GREENACRE GIRLS

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BY

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CHAPTER I
THE FINGER OF PROVIDENCE

"It does seem to me, folkses," said Kit warmly, "that when anyone is trying to write, you might be a little quiet."

The three at the end of the room heeded not the admonition. Doris was so interested that she had almost succeeded in reclining like a Roman maiden on the library table, trying to see over Helen's shoulder. Jean was drawing up the plan for action. The list of names lay before her, and she tapped her pencil on her nose meditatively as she eyed it.

"Now, listen, Jean," Helen proposed. "This would really be a novelty. Let's have a Cupid for postman and not give out our valentines until after the games. And just when we've got them all seated for supper have the bell ring, and a real postman's whistle blow, and enter Cupid!"

"It's too cold for wings," Doris interposed mildly.

"Oh, Dorrie, you goose. He'd be all dressed up beautifully. Buster Phelps is going to be Cupid, only we were going to have him sit in front of a Valentine box and just hand them out. We'll put a little white suit on him with red hearts dangling all over him, and curl his hair angelically."

"You'd better have red heart favors too, Helen," Jean added; "something that opens and shuts, with something else inside for a surprise. And we'll put red crepe shades on all the electric bulbs. Could we get those, do you think, girls?"

"We can get anything if Dad and Mother are home by that time," answered Helen. The rest were silent. Kit, sitting at her mother's desk beside the wide bay window, looked up and frowned at the stuffed golden pheasant on top of the nearest bookcase. Outside snow was falling lightly. The view of the Sound was obscured. A pearly grayness seemed to be settling around the big house as if it

were being cut off from the rest of the world by some magic spell.

"Hope Dad's feeling all right by now," Kit said suddenly, pushing back her thick, dark curls restlessly. "They sail from Sanibel Island the 8th. Wasn't it the 8th, Jean?"

"Oh, they'll be home in plenty of time," Jean exclaimed. "Here we all sit, having the silent mullygrumps when he's better. Mother said positively in her last letter that he had improved wonderfully the previous week."

Helen stared at the long leather couch on one side of the open fireplace. It was over four weeks since her father had lain on it. Throughout the winter there had been day after day of unremitting weakness following his breakdown, and somehow she could not help wondering whether the future held the same. She rose quickly, shaking her head with defiance at the thought.

"Let's not worry, girls. If we all are blue when he comes, he'll have a relapse."

Then Jean spoke, anxiously, tenderly,–her big dark eyes questioning Kit.

"What about Mother?"

"We're all worried about Mother, Jean. It isn't just you at all," Kit spluttered. "But you can be just boiling inside with love and helpfulness, and still not go around with a face like that!"

"Like what?" demanded Jean haughtily.

"Don't fight, children, don't fight," Doris counseled, just as if she were the eldest instead of the youngest. "Remember what Cousin Roxy says about the tongue starting more fires than the heart can put out. You two scrap much more than Helen and I do."

"Well, I think," said Helen sedately, "that we ought to remember Mother just as Jean says. She's almost sick herself worrying over Dad, and there she is, away down in Florida with just the White Hen to talk to."

Jean smiled, thinking of the plump little trained nurse, Miss Patterson, so spick and span and placid that the girls had declared they expected her to cluck at any moment. They had nicknamed her the White Hen, and it surely suited her. Even though no Chantecler had arrived yet to claim her, she was the White Hen,–good-tempered, cheerful, attending strictly to business always, but not just what one might call a lovable companion.

"She's too chirpy for anyone who has responsibilities," Jean said.

"Note Jean when she has responsibilities," Kit proclaimed. "Jean's been playing Mrs. Atlas and carrying the rest of us around on her shoulders. And look at her! Where is the merry smile of old, fair sister?"

Jean smiled rather forlornly. It was true that she had shouldered most of the responsibility since they had been left alone. Cousin Roxana had arrived only a few days previous to the departure of Mrs. Robbins, and it had been rather a

formidable task suddenly to assume a mother's place and run the home.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. "It's only that everything seems to be coming at once. The valentine party and Kit's special effusion for Lincoln's Birthday."

"Class symposium on 'Lincoln–the Man–the President–the Liberator'–" Kit ran it off proudly. "Little classics of three hundred words each. You just ought to see Billie Dunbar's, Jean. He's been boiling it down for a week from two thousand words, and every day Babbie Kane asks him how he's getting along. And you know how Billie talks! He just glowers and glooms and this morning he told her, 'It's still just sap.' He's a scream."

"Kit, don't," laughed Jean in spite of herself. "If you get ink spots on Mother's best suede desk pad, you'll find yourself a little classic."

Kit moved the ink well farther back as a slight concession, and suggested once more that the rest of the family try their level best to keep still about their old party while she finished her symposium.

"You know," Helen began with a far-off look in her eyes, "I think we're awfully selfish, and I mean all of us, not just Kit–"

"Thanking your royal highness," murmured Kit.

"Here's Dad coming back home after five weeks' absence, and we don't know really whether he's better or worse–"

"Helen, don't be a raven quothing things at us," pleaded Jean.

"But it's perfectly true. He needs rest above everything else, Miss Patterson told me so; and here we're planning for a party the minute he gets home."

"Dad says always to go right ahead and have a good time, that it makes him happier to know we are happy."

Kit frowned again. She had straight dark brows set above wide gray eyes, and her frown was somewhat portentous. At fifteen she was far more energetic than Jean at seventeen. No matter what fate might deliver to her she would always find a quick antidote for any manner of trouble. With her short curly hair, she seemed more like the boy of the family, like her father himself, cheery, optimistic, fond of all outdoor life. It was a saying in the Robbins family that Kit might neglect the weeds a bit in her special garden of life, but the general landscape effect would always be artistic and beautiful.

Privately, now that the family were facing a crisis, Kit felt far more competent to act as the head pro tem. than did Jean. The main trouble was, as Helen had said, that Kathleen needed a brake to check her official impetus.

"Anyway, the invitations are all out now and Mother knows we're going to have the party because I wrote her all about it, and she sent back word that she didn't mind a bit so long as we had Cousin Roxy to steer us safely."

"But did you ask Cousin Roxy, Jean?"

"You ask her," said Jean. "She'd fly around the morning star if you asked

her to, Helenita."

Helen thawed at once. The thought of their elderly and stately Cousin Roxana sailing blithesomely around in the early dawn circling the morning star, brought about an immediate resumption of friendly relations. It was the prerogative of sisters to scrap, Kit always held. Sometimes it was quite a satisfaction to say just what you thought in the bosom of your family, get it all off your mind, and know that the family loved you just the same. Under these circumstances, Kit was wont to chant feelingly:

> "Oh, what was love made for, if 'twere not the same
> Through joy and through torment, through sorrow and shame.
> I know not, I ask not, if guilt's in that heart,
> But I know that I love thee, whatever thou art."

Therefore the mere mention of Cousin Roxana brought harmony and mirth into the strained atmosphere of the library.

It seemed as if a special dispensation of Fate had brought their elderly cousin down from her calm and well-ordered seclusion at Gilead Center, Connecticut, just when they needed her most.

Usually she contented herself with sending the family useful and proper gifts on birthdays and at Christmas, but otherwise she did not manifest herself.

She was forty-seven, plump, serene, and still good to look upon, with her fluffy flaxen hair just beginning to look a trifle silvery, and a fine network of wrinkles showing around the corners of her eyes and mouth.

"Land alive, Elizabeth Ann," she had told Mrs. Robbins happily the moment she set foot inside the wide entrance hall at Shady Cove, "didn't I know you needed me?" And she laughed wholesomely. "I didn't plan to descend on you so sudden, but it looked as if it was the finger of Providence pointing the way, with Jerry down sick and you so sort of pindling yourself. Don't you fret a mite about my being put out. I'll stay here with the children and take care of things till you get back home."

And lovely Elizabeth Ann, she who had been Betty all through her girlhood and graceful matronhood, had agreed thankfully. After a three months' siege of nursing her husband through a nervous breakdown, she was glad indeed to welcome the hearty assistance of Cousin Roxy.

"Let's put it right up to her now," Kit exclaimed. "I'd just as soon ask her if Helen's afraid."

Before the others could hold her back, she had slipped out of the library and was running up the stairs, two at a time, into the large sunny room at the

south end of the house which Cousin Roxy had chosen because from its windows she could look out over Long Island Sound. But at the door Kit stopped short. Over at the window stood Cousin Roxy, energetically wiping her eyes with a generous-sized plain linen handkerchief, and the end of her nose was red from weeping.

"Come in, child, come right in," she said hastily, as Kit backed away. "I'm glad you happened up. Come here to your old second cousin and comfort her. I feel as if all the waves and billows of David had washed over me."

Kit hurried over and wrapped her arms around the tall, self-sufficient figure.

"There, there, save the bones," laughed Cousin Roxana, through her tears. "You're just like your father; oh, dear me, Kit, your dear splendid father."

"What's the matter with Dad?" demanded Kit, swift to catch the connection between her cousin's tears and words. "Did you get a letter?"

In silence Cousin Roxana handed over a telegram. It was from Miss Patterson at Palm Beach. They were to stop there after leaving Sanibel Island on the west coast. Kit read it breathlessly:

"Mr. Robbins worse. Sailing 2nd."

"You know, Kit, they'd never do that if there hadn't been a turn for the worse." There was a break in Cousin Roxana's voice as she reached for the telegram. "I just wish that I had him up home safe in the room he used to have when he was a boy. He had measles the same time I did when my mother was alive. That's your Aunt Charlotte, Kit, she that was Charlotte Peabody from Boston. But I always seemed to take after the Robbins' side 'stid of the Peabody, they said, and Jerry was just like own brother to me. I wish I had him away from doctors and trained nurses, and old Doctor Gallup tending him. I've seen him march right up to Charon's ferryboat and haul out somebody he didn't think was through living."

Kit stood with her hands clasped behind her head, looking down at the pines, their branches lightly crystalled with snow and ice. Somehow it didn't seem as if God could let her big, splendid father slip out of the world just when they all needed him so much. During all the months of illness, the girls had not grasped the seriousness of it. He only seemed weak and not himself. They knew he had had to give up his work temporarily, that he never went to the office in New York any more, that it was even an effort for him to give orders over the telephone, but they had taken these things as of little moment.

Perhaps only Jean had really gleaned the real import of her mother's anxious face, the steady daily visits of the nerve specialist, and, last of all, the consultation two days before they had left for the South.

Kit closed her eyes and wrinkled her face as if with a twinge of sharp pain. "It's going to be awful," she said softly, "just awful for Mother."

Cousin Roxana squared her ample shoulders unconsciously, and lifted her double chin in challenge to the worry that the next few days might hold.

"It's more awful for you poor children and Jerry. We women folks are given special strength to bear just such trials; we've *got* to be strong."

But the tears came slowly, miserably to Kit's gray eyes. She pulled the curtains back, and looked out of the window to where the blue waters of Manhasset Bay were turning purple and violet in the gathering gloom of the late afternoon. The land looked desolate, and yet it was but a light snowfall. Down close to the bay some gulls rose and swept in a big half circle towards the other side of the inlet. Buster Phelps, running along the sidewalk towards home, waved up at her a big bunch of pussy willows.

"Spring's coming, Kit," he called riotously. "Just found some and they're 'most out!"

Kit waved back mechanically. Of course she must not break down and cry. Doris might do that, but she and Jean must be strong and brace up the two younger ones so they all could help their mother. Still the tears came. What was the use of spring if–

"Kit, aren't you ever coming down?" called Jean from the foot of the stairs.

"Right now," Kit answered. "You come too, please, Cousin Roxy. We need you fearfully to tell us what to do next."

"No, you don't," said Cousin Roxana calmly. "You don't need me any more than the earth needs me to tell it this snow's going away and the flowers will soon be blossoming. Just trust in the Lord, child. 'It may not be my way, and it may not be thy way, but yet in His own way, the Lord will provide.' It's one thing to stand in the choir and sing that, and it's another to live up to it. The first thing you girls must do is learn how to meet your father with a smile."

CHAPTER II

THE MOTHERBIRD AND HER ROBINS

The next three days were ones of anxious waiting. All plans for the Valentine party had been abandoned, and after school hours the girls hung around Cousin Roxana feeling that she alone could help them bear the suspense. Jean occasionally stole away to her mother's room and looked around to be sure that everything was as she liked it best, and when she came out into the wide upper hall she usually met Kit and Doris stealing from their father's room, their eyes red from weeping.

Helen hunted the cosy corners and curled herself up like a forlorn kitten. Kit declared there wasn't a dry sofa cushion in the house.

"How about your own self?" Doris asked.

"I cry too, but not all the time. Jean and I are standing shoulder to shoulder with Cousin Roxy." Kit straightened her shoulders and stood in martial attitude. "We represent the–the ultima–what's the farthest beyond in Latin, Jean? Anyway that's what we represent, the beyondness in feminine efficiency."

"What does that mean, Kit?"

Kit patted the short bobbed curls on the head of the youngest "robin."

"Means that we've got to keep our heads no matter what happens."

Jean said little. Ever since she could remember, her mother had said to her, "You know I rely on you most, dear. You're mother's comforter."

It was a thought that always gave her fresh strength, to know how much her mother needed her. She was smaller than Kit, slender and with dark eyes, with a look in them that Doris said reminded her of the eyes of a deer.

"Jeanie, there's a Virginia fallow deer over in the Park that looks exactly like you," she would say soberly. "And so do all the squirrels when they keep still and stare at one sideways. You've got such sympathetic, interested, mellow eyes."

"Eyes can't be mellow, Dorrie," Jean laughed. "Try something else."

"Well, they are mellow just the same,–tender and nice, aren't they, Helen?"

And Helen would always agree that they were, tender like the eyes of Jeanne, the girl in the garden at Arles, listening to the voices.

