

Hill Grace Brooks

The Corner House Girls Under Canvas



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Hill Grace Brooks

The Corner House Girls Under Canvas / How they reached Pleasant Cove and what happened afterward

CHAPTER I – TOM JONAH

“Come here, Tess! Come quick and look at this poor dog. He’s just drip-ping-wet!”

Dot Kenway stood at a sitting-room window of the old Corner House, looking out upon Willow Street. It was a dripping day, and anything or anybody that remained out-of-doors and exposed to the downpour for half an hour, was sure to be saturated.

Nothing wetter or more miserable looking than the dog in question had come within the range of the vision of the two younger Corner House girls that Saturday morning.

Tess, who was older than Dot, came running. Anything as frightfully despondent and hopeless looking as that dog was bound to touch the tender heart of Tess Kenway.

“Let’s – let’s take him to the porch and feed him, Dot,” she cried.

“Will Ruthie let us?” asked Dot.

“Of course. She’s gone for her music lesson and won’t know, anyway,” declared Tess, recklessly.

“But maybe Mrs. MacCall won’t like it?”

“She’s upstairs and won’t know, either. Besides,” Tess said, bolstering up her own desire, “she says she hasn’t ever sent anybody away hungry from her door; and that poor dog looks just as hungry as any tramp that ever came to the old Corner House.”

The girls ran out of the sitting-room into the huge front hall which, in itself, was almost big enough for a ballroom. It was finished in dark, dark oak; there was a huge front door – like the door of a castle; the furniture was walnut, upholstered in haircloth, worn shiny by more than three generations of use; and out of the middle of the hall a great stairway arose, dividing when half-way up into two sections, while a sort of gallery was built all around the hall at the second floor, out of which the doors of the principal chambers opened.

There was a third story above, and above that a huge garret – often the playroom of the Corner House girls on such days as this. In the rear were two wings built on to the house, each three stories in height. The house had its “long” side to Willow Street, and only a narrow grass plot and brick walk separated the sitting-room windows from the boundary fence.

It faced Main Street, at its head, where the Parade Ground began. The dripping trees on the Parade were now in full leaf and the lush grass beneath them was green. The lawns of the old Corner House needed the mower, too; and at the back Uncle Rufus – the general factotum of the establishment – had laid out a wonderful kitchen garden which already had yielded radishes and tender onions and salad, and promised green peas to accompany the spring lamb to the table on the approaching Fourth.

Tess and Dot Kenway crossed the big hall of the Corner House, and went on through the dining-room with its big table, huge, heavily carved sideboard and comfortably armed chairs, through the butler’s pantry into the kitchen. As Tess had said, Mrs. MacCall, their good-natured and lovable housekeeper, was not in sight. Nobody delayed them, and they stepped out upon the half-screened porch at the back. The woodshed joined it at the far end. The steps faced Willow Street.

On the patch of drying green a goat was tethered, lying down in the rain, reflectively chewing a cud. He bleated when he saw the girls, but did not offer to rise; the rain did not disturb him in the least.

“Billy Bumps likes the rain,” Dot said, thoughtfully.

The dog outside the gate did not seem to be enjoying himself. He had dropped down upon the narrow strip of sward between the flagged walk and the curbing; his sides heaved as though he had run a long way, and his pink tongue lolled out of his mouth and dripped.

“My!” Dot murmured, as she saw this, “the rain’s soaked right through the poor doggy – hasn’t it? And it’s just dripping out of him!”

Tess, more practical, if no more earnest in her desire to relieve the dog’s apparent misery, ran down to the gate through the falling rain and called to him:

“Poor, poor doggie! Come in!”

She opened the gate temptingly, but the strange dog merely wagged his tail and looked at her out of his beautiful brown eyes. He was a Newfoundland dog, with a cross of some breed that gave him patches of deep brown in his coat and very fine, long, silky hair that curled up at the ends. He was strongly built and had a good muzzle which was powdered with the gray hairs of age.

“Come here, old fellow,” urged Tess, “*Do* come in!”

She snapped her fingers and held the gate more invitingly open. He staggered to his feet and limped toward her. He did not crouch and slink along as a dog does that has been beaten; but he eyed her doubtfully as though not sure, after all, of this reception.

He was muddled to his flanks, his coat was matted with green burrs, and there was a piece of frayed rope knotted about his neck. The dog followed Tess doubtfully to the porch. Billy Bumps climbed to his feet and shook his head threateningly, stamping his feet; but the strange dog was too exhausted to pay the goat any attention.

The visitor at first refused to mount the steps, but he looked up at Dot and wagged his tail in greeting.

“Oh, Tess!” cried the smallest girl. “He thinks he knows me. Do you suppose we have ever seen him before?”

“I don’t believe so,” said Tess, bustling into the woodshed and out again with a pan of broken meat that had been put aside for Sandyface and her children. “I know I should remember him if I had ever seen him before. Come, old fellow! Good doggie! Come up and eat.”

She put the pan down on the porch and stood back from it. The brown eyes of the dog glowed more brightly. He hesitatingly hobbled up the steps.

A single sniff of the tidbits in the pan, and the dog fell to wolfishly, not stopping to chew at all, but fairly jerking the meat into his throat with savage snaps.

“Oh, don’t gobble so!” gasped Dot. “It – it’s bad for your indigestions – and isn’t polite, anyway.”

“Guess you wouldn’t be polite if you were as hungry as he is,” Tess observed.

The dog was so tired that he lay right down, after a moment, and ate with his nose in the pan. Dot ventured to pat his wet coat and he thumped his tail softly on the boards, but did not stop eating.

At this juncture Uncle Rufus came shuffling up the path from the hen-coop. Uncle Rufus was a tall, stoop-shouldered, pleasantly brown negro, with a very bald crown around which was a narrow growth of tight, grizzled “wool.” He had a smiling face, and if the whites of his eyes were turning amber hued with age he was still “purty pert” – to use his own expression – save when the rheumatism laid him low.

“Whar’ yo’ chillen done git dat dawg?” he wanted to know, in astonishment.

“Oh, Uncle Rufus!” cried Dot. “He came along looking *so* wet – ”

“And he was *so* tired and hungry,” added Tess.

“I done spec’ yo’ chillen would take in er wild taggar, ef one come erlong lookin’ sort o’ meachin’,” grumbled the colored man.

“But he’s so good!” said Tess. “See!” and she put her hand upon the handsome head of the bedraggled beast.

“He jes’ er tramp dawg,” said Uncle Rufus, doubtfully.

“He’s only tired and dirty,” said Tess, earnestly. “I don’t believe he wants to be a tramp. He doesn’t look at all like the tramps Mrs. MacCall feeds at the back door here.”

“Nor like those horrid Gypsies that came to the house the other day,” added Dot eagerly. “I was afraid of them.”

“Well, it suah ain’t b’long ’round yere – dat dawg,” muttered Uncle Rufus. “It done run erway f’om somewhar’ an’ hit trabbel far – ya-as’m!”

He pulled the ears of the big dog himself, in a kindly fashion, and the dog pounded the porch harder with his tail and rolled a trusting eye up at the little group. Evidently the tramp dog was convinced that this would be a good place to remain in, and “rest up.”

A pretty girl of twelve or thirteen, with flower-like face, plump, and her blue eyes dancing and laughing in spite of her, ran in at the side gate. She had a covered basket of groceries on her arm, and was swathed in a raincoat with a close hood about her face.

“Agnes!” screamed Dot. “See what we’ve got! Just the nicest, friendfulnest dog – ”

“Mercy, Dot! More animals?” was the older sister’s first comment.

“But he’s such a *nice* dog,” wailed Dot.

“And so hungry and wet,” added Tess.

“What fine eyes he has!” exclaimed Agnes, stooping down to pat the noble head. Instantly the dog’s pink tongue sought her hand and – Agnes was won!

