

Warner Anne

Sunshine Jane



Anne Warner
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CHAPTER I GENERAL IGNORANCE

THERE was something pathetic in the serene unconsciousness of the little village as the stage came lumbering down the hillside, bearing its freight of portent. So many things were going to be changed forever after, – and no one knew it. Such a vast difference was going speedily to make itself felt, and not a soul was aware even of what a bigger soul it was so soon to be. Old Mrs. Croft, clear at the other end of town and paralyzed for twenty years, hadn't the slightest conception of what a leading part was being prepared for her to play. Poor Katie Croft, her daughter-in-law and slave, whose one prayer was for freedom, dreamed not that the answer was now at last coming near. Mrs. Cowmull, sitting on her porch awaiting the "artist who had advertised," knew not who or what or how old he might be or the interest that would soon be hers. Poor Emily Mead, shelling peas on the bench at the back of her mother's house, frowned fretfully and, putting back her great lock of rich chestnut hair with an impatient gesture, wished that she might see "just one real man before she died," – and the man was even then jolting towards her. Miss Debby Vane, putting last touches to the flowers on her guest-room table, where Madeleine would soon see them, was also sweetly unaware of the approach of momentous events. She thought but of Madeleine, the distant cousin whose parents wanted to see if absence would break up an obnoxious love affair, and so were sending her to Miss Debby, who was "only too pleased."

"A love affair," she whispered rapturously. "A *real* love affair in this town!" And then she pursed her lips delightfully, never guessing that she was to see so much besides.

Meanwhile Miss Matilda Drew stood looking sternly out of her sister Susan's window, considering if there were any necessary yet up to now forgotten point to be impressed upon Jane the instant that she should arrive. Miss Matilda was naturally as ignorant as all the rest, – as ignorant even as poor Susan, lying primly straight behind her on the bed. Susan was a widow and an invalid, not paralyzed like old Mrs. Croft, but pretty helpless. Matilda had lived with her for five years and tended her assiduously, as she grew more and more feeble. Now Matilda was "about give out," and – "just like an answer out of a clear sky," as Matilda said – their niece Jane, whom neither had seen since she was a mite in curls fifteen years ago, had written to ask if she might spend her holiday with them. They had said "Yes," and Matilda was going away for a rest while Jane kept house and waited on her poor old aunt. Jane was one of the passengers now rattling along in the stage. She differed widely from the others and from every one else in the village, but all put together, they formed that mass known to literature as "the situation." I think myself that it was the rest that formed "the situation" and that Jane formed "the key," but I may be prejudiced. Anyway, "key" or not, Miss Matilda's niece was a sweet, brown-skinned, bright-haired girl, with a happy face, great, beautiful eyes, and a heart that beat every second in truer accord with the great working principles of the universe. She was the only one among them now who had a foot upon the step that led to the path "higher up." And yet because she was the only one, she had seen her way to come gladly and teach them what they had never known; not only that, but also to learn of them the greatest lesson of her own life. So we see that although conscious of both hands overflowing with gifts, Jane really was as ignorant, in God's eyes, as all the rest. She had gone far enough beyond the majority to know that to give is the divinest joy which one may know, but she had not gone far enough to realize that in the greatest outpouring of generosity which we can ever give vent to, a vacuum is created which receives back from those

we benefit gifts way beyond the value of our own. "I shall bring so much happiness here," ran the undercurrent of her thought; she never imagined that Fate had brought her to this simple village to fashion herself unto better things.

So all, alike unaware – those in the stage and those awaiting its advent with passengers and post – drew long, relieved breaths as it passed with rattle and clatter over the bridge and into the main street.

CHAPTER II

EVERYBODY GETS THERE

JANE sat on the rear seat with old Mr. Cattermole, who was coming home to his daughter, Mrs. Mead.

"Ever been here before?" old Mr. Cattermole asked her.

"No, never."

"Hey?"

"No, never."

"Once?"

"Never."

"What?"

"Never!"

"I'll tell you what it is," said Mr. Cattermole, beaming benevolently, "it's the jolting. It keeps me from hearing what you say."

Jane nodded, smiling.

But old Mr. Cattermole wasn't long inconvenienced by the jolting.

"Who you going to stop with?" he asked next.

"Mrs. Ralston and Miss Drew."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Ralston and Miss Drew."

"Who? I don't hear you."

"Miss Drew."

"The Crews? – There ain't no such people in town."

"Miss Drew!" Jane became slightly crimson.

"I'll tell you," said Mr. Cattermole, "we'll wait. I can't hear. Really I can't."

The next minute they arrived at Mrs. Cowmull's, since she lived in the first house on the street. Lorenzo Rath, the artist, who had been sitting on the middle seat with Madeleine, now pressed her hand, twisted about and shook Jane's, nodded to old Mr. Cattermole, leaned forward and dragged his suit-case from under the seat, and then wriggled out, over two boxes and under a flapping curtain, and down on to the sidewalk. Mrs. Cowmull was standing on the porch, trying to look hospitable and unconscious at the same time. "Here," said the stage driver, suddenly delivering Lorenzo's trunk on to the top of his head, – "and here's the lampshade and the codfish, – they get down here, too."

Lorenzo couldn't help laughing. "Au revoir," he cried, waving the lampshade as the steps began to move.

"We'll meet again soon," Madeleine cried, her face full of bright color.

"Yes, of course."

Then they were off.

"Seemed a nice young feller," said old Mr. Cattermole to Jane.

"Yes." She tried to speak loudly.

"Hey!"

"Yes."

"I'll tell you," said old Mr. Cattermole benevolently, "you come and see my granddaughter Emily, and then we'll talk. My granddaughter's a great student. You'll like her. She's full of the new ideas and new books and all that. We're very proud of her. Only she don't get married."

Then the stage stopped, and Mrs. Mead came running out. "Oh, Father, did you buy the new magazines, – on the train, you know?"

Old Mr. Cattermole was descending backwards with the care of a cat in an apple-tree. "It's my daughter," he said to Jane. "I can always hear her because she speaks so plain. Yes, Emma, it was dusty, very dusty."

"This lawn-sprinkler is your's, ain't it?" said the stage driver, jerking it off the roof into Mrs. Mead's arms. "Here's his bag, too."