But they were full of trouble now, as Jean hurried around the house, following Cousin Roxana's directions, and encouraging Tekla, the Hungarian cook, to stand at her post. Cousin Roxana really did herself proud, as she would have said, as director of preparations. Mr. Robbins' rooms were as immaculate and as clear of non-essentials as the deck of a battleship. Under her orders the girls and Bertha, the second maid, worked faithfully; while Tekla regarded her with silent, wide-eyed admiration.

"We'd never have managed without you, Cousin Roxy," Jean declared when the final half-hour arrived, and they all gathered in the long living-room, listening for the hum of the car up the drive. Helen and Doris were together, arms

entwined about each other's shoulders, on the wide window-seat. Kit paced back and forth restlessly, and Jean sat on the arm of her father's favorite chair before the open fireplace, her eyes watching the curling flames.

"Land, child, I don't see what you want to burn open fires for when you run a good furnace," Cousin Roxana had demurred. "Up home, I'd be only too glad of the furnace. I have to keep the kitchen stove going steady all day, and run one more in the sitting-room."

"I know it isn't necessary," Jean answered, sitting on the rug before the fire, her hands clasped around her knees, kiddie fashion, in spite of her seventeen years, "but it warms the cockles of your heart to watch an open fire. Don't you think so, Cousin Roxy?"

Cousin Roxana sat in the low willow rocker, placidly knitting on a counterpane square of old-fashioned filet.

"We must all hope for the best," she said, beaming at the anxious faces. "Helen, for pity's sake stop that silent drizzling. If it should be the will of the Lord that your blessed father be taken, it isn't right for us to rebel and take on so, is it? I feel just as badly as any of you." She took off her eyeglasses, that were always balanced half way down her nose, and ruminated, "Land, didn't I live with him for years after his mother died. That was your own grandmother, Helen Faunce Robbins. I've got her spinning-wheel up home in the garret still. But I always did say we made too much woe of the passing over of our dear ones. Why, it isn't any time at all before we're going along right after them. I do believe there's many a person been worried to death by weeping relations. Smile, girls, even if your hearts do ache, and cheer him up. Don't meet him with tears and fears. Jean, run and tell Tekla to keep an eye on that beef tea while I'm up here. It has to keep simmering. Kit, can't you keep still for a minute, or does it rest your mortal coil to keep it on the trot?"

So she cheered and encouraged them, and when the automobile rolled up to the veranda steps with Mr. and Mrs. Robbins and the spotless little White Hen, the children did their best to appear happy. Mr. Robbins, wrapped close in furs, waved to them, his lean, handsome face eager with home love and longing.

"Hello, my robins," he called to them. "Back to the nest. Roxy, God bless you, give me a hand. I'm still rather shaky."

They were all trying to kiss him at once, and Doris held one of his thin white hands close against her cheek. It did not require the look in their mother's beautiful eyes to warn them about being careful. Slender and stately, she stood behind him, smiling at them all. Surely in all the world there was nobody quite like Mother, the girls thought, nobody who could be so tender and sweet and yet so gracious and queenlike.

"Why, he doesn't look nearly so bad as I expected," Cousin Roxana told her,

kissing her in a motherly way. Somehow it seemed quite natural for all to pet and comfort the Motherbird, to try and shield her from the harsher side of life and make the sun shine for her always. Life had always run in smooth, flower-bordered canals of peace for Betty Robbins. Only the past three months had shown her the possibilities of trouble and sorrow, and even now they had only knocked at her door, not entered as unbidden guests.

"You mustn't tire him, girls," she told them warningly, as the nurse and Cousin Roxana assisted him upstairs, one step at a time, then a rest before the next. "He must have a chance to recover from the long journey."

"Land o' rest," Roxana called back happily, "I'm so relieved that you didn't have to bring him back on a stretcher I can hardly catch my breath."

"We're hopeful since he stood the journey so well," answered Mrs. Robbins. She leaned back in the big, cushioned willow chair that Doris always called "The Bungalow." Jean slipped off her cloak and Doris took her gloves. Helen knelt to put a fresh log on the fire and Kit hurried down after a tea tray. It was not fitting that the Queen Mother should receive service at the hands of hirelings. But when she returned she found a scene that might have baffled even Cousin Roxana. Helen and Doris knelt on the floor beside the big chair, the tears running down their faces, and Jean hung over the back with her arms close around her mother.

"Mother darling," she begged. "Don't, don't cry so. Why, you're home, and we're all going to look after him, and be your helpers."

Helen sped up after Cousin Roxana, and presently she came bustling downstairs, flushed and efficient.

"Why, Elizabeth Ann," she cried, smoothing back her hair just as if she had been one of the girls. "Don't give way just when your strength should be tried and true."

"Please call me Betty," protested Mrs. Robbins, smiling even through her tears. "It sounds so formal for you to call me Elizabeth Ann. It always makes me feel like squaring my shoulders, Roxy."

"So you should, child," Roxana declared cheerily. "Betty's so sort of gaysome to my way of thinking and there's stability to Elizabeth Ann. Lord knows, you're going to need a lot of stability before you find the way out of this."

"I know I am." As she spoke the Motherbird held her brood close to her, Doris and Helen kneeling beside her and Jean and Kit on each side. She leaned back her head and smiled at them. It was such a lovely face, they thought. Nobody in all the world had quite the same look or air as Mother. Back from her low broad forehead waved thick brown hair. Doris loved to perch on the broad arm of the willow chair and search diligently for any gray hairs that dared to show themselves. If any were found, they were promptly pulled out. Nine might

come in the place of each, as Cousin Roxana said was highly probable according to tradition, but while they were few and far between, they were all eradicated, almost in indignation that Father Time should dare to assail, ever so gently, the splendid fortress of Mother's youth.

"Really, girls," Kit would say sometimes in her abrupt way, "I think Mother has the most interesting face I ever saw, and the most soulful eyes. They can be just as full of fun and mischief as Dorrie's, and then, again, just watch them when she feels sorry for anybody. It's worth while having a pain or something happen to you just to see her look that way."

She was looking "that way" at this moment as she smiled up at Cousin Roxana; just as though there was nothing too hard or too difficult in all the world for her to undertake.

"That's better," Cousin Roxy said comfortably. "Now you children take her up to her room and play you're maids of honor to the queen. I have to tend my broth and see how Jerry's coming along. Looks to me like rest and quiet and cheerful hearts will carry him through if anything will."

"Roxy!" There was a hidden note of tragedy in the Motherbird's voice. Nobody but the same unemotional Roxy knew how she longed to put her head right down on that ample bosom and have a good old-fashioned cry. "Roxy, the doctors say he'll never be any better."

"Fiddlesticks and pinwheels!" exclaimed Miss Robbins indignantly, with a toss of her head. "Lots they know about it. I declare, sometimes I think the more you pay a doctor the less he can do for you and the bigger-sounding names he thinks up to call what may ail you. I certainly do wonder at the way they try to make folks think they've got a special little private telephone wire right up to the Death Angel's door. I never take any stock in them at all, Betty." It came out quite easily. "Give me castor oil, some quinine and calomel, and maybe a little arnica salve for emergencies, and I'll undertake to help anybody hang on to their mortal coils a little bit longer."

"But things seem to be near a crisis now."

"Let them." Cousin Roxana stood with arms akimbo, as if she were hurling defiance at somebody, and the girls fairly hung on her words. "If the soul never had trials, what would be the use of life? Put ye on the armor of faith, Betty Robbins, and hope for the best. As for you, Jean and Kit, and you too, Helen and Dorrie, if I find any of you looking down your noses, I declare I'll stick clothes-

pins on them and fasten a smile to your lips with court plaster."

CHAPTER III
BREAKERS AHEAD

St. Valentine's Day came and went without the party. Once, and sometimes twice, a day the doctor's runabout turned into the broad pebbled driveway and the children went around with subdued voices and anxious faces. Even Tekla, down in her kitchen domain, wore an ominous expression, and told Cousin Roxana that she had dreamed three times of three black birds perching on the chimneys, which was a sure sign of death, anyone could tell you, in her own country.

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't," Roxy laughed back comfortably. "If I were you, Tekla, I'd take something for my liver and go to bed a mite earlier at night."

All the same, her own face looked worried when she entered the sick-room and looked down at Mr. Robbins' face on the pillows.

"It seems ridiculous for me to be lying here, Roxy," he would say to her, with the whimsical boyish smile she loved. "Why, there isn't anything the matter with me only I'm tired out. Machinery's a bit rusty, I guess."

"No, nothing special only that you can't eat or walk or sit up without keeling over." Her keen hazel eyes regarded him amusedly. "You know, Jerry Robbins, if it wasn't for Betty and the girls, I'd trot you right back home with me."

He looked from her to the window. Jean had just brought in a bunch of daffodils in a slender Rookwood jar and had set them in the sunlight.

"You're not going soon, are you, Roxy?"

Roxana seated herself in the chair beside his bed. As she would have put it, there was a time for all things, and this seemed a propitious moment, for her to get something off her mind that had been weighing there for some time.

"I'll have to pretty quick. It looks like an early spring, Jerry, and there's a sight to do up there. Of course Hiram knows how things go as well as I do, but I've been away a month now, and I like to have the oversight of things. Men are menfolks after all, and you can't expect too much from them. I want to get the hay barn shingled, and some new hen runs set out before the little chicks begin to hatch, and all my berry canes need clearing out. You know that mass of blackberries along the stone wall in the clover patch below the lane–what's the matter, Jerry?"

He had closed his eyes as if in pain, and his hand closed suddenly over her own as it lay on the counterpane.

"It makes me homesick to hear you talk, Roxy."

Their glances met presently in a long look of sympathetic remembrance of the dear old times at Maple Lawn.

"If it were not for the girls," he went on slowly. "They are all at an age now when they need the advantages of being near the city."

"Well, I'm not so sure of that," answered Roxy dubiously. "I suppose you feel that you can do more for them down here, Jerry, and it is a sightly place to live, but you did pretty well yourself up at the old Frost District, didn't you?"

He smiled and nodded his head.

"I wonder what Betty would say to the Frost District school-house?" he asked. A vision of it arose out of the memories of the past, the little white school-house that stood at the crossroads, with rocky pastures rising high behind it, and the long white dusty road curving before it. He had been just a country boy, born and bred within a few miles of Maple Lawn at the old Robbins' homestead. He knew every cow path through the woods about Gilead Center, every big chestnut and hickory tree for five miles around, every fork and bend in the course of the wild little river that cut through the valley meadows. Somehow, in these days of weakness and fear that he was losing his grip on life, there had grown up a great yearning to be home again, to find himself back in the shelter of the mothering arms of the hills. They had always been the hills of rest to him as a boy. Over their margins the skyline had promised adventure and bold emprise, but now they beckoned to him to come back to peace and health.

"She isn't country bred, is she, Jerry?"

The question recalled him to the sick-room.

"No," he answered gently, "no, Betty's from California. I believe her people went out originally from New York State, but she herself was born in San Francisco. Later, she lived on her father's ranch for a while in the Coronado Valley, but she was educated in the city. She doesn't know anything about farm life as we do."

Roxana's placid face looked nonplussed. California might just as well be Kamchatka, so far as her knowledge of it was concerned. It did seem rather too bad that Betty had come from such far-off stock, but still, she thought, a great deal could be excused in her on account of it, since it wasn't given to everybody to be born in New England.

"Would she mind it for just a summer, do you suppose?"

"It would have to be for a longer time than one summer, Roxy."

Something in his voice made her suspicious. The nurse had gone out for her daily airing down the shore road. Mrs. Robbins had walked out to meet the

girls on their way from school, intending to accompany them to afternoon Lenten service at St. James's. A lone adventurous fly crept up the window curtain and Roxana promptly slapped him with a ready hand.

"Pesky thing," she said; then, "What did you say, Jerry?"

"I said that it would have to be for a longer time than just one summer. Things have not gone well with me for the past year. I haven't told Betty or the girls about it."

"You should have," said Roxy promptly. "It isn't fair to them not to share your sorrows with them as well as your joys. Partner, that's what it says, doesn't it? Partner of your joys and sorrows, you know, Jerry."

"Betty has never seemed to understand much about money matters so I did not want to worry her."

"Just like a man. So you broke your health down and landed here in bed trying to do it all yourself. Can I help you? How much money do you need to tide you over?"

He laughed unsteadily.

"Dear old Roxy. You'd give anyone your left ear if they needed it, wouldn't you? You don't understand how we live. It takes nearly every cent I earn to cover our current expenses. As long as I could keep well, it did not matter, but three months' illness shows breakers ahead. I am wondering what we are going to do, and I dread even speaking to Betty about it."

"Then let me do it," said Miss Robbins promptly. "I'd love to. Better yet, call a family council and talk things over if you are strong enough to do so. How long can you hold out here?"

"I'm not certain." He looked weary and bothered. "We only rent the place, as you know. The lease is up the first of May. It is $1800 a year."

"You can buy a good farm up home for that, Jerry; house, barns, pasture, haylands, wood lots and all," said Roxana thoughtfully. "It's a nice place here, but it's fearfully extravagant."

"Do you think so, Roxy?" he smiled up at her with a glint of fun in his eyes like Kit's. "Betty and the girls want me to take over the estate below here along the ocean front at $2500 a year because they like the ocean view and the private beach. It really is quite moderate too, considering we're on the North Shore. Property on Long Island is expensive."

She looked out at the clean park-like territory around the large modern house. Winding drives swept in and out. Each residence stood in its own spacious grounds. High rock walls with ornamental entrance gates surrounded each one. There was an artificial pond where the children skated in whiter and the country club crowned the hill with golf links sloping away to the shore on the north.

Down in the ravine stood the artistic gray stone railroad station matching

the real estate office over the way, and farther along were the village stores, the new High School of stucco and tile, and the two churches. Back and forth along the smooth highway slipped a never-ending line of motor cars coming and going like ants over an ant hill. Roxy turned her head towards the bed once more and asked:

"Would you rather do that than go up home with me?"

"It isn't what I'd rather do. It's what we may have to do unless I gain my old strength."

"You'll never get a mite better lying there worrying over unpaid bills and new ones stacking up. I'm going to talk to Betty."

