

Penrose Margaret

Dorothy Dale in the City



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Penrose M.

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CHAPTER I ALMOST CHRISTMAS

Neither books, papers nor pencils were to be seen in the confused mass of articles, piled high, if not dry, in the rooms of the pupils of Glenwood Hall, who were now packing up to leave the boarding school for the Christmas holidays.

“Going home is so very different from leaving home,” remarked Dorothy Dale, as she plunged a knot of unfolded ribbons into the tray of her trunk. “I’m always ashamed to face my things when I unpack.”

“Don’t,” advised Tavia. “I never look at mine until they have been scattered on the floor for a few days. Then they all look like a fire sale,” and she wound her tennis shoes inside a perfectly helpless lingerie waist.

“I don’t see why we bring parasols in September to take them back in Christmas snows,” went on Dorothy. “I have a mind to give this to Betty,” and she raised the flowery canopy over her head.

“Oh, don’t!” begged Tavia. “Listen! That’s bad luck!”

“Which?” asked Dorothy, “the parasol or Betty?”

“Neither,” replied Tavia. “But the fact that I hear Ned’s voice. Also the clatter of Cologne’s heavy feet. That means the plunge – our very last racket.”

“I hope you take the racket out of this room,” said Dorothy, “for I have some Christmas cards to get off.”

“Let us in!” called a voice on the outer side of the door. “We’ve got good news.”

“Only news?” asked Tavia. “We have lots of that ourselves. Make it something more substantial.”

“Hurry!” begged the voice of Edna Black, otherwise known as Ned Ebony. “We’ll be caught!”

Tavia brought herself to her feet from the Turkish mat as if she were on springs. Then she opened the door cautiously.

“What is it?” she demanded. “Is it alive?”

“It was once,” replied Edna, “but it isn’t now.”

The giggling at the door was punctuated with a struggle.

“Oh, let us in!” insisted Cologne, and pushed past Tavia.

“Mercy!” exclaimed Dorothy. “Whatever is this?”

The two newcomers were now in a heap on the floor, or rather were in a heap on a feather bed they had dragged into the room with them. Quick to scent fun, Tavia turned the key in the door.

“The old darling!” she murmured. “Where did the naughty girls get you?” and she attempted to caress the feather tick in which Edna and Cologne nestled.

“That’s Miss Mingle’s feather bed!” declared Dorothy. “Wherever did you get it?”

“Mingling with other things getting packed!” replied Edna, “and I haven’t seen a little bundle of the really fluffy-duffy kind since they sent me to grandma’s when I had the measles. Isn’t it lovely?”

“No wonder she sleeps well,” remarked Tavia, trying to push Cologne off the heap. “I could take an eternal rest on this.”

“But why was it out in the hall?” questioned Dorothy. “I know Miss Mingle has a weak hip and has to sleep on a soft bed, always.”

“Her room was being made over, and she wanted to see it all alone before she left. She is going to-morrow,” said Edna.

“And to-night?” asked Dorothy.

“She must have a change,” declared Edna, innocently, “and we thought an ordinary mattress would be – more sanitary.”

“You cannot hide her bed in here,” objected Dorothy. “You must take it back.”

“Take back the bed that thou gavest!” sang Tavia, gaily. “How could I part with thee so soon!”

“We did not intend to hide it here, Doro,” said Cologne. “We had no idea of incriminating you. There is a closet in the hall. But just now there are also tittle-tattles in the hall. We are only biding a-wee.”

“Oh, it’s leaking!” exclaimed Edna, as she blew a bunch of feathery down at Dorothy. “What shall we do?”

“Get it back as soon as you can,” advised Dorothy. “Let me peek out!”

Silence fell as Dorothy cautiously put her head out of the door. “No one in sight,” she whispered. “Now is your time.”

Quietly the girls gathered themselves up. Tavia took the end of the bed where the “leak” was. Out in the hall they paused.

“The old feather be – ed!
The de – ar feather be – ed!
The rust-covered be – ed that hung in the hall!”

It was Tavia who sang. Then with one jerk she pushed the bed over the banister!

“Oh!” gasped Edna and Cologne, simultaneously.

“Mercy!” came a cry from below. “Whatever is – ”

They heard no more. Inside the room again the girls scampered.

“Right on the very head of Miss Mingle!” whispered Edna, horror-stricken. “Now we are in for it!”

“But she needed it,” said Tavia, in her absurd way of turning a joke into kindness. “I was afraid she wouldn’t find it.”

“Better be afraid she does not find you,” said Dorothy. “Miss Mingle is a dear, but she won’t like leaky feather beds dropped on her.”

“Well, I suppose we will all have to stand for it,” sighed Edna, “though land knows we never intended to decapitate the little music teacher. And she has a weak spine! Tavia Travers, how could you?”

“You saw how simple it was,” replied Tavia, purposely misunderstanding the other. “But do you suppose we have killed her? I don’t hear a sound!”

“Sounds are always smothered in feathers,” said Cologne. “Dorothy, can’t you get the story ready? How did the accident happen?”

“Too busy,” answered Dorothy. “Besides, I warned you.”

“Now, Doro! And this the last day!”

“Oh, please!” chimed in the others.

“I absolutely refuse to fix it up,” declared Dorothy. “I begged you to relent, and now – ”

“Hush! It came to! I hear it coming further to!” exclaimed Cologne. “Doro, hide me!”

A rush in the outer hall described the approach of more than one girl. In fact there must have been at least five in the dash that banged the door of Number Nineteen.

“Come on!”

“Hide!”

“Face it!”

“Feathers!”

“Mingle!”

Some of the words were evidently intended to mean more. Snow was scattered about from out of door things, rubbers were thrust off hastily, and the girls, delighted with the prospect of a real row, were radiant with a mental steam that threatened every human safety valve.

“Girls, do be quiet!” begged Dorothy, “and tell us what happened to that feather bed.”

“Nothing,” replied Nita, “it happened to Mingle. She is just now busy trying to get the quills out of her throat with a bottle brush. Betty suggested the brush.”

“And the hall looks like a feather foundry,” imparted Genevieve. “Mrs. Pangborn is looking for someone’s scalp.”

“There! I hear the court martial summons!” exclaimed Edna. “Tavia! You did it.”

The footfall in the hall this time was decided and not clattery. It betokened the coming of a teacher.

A tap at the door came next. Dorothy scrambled over the excited girls, and finally reached the portal.

“The principal would like to have the young ladies from this room report in the office at once,” said the strident voice of Miss Higley, the English teacher. “She is very much annoyed at the misconduct that appeared to come from Room Nineteen.”

“Yes,” faltered Dorothy, for no one else seemed to know how to find her tongue. “There was – an accident. The girls will go to the office.”

After the teacher left the girls gave full vent to their choking sensations. Tavia rolled off the couch, Edna covered her own head in Dorothy’s best sofa cushion, Cologne drank a glass of water that Tavia intended to drink, and altogether things were brisk in Number Nineteen.

“We might as well have it over with,” Edna said, patting the sofa cushion into shape. “I’ll confess to the finding of the plaguey thing.”

“Come on then,” ordered Dorothy, and the others meekly followed her into the hall.

They were but one flight up, and as they looked over the banister they saw below Miss Mingle, Mrs. Pangborn and several others.

“Oh!” gasped Tavia, “they are sprouting pin feathers!”

“Young ladies!” cried Mrs. Pangborn. “What does this mean?”

They trooped down. But before they reached the actual scene of the befeathered hall, a messenger was standing beside Miss Mingle, and the music teacher was reading a telegram.

“I must leave at once!” she said. “Please, Mrs. Pangborn, excuse the young ladies! Come with me to the office! I must arrange everything at once! I have to get the evening train!”

“You must go at once?” queried the head of the school, in some surprise.

