

Blanchard Amy Ella

The Four Corners



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Amy Ella Blanchard

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CHAPTER I

A NEW SONG

The town itself was one that stood at the foot of Virginia's blue mountains. The house where the Corners lived was on the edge of the town, facing a street which ended at the front gate. At the side of the garden another long street wound its way uphill and was called the old County Road when it began to go down grade. The house was a rambling old affair which had not been painted for some years and was, therefore, of an indescribable hue. One wing was shut up, but the remainder was made excellent use of by four lively girls, of whom the eldest was Nancy Weston. She was variously known as Nan, Nance or Nannie, though she greatly preferred Nannette and sometimes stealthily signed herself so. When she was, as her Cousin Phil expressed it, "on the bias," he often delighted to tease her by calling her Sharp Corner, but her Aunt Sarah often declared that West Corner suited her perfectly since from that quarter sprang up the briskest, as well as the most agreeable, of breezes.

Next to Nan came Mary Lee. She was always called by both names as is a Virginia custom. After Mary Lee came Jacqueline, or Jack as she was called, and her twin sister, Jean. Mary Lee was very unlike Nan, and though there was less than two years difference in their ages, she seemed the older of the two. She was less impetuous, more quiet and reserved, though more self-absorbed and less thoughtful for others. Neither was she so original as Nan and generally followed some one's lead, most frequently that of her Cousin Phil Lewis who was her special comrade, for Mary Lee adored open-air sports, especially boyish ones. Nan liked these intermittently, though when she did enter into them she was liable to be more daring and impetuous than her sister.

Phil lived scarce a block away and, since the confines of his own dooryard were limited, he preferred to spend much of his time within the larger range of his cousins' three acres. He and Mary Lee were about the same age and had many tastes in common; both were devoted to animals, and had a tendency to fads over which they became very enthusiastic for the time being. Phil was a wiry, dark, little fellow quite Mary Lee's opposite, she being fair-haired and blue-eyed with a slow drawl in speaking. Nan spoke more nervously when she was excited, though she, too, spoke with a lingering accent upon certain words. Nan's eyes were sometimes a grayish blue, sometimes almost a hazel, and at times showed the color of deep and tranquil pools of water, an indescribable hue. Their expression changed as did their color and when languidly drooped under their long dark lashes, seemed those of a sentimental romantic maid, but, when in moments of excitement, Nan opened them wide, they glowed like two stars. Her eyes were Nan's best feature. She did not possess a straight nose like Mary Lee's nor such a rosebud of a mouth, but her flashing smile showed even, white little teeth, and the oval of her face was perfect.

The twins were much alike in coloring and feature, but in expression were so different that even the most casual observer could not fail to distinguish Jack from Jean. They had blue eyes like Mary Lee but were dark-haired like Nan. Jack was, as Aunt Sarah Dent expressed it, "a pickle." She had a dreamy pathetic countenance and wore a saintly expression when she was plotting her worst mischief. At her best she was angelic; at her worst she was impish, and just how she would eventually turn out no one could foretell.

Jean was a sweet-tempered, affectionate child, gentle and obedient. Once in a while it seemed as if she felt it a duty to be naughty, but the naughtiness was always as if it were a pretense, and was more of a bluster than an exhibition of actual original sin. "There is no mistake that Jack is full of

the old Adam," Aunt Sarah was wont to declare, "but Jean always acts to me as if she wasn't quite sure that she ought to be human."

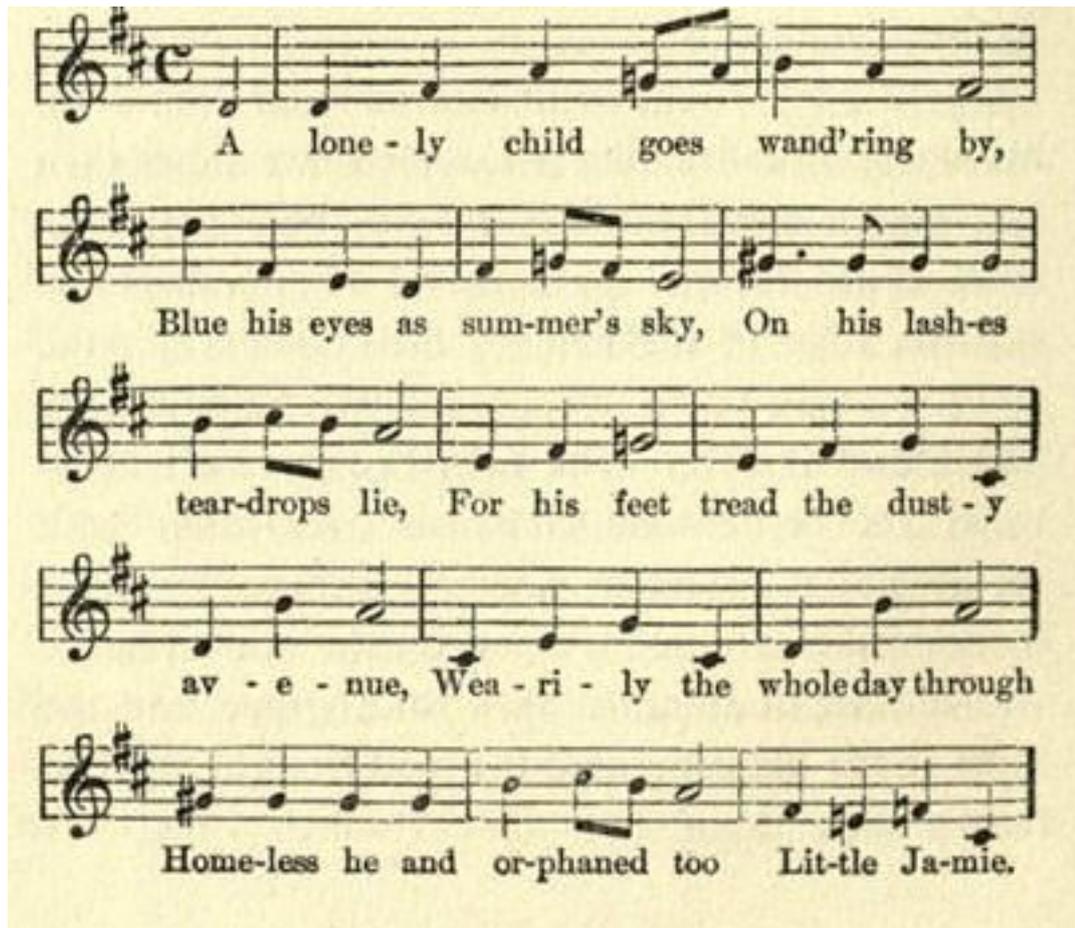
Nan was overflowing with sentiment, a lover of music, books, and pictures, yet liking nothing better than to whirl in and help in domestic emergencies. She had much inventive and mechanical talent which most of the others lacked. She was usually the sunniest and most sweet-tempered of persons, but had her moody days when she "flocked by herself," and liked to brood upon sombre subjects or weave lugubrious ballads which she set to melancholy tunes. These moody moments occurred but seldom and were generally the outcome of hurt feelings after some teasing bout with one of her sisters or some contrite condition following a deserved lecture from her mother or her Aunt Sarah.

Aunt Sarah Dent often came to make long stays with the family after the death of the children's father. A small life insurance and the little place at the end of the street was about all that was left to their mother. Aunt Sarah had a modest income of her own which she cheerfully added to the family exchequer and, therefore, her coming usually meant some added comforts, so they managed fairly well. A woman came in to wash and clean, but the rest of the work was done by the family with the assistance of a half-grown colored girl, and an old negro man, Landy by name. It was supposed that his name in its beginning had been Philander, but he had forgotten and no one else knew. He was a little bent, dried-up old darky, but was tough and wiry and could accomplish more than many younger ones of his color, whom he scorned openly.

Add to the family an old mule named Pete, a handsome Angora cat called Lady Gray, and a mongrel dog whose name was Trouble, and you have its membership.

It was one afternoon in late summer that Nan, having been called Sharp Corner more times than her temper would amiably permit, had gone to a haunt much favored by herself. This was at the extreme edge of the place, a little nook where the orchard ended and a few stunted pines lapped over into the next field. The field had not been cultivated for some time and was overgrown with weeds and a young growth of pine and fir trees. It was rather a desolate spot, for the nearest house was hidden in summer by a thick grove, and the slope of the hill prevented the road from being seen from this point.

Creeping through the rail fence Nan felt that she had placed herself outside trammeling conditions and made her way to where a fallen log, covered with moss, invited her. This was Nan's piano. She seated herself upon a pile of sticks and stones which she had heaped up before the log. In front of her she had constructed a sort of rack, using a bit of wood which she had nailed to the log. Against the rack she placed a newspaper clipping which she secured from blowing away by means of a pin. After a few graceful sweeps of her hands up and down the pretended key-board, she wailed forth to a silent accompaniment:



There was more of the song but Nan sang the first stanza over and over again. At the close of the performance her eyes were full of tears and her voice vibrated with emotion as she quavered forth: "Little Jamie." A flock of crows in the field beyond rose from the stubbly undergrowth with solemn caws and sailed off to the grove beyond. The birds of ill-omen exactly suited Nan's mood. She took an æsthetic delight in their presence. They seemed to be applauding her. She went to the other side of the log and lay down upon the dry pine needles, her head against the log and her eyes fixed upon the blue sky. Her thoughts were with the verses she had cut from a country newspaper. She thought they were delightful, and her fancy brought before her an orphan boy tattered and torn but beautiful as a dream. She felt all the enthusiasm of a true composer as she hummed over the tune she had made.

"I will publish it some day," she said. "The next time everybody is busy and out of the sitting-room, I will try to write it so I will not forget it. I think, myself, that it is lovely and I ought to get a great deal of money for it, enough to buy a piano."

The possession of a piano was Nan's dearest wish. The only musical instrument of which the family could boast was an old wheezy melodeon which stood in the sitting-room. It skipped notes once in a while, especially in its middle range, and was at once a source of pleasure and disappointment to Nan. Her Aunt Sarah declared that it drove her wild to hear Nan try to pick out tunes on it, so the girl usually had to be sure of having the place to herself before she dared to make attempts at music. Feeble little attempts these were, for she knew scarce anything beyond the mere rudiments. But to a great love of music she added a true ear, a good memory, and boundless ambition and perseverance.