He shook his head with a little smile of doubt.

"But it would never be fair to take them away from this sort of thing, Roxy. You don't understand. They have their church and their club work and their special studies. Jean has been taking up a course in Applied Design and Modeling, and Helen has her music. Kit's deep in school work and belongs to about five clubs outside of that. Dorrie's about the only one disengaged, and she has a dancing class and the Ministering Children's League over at church. Betty's on more committees and things than I can count, and she believes that we owe it to the children to give them the best social environment that we can. Perhaps we can get along in some way. There's a little left at the bank."

"How much?" demanded Roxana uncompromisingly. "I mean, after you've paid up everything. I'll bet there isn't five thousand left."

"Five thousand! I doubt much whether there is one thousand. Don't tell Betty that. I have never bothered her about such things, and there are a few securities I might sell and realize on."

"And you think that you've been a good husband to her. Land alive, what are men made of! Here she stands a chance of being left alone in the world with four children to bring up and you've never bothered her about your business. The sooner you get to it, the better, I think." Roxana stood up and adjusted her eyeglasses resolutely. She had seen what he could not, Betty coming leisurely up the box-bordered walk, a loose cluster of yellow jonquils in her arms, and the girls following, all except Kit. "There they come now. I won't say anything till you do, Jerry."

Suddenly Kit's voice sounded at the door. Her short curls were rumpled and towsled, and her eyes wide with excitement, as she hugged a hot water bottle to her face.

"I've heard almost every word you said," she burst out. "I had neuralgia and stayed home this afternoon, and I've been asleep in there on the couch. Please don't be sorry, Dad. I'll help you every blessed bit I can, and I think it would be glorious for us all to go up into the country."

She stopped as the door below, in the front entrance hall, banged and Doris came upstairs on a run, a herald of love and joy.

"Well, child, keep your mouth shut till we know where we're at," counseled Roxy quickly. "Go back and lie down. Here they come."

But Kit stood her ground, and Jean and Helen seemed to catch from her the fact that there was something unusual in the wind as they came in behind their Mother.

"It was a lovely walk," said Mrs. Robbins, drawing off her gloves as she sat down beside the bed and smiled at the patient. "We went down to look at the Dunderdale place, Jerry. It is simply lovely there even in winter. You can see the summer possibilities. I never saw so many shrubs and trees and such beautiful grouping. It made me think of our Californian places."

"Or an Italian garden, Mother dear," Jean added eagerly. "Why, Dad, it's exactly like some of Parrish's pictures, don't you know; tall poplars over here, and then a hedge effect and a low Roman seat tucked in every once in a while. Why, it's just as cheap as can be."

"You'd enjoy the garden so this summer, and there are enclosed sleeping porches, and an inner court like a patio garden. The garage is small, but it will do if we don't get a new car this year."

Right here Cousin Roxana sniffed, a real, unmistakable sniff. She was a believer in quick action. If you had anything to do, the quicker you did it and got over it the better, she always said. So now she raised her head as they all looked at her, and sprang her bolt right out of a clear sky.

"You won't get a new car this year, Betty, my dear, and you're not going to move into any two-thousand-five-hundred-dollars-a-year bungalow, either. I'm going to take the whole lot of you to Gilead Center, and see if Jerry can't get his health back up in those blessed hills of rest."

CHAPTER IV
THE QUEEN'S PRIVY COUNCIL

There was a queer silence, fraught with suspense for each person in the room. Mrs. Robbins looked down at the wearied face lying back on the white pillows with a startled expression in her usually calm eyes. Instinctively both her hands reached for his and held them fast, while Jean laid her own two down on her

mother's shoulders as if she would have given her strength for this new ordeal.

"You mean for a little visit, don't you, Cousin Roxy?" she asked eagerly.

"No, I don't, Jeanie. I mean for good and all, or at least until your father has time to get well, and that can't be done in a few days."

"But Doctor Roswell says he's gaining every day," Mrs. Robbins said. She waited for some reassuring answer, her eyes almost begging for one, but Cousin Roxana was not to be dismayed.

"Jerry, tell what the doctor said to us this morning. Not that I take much stock in him, but he may be on the right track."

"Nothing special, Motherbird and robins all," smiled back Mr. Robbins; "only it appears that I am to be laid up in the dry dock for repairs for a long while, and the sinews of war won't stand the vacation expenses if we stay where we are now."

"I wouldn't try to talk about it, dear, before the children," began Mrs. Robbins, quick to avoid anything that savored of trouble or anxiety. "We must not worry. There will be some way out of it."

"There is," Cousin Roxy went on serenely. "If ever the finger of Providence pointed the way, it's doing it now. I say you'd better move right out of this kind of a place where expenses are high and you can't afford anything at all. This is a real crisis, Elizabeth Ann." She spoke with more decision as she saw Jean pat her mother comfortingly. "It has got to be met with common sense. When the bread winner can't work and there's a nestful of youngsters to bring up and feed and clothe, it's time to sit up and take notice, and count all of your resources."

"How would it do for you to take Father up home with you for a rest, Cousin Roxy?" Jean suggested, stepping into the awkward breach as she always did. "Then we could let Annie and Rozika go, and just keep Tekla to do the cooking and washing. And when he came back we'd have all the moving over, and it would be the prettiest time of the year along in late August."

Mrs. Robbins' face brightened at the suggestion.

"Or we might even renew the lease here, Jerry. The house is very pleasant after all, and we could get along with it if it were all done over this spring."

Mr. Robbins looked up at Cousin Roxana's countenance with whimsical helplessness, and she answered the appeal.

"Now, look here," she said with decision and finality. "You'd better put the idea of staying here right out of your mind, Betty. The winds of circumstance have blown your nest all to smithereens, and if you're the right sort of a motherbird, you'll start right in building a fresh one where it's safer. I think your way lies over the hills to Gilead Center. You can pay all your bills here, sell off a lot of heavy furniture, and move up there this spring. For you can't stay here. There's hardly enough money to see you through as it is. I'm going to help you along a

bit until you get your new start."

"Not money enough," said Mrs. Robbins as though she could not comprehend such an idea. "But we couldn't think of going up there and all living with you, Cousin Roxy."

"You're not going to," answered Roxana. "Thank the Lord, I live in a land where houses and food are cheap and there's room for everybody. We don't tack a brass door-plate on a rock pile like I saw there in New York, Betty, and call it a residence at about ten dollars a minute to breathe. I've been telling Jerry you'd better rent a farm near me, and settle down on it."

"But Roxy–" Mrs. Robbins hesitated.

"Oh, Mother, do it, do it," came in a quick outburst from Kit, standing back against the wall. "It would be perfectly dandy for all of us and would do Dad a world of good!"

"We wouldn't mind a bit. We'd love it, wouldn't we, Dorrie?" Helen squeezed Doris's hand to be sure she would answer in the affirmative. "We'd all help you."

Doris was silent, still too bewildered at the outlook to express an opinion.

"I shouldn't mind for myself, but we must think of the girls–their schooling and what environment means at their age. I suppose Jean could be left at school."

"Thought she was all through school," came from Cousin Roxana.

"I am, only I've been taking lessons in town this winter in a special course, arts and crafts, you know, and next fall I was going into the regular classes at the National Academy of Design."

"What for, child?" Roxy's gray eyes twinkled behind her glasses. "Going to be an artist?"

"Not exactly pictures," Jean answered with dignity. "Conventionalized designs."

"Well, whatever it is, I guess it will hold over for a year while you go up to the country and learn to keep house. Kit here can go to High School. It's seven miles away, but our young folks drive down and put up their horses at Tommy Burke's stable in East Pomfret, and take the trolley over from there. It's real handy."

Kit's eyes signaled to Jean, and Jean's to Helen and Doris. A fleeting vision of that "handy" trip to High School in the dead of winter appeared before them. Kit had a ridiculous way of expressing utter despair and astonishment. She would open her eyes widely, inflate her cheeks, and look precisely like Tweedledee in "Through the Looking-Glass." Doris emitted a low but irrepressible giggle under the strain.

"I think," Mrs. Robbins said hurriedly, "that we might manage if we had a little roadster."

"Rooster?" repeated Cousin Roxy in surprise.

Kit and Doris departed suddenly into the outer hall.

"No, roadster; a runabout that either Jean or I could learn to run. Don't they have them, Jerry, with adjustable tops, one for passengers, one for delivering goods, and so on?"

"Doubtless one for ploughing and harrowing likewise, Betty," Cousin Roxana said merrily. "I guess you'll jog along behind a good, sensible horse for a while. Remember Ella Lou, Jerry? She's fifteen years old and just as perky as ever. I always have to hold her down at the railroad crossing."

"What do you think of it, dear?" asked Mr. Robbins, looking longingly up at the face of the Motherbird. "It would be a great comfort and relief to me to get back to those old hills of rest, but it doesn't seem fair to you or the children. The sacrifice is too great. They do need the right kind of environment, as you say. Suppose we left Jean at least, where she could keep up her studies, and perhaps put Kit into a good private school. Then I might go up home with Roxy, and you and the two younger girls could go out to California to Benita Ranch–"

But Mrs. Robbins laid her fingers on his lips.

"You're not going to banish us to Benita Ranch. If you think it is the best thing to do, Jerry, we'll all go with you. Remember, 'Whither thou goest, I will go. Where thou lodgest, I will lodge–'"

Helen laid her hand over Jean's, and they stepped out softly. Their mother had slipped down on her knees beside the bed, and even Cousin Roxana had gone over to the window to pretend she was looking out at the Sound. The girls fled downstairs to the big music-room back of the library. It had been their special shelter and gathering place ever since they had lived there. Kit and Doris were already there, deep into an argument about the entire situation.

"I don't think it's right to move up there," Helen said, judicially. "We may not like it at all, and there we'd be just the same, planted, and maybe we never could get out of it, and we'd grow old and look just like Cousin Roxy and talk like her and everything."

"Prithee, maiden, have a care what thou sayest," Kit expostulated. "Our fair cousin hath a way, 'tis true, but she is a power in the land, and her voice is heard in the councils of the mighty. I wish I had half her common sense."

"I hate common sense," Jean cried passionately. "I know it's right and we must do the best thing, but, girls, did you see Mother's face? It was simply tragic. Dad's been a country boy, and he's going back home where he knows all about everything and loves it, but Mother's so different. She's like a queen."

"Marie Antoinette had an excellent dairy, and Queen Charlotte raised a prize brand of pork, my dear," Kit answered. Perched upon the long music stool, she beamed on the disconsolate ones over on the long leather couch. "I think

Mother's a perfect darling, but she's a good soldier too, and she'll go, you see if she doesn't. And it won't kill any of us. I don't see why you can't hammer copper and brass, and cut out leather designs in a woodshed just as well as you can in a studio. The really great mind should rise superior to its environment."

"Let's tell Kit that the first time she scraps over dishwashing," Doris said. "I didn't hear anything about Tekla going along, did you, Jean?"

Kit turned around and drummed out a gay strain of martial music on the piano keys, while she sang:

"Oh, it has to be done, and it's got to be done,
If I have to do it myself."

"You'll do your share all right, Kathleen Mavourneen, and when the gray dawn is breaking at that," laughed Jean. "Farm life's no joke, and really, while I wouldn't disagree with Dad and Cousin Roxy about it, I think that those who have special gifts–"

"Meaning our darling eldest sister," quoth Kit.

"–Should not waste their time doing what is not their forte. It takes away the work from those who can't do the other things."

Jean's pointed chin was raised a bit higher in her earnestness, but Kit shook her head.

"You're going to walk the straight and narrow path up at Gilead Center under Cousin Roxy's eagle eye just the same, Jean. It's no good kicking against the pricks. I don't mind so much leaving this place, but we'll miss the girls awfully."

"And the church," added Helen, who was in the Auxiliary Girls' Choir. "We're going to miss that. I wonder if there is a church up there."

"I see where Kit steps off the basket ball team and learns how to run a lawn mower," Kit remarked. "Also, there will be no Wednesday evening dancing class, Helenita, for your princesslike toes to trip at."

"I wish we could all move back to town and see if we couldn't do something there to earn money," Jean said. "One of the girls in the art class found a position designing wall paper the other day, and another one decorates lacquered boxes and trays. When the fortunes of the house suddenly crash, the humble but still genteel family usually take in paying guests, or do ecclesiastical embroidery, don't they?"

"Don't be morbid, Jean," Kit wagged an admonishing finger at her from the stool where she presided, "We'll not take in any boarders at all. I see myself waiting on table this summer at some hillside farm retreat for aged, and respectable females. If we've got to work, let's work for ourselves in the Robbins' common-

wealth."

"And if it has to be, let's not fuss and make things harder for Mother," Doris put in.

"How about Dad?" Kit demanded. "Seems to me that he's got the hardest part to bear. It's bad enough lying there sick all the time, without feeling that you're dragging the whole family after you and exiling them to Gilead Center."

"It's too funny, girls," Jean said all at once, her eyes softening and her dimples showing again. "Just the minute anyone of us takes Dad's part, some one springs up and gives a yell for Mother, and vice versa. I think we're the nicest, fairest, most loyal old crowd, don't you? We won't be lonesome up there so long as we have ourselves,–you know we won't,–and if things are slow, then we'll start something."

"Will we? Oh, won't we?" Kit cried. She twirled around to the keys again, and started up an old darky melody.

"Crept to de chicken coop on my knees,
Ain't going ter work any more.
Thought Ah heard a chicken sneeze,
Ain't going ter work any more.

"Balm of Gilead! Balm of Gilead!
Balm, Balm, Balm, Balm,
Ain't going ter work any more, Ah tole yer.
Balm of Gilead! Balm of Gilead!
Balm, Balm, Balm, Balm,
Ah ain't going ter work any more."

"That's better," Jean said, with a sigh of relief. "We've got to pull all together, and make the best of things. Dad's sick, and the Queen Mother's worried to death. Let's be the Queen's Privy Council and act accordingly."