“Yes! yes! instantly! Oh, this is awful!” groaned the music teacher. “Come, please do!” And she hurried off, and Mrs. Pangborn went after her.

“Just luck!” whispered Tavia, as she scampered after the others, who quickly hurried to more comfortable quarters. “But what do you suppose ails Mingle?”

“Maybe someone proposed to her,” suggested Edna, “and she was afraid he might relent.”

But little did Dorothy and her chums think how important the message to the teacher would prove to be to themselves, before the close of the Christmas holidays.

CHAPTER II

GOING HOME

“Did you ever see anything so dandy?” asked Tavia. “I think we girls should subscribe to the telegraph company. There is nothing like a quick call to get us out of a scrape.”

“Don’t boast, we are not away yet,” returned Dorothy.

“But I would like to see anything stop me now,” argued Tavia. “There’s the trunk and there’s the grip. Now a railroad ticket to Dalton – dear old Dalton! Doro, I wish you were coming to see the snow on Lenty Lane. It makes the place look grand.”

“Lenty Lane was always pretty,” corrected Dorothy. “I have very pleasant remembrances of the place.”

The girls were at the railroad station, waiting for the train that was to take them away from school for the holidays. There were laughter and merry shouts, promises to write, to send cards, and to do no end of “remembering.”

And, while this is going on, and while the girls are so occupied in this that they are not likely to do anything else, I will take just a few moments to tell my new readers something about the characters in this story.

The first book of this series was called “Dorothy Dale; A Girl of To-Day,” and in that, Dorothy, of course, made her bow. She was the daughter of Major Dale, of Dalton, and, though without a mother, she had two loving brothers, Joe and Roger. Besides these she had a very dear friend in Tavia Travers, and Tavia, when she was not doing or saying one thing, was doing or saying another – in brief, Tavia was a character.

In the tale is told how Dorothy learned of the unlawful detention of a poor little girl, and how she and Tavia took Nellie away from a life of misery.

“Dorothy Dale at Glenwood School,” my second volume, told how our heroine made her appearance at boarding school, where she spent so many happy days, and where she still is when the present story opens. And as for Tavia, she went, too, thanks to the good offices of some of her chum’s friends.

Glenwood School was a peculiar place in many ways, and for a time Dorothy was not happy there, owing to the many cliques and mutual jealousies. But the good sense of Dorothy, and some of the madcap pranks of Tavia, worked out to a good end.

There is really a mystery in my third volume – that entitled “Dorothy Dale’s Great Secret.” It was almost more than Dorothy could bear, at first, especially as it concerned her friend Tavia. For Tavia acted very rashly, to say the least. But Dorothy did not desert her, and how she saved Tavia from herself is fully related.

When Dorothy got on the trail of the gypsies, in the fourth book of the series, called “Dorothy Dale and Her Chums,” she little dreamed where the matter would end. Startling, and almost weird, were her experiences when she met the strange “Queen,” who seemed so sad, and yet who held such power over her wandering people. Here again Dorothy’s good sense came to her aid, and she was able to find a way out of her trouble.

One naturally imagined holidays are times of gladness and joy, but in “Dorothy Dale’s Queer Holidays,” which is the fifth book of this line, her vacation was “queer” indeed. How she and her friends, the boys as well as the girls, solved the mystery of the old “castle”, and how they saved an unfortunate man from danger and despair, is fully set forth. And, as a matter of fact, before the adventure in the “castle” came to an end, Dorothy and her friends themselves were very glad to be rescued.

Mistaken identity is the main theme of the sixth volume, called “Dorothy Dale’s Camping Days.” To be taken for a demented girl, forced to go to a sanitarium, to escape, and to find the same girl for whom she was mistaken, was part of what Dorothy endured.

And yet, with all her troubles, which were not small, Dorothy did not regret them at the end, for they were the means of bringing good to many people. The joyous conclusion, when the girl recovered her reason, more than made up for all Dorothy suffered.

Certainly, after all she had gone through, our heroine might be expected to be entitled to some rest. But events crowded thick and fast on Dorothy. On her return to Glenwood, after a vacation, she found two factions in the school.

Just who was on each side, and the part Dorothy played, may be learned by reading the seventh book of this series, called “Dorothy Dale’s School Rivals.” There was rivalry, none the less bitter because “sweet girl graduates” were the personages involved. But, in the end, all came out well, though at one time it looked as though there would be serious difficulties.

Of course many more characters than Dorothy and Tavia played their parts in the stories. There were Ned and Nat, the sons of Mrs. White, Dorothy’s aunt, with whom, after some years spent in Dalton, Dorothy and her father and brothers went to live, in North Birchlands. Tavia was a frequent visitor there, and Tavia and the good-looking boy cousins – well, perhaps you had better find out that part for yourself.

Dorothy was always making friends, and, once she had made them she never lost them. Not that Tavia did not do the same, but she was a girl so fond of doing the unexpected, so ready to cause a laugh, even if at herself, that many persons did not quite know how to take her.

With Dorothy it was different. Her sweet winsomeness was a charm never absent. Yet she could strike fire, too, when the occasion called for it.

And so now, in beginning this new book, we find our friends ready to leave the “Glen”, as they called it; leave the school and the teachers under whose charge they had been for some time.

Leaving Glenwood was, as Dorothy said, very different from going there. One week before Christmas the place was placed in the hands of the house-cleaners, and the pupils were scattered about over the earth.

Dorothy and Tavia were together in the chair car of the train; and Dorothy, having gathered up her mail without opening it as she left the hall, now used her nail file to cut the envelopes, and then proceeded to see what was the news.

“Oh, Tavia!” she exclaimed, as she looked at the lavender paper that indicated a note from her Aunt Winnie, otherwise Mrs. White. “Listen to this. Aunt Winnie has taken a city house. Of course it will be an apartment – ” she looked keenly at the missive, “and it will be on Riverside Drive.”

“Oh, the double-deckers!” exclaimed Tavia. “I can feel the air smart my cheeks,” and she shifted about expectantly. “Let’s take the auto bus – I always did love that word bus. It seems to mean a London night in a fog.”

“Well, I am sure it will mean good times, and I assure you, Tavia, Aunt Winnie has not forgotten you. You are to come.”

“There is only one Aunt Winnie in the world,” declared Tavia, “and she is the Aunty Winnie of Dorothy Dale.” Tavia was never demonstrative, but just now she squeezed Dorothy’s hand almost white. “How can I manage to get through with Dalton? I have to give home at least three snowstorms.”

“We are getting them right now,” said Dorothy. “I am afraid we will be snowbound when we reach the next stop.”

Wheeling about in her chair, Tavia flattened her face against the window as the train smoke tried to hide the snowflakes from her gaze. Dorothy was still occupied with her mail.

“It does come down,” admitted Tavia, “but that will mean a ride for me in old Daddy Brennen’s sleigh. He calls it a sleigh, but you remember, Doro, it is nothing more than the fence rails he took

from Brady's, buckled on the runners he got from Tim, the ragman. And you cannot have forgotten the rubber boot he once used for a spring."

"It was a funny rig, sure enough," answered Dorothy, "but Daddy Brennen has a famous reputation for economy."

"I hope he does not take it into his head to economize on my spinal cord by going over Evergreen Hill," replied Tavia. "I tried that once in his rattletrap, and we had to walk over to Jordan, and from there I rode home on a pair of milk cans. But Doro," she continued, "I cannot get over the sudden taking away of Mingle Dingle. Surely the gods sent that telegram to save me."

"I hope nothing serious has happened at her home," Dorothy mused. "I never heard anything about her family."

"You don't suppose a little mouse of a thing, like that born music teacher, has any family," replied Tavia irreverently. "I shall ever after this have a respect for the proverbial feather bed."

