Misses Grant pay you,” said Helen.

“Lawsamussy, missy, she ain’t wuth what I is. She ain’t nebber wucked out ter say much. I done started at six and wucked up ter seben, an’ if Chloe gits now what I gits, she’ll be too proudified.

You jis' start her at six same as Miss Ellanlouise done me.”

CHAPTER IV

GRANTLY

Since our girls were to become quite intimate with the peculiar old sisters and their home, perhaps it would be just as well for me to give my readers some idea of what Grantly was like.

The first thing that struck a visitor was the wonderful box bushes in the hedge enclosing the yard and in a labyrinth in the garden. These bushes were so thick that one could really walk on the tops of them if they were kept clipped, which they were not. In the labyrinth the bushes met overhead and even after a heavy rain the paths between were perfectly dry. It took days of soaking rain to make those winding paths wet. Beyond the labyrinth was an old-fashioned garden, but now in October chrysanthemums and late roses and cosmos were all that was left of the riot of color that could be seen there during the spring and summer.

The house was of a very peculiar architectural design: a long, low body with a tower at each end. In each tower was a square room with many windows overlooking the country for miles around. Miss Ella claimed one of these rooms as her own especial property; Miss Louise the other. To approach Miss Ella's sanctum sanctorum it was necessary to climb a narrow spiral stairway; Miss Louise's was more accessible by reason of a broad stairway of many landings, but the ceilings at the landings were

so low that anyone of ordinary stature must stoop to ascend.

These rooms were used only as sitting-rooms by the erratic sisters as, strange to say, the two old ladies slept in the same room and in the same great four-posted tester bed. There were many other bedrooms in the mansion, but they both preferred the great chamber leading from the parlor, and there they slept and no doubt quarreled in their sleep.

“This is my sitting-room up here,” said Miss Ella as she showed her guests over the quaint old house. “You may come up if you like. I had the steps made this way so Louise can’t get up here and worry my soul out of me with her eternal chatter. She’s too fat for the spiral stairway. Elephant!”

“Yes, and my sitting-room is in the other tower, and thank goodness, Ella would find it a back-breaking job to get up my steps,” retaliated Miss Louise. “Giraffe!”

Those strange old ladies had actually had the original steps to the towers changed to suit their particular grouches! They really spent very little time in their tower fastnesses, however, as they were much happier when together and quarreling.

A tale was told in the neighborhood that once Miss Ella had neglected or forgotten to contradict Miss Louise on some vital subject such as whether it was or was not going to rain, and Miss Louise was so uneasy that she sent post haste for Dr. Allison.

“I was afraid it was a stroke or something,” whimpered Miss Louise. She worried herself into a sick headache before the doctor arrived, and then the fat one had to go to bed and take the

medicine and Miss Ella was forced to repent of her misbehavior by nursing her sister. Dr. Allison left strict injunctions that she was not to worry her poor sister again by agreeing with her.

Grantly was filled with fine old furniture and all kinds of curios. A great-uncle had been a traveler in the Orient and many were the teakwood cabinets and jade ornaments; curious Japanese prints; Chinese embroidered fans and screens; bronze Buddhas; rare vases with inlaid flowers and birds; Toby jugs and lacquered teapots; quaint armor, swords and daggers; everything in fact that might be found in an old house that a traveler had once called home.

“Does Tempy dust all these beautiful things?” asked Mrs. Carter, who was quite carried away by the wonders in her landladies’ home.

“Bless you, no! She doesn’t dare to touch a one of them,” laughed Miss Louise. “Ella dusts the high ones, I dust the low.” She said it quite with the air of the song:

“You take the high road,
I’ll take the low.”

With all of its beauties, Grantly was undergoing a process of slow decay. Lack of paint and neglected leaks were getting in their insidious work. There never seemed to be money enough for the owners to afford the needed repairs, and if there ever was any money at all, they could never come to an agreement on

which repairs were the most urgent.