“He’s splendid! he’s a fine old fellow!” she cried. “Of course we’ll keep him, Dot.”

“If Ruthie says so,” added Tess, with a loyalty to the oldest Corner House girl born of the fact that Ruth had mothered the brood of three younger sisters since their real mother had died three years previous.

“I dunno wot yo’ chillen want er dawg for,” complained Uncle Rufus.

“To keep chicken thieves away,” said Agnes, promptly, laughing roguishly at the grumbling black man.

“Oh!” cried Tess. “You said yourself, Uncle Rufus, that those Gypsies that stopped here might be looking at Ruth’s chickens.”

“Well, I done guess dat tramp dawg knows when he’s well off,” said the old man, chuckling suddenly. “He’s layin’ down lak’ he’s fixin’ tuh stay – ya-as’m!”

The dog had crept to the most sheltered corner of the porch and curled up on an old rag mat Mrs. MacCall had left there for the cats.

“He ought to have that dirty old rope taken off,” said Agnes.

Uncle Rufus drew out his clasp knife and opened the blade. He approached the weary dog and knelt down to remove the rope.

“Glo-ree!” he exclaimed, suddenly. “He done got er collar on him.”

It was hidden in the thick hair about the dog’s neck. The three girls crowded close to see, Uncle Rufus unbuckled it and handed the leather strap to Agnes.

“See if there is any name and address on it, Aggie!” gasped Tess. “Oh! I hope not. Then, if we don’t know where he came from, he’s ours for keeps.”

There was a small brass plate; but no name, address, or license number was engraved upon it. Instead, in clear script, it was marked:

“THIS IS TOM JONAH. HE IS A

GENTLEMAN.”

“There!” cried Dot, as though this settled the controversy. “What did I tell you? He *can’t* be any tramp dog. He’s a gentleman.”

“Tom Jonah,” murmured Agnes. “What a funny name!”

When Ruth came home the younger girls bore her off at once to see Tom Jonah sleeping comfortably on the porch. The old dog raised his grizzled muzzle, wagged his tail, and beamed at her out of his soft brown eyes.

“The dear love!” cried Tess, clasping her hands. “Isn’t he beautiful, Ruthie?”

“Beautifully dirty,” said Ruth, doubtfully.

“Oh, but Uncle Rufus says he will wash him to-morrow. He’s got some insect – insecty-suicide soap like he puts on the henroosts – ”

“Insecticide, Dot,” admonished Tess. “I wish you wouldn’t try to say words that you *can’t* say.”

Dot pouted. But Ruth patted her head and said, soothingly:

“Never mind, honey. We’ll let the poor dog stay till he rests up, anyway. He looks like a kind creature.”

But she, as well as the adults in the old Corner House, did not expect to see Tom Jonah the next morning when they awoke. He was allowed to remain on the porch, and despite the objections of Sandyface, the mother cat, and the army of younger felines growing up about her, Tom Jonah was given a bountiful supper by Mrs. MacCall herself.

Dot and Tess ran to peep at the dog just before going to bed that night. He blinked at them in the lampshine from the open door, and thumped the porch flooring with his tail.

It was past midnight before anything more was heard of Tom Jonah. Then the whole house was aroused – not to say the neighborhood. There was a savage salvo of barks from the porch, and down the steps scrambled Tom Jonah. They heard him go roaring down the yard.

Then there arose a great confusion at the hen house – a squawking of frightened hens, the loud “cut, cut, ca-da-cut!” of the rooster, mingling with which was the voice of at least one human being and the savage baying of Tom Jonah.

CHAPTER II – SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO

Uncle Rufus was too old and too stiff to get out of bed and down from his third-story room in the old Corner House, to be of any assistance at this midnight incident. But the girls were awakened the moment Tom Jonah began barking.

“It’s a hen thief!” squealed Tess, leaping out of her own warm nest.

“I hope that dog bites him!” cried Agnes, savagely, from the other room.

She ran to the window. It was a starlit, but foggy night. She could see only vaguely the objects out of doors.

Ruth was scrambling into a skirt and dressing sacque; she thrust her feet into shoes, too, and started downstairs. Mrs. MacCall’s window went up with a bang, and the girls heard the housekeeper exclaim:

“Shoo! shoo! Get out of there!”

Whoever it was that had roused Tom Jonah, the person was evidently unable to “get out of there.” The dog’s threatening growls did not cease, and the man’s voice which had first been heard when the trouble started, was protesting.

Agnes followed her older sister downstairs. Of course, Aunt Sarah Maltby, who slept in one of the grand front rooms in the main part of the house, did not even hear all the disturbance. And there were not any houses really near the Stower Homestead, which Milton people knew by the name of “the old Corner House.”

Therefore, the sounds of conflict at the Kenway hennery were not likely to arouse many people. But when Ruth and Agnes reached out-of-doors, the younger girl remembered one person who might hear and be of assistance.

“Let’s call Neale O’Neil!” she cried to Ruth. “He’ll help us.”

“We’d better call a policeman,” said Ruth, running down the brick path.

“Huh! you wouldn’t find a policeman in Milton at this hour of the night, if you searched for a week of Sundays,” was the younger girl’s ambiguous statement. Then she raised her voice and shouted: “Neale! Neale O’Neil! Help!”

Meantime the dog continued his threatening bayings. The fowls fluttered and squawked. Billy Bumps began to blat and butt the partition in his pen. Whoever had ventured into the hennery had gotten into hot quarters and no mistake!

Ruth stopped suddenly in the path and clutched at Agnes’ arm. Agnes was as lightly dressed as herself; but it was a warm June night and there was no danger of their getting cold.

“Suppose the dog does not remember us?” the older girl gasped in Agnes’ ear. “Maybe – maybe he’ll tear us to pieces. How savage he sounds!”

Agnes was frightened; but she had pluck, too. “Come on, Ruth!” she said. “He is only mad at the thief.”

“If it *is* a thief,” quavered Ruth. “I – I am afraid to go on, Aggie.”

At that moment the sound of little feet pattering behind them made both girls turn. There were Dot and Tess, both barefooted, and Dot with merely a doubled-up comforter snatched from her bed, wrapped over her night clothes.

“Mercy me, children!” gasped Ruth. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, we mustn’t let Tom Jonah *bite* that man,” Tess declared, and kept right on running toward the henhouse.

“If that dog bites – ” screamed Ruth, and ran after her smaller sister.

There was the big dog leaping savagely toward the low eaves of the hennery. A kicking figure was sprawled on the roof, clinging with both hands to the ridge of it. The girls obtained a glimpse of a dark face, with flashing teeth, and big gold rings in the marauder’s ears.

“Tak’ dog away! Tak’ dog away!” the man said, in a strangled voice.

“He’s one of those Gypsies,” whispered Agnes, in an awed voice.

A tribe of the nomads in question had passed through Milton but a day or two before, and the girls had been frightened by the appearance of the men of the tribe who had called at the old Corner House.

Now, whether this marauder belonged to the same people or not, Ruth saw that he looked like a Gypsy. For another reason, too, her mind was relieved at once; Tom Jonah was only savage toward the man on the roof.

When Tess ran right up to the leaping dog, he stopped barking, and wagged his tail, as though satisfied that he had done his duty in drawing the family to the scene. But he still kept his eyes on the man, and occasionally uttered a growl deep in his throat.

“What are you doing up there?” Ruth demanded of the man.

“Tak’ away dog!” he whined.

“No. I think I will let the dog hold you till a policeman comes. You were trying to rob our henroost.”

“Oh, no, Missee! You wrong. No do that,” stammered the man.

“What were you doing here, then?”

Before the fellow could manufacture any plausible tale, a shout came from beyond the back fence, and somebody was heard to scramble into the Corner House yard.

“What’s the matter, girls?” demanded Neale O’Neil’s cheerful voice.

“Oh, come here, Neale!” cried Agnes. “Tom Jonah’s caught a Gypsy.”