"It will be autumn soon," Nan went on to herself, her thoughts still wandering in a vague dream. "I think I like autumn best of all seasons. I'd like to write poetry about it. When I am a great musician, I will write a piece of music and call it 'Autumn Whispers,' and it will sound like the wind in the trees and the corn shocks. Then I will write another and that will be called 'Autumn Secrets.' It will

be about golden sunshine and shining red leaves and little pools of water in the hollows that look as if a piece of blue sky had dropped in them. I wish I could write music that would be a picture and a poem, too; it would be nice to have them all together. Trouble, where did you come from? I know Phil is around somewhere," she exclaimed, suddenly, sitting up very straight. "I don't want him to find me here. He has called me 'Sharp Corner' once too often to-day."

She jumped up and bending low, ran along the line of fence toward the hollow which intervened between this and the next rise of ground. Trouble stood still for a moment, uncertainly looking after her, then he trotted off in an opposite direction.

Pursuing her way, Nan reached the small stream which ran through the hollow. Ferns and mosses were here in abundance. Here and there a cardinal flower flaunted its red banner. Low aground trailed the hedge bindweed, and in the field beyond a slim spire of goldenrod showed itself. This attracted Nan's notice. "I said it would be autumn soon," she said, "for there is the first goldenrod of the season. I must get that piece for Aunt Sarah, though if she has an idea of where it came from, she won't have it." She gave a hasty glance in the direction of the house beyond sheltering trees as she gained the other side of the brook to gather her ambitious spray of goldenrod, for that house set in the grove of oaks belonged to Grandmother Corner, whose grandchildren were strangers to her. The running brook was the barrier which they seldom crossed and, when they did, it was secretly. The big buff house was closed, the green shutters tightly fastened, the door boarded up and the gate locked, for its owner was abroad. With her daughter Helen, she had been in Europe ever since Nan could remember.

Sometimes Nan would push her way through the hedge which surrounded the lawn, plunge through the long grass and stand staring up at the silent house where her father had been born. Certain accounts given by old Landy made her believe that it was of palatial magnificence and she longed to see its interior. Once when the care-taker had made one of his infrequent visits, one of the lower windows was opened, and Nan who had long watched and waited for such an opportunity, tiptoed up to peep in. At first she saw nothing but ghostly sheeted furniture and pictures shrouded in muslin cases, bare floors and uncurtained windows. She was about to creep away disappointed when she saw the man upon a ladder uncovering a picture. It was of a stately lady in a velvet gown, the slender fingers half hidden by costly lace, and Nan gazed with all her eyes at the haughty face. Was it her grandmother's portrait, she wondered. She watched till the man readjusted the covering and then she crept away dreaming of a day when she might see the original of the portrait and when she might be allowed to walk through those silent rooms again restored to their former splendor.

On this afternoon, however, she did not go near the house, but followed the stream for a short distance, crossed back again and came around the other side of her own home garden where old Landy was at work, talking to himself as was his wont.

"Reckon dese yer vines is done fo'. Clar 'em erway. No mo' beans on 'em. How co'n comin' on? Get a mess offen dis row by Sunday. Tomats plenty. Melons gittin' good an' ripe." He stooped down to tap a large melon with his bony knuckles. "She jest a bus'in' wid sweetness by 'nother week. Um, um, she fa'r make me dribble at de mouf to look at huh."

"Who-o-o!" came a long-drawn owlish cry from behind him.

"Who dat?" cried Landy, pulling himself erect from his contemplation of the melon. "Whicher one o' yuh chilluns is it? Hyar, yuh, Jack er Phil er whomsoever yuh is, git outen fum behin' dat co'n brake. I sees yuh."

A suppressed giggle from Nan made known her whereabouts, and she arose up from behind the tall tasseled corn. "You didn't see me or you wouldn't have called me Phil or Jack, but you heard me, didn't you? Did you think I was a real sure enough owl, Unc' Landy?"

"Humph! I knows ole hooty-owl better'n dat. I knows yuh is a huming varmint."

"Oh, Unc' Landy! the idea of calling me a varmint. I am not one at all."

"Den wha' fo' yuh grubbin' roun' in de gyardin' stuff lak ole mole?" he asked chuckling.

"Same reason you do; to see how it is getting on. When will the watermelons be ready to eat? It seems to me they are very late this year."

"Dey is late. I say dey is, but nex' week, ef de Lord sees fittin', we bus' open dis one. She de fust to be pick. I layin' out to lif huh fum huh sandy baid nex' Tuesday."

"And we'll have it for dinner. Oh, my! I wish it were ready now. Did they used to have a watermelon patch over at Grandmother Corner's? There isn't any now."

"How yuh so wise?"

"Oh, I've been all around the place. I know just where the garden used to be."

"Yo' ma say yuh chilluns ain't to ha'nt de ole place."

"I know and I don't haunt it; I just go there once in a while. I haven't been for a long, long time. I don't see, anyhow, why we can't go when it was father's home."

"Yuh nuvver sees yo' ma er yo' auntie cross de brook."

"No, but then –"

"Den wha' fo' yuh do what dey don' do?"

"I do lots of things which they don't do and they do lots of things I don't do; that's no reason. When do you reckon my Grandmother Corner will come back?"

"Das mo'n any huming know, I tell yuh, honey. She done taken huh disagreeables an' huh hity-tyties long wid huh. Das all I kyar to know. She want de yarh an' all dat derein is, das what she want; mebbe she fin' it off yandah in dem quare countries, but she don't git back dem ha'sh words she speak to yo' pa on his las' day. Dey a-follerin' huh an' a gnawin' an' a clawin' at huh heart. She cyarnt git rid o' dem wha'soevah she go, though she try to flee fum 'em."

The picture of her grandmother's fleeing from place to place pursued by bitter words in the form of skeleton-like creatures who gnashed their teeth and clawed with bony fingers took hold of Nan's imagination. Her mother never mentioned Grandmother Corner's name, and from old Landy Nan gleaned all that she knew of her. Heretofore, what had been told her did not cause her to give much love to this unknown grandmother, but now she began to feel rather sorry for her. "I wish you took care of the big house," she said, "for then you could let me go in there to see the pictures and beautiful things, and I could play on the piano."

"Humph! I say let you in. Ef it depen' upon ole Landy yuh ain' nuvver go inside de do'. Nobody tell me go but onct. I ain't nuvver pass my foot ovah de do'-sill agin whilst I lives on dis yarh."

While he talked Landy slashed away at the dead vines vindictively. As he clawed at them with his lean black fingers he made Nan think of the bitter words which pursued her grandmother. They must appear something like Landy, only more bony and wicked-looking. Nan laughed at the conceit.

"'Tain't nothin' to larf at," grumbled Landy. "Dese yer fambly q'urrels is turrble things. Yo' pa know yo' gran'ma don't like be crossed 'bout de propotty, but he feel lak he bledged to say what he think, an' she tu'n on him an' de las' word she uvver give mek him have de heart-ache. Yo' ma ain' fergit dat, an' das fo' why she don' lak you chilluns to go trespassin' on de ole place. Hit yo' gran'ma's an' she got full an' plenty whilst yo' pa what oughter had his share done got nothin' ter leave yuh-alls but dis little ole place. Das why I laks ter mek hit smile an' see de melons grow plum big an' de co'n-fiel' lookin' prosp'ous. Yo' gran'pa mean yo' pa to hev his shar' but de ole lady hol' on to uvvry thing whilst she 'bove groun'. Nemmin', yuh-alls has full an' plenty to eat. Ain' de tomats jest a-humpin' deyse'fs? Yo' ma has pickles an' cans o' 'em fo' de whole wintah, dey so many."

"I like the little yellow ones best," remarked Nan, who was tired of the old man's long monologue. He was given to reciting these bits of family history to her though to no one outside the family itself would he have breathed a word. "I think these make the very nicest preserves," continued Nan, "and I like them raw, too. I always feel as if I were eating golden fairy fruit only they aren't sweet like I imagine fairy fruit would be." She stooped to gather a tiny red tomato from the vines at her feet. They used to call these love-apples, Aunt Sarah says, and they thought they were poisonous.

"I am glad they found out it wasn't so," she said, popping the red morsel into her mouth. "What are you going to do now, Landy?"

"Gwine tek a tu'n at de fence." When Landy's other occupations did not demand attention there was always the fence to turn to; something upon which to exhaust his energies. It was patched and mended beyond hope now, Mrs. Corner thought, and the repairs were creeping from the side to the front, for Landy had frequently "borrowed from Peter to pay Paul," and when a paling was missing from the front he had always promptly supplied it from the sides, replacing it by a board, a post, or whatever came handy, so that the two side fences presented a curious style of building. White, green or gray boards took their place as occasion required. Tops from empty boxes set forth some address in staring black letters, a bit of wire fence was hitched to a cedar post on one side and an old bed-slat on the other; but the fence served its purpose to keep out wandering cattle from the garden which was Landy's pride. And though Mrs. Corner sighed when she went that way, there was no money to be spared for new fences so the old one was eked out from year to year.

Leaving Landy to work upon the fence, Nan supplied herself with more small tomatoes and went up to the house thinking of the grandmother across seas and determining to curb her own tongue lest it lead her into such trying ordeals as the being haunted by bitter words.

CHAPTER II

THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

As she entered the long living-room, Nan found it deserted except for the presence of Lady Gray, who sleepily stretched out her paws on the broad window-sill where she was taking a nap, and winked one eye at Nan. "Nobody here, at least nobody who counts, if you will excuse the remark, Lady Gray," said Nan, "so I can try my song."

She went to the corner where the melodeon stood. It was piled high with a variety of things; her mother's work-basket, Aunt Sarah's knitting, a scrap-book, and some sheets of paper from which Nan was taking cuttings, the twins' dolls, and a pile of books which she herself had taken from the shelves. All these had to be removed before the song could be tried.