And then they went on again. Madeleine now had space to turn about. "You'll come and see me?" she asked Jane earnestly; "it'll be so nice. We're both strangers here."

"I'll try," Jane answered, "but I shall be closely tied to the house. Aunt Susan is an invalid, you see. I'll not only have all the work, but if I go out, that poor sick woman will be left helpless and alone up-stairs."

"Perhaps I can come and see you, then," said Madeleine. "I'll have the time to come, if you'll have the time to see me."

"I don't know anything about what my life will be," said Jane. "As I told you on the train, I've only seen my aunts once in my life and that was fifteen years ago. But I should think that you could come and see us. I should think that a little company would do Aunt Susan a lot of good. I'm sure that it would, in fact. But she may not like to see strangers. I really don't know a thing about it. I'm all in the dark."

"I'll come and ask if I may come," said Madeleine brightly. "If she sees me, maybe she'll like me. Most everybody does." She laughed.

"I'm sure of that," Jane said, laughing, too. Then the stage stopped at Miss Debby Vane's, and Miss Debby came flying down to embrace her cousin. "Thanks be to God that you're here safe, my dear. These awful storms at sea have just about frightened me to death."

"But I was on land, Aunt Deborah." Madeleine, in getting down, had gotten into a warm embrace at the same time.

"I know, dear, I know. But one can't remember that all the time – can one?" Miss Debby was kissing her over and over.

"Your step-ladder. Look out!" cried the stage driver, and they had barely time to jump from under.

Then Madeleine reached up and clasped Jane's hand. "We shall be friends," she said earnestly; "I've never met any one whom I've liked quite in the same way that I like you. Do let us see all that we can of one another."

"I want to, I know," Jane answered.

The stage driver was already remounting his seat.

"Au revoir," Madeleine cried, just as Lorenzo had done.

"Just for a little," Jane called back, and then she was alone in the stage, rattling down the long, green-arched street to its furthest end.

"There goes the stage," Katie Croft called out to her mother-in-law in the next room. "Now Miss Drew'll have her niece and be able to get away for a little rest."

"If it was a daughter-in-law, she couldn't, maybe," said a voice from the next room; "the rest is going to be poor, sweet Susan Ralston's, anyhow. Oh, my Susan Ralston, my dear, sweet Susan Ralston, my loving Susan Ralston, where I used to go and call!"

"Why, Mother, you haven't so much as thought of Mrs. Ralston for years." Katie's voice was very sharp.

"Nobody knows what I think of," wailed the voice from the other room. "My thoughts is music. They fly and sing all night. They sing Caw, Caw, and they fly like feathers."

Katie Croft walked over and shut the door with a bang. Katie was almost beside herself.

The stage now drew up before the Ralston house.

Miss Matilda quitted the window, where she had stood watching for an hour, and went to the gate. Her emotions were quite tumultuous – for her. Single-handed she had tended her sister for five

years, and now she was going to have a rest. She had had very trying symptoms, and the doctor had advised a rest, – three weeks of freedom, night and day. She was going away on a real holiday, going back to the place where she had taught school before the summons had come to cherish, love, and protect her only sister, who was not strong and had property. It seemed like a dream, – a wild, lively, and joyful dream. She almost smiled as she thought of what was at hand.

Jane descended, her small trunk came bang down beside her in the same instant, and the driver was paid and drove off. The aunt and niece then turned to go into the house.

"Well, and so it's you!" Matilda's tone and glance were slightly inquisitorial, and more than slightly dictatorial. "I'm glad to see you're strong. You'll need be. She's an awful care. She ain't up much now. Isn't up at all sometimes for weeks. Sleeps considerable. Take off your hat and coat and hang them there. That's the place where they belong."

Jane obeyed without saying anything. But her smile spoke for her.

"Hungry?" inquired Matilda.

"A little."

"I surmised you would be and waited supper. Thought you'd see how I fixed hers then. She's eating very little. Less and less all the time. There's a garden to weed, too. Awful inconvenient out there across two stiles. But she won't give it up. She pays me to tend it, or I'd let the dandelions root it out in short order. But I tend it."

They had gone into the kitchen, where a kettle stewed feebly over a half-dead fire. "Sit down," said Matilda. "I'll fix her supper first. She takes her tea cold, so I save it from morning and heat it up with a little boiling water, *so*. Then there's this bit of fish I saved from day before yesterday, and I cut a piece of bread. No butter, because her stomach's delicate. You'll see that she'll hardly eat this. Watch now."

Jane sat and watched, still smiling.

"Mr. Rath, the artist, came down in the stage with you, didn't he?" Miss Matilda went on. "What kind of a young man was he? Somebody'll tell you, so it might as well be me, what's brought him here. Mrs. Cowmull's trying to marry off her niece, Emily Mead. There aren't any men in town, so she advertised. She gave it out that she wanted a boarder, but everybody see through that. That's what marriage has come to these days, catching men to board 'em and then marrying them when they're thinking of something else. I thank Heaven I ain't had nothing to do with any marriage. They're a bad business. There, that's your supper."

Jane started slightly. Her own cold fish and lukewarm tea sat before her. "Shan't I take Aunt Susan's up first?" she asked, recollecting that she still had some lunch in her bag, and that Matilda would be leaving early in the morning.

"No need. She likes things cold. You ought to see her face if she gets anything boiling in her mouth. It's no use to give her nothing hot. You'd think it was a snake. I give it up the third time she burnt her."

"But I ought to go up and see her, I think; she hasn't seen me since I was such a little girl."

"No need. You go ahead and enjoy your supper without bothering over her. She knows you're here, and she isn't one that's interested in things. She'll read an old shelf paper for hours, but carry her up a new paper and like as not when you get to the bed with it, you'll find her asleep. She sleeps a lot."

Jane – thus urged – picked the chilled fish with a fork and considered.

"I'll show you about the house after you've done eating," the aunt continued presently; "it's easy taken care of, for I keep it all shut up. Just Susan's room and mine and the kitchen is open. The neighbors won't bother you, for I give them to understand long ago as I wasn't one with time to waste. There isn't any one in the place that a woman with any sense would want to bother with, anyhow."

"I don't fancy that I'll have time to be lonesome," smiled Jane, bravely swallowing some tea.