"Here is Stony Junction," Dorothy remarked, as the trainman let in a gust of wind from the vestibuled door to shout out the name of that station. "Madeline Maher gets off here. There, she is waving to us! We should have spoken to her."

"Never too late," declared Tavia, and she actually shouted a good-bye and a merry Christmas almost the full length of the car. Dorothy waved her hand and "blew" a kiss, to which the pretty girl who, with the porter close at her heels, was leaving the train for her home, responded. Chairs swung around simultaneously to allow their occupants a glimpse of the girl who had startled them with her shout. Some of the passengers smiled – especially did one young man, whose bag showed the wear usually given in college sports. He dropped his paper, and, not too rudely, smiled straight at Tavia.

"There!" exclaimed she. "See what a good turn does. Just for wishing Maddie a hilarious time I got that smile."

"Don't," cautioned Dorothy, to whom Tavia's recklessness was ever a source of anxiety. "We have many miles to go yet."

"So much the better,' as the old Wolfie, in Little Red Riding Hood, said," Tavia retorted. "I think I shall require a drink of water directly," and she straightened up as if to make her way to the end of the car, in order to pass the chair of the young man with the scratched-up suitcase.

Dorothy sighed, but at the same time she smiled. Tavia could not be repressed, and Dorothy had given up hope of keeping her subdued.

"Come to think of it," reflected Tavia, "I never had any permanent luck with the drinking water trick. He looks so nice – I might try being sweet and refined," and she turned away, making the most absurd effort to look the part.

"Getting sense," commented Dorothy. "We may now expect a snowslide."

"And have my hero dig me out," added the irrepressible one. "Wouldn't that be delicious! There! Look at that! It is coming down in snowballs!"

"My!" exclaimed Dorothy, "it is awful! I hope the boys do not fail to meet me."

"Oh, if they didn't, you would be all right," said Tavia. "They serve coffee and rolls at North Birchland Station on stormy nights."

"I declare!" exclaimed Dorothy, "that young man is a friend of Ned's! I met him last Summer, now I remember."

"I knew I would have good luck when I played the sweet-girl part," said Tavia, with unhidden delight. "Go right over and claim him."

"Nonsense," replied Dorothy, while a slight blush crept up her forehead into her hair. "We must be more careful than ever. Boys may pretend to like girls who want a good time, but my cousins would never tolerate anything like forwardness."

"Only where they are the forwarders," persisted Tavia. "Did not the selfsame Nat, brother to the aforesaid Ned –"

As if the young man in front had at the same time remembered Dorothy, he left his seat and crossed the aisle to where the girls sat. His head was uncovered, of course, but his very polite manner and bow amply made up for the usual hat raising.

“Is not this Miss Dale?” he began, simply.

“Yes,” answered Dorothy, “and this Mr. Niles?”

“Same chap,” he admitted, while Tavia was wondering why he had not looked at her. “Perhaps,” she thought, “he will prove too nice.”

“I was just saying to my friend,” faltered Dorothy, “that I hope nothing will prevent Ned and Nat from meeting me. This is quite a storm.”

“But it makes Christmas pretty,” he replied, and now he did deign to look at Tavia. Dorothy, quick to realize his friendliness, immediately introduced the two.

It was Tavia’s turn to blush – a failing she very rarely gave in to. Perhaps some generous impulse prompted the gentleman who occupied the chair ahead to leave it and make his way toward the smoking room. This gave Mr. Niles a chance to sit near the girls.

“We expect a big time at Birchland this holiday,” he said. “Your cousins mentioned you would be with us.”

“Yes, they cannot get rid of me,” Dorothy replied, in that peculiar way girls have of saying meaningless things. “I am always anxious to get to the Cedars – to see father and our boys, and Aunt Winnie, of course. I only wish Tavia were coming along,” and she made a desperate attempt to get Tavia into the conversation.

“Home is one of the Christmas tyrannies,” the young man said. “If it were not Christmas some of us might forget all about home.”

Still Tavia said not a single word. She now felt hurt. He need not have imagined she cared for his preaching, she thought. And besides, his tie needed pressing, and his vest lacked the top button. Perhaps he had good reasons for wanting to get home to his “Ma,” she was secretly arguing.

“You live in Wildwind – not far from the Cedars; do you not?” Dorothy asked.

“I did live there until last Fall,” he replied. “But mother lost her health, and has gone out in the country, away from the lake. We are stopping near Dalton.”

Tavia fairly gasped at the word “Dalton.”

“Then why don’t you go home for Christmas?” she blurted out.

“I am going to mother’s place to get her first,” he said. “Then, if she feels well enough, we will come back to the Birchlands.”

“My friend lives at Dalton,” Dorothy exclaimed, casting a look of admiration at the flushing Tavia.

“Indeed?” he replied. “That’s my station. I ride back from there. I am glad to have met someone who knows the place. I was fearful of being snowbound or station-bound, as I scarcely know the locality.”

“I expect to ride in Daddy Brennen’s sleigh,” said Tavia, with an effort. “He is the only one to know on a snowy night at Dalton.”

“Then perhaps you will take pity on a stranger, and introduce him to Daddy and his sleigh,” the youth replied. “Even a bad snowstorm may have its compensations.”

Tavia hated herself for thinking he really was nice. She was not accustomed to being ignored, and did not intend to forget that he had slighted her.

“I almost envy you both,” said Dorothy, good humoredly. “Just see it snow! I can see you under Daddy’s horse blanket.”

“It’s surely a horse blanket,” replied Tavia. “We cannot count on his having a steamer rug.”

“I suppose,” said Mr. Niles, “the sleigh answers all stage-coach purposes out that way?”

“As well as freight and express,” returned Dorothy. “Dear old Dalton! I have had some good times out there!”

“Why don’t you come out now, Doro?” asked Tavia, mischievously. “There may be some good times left.”

The gentleman who had vacated the seat taken by Mr. Niles was now coming back. This, of course, was the signal for the latter to leave.

“We are almost at the Birchlands!” he said, “I hope, Miss Dale, that those boy cousins of yours do not get buried in the snow, and leave you in distress. I remember that auto of theirs had a faculty for doing wild things.”

“Oh, yes. We had more than one adventure with the *Fire Bird*. But I do not anticipate any trouble to-night,” said Dorothy. “I heard from Aunt Winnie this morning.”

With a word about seeing them before the end of their journey, he took his chair, while Tavia sat perfectly still and silent, for, it seemed to Dorothy, the first time in her life.

“What is it?” she asked. “Don’t you feel well, Tavia?”

“I feel like bolting. I have a mind to get off at Bridgeton. Fancy me riding with that angel!”

“I’m sure he is very nice,” Dorothy said, in a tone of reproof. “I should think you would be glad to have such pleasant company.”

“Tickled to death!” replied Tavia, mockingly.

“I’m sure you will have some adventure,” declared Dorothy. “They always begin that way.”

“Do they? Well, if I fall in love with him, Doro, I’ll telegraph to you,” and Tavia helped her friend on with hat and coat, for the Birchlands had already been announced.

CHAPTER III

“GET A HORSE!”

“Hello there, Coz!” shouted Nat White, as Dorothy stepped from the train. “And there’s Tavia – and well! If it isn’t Bob Niles!”

“Yes,” said Dorothy, postponing further greetings until the train should pull out, and Tavia’s last hand-wave be returned. “We met him coming up, and he goes to Dalton.”

“Well I’ll be jiggered! And he has Tavia for company!” exclaimed the young man, who for years had regarded Tavia as his particular property, as far as solid friendship was concerned.

“And Tavia has already vowed to be mean to him,” said Dorothy, as she now pressed her warm cheek against that of her cousin, the latter’s being briskly red from the snowy air. “She would scarcely speak to him on the train.”