CHAPTER V
KIT REBELS

Cousin Roxy departed for Gilead Center, Connecticut, the following Monday.

"I'd take you with me, Jerry, and the nurse too, if it were spring," she said, "but the first of March we get some pretty bad spells of weather, and it's uncertain for anybody in poor health. You stay here and cheer up and get stronger, and gradually break camp. If you need any help, let me know."

It was harder breaking camp than any of them realized. They had lived six years at Shady Cove, near Great Neck on Long Island. Before that time, there had been an apartment in New York on Columbia Heights. As Kit described it with her usual graphic touch: "Bird's-eye Castle, eight stories up. Fine view of the adjacent clouds and the Palisades. With an opera glass on clear days, you could also see the tops of the Riverside 'buses."

It had seemed almost like real country to the girls when they had left the city behind them and moved to Shady Cove. Doris had the measles that year, and the doctor had ordered fresh air and an outdoor life for her, so the whole family had benefited, which was very thoughtful and considerate of Dorrie, the rest said.

But now came the problem of winnowing out what Cousin Roxana would have called the essential things from the luxuries.

"Dear me, I had no idea we had so many of the pomps and vanities of this wicked world," Jean said regretfully, one day. There were sixteen rooms in the big home, all well furnished. Reception-room, library, music-room, and dining-room, with Tekla's domain at the back. Upstairs was a big living-room and plenty of bedrooms, with three maids' rooms in the third story.

At the top of the broad staircase over the sun-parlor was a wide sleeping-porch. In the cold weather this was enclosed and heated, and the girls loved it. Broad cushioned seats like cabin lockers surrounded it on three sides, and here they could sit and talk with the sun fairly pelting them with warmth and light. Here they sat overhauling and sorting out hampers and bags and bureau drawers of "non-essentials."

"I can't find anything more of mine that I'm willing to throw away," said Doris flatly, stuffing back some long strips of art denim into a box. "I want that for a border to something, and I'll need it fearfully one of these days. What's a luxury anyway?"

"Makes me think of Buster Phelps," Helen remarked. "Last night when I went over to tell Mrs. Phelps that we couldn't be in the Easter festival, Buster was just having his dinner, and he wanted more of the fig soufflé. His mother told him he mustn't gorge on delicacies. So Buster asked what a delicacy was anyway, and he said some day he was going to have a whole meal made of delicacies. Isn't that lovely?"

"Don't throw away any pieces at all, girls," Jean warned. "Cousin Roxy says

we'll need them all for rag carpets."

"You can buy rag rugs and carpets anywhere now," said Helen.

"Yes, oh, Princess, and at lovely prices too. We folks who are going to live at Gilead Center, will cut and sew our own, roll them in nice fat balls, and hand them over to old Pa Carpenter up at Moosup, to be woven into the real thing at fifteen cents a yard. It'll last for years, Cousin Roxy says. When you get tired of it, you boil it up in some dye, and have a new effect. I like the old hit-and-miss best."

Kit regarded her elder sister in speechless delight.

"Jean Robbins, you're getting it!" she gasped. "You're talking exactly like Cousin Roxy."

"I don't care if I am," answered Jean blithely. "It's common sense. Save the pieces."

"She who erstwhile fluttered her lily white hands over art nouveau trifles light as air," murmured Kit. "I marvel."

She looked down at the garden. Windswept and bare it was in the chill last days of February. Yet there was a hint of spring about it. A robin was perched near the little Japanese tea house they had all enjoyed so much, with its wistaria vines and stone lantern. Leading from it to the hedged garden at the back was a pergola over a flagged walk.

The garage was of reddish fieldstone, and like the house covered with woodbine. A tall hedge of California privet enclosed the grounds, with groups of shrubbery here and there. Memories of all the fun which they had enjoyed in the past six years passed through her mind. There had been lawn fêtes and afternoon teas, croquet parties and tennis tournaments. She hugged her knees, rocking back and forth anxiously.

"What is it, Kit?" asked Jean, mildly. Jean was the first to have an emotional storm over the inevitable, but once it was over, she always settled down to making the best of things, while Kit gloomed and raged inwardly, and felt all manner of premonitory doubts.

"Wonder what we'll really find to do there all the time. I don't want to be a merry milkmaid, do you?"

"If it would help Dad and Mother, yes."

"Certainly, certainly. You don't quoth 'Nevermore,' do you? You're a chirruping raven. We'd all walk from here to Gilead Center on our left ears if it would help Dad and Mother, but the fact that we'd do it wouldn't make it any easier, would it?"

"Don't be savage, Kit," said Helen.

"Who's savage?" demanded Kit haughtily. "I'm just as ready to face this thing as anyone. If it were a small town up in the wilds, even, I wouldn't mind,

but it just isn't anything but country."

Jean tapped the end of her nose thoughtfully with her thimble.

"What is Gilead Center then? Isn't that a town?"

"No, it isn't. It's a hamlet. Trolley seven miles away, post office five. There used to be a post office there when the mail-wagon made the trip over, but they needed the building to keep the hearse in, so it's gone."

"You're making that up, Kit," severely.

"I'm not," protested Kit. "You can ask Cousin Roxy. Nobody ever dies up there. They just fade away, and the hearse is seldom needed and was in the way. There are only nine houses in the village proper, one store, one church, and one school. Her house is a mile outside the village, so where will we be?"

"Is it on the map?" asked Doris hopefully.

"Some maps. Township maps. This morning Mother and I were looking up how to get there. You've got your choice of two routes and each one's worse than the other, and more of it."

"Kit, you're crawfishing."

Kit swept by the remark, absorbed in her own forebodings.

"You can reach this spot by land or sea. Cousin Roxy says that it takes five hours for anybody to extricate oneself after one is really there. You can take a boat to New London, ride up to Norwich, transfer to a trolley and trundle along for another hour, then hire a team at Tommy Burke's stable in East Pomfret, and drive an hour and a half more up through the hills. Or you can take a Boston Express up to Willimantic, and hop on a side line from there. A train runs twice a day–"

"What road, Kit?" asked Helen. They leaned around her, fascinated at her sudden acquisition of knowledge.

"Any road you fancy. Central Vermont up to Plainfield, or Providence line over to South Pomfret. There's South Pomfret and East Pomfret and Pomfret Green and Pomfret Station. It really doesn't seem to matter which way you go so long as it lands you at one of the Pomfrets. And Pomfret is five miles from Gilead Center, Plainfield is seven miles, Boulderville is–"

"Oh, please, Kit, stop it," Jean cried, with both hands over her ears. "We'll motor over anyway–"

"Didn't you hear that Dad's going to sell the machine?" Helen whispered. It would never do to let a hint of regret reach beyond the sleeping porch circle. "The Phelpses are going to buy it. Buster told me so."

"I knew it before," Jean said quite calmly, going on with her sorting of pieces. "Dad says it will pay nearly all moving expenses and keep us for months. What else could he do? There'd be nobody to run it, would there? Anyway I want a horse to ride, don't you, Kit? Can't you see us all in a joyous cavalcade

riding adown the woodland way? I'm Guenevere." With laughing lips, and happy eyes she quoted:

"All in the boyhood of the year
Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenevere
Rode to covert of the deer."

"Plenty of deer up there, Cousin Roxy says. We all can go hunting."

"Never mind the deer. We won't be doing that at all. Mother says Tekla can't possibly go and we're going to do our own housework. Isn't it queer, when a father breaks down, it just seems as if a home caves in."

"Well, it doesn't do any such thing, Helen," responded Kit stolidly. "It may seem to, but it doesn't. Even if we are going to live five miles from nowhere with the eye of Cousin Roxana forever resting upon us, there'll be lots of fun ahead. What's that about the world making a pathway to your door? I'm going to be famous some day and there'll be a nice little sheep path leading from New York up to Gilead Center, worn by the feet of faithful pilgrims."

"It's so nice having one genius in the family," Jean answered, leaning her chin on one hand. "Now I don't mind leaving the house behind, or the machine, or anything like that. But it's the people I like best that I can't take up with me. Who will we know there, I wonder?"

"Human beings anyhow," Helen stated. "We'll make hosts of new friends. Besides, lots of the girls have promised to visit us. Think of Mother, girls. She's breaking away from everything she likes best. And you know that we're just girls after all, with all our lives ahead of us, so we may have a chance to escape some time; but Mother can't look forward, she is just cutting herself off from everything."

"Just listen to dear old Lady Diogenes." Kit reached down and gave the slender figure a good all-around hug. "How do you know she's losing what she loves best? Don't you remember that old Druid poem in Tennyson about the people calling for a sacrifice and they asked which was the king's dearest? Supposing Dad had died right here. What would he have missed? His country club, his golf, his town club, his business, and his business friends. Mother loses about the same, the country club and golf club, the church, and the social study club. They'll never settle down to real farm life, Jean. It's just impossible. You can't take a family of–of–"

"Peacocks? Bulfinches? Canaries?" suggested Doris.

"No, I should say park swans," Kit said. "That's what we are out here,–park swans swimming around on an artificial lake, living on an artificial island in a

little artificial swan house, swimming around and around, preening our feathers and watching to see what people think of us. You can't take park swans and put them right out into the country, and expect them to make the barnyard a howling success all at once."

"Kit, dear old goose," Jean interposed, "we're not park swans or any such thing. We're just robins, and robins are robins whether they build in a park catalpa or a country rock maple. We'll just migrate, build a new nest, and behave ourselves. Not because we like to, but because it's our nature to, being, as I said before, just robins."

CHAPTER VI
WHITE HYACINTHS

It had been decided to leave Kit and Jean behind to finish their schooling. They could board at the Phelpses' home next to Shady Cove along the shore road, but both girls begged to go with the family.

"Why don't you stay?" advised Helen. "You'll escape all of the moving and settling and ploughing."

"We don't want to escape anything," said Kit firmly. "It isn't any fun being left behind with the charred remains."

"Oh, Kit, don't call them that; it's grewsome," begged Doris.

"I don't care. I feel grewsome when I think of being left behind. How do you suppose we'd feel to walk past the Cove and not see any of the rest of you around."

"It's better than being cut right bang off in the middle of everything," replied Helen, with one of her rare explosions. Whenever wrath decided to perch for a minute on her flaxen hair, it always delighted the other girls. Kit said it was precisely like watching a kitten arch its back and scold. "Everything," she repeated tragically. "I can't finish a single thing and I know I'll never pass, being switched off to goodness knows what sort of a school."

"Let's not grouch anyway," counseled Jean. "Mother's getting thinner every day. As long as it's got to be, tighten your belts and face the enemy. Right about face! Forward! March!"

"I do wish that Kit wouldn't be so happy about things that make you just miserable."

Kit danced away down the hallway warbling sweetly:

"Gondolier, row, row!
Gondolier, row, row!
'Tis a pretty air I do declare,
But it haunts a body so."

"You're an old tease, Kit," Jean admonished in her very best big-sister style. "Please keep away from that crate of perishable matter. Mother's just promised me that we can go with the rest, only I'm going up first with Dad and Miss Patterson."

It had been decided to send Mr. Robbins up before the moving, so he could have a week or two of rest at Maple Lawn, Cousin Roxana's home. The latter was diligently sending down descriptions of adjacent farms and all sorts of home possibilities, but none seemed to fit the bill, as she said. Either there was too much land, or not enough, or it was too far from the village or not far enough, or too much room, or not room enough.

"For pity's sake," Kit said one night, after all the family had suggested various styles in nests, "let's all tent out and do summer light housekeeping. We'll never find just what we want,–never, Mumsie. Jean wants a rose garden and a sun dial. I want golf links, or at least a tennis court, even if we remove the hay fields. Helen wants wistaria arbors and a very large vine-covered porch. Doris wants a dog, four cats, a hive of bees, a calf, and a pony. You want a house facing south, far back from the road, barn not too near, dry cellar, porch, century-old elms for shade, good well, sink in house, and option of purchase, not over ten dollars a month."

"What do you want, Dad?" asked Jean. It was one of her father's "good" days, when he was able to sit up in his big Morris chair before the fire in the upstairs living-room, and be one of the circle with them.

"Peace and rest," smiled Mr. Robbins.

"Me too," Kit agreed, kneeling beside his chair and rubbing her head up and down his arm. "Dad and I are going to seek gracious peace the livelong day under some shady chestnut tree."

"Dad may, but you won't, Kathleen," Jean laughingly prophesied. "It's going to be the commonwealth of home."

"Wish we were going to an island," Helen said wistfully. "I've always felt as if I could do wonders with an island."

"Anybody could. There's some chance for imagination to work on an island, but what can you do with a farm in Gilead Center?" Kit looked like a pensive

parrot, head on one side, eyes half closed in melancholy anticipation. "Darling, precious old Dad here doesn't know a blessed thing about farming–"

"Now, Kit, go easy," Mr. Robbins chided. "Seneca farmed and so did Ovid. It's all in the way you look at things."

"'Under the greenwood tree,' you know, Kit," added Jean.

"Yes, and that ends with a fatal warning too," Kit rejoined mournfully, "'While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.'"

"We'll all be keeling pots, Kathleen. It's the Robbins' destiny. You know, Dad, I thought all along that Tekla would go with us. I thought she'd feel hurt if we didn't take her, after she'd been telling us girls all these fairy tales about her native land where she loved to milk twenty cows at three A.M. I thought she'd simply leap at the chance of rural delights, and now she isn't going along with us at all. She says she won't go anywhere unless there are street pianos and moving pictures."

Jean's face was deliciously comical as she recounted the backsliding of Tekla, and Helen chanted softly:

"Knowest thou the land, Mignon?"

"You can laugh all you want to, but it's a serious proposition, Helenita. If Tekla deserts, we'll all have to pitch in. The Nest expects that every robin will do its duty."

"Oh, I don't believe it's going to be nearly as bad as we expect," Mrs. Robbins said happily, as she passed through the room with her pet cut glass candlesticks in her hands. "We're facing the summer, remember, girls, and I can't help but think that Cousin Roxana will be a regular bulwark of strength to all of us."