"You'd have if it wasn't for the garden. I don't know whatever in the world makes Susan set such store by that garden. She will have it that it shall be kept up in memory of her husband, and you never saw such weeds. I've often sat down backwards when one come up – often."

"I can't see it at all," with a glance out of the window.

"You can't from here. And it's got to be watered, and she counts every pot full of water from her bed. She can hear me pumping. The birds dig up the seeds as fast as I can plant 'em, and I never saw no sense in slaving in the sun over what you can buy in the shade any day. – Are you done?"

"Yes, I'm done."

"Then come on."

"Can I spread the tray?"

"Tray! She doesn't have a tray. What should I fuss with a tray for, when I've got two hands?"

Jane rose and stood by the table in silence, watching the cup filled from the standing teapot and the plate ornamented with a lonely bit of fish and a slice of bread. "Don't you butter the bread?"

"She's in bed so much she mustn't have rich food," Matilda answered; "there, now it's ready. Come on."

"Shan't I carry anything?"

"I can take it, I guess. I've carried it alone for five years; I guess I can manage it to-night."

Jane followed up the stairs in silence; Matilda marched ahead with a firm, heavy tread.

"Shall I knock for you?"

"I don't know what for. She yells anyway, whenever I come in, whether she's knocked or not. Just open the door."

Jane opened the door gently, and they went in together. The room was half darkened, and only a little sharp nose showed over the top of the bedquilt.

"Here's your supper," said the affectionate sister, "and here's Jane."

A shrill cry was followed by two eyes tipping upward beyond the nose. "Oh, are you Jane?" There was a lot of pathos in the tone.

The girl moved quickly to the bedside. "I hope that we're going to be very happy," she said; "we must love one another very much, you know."

The invalid hoisted herself on to an elbow and looked towards the plate which Matilda was holding forth.

"Oh, my! Fish again!" she wailed.

Later – on their way back to the kitchen fire – Matilda said significantly: "Most ungrateful person I ever saw, she is. But just don't notice what she says. It's the only way to get on. I keep her room tidy and I keep her house clean and I keep her garden weeded. I'm careful of her money, and she's well fed. I don't know what more any one could ask, but she ain't satisfied and she ain't always polite, but you'll only have three weeks of what I've had for five years, so I guess it won't kill you."

"Oh, I think that I'll be all right," Jane answered cheerfully.

"The stage is ordered for seven in the morning, and I shall get up at half-past four," the aunt continued. "You can sleep till five just as well. I'm going to bed now, and you'd better do the same thing."

"Yes, I think so," said Jane cheerfully; "good night."

CHAPTER III

MATILDA TEACHES

MATILDA seated herself bolt upright on one of the kitchen chairs and drew a hard, stiff sigh.

"It'll be a great rest to get away," she said, "more of a rest than any one but me will ever know. You see, she's left all she's got to me in her will, so I'm bound in honor to keep a pretty sharp watch over everything. I can't even take a chance at her sinking suddenly away, with the room not picked up or a cobweb in some high corner. I've seen her will, and she ain't left you a cent, so you won't have the same responsibility. It'll be easier for you."

"I'll do my very best," said Jane.

"The trouble is I'm too conscientious," said Matilda. "I was always conscientious, and she was always slack. It's an awful failing. It's a warning, too, for now there she lays, snug as a bug in a rug, and me with New Asthma in my arm from tending her and the house."

"You'll get over all that very soon," said the niece soothingly.

Matilda glanced at her suspiciously. "No, I shan't. I may get better, but I shan't get over it. It's a nerve trouble and can't never be completely cured. A doctor can alligator it, but he can't cure it. I'll have it till I die."

Jane was silent.

"You wrote that you were some kind of a nurse. What kind did you say you were?"

"I'm a Sunshine Nurse."

"A Sunshine Nurse! What's that? Some new idea of never pulling down the shades?"

Jane laughed. "Not exactly. It's an Order just founded by a doctor. He picked out the girls himself, and he sends them where he chooses for training."

"What's the training?"

Jane looked at her and hesitated a little. "I expect you'll laugh," she said finally; "it does sound funny to any one who isn't used to such ideas. We're to see the sun as always shining, and always shine ourselves, and our training consists in going where there isn't any brightness and being bright, and going where there isn't any happiness and teaching happiness."

"Sounds to me like nonsense," said Matilda, rising abruptly; "don't you go letting up the sitting-room shades and fading the upholstering, – that's all I've got to say. Come now and I'll show you about locking up, and then we'll go to bed."

Jane obeyed with promptness and was most observant and attentive. Matilda loaded her with behests and instructions and seemed appreciative of the intelligence with which they were received.

"I wouldn't go in for nothing fancy," she said, as they completed their task; "the less you stir up her and the house, the easier it'll be for me when I come back. You don't want to ever forget that I'm coming back, and don't put any fancy ideas into her head. There's plenty to do here without going out of your way to upset my ways."

"I'll remember," said Jane.

Then they started up-stairs, and a few minutes later the Sunshine Nurse was alone in her own room, free to stand quietly by the window and let her outward gaze form a bond between the still beauty of a country night and the glad vision of work in plenty, and that of a kind which Miss Matilda couldn't prohibit, because she knew not the world in which such work is done.

"Not – " said Jane to herself with a little whimsical smile – "not but what I'm 'most sure that my teaching will be manifest in a lot of material changes, too, but by the time that she comes back, her own feelings will be sufficiently 'alligatored' so that she'll see life differently also. God's plan is just as much for her good in sending her away as it is for mine in sending me here, and I mustn't

forget that for a minute. I'll be busy and she'll be busy, and we'll both be learning and we'll both be teaching and we'll both be being necessary."

She drew a chair close and sat down, full of her own bright and helpful thoughts. Much of love and wonder came flooding into her through the medium of the sweet, calm night without. "It's like being among angels," she fancied, and felt a close companionship with those who had known the Great White Messengers face to face.

Long she sat there, praying the prayer that is just one indrawn breath of content and uplifted consciousness. Not many girls of twenty-two would have seen so much in that not unusual situation, and yet it was to her so brimful of fair possibilities that she could hardly wait for morning to begin work.