The warm summer sunshine sifted in through the vines that covered the western windows and disclosed the dinginess of the room. An old-fashioned paper, discolored by time, covered the walls; its green and gold had been pleasant to look upon in days gone by, but now it was patched and streaked. Upon the floor was a worn carpet; handsome old mahogany furniture which had lost its polish gave a well-filled appearance to the room, though the springs of the long sofa had been greatly weakened by frequent jumpings upon them, so that the seat of the sofa presented an uphill and down-dale surface, not rendered more inviting by the neutral-toned, frayed upholstery.

A tall secretary with a beautifully leaded glass top had been chosen by some yellow-jackets as a place for building purposes, and they were droning about their mud-bedaubed residences along the edge of the secretary's top.

A handsome centre-table with claw feet was littered with books and magazines. A set of chairs in about the same condition as the sofa evidenced that a constant use had been made of them. The shades at the windows were in a more or less worn condition. Over the mantel hung a portrait of a man in gray uniform, one hand on his sword. His eyes were like Nan's.

Nan began industriously to pick out her tune by working the pedals of the old melodeon vigorously, an operation which was followed by a long-drawn wheezing complaint from somewhere in the interior of the instrument. But Nan did not perceive any reason for amusement; she carefully wrote down her notes one by one, saying aloud "*D, d, f, a*, – I wish that note would sound. I think it must be *a – b, a*, – I wonder if it is *a*; it comes so often, too, I ought to know. Oh, dear, *e* is out of order, too. Let me see, where was I? Oh, yes, 'blue his eyes,' it is eyes that ought to be *e*. I reckon I'll know what it is anyhow, even if I don't get it exactly right. 'Blue his eyes,'" she sang softly.

"Nannie," came a voice from the window, "do shut up that dreadful wheezing thing; I want to take a nap."

Nan jumped up and closed the melodeon with a bang. Why was it that Aunt Sarah always wanted to take a nap when she was "composing"? It was always so. Aunt Sarah might go days and never think of napping in the daytime, but let Nan but send forth one note and, if Aunt Sarah were anywhere within hearing distance, there came the order to stop. "I wish I could have it all to myself somewhere out of the way," she said. "I'll ask mother if I may get Landy to take it over in one of the old rooms, or up in the attic or somewhere so nobody will hear me."

Acting upon this idea she sought out her mother who was busy at her sewing-machine. Mrs. Corner looked up brightly, though she did not stop her work when Nan appeared. "Well, daughter?" she said.

"Oh, mother, mayn't I have the old melodeon all to myself somewhere; over in the barn, or in one of the shut up rooms of the wing or in the garret or somewhere so nobody can hear when I am playing?"

"Playing?" An amused pucker came around Mrs. Corner's eyes. "It is truly playing that you do with it. I don't see how I can let you have it, for it is so useful to pile things on in the living-room."

"But mother, a table would do just as well."

"If one had the table."

"I'm sure there must be one somewhere in the garret."

"None that is whole."

"There's one that is only a little rickety in the legs, and Landy could mend that."

"Landy has no time for such things, at least, unless they are absolutely necessary. He has all that he can do."

"Oh, but I do want it so very much. Aunt Sarah always wants to take a nap the minute I begin to play and I always have to stop."

Mrs. Corner smiled again. "I'm not surprised. Don't be unreasonable, Nan. You know it is trying to hear any one wheeze out impossible tunes with one finger, or make distracting discords which are agony to a sensitive ear. You are getting too big to want to drum."

A lump arose in Nan's throat. She was shy of divulging her ambitions. Her mother did not understand that she did not want to drum, but that this was a serious matter. She would not explain, however, but she hurried away with a sense of being aggrieved. Mary Lee and Phil were at that moment deeply interested in watching a family of tadpoles which were about to lose their tails. The two children kept them in an old half-cask and spent many moments in bending over it. Jack and Jean were playing house with paper-dolls in the orchard. No one wanted Nan and she did want her music. She made one more attempt, returning slowly to her mother's door. "If you only just knew, mother, how awfully much I want it, you'd let me have it."

Her mother stopped stitching. "Poor little girl," she spoke sympathetically, "I wish you could have lessons, and that I could give you a good piano to practice on, for I do appreciate your love of music, but dear, I don't see that your efforts on that old worn-out melodeon will bring you the slightest reward; in fact, I have heard it said that it is not well to allow a child to practice on a poor instrument. Now, be reasonable, darling, and don't want impossibilities. You know mother would give you your every heart's desire if she could."

"I know," said Nan weakly as she turned again from the room. A sudden inspiration had seized her, and her heart beat very fast as she made her way back to the retreat in the pines and from there to the hollow and on to the very threshold of the house at Uplands, the old Corner place. She tried the door but it did not yield to her efforts. From window to window she went making an effort to open each. To the side door, the back door and around to the porch on the north side. There were side lights to the door here, and, shading her eyes, Nan tried to peer through into the dimness.

Nan thought she heard sounds within and felt a little scared, then all at once she saw a form in black garments flit across the hall, and with a suppressed scream she turned and fled, crashing through the weeds and underbrush, leaping across the brook and reaching her retreat frightened and wondering. There could be no mistake; some one was certainly there. Was it flesh and blood presence or some ghostly visitor? Uplands had the reputation of being haunted and Nan really believed she had seen the ghost of her great-great-grandmother.

She sat quaking and yet half trying to make up her mind to return for further investigation when a shadow fell across the spot where she sat, and, looking up, she saw a strange little lady standing before her, looking down at her wistfully. The lady was all in black and though her face was young, and her cheeks showed softly pink, her hair was very white. Nan had not seen her approach, and it appeared almost as if she had dropped from the skies. "Who are you?" inquired the little lady.

"One of the four Corners," returned Nan with a sudden smile.

"Which one?"

"Nan."

"I was sure of it. And why were you trying to get into that house?" The little lady nodded toward Uplands.

"Because it is my grandmother's and – and – " She glanced up shyly at the stranger.

"Go on, please," said the lady, taking a seat on an end of Nan's pretended piano. "Did you want anything in particular?"

There was something compelling in the lady's manner, and Nan replied, "Yes, I did. I know I really ought not to have gone, for mother doesn't like us even to cross the brook. She never actually forbids it, but she looks distressed if she finds out that any of us have been over, but I wanted awfully to see if I could get in and try to open the piano. It seems so perfectly dreadful for it to stand there month after month and year after year, no good to anybody, when I'd give my right hand to have it."

"If you gave your right hand for it," said the lady, suddenly dimpling, "you could only play bass, you know, and I don't believe you would care for that."

Nan laughed. "No, I wouldn't. I like the fine high notes, though sometimes I think the growling bass of the organ at church is beautiful. It makes me think of what it says in the Psalter: 'The noise of the seas, the noise of the waves, and the tumult of the people.'"

The lady nodded understandingly and was silently thoughtful for some moments, then she said, "This is a nice little spot." She put her hand upon Nan's improvised music-rack. "What is this for?" she asked.

Nan blushed. "It's just to hold up the music, you know. That's my piano where you are sitting."

"Goodness!" cried the lady, jumping up. "How undignified of me to sit on a piano. Please pardon me; I didn't know."

"Of course not." Nan's eyes grew starlike. It was not only very delightful but very exciting to meet one who so perfectly understood. "You see," she went on, "all I have at home is a dreadful old melodeon that skips notes and wheezes like our old Pete; he has the heavens, you know."

"Poor old Pete," said the lady, with a tender retrospective look in her eyes. "You have the melodeon, yes, and then?"

"Aunt Sarah always wants to take a nap the minute I begin to play, and to-day," her voice dropped and she went nearer to her visitor, "I had made a new tune and I did so want to write it down. I came out here first and tried it; it sounded very well, I thought, but I had written only a little of it when I had to shut the melodeon. Aunt Sarah always does have such inconvenient times for taking naps," she sighed.

"Won't you let me hear your song, or your tune?" said the lady, politely seating herself with an expectant air upon a stump further off.

Nan's cheeks grew redder. She did not like to seem ungracious to this stranger who showed such an unusual interest in her performances and yet her only audience heretofore had been the creatures of the field and the air. "No one has ever heard it but the crows," she said hesitatingly, then impulsively: "You won't laugh?"

"Indeed no, of course not," returned the lady with some real indignation at such a suspicion.

Nan sat still long enough to screw up her courage to the active point, and then drawing from her blouse a bit of paper, she seated herself before her log-piano and began her song. The lady, with cheek in hand, leaned forward and listened intently. Once there was a slight flicker of amusement in her eyes, but for the most part her face was tenderly serious. At the close of the song she said gently: "Thank you, dear. I think that is a very sweet little air for one so young as you to think of. May I see?" She extended her hand for Nan's half-written song. "How will you finish it?" she asked.

"I don't know. I'll have to wait till Aunt Sarah goes out or goes away. I hope I shall not forget it before then. I'll sing it over every day and then maybe I won't forget."

The lady looked at her thoughtfully for a minute. "Can you keep a secret?" she asked suddenly.

"Oh, yes. Why, nobody, not even Mary Lee, has an idea about this." She waved her hand to include her music-room retreat.

"Then promise not to tell a soul."

"I promise." Nan's eyes grew eager.

"I am your fairy godmother, and if you will meet me under the sunset tree to-morrow morning at ten o'clock, I will conduct you to a place where you can finish your song undisturbed, for I guarantee Aunt Sarah will not be caught napping within hearing of you and the melodeon."

"Oh, how perfectly delicious," cried Nan, her imagination all afire. "I'd love that. Where is the sunset tree? It is such a lovely name for it."

The lady pointed to a huge oak just across the brook. "It is called that because one can see the sunset so finely from there. Have you never been up to look at the sun go down behind the hills? There is one little notch between the mountains over there and at a certain season of the year the sun drops right down into it."

"I have never seen it," said Nan, regretfully. "I wonder why no one ever told me about it. I think sunset tree is such a lovely name and it is just the spot for a trysting place. It would be a lovely secret, but I never had a real important one from mother before. I shall have to tell her about going up there; not right away, but some day. It always comes out sooner or later and I would rather tell just mother, if you don't mind."

"So you may. I'm glad you feel that way about it. Little girls should never have secrets they cannot tell their mothers. In three days you may tell her, if you think it would be right to keep silence that long."