By the second week in March word came from the family's bulwark that she thought the weather was mild enough for Mr. Robbins and Miss Patterson to attempt the trip. Accordingly, the first section of the caravan set out on its exodus to the promised land, as Kit called it.

"It does seem, Mother dear," Jean said at the last minute, "as if Kit ought to go with them, and let me stay down here to help you close up things."

"I'd rather have you with your Father." Mrs. Robbins laid her hands on Jean's slender shoulders tenderly. "If I can't be with him, I'd rather have the little first mate. Remember how he used to call you that, when you were only Doris's size?"

"Well, I feel terribly grown up now, Mother. Seventeen is really the dividing line. You begin to think of everything in a more serious way, don't you know. When I look at Kit and Helen sometimes, it seems years and years since I felt the

way they do, so sort of irresponsible."

"Poor old grandma," Mrs. Robbins laughed, as she kissed her. "We'll make some nice little lace caps for you with lavender bows. Maybe Cousin Roxy'll let you pour tea."

Jean had to laugh too, seeing the comic side of her aged feeling, but it was true that she felt a new sense of responsibility when they left New York City for Gilead Center. The Saturday following their departure, the first carload of household goods left Shady Cove. It had been a difficult task, weeding out the necessities from the luxuries, as Kit expressed it. Many a semi-luxury had been slipped in by the girls on the plea that Father might need it, or would miss it. Kit had managed to save the entire library outfit intact on this excuse: three bookcases, leather couch, two wide leather arm-chairs, and the flat-topped mahogany desk.

"Books and pictures are necessities," she declared firmly, saving an old steel engraving of Touchstone and Audrey in the Forest of Arden. "This, for instance, has always hung over the little black walnut bookcase, hasn't it? Could we separate them? I guess not. In it goes, Helen, and see that you handle it with care. There's one thing that we can take up with us, and no slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune can get it away from us, either, and that's atmosphere. Even if we have to live in a well-shingled, airy barn, we can have atmosphere."

"Don't laugh, Dorrie," Helen admonished, as Doris dove into a mass of pillows. "Kit doesn't mean that sort of atmosphere. She means–"

"I mean living in a garden of white hyacinths. Miss Carruthers, our teacher at the art class, told us a story the other day about Mahomet and his followers. He told them if they only had two pence, to spend one for a loaf of bread to feed the body, and the other for white hyacinths to feed the soul. That's why I want all our own beloved things around us, don't you know, Mother dear? Just think of Dad's face if we can blindfold him, lead him into a lovely sunny room up there, take off the bandage, and let him find himself right in his own library just as he had it down here!"

"And as long as he's going to stay in bed, or lie on a lounge, he'll never know what the rest of the house is like," added Doris.

"But he's not going to stay in bed, we hope," answered the Motherbird, catching the youngest robin in her arms for a quick kiss. "That's why we're going up there, to get him out into the sunlight as soon as possible, so he'll get quite well again."

Kit passed down the stairs completely covered with the burden which she bore.

"I've got all the portières, table covers, couch covers, scarfs and doilies," she called. "We may have to turn the attic into a cosy corner before we get through.

It's all in the effect, isn't it, Mumsie?"

"I'm sorry that Dad sold the machine, that's all," Helen remarked. Helen was the far-sighted one of the family. "Talbot Pearson says he knows we could have gotten fifteen hundred for it just as easy as not. His mother told him it was worth every penny of fifteen hundred, and Dad let it go for eight hundred just because he liked the Phelpses."

"Helen, dear, eight hundred cash is worth more than fifteen hundred promised," Mrs. Robbins said, smiling over at her. "And the machine is last year's model. I'm glad with all my heart that Mr. Phelps bought it, because they've been wanting one very much, and the children will get so much enjoyment out of it."

The girls looked down at her admiringly, almost gloatingly, as she sat back contentedly in the low wicker arm-chair in the sunny bay-window.

"Mother, you're a regular darling, truly you are," Kit exclaimed. "You're so big and fine and sympathetic that you make us feel like two cents sometimes when we've been selfish. Why do you look so happy when everything's going six ways for Sunday?"

Mrs. Robbins held up a letter that Doris had just brought upstairs to her.

"Cousin Roxana writes that Father stood the trip well and has slept every night since they reached Maple Lawn. Isn't that worth all the automobiles in the world?"

The eight hundred dollars in cash had been a helpful addition to their bank account. During the past few weeks, the girls had learned what it meant to consider money, something they had never given a thought to before. While they had never been rich, there had always been an abundance of everything they wanted, with never a suggestion of retrenching on expenses until now. Once they understood the situation, however, they all seemed to enjoy helping to solve the family problem. For several days Doris had appeared to have something on her mind. Finally, she came in smiling, and opened her hand, disclosing a ten dollar bill. Kit fell gracefully over into a chair.

"Dorrie, you mustn't give your poor old sister sudden shocks like that in these days," she exclaimed. "Where did you find that?"

"I sold Jiggers to Talbot Pearson," Doris replied, her eyes shining like stars. "He's been asking and asking for him ever since I got him, and now I've done it. There's ten dollars I got all by myself to help Dad."

Neither Kit nor Helen spoke, but they regarded the youngest robin with the deepest pride and affection. Jiggers was a Boston bull puppy, the special property of Doris, and they knew just what a heart-wrench it had been to part with him. Mrs. Robbins took the crisp green bill from Doris's hand, while the tears slowly gathered on her lashes.

"It's perfectly splendid of you, dear," she said.

Doris beamed and danced around on tiptoe like a captive butterfly, but the family noticed she kept away from the spot where Jiggers' little kennel had stood. There are some things the heart cannot quite bear.

Much debating was held over the piano. The girls loved it and declared it could not be true economy to part with it. It was an Empire baby grand that had descended to them from the Riverside apartment days in town. Helen said she always expected to see it pick up its skirts and pirouette like Columbine, it was so gay and pretty in its gold case all decorated in trailing flower garlands and little oval panels with Watteau figures treading gaysome measures in blossomy dells.

"Listen, Mother darling," Kit said finally, "you know what I told you about white hyacinths. That precious old piano is a white hyacinth and we'll starve our inmost souls if we try to live without it. Why, we've loved it and pounded it for years."

So it was boxed and shipped to Gilead Center as a white hyacinth, together with many another disguised "necessity."

"They've turned into arrant smugglers," Mrs. Robbins wrote her husband. "And I cannot blame them, because I catch myself doing the same thing, packing things I should not, and making myself believe they are essential. I'm sure I don't see where we are ever to put everything in a farm-house."

Cousin Roxana brightened up and smiled when that portion of the letter was read aloud to her. She was sitting in a straight-backed, split-bottomed chair by the south window in the sitting-room, sorting out morning-glory and nasturtium seeds and putting them into baking powder boxes.

"Guess Betty'll hearten up some when she sees the Mansion House," she said.

CHAPTER VII
THE LAND O' REST

While some of the Long Island farms had begun to look faintly green by the end of March, not a blade or a leaf was unfurled anywhere around Gilead Center. Pussy willows and reddening maple twigs held the only promise of spring so far.

Jean drew on a pair of heavy driving gloves, and waited at the side "stoop" for Hiram to drive around from the barn with Ella Lou and the double seated democrat. Hiram was Cousin Roxana's hired help, smooth faced and lean, some-

where in the neighborhood of fifty. He took care of three horses and two cows and worked the farm with outside help in busy seasons.

Some folks in Gilead Center held that Roxy Robbins could have got along with one horse, but Roxana kept her pair of handsome Percherons just the same, and let Hiram haul wood all winter with them.

Ella Lou was a black mare with white shoes and stockings and a white star on her forehead. It really did seem as if she knew all about the family's affairs. She was aware of every road in the township. Not a tree could be cut down along the road, not a cord of piled wood added or taken away, that Ella Lou did not take note of the fact at her next passing by.

To-day when Hiram drove up with her to the three stone steps by the white lilacs, she acted as wise and knowing as could be, turning her head around to look at Jean just as if she could have said, "We're going after them at last, aren't we?"

Cousin Roxy stood at the screened pantry window, mixing pie crust. She leaned down and called some last advice as Jean climbed up and took the reins.

"Hitch her to that white post above the express office, Jeanie. There's a couple freights come in right after that 3:30 train, and they set her crazy shuffling back and forth. And have the girls sit on the back seat 'cause them springs are kinder giving way, and your Mother's nervous. And bring up a wick for the student lamp from the Mill Company Store. No, never mind," just as Ella Lou started to prance, "'cause they don't keep that kind, come to think of it. Goodbye. If you don't remember the turnings, just slack up the reins and she'll find the right road."

Jean laughed and waved her hand. It was her first attempt at driving alone, but Ella Lou seemed to appreciate just how she felt, and swung out around the triangle of grass that marked the entrance to the private driveway.

Maple Lawn stood just at the crossroads, a white comfortable-looking house, one story and a half high, with a long low "ell" hitched on to the back, and a white woodshed leaning up against it for company.

Four great rock maples grew before its spacious lawn like a row of Titan sentinels, in summertime, garbed in Lincoln green like Robin Hood's merry men. Then too, Baltimore orioles and robins nested in them and contended with the chipmunks for squatter rights.

The house stood on a hill that faced the sunset. Down from the orchard sloped corn fields and rye fields. Below the winding white road was a deep ravine where a brook ran helterskelter by hilly pastures until it slipped away into the cool shade of a quiet glen, sweet scented with hemlock and spruce.

In the distance, hill after hill rose in mellowed beauty, each seeming to lean in sisterly fashion against the next taller one. From the sitting-room window Cousin Roxana declared she had seen "the power and the glory" unfold in

rapturous vision when the sun spread its alchemy over old Gilead township.

The course of Little River could be traced down through the valley by its fringe of willows and alders. For perhaps fifteen miles it rambled, winding in and out around little islands, dodging old submerged trees that lifted skeleton arms in protest, spreading out above some old rock dam into a tiny lake, then dashing like some chased wild thing through a mill run and out again into low, moist meadows, thick with flag and rushes.

At a point about a mile below the house stood the old Barlow lumber mill. Ella Lou caught the first hum of it and quickened her pace until she came to its watering trough, half toppling over at one side of the road, its sides all green with moss.

Jean let her take her own way. Once she shied at a shadowy brown shape that skitted across the road under her feet, and Jean wondered whether it was a rabbit or a muskrat. Already she was catching the country spirit. Little objects of everyday life held a meaning for her and she found herself watching eagerly for new surprises as she drove along the old river road. How the girls would love it all, she thought, with a little tightening of her throat. It might be a little lonesome at first, but surely it was, as Cousin Roxana always said, "the land o' rest."

The final decision on the new home site was to be left to her mother. Several places had been selected with a leaning towards the Mansion House, but, as Roxy said again, in her cheery, buoyant way, Betty must be left unbiased to form her own opinion, although according to her way of thinking, no sensible person with half their wits could pass over the merits of the Mansion House, or the wonderful opportunities it presented.

"It's going to rack and ruin, and it fairly cries out for somebody to take hold of it and love it," she had said. "I don't know but what I'd drive by it if I were you, Jeanie, on your way back from the station, even if it is a mite out of your way, just to see the look on your Mother's face when she sees it. There's a Providence in all things, of course, and I ain't gainsaying it, but I do like to jog it along a bit now and then."

It was a drive of seven miles down to Nantic, the nearest railroad station. Ella Lou made it in good time and now stood complacently hitched to the white post above the express office. Already, it appeared, Mr. Briggs, the station master knew Jean, and smiled over at the trim, city-like figure pacing up and down on the platform waiting for the Willimantic train. This was the side line up to Providence that connected with the Boston express from New York.

"Expecting some of your folks up?" asked Mr. Briggs pleasantly. Nobody could say that friendly interest in strangers and their affairs was not evinced around Nantic. It was part of the joy of life to Mr. Briggs to locate their general intentions.

"My Mother and sisters," Jean answered happily.

"Figure on staying a while, do they?"

She nodded rather proudly. "We're going to live here. We're Miss Robbins' cousins. You'll have the freight car up with our goods this week."

"Like enough," said Mr. Briggs encouragingly. "Yes, I knew you belonged to Roxy. I've known Roxy herself since she was knee high to a toadstool. There comes your local."

Around the hillside bend of track came the train. It seemed to Jean as if seconds turned to minutes then. The dear blessed train that was bearing Mother and Helen and Kit and Doris up out of the world of uncertainty and trouble into this haven of blossoming hopes. She wanted to stretch out both her arms to it as it slowed down and puffed, but there on the last car she caught a glimpse of Kit, one foot all ready to drop off, waving one hand and hanging on with the other.

"Oh, Mother darling," Jean cried, joyously, once she had them all safe on the platform. "It's so beautiful up here, and Dad's looking better every day. He sits up for a while now, and the old doctor told us the only thing that ailed him was a little distemper. Isn't that fun? Where are your trunks, girls?"

But this was Mr. Briggs's cue to come forward, hat in hand, and be introduced, so he took the baggage under his own personal supervision. It appeared that you never could tell anything about when trunks were liable to show up once they got started for Nantic, but the likelihood was, barring accidents, that they'd come up on the six o'clock train, and there wasn't a bit of use putting any reliance on that either, 'cause they might not show up till the milk train next morning.

"Hope you'll like it up here," was his parting salute, as they drove up the hill road, and Kit called back that they liked it already, much to Mr. Briggs's enjoyment.

Mrs. Robbins sat on the front seat, both as the place of honor, and in remembrance of Cousin Roxana's warning against the back springs. At the top of the hill Jean rested Ella Lou, so the girls could look back at the little town. There was the huge one story stone mill, covering acres of ground, with immense ventilators looking like those on steamships or like strange uprearing heads of prehistoric reptiles.