When she rose to undress, when she climbed into the plain, hard bed that received her so kindly, when she slept at last, all was with the same sense of responsibility mixed with energetic intention. All that she had "asked" in the usual sense of "asking in prayer" had been "to be shown exactly how," and because she was one of those who know every prayer to be answered, in the hour of its making she knew that to be answered, too. "I'll be led along," was her last thought before sleeping, and it swept the fringe of her consciousness, leaving her to enter dreamland with the happy security of a trusting child.

It really seemed no time at all before Matilda rapped loudly on her door, bringing her suddenly to the knowledge that the hour to begin all the longed-for work was at hand.

"Five o'clock!" Matilda howled gently through the crack.

"Yes, yes," she cried in response.

The door opened a bit wider. "You'd better get right up or you'll go to sleep again," Matilda said, putting her head in, "right this minute."

"Yes, I will."

She sat up in bed to prove it.

"All right," said her aunt – and shut the door.

Jane had unpacked her small trunk the night before, and so was able to dress quickly and get down-stairs without a minute wasted. She found Matilda in the kitchen, very busy with the stove.

"I do hope you'll remember what I said last night," she said, shoveling out ashes with an energy that filled the room with dust. "I can't have her habits all upset. It'll be no good giving me this change if you go and spoil her. Remember that."

"I won't make any trouble," promised Jane. "I'll always remember that you're coming back."

As she spoke, she saw again the thin, hopeless face on the pillow up-stairs and knew that Matilda herself was to know a glad surprise over the change which should welcome her home-coming. It was the learning to instantly realize the better side of those who insisted on exhibiting their worst that was the leading force in the training of that beaming little Order to which she belonged. The Sunshine Nurses were forbidden to consider anything or anybody as fixedly wrong either in kind, conception, or working out. It would be a very comfortable way of looking at things – even for such mere, ordinary, everyday folk as you and me.

Matilda now said, "Ugh, ugh!" over the dust and proceeded to dive into the wood-box with one hand and get a sliver in her thumb.

"In the morning she has tea," she said, going to the window to put her hand to rights. "One cup. Piece of bread. At noon, whatever is handy. Night, cup of tea and whatever she fancies. Bread or a cracker usually. She eats very little and less all the time. The cat eats more than she does. He's a snooper, that cat, – you'll have to watch out."

Jane didn't seem to understand. "A – a snooper?"

"Steals food. Awful thief. Slap him when you catch him at it; it's all you can do. Sometimes I throw water over him. He'll make off with what would be a meal for a hired man, and he's sly as any other thief."

"Can't I help you with your hand?"

"No, you can't. I get lots of them. They bother me a little because Mrs. Croft's cousin died of blood-poison from one. There, it's out. What was I saying? Oh, yes, the cat."

"Where is she now?"

"It's a he. Named Alfred for her husband. He's up in her room now. Always sleeps on her bed. She will have him, and I humor her. She's my only sister and she can't live long and she's left me all her money, and I humor her. It's my plain duty."

"Is it healthy for an invalid to sleep with a cat?"

"No, it ain't. But I promised to do whatever she said about the cat and the garden, and I do."

"I'm sure it's very good in you," Jane murmured, looking out of the window.

"It is. I'm a good woman. I do my whole duty, and there's not many in a town this size can say as much."

"Where is the garden?"

"I'll show you, if you don't mind getting your feet wet. I have my rubbers on already, to travel, so I can go right there now while the fire is kindling."

"Is it wet?"

"Most grass is wet, at five in the morning."

Jane wanted to laugh. "I mean, isn't there a path?"

"Part way, and then you have to climb two fences."

"Climb! Two!" the niece turned in surprise.

"Climb two fences. You never saw such a place. The strip between is rented for a cow-pasture. That's why there's two fences."

"But why not have gates?"

"Don't ask me. Find out if you can. I've lived here five years, and I ain't found out. You try and see if you'll do better. She's very secretive, and so was he before he died. I've just had to get along the best I could. She fails and fails steady, but it don't seem to affect her health none, and now at last it's affected mine instead and give me neophytes in my left arm."

Jane turned her head and looked some more out of the window.

"We'll go now. Might as well. The kettle will get to boiling while we're away, and then we'll have breakfast. It boils slow, because I've got the eggs in it for my lunch. Come on."

The question of the wet grass seemed to have faded. They went out the kitchen door. It was a clear, bright morning. "Weedy weather," commented Matilda, and led the way down the path.

"It's a pretty place," said Jane, her eyes roaming happily.

"Yes, I suppose so. But it takes an artist or some one who hasn't lived in it for five years to feel that way." She paused to climb the first fence. It was three rails high and very awkward. "I'll go over first," she said. "Think of it; I've done this six times a day for five years."

Jane didn't wonder that she was so agile at it. "But how funny to have a garden away off here!" she said.

Matilda was now over on the other side. "Yes, and think of keeping it up. Folks about here make no bones of telling me that they were both half-witted, only as she's my sister, they try to give me to understand as she caught it from him. He was a miser, you know."

Jane was just getting her second leg over. "I don't know a thing about him," she said.

"Well, you will, soon enough. The neighbors'll come flocking as soon as I'm gone, and you'll soon know all there is to know about us all. They'll pick me to pieces, too, and tell you I'm starving Susan to death, but I don't care. Climbing these fences has hardened me to calumny."

They crossed the strip of cow-pasture, and Matilda got over another fence, saying as she did so: "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth," leaving Jane to make the application and follow her at the same time.

Then they found themselves in a trim little garden.

"How sweet," said the niece.

"You can see I've done my duty by it, too," said Matilda; "that's my way. I'm hard and I ain't pretty to look at, but I do my duty, which is more'n most handsome women do. Every last bean here is clawed around like it ought to be, and the whole thing neat as wax. Same with Susan; you'd think from her face I'd murdered her, and yet the Recording Angel knows she's had a cold sponge and every last snarl combed out of her hair every day since I came. I don't boast, but I do work."

"Dear me, it's a long way from the house," said Jane, forgetting her higher philosophy for the minute.

"It's a good ten minutes to get here. A picking of peas is a half-hour's job. And ten to one, when I get back, the cat's been at the cream."

Jane had had time to remember. "I can see you've been awfully good," she said warmly, "and my, but you've worked hard. Everything shows that."