“A bad sign,” said Nat, as he helped Dorothy with her bag. “There are the Blakes. May as well ask them up; their machine does not seem to be around.”

The pretty little country station was gay with holiday arrivals, and among them were many known to Dorothy and her popular cousin. The Blakes gladly accepted the invitation to ride over in the *Fire Bird*, their auto having somehow missed them.

“You look – lovely,” Mabel Blake complimented Dorothy.

“Doesn’t she?” chimed in Mabel’s brother, at which Dorothy buried her face deeper in her furs. Nat cranked up; and soon the *Fire Bird* was on its way toward the Cedars, the country home of Mrs. Nathaniel White, and her two sons, Nat and Ned. Mrs. White was the only sister of Major Dale, Dorothy’s father, and the Dale family, Dorothy and her brothers, Joe and little Roger, had lately made their home with her.

It lacked but a few days of Christmas, and the snowstorm added much to the beauty of the scene, while the cold was not so severe as to make the weather unpleasant. All sorts of happy remembrances were recalled between the occupants of the automobile, as it bravely made its way through drifts and small banks.

“Oh, there’s old Peter!” exclaimed Dorothy, as a man, his stooped shoulders hidden under a load of evergreens, trudged along.

“And such a heavy burden,” added Mabel. “Couldn’t we give him a lift?”

Nat slowed up a little to give the old man more room in the roadway. “Those Christmas trees are poor company in a machine,” he said. “I have tried them before.”

“But it is so hard for him to travel all the way to the village?” pleaded Dorothy. “We could put his trees on back, and he could – ”

“Sit with you and Mabel?” and Ted Blake laughed at the idea.

“No, you could do that?” retorted Dorothy, “and Peter could ride with Nat. Please, Nat – ”

“Oh, all right, Coz, if it will make you happy. I wish, sometimes, I were lame, halt and old enough – to know.” Whereat he stopped the machine and insisted on old Peter doing as the girls had suggested.

It was no easy matter to get the trees, and the bunches of greens, securely fastened to the back of the auto, but it was finally accomplished. Peter was profuse in his thanks, for the greens had been specially ordered, he said, and he was already late in delivering them.

“Which way do you go?” asked Nat.

“Out to the Squire’s,” replied Peter. “But that road is soft, I wouldn’t ask you take it.”

“Oh, I guess we can make it,” proposed Nat. “The *Fire Bird* is not quite a locomotive.”

“She goes like a bird, sure enough,” affirmed Peter. “But that road is full of ditches.”

“We will try them, at any rate,” insisted Nat, as he turned from the main road to a narrow stretch of white track that cut through woods and farm lands.

“If we are fortunate enough not to meet anything,” said Dorothy. “But I have always been afraid of a single road, bound with ditches.”

“Of course,” growled Nat, “there comes Terry with his confounded cows.”

Plowing along, his head down and his whip in hand came Terry, the half-witted boy who, Winter and Summer, drove the cows from their field or barn to the slaughter house. He never raised his head as Nat tooted the horn, and by the time the machine was abreast of the drove of cattle, Nat was obliged to make a quick swerve to avoid striking the animals.

“Oh!” gasped both Dorothy and Mabel. The car lunged, then came to a sudden stop, while the engine still pounded to get ahead.

“Hang the luck!” groaned Nat, vainly trying to start the car, which was plainly stalled.

“I told you,” commented Peter, inappropriately. “This here road – ”

“Oh, hang the road!” interrupted Nat. “It was that loon – Terry.”

As the young man spoke Terry passed along as mutely as if nothing had happened.

“I’d like to try that whip on him, to see if I could wake him up,” said Ted, as he leaped out after Nat to see what could be done to get the car back on the road.

But it was an impossible task. Pushing, pulling, prying with fence rails – all efforts left the big, red car stuck just where it had floundered.

“I know,” spoke Peter, suddenly. “I’ll get Sanders’s horse.”

“Sanders wouldn’t lend his horse to pull a man out of a ditch,” said Nat. “I’ve asked him before.”

“That’s where you made a mistake,” replied Peter. “I won’t ask him,” and he awkwardly managed to get out of the car, and was soon out on the road and making his way across the snow-covered fields.

“We may be tried for horse-stealing next,” remarked Ted, grimly. “Girls, are you perishing?”

“Not a bit of it,” declared Dorothy. “This snow is warm rather than cold.”

“My face is burning,” insisted Mabel. “But I do hope old Sanders does not set his dogs on us.”

“He’s as deaf as a post,” Ted said. “That’s a blessing – this time, at least.”

“There goes Peter in the barn,” Dorothy remarked. “He has got that far safely, at any rate.”

A strained silence followed this announcement. Yes, Peter had gone into the barn. It seemed night would come before he could possibly secure the old horse, and get to the roadway to give the necessary pull to the stalled *Fire Bird*. They waited, eagerly watching the barn door. Finally it opened. Yes, Peter was coming, leading the horse.

“Now!” said Peter, standing with an emergency rope ready, “if only he gets past the house – ”

He stopped. The door of the snow-covered cottage opened, and there stood the unapproachable Sanders.

“Oh!” gasped Mabel. “Now we are in for it!”

“Then,” said Dorothy, “let us be ready for it. I’ll prepare the defence,” and before they realized what she was about to do she had selected one of the very choicest Christmas trees, and with it on her fur-covered shoulder, actually started up the box-wood lined walk to where the much-dreaded Sanders was standing, ready to mete out vengeance on the man who had dared to enter his barn, and take from it his horse.

“Oh Mr. Sanders!” called Dorothy. “Have you that dear little grand-daughter with you? The pretty one we had at the church affair last year?”

“You mean Emily?” he drawled. “Yep, she’s here, but – ”

“Then, you wonder why we have taken your horse? And why we were stalled here?” The others could hear her from the roadway. They could see, also, that Sanders had stopped to listen. “Now we want Emily to have a Christmas tree, all her own,” went on Dorothy, “and Peter is good enough to donate it. But our machine – those cars are not like horses,” she almost shouted, as Sanders being

deaf, and watching the inexorable Peter leading his horse away, had cause to be aroused from his natural surprise. "After all," persisted Dorothy, "a horse is the best."

By this time Peter was outside the big gate. Sanders made a move as if to follow, when Dorothy almost dropped the clumsy tree.

"Oh, please take it!" she begged. "I want to see Emily while they are towing the machine out. It's a lucky thing it happened just here, and that you are kind enough to let us have your horse."

"Well what do you think of that!" exclaimed Ted, in a voice loud enough for those near him to hear. "Of all the clever tricks!"

"Oh, depend on Doro for cleverness," replied Nat, proudly. "You just do your part, Ted, and make this rope fast."

Mabel stood looking on in speechless surprise. She saw now that Dorothy and old Sanders were entering the cottage. Dorothy was first, and the man, with the Christmas tree, followed close behind her. The boys with Peter were busy with rope, horse and auto. Soon they had the necessary connection made, with Nat at the wheel, and all were tugging with might and main to get the *Fire Bird* free from the ditch.

If there is anything more nerve-racking than such an attempt, it must be some other attempt at a balking auto. Would it move, or would it sink deeper into the mud that lay hidden beneath the newly-fallen snow?

Nat turned the wheel first this way and then that. Ted had his weight pressed against the rear wheel of the machine, while Peter coaxed and led the horse. Suddenly the old horse, as if desperate, gave a jerk and pulled the *Fire Bird* clear out into the roadway!

"Hurrah!" yelled Ted, bounding through the snow.

"Great stunt!" corroborated Nat. "Peter, you are all right!"

"Peter did some," replied the old man, freeing the horse from the rope that held him to the machine; "but that young lady – if she hadn't kept Sanders busy – we might all have been arrested for horse-stealing."