"Oh, that will not be very long. I could keep the secret longer if you said so."

"That will be long enough. Now, shut your eyes while you count one hundred slowly or the queen of the fairies will not let me appear again. The spell will be broken if you so much as peep, or if you do not count aloud."

Nan closed her eyes very tight and began to count. She gave a little interrupting gasp as she felt a light kiss on her cheek, but she kept steadily on till she had reached the desired number. Then she opened her eyes and looked around. There was no one in sight. The afternoon sun was sinking behind the trees, and the cows were returning home along the county road. With the weight of such a secret as she had never before carried, Nan ran home in a happy tumult of excited expectation. At the back of the house she came upon Mary Lee and Phil still absorbed in their polywogs.

"Come see," cried Mary Lee, "they are too funny for anything, Nan. They are the interestingest things I ever saw."

Nan went up to look. "What is so wonderful about polywogs?" she asked.

"You'd think yourself wonderful," said Phil indignantly, "if you could change yourself from a swimming beast into a hopping one and be as awfully amphibious as they are."

Nan laughed and drew her finger slowly through the water in the cask. "They aren't half so wonderful as fairies," she said. "They can change themselves into all sorts of things."

"Oh, pshaw! Everybody knows that there are no real fairies. These can really change before your very eyes; we've watched them from day to day, haven't we, Mary Lee?"

"Yes, we have," was the answer. "Nan always likes foolish make-believe things, but we like the real ones."

"Fairy godmothers are real," Nan answered back over her shoulder as she left the pair discussing the proper treatment of their present pets. They paid no attention to her speech and she laughed to herself, exulting in her secret. Before she reached the house she heard a wail from the direction of the orchard, and perceived Jean sitting on the ground under a tree. As Nan approached, she whimpered softly.

"What's the matter, kitten?" asked Nan.

"Jack was pretending I was a calf," said Jean, mournfully, "and she hobbled me to the tree so I couldn't get to my mother, and now she's gone off and I can't get the rope untied."

"Poor little calf, and the cows all coming home, too. Never mind, I'll untie you. Where is Jack?"

"She was going for her cows, but I reckon she's done forgot it."

"Don't say done forgot; that sounds like Mitty and Unc' Landy."

Jean hung her head. She was used to these chidings from her eldest sister. She had a curious babyish way of speaking, not being easily able to make the sounds of *th* or *qu*. "I know it isn't crite right," she said, "but I forget sometimes."

Nan put her arms around her. "Of course you do. We all forget some things sometimes. Come with me and let us hunt up Jack. I'll venture to say she's in some mischief."

She was not far wrong in her conjectures, for after a half hour's diligent searching, Jack was found. She had discovered a can of white paint, supplied by Aunt Sarah for the betterment of the front fence which Landy had proudly commenced to adorn with a shining coat of whiteness. He had been called away when he had made but little progress and Jack had taken up the job with great glee. She was in the height of her enjoyment, daubing on great masses of white which dribbled down the palings wastefully. The child herself was smeared from hair ribbon to shoe-strings and was a sight to behold.

"Jack Corner!" exclaimed Nan. "You dreadful child! Just look at you, and, oh, dear, how you are wasting paint. It won't begin to be enough to finish the fence the way you have been using it. Unc' Landy will give you Jesse."

"Some one's always giving me Jesse," complained Jack. "You all keep saying Unc' Landy has so much to do and I am only helping him."

"Pretty help, using up the paint and ruining your clothes. March yourself straight into the house, miss." Nan took hold of Jack's shoulder which was twitched away, and with a vicious fling of the dripping brush directly at Nan, Jack turned and fled.

"She is the most trying child," said Nan, deftly dodging the brush, though not without receiving some drops upon her frock. "I declare, there isn't a day when she doesn't do something dreadful."

"She just fought she was helping," put in Jean, always ready to defend her twin by imputing worthy motives to her performances.

"Maybe she did, but it's pretty poor help," said Nan, stooping to pick a plantain leaf with which to wipe off the worst spots from her skirt. "Aunt Sarah was so good as to buy the paint. I know she went without something to do it, and now for Jack to do her so mean as to play this scurvy trick is too bad. I'm all done out with Jack. It's lucky we found her when we did or there wouldn't have been even as much paint as there is. I must go tell Unc' Landy at once. Maybe he can scrape off some of this before it dries. Help indeed! It gives him double work." Her last words were spoken to thin air, for Jean had hurried off to comfort Jack and Nan was left to break the news to Unc' Landy.

CHAPTER III

NAN'S SECRET

When Nan opened her eyes the next morning it was with a consciousness that something pleasantly exciting was to happen, and she lost no time in hurrying down-stairs and, after breakfast, in getting through her prescribed duties with more than usual haste. Her mother smiled to see that she was so eager and businesslike and that her moodiness of the day before had departed, while Aunt Sarah said: "I hope your fancy will not lead you to try the tune the old cow died of to-day, Nannie."

Nan smiled but made no reply. What matter if Aunt Sarah did cast slurs upon her musical attempts? There were persons in the world who took them seriously, and she felt a thrill of satisfaction as she thought of the soft white hair and blue eyes of her fairy godmother.

It was with some difficulty that she was able to reach the sunset tree without being seen. Jack, in penitential mood, and Jean looking for sympathy, followed her everywhere, and it was not till she had robbed a rose bush of its red berry-like seeds and had constructed a wonderful set of dishes, a lamp, and a whole family of people from the berries, that the reward of her ingenuity came to her in the delight of the children over these novel toys and in their content with a corner of the porch for a playroom. After seeing them well established, Nan set off.

"I've dusted the living-room, made my bed, picked up after Jack, and I believe that is all," she told herself. "There's Phil coming, I am thankful to say, so Mary Lee will not tag me." She paid no heed to the question, "Where are you going?" which Mary Lee called after her, but kept on till the barn hid her from sight. She hoped she had not kept her friend waiting and that she would not become impatient and leave, for it was after ten. But as she came up to the tree she saw the sombre little figure sitting quietly there. "I was so afraid you couldn't wait," said Nan breathlessly. "The children were so tiresome and wanted all sorts of things done for them so I couldn't get away before."

"There's plenty of time," replied her friend. "Sit down and cool off; you've come too fast in the hot sun. Tell me about the children."

"Jean is a dear, and Jack can be perfectly fascinating when she chooses. They are the twins, you know. Jack's name is Jacqueline. Aunt Sarah says she was mixed together with more original sin than any of us, and if there hadn't been a lot of angel used in her make up she doesn't know what would become of her. She is simply dear this morning, but yesterday afternoon!" And Nan gave an account of Jack's muddle with the paint.

Her companion laughed. "She must keep you in hot water," she said. "Tell me about Mary Lee."

"Oh, do you know there is a Mary Lee?" said Nan in surprise. "But of course everybody knows us. She is named for our mother, and I am named for papa's sister Nancy Weston who died. We called Jack and Jean after papa. His name was John and Jean is the French for John, only we give it the Scotch pronunciation. Papa was always called Jack and so Jacqueline is called that."

"Yes, I know – I mean I see," returned her companion. "Come, now, shall we go on? Are you ready to be conducted to the place of your desires? You must go blindfolded."

"How lovely! That makes it so deliciously mysterious. I hope I shall not fall and bump my nose."

"I'll take care that you do not. Let me tie this over your eyes." She drew a soft silken scarf from a bag she held, and made it fast over Nan's eyes. "Can you see?" she asked.

"No, indeed, I can't. Not the leastest little bit."

"Now give me your hands. There, I'll put them around my waist and you will walk just behind me."

Their way was made very cautiously and slowly and at last Nan set foot upon a board floor. "Now I can lead you," said her guide. "One step up, please."

Nan was led along the floor for some distance making one sharp turn, and then was gently forced to a seat. "There," said her guide. "Sit here perfectly still till you hear a bell ring; then you may untie your scarf, but you must not leave the room till I come for you."

Nan sat very still. Presently she heard a light footstep cross the floor, then a door closed and after a few minutes a bell in the distance tinkled softly. Up went her hands and the scarf was withdrawn in a jiffy. She found herself sitting before an open piano. On each side of her were set lighted candles in tall brass candlesticks. Into the room no gleam of daylight made its way. In the shadowy corners were sheeted chairs and sofas and on the wall were covered pictures. Nan recognized the place at once. It was the drawing-room of her grandmother's house and over the mantel must be the very portrait she had once gazed upon with such delight. Now it was screened from view. "I just wonder who in the world she is," exclaimed Nan thinking of her guide. "I'd like to know how she got in here and all about it. Perhaps she is some of our kinsfolk who has come down here to look after something for grandmother. I'm going to ask her."

Having made this decision, she turned her attention to the piano. In spite of long disuse it gave forth mellow and delightful tones as she touched it softly. It seemed very big and important after the little melodeon, but soon the girl gained confidence and became absorbed in writing down her little song which she did note by note, calling each aloud. "I am not sure that it is just right," she said as she concluded her task, "but it is as right as I can make it."

She arose from her seat and tiptoed around the room, lifting the covers from the shrouded furniture and getting glimpses of dim brocade and silky plush. Then she went back to the piano. All was so still in the house that Nan felt the absolute freedom of one without an audience. She touched the keys gently at first, but, gaining confidence and inspiration, went on playing by ear snatches of this and that, becoming perfectly absorbed in the happiness of making melody.

She was so carried away by her performance that she neither saw nor heard the door open and was not aware of any one's presence till a soft voice said: "I declare, the blessed child really has talent."

"Oh!" Nan sprang to her feet. "Were you listening?"

"I have been for a short time only. How did you get along with your song?"

"Pretty well. I don't know whether it is exactly right. I don't know much about time, and sharps and flats."

"May I see? Perhaps I can help you."

Nan timidly held out her little awkwardly written tune and the lady scanned it carefully. "You haven't your sharps and naturals just right," she remarked. "You see this is the sign of a natural," and taking Nan's pencil she made the necessary corrections, then sitting down to the piano she played the simple air through and afterward went off into a dreamy waltz while Nan listened spellbound.

"Please tell me who you are," the child cried when the music ceased.

"I did tell you. I am your fairy godmother. You may leave out the fairy if you like, for I am quite substantial."