“Tom *Who*?” demanded the tall, pleasant-faced boy of fifteen, who immediately approached the henhouse.

“Tom Jonah,” announced Tess. “He’s just the *nicest* dog!”

The boy saw the group more clearly then. He looked from the savagely growling animal to the man sprawling on the roof, and burst out laughing.

“Yes! I guess that fellow up there feels that the dog is very ‘nice.’ Where did you get the dog, and where did *he* get his name?”

“We’ll tell you all about that later, Neale,” said Ruth, more gravely. “At least, we’ll tell you all we know about the dear old dog. Isn’t he a splendid fellow to catch this man at my hens?”

“And the fellow had some in this bag!” exclaimed Neale, finding a bag of flopping poultry at the corner of the hen-run.

“Tak’ away dog!” begged the man on the roof again.

“That’s all he’s afraid of,” said Agnes. “I bet he has a knife. Isn’t he a wicked looking fellow?”

“Regular brigand,” agreed Neale. “What we going to do with him?”

“Give him to a policeman,” suggested Agnes.

“Do you suppose the policeman would *want* him?” chuckled Neale. “To awaken a Milton officer at this hour of the night would be almost sacrilege, wouldn’t it?”

“What *shall* we do?” demanded Agnes.

Ruth had been thinking more sensibly for a few moments. Now she spoke up decisively:

“The man did not manage to do any harm. Put the poultry back in the house, Neale. If he ever comes again he will know what to expect. He thought we had no dog; but he sees we have – and a savage one. Let him go.”

“Had we better do that, sister?” whispered Agnes. “Oughtn’t he to be punished?”

“I expect so,” Ruth said, grimly. “But for once I am going to shirk my duty. We’ll take away the dog and let him go.”

“Who’ll take him away?” demanded Agnes, suddenly.

Neale had taken the sack in which the fowl struggled, to the door of the henhouse, opened it, and dumped the fowl out. Tom Jonah evidently recognized him for a friend, for he wagged his tail, but still kept his eye on the man upon the roof.

“I declare!” said Ruth. “I hadn’t thought. Whom will he mind?”

“Come here, Tom Jonah!” said Neale, snapping his fingers.

Tom Jonah still wagged his tail, but he remained ready to receive the Gypsy (if such the fellow was) in his jaws, if he descended.

“Come away, Tom!” exclaimed Agnes, confidently. “Come on back to the house.”

The man on the roof moved and Tom Jonah stiffened. He refused to budge.

“Guess you’ll have to call a cop after all,” said Neale, doubtfully.

“Here, sir!” commanded Ruth. “Come away. You have done enough – ”

But the dog did not think so. He held his place and growled.

“I guess you’re bound to stay up there, till daylight – or a policeman – doth appear, my friend,” called up Neale to the besieged.

“Tak’ away dog!” begged the frightened fellow.

“Why, Tom Jonah!” exclaimed Tess, walking up to the big dog and putting a hand on his collar.

“You must come away when you are spoken to. You’ve caught the bad man, and that’s enough.”

Tom Jonah turned and licked her hand. Then he moved a few steps away with her and looked back.

“Come on with me, Tom Jonah,” commanded the little girl, firmly. “Let the bad man go.”

“What do you know about *that*?” demanded Neale.

The next minute the fellow had scrambled up the roof, caught the low hanging limb of a shade tree that stood near the fence, and swinging himself like a cat into the tree, he got out on another branch that overhung the sidewalk, dropped, and ran.

Tom Jonah sprang to the fence with a savage bay; but the man only went the faster. The incident was closed in a minute, and the little party of half-dressed young folk went back to their beds, while the strange dog curled up on his mat in the corner of the porch again and slept the sleep of the just till morning.

And now that the excitement is over, let us find out a little something about the Corner House girls, their friends, their condition in life, and certain interesting facts regarding them.

When Mr. Howbridge, the lawyer from Milton and Uncle Peter Stower’s man of affairs and the administrator of his estate, came to the little tenement on Essex Street, Bloomingsburg, where the four orphaned Kenway girls had lived for some years with Aunt Sarah Maltby, he first met Tess and Dot returning from the drugstore with Aunt Sarah’s weekly supply of peppermint drops.

Aunt Sarah had been a burden on the Kenways for many years. The girls had only their father’s pension to get along on. Aunt Sarah claimed that when Uncle Peter died, his great estate would naturally fall to her, and then she would return all the benefits she had received from the Kenway family.

But the lawyer knew that queer old Uncle Peter Stower had made a will leaving practically all his property to the four girls in trust, and to Aunt Sarah only a small legacy. But this will had been hidden somewhere by the old man before his recent death and had not yet been found.

There seemed to be no other claimants to the Stower Estate, however, and the court allowed Mr. Howbridge to take the Kenway girls and Aunt Sarah to Milton and establish them in the Stower Homestead, known far and wide as the old Corner House.

Here, during the year that had passed, many interesting and exciting things had happened to Ruth and Agnes and Tess and Dot.

Ruth was the head of the family, and the lawyer greatly admired her good sense and ability. She was not a strikingly pretty girl, for she had “stringy” black hair and little color; but her eyes were

big and brown, and those eyes, and her mouth, laughed suddenly at you and gave expression to her whole face. She was now completing her seventeenth year.

Agnes was thirteen, a jolly, roly-poly girl, who was fond of jokes, a bit of a tomboy, up to all sorts of pranks – who laughed easily and cried stormily – had “lots of molasses colored hair” as she said herself, and was the possessor of a pair of blue eyes that could stare a rude boy out of countenance, but who *would* spoil the effect of this the next instant by giggling; a girl who had a soulmate among her girl friends all of the time, but not frequently did one last for long in the catalog of her “best friends.”

Nobody remembered that Tess had been named Theresa. She was a wise little ten-year-old who possessed some of Ruth’s dignity and some of Agnes’ prettiness, and the most tender heart in the world, which made her naturally tactful. She was quick at her books and very courageous.

Dorothy, or Dot, was the baby and pet of the family. She was a little brunette fairy; and if she was not very wise as yet, she was faithful and lovable, and not one of “the Corner House girls,” as the Kenways were soon called by Milton people, was more beloved than Dot.

The girls’ best boy friend lived with the old cobbler, Mr. Con Murphy, on the rear street, and in a little house the yard of which adjoined the larger grounds of the old Corner House. We have seen how quickly Neale O’Neil came to the assistance of the Kenway girls when they were in trouble.

Neale had been brought up among circus people, his mother having traveled all her life with Twomley & Sorber’s Herculean Circus and Menagerie. The boy’s desire for an education and to win a better place in the world for himself, had caused him to run away from his uncle, Mr. Sorber, and support himself in Milton while he attended school.

The Corner House girls had befriended Neale and when his uncle finally searched him out and found the boy, it was they who influenced the man against taking Neale away. Neale had proved himself an excellent scholar and had made friends in Milton; now he was about to graduate with Agnes from the highest grammar grade to high school.

The particulars of all these happenings have been related in the first two volumes of the series, entitled respectively, “The Corner House Girls” and “The Corner House Girls at School.”

When Agnes woke up in the morning following the unsuccessful raid of the Gypsy man on the hennery, she had something of wonderful importance to tell Ruth. She had seen her “particular friend,” Trix Severn, on the street Saturday afternoon and Trix had told her something.

“You’ve heard the girls talking about Pleasant Cove, Ruthie?” said Agnes, earnestly. “You know Mr. Terrence Severn owns one of the big hotels there?”

“Of course. Trix talks enough about it,” said the older Kenway girl.

“Oh! you don’t like Trix – ”

“I’m not exceedingly fond of her. And there was a time when you thought her your very deadliest enemy,” laughed Ruth.

“Well! Trix has changed,” declared the unsuspecting Agnes, “and she’s proposed the very nicest thing, Ruth. She says her mother and father will let her bring all four of us to the Cove for the first fortnight after graduation. The hotel will not be full then, and we will be Trix’s guests. And we’ll have loads of fun.”