Matilda's face flushed with pleasure, the sudden pathetic flushing of unexpected appreciation. "I just have," she declared. "I've worked hard all my life and done a lot of good, and nobody's ever bothered to thank me. She don't. She just lays there and lets me run up and down stairs and climb fences and dig weeds and scamper back and forth with a extra hike, when I hear the bell of the door, till it'll be a mercy if I don't get neophytes all over, and the New Asthma in both legs, *I* think."

After a brief tour of the tiny whole, devoted mainly to instructing the novice, Matilda led the way back to the house.

"Does it ever need watering?" Jane asked, lapsing again to a lower level.

"Sometimes," said Matilda briefly. Jane hadn't the heart to say another word until – several steps further on – it occurred to her that the garden also could be only a good factor in God's plan, if she wreathed it and shrined it and saw it in her world, as He saw all His world on the day when it was first manifest and set. "And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good."

CHAPTER IV

JANE BEGINS SUNSHINING

THE stage came for Matilda at eight o'clock. For half an hour before it could possibly be due, the traveler sat ready on a chair in the hall, with her umbrella tightly gripped in both hands, delivering bits of useful information as they occurred to her.

"Be careful to lock up well every night."

"Remember if she dies sudden, I shall want to know at once."

"Don't look to enjoy yourself, but remember you're doin' a act of Christian charity."

Jane sat on a small, hard ottoman in the corner by the whatnot and said: "I'll try," or "Yes, indeed," every time.

"You're a good girl," the aunt said finally. "I'm glad to know you. Those Rainy-day Cooks or whatever you call yourself – "

"Sunshine Nurse."

"Yes, of course, – well, it's a good idea. I feel perfectly sure you'll do everything you know how."

"Yes, I will," said Jane, resolving all over fresh that everything was going to come out fine, even to the return of Matilda herself.

"There, I hear the stage on the bridge," said her aunt, jumping to her feet suddenly. "I must go and say good-by to Susan."

"Isn't she still asleep?"

"It doesn't matter. She's my only living sister, and it's my duty to wake her up."

She rushed up-stairs, and a feeble little yell from above soon announced her duty done. Then followed a brief hum and jabber, and then she came running down again.

"Feels bad to see me go," she said briefly. "That's natural, as she's turned over to you body and soul and ain't the least idea what you're like. I told her it was no more chances than every child run just being born, and a third of them lived, but she never could see reason, – kind of clung to my arm, – she's my only sister, and it makes me feel bad." With which hasty statement Matilda gave a brief dab to each eye, put up her pocket-handkerchief, and opened the front door. Jane had her bag in her hand, and they had carried the trunk to the gate before.

The stage was empty, and the driver was tying the trunk-strap with a rope.

"Well, good-by," said Matilda; "remember to lock up well every night."

"Yes, I will," said Jane. "I hope you'll have a good time and a splendid change."

"I'm sure of the change," said Matilda, swinging herself up with an agility bred of her liberal diet on stiles. "Five years, – will you only think of it?"

The driver picked up the reins, gave them a slap, and the expedition was off.

Matilda Drew was really "gone off on a visit."

"Think of it," said Katie Croft, who, despite her town-name of "Katie," was a gray-haired woman of fifty. "Think of it! A vacation! What luck some folks have. I shall never have a vacation in all – " her voice ceased, and she continued sweeping down the steps, the stage passing out of sight as she did so.

Meanwhile Jane had re-entered the house and carefully closed the door after her. She felt curiously freed in spirit, and that subtly supreme joy of seeing a helplessly bad situation delivered bound and gagged into one's hands to be mended was hers.

"I'll go straight and ask about auntie's breakfast first," she thought, mounting the staircase. To her light tap at the door, a feeble "come in" responded. She entered then and observed, with a slight start, that the invalid had just been up. The blind was drawn, and a pair of kicked-off slippers betrayed

a hasty jump back into bed. Her eyes sought Susan's in explanation. "I didn't know that you could move about," she said, with a pleased look.

Susan's little, sharp nose had an apologetic appearance, as it showed over the sheet-fold. "I can get about a little, days when I'm strong," she explained, "and I wanted to see her off. I wanted to see if she really did go." She paused, gave a sharp choke and gasp, and then waited.

Jane leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I will try very hard to make you comfortable and happy," she said gently.

Susan rather shrunk together in the bed. "What kind of a girl are you, anyhow?" she asked suddenly and sharply. "Are you really religious, or do you only just go to church?"

"I try to do what's right," her niece answered simply.

The invalid contemplated her intently. "It can be pretty hard living with any one that tries to do right," she said. "My experience is that good people is often more trying than bad ones. Maybe it's just that I've had more to do with them, though. I suppose Matilda told you about everything and the garden and all?"

"Yes, I think I know what to see to."

"And the cat? – and his stealing?"

"Yes, she told me about him."

"The garden must be weeded," Susan pronounced, sinking down deep into the bed. "Don't you ever forget that. And that cat has got to be fed – and well fed, too – even if he does steal."

Jane watched her disappear beneath the bedclothes.

"Auntie," she said, "I've got lots of funny ideas, and one of them is that it's wicked not to be just as happy as possible every minute. Now I'm to be here three weeks, and I think that I ought to be able to make them a real change for you as well as for Aunt Matilda. We'll begin with your breakfast. You tell me what you like best, and I'll fix it for you – "

Susan's head came up out of the bed-clothes with the suddenness of a boy rising from a dive. "If I can have anything I want," she cried, "I want some hot tea – some boiling hot tea, some tea made with water that's boiling as hard as it can boil. And I want the pot hot. Burning hot before the tea goes in."

Jane started. "I thought you liked your tea cold."

Susan's eyes fairly snapped. "Well, I don't. I don't like nothing cold. I like everything hot."

Jane moved towards the door. "I'll go and make some right away," she said.

Susan's small, bright eyes looked after her very hard indeed. "I wonder if you really mean what you say about my doing what I please."

"Of course I mean what I say."

"Then I want to go back into my own room."

The niece stopped. "Isn't this your room?" she asked in surprise.

"No, this is the nearest room to the top of the stairs. I'll show you which is my room." With a quick leap she was out of bed.

"Barefooted!" cried Jane.

"I'll get into slippers quick enough, and I always wear stockings in bed. It's one of my peculiar ways. I'm very peculiar." She was running out of the room. Jane followed, astonished at the strength and steadiness of the bedridden.