"Are you kin to – to grandmother? Did she send you?"

"She did not send me and has no idea I am here."

Nan stared. "I know, of course, just where I am," she said. "This is Grandmother Corner's house. I saw into this very room once and I saw that," she indicated the portrait. "I just saw it for a minute and I do so want to see it real good. Could I?" she asked, wistfully.

"Why do you want to see it?" asked her companion.

"Because I love it. Oh, I know, I know," she went on hastily. "Landy has told me."

"Has told you what?"

"I can't tell you unless you are kinsfolk."

"You can tell me anything because there is nothing I don't know about this house and those who used to live here."

"Oh, then, you know how cruel my grandmother was to papa, and how she couldn't bear his marrying mother."

"It wasn't because it was herself," put in the other eagerly. "There was no objection to Mary personally, but she hated to give him up to any one. She would have felt the same way if he had wanted to marry a princess. She never did get over the fact of sharing him with some one else; she never will."

"I didn't know all that, but I knew about the bitter words and how they have been haunting her, and I feel so very sorry for her. I know it would break my mother's heart to lose one of us," said Nan, "and if she had been cross to us and anything had happened that we were hurt meantime she would never forgive herself. Why, when Jack has been her naughtiest, mother never misses kissing her good-night. Last night Jack had to be put right to bed for punishment and before I went to sleep I heard mother in the nursery and Jack was crying, then when mother came to kiss me good-night I saw she had been crying, too. She is such a dear mother."

"She must be," said the little lady, her voice a-tremble, "and you are right to feel sorry for your grandmother. She needs all your love and sympathy."

"I wonder if I shall ever see her," said Nan wistfully.

"I hope so. I think so."

"And may I see the picture?"

"It is too high to reach, I am afraid."

"Oh, but I can get a pole or something and lift up the cover," said Nan, quick to see a way.

"Run, then, and find one."

Nan disappeared and soon returned with an ancient broom, the handle of which was used to lift the cover sufficiently so that by the dim light of the candles, which her friend held high, Nan beheld the portrait again.

"Thank you, so much," she said gratefully. "I am very glad you are kin of ours, even if I don't know who you are. I love you and I am going to try to love my grandmother."

The little lady suddenly put her arms around her and held her close. "You are a dear, dear child, and I love you, too," she said. "Some day you shall see me again. Kiss me, Nancy."

Nan held up her sweet red mouth to receive the warm kiss. "I shall be seeing your grandmother before long," said her friend, holding the girl's hands and looking tenderly at her.

"But she is in Europe."

"And are there no steamers that cross the ocean?"

"Are you going there, then?"

"That is my intention."

"Then, are you going to tell her about me? Will she care to know?" Nan paused before she said hesitatingly, "Would it make her very mad if I sent a kiss to her?"

"Dear child, no. It would make her very glad, and would help to ease her sad heart, I am sure."

"Then I'll do it. Take this, please." Nan pressed a hearty kiss on the lady's lips. "Then," she added: "I must tell mother, you know."

"Of course. You may tell her day after to-morrow that you met your godmother."

"My fairy godmother."

"As you like. Now you must run along. Good-bye till we meet again. One more kiss, Nannie, for your Aunt Helen."

"Oh, yes, I always forget her. I was so little when I last saw her, you know. But I'll send her a kiss if you want me to. Good-bye, dear fairy godmother. Ask the queen of the fairies to send you this way soon again."

The candle-lighted room, the little white-haired figure, the shrouded portrait all seemed unreal as Nan stepped out again into the bright sunlight. She longed to tell her mother all about it, but she reflected that the secret was not all her own and determined to be silent till the time was up. Only

one question did she ask and the answer almost made her betray herself. "Mother," she said when her mother came to say good-night, "who was my godmother?"

"Your Aunt Helen," was the reply.

Nan sat straight up in bed her eyes wide with surprise. "Why, why," she stammered, but she immediately nestled down again.

"Did you never know that?" asked her mother.

"If I did I forgot," replied Nan, and she lay awake for a long time thinking of the strangeness of the morning's experience. She could scarcely wait till the time rolled around and brought her to the day when she could tell her mother the story of her secret meeting. It seemed to her that since the day before yesterday her mental self had grown prodigiously. Mary Lee, a year and a half younger seemed now such a child, although heretofore she had been considered the more mature. Once in a while the two had discussed their grandmother and the Corner family, but Mary Lee was not greatly interested in the subject and had concluded the conversation by saying: "I don't care a picayune where she is or what she thinks. She has never done anything for me and she might as well be out of the world as in it, as far as we are concerned. I'm never going to bother my head about her, and I don't see why you want to, Nan."

This crushing indifference satisfied Nan that Mary Lee was not to be confided in when the silent house at Uplands, like a magnet, drew Nan toward it, and she was rather glad that she did not want to tell any one but her mother, for had a sympathetic spirit been ready to hear the secret would have been hard to keep.

When the eventful day came she followed Mrs. Corner from dining-room to pantry and from pantry to kitchen waiting for a chance to give her confidence. "When shall you be through, mother?" she asked. "It seems as if you had so much more than usual to do this morning."

"No more, than always," returned her mother. "Why are you so impatiently following me up, Nan? What is it? Can't you tell me now?"

Nan glanced at Mitty and the washerwoman who were eating their breakfast. "It's a secret," she said in a low tone, "a very important secret."

Mrs. Corner smiled. Nan's secrets were not usually of great importance except in her own estimation. "Well, I shall be in my room as soon as I give out the meal and sugar; you can come to me then, if you can't tell me here. Suppose you pass the time away in looking up Jack. It is about time she was getting into mischief again. She always chooses Monday morning for some sort of escapade; I suppose keeping bottled up over Sunday is too much for her."

"I'll go see where she is," agreed Nan. "She won't be painting the fence this time, I know."

Jack was discovered before a tub in the wash house. In the absence of Ginny, the washerwoman, at breakfast, she had seized the opportunity of taking her place and was about to plunge her best muslin frock into the water with the stockings and underwear when Nan came upon her. "Jacqueline Corner, what are you up to now?" cried Nan, snatching the frock from her.

"I'm just helping Ginny to wash," replied Jack with her usual air of injured innocence when discovered under such circumstances.

"You were just helping Landy when you wasted the paint and ruined your blue frock," said Nan sarcastically. "Walk yourself right out of here. Ginny is perfectly capable of doing the washing without your assistance. Besides that lawn frock doesn't go in with black stockings; a pretty mess you'd make of it. Ginny won't thank you for mixing up her wash when she's sorted it all out. Try your energies upon something you know about, young lady."

Jack flung herself away. "You're always saying I mustn't do this and I mustn't do that," she complained. "You're a regular old cross-patch. You're not my mother to order me around."

"Mother sent me to see after you, so there," returned Nan. "I'm next to mother, too, for I'm next oldest. Where's Jean?"

"I don't know and I don't care," returned Jack, sullenly.

"Who's a cross-patch now? Here comes Ginny; you'd better make tracks out of here."

Jack fled and Nan returned to the house to find her mother ready to sit down to her sewing. The girl carefully shut the door and then established herself on an ottoman near her mother. "What does my Aunt Helen look like?" she asked abruptly.

Her mother looked up in surprise. "That's the second time lately that you have asked me about your Aunt Helen. Why this sudden interest, Nannie?"

"I'll tell you presently. It's part of the secret."

"Oh, it is. Well then, Helen has dark hair and blue eyes, a fair skin and little hands and feet. She is quite small, not much taller than you."

"It all sounds right," said Nan reflectively, "except the hair. Is she quite old, mother?"

"She is younger than I."

"Oh, then, of course, it is some one else, only my little lady has a very young smile. Maybe she isn't so awfully old. Could any one younger than you have real white hair, mother?"

"Why, yes, I have seen persons much younger whose hair had turned quite gray. Sometimes hair turns gray quite suddenly from illness or grief or trouble."

"Could Aunt Helen's hair be gray by this time?"

"It could be, though it was dark when I saw her last."

Nan pondered upon this and then said: "Well, anyhow, whoever it was, she told me I was to tell you that she was my godmother. Did I have two godmothers?"

"Yes, but I was one. What is all this about? Whom have you seen, and where did you see her?"

Nan launched forth into her story, her mother listening so attentively that her sewing lay untouched in her lap. When Nan had concluded, Mrs. Corner picked up her work again, but she was so agitated that she was unable to thread her needle.

"Who was she? Who was she?" queried Nan.

"Your Aunt Helen, without doubt."

"But I thought she was in Europe with my grandmother."

"So I thought. She evidently came over on some matter of business, leaving your grandmother there."

"Are you sorry I saw her, mother?" asked Nan, leaning her elbows on her mother's lap and looking up into her face. "I told her I ought not to go to Uplands because you don't like us to. Are you sorry I went? Are you angry, mother?"

"No, I think I am glad, Nannie."

"Then I am glad, but why didn't she come to see you when she was so near? Did she say mean horrid things, too? I can't imagine her doing anything hateful and mean."

A pained expression passed over Mrs. Corner's face. "What do you know about that sad time, Nannie? I have never mentioned it to you children."

"No, but Unc' Landy told me grandmother said bitter things. I know you didn't though."

Mrs. Corner sighed. "I said one thing, Nannie, that I have often regretted since, and it is because of it that your Aunt Helen did not let me know of her being here. It was in a moment of deep distress. I was hurt, indignant. I felt that I had been left desolate with insufficient means to support my children, and in the only interview I had with your grandmother I said, 'I hope I shall never again behold the face of one of the Corner family except the children of my beloved husband who bear his name.'"

"I don't blame you," said Nan, taking her mother's hand between her own. "They were horribly mean to go off with their money and not give you a penny. They ought at least to have let you live in the big house and use the piano."

Her mother smiled. "That is the way you look at it. Well, we get along somehow without them, thanks to Aunt Sarah. I am sorry I did not try to be more friendly to Helen. She was dominated by her mother and it was no doubt a choice between her and you children. She was very fond of you

as a baby and she has not forgotten. Her mother's sadly jealous and envious spirit is what has made all the trouble."

"I was four years old when they went away," said Nan. "I don't remember them at all, though I remember dear daddy perfectly."