“I – don’t – know – ” began Ruth, but Agnes broke in warmly:

“Now, don’t you say ‘No,’ Ruthie Kenway! Don’t you say ‘No!’ I’ve just made up my mind to go to Pleasant Cove – ”

“No need of flying off, Ag,” said Ruth, in the cool tone that usually brought Agnes “down to earth again.” “We have talked of going there for a part of the summer. A change to salt air will be beneficial for us all – so Dr. Forsythe says. I have talked to Mr. Howbridge, and he says ‘Yes.’”

“Well, then!”

“But I doubt the advisability of accepting Trix Severn’s invitation.”

“Now, isn’t that mean – ”

“Hold your horses,” again advised Ruth. “We will go, anyway. If all is well we will stay at the hotel a while. Pearl Harrod’s uncle owns a bungalow there, too; *she* has asked me to come there for a while, and bring you all.”

“Well! isn’t that nice?” agreed Agnes. “Then we can stay twice as long.”

“Whether it will be right for us to accept the hospitality offered us when we have no means of returning it – ”

“Oh, dear me, Ruth! don’t be a fuss-cat.”

“There is a big tent colony there – quite removed from the hotel,” suggested Ruth. “Many of our friends and their folks are going *there*. Neale O’Neil is going with a party of the boys for at least two weeks.”

“Say! we’ll have scrumptious times,” cried Agnes, with sparkling eyes. Her anticipation of every joy in life added immensely to the joy itself.

“Yes – if we go,” said Ruth, slowly. But it was something for the others to look forward to with much pleasure.

CHAPTER III – THE DANCE AT CARRIE POOLE’S

Tess and Dot Kenway had something of particular interest to hold their attention, too, the minute they awoke on this Sunday morning. Dot voiced the matter first when she asked:

“Do you suppose that dear Tom Jonah is here yet, Tess?”

“Oh, I hope so!” cried the older girl.

“Let’s run see,” suggested Dot, and nothing loth Tess slipped into her bathrobe and slippers, too, and the two girls pattered downstairs. Their baths, always overseen by Ruth, were neglected. They must see, they thought, if the good old dog was on the porch.

Nobody was astir downstairs; Mrs. MacCall had not yet left her room, and on Sunday mornings even Uncle Rufus allowed himself an extra hour in bed. There was the delicious smell of warm baked beans left over night in the range oven; the big, steaming pot would be set upon the table at breakfast, flanked with golden-brown muffins on one side and the sliced “loaf,” or brownbread, on the other.

Sandyface came yawning from her basket behind the stove when Tess and Dot entered the kitchen. She had four little black and white blind babies in that basket which she had found in a barrel in the woodshed only a few days before.

Mrs. MacCall said she did not know what was to be done with the four kittens. Sandyface’s original family was quite grown up, and if these four were allowed to live, too, that would make nine cats around the old Corner House.

“And the goodness knows!” exclaimed the housekeeper, “that’s a whole lot more than any family has a business to keep. We’re overrun with cats.”

Tess unlocked the door and she and Dot went out on the porch, Sandyface following. There was no sign of the big dog.

“Tom Jonah’s gone!” sighed Dot, quaveringly.

“I wouldn’t have thought it – when we treated him so nicely,” said Tess.

Sandyface sniffed suspiciously at the old mat on which the dog had lain. Then she looked all about before venturing off the porch.

The sunshine and quiet of a perfect Sunday morning lay all about the old Corner House. Robins sought their very souls for music to tell how happy they were, in the tops of the cherry trees. Catbirds had not yet lost their love songs of the spring; though occasionally one scolded harshly when a roaming cat came too near the hidden nest.

Wrens hopped about the path, and even upon the porch steps, secure in their knowledge that they were too quick for Sandyface to reach, and with unbounded faith in human beings. An oriole burst into melody, swinging in the great snowball bush near the Willow Street fence.

There was a moist, warm smell from the garden; the old rooster crowed raucously; Billy Bumps bleated a wistful “Good-morning” from his pen. Then came a scramble of padded feet, and Sandyface went up the nearest tree like a flash of lightning.

“Here is Tom Jonah!” cried Tess, with delight.

From around the corner of the woodshed appeared the big, shaggy dog. He cocked one ear and actually smiled when he saw the cat go up the tree. But he trotted right up on the porch to meet the delighted girls.

His brown eyes were deep pools where golden sparks played. The mud had been mostly shaken off his flanks and paws. He was rested, and he acted as though he were sure of his position here at the old Corner House.

“Good old fellow!” cried Tess, putting out a hand to pat him.

At once Tom Jonah put up his right paw to shake hands. He repeated the feat with Dot the next moment, to the delight of both girls.

“Oh!” gasped Dot, “he’s a trick dog.”

“He’s just what his collar says; he’s a gentleman,” sighed Tess, happily. “Oh! I hope his folks won’t ever come after him.”

Ruth had to come down for Tess and Dot or they would not have been bathed and dressed in time for breakfast. The smaller girls were very much taken with Tom Jonah.

They found that he had more accomplishments than “shaking hands.” When Agnes came down and heard about his first manifestation of education, she tried him at other “stunts.”

He sat up at the word of command. He would hold a bit of meat, or a sweet cracker, on his nose any length of time you might name, and never offer to eat it until you said, “Now, sir!” or something of the kind. Then Tom Jonah would jerk the tidbit into the air and catch it in his jaws as it came down.

And those jaws! Powerful indeed, despite some of the teeth having been broken and discolored by age. For Tom Jonah was no puppy. Uncle Rufus declared him to be at least twelve years old, and perhaps more than that.

But he had the physique of a lion – a great, broad chest, and muscles in his shoulders that slipped under the skin when he was in action like a tiger’s. Now that he was somewhat rested from the long journey he had evidently taken, he seemed a very powerful, healthy dog.

“And he would have eaten that tramp up, if he’d gotten hold of him,” Agnes declared, as they gathered at the breakfast table.

“Oh, no, Aggie; I don’t think Tom Jonah would really have *bitten* that Gypsy man,” Tess hastened to say. “But he might have grabbed his coat and held on.”

“With those jaws – I guess he would have held on,” sighed Agnes.

“Anyway,” said Dot, “he saved Ruthie’s hens. Didn’t he, Ruthie?”

“I’ll gladly pay his license fee if he wants to stay with us,” said Ruth, gaily.

The cornmeal muffins chanced to be a little over-baked that morning; at least, one panful was. Dot did not like “crusts”; she had been known to hide very hard ones under the edge of her plate.

She played with one of these muffin crusts more than she ate it, and Aunt Sarah Maltby (who was a very grim lady indeed with penetrating eyes and a habit of seldom speaking) had an accusing eye upon the little girl.

“Dorothy,” she said, suddenly, “you will see the time, I have no doubt, when you will be hungry for that crust. You had better eat it now like a nice girl.”

“Aunt Sarah, I really do not want it,” said Dot, gravely. “And – and if I don’t, do you think I shall really some day be hungry for just *this* pertic’lar crust?”

“You will. I expect nothing less,” snapped Aunt Sarah. “The Kenways was allus spend-thrifts. Why! when I was your age, Dorothy, I was glad to get dry bread to eat!”

Dot looked at her with serious interest. “You must have been awfully poor, Aunt Sarah,” she said, sympathetically. “You have a much better time living with us, don’t you?”

Ruth shook her head admonishingly at the smallest girl; but for once Aunt Sarah was rather nonplussed, and nobody heard her speak again before she went off to church.

Neale came over later, dressed for Sunday school, and he was as much interested in the new boarder at the Corner House as the girls themselves.

“If he belongs anywhere around Milton, somebody will surely know about him,” said the boy. “I’ll make inquiries. Wherever he comes from, he must be well known in that locality.”