"But I thought that – that you were always in bed," she stammered.

Susan stopped short and turned about. "It was the pleasantest way to get along," she said briefly. "I guess that you've a really kind heart, so I'll trust you and tell you the truth. Matilda wasn't here very long before I see that if her patience wasn't to give out, I'd got to begin to fail. I went to bed, and I've failed ever since. I've failed steady. It's been the only thing to do. It wasn't easy, but it was that or have things a lot harder. So I failed."

Jane stared in amazement, and then suddenly the fun of it all overcame her, and she burst out laughing. Susan laughed, too. "It was all I could do," she repeated over and over.

"And so you failed," said her niece, still laughing.

"Yes, and so I failed."

"Mercy on us, it's the funniest thing I ever heard in all my life," exclaimed the Sunshine Nurse.

"It ain't always been funny for me," said Susan, "but come, now, I want to show you my room."

She opened a door as she spoke and led the way into a dark, musty-smelling place. It was the work of only a minute to draw the blind and throw up the window. "Right after we've had breakfast, we'll clean it," the aunt declared, "and then I'll move right back in. Husband and me had this room for twenty long years together. He was a saving man, and most of what he was intending to save when I wanted to buy things was told me in this room. Whatever I wanted he always said I could have, and then when it came night, he said I couldn't. The room is full of memories for me – sad memories – but after he was mercifully snatched to everlasting blessedness, I grew fond of it. It's a nice room."

"I think I'll get your tea," said Jane, "and then I'll clean this room and help you move into it. We'll have you all settled before noon."

She turned and ran down to the kitchen. The kettle was singing, and she stuffed more wood in under it and began to hunt for a tray and the other concomitants of an up-stairs breakfast. Things were not easily found.

"Well, I declare!" a voice at the window behind her exclaimed, as she was down on her knees getting a tray-cloth out of a lower drawer. The voice gave her a violent start, being a man's. She sprang to her feet and faced about.

"I'm sorry; I thought you'd know me." It was the artist of the day before, the young man who had come down in the stage.

"It's so early." She went to the window and shook hands. "But I'm glad to see you, anyhow."

"I always get up at six and walk five miles before breakfast when I'm in the country," he explained.

"Do you really? What enterprise!"

"And so this is where you've come. Why, it's the quaintest old place that I ever saw. A regular tangle of picturesque possibilities. Who are you visiting?"

"I'm taking care of my invalid aunt while my other aunt has a little rest."

"Is she very ill?"

"Oh, no. But this is her tea that I'm making, and I must take it up to her now."

"I'll go, then. But may I come again – and sketch?"

"I can't have company. I'll be too busy."

"Can't I help with the work?"

He was so pleasant and jolly that she couldn't help laughing. "I'm afraid not," she said, shaking her head.

He stood with his hand on the window-sash. "Do you know my name?" he asked.

"No."

"It's Lorenzo, Lorenzo Rath. I've to grow famous with that name. Think of it."

She laughed again.

"I can draw the outside of the house, anyhow – can't I?"

"Dear me, I suppose so," – she picked up the tray, – "you must go now, though. Good-by."

"Good-by," he cried after her.

"Oh, see the steam," was Susan's exultant exclamation, as she entered her room. "I ain't seen steam coming out of a teapot's nose for upwards of three years. Matilda just couldn't seem to stand my taking my tea hot, and she's my only sister, and I humor her. Who was you talking to?"

"A man who came down on the stage yesterday. He was out walking and didn't know that I lived here."

"Oh, a love affair!" cried Susan, in high-keyed ecstasy. "He's fallen in love with you, and like enough was prowling around all night. Oh! How interesting! I ain't seen a love affair close to for years." She was so genuinely joyful that Jane felt sorry to dampen the enthusiasm.

"I don't believe you'll see one now," she said, smiling good-humoredly. "You see, I don't mean to marry, Auntie. I'm a Sunshine Nurse, and they have their hands too full for that kind of thing."

"A nurse! I didn't know you were a nurse."

"A Sunshine Nurse is a person who does what doctors can't always do, – who makes folk well."

"Are you going to make me well?"

"Yes," said Jane, resolutely.

Susan stopped eating and looked at her with an expression full of contradictory feelings. "I shall like it," she said slowly. "But, oh my! Matilda won't. Why, she – " she paused. "Oh, I *do* wonder if I can trust you?"

"Anybody can trust me," said Jane. "It's part of my training to be honest."

"Dear me, but that's a good idea," said Susan, with sincerest approval. "Well, if I can trust you, I don't mind telling you that it's taken considerable care for me to live along with Matilda. I don't mean anything against her – not rat-poison nor anything like that, you know? – but she hasn't just approved of my living; she's looked upon it as a waste of her time. And I've had to manage pretty careful in consequence. You see, she's my only sister, and she'd have my property anyhow, but if I had to have a nurse or a woman to look out for me long, there'd be no property to leave. She's real sensible, and we both know just how it is, but it's been pleasantest for me to stay more and more in bed and kind of catch at things as I walk, and once in a while I don't eat all day, and so it keeps up her hope and keeps things pleasant."

Jane looked paralyzed. "How can you go without food all day?"

Susan considered a little. Then she took a big drink of hot tea and confessed. "I don't really. I watch till she goes to the garden, and then I skip down-stairs and make a good meal and lay it all on the cat."

Jane sank down on the foot of the bed and burst out laughing again. Again she just couldn't help it. Susan laughed, too; first softly and gingerly, then in a way almost as hearty as her niece's.

"Oh me, oh my," the latter declared, after a minute, wiping her eyes. "Well, we'll have a very lively three weeks, I see."

"Oh, yes," Susan exclaimed, "and we'll have liver and bacon, and I'll see the neighbors when they come in. I give up seeing them because it made so much trouble, and the way I'm made is – 'Anything for peace.' That's what I always used to say to husband, whatever he said. First along I used to say real things, but all the last years I just said whatever he said; anything for peace."

"You've finished your tea now," said Jane, rising. "I'll take the tray down while you dress a bit, and then we'll move you into the other room."

"Oh, and *how* I will enjoy it," cried Susan, clasping her hands in ecstasy. "Oh, you Sunshine Jane, you – how glad I am you've come."

"I'm glad, too," said Jane. "We'll have an awfully nice time."