"She knew his weak spot," agreed Nat. "That little Emily seems to be the one weak and soft spot in old Sanders's life."

"I had better go up and see what's going on," suggested Mabel, as everything seemed about in readiness to start off again.

"Good idea," assented her brother, "he might be eating her up."

Mabel rather timidly found her way up to the cottage. It was already dusk, but the light of a dim lamp showed her the way, as it gleamed through a gloomy window, onto the glistening snow.

"Won't it be perfectly lovely, Emily?" she heard Doro saying, as she saw her with her arms about a little red-haired girl, both sitting on a sofa, while Sanders attempted to prop the Christmas tree up in a corner, bracing it with a wooden chair. Mabel raised the latch without going through the formality of knocking. As she entered the room, all but Dorothy started in surprise.

"This is my friend," Dorothy hurried to explain, "it is she who is going to help me trim the tree up for Emily. We will come to-morrow," and she rose to leave. "Mabel will fetch the doll, Emily. That is, of course, if we can persuade Santa Claus to give us just the kind we want," she tried to correct.

"A baby dolly – with long hair and a white dress," Emily ordered. "And I want eyelashes."

"Peticular," said Sanders, with a proud look at the child, who, as the boys had said, made up the one tender spot in his life. "If her ma's cold is better, she is coming up herself."

"Is she sick?" Emily ventured, glad to be able to say something intelligent.

"Yep," replied the old man, sadly. "She's been sick a long time. I fetched Emily over this afternoon in the sleigh."

"Well, we are so much obliged," remarked Dorothy. "And good-bye, Emily. You'll have everything ready for Santa Claus; won't you?"

“I’ve got my parlor set from last year,” said the child, “and mamma says Santa Claus always likes to see the other things, to know we took care of them.”

“Thanks, Sanders,” called Peter, at the window. “The horse is as good as ever. Don’t sell him without giving me a chance. I could do something if I owned a mare like that.”

“All right,” called back Sanders, whose pride was being played upon. “He might be worse. Did you put her in the far stall?”

“Just where I got her. And I tell you, Sanders, even a horse can play at Christmas. Only for him I never could get those trees to town.”

“And only for Peter,” put in Dorothy, “we could not have gotten Emily her tree. Now that’s how a horse can turn Santa Claus. Good-bye, Mr. Sanders, you may expect us before Christmas.”

And then the two girls followed the chuckling Peter back to the *Fire Bird*, where the boys impatiently awaited them, to complete the delayed party bound for home, and for the Christmas holidays.

CHAPTER IV

A REAL BEAUTY BATH

“This is some,” remarked Bob Niles, before he knew what he was talking about. They had just been ensconced in Daddy Brennen’s sleigh. Tavia was beside him – that is, she was as close beside him as she was beside Daddy Brennen, but the real fact was, that in this sleigh, no one could be beside anyone else – it was ever a game of toss and catch. But that was not Daddy’s fault. He never stopped calling to his horse, or pulling at the reins. It must have been the roads, yet everyone paid taxes in Dalton Township.

“Don’t boast,” Tavia answered, adjusting herself anew to the last jolt, “this never was a sleigh to boast of, and it seems to be worse than ever now. There!” she gasped, as she almost fell over the low board that outlined the edge, “one more like that, and I will be mixed up with the gutter.”

“Perhaps this is a safer place,” Bob ventured. “I seem to stay put pretty well. Won’t you change with me?”

“No, thanks,” Tavia answered, good-humoredly. “When Daddy assigns one to a seat one must keep it.”

“Nice clean storm,” Daddy called back from the front. “I always like a white Christmas.”

“Yes,” Tavia said, “looks as if this is going to be white enough. But what are you turning into the lane for, Daddy?”

“Promised Neil Blair I’d take his milk in for him. He can’t get out much in storms – rheumatism.”

“Oh,” Tavia ejaculated. Then to Bob: “How we are going to ride with milk cans is more than I can see.”

“The more the merrier,” Bob replied, laughing. “I never had a better time in my life. This beats a straw ride.”

“Oh, we have had them too, with Daddy,” she told him. “Doro and our crowd used to have good times when she lived in Dalton.”

“No doubt. This is the farmhouse, I guess,” Bob added, as the sleigh pulled up to a hill.

“Yes, this is Neil’s place,” Tavia said. “And there comes Mrs. Blair with a heavy milk can.”

“Oh, I must help her with that,” offered the young man. “I suppose our driver has to take care of his speedy horse.”

Disentangling himself from the heavy blankets, Bob managed to alight in time to take the milk can from the woman, who stood with it at the top of the hill.

“Oh, thank you, sir!” she panted. “The cans seem to get heavier, else I am getting lazy. But Neil had such a twinge, from this storm, that I wouldn’t let him out.”

“And did you do all the milking?” Tavia asked, as Bob managed to place the can in the spot seemingly made for it, beside Daddy.

“Certainly. Oh, how do you do, Tavia? How fine you look; I’m glad to see you home for Christmas,” Mrs. Blair assured the girl.

“Thank you. I’m glad to get home.”

“Fetchin’ company?” with a glance at young Niles.

“No, he’s going farther on,” and Tavia wondered why it was so difficult for her to make such a trifling remark.

“Well, I’m glad he came this way, at any rate,” the woman continued. “But Daddy will be goin’ without the other can,” and she turned off again in the direction of the barn.

“Are there more?” Bob asked Tavia, cautiously.

“I’m afraid so,” she replied. “But I guess she can manage them.”

“My mother would disown me if she knew I let her,” Bob asserted, bravely. “This is an experience not in the itinerary,” and he scampered up the hill, and made for the barn after Mrs. Blair.

Tavia could not help but admire him. After all, she thought, a good-looking lad could be useful, if only for carrying milk cans.

“And has that young gent gone after the can?” asked Daddy, as if just awaking from some dream.

“Yes,” Tavia replied, rather sharply. “He wouldn’t let Mrs. Blair carry such a heavy thing.”

“Well, she’s used to it,” Daddy declared. At the same time he did disturb himself sufficiently to get out and prepare to put the second can in its place.

A college boy, in a travelling suit, carrying a huge milk can through the snow, Tavia thought rather a novel sight, but Bob showed his training, and managed it admirably.

“I’ll put her in,” offered Daddy, “I didn’t know you went after it.”

“So kind of him,” remarked Mrs. Blair, “but he would have it. Thank you, Daddy, for stopping. Neil’ll make it all right with you.”

Daddy was standing up in the sleigh, the can in his hands, “I think,” he faltered, “I’ll have to set this down by you, Miss Travers,” he decided.

“All right,” Tavia agreed, making room at her feet.

He lifted the can high enough to get it over the back of the seat. It was heavy, and awkward, and he leaned on the rickety seat trying to support himself. The weight was too much for the board, and before Bob could get in to help him, and before Tavia could get herself out of the way, the can tilted and the milk poured from it in a torrent over the head, neck and shoulders of Tavia!

“Oh, mercy!” she yelled. “My new furs!”

“Save the milk,” growled Daddy.

“Jump up!” Bob commanded Tavia. “Let it run off if it will.”

But Tavia was either too disgusted, or too surprised, to “jump up.” Instead she sat there, fixing a frozen look at the unfortunate Daddy.

“My milk!” screamed Mrs. Blair. “A whole can full!”

“Was it ordered?” Bob asked, who by this time had gotten Tavia from under the shower.

“No,” she said hesitatingly, “but someone would have took it for Christmas bakin’.”

“Then let us have it,” offered Bob, generously. “If I had kept my seat perhaps it would not have happened.”

“Nonsense,” objected Tavia, “it was entirely Daddy’s fault.”

But Daddy did not hear – he was busy trying to save the dregs in the milk can.