The overseer's house was suffering in the same way. A kind of dry rot had attacked portions of it. Weather-boarding was so loose in places that Bobby could pull it off. Steps groaned and floors creaked; shutters had lost fastenings; putty had dropped from the window panes, which were insecurely held in place with tacks; mop-boarding and floors had parted company many years before. All of these little details had escaped the inexperienced eyes of Douglas and Helen when they decided that this was the place of all others to spend the winter. Dr. Wright, who had accompanied them, had been more noticing, but had wisely decided to say nothing, as he wanted his patient to become interested in tinkering at small jobs, and he could see that this little farm would keep Mr. Carter busy.

The ladies of Grantly had promised to have everything in order before the tenants should arrive, but disagreeing on which workman they should employ, the time had slipped by and nothing had been done.

The pump to the well had lost its sucker and had to be primed before water could be got. This meant that the person who pumped must remember to fill a can of water and leave it for the next pumper. The yard gate shut with difficulty and opened with more. The stovepipe in the kitchen had a large hole in one side and if the wind shifted, so did the smoke, seeking an outlet through the nearest aperture.

All of these disagreeable features dawned gradually on our

girls. They saw nothing to be complained of in those rare October days. Accustomed as they had become to camp life, they made light of any inconveniences. Their father was happy and getting better every day, so any small hardships that might fall to their share were to be lightly borne.

CHAPTER V

VALHALLA

That was the name Nan gave to the little winter home.

“Valhalla is the place where the dead warriors go, and that is what we all of us are after the day’s work is done.”

Commuting at first was very tiring for both Nan and Lucy. Catching trains was hard on their nerves and the trip seemed interminable, but in a few weeks they fell into the attitude of mind of all commuters and just accepted it as part of the daily routine. It became no more irksome than doing one’s hair or brushing one’s teeth.

The girls made many friends on the train and before the winter was over really enjoyed the time spent going to and from school. Billy Sutton was Nan’s devoted cavalier. He managed, if possible, to sit by her and together they would study. He helped her with her mathematics, and she, quick at languages, would correct his French exercises. Those were sad mornings for Billy when the seat by Nan was taken before they reached Preston. He cursed his luck that Preston should not have been beyond Grantly instead of a station nearer to town. Coming home he always saw to it that no “fresh kid” got ahead of him in the choice of seats. He would get to the station ahead of time and watch with eagle eye for Nan’s sedate little figure; then he would pounce on her like

a veritable eagle and possess himself of her books and parcels. Thereafter no power could have separated him from her short of the brakeman who cruelly called out: "P-errr-reston!"

Billy's younger sister Mag was of great assistance to her big brother in his manœuvres. She struck up a warm friendship with Lucy, and since the two younger girls were together, what more natural than that he and Nan should be the same?

"How would you like me to run you over to see Lucy for a while this afternoon?" he would ask in the lordly and nonchalant manner of big brothers, and Mag would be duly grateful, all the time laughing in her sleeve, as is the way with small sisters.

The only person who ever got ahead of Billy on the homeward voyage was Count de Lestis. That man of the world with lordly condescension permitted Billy to carry all the books and parcels and then quietly appropriated the seat by Nan. That was hard enough, but what was harder was to see how Nan dimpled under the compliments the count paid her, and how gaily she laughed at his wit, and how easily she held her own in the very interesting conversation into which they plunged. Billy, boiling and raging, could not help catching bits of it. Actually Nan was quoting poetry to the handsome foreigner. With wonder her schoolboy friend heard her telling the count of how she had gone up in an aeroplane the preceding summer and what her sensations were. She had never told him all these things.

"And why is it you like so much to fly?" the count asked. "Is it merely the physical sensation?"

“Oh no, there is something else. I’ll tell you a little bit of poetry I learned the other day from a magazine. That is the way I feel, somehow:

“Well, good-by! We’re going!
Where?
Why there is no knowing
Where!
We’ve grown tired, we don’t know why,
Of our section of the sky,
Of our little patch of air,
And we’re going, going!
Where?