“Why so?” demanded Agnes.

“Because of what it says on his collar,” laughed Neale O’Neil.

“Because of what it *doesn’t* say, I guess,” explained Ruth, seeing her sister’s puzzled face. “There is no name of owner, or license number. Do you see?”

“It – it would be an insult to license a dog like Tom Jonah,” sputtered Tess. “Just – just like a tag on an automobile!”

“Yo’ right, honey,” chuckled Uncle Rufus. “He done seem like folkses – don’ he? I’s gwine tuh give him a reg’lar barf an’ cure up dem sore feetses ob his. He’ll be anudder dawg – sho’ will!”

The old man took Tom Jonah to the grass plot near the garden hydrant, and soaped him well – with the “insect-suicide” soap Dot had talked about – and afterward washed him down with the hose. Tom Jonah stood for it all; he had evidently been used to having his toilet attended to.

When the girls came home from Sunday school, they found him lying on the porch, all warm and dried and his hair “fluffy.” They had asked everybody they met – almost – about Tom Jonah; but not a soul knew anything regarding him.

“He’s going to be ours for keeps! He’s going to be ours for keeps!” sang Tess, with delight.

Sandyface’s earlier family – Spotty, Almira, Bungle and Popocatepetl – had taken a good look at the big dog, and then backed away with swelling tails and muffled objections. But the old cat had to attend to the four little blind mites behind the kitchen range, so she had grown familiar enough with Tom Jonah to pass him on her way to and from the kitchen door.

He was too much of a gentleman, as his collar proclaimed, to pay her the least attention save for a friendly wag of his bushy tail. To the four half-grown cats he gave little heed. But Tess and Dot thought that he ought to become acquainted with the un-named kittens in the basket immediately.

“If they get used to him, you know,” said Tess, “they’ll all live together just like a ‘happy family.’”

“Like *us*?” suggested Dot, who did not quite understand the reference, having forgotten the particular cage thus labeled in the circus they had seen the previous summer.

“Why! of course like *us*!” laughed Tess, and Sandyface being away foraging for her brood, Tess seized the basket and carried it out on the porch, setting it down before Tom Jonah who was lying in the sun.

The big dog sniffed at the basket but did not offer to disturb the sleeping kittens. That would not do for the curious girls. They had to delve deeper into the natural lack of affinity between the canine and the feline families.

So Tess lifted one little black and white, squirmy kitten – just as its mother did, by the back of its neck – and set it upon the porch before the dog’s nose. The kitten became awake instantly. Blind as it was, it stiffened its spine into an arch, backed away from the vicinity of the dog precipitately, and “spit” like a tiny teakettle boiling over.

“Oh! oh! the horrid thing,” wailed Dot. “And poor Tom Jonah didn’t do a thing to it!”

“But see him!” gasped Tess, in a gale of giggles.

For really, Tom Jonah looked too funny for anything. He turned away his head with a most embarrassed expression of countenance and would not look again at the spitting little animal. He evidently felt himself in a most ridiculous position and finally got up and went off the porch altogether until the girls returned the basket of kittens to its proper place behind the stove.

At dinner that Sunday, when Uncle Rufus served the roast, he held the swinging door open until Tom Jonah paced in behind him into the dining-room. Seeing the roast placed before Mrs. MacCall, Tom Jonah sat down beside her chair in a good position to observe the feast; but waited his turn in a most gentlemanly manner.

Mrs. MacCall cut some meat for him and put it on a plate. This Uncle Rufus put before Tom Jonah; but the big dog did not offer to eat it until he was given permission. And now he no longer “gobbled,” but ate daintily, and sat back when he was finished like any well-bred person, waiting for the next course.

Even Aunt Sarah looked with approval upon the new acquisition to the family of the old Corner House. She had heard the tale of his rescue of Ruth’s poultry from the marauding Gypsy, and patted Tom Jonah’s noble head.

“It’s a good thing to have a watch-dog on the premises,” she said, “with all that old silver and trash you girls insist upon keeping out of the plate-safe. Your Uncle Peter would turn in his grave if he knew how common you was makin’ the Stower plate.”

“But what is the good of having a thing if you don’t make use of it?” queried Ruth, stoutly.

Ruth was a girl with a mind of her own, and not even the carping criticisms of Aunt Sarah could turn her from her course if once she was convinced that what she did was right. Nor was she frightened by her schoolmates' opinions – as note her friendship with Rosa Wildwood.

Bob Wildwood was a “character” in Milton. People smiled at him and forgave his peculiarities to a degree; but they could not respect him.

In the first place, Bob was a Southerner – and a Southerner in a New England town is just as likely to be misunderstood, as a Northerner in a Georgian town.

Bob and his daughter, Rosa, had drifted to Milton a couple of years previous. They had been “drifting” for most of the girl's short life; but now Rosa was quite big enough to have some influence with her shiftless father, and they had taken some sort of root in the harsh New England soil, so different from their own rich bottom-lands of the South.

Besides, Rosa was in ill health. She was “weakly”; Bob spoke of her as having “a mis'ry in her chest.” Dr. Forsythe found that the girl had weak lungs, but he was sane and old-fashioned enough to scout the idea that she was in danger of becoming a victim of tuberculosis.

“If you go to work, Bob, and earn for her decent food and a warm shelter, she will pull through and get as hearty and strong as our Northern girls,” declared the doctor, sternly. “You say you lost her twin two years ago – ”

“But I didn't done los' Juniper by no sickness,” muttered Bob, shaking his head.

The Corner House girls thought Bob Wildwood a most amusing man, for he talked just like a darky (to their ears); but Uncle Rufus shook his head in scorn at Wildwood. “He's jes' no-'count white trash,” the old colored man observed.

However, spurred by the doctor's threat, Bob let drink alone for the most part, and went to work for Rosa, his remaining daughter, who was just Ruth's age and was in her class at High – when she was well enough to get there. In spite of her blood and bringing up, Rosa Wildwood had a quick and retentive mind and stood well in her classes.

Bob became a coal-heaver. He worked for Lovell & Malmsey. He drove a pair of mules without lines, ordering them about in a most wonderful manner in a tongue entirely strange to Northern teamsters; and he was black with coal-dust from week-end to week-end. Ruth said there only was one visible white part of Rosa's father; that was the whites of his eyes.

The man must have loved his daughter very much, however; for it was his nature to be shiftless. He would have gone hungry and ragged himself rather than work. He now kept steadily at his job for Rosa's sake.

On Monday Rosa was not at school, and coming home to luncheon at noon, Ruth ran half a block out of her way to find out what was the matter. Not alone was the tenement the Wildwoods occupied a very poor one, but Rosa was no housekeeper. It almost disgusted the precise and prim Ruth Kenway to go into the three-room tenement.

Rosa had a cold, and of course it had settled on her chest. She was just dragging herself around to get something hot for Bob's dinner. Ruth made her go back to bed, and she finished the preparations.

When she came to make the tea, the Corner House girl was horrified to observe that the metal teapot had probably not been thoroughly washed out since the day the Wildwoods had taken up their abode in Milton.

“Paw likes to have the tea set back on the stove,” drawled Rosa, with her pleasant Southern accent. “When he gets a chance, he runs in and ‘takes a swig,’ as he calls it, out of the pot. He says it's good for the gnawin' in his stomach – it braces him up an' is *so* much better than when he useter mix toddies,” said the girl, gratefully. “We'd have had June with us yet, if it hadn't been for paw's toddies.”

“Oh!” cried Ruth, startled. “I thought your sister June died?”

Rosa shook her head and the tears flowed into her soft eyes. "Oh, no. She went away. She couldn't stand the toddies no more, she said – and her slavin' to keep the house nice, and us movin' on all the time. June was housekeeper – she was a long sight smarter'n me, Ruth."

"But the teachers at school think you are awfully smart," declared the Corner House girl.