"Let's not talk of it any more," said Mrs. Corner.

"Aunt Helen said we might see each other again some day. Do you suppose they will come back and will be nice to us and let us go up there sometimes?"

"We cannot say. I do not look into the future to find such possibilities, Nannie. You must not build too many air-castles."

"Oh, but I like to," replied Nan. "It's lots of fun to do it and if they don't amount to anything I've had the fun of the building and nobody's hurt when they tumble down."

"In that case I suppose it doesn't make much difference, and when one is naturally a castle-builder it is hard to give up the habit."

"It isn't as bad as sucking one's fingers as Jean does, for it doesn't put my mouth out of shape; it only amuses me and I often forget my castles an hour after they are ten stories high. I suppose I am not to tell the children about Aunt Helen."

"I think I wouldn't yet."

"No," said Nan with a mature air. "I think it's best not. They mightn't understand. Besides, as she isn't a polywog nor a newly hatched bird, Mary Lee wouldn't be very much interested in her."

CHAPTER IV

A MOTHER'S SECRET

The first days of autumn brought back school days. Aunt Sarah had gone to visit a nephew in lower Maryland, leaving behind her mementoes in the form of the coat of paint for the front fence, a new cover for the living-room table, and many stitches put in made-over garments for the children. She had further dispensed her bounty in a direction of which the children as yet knew nothing, and it was Nan who first heard of it from her mother.

Aunt Sarah's absence was felt in more ways than one. Mrs. Corner was her favorite niece. A tiny grave in the old churchyard marked the resting place of her namesake, Nan's elder sister, who was her mother's first-born and who lived but three short months. It may have been that Aunt Sarah's heart went out more tenderly toward her own sister's child because of this loss which was so heavy a grief to them both, but whether it was because of this bond between them or because they mutually loved and respected each other, it is true that any sacrifices which Miss Dent felt she could make she made for the Corner family, and when she was with them no task was too heavy for her, and her wise counsel and helpful hands were greatly missed by Mrs. Corner.

It was just after Aunt Sarah's departure, and while school was still a novelty, that Nan, running in to tell her mother of the day's doings, noticed that Mrs. Corner was sewing not for one of the children but for herself. This was so unusual that Nan remarked it, and forgetting her school gossip exclaimed, "Why, mother, you are making a new frock! Where did you get it?"

Her mother dropped her work with a sigh. Nan noticed that the dear face was pale and sad. "Aunt Sarah gave it to me," was the answer. There was silence for a few moments after this, while Mrs. Corner went on with her work of measuring off the black breadths. "I have something to tell you, little daughter," she then said. "You had a secret to tell me a little while ago, and now I have one to tell you." She paused. "It isn't a happy secret, Nan," she went on, "but as you are my eldest and my staff to lean upon, you must try to help me bear it without rebelling."

Nan grew very sober. This was such a melancholy beginning that she feared what might follow, but being a young person who never thrust aside unpleasant things when she knew they must be met she said firmly, "Don't bother about me, mother; I'll be as brave as a lion."

The scissors snipped along the edges of the pattern while Mrs. Corner bent over her work. Presently she said, "It is this, Nannie: that I must leave you for awhile."

All sorts of notions flew to Nan's mind. Was her mother perhaps going to Europe to hunt up her Aunt Helen? Was she going to see Cousin Henry Dent in Maryland? "Oh, mother," she cried, "tell me quick. Where are you going?"

"I am going to the Adirondacks, Nannie."

"The Adirondacks?" Nan looked the surprise she felt. "Why in the world are you going there? You don't know any one up in those regions, do you?"

"No, and that makes it harder. I am going for my health, Nannie."

The blood forsook Nan's cheeks. She felt as if she were sinking down, down, and it took all her effort to check a rising sob. All she did, however, was to hold her nether lip closely between her teeth and to draw a quivering sigh. Then she gasped out: "Oh, mother, mother, it doesn't mean – it can't mean –"

"It doesn't mean anything very serious – yet," said Mrs. Corner dropping her scissors and sitting down by Nan's side. "But the doctor says if I go now the tendency will probably be overcome. If I stay it may mean that the disease will get the better of me, and dear Aunt Sarah has made it possible for me to go. Only a few months, Nan, and Aunt Sarah will come and stay with you while I am away."

Now, I want you to stand by Aunt Sarah. She has made, and will continue to make every sacrifice for your mother, and you must make sacrifices for her."

"Oh, I will," cried Nan. "I won't touch the melodeon, and I won't nag the others any more than I can help. Aunt Sarah is good. Oh, I know she is so good, but she isn't – she isn't – you." This time the tears would have their way and they began to course down Nan's cheeks though she sat up straight and tried to blink them away. "And – and" – she went on, "she doesn't – it's hard to make her understand things like it's not always being a waste of time to do what you like and all that."

"I know, but, dear, remember that persons are very likely to respond to what you expect of them, and you will find Aunt Sarah very sympathetic if you take her the right way."

Nan was not at all sure that she could find that right way but she did not say so. She only looked at her toes very mournfully and wondered if it had happened to be Aunt Helen instead of great-aunt Sarah who was to be left in charge whether she would have minded it so much.

"No mother could have had my interests more at heart," continued Mrs. Corner. "Think how she has toiled and sacrificed herself for me, and it is entirely due to her that I am able to go, for not only has she provided the money for my journey, an expensive one, but she has thought of a way to pay my board while I am away, and it is just here, Nan, that I shall have to depend upon you to stand by Aunt Sarah. Cousin Tom Gordon's two boys are to board here and go to school. They want to prepare for the University and it seems a godsend that they are coming this year, for it will make my going away possible. Of course this is a new element. Two boys coming into a family will make new conditions and you must consider that Aunt Sarah is very unselfishly and devotedly undertaking a greater responsibility than we have any right to ask of her. So, Nan, try to play the part of peacemaker always. Be the sweetener of tart speeches; be the sunshine that drives away the clouds. Aunt Sarah loves you and appreciates you, though she has a little crisp way which your over-sensitiveness finds harsh. Never mind that. Be patient and wise and sweet, so will you help your mother and bring her back speedily."

"I'll try, oh, I'll try," said Nan. This was a secret indeed. What plans! What changes! "When do the boys come, and when do you go?" she asked.

"I go next week. Aunt Sarah will try to be here before I leave and before the boys arrive. They expect to get here on the fifteenth."

"Such a little while; such a little while." Nan caught her mother's hand and covered it with kisses. "And when shall you be back?" she asked.

"That I cannot say. It will depend upon what the doctors say."

Nan sat holding her mother's hand against her cheek. It would be their first separation and it would be a hard one. Every now and then the tears gushed to her eyes, though she tried to force them back. "Are you going to tell the others why you are going?" she asked.

"No," returned Mrs. Corner slowly. "I think we will not tell them just why." That *we* gave Nan a sense of partnership in these schemes. It elevated her to a place beside her mother and Aunt Sarah. She was their confidante and it behooved her to adjust her shoulder to a certain burden of responsibility.

"Tell me about the boys," she said. "Are they nice boys?"

"I hope so. If they are not you must try to make them so. Their names are Randolph and Ashby. Randolph is a year older than you and Ashby a year younger."

"Where will they sleep?" asked Nan, coming down to practical things.

"They can have the room Aunt Sarah always occupies and she can sleep in my room with Jean and Jack."

"Will she like that? Couldn't Mary Lee and I go into your room and let the boys have ours? Your room is so big and with two double beds in it we could do very well. Aunt Sarah always likes that southwest room and it would be warmer in winter."

Mrs. Corner looked pleased at this evidence of consideration. "I am sure that would be a much more comfortable plan for all but you and Mary Lee. It would be some trouble to move all your belongings. I thought the other way would be more convenient; still, if you don't mind – "

"Oh, no, we won't let ourselves mind," said Nan; then, a little shamefacedly, "besides, it would seem more like being near you to sleep in your bed."

Her mother gave the hand that held hers a little squeeze. "Now, I must go on with my work," she said. "I shall have to get this done before I go."

"Can't I help?" asked Nan eagerly.

"Not on this, I'm afraid."

"Then I'll do the other things that you do. I'll go see if Mitty has everything out for supper." She picked up the key basket but paused before leaving the room. "May I tell Mary Lee and the twins about the boys coming and your going if I don't tell why?"

"Yes, I shall be glad if you would." And Nan flew to assume the important office of giving information which would cause a sensation.

She found Mary Lee placidly nursing a decrepit duck which had fallen into the slop barrel, showing in her pursuit of dainties an eagerness which did not accord with her age. Having been rescued and well washed by Mary Lee, she was now lying in that young person's lap rolled in an old bit of horse blanket, her restless eyes alone giving evidence of her uncurbed ambition.

"Come here, Mary Lee, I have a mighty big piece of news to tell you," cried Nan. "I'm going to tell you first."

"You come here," said Mary Lee. "I can't put the duck down till she gets dry."

"How ridiculous! As if a duck cared whether she was wet or dry," said Nan, going up and giving the duck a friendly poke, eliciting a remonstrative "Quack!"

"You'd care if you had fallen into a slop barrel and had to be dipped out in a bucket and lathered all over and rinsed off," said Mary Lee.

"I wouldn't be so foolish as to fall into a slop barrel in the first place. Ducks are such greedy things. I don't see how she got up there."

"She walked up a board like anybody," returned Mary Lee.

"Well, anywhere that she could swim would have done for her bath. It was silly to go through all that fuss of bathing her when she's just a duck that loves water like any other duck."

"What is your news?" asked Mary Lee, changing the subject. "I don't believe it's anything much. You always get so excited over trifles."

"I reckon you won't call this a trifle," replied Nan, "when I tell you that mother is going away for weeks and that Aunt Sarah is coming back to look after us, and that Randolph and Ashby Gordon are coming here to board all winter. I should think that was something to get excited over," she said triumphantly.

Mary Lee stared. "You're making it all up just to fool me."

"I'm not, either. What in the world would I want to do that for? It's true, every word of it. You can ask mother if it isn't."

"What's she going for?" asked Mary Lee.

"Oh, just because. Grown people have their reasons for doing things and we can't always be told them," replied Nan, with, it must be said, rather a condescending air.