“What’s it worth?” persisted Bob.

“Two dollars,” replied Mrs. Blair, promptly.

Bob put his hand in his pocket and took out two bills. He handed them to the woman.

“There,” he said, “it will be partly a Christmas present. I only hope my – friend’s furs will not be ruined.”

“Milk don’t hurt,” Mrs. Blair said, without reason. “Thank you, sir,” she added to Bob. “This is better than ten that’s comin’. And land knows we needed it to-night.”

“I’ve lost time enough,” growled Daddy. “And that robe is spoiled. Next time I carry milk cans I’ll get a freight car.”

“And the next time I take a milk beauty bath,” said Tavia, “I’ll wear old clothes.” But as Bob climbed in again, and Tavia assured him her furs were not injured, she thought of Dorothy’s prediction that she, Tavia, was about to have an adventure when she met Bob Niles.

“I’ll have something to tell Dorothy,” she remarked aloud.

“And I’ll have news for Nat,” slyly said Bob.

CHAPTER V

DOROTHY'S PROTEGE

“Well, what do you think of that!”

“Well, what do you think of this!”

It was Nat who spoke first, and Dorothy who echoed. They were both looking at letters – from Tavia and from Bob.

“I knew Bob would find her interesting,” said Nat, with some irony in his tone.

“And I knew she would finally like him,” said Dorothy, significantly.

“Bob has a way with girls,” went on Nat, “he always takes them slowly – it’s the surest way.”

“But don’t you think Tavia is very pretty? Everyone at school raves about her,” Dorothy declared with unstinted pride, for Tavia’s golden brown hair, and matchless complexion, were ever a source of pride to her chum.

“Of course she’s pretty,” Nat agreed. “Wasn’t it I who discovered her?”

Dorothy laughed, and gave a lock of her cousin’s own brown hair a twist. She, as well as all their mutual friends, knew that Nat and Tavia were the sort of chums who grow up together and cement their friendship with the test of time.

“Come to think of it,” she replied, “you always did like red-headed girls.”

“Now there’s Mabel,” he digressed, “Mabel has hair that seems a misfit – she has blue eyes and black hair. Isn’t that an error?”

“Indeed,” replied Dorothy, “that is considered one of the very best combinations. Rare beauty, in fact.”

“Well, I hope she is on time for the Christmas-tree affair out at Sanders’s, whatever shade her hair. I don’t see, Doro, why you insist on going away out there to put things on that tree. Why not ask the Sunday School people to trim it? We gave the tree.”

“Because I promised, Nat,” replied Dorothy, firmly, “and because I just like to do it for little Emily. I got the very doll she ordered, and Aunt Winnie got me a lot of pretty things this morning.”

“Wish momsey would devote her charity to her poor little son,” said the young man, drily. “He is the one who needs it most!”

“Never mind, dear,” and Dorothy put her arms around him, “you shall have a dolly, too.”

“Here’s Ned,” he interrupted, “I wonder if he got my skates sharpened? I asked him, but I’ll wager he forgot.”

The other brother, a few years Nat’s senior, pulled off his furlined coat, and entered the library, where the cousins were chatting.

“Getting colder every minute,” he declared. “We had better take the cutter out to Sanders’s – that is, if Doro insists upon going.”

“Of course I do,” Dorothy cried. “I wouldn’t disappoint little Emily for anything. Funny how you boys have suddenly taken a dislike to going out there.”

“Now don’t get peevish,” teased Ned. “We will take you, Coz, if we freeze by the wayside.”

“Did you get my skates?” Nat asked.

“Not done,” the brother replied. “Old Tom is busy enough for ten grinders. Expect we will have a fine race.”

“And I can’t get in shape. Well, I wish I had taken them out to Wakefield’s. He would have had them done days ago. But if we are going to Sanders’s, better get started. I’ll call William to put the cutter up.”

“Here come Ted and Mabel now. They’re sleighing, too,” exclaimed Dorothy. “Won’t we have a jolly party!”

“That’s a neat little cutter,” remarked Ned, glancing out of the window. “And Mabel does look pretty in a red – what do you call that Scotch cap?”

“Tam o’Shanter,” Dorothy helped out. “Yes, it is very becoming. But Neddie, dear?” and her voice questioned.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he replied indifferently. “Mabel was always kind of – witchy. I like that type.”

“And Ted is – so considerate,” Dorothy added with a mock sigh. “I do wonder how Bob and Tavia are getting along?”

“Probably planning suicide by this time – I say planning, you know, not executing. It would be so nice for a boy as good as Bob to be coerced into some wild prank by the wily Tavia.”

“She did not happen, however, to lead you into any,” retorted Dorothy, “and I take it you are a ‘good boy’.”

“Oh, but how hard she tried,” and he feigned regret. “Tavia would have taught me to feed out of her hand, had I not been – so well brought up.”

This bantering occupied the moments between the time Ted’s sleigh glided into view, and its arrival at the door of the Cedars.

“Lo, ’lo!” exclaimed Mabel, her cheeks matching the scarlet of her Tam o’Shanter.

“Low, low! Sweet and Low!” responded Nat. “Also so low!”

“No – but Milo!” said Ned, with a complimentary look at Mabel. “The Venus mended.”

“High low,” went on Ted. “That’s what it is. A high – low and the game! To go out there to-night in this freeze!”

“Strange thing,” Dorothy murmured, “how young men freeze up – sort of antagonistic convulsion.”

“Oh, come on,” drawled Ned, “when a girl wills, she will – and there’s an end on it.”

It did not take the girls long to comply – Dorothy was out with Ted, Mabel, Nat and Ned before the boys had a chance to relent.

“Those bundles?” questioned Ted, as Dorothy surrounded herself with the things for Emily.

“Now did you ever!” exclaimed Dorothy. “It seems to me everything is displeasing to-day.”

“No offence, I’m sure,” Ted hastened to correct, “but the fact is – we boys had a sort of good time framed up for this afternoon. Not but what we are delighted to be of service – ”

“Why didn’t you say so?” Dorothy asked.

It seemed for the moment that the girls and boys were not to get along in their usual pleasant manner. But the wonderful sleighing, and the delightful afternoon, soon obliterated the threatening difficulties, and a happy, laughing party in each cutter glided over the road, now evenly packed with mid-winter snow.

The small boys along the way occasionally stole a ride on the back runners of the sleighs, or “got a hitch” with sled or bob, thus saving the walk up hill or the jaunt to the ice pond.

“Oh, there’s Dr. Gray!” Dorothy exclaimed suddenly as a gentleman in fur coat and cap was seen hurrying along. “I wonder why he is walking?”

“For his health, likely,” Ted answered. “Doctors know the sort of medicine to take for their own constitutions.”

By this time they were abreast of the physician. Dorothy called out to him:

“Where’s your horse, Doctor?”

“Laid up,” replied the medical man, with a polite greeting. “He slipped yesterday – ”

“Going far?” Ted interrupted, drawing his horse up.

“Out to Sanders’s,” replied the doctor.

“Sanders’s!” repeated Dorothy. “That’s where we’re going. Who’s sick?”

“The baby,” replied the doctor, “and they asked me to hurry.”

“Get in with us,” Ted invited, while Dorothy almost gasped. Little Emily sick! She could scarcely believe it.

Dr. Gray gladly accepted the invitation to ride, and the next cutter with Ned, Nat and Mabel, pulled up along side of Ted’s.

“You may as well turn back,” Dorothy told them. Then she explained that little Emily was sick, and likely would not want her Christmas tree trimmed.

“But I’ll go along,” she said, “I may be able to help, for her mother is sick, even if she is with her.”

After all her preparations, it was a great disappointment to think the child could not enjoy the gifts. Dr. Gray told her, however, that Emily was subject to croup, and that perhaps the spell would not last.