The little crooked main street could be traced by its lines of buildings, and back in a mass of trees stood the old French convent. Scattered everywhere were the houses of the mill workers, all of a uniform pattern, painted white with green blinds, and a patch of green yard to each. Jean, flushed and proud of her responsibility, turned Ella Lou's head towards home and made quick time. The maple buds were swelling and looked rosy red against the thickets of dark shiny green laurel. Behind them rose slim lines of white birches. Doris named them the

"White Ladyes," after the gentle lady ghost in "The Monastery."

"How far is it, Jeanie?" asked Helen. Just then the road came out on the hilltop overlooking the big reservoir. "Oh, look, look, girls," she cried. "Isn't it like a bit of out West, Motherie? All those rocks and pines."

"I'd rather have these dear old hills than all the mountains going," Kit declared with her usual forcefulness. "We seem to be going up higher and higher all the time."

"So we are," Jean told her. "It's a steady rise from New London to Norwich, then up to our own Quinnebaug hills. Are you warm enough, Mumsie?"

"Plenty," said Mrs. Robbins, happily. "Though it is ever so much cooler here than on Long Island, isn't it, girls?"

"We've got an open log fire in your room all ready for you," Jean replied. "You can just sit and toast and toast away to your heart's content, Queen Motherkin."

"For pity's sake, who ever had the courage to carry all the rocks for these stone walls?" asked Kit. "Jean, what do you say to this? Let's buy barrels of cement, and mix it up with sand and water, and make a lot of lovely old garden seats and grottoes and pergolas. I'm going to make a sun dial."

"Why not get a Roman seat mold," Jean proposed, "and just pour in cement and turn out a lot of them and whenever we come to a particularly fine view, put a seat there."

"Oh, you castle builders," laughed Mrs. Robbins. "When we haven't even a home yet. You'd think there was a baronial estate waiting for us."

"There is," Jean answered mysteriously. "Cousin Roxy and I think that we've found the right place. Father hasn't seen it, of course, but I found it, and Cousin Roxy said we couldn't get it because somebody'd died, and it had gone to people out West."

"Which gave our precious old Jean a chance to delve into mystery," Kit suggested. "Yes, yes, go on, sister mine. You interest us amazingly. What didst do then?"

"Oh, I found him," said Jean, enthusiastically. "He lives away out West in Saskatoon, and has never even seen this place, so he's willing to sell it for almost nothing, $2,500, and even that includes the water power."

Kit shook her head deploringly.

"Listen to the poor child, Mother dear. She chats of thousands as if they were split peas and she was making a pudding."

"Hush, Kit. He'll rent it too for a hundred dollars a year, timber rights reserved excepting for our own use, and we can sell the hay."

"How many rooms, dear?" asked Mrs. Robbins.

"Seventeen," replied Jean, blithely. "Oh, it isn't a country cottage or a farm-

house at all. They call it the Mansion House out here, and it's so big that nobody wants it for a gift."

"Do you want a castle or an inn?" asked Kit.

"Where is it?" Helen inquired cautiously.

"When can we move in?" Doris asked practically.

"Well, you can see the cupola, I think, as soon as we get up to the top of Peck's Hill. I'll stop then. It's fearfully lonesome, and perhaps you'd rather be in the village. Cousin Roxy says that some folks do say–"

"Stop her, stop her," Kit exclaimed. "Jean, you're talking exactly like Cousin Roxy. Isn't she, Mother?"

"Never mind, dear. Go right on," comforted Mrs. Robbins, smiling at the eager young face beside her. Three weeks at Maple Lawn had surely taken a lot of the spread out of Jean's sails.

"I don't think we'd be one bit lonely. It's about a mile from Maple Lawn, and half a mile from Mr. Peck's place down the valley, and the mail goes right by the door. And there's an old ruined stone mill on an island, and a waterfall, and a bridge, and big pines along the terrace in the front yard. It does need painting, I suppose, and shingling in spots, and the veranda lops a little bit where it needs shoring up, Hiram told me–"

"Specify Hiram," Helen asked mildly. "We don't know a thing about Hiram, Jeanie."

"He's the hired man, and he can do anything."

"But, dear," interrupted Mrs. Robbins, "can't you realize that there must be something wrong with it or it never would be rented for such a sum.

"Oh, there is," Jean replied promptly. "It's too far from the railroad or village, and the mill burned down six years ago, and the owner died from the shock of losing everything he had, and there it stands, going to rack and ruin, Cousin Roxy says, waiting for the Robbinses to appear and turn it into a nest."

"How about school?" asked Kit suddenly.

Jean waved her long whip grandly.

"Who wants a school out here? The groves were God's first temples. There's a school, though, over at the Gayhead crossroads. We're going to have a horse and drive you over to the trolley so you can catch it to the High School."

"Jean has us all moved and settled already," Mrs. Robbins said, "I'm sure I'd like to be near where Roxana lives."

"Well, there it is," Jean exclaimed happily. Ella Lou pricked up her ears, and quickened her pace, down one little hill, up another, over a culvert, and suddenly there appeared white chimneys rising above an apple orchard at the top of the hill.

"There it is," she said, pointing to it with her whip. "Seven miles from

nowhere, but right next door to Heart's Content."

CHAPTER VIII
SPYING THE PROMISED LAND

The following morning Miss Robbins said she thought she would drive down to the Mansion House with Elizabeth Ann herself, and they'd look it over.

"If you girls feel like coming down, you can take the short cut through the woods. Like enough you'll find some blood root out by now and saxifrage too. Don't be like Jean, though. The other day she came up from the brook and said she'd found a calla lily, and it was just skunk cabbage."

So the girls took the short cut through the woods. They were just beginning to show signs of spring. The trees were bare, but under the dry leaves they found the new life springing. It was all new and interesting to them. Down at the Cove they had been in a beautiful part of Long Island but it was all restricted property. Here the woods and meadows spread for miles on every hand. Every pasture bar seemed to invite one to climb over it and explore the "Beyond," as Doris called it. And where the woods ended in rocky pastures and wide spreading fields, they came out to a spot where they overlooked the Mansion House and its grounds.

Cousin Roxana and Mrs. Robbins were there before them. The side door stood hospitably open, and Ella Lou was hitched to the post just as though she belonged there. It was a curiously interesting old place. First of all, a rock wall enclosed the grounds, with rock columns at the two entrance gates. These were wide, for the drive entered on one side, wound around the house, and came out on the other road, as the house stood at a corner.

The house itself looked like a glorified farmhouse. It wasn't at all like a bungalow, Kit declared. In fact it was hard to place it in the history of architecture.

"I think perhaps it started out to be Mid-Victorian with that general squareness and the veranda," said Mrs. Robbins.

"That isn't Mid-Victorian, Mother darling," Jean interposed. "That's the Reaction Period in New England. First of all none of the Puritan women had any time to sit out on porches or verandas, so all the houses were made plain faced. Then after the war they began to turn their minds to lighter things, so they stuck a cupola up here, and tacked on a little porch there, and gave the windows fancy

eyebrows, and little scalloped wooden lace ruffles along the edges of the eaves. Isn't that so, Cousin Roxy?"

"Well, I declare, Jeanie," laughed Miss Robbins, "maybe you're right. I'd say, though, it was mostly a hankering after titivation. I don't set much store by it myself, so long as I've got plenty of flowering bushes 'round a house, and climbing vines. That makes me think, you've got a sight of them here, flowering quince and almond, and 'pinies,' and all sorts of hardy annuals. There used to be a big border of them, I remember, at the back of the house, and behind it was an old-fashioned rose garden."

"A rose garden!" Kit and Helen gasped.

"Wish I had my sun dial under my arm this minute," added Jean. "Come on, girls."

Back they went to find it, and after hunting diligently through hazel bushes and upspringing weeds, they found where one terrace dipped into a sunken space walled in once upon a time, though now the tumbled gray rocks had half fallen down, and some were sunken in the earth. But still they found some old rose canes, and several large bushes that looked hopeful. There was a flagged walk with myrtle growing up between the stones, and a tumble-down arbor that Doris declared looked exactly like a shipwrecked pilot house off some boat.

"Let's call it our pilot house. We may need piloting before we get through," said Helen, sitting down on the broad front steps, her chin on her palms, listening to the music of falling water in the distance and the wind overhead in the great, slumbrous pines. There were four of these, two on each side of the long terrace, with rock maples down near the rock wall, and several pear and cherry trees. Along the terrace were old-time flower beds, three on each one, outlined with clam shells.

"Miss Trowbridge used to have gladiolus set out in those beds, with pansies and sweet alyssum set 'round the edges, and outside again, old-hen-and-her-chickens. They looked real sightly."

"Who was Miss Trowbridge, Cousin Roxy?" asked Mrs. Robbins. She sat beside Jean, her hands clasped lightly in her lap, her hat lying beside her. There was a look of concent on her face that had been a stranger there for many months. Doris dropped a spray of half blossomed cherry twigs in her lap, and ran away again.

"She was own sister to the Trowbridge that owned the mills. She married some man out in Canada, lived a while out there, then gave up and died. She never did have much backbone that I could see, but she loved flowers. Did you notice a big glass bay window off the dining-room? She called that her conservatory. I remember asking her if it was her 'conversationary,' and how she did laugh at me! Well, everyone can't be expected to know everything. It's all I can do to

keep up with Gilead Center these days. Her name was Francelia and she married a McRae."

"But who had the place after she and her brother died?"

Cousin Roxana never believed in directness when it came to genealogies. She delighted in them, and would slip her glasses down to the middle of her long nose, elevate her chin, and go after a family tree like a government arborist.

"Well, according to my way of thinking, it should belong to Piney Hancock and her brother Honey. His name's Seth, but they call him Honey. Their mother was Luella Trowbridge, own sister to Francelia and Tom who owned the mills, but she married Clint Hancock against everybody's word, and her father cut her off in his will, and never saw her from the day she was married. Tom did the same, but Francelia used to go over and see her after Piney and Honey were born. They live down near Nantic. You must have passed the house, little bit of a gray one with rambler roses all over it, and a well sweep at one side. The property went to Francelia after Tom died, and she had one boy. He's out in Northwest Canada now and don't give a snap of his finger for this place, when there's Piney and Honey loving it to death and can't hardly walk on the grass. Still, I suppose if they went to law, they'd get nothing out of it after all the lawyers had been satisfied."

Kit and Helen listened open-eyed.

"My goodness, Cousin Roxy," exclaimed Kit, "how on earth do you ever manage to keep track of all of them?"

"Keep track of them? Land, child, that ain't anything after you've been to school with them and lived neighbors all your life. You children will like Piney and her brother, and maybe you can help put a little happiness into their lives, poor youngsters."

"Oh, Mumsie, I love this place already," whispered Jean contentedly, snuggling close to her mother's side.

"Do you, dear?" Mrs. Robbins smiled down into the eldest robin's face. For some reason she always waited for Jean's judgment and opinion.

"Yes, I do, because it isn't really a farm and still we can have a garden and sell the hay and get out wood and raise all we need for ourselves. I don't think we can do much else the first year, can we, Cousin Roxy?"

"If you do all that you'll be getting along finely. I'm going to start you off chicken raising with a lot of little ones from my incubator. You can buy all you want for ten cents apiece, and if you get about fifteen last year pullets and a rooster, you've got your barnyard family all started."

"Oh, I want to be mother to the incubator chickens; may I, please?" begged Doris instantly. "I think one of the saddest things in life is to be hatched without a mother."

"Sympathetic Dorrie," laughed Kit, catching her down on the grass and rolling her. "She's going to adopt all the chickens and goodness only knows what else."

"I'm going to keep bees," Helen announced serenely, with a certain aloofness in her manner quite as if she had stated that her chosen occupation was one befitting a damsel of high degree. "I've always wanted bees ever since I read Maeterlinck's 'Life of the Bee.' I want a garden close and bees that bring me home the honey from the clover fields and meadows fair."

"Lovely," Jean exclaimed, hugging her knees, and rocking to and fro contentedly. "You always select such royal occupations, Helenita. I shall be the middleman of the farm. I am going to find markets for all that my princess sisters raise. I'll make the castle pay expenses and that's more than most castles do. I want a horse and some sort of a wagon."

"Don't get anything foolish," admonished Cousin Roxana. "Either a good low buggy with a top for bad weather, and a good deep space at the back to tuck things away in, or else a covered democrat's nice too, and you can put in an extra seat in them if you like. I guess a democrat's the best thing for you after all."

"Until we get our roadster," supplemented Helen. "I know Mother'll never get along way up here without some kind of a car, will you, Mother dear?"

Mrs. Robbins shook her head smilingly.

"I'm thinking more about a new steel range for the kitchen, Childie."

Roxana smiled too. Only a few weeks before, kitchen ranges had been things of small import with Betty Robbins. All that the Motherbird had been able to say when questioned at that time was that they cooked with electricity, and had a gas range, she believed, but Tekla was the one who knew.

"You'll have to burn wood out here, Helen, unless you get a tame lightning rod and hitch it to an electric stove," Kit said.

"I don't care what we have to do," Jean interposed. "I want the place; don't you, Mother?"

"I think I shall love it," said Mrs. Robbins, lifting her face to the swaying pine boughs overhead. "I wish that I could stay here now and not have to go away at all."

"Helen, put the kettle on, and we'll all have tea," chanted Kit. "You know, Cousin Roxy, we always make Helen fix our tea. It isn't that she does it so wonderfully better than the rest of us, but she thinks she does, and she makes the most enticing ceremonial of it. You want to burn incense and kowtow before her serene highness. Wait till you see her do it!"

Helen rose and made a deep curtsey before Miss Robbins.

"We ask the pleasure of your ladyship's presence at tea two weeks from today."

"Oh, I'll be here," Cousin Roxana answered. "But I guess we'll leave the ladyship behind. I've got a Quaker great-grandmother tucked in behind me along the line of ancestors, and there's a silver goblet up home that Benjamin Franklin drank from once when he was a guest at your great-great-great-grandfather Eliot's place on the old Providence plantations. Nice, pleasant, unassuming sort of man too, I've always heard tell he was. So I'm all democrat clear through."

"You're a darling," Doris exclaimed, hugging her from behind, both arms wound tightly around her throat. "We'd never have come up here at all if it hadn't been for you."