"Do you know why?" asked her sister, determined upon getting to the heart of the matter.

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't."

"If you do, I think you are downright mean not to tell me. I'm 'most as old as you, and she's my mother as much as she is yours."

These latter facts Nan could not deny, so she answered weakly, "Well, anyhow, I shan't tell."

Mary Lee was slow to wrath, but once aroused she did not hesitate to speak her worst. She deposited her roll of horse blanket upon the ground and the duck with satisfied quacks waddled forth

from the encumbering folds, glad of her freedom. "You are altogether too high and mighty, Nancy Weston Corner," said Mary Lee, quite outraged by Nan's refusal. "You're a scurvy old pullet, so there!"

"I like your way of calling names," returned Nan contemptuously. "I should think any one could tell that you had been near a slop barrel; you talk like it."

Mary Lee did not wait for further words, but fled to her mother, Nan following, taking the shorter way and reaching her mother first. "I tried to tell Mary Lee without saying why," she began breathlessly, "and she called me a horrid name, so I don't know how it will turn out."

"I think we shall have to tell her," said Mrs. Corner. "I did not realize that it might be difficult for you."

"She's coming now," said Nan.

Mary Lee's footsteps were hastily approaching. She burst into the room with, "Mother, is it true that you are going away?"

"Yes, dear child."

"What for? Nan was so mean and wouldn't tell me."

"I didn't give Nan permission to tell you why I was going."

"She needn't have been so disagreeable about it though," said Mary Lee. "Why didn't she say that you told her not to tell?"

"You didn't give me a chance," put in Nan. "You called me a scurvy old pullet before I could explain."

"What a name, Mary Lee," said Mrs. Corner reprovingly. "Where did you hear it?"

"Phil says it."

"Don't say it again. If you lose your temper like that and cannot bridle your tongue, I am afraid your mother will have many sorry moments while she is away trying to regain her health."

In an instant Mary Lee was on her knees by her mother's side. "Are you ill, mother?" she asked anxiously.

"Not very, but I may be if I do not have a change of climate, so I am going to take a trip. I have hardly left this place for eight years and more. I shall come back trig as a trivet, Mary Lee, so don't be troubled about me."

Nan left her mother to explain matters further and sought the twins who were amicably swinging under a big tree. As she unfolded her news to them the point which at first seemed to be most important was the coming of the two boys. Jack objected to their arrival, Jean welcomed it, and straightway they began a discussion in the midst of which Nan left them. Her brain was buzzing with the many thoughts which her interview with her mother suggested. She determined to be zealous in good works, and immediately hunted up Mitty that she might see that all was going well in the kitchen.

Mitty had not much respect for one younger than herself and paid no attention when Nan entered, but kept on singing in a high shrill key:

"Whe-e-en Eve eat de apple,
Whe-e-e-en Eve eat de apple,
Whe-en Eve eat de apple,
Lord, what a try-y-in' time."

"Mitty, have you everything out for supper?" asked Nan with her mother's manner.

Mitty rolled her eyes in Nan's direction, but vouchsafed no reply, continuing to sing in a little higher key:

"When she-e gabe de co' to Adam,
Whe-en she gabe de co' to Adam,

Whe-e-en she gabe de co' to Adam,
Lord, what a try-y-yin' time."

"I want to know," repeated Nan severely, "if you have everything out for supper?"

"I has what I has," returned Mitty, breaking some splinters of wood across her knee.

"I wish you'd answer me properly," said Nan, impatiently.

"Yuh ain' de lady ob de house," returned Mitty, provokingly. "Yuh ain' but jest a little peepin' chick. Yuh ain' even fryin' size yet."

"I think when mother sends me with a message, it is your place to answer me," said Nan with her head in the air. "I will see if Unc' Landy can get you to tell me what mother wants to know." And she stalked out.

As Unc' Landy was Mitty's grandfather, and the only being of whom she stood in awe, this had its effect. "I tell yuh, Miss Nan, 'deed an' 'deed I will," cried Mitty, running after her and hastily enumerating the necessary articles to be given out from the pantry. "'Tain' no buttah, 'tain' no sugah, jest a little bit o' co'n meal. Oh, Miss Nan!"

But Nan had passed beyond hearing and was resolutely turning her steps toward Unc' Landy's quarters, a comfortable brick cabin which stood about fifty yards from the house. The old man was sitting before its door industriously mending a hoe-handle. It was not often that Nan complained of Mitty, for she, too, well knew the effect of such a course. Upon this occasion, however, she felt that her future authority depended upon establishing present relations and that it would never do to let Mitty know she had worsted the eldest daughter of the house. "Unc' Landy, I wish you'd speak to Mitty," said Nan. "She wouldn't tell me what to give out for supper and mother gave me the keys to attend to it for her; she's busy sewing."

Unc' Landy seized the hoe-handle upon which he was at work, and made an energetic progress toward the kitchen, catching the unlucky Mitty as she was about to flee. Brandishing his hoe-handle, he threateningly cried: "Wha' yo' mannahs? I teach yuh show yo' sassy ways to one of de fambly!"

Up went Mitty's arm to defend herself from the impending blow while she whimpered forth: "I done say 'tain' no buttah; 'tain' no sugah; the's a little bit o' meal; an' Miss Nan ain' hyah me."

"Ef I bus' yo' haid open den mebbe she kin hyah yuh nex' time," said Unc' Landy catching the girl's shoulder and beginning to bang her head against the door.

But here Nan, feeling that Mitty was scared into good behavior interfered. "That will do, Unc' Landy. If she told me, it is all right."

"She gwine speak loudah an' quickah nex' time," said Unc' Landy, shaking his hoe-handle at Mitty. "Yuh tell Miss Nan what she ast yuh, er I'll fetch Mr. Hoe ober hyah agin an' try both ends, so yuh see which yuh lak bes'." And he went off muttering about "dese yer no 'count young niggahs what so busy tryin' to be sma't dey ain' no time to larn sense."

The thoroughly humbled Mitty meekly answered all Nan's questions and Nan felt that she was fortified with authority for some time to come.

Nan was always shocked and repelled by Unc' Landy's methods, and only in extreme cases was she willing to appeal to him. Such appeals, sometimes bringing swifter and more extreme punishment, so affected Nan as to make her avoid Unc' Landy for days. He was always so very tender and courteous to every member of the "fambly" that it seemed almost incredible that he should be so merciless to one of his own flesh and blood, but such was a common attitude of the older negroes toward the younger ones, and his was not an unusual case. When Mrs. Corner was on hand she never permitted the old man to exercise his rights toward Mitty, but once or twice when the girl had overstepped bounds in his presence, he had meted out punishment to her later on, so she feared him while she respected him, praising him lavishly to her boon companions.

"Gran'daddy got a pow'ful long ahm," she would say, "an' man, I say he swif' an' strong, mos' lak angel Gabr'el wid he swo'd an' trumpet. I mos' as feared o' gran'daddy as I is o' angel Gabr'el. Ef

gran'daddy call me an' angel Gabr'el blow he trumpet at de same time I don' know which I bleedged to min'. I specs I run a bilin' to gran'daddy fust."

Having established her position in the kitchen, Nan returned to her mother. Every moment seemed precious now, and that night after Mary Lee was asleep, Nan crept softly from her bed and laid herself down by her mother whose arms clasped her close, but who did not allow her to remain. "It is not well for you to sleep with me, dear," she said. "It will be better for us both if you go back to your own room." Nan obeyed, but it was an anxious hour that she spent before sleep visited her. The night hours brought her many forebodings, and she felt that her young spirit was stretching beyond the limits of childhood toward that larger and less happy region of womanhood.

CHAPTER V

HOUSEWIFELY CARES

The day for Mrs. Corner's departure came around all too soon. Aunt Sarah was to have arrived the evening before, but up to the last moment she had not come, and Mrs. Corner felt that she could not wait since all her arrangements were made. "I am positive she will be here to-day," she told Nan, "probably by the noon train, and the boys will not come till to-morrow, so you will have no trouble, even if Aunt Sarah should not come till night."

There were many tears and embraces at the last moment. Even Jean's placidity was disturbed and when the train which held her mother, moved out of sight, she flung herself in Nan's arms sobbing, "Oh, I didn't want her to go, I didn't."

Jack rubbed her eyes with none too clean fists and reiterated: "I promised I'd be good; I promised I'd be good." As for Mary Lee she slipped an arm around her elder sister, but "Oh, Nan! Oh, Nan!" was all she could say. Nan herself bravely kept back the tears but her feeling of helplessness and desolation was almost more than she could bear. Mother, who had never left them for so much as a night, gone far away where they could not and should not reach her. No one to advise, to comfort, to sympathize. No one to confide in. It was all blackness and darkness without that blessed mother.

Four very sober children returned to the house to eat their dinner alone. Even the importance of sitting at the head of the table brought no joy to Nan, and the fact that Phil's mother had sent them over a dish of frozen custard brought none of them any great enjoyment.

Mitty had taken advantage of the occasion to announce that she was going to a "fessible." She informed Nan that she had asked Mrs. Corner's consent weeks before and had been told that when the Sons and Daughters of Moses and Aaron had their "fessible" she could go. There was really nothing to say, and Mitty, adorned in a rattling, stiffly starched petticoat over which as stiffly a starched pink lawn stood out magnificently, started forth, bearing her purple parasol and wearing her brilliant yellow hat trimmed with blue roses.

"She certainly is a sight," remarked Mary Lee, watching Mitty's exit. "Wouldn't her feathers drop if she should get wet? Oh, Nan, I do believe a thunder-storm is coming up. Look at that black cloud."

"Now don't begin to be scary," said Nan, coming to the window. If there was one thing above another of which Mary Lee was scared it was a thunder-storm; it completely demoralized her, and she would always retire to the darkest corner, crouching there in dread of each flash of lightning and clap of thunder. Nan scanned the sky and then said calmly, "Well, I think it is very likely we will have a shower; we generally do when the Sons and Daughters have their festival."

It had been a sultry day, and the low-hanging clouds began to increase in mass, showing jagged edges, and following one another up the sky, black, threatening, rolling forms. In the course of half an hour, the first peal of distant thunder came to their ears and Mary Lee began to tremble. "It seems a thousand times worse when mother isn't here," she complained. "It seems dreadful for us four children to be here all alone. Suppose the lightning should strike the house."