At the house they found everything in confusion. Emily’s sick mother coughed harder at every attempt she made to help the little one, while Mr. Sanders, the child’s grandfather, tried vainly to get water hot on a lukewarm stove.

“Pretty bad, Doc,” he said with a groan, “thought she’d choke to death last night.”

Without waiting to be directed, Dorothy threw aside her heavy coat, drew off her gloves, and was breaking bits of wood in her hands, to hurry the kettle that, being watched, had absolutely refused to boil.

“You can just put that oil on to heat, Miss Dale,” Dr. Gray said, he having bidden the sick woman to keep away from Emily. “We’ll rub her up well with warm oil, and see if we can loosen up that congestion.”

Emily lay on the uneven sofa, her cheeks burning, and her breath jerking in struggles and coughs.

Dorothy found a pan and had the oil hot before the doctor was ready to use it.

“Quite a nurse,” he said, in that pleasant way the country doctor is accustomed to use. “Glad I happened to meet you.”

“I’m glad, too,” Dorothy replied sincerely. “Never mind, Emily, you will have your Christmas tree, as soon as we get the naughty cold cured,” she told the child.

Emily’s eyes brightened a little. The tree still stood in a corner of the room. Outside, Ted was driving up and down the road in evident impatience, but Dorothy was too busy to notice him.

Soon the hot applications took effect, and Emily breathed more freely and regularly. Then the doctor attended to the other patient – the mother. It was a sad Christmas time, and had a depressing effect even on the young spirits of Dorothy. She tried to speak to Emily, but her eyes wandered around at the almost bare room, and noted its untidy appearance. Dishes were piled up on the table, pans stood upon the floor, papers were littered about. How could people live that way? she wondered.

Mrs. Tripp, Emily’s mother, must be a widow, Dorothy thought, and she knew old Mrs. Sanders had died the Winter before.

The doctor had finished with Mrs. Tripp. He glanced anxiously about him. To whom would he give instructions? Mr. Sanders seemed scarcely capable of giving the sick ones the proper care.

Dorothy saw the look of concern on the doctor’s face and she rightly interpreted it.

“If we only could take them to some other place,” she whispered to him. Then she stopped, as a sudden thought seized her.

“Doesn’t Mr. Wolters always make a Christmas gift to the sanitarium?” she asked Dr. Gray.

“Always,” replied the doctor.

“Then why can’t we ask him to have little Emily and her mother taken to the sanitarium? They surely need just such care,” she said quickly.

The doctor slapped one hand on the other, showing that the suggestion had solved the problem. Then he motioned Dorothy out into the room across the small hall. She shivered as she entered it, for it was without stove, or other means of heating.

“If I only had my horse,” he said, “I would go right over to Wolters’s. He would do a great deal for me, and I want that child cared for to-night.”

“I’ll ask Ted to let us take his sleigh,” Dorothy offered, promptly. “He could go with us to the Corners, and then you could drive.”

“And take you?” asked Dr. Gray. “I am sure you young folks have a lot to do this afternoon.”

“No matter about that,” persisted Dorothy. “If I can help, I am only too glad to do it. And Mr. Wolters is on Aunt Winnie’s executive board. He might listen to my appeal.”

There was neither time nor opportunity for further conversation, so Dorothy hastily got into her things, and soon she was in Ted’s sleigh again, huddled close to Dr. Gray in his big, fur coat.

The plan was unfolded to Ted, and he, anxious to get back to his friends, willingly agreed to walk from the Corners, and there turn the cutter over to the charity workers.

“But Dorothy,” he objected, “I know they will all claim I should have insisted on your coming back with me. They will say you will kill yourself with charity, and all that sort of thing.”

“Then say I will be home within an hour,” Dorothy directed, as Ted jumped on the bob that a number of boys were dragging up the hill. “Good-bye, and thank you for the rig.”

“One hour, mind,” Ted called back. “You can drive Bess, I know.”

“Of course,” Dorothy shouted. Then Bess was headed for The Briars, the country home of the millionaire Wolters.

“Suppose he has already made his gift,” Dorothy demurred, as she wrapped the fur robe closely about her feet, “and says he can’t guarantee any more.”

“Then I guess he will have to make another,” said the doctor. “I would not be responsible for the life of that child out there in that shack.”

“If he agrees, how will you get Mrs. Tripp and Emily out to the sanitarium?” Dorothy asked.

“Have to ’phone to Lakeside, and see if we can get the ambulance,” he replied. “That’s the only way to move them safely.”

It seemed to Dorothy that her plan was more complicated than she had imagined it would be, but it was Christmas time, and doing good for others was in the very atmosphere.

“It will be a new kind of Christmas tree,” observed the doctor. “But she’s a cunning little one – she deserves to be kept alive.”

“Indeed she does,” Dorothy said, “and I’m glad if I can help any.”

“Why I never would have thought of the plan,” said the doctor. “I had been thinking all the time we ought to do something, but Wolters’s Christmas gift never crossed my mind. Here we are. My, but this is a great place!” he finished. And the next moment Dorothy had jumped out of the cutter and was at the door of Mr. Ferdinand Wolters.

CHAPTER VI

THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Dorothy was scolded. There her own family – father, Joe and Roger, to say nothing of dear Aunt Winnie, and the cousins Ned and Nat – were waiting for her important advice about a lot of Christmas things, and she had ridden off with Dr. Gray, attending to the gloomy task of having a sick child and her mother placed in a sanitarium.

But she succeeded, and when on the following day she visited Emily and her mother, she found the nurses busy in an outer hall, fixing up the Christmas tree that Mr. Sanders had insisted upon bringing all the way from the farmhouse where Dorothy had left it for little Emily.

The very gifts that Dorothy left unopened out there, when she found the child sick, the nurses were placing on the tree, waiting to surprise Emily when she would open her eyes on the real Christmas day.

And there had been added to these a big surprise indeed, for Mr. Wolters was so pleased with the result of his charity, that he added to the hospital donation a personal check for Mrs. Tripp and her daughter. The check was placed in a tiny feed bag, from which a miniature horse (Emily's pet variety of toy) was to eat his breakfast on Christmas morning.

Major Dale did not often interfere with his daughter's affairs, but this time his sister, Mrs. White, had importuned him, declaring that Dorothy would take up charity work altogether if they did not insist upon her taking her proper position in the social world. It must be admitted that the kind old major believed that more pleasure could be gotten out of Dorothy's choice than that of his well-meaning, and fashionable, sister. But Winnie, he reflected, had been a mother to Dorothy for a number of years, and women, after all, knew best about such things.

It was only when Dorothy found the major alone in his little den off his sleeping rooms that the loving daughter stole up to the footstool, and, in her own childish way, told him all about it. He listened with pardonable pride, and then told Dorothy that too much charity is bad for the health of growing girls. The reprimand was so absurd that Dorothy hugged his neck until he reminded her that even the breath of a war veteran has its limitations.

So Emily was left to her surprises, and now, on the afternoon of the night before Christmas, we find Dorothy and Mabel, with Ned, Nat and Ted, busy with the decorations of the Cedars. Step ladders knocked each other down, as the enthusiastic boys tried to shift more than one to exactly the same spot in the long library. Kitchen chairs toppled over just as Dorothy or Mabel jumped to save their slippered feet, and the long strings of evergreens, with which all hands were struggling, made the room a thing of terror for Mrs. White and Major Dale.

The scheme was to run the greens in a perfect network across the beamed ceiling, not in the usual "chandelier-corner" fashion, but latticed after the style of the Spanish serenade legend.

At intervals little red paper bells dangled, and a prettier idea for decoration could scarcely be conceived. To say that Dorothy had invented it would not do justice to Mabel, but however that may be, all credit, except stepladder episodes, was accorded the girls.