"There, child, there. It says in the Book, you know, 'The Lord moveth in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform,' and if I do say it as shouldn't, He seems to pick me out every once in a while and lets me help a little bit, blessed be His Name. Now, let's start for home." She rose from the porch step energetically. "Ella Lou's begun to move around and that's to let me know it's after five. She can always tell the time when the sun gets low."

"I feel sure Mother wants the place, don't you, Jean?" Kit asked, as the girls went up through the woods towards home. "All the time we were going through the house I could see every bit of our furniture in the right places there. And there's so much room that Dad will hardly know the difference between this place and the old one at the Cove. He could have those two big rooms overlooking the valley on the second floor. You can see the great brown stone dam from there and the ruins of the mill, and hear the falling water. I wish we had time to climb out over the old dam to the mill."

"It's better than living right in a village," Jean answered, pushing aside the young birches that crowded the way. "I rather dreaded that somehow. Everybody'd want to know all about us right off, and why we came up, and what ailed Dad, and everything else. I hope, though, Mother won't be lonely here. You know, girls, it is lonely for a woman like her, where Cousin Roxy doesn't mind it."

"We'll have to pitch in and make up to her for everything she's lost," said Doris solemnly.

"Dear old Dorrie." Kit put her arm around the littlest sister and squeezed her affectionately. "You know, you are an awful make-believe. You are just like somebody, I've forgotten who it was, in the old Norse fairy lore, who lost his way over the hills and fell asleep in a magic ring, and when he wakened the wee folks had anointed his eyes with fairy ointment and everything that he looked at after that seemed beautiful to him. Goodness knows we're going to need something like that out here. Of course it's all lovely now, but what will it be like in the winter when the north wind doth blow, and we shall have snow, and what will poor robin do then, poor thing?"

"It's all a question of system," Jean declared, her hands deep in her white sweater pockets, and its collar turned high around her neck. "We'll have to make a business of living, and learn how to do things we hate to do with the least effort."

"You're just a bluffer, Jean Robbins," exclaimed Helen, "just a bluffer. Anyone would think to hear you talk that you actually enjoyed privations. Of course when we're with Mother and Dad, or even Cousin Roxy, we have to put on a whole lot, but when we're alone I do think we might at least be sincere with ourselves. We all know how we feel at heart about this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" asked Kit, on the offensive instantly. "What do you mean?"

"Giving up everything we've been used to, and living out here in the woods. I'm going to miss the girls most of all."

"Well, we don't like losing everything any better than you do, Helen," Jean said soothingly. "Only–"

"Don't pat me," retorted Helen, shaking off her hand; "I know I'm selfish, and I'm beginning to feel sorry I said anything. Only it does look so bleak and forlorn here somehow."

"But if you have to do a thing, why, you just have to do it, that's all," Kit declared. "It's better to make up your mind you're going to like it. Look at that cow ahead of us. It must have strayed."

Through the birches ahead they could see some object obstructing the narrow path, its back towards them. Large as a cow it was, and reddish brown, but in place of short horns, this animal had spreading antlers, and Jean caught sight of its round puff of a tail.

"Oh, girls, it's a deer!"

At her voice the deer started and pushed into the thick underbrush until it came to a stone wall. They watched it rise and clear it at a bound like a thoroughbred horse, its knees bent under, its head held high. Then it was gone.

"Well, isn't that perfectly gorgeous!" gasped Kit, explosively. "I've never seen one on its native heath before. Wish we could tame some, don't you, girls?"

"The Lady Kathleen doth already see a baronial estate with does and fawns at large," said Jean teasingly. "Wouldst have a few white peacocks standing on one foot upon thy entrance gates, oh, sister mine?"

"Well, I don't know but what they would look nice," Kit answered placidly. "I tell you what we do want to raise–turkeys. I've always wanted turkeys or geese. It's the simple turkey-tender that the fairy godmother turns into a beauteous princess."

Doris danced along the path ahead of them.

"I like this ever so much better than the Cove," she called. "It is all so wild

and free."

"It will be fun mixing things up and making a success out of it whether it wants to be or not–I mean the new home," Jean replied. "Only we're sure to get lonely sometimes for the people we liked down there. You know what I mean, don't you, Helen?"

"Indeed I do," Helen said fervently. "That's just what I told you. Think of our being buried up here in these woods for months and maybe years."

"Still, it is worse for Mother. It's sort of an adventure for us girls from which we'll escape some time, but it's the real thing for her, something that's going to last perhaps all through her life."

"No, it won't, Kit, because we'll grow up and rescue her if she doesn't like it."

"What about Dad?" asked Doris. "The doctors in the city say he'll never get any better, and the old doctor up here says he'll begin to get better at once if he just stops thinking about himself and gets out of doors."

"I'd believe a doctor that talked to me like that even if I was half afraid he might be wrong," Kit said soberly.

They paused at a spur of land that looked out over the long valley. Little River flowed in a winding course marked by alders and willows. Now that there was no foliage to obscure the view, they could catch a glimpse here and there of a red roof or a white chimney. There was the Smith mill, then the old white Murray homestead with its weather vane standing on a little hill like a big yardarm at large. Then came their own old ruined mill, half tumbling down, with empty window casings, all overgrown with woodbine and poison ivy. Farther up the valley one caught the hum of another mill, purring musically in a sort of crescendo scale until it broke off into a snappy zip! as the log broke.

Already Jean declared she knew the names and histories of all the people there, and which way the roads went, and where the nearest towns lay.

"I feel exactly as if I stood now on the crest of the Delectable Mountains," she said with a quiet; sigh. They had stood there some time in silence, looking at the widespread land of hills and valleys, upland meadows, warm and brown in the early spring sunshine, and sweeps of woodland, russet red with maple and ash, with here and there the dark sombre richness of laurel or pine. "Who was it did that, Christian in 'Pilgrim's Progress,' wasn't it?"

Helen and Doris knelt to look at some blossoming saxifrage at the edge of a rock. Kit stood erect and tender-eyed.

"Oh, I don't know who it was," she said, quite gently for her, "but I know how he felt anyway. I always feel that way when I look out over vast distances, specially skylands; I wish I had wings or was all I want to be. Don't you know what I mean, Jeanie? It makes you think of all the things you hope to do some

day."

"Like the spies that Gideon sent forth to look over the Promised Land," Jean answered. "I always think of them at such times, traveling miles and miles up through the mountains until all at once they came to a sudden opening and they looked out at it all lying at their feet like this."

Kit smiled, her cheeks rosy from the upland climb, her hands deep in her sporting coat pockets. There was almost a challenging tilt to her chin as she faced that sweep of valley, barren and brown in the spring sunset hour.

"Well, it is *our* Promised Land," she declared, "and I can tell it right now that it's got to blossom like the rose and pour out milk and honey, because we've come to stay."

CHAPTER IX

THE LADY MANAGERS CHOOSE A NAME

That very night a council was held of what Mr. Robbins termed "the Board of Lady Managers."

"I think I need Hiram in here for support," he said laughingly, from his favorite resting place, the old fashioned high-backed davenport in the sitting-room.

There were no such things at Maple Lawn as a library, a reception room, or a den. There was a front entry and a side entry and a well-room at the back of the kitchen. There was a parlor and a front bed-room, a side bed-room and a big sunny sitting-room that was dining-room also, and finally the old kitchen with its Dutch oven, and hooks in the ceiling for hanging up smoked beef and bacon sides.

Not that Cousin Roxy ever used the Dutch oven nowadays excepting to store things away in. She had instead a fine shiny, water-back steel range, over which she hovered like a sorceress from five A.M. to eleven A.M., producing such marvels of cookery as held the girls spellbound: raised doughnuts with jam inside and powdered sugar outside; apple turnovers made with Peck's Pleasants and rich Baldwins; ginger cookies, large as saucers with scalloped edges, soft and rich as butter scotch; and pies, with rich, flaky crust and delectable filling in endless varieties. Jean declared that she had learned more about cooking in the few weeks she had lived at Maple Lawn than in all her life before.

"Well, there's cooking and cooking, girls," Cousin Roxana had replied placidly, fishing for brown doughnuts with her long, hand-wrought iron fork. "It's one thing to cook when you've got everything to do with, and quite another when you are eternally figuring out how to make both ends meet. Of course, I don't have to do that. Land knows there's plenty to eat and more to, praise the Lord, but it's all plain food, and you've got to learn how to toss vegetables around in forty different ways out here if you want any variety."

That evening it was when the Board of Lady Managers discussed everything that lay ahead of them from the said vegetables to chickens, cows, horses, and farm implements.

Mr. Robbins had seemed relieved when he was sure that the Motherbird approved of the Mansion House. It was near Maple Lawn and Roxana, he said, and they would surely need both many times during their first experimental year in the country. Also, it was on the mail route, and not too large a place in acreage for them to handle. There was a good apple orchard, somewhat run down, but it would be all right with pruning and proper care. Besides, there were four good pear trees, two large cherry trees, white hearts and red, and three crabapple trees.

"Guess if you hunt around, you might find some quinces too, and plenty of berries and currants," Cousin Roxana said. "It's been let go to waste the past few years, and it'll take a year or more to get it back into shape. You'd better write out West and get a three-year lease, with option of purchase."

"We couldn't think of buying it, even with water rights and all," Mrs. Robbins demurred, "but we might try the three-year lease. What do you think, dear?"

"I should write tonight," Mr. Robbins told her, confidently. "Even if I should gain my health completely"–how cheerily he said it, the girls thought–"we could still stay up here summers, and you all would enjoy it, I know. Look at Dorrie's pink cheeks, and Jean looks like another girl. If I keep on much longer on Roxy's cooking, I expect to be mowing hay in the lower meadows by July."

So the letter was written, the wonderful letter freighted with so many hopes. All four girls escorted Mrs. Robbins down to the mailbox at the crossroads the next noon. It was truly a fateful moment, as Kit remarked solemnly. So much depended upon the nature of the answer from far-off Saskatoon. Perched on the fence rail Dorrie began to compose poetry to fit the occasion.

"Kit, beat time for me, will you?" she called happily, teetering on the rail like a young bluebird. "Here it goes now:

"Oh, Saskatoon,
Please answer soon!
Sweet Saskatoon,
We ask this boon–

What's his name, Mumsie?"

"Ralph McRae," Jean answered for her mother.

"You know, really, Dorrie," protested Helen, "if you could just see yourself on that rail fence chanting doggerel to the spring breezes, you'd come down."

But Doris kept to the rail all the same, and sang with her fair hair blowing around her little face, already showing freckles. Even Kit felt the inspiration of the moment.

"Oh, I love these April mornings! You can smell everything that's sweet and new in the air, can't you, Motherkin? And I found arbutus buds down in the pines too, and an old crow's nest, and the crocuses are up."

Mrs. Robbins lifted her face to the blue sky, with its great white clouds that drifted up from the south in an endless argosy of beauty, and quoted softly:

"When Spring comes down the wildwood way,
A crocus in her hair–"

"There comes the mail wagon down the wildwood way," Jean called from the curve of the road.

Already they had grown to watch for it as the one real event of the day. Mrs. Robbins said it reminded her of the little milk wagons in the South. It had a white oblong body with a projection at the back, a "lean-to" as Cousin Roxana called it, for parcel post packages. The top came forward over the front seat in a canopy effect to shield Mr. Ricketts, the rural free delivery carrier, from the sun. Finally, there was a plump white horse that matched the whole turnout exactly, and Mr. Ricketts, his cap pushed back on his head, a smile of perpetual well-being on his face.

"Looks like we'd get a spell of fine weather," he called. "Tell Miss Robbins I noticed a postcard for her about her subscription being up for her floral monthly, and if she ain't going to renew hers, I'll send in my own for this year."

"Now just hear that," exclaimed Cousin Roxy when she was given the message. "He's read my floral monthly regularly coming along the route. Well, I don't know as I mind. He's a real good mail carrier anyhow, and all men have failings. Hewers of wood and drawers of water, the good Book calls them, and I'd like to know what else the pesky things are for. That doesn't mean you at all, Jerry. You were always a good boy. Tom Ricketts knows better than to read my floral monthly without so much as by your leave, ma'am. But I'll renew it."

"He must have read the postcard too," said Helen.

"Read it?" Cousin Roxy sniffed audibly. "I'd like to see anything get by them down at that post office. They know a sight more about you than you do

yourself. Postmaster Willets could sit down single-handed and write a history of the local inhabitants of this town just from memory and postcards, I don't doubt a mite."

The very next day the girls went again to the Mansion House. The keys were at Mr. Weaver's, the next house down the road from Maple Lawn. It was a regular gray mouse of a house sitting far back from the road and facing the western hills. Philemon Weaver lived there alone. He was ninety-one and had had six wives, Cousin Roxana told them.

"Though mercy knows, nobody holds that against him. It was a compliment to the sex, I suppose, if he could get them. And Uncle Philly's buried them all reverently and properly."

They found the old fellow working at a carpenter's bench out in the woodshed. His hair was gray and curly and his upper lip clean shaven. Doris said he looked just like the pictures of Uncle Sam. He was tall and lean and stoop-shouldered, but his blue eyes were full of twinkles and he had the finest set of false teeth, Kit remarked soberly, that she'd ever seen, and the most winsome smile.

"Winsome? Philly Weaver winsome?" laughed Cousin Roxana when she heard it. "Well, I must say, Kit, that is the greatest yet. Winsome!"

"But he is," Kit protested, "really winsome. He gave us each a drink from his well and showed Jean his Dutch tile stove and his grandfather's clock. And he's got the dearest old chest out in that side hall, Cousin Roxy. I asked him how much he'd take for it, and he said no, he guessed he'd better not, though it was worth as much as two dollars and a half, but it had been his great-grandmother's setting-out chest. Wasn't that dear of him?"