"June warn't so smart at her books," said Rosa. "But she could do *anything* with her hands. You'd think she was two years older'n me, too. She was dark and handsome. She got mad, and run away, and then we started lookin' for her; but we've never found her yet," sighed Rosa. "And now I've got so miserable that I can't keep traveling with paw. So we got to stop here, and maybe we won't ever see June again."

"Oh! I hope you will," cried Ruth. "Now, your father's dinner is all ready to dish up. And I'll come back after school this afternoon and rid up the house for you; don't you do a thing."

Ruth had time that noon for only a bite at home, and explained to Mrs. MacCall that she would be late in returning from school. She carried a voluminous apron with her to cover her school frock when she set about "ridding up" the Wildwood domicile.

Ruth wanted to help Rosa; she hoped Rosa would keep up with the class and be promoted at the end of the term, as she was sure to be herself. And she was sorry for sooty, odd-talking Bob Wildwood.

What Rosa had said about her lost twin sister had deeply interested Ruth Kenway. She wanted, too, to ask the Southern girl about "June," or Juniper.

"We were the last children maw had," said Rosa. "She just seemed to give up after we were born. The others were all sickly – just drooped and faded. And they all were girls and had flower names. Maw was right fanciful, I reckon.

"I wish June had held on. She'd stuck it out, I know, if she'd believed paw could stop drinking toddies. But, you see he *has*. He 'swigs' an awful lot of tea, though, and I expect it's tanning him inside just like he was leather!"

Ruth really thought this was probable – especially with the teapot in the condition she had found it. But she had put some washing soda in the pot, filled it with boiling water, and set it back on the stove to stew some of the "tannin" out of it.

While the Corner House girl was talking with Rosa in the little bedroom the girl called her own, Bob brought his mules to a halt before the house with an empty wagon, and ran in as usual.

The girls heard him enter the outer room; but Ruth never thought of what the man's object might be until Rosa laughed and said:

"There's paw now, for a swig at the teapot. I hope you left it full fo' him, Ruthie, dear."

"Oh, goodness mercy me!" cried the Corner House girl, and darted out to the kitchen to warn the man.

But she was too late. Already the begrimed Bob Wildwood had the spout of the teapot to his lips and several swallows of the scalding and acrid mixture gurgled down his throat before he discovered that it was not tea!

"Woof! woof! woof!" he sputtered, and flung pot and all away from him. "Who done tryin' poison me! Woof! I's scalded with poison!"

He coughed and spluttered over the sink, and then tried a draught of cold water from the spigot – which probably did him just as much good as anything.

"Oh, dear me, Mr. Wildwood!" gasped Ruth, standing with clasped hands and looking at the sooty man, half frightened. "I – I was just boiling the teapot out."

"Boilin' it out?"

"Yes, sir. With soda. I – I – It won't poison you, I guess."

"My Lawd!" groaned Bob. "What won't yo' Northerners do nex'? Wash out er teapot!" and he grumblingly went forth to his team and drove away.

Ruth felt that her good intentions were misunderstood – to a degree. But Rosa thanked her very prettily for what she had done, and the next day she was able to come to school again.

It was only a few days later that Carrie Poole invited a number of the high school girls and boys – and some of the younger set – to the last dance of the season at her home. She lived in a huge old farmhouse, some distance out of town on the Buckshot road, and the Corner House girls and Neale O'Neil had spent several pleasant evenings there during the winter and spring.

The night before this party there was a big wind, and a part of one of the chimneys came down into the side yard during the night with a noise like thunder; so Ruth had to telephone for a mason before breakfast.

Had it not been for this happening, the Corner House girls – at least, Ruth and Agnes – and Neale O'Neil, would have escaped rather an embarrassing incident at the party.

Neale came over to supper the evening of the party, and he brought his pumps in a newspaper under his arm.

“Come on, girls, let's have your dancing slippers,” he said to the two older Corner House girls, who were going to the dance. “I'll put them with mine.”

And he did so – rolling the girls' pretty slippers up in the same parcel with his own. He left the parcel in the kitchen. Later it was discovered that the mason's helper had left a similarly wrapped parcel there, too.

When the three young folk started off, it was Agnes who ran back after the bundle of dancing slippers. Neale carried it under his arm, and they walked briskly out through the suburbs of Milton and on along the Buckshot road.

“Are you really going to Pleasant Cove this summer, Neale?” demanded Agnes, as they went on together.

“If I can. Joe has asked me. And you girls?”

“Trix says we must come to her father's hotel for two weeks at least,” Agnes declared.

“Humph!” said Neale, doubtfully. “Are you going, Ruth?”

“I – don't – know,” admitted the older Corner House girl.

“Now, isn't that just too mean?” complained Agnes. “You just say that because you don't like Trix.”

“I don't know whether Trix will be of the same mind when the time comes,” said Ruth, firmly.

“I believe you,” grunted Neale.

Agnes pouted. “It's just mean of you,” she said. “Of course she will want us to go.” While Agnes was “spoons” with a girl, she was always strictly loyal to her. She could not possibly see Trix Severn's faults just now.

They arrived at the farmhouse and found a crowd already assembled. There was a great deal of talking and laughter, and while Neale stood chatting with some of the boys in the hall, Ruth and Agnes came to him for their slippers.

“Sure!” said the boy, producing the newspaper-wrapped bundle he carried. “Guess I'll put on my own pumps, too.”

He unrolled the parcel. Then a yell of derision and laughter arose from the onlookers; instead of three pairs of dancing slippers, Neale produced two pairs of half-worn and lime-bespattered shoes belonging to the masons who had repaired the old Corner House chimney!

“Now we can't dance!” wailed Agnes.

“Oh, Neale!” gasped Ruth, while the young folk about them went off into another gale of laughter.

“Well, it wasn't my fault,” grumbled Neale. “Aggie went after the bundle.”

“Shouldn't have left them right there with the masons' bundle – so now!” snapped Agnes.

CHAPTER IV – THE MYSTERY OF JUNE WILDWOOD

Now, Trix Severn had maneuvered so as to get the very first dance with Neale O'Neil. Among all the boys who attended the upper grammar grades, and the High, of Milton, the boy who had been brought up in a circus was the best dancer. The older girls all were glad to get him for a partner.

Time had been when Trix sneered at "that circus boy," but that was before he and the two older Corner House girls had saved Trix from a collapsing snow palace back in mid-winter.

Since that time she had taken up with Agnes Kenway as her very closest chum, and she had visited the old Corner House a good deal. When Agnes and her sister arrived at the party on this evening, with Neale as escort, Trix determined to have at least *one* dance with the popular boy.

"Oh, Neale!" she whispered, fluttering up to him in her very nicest way, "Ruth and Agnes will be half an hour primping, upstairs. The music is going to strike up. Do let *us* have the first dance."

"All right," said Neale, good-naturedly.

It was the moment later that the discovery was made of the masons' shoes in the bundle he carried under his arm.

"Now we can't dance," repeated Agnes, when the laughter had somewhat subsided.

"Oh, Neale can dance just as well," Trix said, carelessly. "Come on, Neale! You know this is *our* dance."

Of course Neale could dance in his walking shoes. But he saw Agnes' woebegone face and he hesitated.

"It's too bad, Aggie," he said. "If it wasn't so far –"

"Why, Neale O'Neill" snapped Trix, unwisely. "You don't mean to say you'd be foolish enough to go clear back to the Corner House for those girls' slippers?"

Perhaps it was just this opposition that was needed to start Neale off. He pulled his cap from his pocket and turned toward the door, with a shrug. "I guess I can get back in an hour, Ag. Don't you and Ruth dance much in your heavy shoes until then. You'll tire yourselves all out."

"Why, Neale O'Neill" cried Trix. "You won't do it?"

Even Ruth murmured against the boy's making the trip for the slippers. "We can get along, Neale," she said, in her quiet way.