"Let me hang the big bell," begged Ted, "if there is one thing I have longed for all my life it was that – to hang a big 'belle'."

He aimed his stepladder for the middle of the room, but Nat held the bell.

"She's my belle," insisted Nat, "and she's not going to be hanged – she'll be hung first," and he caressed the paper ornament.

"If you boys do not hurry we will never get done," Dorothy reminded them. "It's almost dark now."

“Almost, but not quite,” teased Ted. “Dorothy, between this and dark, there are more things to happen than would fill a hundred stockings. By the way, where do we hang the hose?”

“We don’t,” she replied. “Stockings are picturesque in a kitchen, but absurd in such a bower as this.”

“Right, Coz,” agreed Ned, deliberately sitting down with a wreath of greens about his neck. “Cut out the laundry, ma would not pay my little red chop-suey menu last week, and I may have to wear a kerchief on Yule day.”

“Oh, don’t you think that – sweet!” exulted Mabel, making a true lover’s knot of the end of her long rope of green that Nat had succeeded in intertwining with Dorothy’s ‘cross town line’.

“Delicious,” declared Ned, jumping up and placing his arms about her neck.

“Stop,” she cried. “I meant the bow.”

“Who’s running this show, any way?” asked Ted. “Do you see the time, Frats?”

The mantle clock chimed six. Ned and Nat jumped up, and shook themselves loose from the stickery holly leaves as if they had been so many feathers.

“We must eat,” declared Ned, dramatically, “for to-morrow we die!”

“We cannot have tea until everything is finished,” Dorothy objected. “Do you think we girls can clean up this room?”

“Call the maids in,” Ned advised, foolishly, for the housemaids at the Cedars were not expected to clean up after the “festooners.”

Dorothy frowned her reply, and continued to gather up the ends of everything. Mabel did not desert either, but before the girls realized it, the boys had run off – to the dining room where a hasty meal, none the less enjoyable, was ready to be eaten.

“What do you suppose they are up to?” Mabel asked.

“There is something going on when they are in such a hurry. What do you say if we follow them? It is not dark, and they can’t be going far,” answered Dorothy.

Mabel gladly agreed, and, a half hour later, the two girls cautiously made their way along the white road, almost in the shadow of three jolly youths. Occasionally they could hear the remarks that the boys made.

“They are going to the wedding!” Dorothy exclaimed. “The seven o’clock wedding at Winter’s!”

Mabel did not reply. The boys had turned around, and she clutched Dorothy’s arm nervously. Instinctively both girls slowed their pace.

“They did not see us,” Dorothy whispered, presently. “But they are turning into Sodden’s!”

Sodden’s was the home of one of the boys’ chums – Gus Sodden by name. He was younger than the others, and had the reputation of being the most reckless chap in North Birchland.

“But,” mused Mabel, “the wedding is to be at the haunted house! I should be afraid – ”

“Mabel!” Dorothy exclaimed, “you do not mean to say that you believe in ghosts!”

“Oh – no,” breathed Mabel, “but you know the idea is so creepy.”

“That is why,” Dorothy said with a light laugh, “we have to creep along now. Look at Ned. He must feel our presence near.”

The boys now were well along the path to the Sodden home. It was situated far down in a grove, to which led a path through the hemlock trees. These trees were heavy with the snow that they seemed to love, for other sorts of foliage had days before shed the fall that had so gently stolen upon them – like a caress from a white world of love.

“My, it is dark!” demurred Mabel, again.

“Mabel Blake!” accused Dorothy. “I do believe you are a coward!”

It was lonely along the way. Everyone being busy with Christmas at home, left the roads deserted.

“What do you suppose they are going in there for?” Mabel finally whispered.

“We will have to wait and find out,” replied Dorothy. “When one starts out spying on boys she must be prepared for all sorts of surprises.”

“Oh, there comes Gus! Look!” Mabel pointed to a figure making tracks through the snow along the path.

“And – there are the others. It did not take them long to make up. They are – Christmas – Imps. Such make-ups!” Dorothy finished, as she beheld the boys, in something that might have been taken, or mistaken, for stray circus baggage.

Even in their disguise it was easy to recognize the boys. Ned wore a kimono – bright red. On his head was the tall sort of cap that clowns and the old-fashioned school dunce wore. Nat was “cute” in somebody’s short skirt and a shorter jacket. He wore also a worsted cap that was really, in the dim light, almost becoming. Ted matched up Nat, the inference being that they were to be Christmas attendants on Santa Claus.

The girls stepped safely behind the hedge as the procession passed. The boys seemed too involved in their purpose to talk.

“Now,” said Dorothy, “we may follow. I knew they were up to something big.”

“Aren’t they too funny!” said Mabel, who had almost giggled disastrously as the boys passed. “I thought I would die!”

There was no time to spare now, for the boys were walking very quickly, and it was not so easy for the girls to keep up with them and at the same time to keep away from them.

Straight they went for what was locally called the “haunted” house. This was a fine old mansion, with big rooms and broad chimneys, which had once been the home of a family of wealth. But there had been a sad tragedy there, and after that it had been said that ghosts held sway at the place. It had been deserted for two years, but now, with the former owner dead, a niece of the family, fresh from college, had insisted upon being married there, and the house had been accordingly put into shape for the ceremony.

It was to be a fashionable wedding, at the hour of six, and people had kept the station agent busy all day inquiring how to reach the scene of the wedding.

Lights already burned brightly in the rooms, that could be seen to be decorated in holiday style. People fluttered around and through the long French windows; the young folks, boys and girls, being hidden in different quarters, could alike see something of what was going on in the haunted house.

“They’re coming!” Dorothy heard Nat exclaim, just as he ducked in by the big outside chimney. The broad flue was at the extreme end of the house, forming the southern part of the library, just off the wide hall that ran through the middle of the place. Dorothy and Mabel had taken refuge in one of the many odd corners of the big, old fashioned porch, which partly encircled this wing, and commanding a wonderful view of the interior of the house, the halls and library, and long, narrow drawing room.

There was a smothered laugh at the corner of the porch where the boys had ducked, and the girls watched in wonder. The latter saw Nat boost Ned up the side of the porch column, and Ted followed nimbly. In tense silence the girls listened to their footsteps cross the porch roof, then as scraping and slipping and much suppressed mirth floated down.

“They’re going down the chimney!” declared Dorothy, in astonishment.

“They surely are!” affirmed Mabel, leaning far over the porch rail.

“But, Doro, what of the fire?”

“They don’t use that chimney. They use the one on the other side of the house, and the one in the kitchen.”

CHAPTER VII

REAL GHOSTS

“That explains the basket!” exclaimed Dorothy, suddenly.

“How can they do it!” Mabel giggled excitedly.

“They can’t,” Dorothy replied, calmly, “they’ll simply get in a mess – soot and things, you know.”

“Let’s run. I’m too excited to breathe! I know something dreadful is bound to happen!” And Mabel clutched Dorothy’s arm.

“And leave the boys to their fate? No, indeed, we’ll see the prank through, since we walked into it,” Dorothy said, determinedly.

Mabel laughed nervously, and looked at Dorothy in puzzled impatience. “I always believe in running while there’s time,” she explained.

Music, sweet and low, floated out on the still, cold air of the night, and the wedding guests, in trailing gowns of silver and lace and soft satins, stood in laughing groups, all eyes turned toward the broad staircase.

“How quiet it’s become; everyone has stopped talking,” whispered Mabel, in Dorothy’s ear.

“How peculiarly they are all staring! But of course it must be exciting just before the bride appears,” murmured Dorothy, in answer.

“Oh, there comes the bride!” cried Mabel. “Isn’t she sweet!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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