She ran down-stairs with the tray and found Madeleine sitting in the kitchen, waiting. "Why, how long have you been here?" she asked.

Madeleine lifted a rather mournful countenance and tried to smile. "Oh, Miss Grey. I'm so blue. I can't stand this place at all, I don't believe. My situation is going to be unbearable."

"What's the matter with it?"

"It's so small and petty and spiteful. All last evening I had to sit and listen to gossip. I hate personalities. Why, whatever I do is going to be seen and talked about the minute I do it."

Jane looked grave. "That nice woman who came out to meet you didn't look like a gossip."

"She isn't, but she sits and listens, and every once in a while she throws oil on the fire by saying, 'I never believed the story.'"

"Who did the talking?"

"The neighbors – a woman named Mrs. Mead, who came in with her daughter. The mother was old-fashioned in her ideas, and the daughter was new. That old man in the stage stopped there, you know."

"My aunt spoke of them last evening," said Jane; "she said that Emily Mead was picked out to marry that young man who came down with us."

Madeleine laughed and then blushed. "I'm afraid not," she said. "I know him. He won't marry anybody here."

Jane turned and began to put away the breakfast things.

"Don't be bored," she said gently. "Put on this extra apron, and help me wash these dishes; and then I'll set the kitchen to rights and get ready to move my aunt into another bedroom. She's an invalid, you know."

"What kind of a person is your aunt?"

"Awfully nice," began Jane, but was stopped by the sudden opening of the hall door.

There stood Susan, all dressed.

"It seems good to have clothes on again," she remarked calmly; "I ain't been dressed for upwards of three years."

Then she saw Madeleine. "How do you do," she said, holding out her hand. "I suppose you're the Miss Mar from Deborah's?"

"Yes, I am," Madeleine admitted, smiling.

"My, but you look good to me," said Susan; "it's so nice to see a strange face. You see, I've been in bed for a long time, and I give up seeing strangers long before that." She sat down on one of the kitchen chairs and beamed on them both, turn and turn about. "Husband always thought that strangers was pickpockets," she said, "but I like to look at 'em. My, but I will enjoy these next weeks. You see, I live with my sister," she explained to Madeleine, "and I've had a pretty hard time. My sister's got a good heart, but maybe you know how awful hard it is to live with that kind of people. It's been pleasanter to stay in bed."

"But you won't do that any more, Auntie," said Jane, moving busily about.

"No, indeed I won't. You see," again to Madeleine, "she was my only sister, so I humored her. It's the only way to get on with some people. But you can even humor folks too much, and she got a disease they call the Euphrates all up and down her ear and her elbow, just from being humored too much. So she's gone off for a change."

"What are you doing?" Madeleine asked Jane.

"Making waffles. I thought it would be fun to eat them hot right now."

Susan fairly shrieked with joy. "I ain't so much as smelt one since husband died. Waffles in the morning, and I'm so awful hungry, too. Oh, Jane, the Lord will surely set a crown of glory on your head the minute He sees it. Your feet won't be into heaven when the crown goes on. How did you ever think of it?"

Jane brought out the iron, laughing as she did so. "Why, Auntie, it's part of my training."

"Cooking waffles in the morning?"

"No. Giving joy. If I think of any way to give pleasure and don't do it, I count it a sin. To make more happiness is all the work of a Sunshine Nurse."

"Isn't that splendid?" Susan appealed to Madeleine.

Madeleine's great, beautiful eyes were lifted towards the other girl's face with an expression mysterious in its longing. "Teach me the gift," she said; "I want to make more happiness, too."

"We'll be her class," exclaimed Susan, "just you and me."

"The first lesson is eating waffles," Jane announced solemnly.

"And me, too," cried a voice in the kitchen window, and there was Lorenzo Rath back for his second call that day, and it not yet ten o'clock. "I've been to Mrs. Cowmull's and eaten breakfast, and I'm as hungry as a wolf." He came in through the window as he spoke.

"Oh, a young man!" cried Susan. "I ain't seen a young man since the last time the pump broke. Oh, my! Ain't this jolly? Ain't this fun?"

"You show Madeleine where to find plates and forks and knives, Auntie," said Jane. "Here, Mr. Rath, I'll break two more eggs and you can beat them. I haven't made enough batter, if there's a man to eat, too."

"I feel as if I'd leave Mrs. Cowmull's to-morrow and come here to board," said Lorenzo. "Could I?" His tone was very earnest.

"No, you couldn't," said Jane firmly.

"Oh, let him," exclaimed Susan, from the pantry, where she was getting out plates. "It'll make Mrs. Cowmull so mad, and I ain't made any one mad for years and years. I'd so revel to be human again. And it would be so nice having a man about, too."

"I couldn't think of it," said Jane, getting very crimson.

Madeleine looked at the artist.

"Then I shall leave Mrs. Cowmull's, anyway," said Lorenzo, decidedly; "I shall look up another place at once. Why, that woman would drive me mad. She says something ridiculous every time she opens her mouth. She asked me this morning if I'd ever climbed to the top of the Kreutzer Sonata."

"What did you say?" Madeleine asked.

"I told her no, but I'd been to the bottom of the Campanile and seen them getting out coal from the mine there."

"Well, that showed you'd seen some sights, anyhow," said Susan, placidly.

"The waffles are done!" Jane announced. They all drew up round the table.

"This is living," the invalid exclaimed. "If my sister would only never come back!"

"Maybe she won't!" suggested Lorenzo.

"I wouldn't like her to die," said Susan, gravely. "I'm sensitive over feeling people better off dead. But if she'd marry, it would be nice."

"For the man?" queried Lorenzo.

"For us all," said Susan, gravely.

"Just exactly the right thing is going to happen to her and everybody," said Jane, firmly – dividing the waffles as she spoke.

"Are you so sure?" the artist asked, looking a little amused.

Susan noticed the look. "She's a Sunshine Nurse," she explained quickly. "It's her religion to be like that. She can't help it. She's promised."

CHAPTER V

A CHANGE IN THE FEEL OF THINGS

IT didn't take long for the town to wake up to the fact that some new element had entered into its composition.

"I can't get over it, Susan Ralston's being up and about," Miss Debby Vane said distressedly to Mrs. Mead. "Why, she was 'most dead!"