“Who would ever stop to care? —
Far off land or farther sea
Where our feet again are free,
We shall fare all unafraid
Where no trail or furrow’s made —
Where there’s room enough, room enough, room enough for
laughter!
And we’ll find our Land o’ Dreaming at a long day’s close,
We’ll find our Land o’ Dreaming – perhaps, who knows?
To-morrow – or the next day – or maybe the day after!

“So good-by! We’re going!
Why?
O, there is no knowing
Why!

Something's singing in our veins,
Something that no book explains.
There's no magic in your air!
And we're going, going!
Where?

“Where there's magic and to spare!
So we break our chains and go.
Life? What is it but to know
Southern cross and Pleiades,
Sunny lands and windy seas;
Where there's time enough, time enough, time enough for
laughter!
We'll find our Land o' Dreaming, so away! Away!
We'll find our Land o' Dreaming – or at least we may —
Tomorrow, or the next day, or maybe the day after!”

Nan Carter was a very charming girl at any time, but Nan Carter reciting poetry was irresistible. So the count found her. Her eyes looked more like forest pools than ever and the trembling Billy was very much afraid the handsome nobleman was going to fall into said pools. He gritted his teeth with the determination to be on the spot ready to pull him out by his aristocratic and well-shod heels if he should take such a tumble.

“Ah, you have the wanderlust, too! I'd like to go with you to your Land o' Dreaming.” Fortunately Billy did not hear this remark, as the brakeman opened the door at this juncture and shouted the name of a station.

For once Billy was glad when the brakeman finally called: "P-err-reston!" If he had to get out, so had the hated count. He never had taken as much of a fancy to de Lestis as the other members of the neighborhood had, anyhow, and now he knew why he had never liked him.

"He is a selfish, arrogant foreigner," he raged on in his boyish way. "He might have let me sit with Nan part of the way, anyhow."

Nan went home quite pleased with the interesting conversation she had had on the train. The count was rapidly becoming a warm friend of the family. Everybody liked him but Lucy, and she had no especial reason for disliking him.

"He's got no time for me and I guess that's the reason," she said when questioned. "Mag doesn't cotton to him much, either."

"Well, I should think you would be glad for Father to have somebody to talk to," said Helen. "You and Mag are too young to have much in common with a grown-up gentleman."

"Pooh, Miss Grandmother! I'm most as old as Nan and he cottons to her for fair. I know why he doesn't think much of Mag and me – it is because he knows we know he is nothing but a Dutchman."

"Dutchman! Nonsense! Dutchmen proper come from Holland and Count de Lestis is a Hungarian."

"Well, he can talk Dutch like a Prussian, anyhow. You oughter hear him jabbering with that German family that live over near Preston. He brings old Mr. Blitz newspapers all the time and they

laugh and laugh over jokes in them; at least, they must be jokes to make them laugh so.”

“Of course the count speaks German. He speaks a great many languages,” declared Helen with the dignified air that she thought necessary to assume when she and Lucy got in a discussion.

“Well, what’s the reason he ain’t fighting for his country? Tell me that! Mag says that Billy says that if his country was at war you wouldn’t catch him buying farms in strange countries, like this de Lestis. He says he’d be in the fight, if he couldn’t do anything but beat a drum.”

“But you see he is not in sympathy with the cause, child. All of the Austrians and Hungarians are not on the Kaiser’s side. A whole lot of them believe in a more democratic form of government than Emperor William wants. The count explained all that to Father. He says he could not conscientiously fight with Prussia against democracy.”

“All that sounds mighty fine but I like men that fight,” and Lucy tossed her head. “Me and Mag both like men that fight.”

“Mag and I,” admonished Helen.