"And you promised to dance with me this first dance," declared Trix, angrily, as the music began.

Neale did not pay much attention to her – at the moment. "It's my fault, I guess," he said, laughing. "I'll go back for them, Ag."

But Trix got right between him and the door. "Now! you sha'n't go off and leave me in the lurch that way, Neale O'Neill" she cried, shrilly.

"Aw – There are other dances. Wait till I come back," he said.

"You can dance in the shoes you have on," Trix said, sharply.

"What if?"

"But *we* can't, Trix," interposed Agnes, much distressed. "Ruth and I, you know –"

"I don't care!" interrupted Trix, boiling over at last. "You Corner House girls are the most selfish things! You'd spoil his fun for half the party –"

"Aw, don't bother!" growled Neale, in much disgust.

"I will bother! You –"

"Guess she thinks she owns you, Neale," chuckled one of the boys, adding fuel to the flames. Neale did not feel any too pleasant after that. He flung away from Trix Severn's detaining grasp.

"I'm going – it isn't any of *your* concern," he muttered, to the angry girl.

Ruth bore Agnes away. She was half crying. The rift in the intimacy between her soulmate and herself was apparent to all.

To make the matter worse – according to Trix’s version – when Neale finally returned, almost breathless, with the mislaid slippers, he insisted, first of all, upon dancing with Ruth and Agnes. Then he would have favored Trix (Ruth had advised it), but the angry girl would not speak to him.

“He’s nothing but a low circus boy, anyway!” she told Lucy Poole. “And I don’t think really well-bred girls would care to have anything to do with him.”

Those who heard her laughed. They had known Trix Severn’s ways for a long time. She had been upon her good behavior; but it did not surprise her old acquaintances that she should act like this.

It made a difference to the Corner House girls, however, for it made their plans about going to Pleasant Cove uncertain.

The other girls knew that Trix had invited the Corner House girls for the first two weeks after graduation, and that Ruth had tentatively accepted. Therefore even Pearl Harrod – who wanted Ruth and her sisters, herself – scarcely knew whether to put in a claim for them or not.

Graduation Day was very near at hand; the very day following the closing of the Milton High, several family parties were to leave for the seaside resort which was so popular in this part of New England.

They had to pass through Bloomingburg to get to it, but when the Kenways had lived in that city, they had never expected to spend any part of the summer season at such a beautiful summer resort as Pleasant Cove.

It was a bungalow colony, with several fine hotels, built around a tiny, old-fashioned fishing port. There was a still cove, a beautiful river emptying into it, and outside, a stretch of rocky Atlantic coast on which the ocean played grim tunes during stormy weather.

This was as much as the Corner House girls knew about it as yet. But they all looked forward to their first visit to the place with keen delight. Tess and Dot were talking about the expected trip a good deal of the time they were awake. Most of their doll-play was colored now by thoughts of Pleasant Cove.

They were not too busy to help Mrs. MacCall take the last of the winter clothing to the garret, however, and see her pack it away in the chests there. As she did this the housekeeper sprinkled, with lavish hand, the camphor balls among the layers of clothing.

Dot had tentatively tasted one of the hard, white balls, and shuddered. “But they *do* look so much like candy, Tess,” she said. Then she suddenly had another thought:

“Oh, Mrs. MacCall! what do you suppose the poor moths had to live on ’way back in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve wore any clothes?”

“Now, can you beat *that*?” demanded the housekeeper, of nobody in particular. “What won’t that young one get in her head!”

Meanwhile Ruth was helping Rosa Wildwood all she could, so that the girl from the South would be able to pass in the necessary examinations and stand high enough in the class to be promoted.

Housework certainly “told on” Rosa. Bob said “it jest seems t’ take th’ puckerin’ string all out’n her – an’ she jest draps down like a flower.”

“We’ll help her, Mr. Wildwood,” Ruth said. “But she really ought to have a rest.”

“Hi Godfrey!” ejaculated the coal heaver. “I tell her she kin let the housework go. We don’t have no visitors – savin’ an’ exceptin’ *you*, ma’am.”

“But she wants to keep the place decent, you see,” Ruth told him. “And she can scarcely do that and keep up with her studies – now. You see, she’s so weak.”

“Hi Godfrey!” exclaimed the man again. “Ain’t thar sech a thing as bein’ a mite *too* clean?”

But Bob Wildwood had an immense respect for Ruth; likewise he was grateful because she showed an interest in his last remaining daughter.

“I tell you, sir,” the oldest Corner House girl said, gravely. “Rosa needs a change and a rest. And all us girls are going to Pleasant Cove this summer. Will you let Rosa come down, too, for a while, if I pay her way and look out for her?”

The man was somewhat disturbed by the question. “Yuh see, Miss,” he observed, scratching his head thoughtfully, “she’s all I got. I’d plumb be lost ’ithout Rosa.”

“But only for a week or two.”

“I know. And I wouldn’t want tuh stand in her way. I crossed her sister too much – that’s what I did. Juniper was a sight more uppity than Rosa – otherwise she wouldn’t have flew the coop,” said Bob Wildwood, shaking his head.

Ruth, all tenderness for his bereavement, hastened to say: “Oh, you’ll find her again, sir. Surely you don’t believe she’s dead?”

“No. If she ain’t come to a *bad* end, she’s all right somewhar. But she’d oughter be home with her sister – and with me. Ye see, she was pretty – an’ smart. No end smart! She went off in bad comp’ny.”

“How do you mean, Mr. Wildwood?” asked Ruth, deeply interested.

“Travelin’ folks. They had a van an’ a couple team o’ mules, an’ the man sold bitters an’ corn-salve. The woman dressed mighty fine, an’ she took June’s eye.

“We follered ’em a long spell, me an’ Rosa. But we didn’t never ketch up to ’em. If we had, I’d sure tuck a hand-holt of that medicine man. He an’ his woman put all the foolishness inter Juniper’s haid.

“An’ Rosa misses her sister like poison, too,” finished Bob Wildwood, slowly shaking his head.

There seemed to be a mystery connected with the disappearance of Rosa’s sister, and Ruth Kenway was just as curious as she could be about it; but she stuck to her subject until Bob Wildwood agreed to spare his remaining daughter for at least a week’s visit to Pleasant Cove, while the Corner House girls would be there.

CHAPTER V – OFF FOR THE SEASIDE

The last hours of the school term were busy ones indeed. Even Tess had her troublesome “zaminations.” At the study table on the last evening before her own grade had its closing exercises, Tess propounded the following:

“Ruthie, what’s a ‘scutcheon?”

“Um – um,” said Ruth, far away.

“A *what*, child?” demanded Agnes.

“‘Scutcheon?”

“‘Escutcheon,’ she means,” chuckled Neale, who was present as usual at study hour.

“Well, what *is* it?” begged Tess, plaintively.

“Why?” demanded Ruth, suddenly waking up. “That’s a hard word for a small girl, Tess.”

“It says here,” quoth Tess, “that ‘There was a blot upon his escutcheon.’”

“Oh, yes – sure,” drawled Neale, as Ruth hesitated. “That must mean a fancy vest, Tess. And he spilled soup on it – sure!”

“Now Neale! how horrid!” admonished Ruth, while Agnes giggled.

“I do think you are all awful mean to me,” wailed Tess. “You don’t tell me a thing. You’re almost as mean as Trix Severn was to me to-day. I don’t want to go to her father’s hotel, so there! Have we got to, Ruthie?”

“What did she do to you, Tess?” demanded Agnes, with a curiosity she could not quench. For, deep as the chasm had grown between her and her former chum, she could not ignore Trix.

“She just turned up her nose at me,” complained Tess, “when I went by; and I heard her say to some girl she was with: ‘There goes one of them now. They pushed their way into our party, and I s’pose we’ve got to entertain them.’ Now, *did* we push our way in, Ruthie?”