"Then mother would be safe," said Nan, exultantly.

"But it wouldn't do her any good if we should all be killed," Mary Lee returned lugubriously.

"Suppose it should strike the train mother is in?" said Jean in a frightened tone.

"Oh, it couldn't," Nan reassured her. "It goes so fast that it would get beyond the storm. The sun is probably shining bright where mother is by this time."

This was more comforting; nevertheless Mary Lee's fears increased in proportion to the loudness of the thunderclaps. "I'm sure we are not safe here," she declared. "It is getting worse and worse, Nan." A terrific crash which seemed to come from directly overhead gave proof to the truth

of her words. Jean clung to her and even Jack looked scared. Mary Lee cowered down in the corner and covered her face.

"Come, I'll tell you what we'll do," said Nan, though by no means unaffrighted herself; "we'll do what Aunt Sarah's grandmother used to do; we'll all go up-stairs; it's safer there, and we'll pile all the pillows on mother's bed – we'll pull it into the middle of the room first – and then we'll all get on it and say hymns. There isn't any feather-bed like they used to have, but the pillows will answer the same purpose. Come, Mary Lee." They all rushed up-stairs, and, between thunderclaps, gathered pillows from the different rooms, and then established themselves upon them in the middle of the bed.

"Aunt Sarah said they never used to feel afraid when their grandmother commenced to say the hymns, and she taught me the best one to say. Keep still, Jack, and I'll say it." A second violent crash of thunder drowned her words and Mary Lee threw herself prone upon her face, calling out: "Put some pillows over me so I can't see nor hear."

"We can't; we're sitting on them," returned Nan. "You are perfectly safe, Mary Lee. Now listen and you won't mind the thunder." And she began the fine old hymn:

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform,
He plants His footsteps on the sea,
And rides upon the storm."

"It scares me for Him to ride upon the storm," faltered Jean.

"But you know if He is in the storm, He is right here to take care of us," said Nan, reassuringly. Jean was satisfied. Even Mary Lee raised her head when Nan had finished the hymn. "Now it is your turn," said Nan. "What will you say, Mary Lee?"

"I think I like 'Jesus, Lover of My Soul,' but I don't know it very well. Do you dare get down and bring me my hymnal, Nan? I wouldn't ask you only I could no more leave this spot than fly."

"I don't mind, I'm sure," responded Nan readily. "I think the worst is over anyhow." But she had scarcely returned with the book when another loud peal sent her scrambling to her nest in the pillows and it was some moments before Mary Lee could gain courage to sit up and repeat the hymn, which she could not do without frequent peepings at the page before her.

"Now Jack, it's your turn," Nan prompted.

Jack was always ready and she began and said through without faltering the hymn beginning: "Dear Jesus ever at my side." There was a most uplifted and saintlike expression on the child's face as, with clasped hands, she repeated the closing lines:

"But when I sleep, Thou sleepest not,
But watchest patiently."

One would have supposed Jack to be a most lovely and angelic person, and, in truth, for the time being, she was angelic.

Jean's turn came last. "I can't fink of anyfing but 'Jesus, tender Shepherd, Hear Me,' and it isn't bedtime yet," she said.

"Never mind if it isn't," said Nan; "it is quite dark and that will do very nicely." So Jean added her hymn while the storm still raged. However, they were all comforted, and finding that the plan of Aunt Sarah's grandmother worked so well, Nan proposed that they should not stop but should take another round of hymns.

"It would be nicer to sing them I think," said Jack.

"So it would," the others agreed, "and then nobody would have to remember all, for, if one should forget the hymnal will be right here."

"Let's sing 'Now the day is over,'" said Jack.

"But it isn't over," objected the literal Jean. However as this was a general favorite, they sang it through and by that time the storm was passing over and they felt they could safely leave the feather pillows.

"It was a splendid plan," declared Mary Lee. "Once or twice I almost forgot to be afraid, though I do wish Unc' Landy could have been somewhere in the house."

"I don't know how he could have helped matters," returned Nan, "though I shouldn't have minded his being on hand. I don't believe he has gone to the festival and very likely has been out in all the storm stopping leaks in the barn; it's what he generally does. Gracious! what's that?"

A thundering knock at the door stopped them in their work of returning the pillows to their places. "Who can it be?" said Nan.

"Maybe it's some one from Cousin Mag Lewis's to see if we are all right," said Mary Lee. "I shouldn't wonder if it were Phil."

"Well, you go see."

Mary Lee ran down-stairs to the door. It was still raining a little as the puddles in the front walk showed. The vines were dripping and the flowers hung heavy heads. Mary Lee did not notice these things, however, for two strange lads stood before her. She at once surmised who they were. "Come right in," she said. "Just put your umbrellas in that corner of the porch. I'll tell Nan you are here."

"We are Randolph and Ashby Gordon," said the boys.

"I know," returned Mary Lee, and sped up the stairs leaving the boys to deposit their wet umbrellas on the porch. "Nan, Nan," called the girl, "they've come, and Aunt Sarah isn't here."

"Who has come?" Nan questioned from the top of the steps.

"The boys, our cousins, Randolph and Ashby. They are at the front door."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Nan. "What did you say to them, Mary Lee?"

"I didn't say anything except to tell them where to put their umbrellas. Come right down, please, Nan."

"Their bed isn't made or anything," said Nan, pausing to look across at the open doorway which disclosed a room not yet in good order. "I'll have to explain, I suppose."

She went sedately down-stairs to find the two boys standing in the front hall. "Oh, how do you do?" she began. "We didn't expect you to-day" – and then feeling that this was scarcely a welcoming speech, she hesitated, blushing at not being ready for the occasion.

"I know," said the elder boy, "and we must apologize for being ahead of time, but we found that we could get here to-day and have company all the way. A friend of father's, one of the professors at the University, was coming, and he insisted upon our taking the same train. I hope it doesn't make any difference to you."

"No," Nan faltered, "only Aunt Sarah hasn't come yet and your room isn't quite ready."

"Oh, no matter," returned the boy, courteously enough, but rather distantly.

"You see, mother went away only this morning," Nan continued her explanations, "and Mitty, our girl, has gone out, but if you will just walk into the living-room and make yourselves at home, I can soon get everything in order. I'm Nan, you know. It was Mary Lee who opened the door and the twins are up-stairs. We had a heavy storm, didn't we?"

"We certainly did," replied Randolph, following her into the room. His brother silently entered with him.

"Please make yourselves at home," repeated Nan.

Having established her guests, she flew up-stairs. "They're here sure enough," she said. "You all will have to help me get the room ready; fortunately it has been swept. Jean, get some clean towels and the piece of soap from mother's room. I suppose we shall have to give them soap. Jack, I wish you would get some water. No, you'd better not," she called. But Jack, finding a chance to help and rather liking the task imposed upon her, was already half way down-stairs. With Mary Lee's assistance, the

bed was made and the room was soon tidy. Then Nan returned below stairs to decide what to have for supper. She would put the best foot forward, and, though she was racking her brains for a proper bill of fare, she would not show her anxiety. Her own efforts in the way of cooking had been limited, for her mother had always been there to take the weight of responsibility. She could make tea, but perhaps the boys didn't drink it; she would find out. She would have to attempt either biscuits or batter bread, for, of course, cold bread was out of the question. There was no cold meat. She would fry some bacon. Bacon and eggs would do nicely. She would set Mary Lee to paring and cutting up some peaches. There could be sliced tomatoes, too. If the bread question could be settled, they would do very well. She would bake some potatoes in case her bread was a failure. She sent Jean to find Mary Lee and tell her to come to the kitchen and then she set to work.

"They're just like company," was the remark with which she greeted Mary Lee. "They don't act a bit as if they belonged to us. The little one, Ashby, hardly opened his lips, and the other one was polite enough but acted as if we weren't kinsfolk at all, but just strangers who were going to take them to board. I'm going to have bacon and eggs for supper. I wish you'd see if Unc' Landy is around anywhere; he can cut the bacon for us. I'm afraid I could not do it well, and I shall have to try some biscuits. I've made the fire, Mary Lee, and I wish you'd put a few potatoes in the oven. Where's Jack? There isn't a speck of cake in the house and they look as though they were used to having it."

"How can Jack do anything about it?" inquired Mary Lee, rolling the potatoes into a pan preparatory to washing them.

"I'm going to send her over to Cousin Mag's to see if she has any. I'd better write a note for Jack gets things mixed sometimes." She ran to her room and scribbled a note to Mrs. Lewis, as the two families often accommodated one another in this way. Having despatched Jack upon her errand, Nan turned her attention again to the supper. Unc' Landy had evidently been storm-stayed somewhere and had not yet returned, so the bacon was cut rather clumsily and set over the fire to sizzle. To Mary Lee was given the responsibility of preparing the peaches and setting the table. Nan suggested that she put on the very best of everything.

"Oh, need we do that?" she said. "We'll have to wash them up afterward, you know, for Mitty will not be here to do it, and it would be awful if we were to break anything."

"Never mind," returned Nan, "I'll take the risk. We must show them that we have nice silver and china. Go on and do as I say, Mary Lee."

Mary Lee obeyed and Nan turned to her other tasks. "I wonder how long it takes bacon to cook," she said to herself, "and I wonder how much flour I shall need for the biscuits. I'll have to guess at it. Dear me, how does any one ever learn all those things?" She carefully sifted her flour and then measured out her baking powder accurately. As she was hesitating as to the amount of lard required, she realized that the kitchen was full of smoke from burning bacon, and, hurrying to the stove, she discovered that every slice was hard and black.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, "it's ruined, and I'll have to cut more; it's such a trouble, too. I'll finish the biscuits first, for I see the bacon will cook while they are baking." The interruption made her forget the salt for her biscuits, and she set rather a rough, ragged looking panful in the oven.

The next lot of bacon was cooked more successfully, though some slices were thick at one end and thin at the other. Some were short, some were long, quite unlike the neat curly bits which usually appeared upon the table. Mary Lee came in as she was concluding her tasks and her comments upon the looks of the dish did not reassure Nan.

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