The gentleman in question had just been off on a business trip. He had much business in New York and Washington and sometimes made flying visits to Chicago. He was interested in a land agency and was hoping to import some Hungarian and Serbian families to the United States. He had bought up quite a tract of land in Virginia, making cash payments that showed he had unlimited means.

“They make excellent servants,” he told the Misses Grant, “far superior to your negroes. The Serbs are especially fine farmers. It is really a nation of yeomen. They could make the barren tracts of Virginia blossom like the rose.”

“Well, bring them over then.” The sisters almost agreed about this but they had a diverging point in that Miss Ella thought she would rather have a family of Hungarians, since that was the count’s nationality; while Miss Louise fancied some Serbs, because they were at least fighting on the side of the Allies.

But to return to “Valhalla.”

Douglas did not at all approve of the name Nan had given the little home. “I am not a dead warrior when the day is over nor do I mean to be one ever,” she declared.

She started in on her winter of teaching with all the energy and vim of the proverbial new broom. She gloried in the fact that she was able to turn her education to some account; and while the remuneration of a country school teacher is certainly not munificent, it helped a great deal towards the family expenses.

The rent from the Carters’ pretty home in Richmond was all they had to live on now, except for a small sum in bank left over from the camp earnings. It would be possible to manage if no clothes had to be bought, and one and all promised to do with last year’s suits.

Only a born teacher could make a real success of a country school where thirty children must be taught in all grades up to high-school standing. It took infinite patience, boundless good

humor, and a systematic saving of time, together with a keen sense of fun to get Douglas over each day. She found the school in a state of insurrection, due to having proved too much for the first teacher, who had found urgent business elsewhere, and then for a series of substitutes until the present incumbent, Miss Douglas Carter, was installed.

She made a little speech the first morning, telling the pupils quite frankly that this was her first year of teaching but that it was not going to be her last; that she was determined to make good and she asked their help; that she was willing to give them all she had in the way of knowledge and strength but that they must meet her half-way and do their best. She gave them to understand from the very first that she intended to have good order and that obedience was to be the first lesson taught.

Most of the children fell into her plans with enthusiasm. Of course there were the reactionaries who had to be dealt with summarily. Bobby was one of them. He was very difficult to manage in school. Never having been under the least restraint before in all of his seven years, it was hard on him to have to sit still and pretend to study, and he made it harder on Douglas. The faction opposed to government in any form egged him on. They laughed at his impertinent remarks to the teacher and bribed him to do and say many outrageous things.

Poor Douglas was tempted to confess herself beaten as far as her little brother was concerned and give up trying to teach him. He was rather young for school, she almost fooled herself

into believing; but there was a sturdiness and determination in Douglas Carter's make-up that would not let her succumb to difficulties.

"I will succeed! He shall learn! My pupils must respect me, and if I can't make my own little brother obey me, how can I expect to control the rest of them?"

She asked herself what she would do with any other pupil, not her brother, who gave her so much trouble.

"Write a note to his mother or father, of course," she answered.

"But I can't bear to bother Father, and Mother would blame me and no doubt pet Bobby. I'll write a note to Dr. Wright and his disapproval will hurt Bobby more than anything that could happen."

And so she wrote the following letter to Bobby's employer:

Preston, Va., R. F. D. Route 1.

November 1, 1916.

Dear Dr. Wright:

I am sorry to inform you that your chauffeur, Robert Carter, Jr., is misbehaving at school in such a way that his teacher is afraid he will have to be expelled. She has done everything in her power to make him be more considerate but he is very, very naughty and tries to worry his teacher all the time.

Very sincerely,

Douglas Carter.

Dr. Wright telephoned that he would be down to see them on

Saturday after receiving Douglas's note; but the message was sent via Grantly, as the Carters had no telephone, and Miss Ella and Miss Louise could not agree just what his name was or when he said he was coming. So the matter was lost sight of in the wrangle that ensued and the word was not delivered until too late.