"Matilda ought not to have gone away," Mrs. Mead said sternly. "Sick folks in bed can't bear a change. A new face gives them a little spurt of strength, and then when they see the old face again, they kind of give up hope and drop right off."

"Yes, I know that," said Miss Debby; "my father had a cousin die that way. There was a doctor going about in a wagon, pulling teeth and giving shocks, and he said he'd give Cousin Hannah a shock and cure her. So they took him up-stairs, and there she was dead of heart disease. They thought of prosecuting him, but the funeral coming right on they hadn't time, and then he was gone to another place, and it seemed too much bother."

"That girl is just the same kind, I believe," said Mrs. Mead; "that dreadful way of making you feel that after all what she says is pretty sensible, maybe. My Emily is awfully took with her, and Father's just crazy about her. He come down on the stage with her, and then he went out to see her. She knows how to get around men; she was frying doughnuts."

"Yes, and Mrs. Cowmull's artist was out there, and they had waffles in the middle of the morning. That's a funny kind of new religion."

"Has she got a new religion?" Miss Debby looked frightened. "I hadn't heard of it."

"Why, yes; Emily says she's got the funniest religion you ever heard of. Whatever she wants to do or don't want to do, she says it's her religion."

"Dear me, but I should think that that would be very convenient," said Miss Debby, much impressed. "Why, my religion is always just the opposite of what I want to do or don't want to do. It says so every Sunday, you know, – 'we have done those things,' and so forth."

"Hers is different," said Mrs. Mead.

"Well, I declare," repeated Miss Debby; then, suddenly, "I remember now that Madeleine said that they had waffles because Jane said that she thought waffles would taste good, and it was her religion to do whatever you thought of right off. Well, I declare!"

Both ladies stared in solemn amazement at one another.

"This'll be a nice town to live in, if she sets everybody to doing whatever you like, because it's right," Mrs. Mead said finally. "Father won't put on his coat again this summer."

"It'll make a great difference in the feeling of the town," said Miss Debby, mysteriously, "a great difference. Well, I hope it won't change Madeleine any way her family won't approve. Madeleine's in love, and I suppose it's Mr. Rath. They knew each other before, and her family don't want it. I've pieced it all out of scraps."

"Oh, dear!" said Emily Mead's mother, her face falling; "my, I hadn't heard but what he was a free man."

"Oh, no," said Miss Debby, "your sister isn't sure. But everybody else is. My own view of artists is they're deluders and snares. I give an artist a picture and a dollar once to enlarge, and that was the last I ever heard of them both – of all three."

"I wonder if Emily knows Mr. Rath's engaged," said Mrs. Mead, sadly. "Dear me, I never thought of that."

"Not engaged, but in love," corrected Miss Debby.

"Perhaps he's a real artist and changeable," suggested Mrs. Mead.

"There's no comfort in that for any one, 'cause if he'll change once, he'll change right along."

Mrs. Mead sighed very heavily. "Well, I must keep up for Father and Emily," she remarked, not tracing any very clear connection between word and deed.

"Yes," said Miss Debby, "you must, and we'll all keep a sharp eye on these new kind of ways of looking at things, for we don't know where they'll end."

The "new way of looking at things" had already been very efficacious in the house at the other end of the street. It had assumed an utterly new appearance, both outside and in.

"And I never felt nothing like the change in the *feel* of it," Susan exclaimed that afternoon, as she re-arranged her belongings in her own room. "Oh, you Sunshine Jane, you, you've just sunshone into every room, and I'm so happy turning my things about I don't know what to do. Matilda wouldn't never let me turn a china cow other end to, and I've lived with some of the ornaments facing wrong for the whole of these five long years."

"It isn't me, Auntie," said Jane, washing shelves with the hearty and happy energy which she threw into every task in which she engaged; "it's the opening of the windows and the letting in of God and His sunshine together. I'll soon have time to clean the whole house, and then we'll have fun re-arranging every room. You've such pretty things, and they must be rubbed up and given a chance to play a part in the world. God never meant anything to be idle, – not even a brass andiron. If it can't work, it can shine and be cheerful, anyway. What can't smile ought to shine, you know."

"I wonder why rubbing things makes 'em bright," said Susan, opening her bonnet-box and hitting her bonnet a smart cuff to knock dust out of the folds. "I never could understand that."

"It's your individuality that you transfer till the poor dull things get enough of it to shine alone, without anybody's help."

"What a good reason," said Susan. "My, to think maybe I'll go to church again in this bonnet! Matilda was always wanting to rip it up, but something made me cling to it. It's a kind of souvenir. I wore it to husband's funeral and my last picnic, and there are lots of other pleasant memories inside it."

"I'll freshen it up with a cloth dipped in ammonia," said Jane. "Dear me, how I *do* enjoy washing shelves. I love to sop the soapy water over and mop the corners, and dry the whole, and fit a clean newspaper in, and then see the closet in perfect order."

"You like to do everything, seems to me," said Susan.

"Yes, I do. I've been led to see that doing things well is about the finest way in which one can pass one's time. And I'm crazy over doing things *well*. If I fold a towel, I like to fold it just square, and if I make a bed, I want the fold in the spread and the fold in the sheet to meet even."

"You'll make a fine wife, Jane," said Susan, gravely, "only no man'll ever appreciate the folds lying straight."

Jane laughed merrily. "I'm never going to marry; I'm one of the new sex, the creatures who are born to live alone and lend a hand anywhere. Didn't you know that?"

"That's nonsense," said Susan; "no woman's made so."

"No. It's a big fact. One of the newest facts in the world. The New Woman, you know!"

"Mercy on us," said Susan, "don't you go in for any of that nonsense. The idea of a girl like you deciding not to marry! I never heard of such a thing!"

"It's so, though," said Jane, smiling brightly; "you see, my little Order is a kind of Sisterhood. We're taught to want to help in so many homes and to never even think of a home of our own. We're taught to love all children so dearly that we mustn't limit ourselves to one family of little ones. We're trained to be so fond of the best in every man that we see more good to be done as sisters to men than as wives."

"I don't believe Mr. Rath will agree with you," said Susan, "nor any other real nice fellow."

Jane was cutting paper for the shelves. "Yes, he will," she said, nodding confidently; "men are so scarce nowadays that they are ready to agree with any one."

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