Ruth was angry. It was not often that she displayed indignation, so that when she did so, the other girls – and even Neale – were the more impressed.

“Of course she was speaking of that wretched invitation she gave us to stay at her father’s hotel at Pleasant Cove,” said Ruth. “Well!”

“Oh, Ruthie! don’t say you won’t go,” begged Agnes.

“I’ll never go to that Overlook House unless we pay our way – be sure of that,” declared the angry Ruth.

“But we *are* going to the shore, Ruthie?” asked Tess.

“Yes.”

“Maybe Pearl Harrod will ask us again,” murmured Agnes, hopefully.

“I guess we can pay our way and be beholden to nobody,” said Ruth, shortly. “I will hire one of the tents, if nothing else. And we’ll start the very day after High closes, just as we planned.”

Despite the loss of her “soulmate,” Agnes was pretty cheerful. She was to graduate from grammar school; and although she was sorry to lose Miss Georgiana Shipman as a teacher, she was delighted to get out of “the pigtail classes,” as she rudely termed the lower grades.

“I’m going to do up my hair, Ruthie, whatever you say,” she declared, “just as soon as I get into high school next fall. I’m old enough to forget braids and hair-ribbons, I should hope!”

“Not yet, my child, not yet,” laughed Ruth. “Why! there are more girls in High who wear their hair *down* than *up*.”

“But I’m so big – ”

“You mean, you’d be big,” chuckled Neale, “if you were only rolled out,” for he was always teasing Agnes about her plumpness.

“Well! I want to celebrate some way,” sighed Agnes. “Can’t we have a specially nice supper that night?”

"Surely, child," said her sedate sister. "What do you want?"

"Well!" repeated Agnes, slowly; "you know I'll never graduate from Grammar again. Couldn't we kill some of those nice frying chickens of yours, Ruthie?"

"Oh, my!" cried Neale. "What have the poor chickens done that they should be slaughtered to make a Roman holiday?"

"Mr. Smartie!" snapped Agnes. "You be good, or you sha'n't have any."

"If that Tom Jonah hadn't been busy on a certain night, none of us would have eaten those particular frying chickens," laughed Neale. "I wonder if that Gypsy is running yet?"

"He didn't get the frying chickens in the bag," said Agnes. "They were in another coop. We hatched them in January and brought them up by hand. Say! I don't believe you know much about natural history, Neale, anyway."

"I guess he knows more than Sammy Pinkney does," Tess said, again drawn into the conversation. "Teacher asked him to tell us two breeds of dairy cattle and which gives the most milk. She'd been reading to us about it out of a book. So Sammy says:

"The bull and the cow, Miss Andrews; and the cow gives the most milk."

Dot's school held its closing exercises one morning, and Tess' in the afternoon. Then came the graduation of Agnes and Neale O'Neil from the grammar school. Ruth was excused from her own classes at High long enough to attend her sister's graduation.

Although the plump Corner House girl was no genius, she always stood well in her classes. Ruth saw to that, for what Agnes did not learn at school she had to study at home.

So she stood well up in her class, and she *did* look "too distractingly pretty," as Mrs. MacCall declared, when she gave the last touches to Agnes' dress before she started for school that last day. Miss Ann Titus, Milton's most famous seamstress and "gossip-in-ordinary," had outdone herself in making Agnes' dress. No girl in her class – not even Trix Severn – was dressed so becomingly.

The envious Trix heard the commendations showered on her former friend, and her face grew sourer and her temper sharper. She well knew she had invited the Corner House girls to be her guests at Pleasant Cove; but she did not want them in her party now. She did not know how to get out of "the fix," as she called it in her own mind.

She had intimated to two or three other girls who were going, however, that Agnes and Ruth had forced the invitation from her in a moment of weakness. If she had to number them of her party, Miss Trix proposed to make it just as unpleasant for the Kenway sisters as she could.

High school graduation was on Thursday. On Friday a special through train was put on by the railroad from Milton to Pleasant Cove. It was scheduled to leave the former station at ten o'clock.

Luckily Mrs. MacCall had insisted upon having all the trunks and bags packed the day before, for on this Friday morning the Corner House girls had little time for anything but saying "good-bye" to their many friends, both human and dumb.

"Whatever will Tom Jonah think?" cried Tess, hugging the big dog that had taken up his abode at the Corner House so strangely. "He'll think we have run away from him, poor fellow!"

"Oh! *don't* you think that, Tom Jonah!" begged Dot, seizing the dog on the other side. "We all love you so! And we'll come back to you."

"You'll give him just the best care ever, won't you, Uncle Rufus?" cried Agnes.

"Sho' will!" agreed the old colored man.

"*Can't* we take him with us, Ruthie?" asked Dot.

Ruth would have been tempted to do just this had she been sure that they would hire a tent in the colony as soon as they reached Pleasant Cove. Tom Jonah was just the sort of a protector the Corner House girl would have chosen under those circumstances.

But Ruth was puzzled. She had not seen Pearl Harrod, and was not sure whether Pearl had completely filled her uncle's bungalow with guests or not. Of one thing Ruth was sure: if they went

to the Overlook House (Mr. Terrence Severn's hotel), they would pay their board and refuse to be Trix's guests.

When the carriage came for them, Tom Jonah stood at the gate and watched them get in and drive away with a rather depressed air. Dot and Tess waved their handkerchiefs from the carriage window at him as long as they could see the big dog.

There was much confusion at the station. Many people whom the girls knew were on the platform, or in the cars already. Trix Severn was very much in evidence. The Kenway sisters saw the other girls who were going to accept Miss Severn's hospitality in a group at one side, but they hesitated to join this party.

Trix passed the Kenways twice and did not even look at them. Of course, she knew the sisters were there, but Ruth believed that the mean-spirited girl merely wished them to speak to her so that she could snub them publicly.

"Well, Ruthie Kenway!" exclaimed a voice suddenly behind the Corner House girls.

It was Pearl Harrod. Pearl was a bright-faced, big girl, jovial and kind-hearted. "I've just been looking for you everywhere," pursued Pearl. "Here it is the last minute, and you haven't told me whether you and the other girls are going to my uncle's house or not."

"Why – if you are sure you want us?" queried Ruth, with a little break in her voice.

"I should say yes!" exclaimed Pearl. "But I was afraid you had been asked by some one else."

Trix turned and looked the four sisters over scornfully. Then she tossed her head. "Waiting like beggars for an invitation from *somebody*," she said, loudly enough for all the girls nearby to hear. "You'd think, if those Corner House girls are as rich as they tell about, that they'd pay their way."

CHAPTER VI – ON THE TRAIN

“Don’t you mind what that mean thing says,” whispered Pearl Harrod, quickly.

She had seen Ruth flush hotly and the tears spring to Agnes’ eyes when Trix Severn had spoken so ill-naturedly. The younger Corner House girls did not hear, but Ruth and Agnes were hurt to the quick.

“You are very, very kind, Pearl,” said Ruth. “But we had thought of going to the tent colony – ”

“Didn’t Trix Severn ask you to her place?” demanded Pearl, hotly. “I *know* she did. And now she insults you. If she hadn’t asked you first, and seemed so thick with your sister, Ruth, I would have insisted long ago that you all come to uncle’s bungalow. There’s plenty of room, for my aunt and the girls won’t be down for a fortnight.”

“But, Pearl – ”

“I’ll be mad if you don’t agree – now I know that Trix has released you, Ruth Kenway,” cried the good-hearted girl. “Now, don’t let’s say another word about it.”

“Oh, don’t be angry!” begged Ruth. “But won’t it look as though we *were* begging our way – as Trix says?”

“Pooh! who cares for Trix Severn?”

“You – you are very kind,” said Ruth, yielding at length.

“Then you come on. Hey, girls!” she shouted, running after her own particular friends who were climbing aboard the rear car. “I’ve gotten them to promise. The Corner House girls are going with us – for two weeks, anyway.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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