CHAPTER VI

CHLOE

To Helen had fallen the most difficult and trying part of the program: training a cheap, country servant to the ways of civilization. Many times did she think of Miss Louise's trained monkey as she labored with Chloe, with whom she had to start all over every day.

A seven o'clock breakfast must be ready for Nan and Lucy, and the one morning that she left it to Chloe the girls had to go off with nothing more comforting on their little insides than cold bread and milk. That was when the new maid had first arrived and Helen had not sounded the depths of her incompetence and ignorance.

"What would you have done in your own home if you had had to have an early breakfast for someone?" asked Helen, curious to know if the girl knew how to do anything.

"I'd 'a' done what I done this mornin': let 'um fill up on what col' victuals they was lef' on de she'f."

Helen endeavored to introduce Chloe to the mysteries of the fireless cooker, which they had brought with them from camp, but the girl seemed to think there was some kind of magic in a thing that cooked without fire and would none of it.

"I ain't a-goin' ter tetch no sich hoodoo doin's as dat 'ere box,"

she asserted. "It mus' hab a kinder debble in it ter keep it hot 'thout a piece er dry wood or nothin'."

Helen was lifting out the pot full of steaming oatmeal that she had put in the cooker the night before, determined that her sisters should not have to go off again with such cold comfort.

"All right, you keep up the wood fire and I'll attend to the fireless cooker," laughed Helen. "What makes the stove smoke? It was burning all right yesterday."

"Smoking 'cause dat hoodoo debble done got in it," and Chloe rolled her great eyes until nothing showed but the whites.

"Smoking because you've got the damper turned down," and Helen righted the appliance. "Have you set the table?"

"Yassum!"

"Put everything on it just as I showed you yesterday?"

"Nom! I ain't put nothin' on it. I jes' sot the cheers up to it, but all the gals is got ter do is jes' retch the things off'n the sidebo'd."

That meant that Helen must run and get the table set as quickly as possible as it was three minutes to seven.

Chloe followed her meekly to the dining-room to do her bidding.

"Run back to the kitchen, Chloe, and look at the biscuit, and see if they are burning," cried Helen as she rapidly placed the silver on the table.

A few minutes later, having set the table she hastened to the kitchen. An ominous odor greeted her.

"Chloe, did you look at the biscuit?"

“Yassum! They was gettin’ ready to burn. I guess they is ’bout burned by now.”

“Oh, Chloe, why didn’t you take them out?” and poor Helen thought maybe she was going to weep with exasperation.

“You nebber tol’ me ter do mo’n look at ’em. My maw an’ Sis Tempy both done caution me not to be too frisky ’bout doin’ things ’til the white folks tells me. Tempy says white folks laks ter boss ’bout ev’rything.”

“Oh, for a trained monkey!” thought Helen. “I could at least give one a good switching.”

Chloe had only two characteristics to work on: one was perfect good-nature, the other unbounded health and strength. Helen wondered if she had enough material to go on to evolve even a passable servant. Anyhow she meant to try. She determined to do the cooking herself for a little while with Chloe as scullion, and also to have the girl do the housework.

Of course Mrs. Carter was of absolutely no assistance. She held to her purpose of semi-invalidism. The family would not listen to her when she offered the only sane suggestion for the winter: that they should oust the tenant and move back into their own pretty, comfortable, well-furnished home; Douglas to make her début in Richmond society and the other girls continue at school. As for money – why not just make bills? They had perfectly good credit, and what was credit for but to use? Dr. Wright had been so stern with her, and Douglas so severe and unfilial, and they had intimated that she wanted to kill her dear

Robert, so she had just let them have their own way. She insisted she had not the strength to cope with these changed conditions and took on the habits of an invalid.

Helen, remembering how Susan, who was supposed to help with the cooking at the camp, had been kept busy waiting on her mistress, feared Chloe would be pressed into lady's maid service, too. Indeed Mrs. Carter attempted it, but Chloe proved too rough for the job, and that poor lady was forced to run the ribbons in her lingerie herself.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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