Armed with the key and waving good-bye to the old man at the top of the hill, they started down to the crossroads. Already they called the house home. It was so satisfying, Kit said, just to wander about the rooms and plan. There was one large southeast room that must be the living-room and library combined. Back of this, opening out on a wide side porch, was the dining-room. On the opposite side of the front hallway was a sitting-room with a glass-enclosed extension for flowers, and between it and the kitchen was a good-sized hallway lined with shelves and long handy drawers beneath them.

It was the kitchen and garret, though, that the girls lingered over most. The former extended across the entire back of the house and Helen counted eleven doors opening out of it. The floor was made of oaken planks worn smooth as satin, some of them over two feet wide. Behind the sheet iron partition, they found a huge old-fashioned rock fireplace with the crane still hanging in it. Helen and Doris could easily stand inside the aperture and there was a jutting out of the walls on each side that formed the cosiest kind of an inglenook.

"It seemed from this they e'en must be,
Each other's own best companie,"

quoted Kit, from "The Hanging of the Crane." "Where are you, Jeanie? You're missing thrills of discovery."

But Jean was getting her own thrills. She had gathered her skirts around her, and ventured down the old winding cellar steps, groped around in the dark until she found the outside doors and removed the big wooden bar that held them. The stone steps outside were green with moss, and an indignant toad hopped back out of the sunlight when she threw open the doors.

"We'll get the mouldy smell out of the cellar in a few days," she told the others, rolling up her sleeves and sitting down in the sunshine on the top step. "And there's a furnace down there, too. It looks old and rusty, but it's there. No wonder they called it the Mansion House with a real furnace in the cellar and running water in the kitchen sink. But how funny and New Englandy, girls, to call it that, doubling up on mansion and house. Let's name it something else, something piney."

"Valley View," suggested Helen.

"Sounds too slippery," Kit said. "How's Heart's Content? Too sentimental? Well then, Piney Crest. It is on a sort of crest or mount up here above the valley and the pines make it seem solemn."

"Well, they won't after we once get here," Doris declared. "Let's call it something happy."

Kit stood with arms akimbo, looking up at the tall tapering pines. They were splendid old lords of the conifers, towering as high as the cupola itself. Their branches spread out like great hoopskirts of green. Underneath was a thick silky carpet of russet needles, layer on layer from many seasons of growth. Beyond the limits of the garden lay the strip of white road, and across that came wide fields that seemed to fall in long waves to meet the river. On all sides they slipped away from the old mansion, their square borders outlined with the gray rock walls, each with its brave showing of springtime green, where every clambering vine had sent forth leafy tendrils, and even the moss had freshened up under the April showers.

"In a couple of weeks more they'll all be green," said Jean, her dark eyes bright with anticipation. "And we'll plough them and sow them, and they'll grow and grow, girls, and turn a real golden harvest over to us by fall. Blessed green acres of promise!"

"There you are," exclaimed Kit triumphantly, wheeling around on them. "Greenacres. It just fits the place, and it's full of the country and makes you think of good things to eat. Greenacres. All in favor of that name please signify

in the usual manner."

Whereupon Doris picked up her skirts and made a low curtesy, and Helen did the same, and lastly Jean and Kit swept each other an elaborate court bow, showing that the vote was entirely unanimous.

Therefore, Greenacres was the new name given to the old Mansion House, and the girls felt that in the bestowal of the name, they held a guarantee with Fate of happy augury.

CHAPTER X
SETTLING THE NEST

"Goods have come," called Mr. Ricketts from the mail box one morning. The pink freight card lay on top, and he seemed as pleased as anyone to find it there. "Letter from out West too, I noticed, so I presume you folks will be settled pretty soon."

"I almost feel as if I ought to let him read what Mr. McRae says," Mrs. Robbins said amusedly. "He's so friendly and interested."

As she opened the letter, the girls gathered around her chair, eager-eyed and curious to see what it contained. Jean declared that she liked the handwriting because it was firm and plain without any flourishes. Kit was sure he used a stub pen and was rather morose and dignified. Helen asked if she might keep the postage stamp for a memento, and Doris kept patting her mother's shoulder tenderly as if she would have protected her against any disappointment.

"You read it, dear. I'd much rather you did," the Motherbird said, handing it over to Mr. Robbins.

Cousin Roxana was out in the buttery singing softly to herself about some day when the mists had rolled in splendor from the beauty of the hills, and the nurse was upstairs, packing to return to New York the following day. There was just their own little home group of robins and they listened anxiously for the verdict. The letter ran:

SASKATOON, SASKATCHEWAN, April 4th, 19–.

Mr. Jerrold Robbins, Gilead Center, Conn.

MY DEAR MR. ROBBINS: Your letter of March 28th, received. I should be very glad to rent the old house down at Stony Eddy on a lease, but do not want to let it go out of the family. Miss Robbins can tell you the conditions under which it came into my possession and why I am not at liberty to part with it. If you care to rent it at $100 a year, it is yours. Any necessary repairs it may need I am willing to make. I have never seen the property myself, but whatever Miss Robbins says about it will be satisfactory to me, as she was my Aunt Trowbridge's dearest friend.

Hoping if you decide to take the place, you may be happy there, I am,

Yours sincerely, RALPH McRAE.

"It's ours," Jean breathed thankfully.

"I always felt that it was, somehow," Mrs. Robbins smiled happily around at her brood. "And I know you'll like it, Jerry."

"Oh, I know the place, I remember admiring it as a boy. Besides, I'd like anything up here. Why, I could live out yonder in Roxy's corncrib very comfortably this summer if she'd only let me," teased the invalid. "Better send a check out at once for the rent, Betty, and get into it as soon as possible."

It was the third week in April when they drove down in relays from Maple Lawn and took possession of the new home. There had been considerable repairing to be done: painting and papering, mending the waterpipes and furnace, and cleaning out the chimneys.

The goods had been brought up from Nantic by Hiram in the big hay wagon, he making four trips. Mrs. Robbins had wanted to hire an automobile truck from Norwich, but Roxana said it was all nonsense with two big horses standing idle in the barn just aching for work, and Hiram fussing around over frost still being in the ground so he couldn't do any deep ploughing. So the goods came up and were packed into the big front room downstairs while the girls and Mrs. Robbins went back and forth "settling."

Hiram's younger brother came to do the papering and painting. He looked exactly like a young rooster, Kit declared, all neck and legs, and he was fearfully shy. She found immediate diversion in appearing before him suddenly in her most abrupt manner and asking his opinion anxiously on something, whereupon Shad would blush intensely to the roots of his taffy colored hair, and splash paste blindly.

His name was Shadrach Farnum, but Shad suited him to perfection. As Cousin Roxana said, he did sort of run to bone. But he could paint and paper to

the queen's taste and gradually the rooms began to look different. The big living-room was covered with a soft wood brown burlap that harmonized well with their ash furniture and bookcases, and the brown Spanish leather cushions. Window seats were built around the two bay windows, and the girls sewed diligently to cover the cushions for these with burlap, and to make inside curtains just to outline, as Jean said, the cream filet ones.

"It looks so warm and tender and friendly, doesn't it?" Doris exclaimed when the big brown suede cover was laid on the long library table and the copper lamp placed in the center. The copper lamp was really an institution in the Robbins' family. The girls had given it personal conduct from the Cove on Long Island to Nantic. Jean had found it in an old copper and brass shop in New York at a wonderful reduction, and had carted it home herself in triumph. The bowl was broad and low and squat, shaped a good deal like a summer squash. The shade was perforated by hand with exquisite artistry into strange Muscovite designs, through which the light shone softly. When it was lighted the first evening in the new home, Helen said she felt as if she were before a shrine.

"And it is a shrine too," Jean told them, "the shrine of home."

Once in the long ago when they had all been quite young, Jean had been found industriously writing names on bits of paper, and fastening them with mucilage to pieces of the furniture.

"I thought they might feel queer not having any names," she said when discovery came, "so I was naming them."

The lamp had a name too; it was always alluded to as Diogenes.

"It looks exactly like the kind of lamp he would have loved," Kit explained.

The day after they really moved in, Cousin Roxana drove down with Ella Lou and some good advice, a large brown crock of freshly baked beans and a loaf of brown bread.

"You need a good safe horse that you all can drive," she said. "Sam Willetts has a brown mare that seems just about the ticket. I telephoned over to him this morning and he'll sell her for $75.00, which isn't bad at all. If you like, Betty, I'll call him up again as soon as I get back and Honey Hancock can bring her over. Honey's working for Mr. Willetts now, and the mare used to belong to the Hancocks. She was a regular pet, Piney said."

Mrs. Robbins was sure it was a good plan and Cousin Roxana was instructed to close the bargain. So it was that Greenacres made the acquaintance of Honey Hancock, destined to be a close friend before summer was over, and always a family standby.

It was a little past the supper hour when Honey drove up. Hitched to the back of the wagon was the brown mare, and they all went out to look at her. Honey was about fourteen and tall for his age. Rosy-cheeked he was, with blue

eyes and curly brown hair and dimples so deep and ingratiating that Helen said it was a burning shame to waste them on a boy.

He stood at the mare's head, patting her slender, glossy neck and combing her mane with his fingers, telling the girls her history, how she had belonged to Molly Bawn, their old mare, and how his father had broken her to harness himself.

"But she never had to be really broken in. Piney and I started riding her bareback when she was out in pasture and she was just as tame as a kitten. She understands anything you say to her. Mother hated to sell her to Mr. Willetts, but we had to, and as I was working for him, why, she didn't know any difference. She's used to a good deal of petting–"

"Oh, we'll all pet her here," Jean promised. "We must have something to drive her in. Haven't you a davenport that she'll drive nicely in?"

"A davenport!" exclaimed Kit. "Jean Robbins, a davenport's a sofa. She'd look nice hitched to a sofa. My sister isn't used to the country at all, Honey. She means a democrat, you know. The kind of a wagon you can put one seat or two on, and still have room to put things away in."

"We haven't anything like that," said Honey, "but they might have down at Mr. Butterick's. He's the carriage maker. He can take a pair of old carriage wheels, and turn out a good buggy almost while you watch him."

"You have wonderful people up here," Helen said fervently. "It seems as if whenever you want a certain kind of a person, there he is waiting for you. Where does Mr. Butterick live?"

"Down in Rocky Glen; second house past the basket weaver, Mr. Tompkins."

"Suppose we go over there tomorrow, girls," Jean suggested. "Or do you have to take the mare over, Honey, and let Mr. Butterick sort of fit her with a carriage and a harness? I wish I could put her in the barn right now."

"Better get somebody to take care of her first," Helen said practically. "We'd feed her fish cakes and doughnuts."

Honey shifted his weight from one foot to the other somewhat uneasily.

"Don't suppose you folks think of taking anybody on regularly, do you? Mother said I was to ask, and say if you wanted me I might come up. It's nearer home than Mr. Willetts' and there's only Piney and Mother at home, and they need me to do the chores after I get home at night."

Jean hastily signaled to Kit for fear she wouldn't remember all that Cousin Roxana had told them about Honey Hancock and his sister. But just then Mrs. Robbins stepped out on the side porch and smiled at Honey until he turned red and grinned delightedly.

"I could come for about ten a month, Mother thought," he vouchsafed with

much embarrassment.

The other Mother thought ten was about right too, and Honey drove away in the spring twilight, happy as one of the barn swallows that circled in the dusk in a wonderful vesper dance. All the way up the hill they heard him whistling "Beulah Land," and the hearts of the girls echoed the sweet old melody. Although the deal had been closed over the brown mare, and the check reposed in Honey's overalls' pocket, he took her back with him, and promised to ride her over in the morning so the girls should not have the care of her over night.

"I asked him what her name was," Doris said, "and he told me they just called her Mollie's Baby. We must think up some wonderful name for her. You know, Mother darling, she looked over at me so tenderly and wistfully when Honey said she would have to go back over night. I know she longed to stay with us."

The next addition to the place was the lot of chickens. It had been agreed the first year that no large expenditures should be made for anything, because it was all more or less experimental.

"We want to take care of Dad, and make him well this first year," Jean told the other girls up in their room one night.

One point about the Robbins family that was different from other families was their distinctive individualities; they simply demanded separate expression, as Jean put it. Nobody liked to double up with anyone else, and here at Greenacres there were plenty of rooms to choose from, so that each daughter might have her own. Two large bed-rooms with alcoves crossed the front of the house. These had been turned over to Mr. and Mrs. Robbins. Then came curious rooms, as Kit said. The hallway rambled through the second story, two steps up over here and two steps down over there. There were unexpected little corridors opening out from it like crooked arms. It really was a fascinating hallway, and the rooms along it were quite exceptional. There were two wings to the house, and an extension at the back over the summer kitchen "ell." This was a source of delight to the girls, for they found all kinds of interesting relics tucked back in this extension.

"Mother dear," Helen said seriously, appearing one day with cobwebs in her hair and dust smudges on her arms and face, "we've found perfectly wonderful things. Old newspapers before the war, and old magazines with hoopskirts in them and bonnets with flowers inside the poke!"

"And two old maps dated 1829, one of New York State and one of Connecticut," Kit added. "Both mounted on old yellow homespun linen and braced with hand carved ebony. Now what do you think of that, Dad? I'll bring them down to you. And a thing that looks like a little pilot wheel, but it isn't. Jean says it's part of a spinning outfit because she's seen them out in front of antique shops on Madison Avenue in New York. And we found a foot warmer, and an hour glass

with one support broken, and a tailor's goose, and some old clothes-pins that had been whittled by hand."

Jean selected the west room for her very own. It had a square bay window over the bower, as the girls had nicknamed the little conservatory off the dining-room. The upstairs window was smaller, but almost as pleasant, with small panes of glass and a beautiful outlook over the valley and the old dam.

Doris had a smaller room next to Jean's, and then came a pleasant southeast room for a guest chamber.

"And for pity's sake, let's make it comfy and cheery," said Kit. "Most guest chambers give you the everlasting dumdums, don't they, Jeanie? Let's make ours look as if it were really to enjoy."

Kit had taken for her special domicile the room over the summer kitchen, because it had so many shelves and cupboards in it. At first she had wanted the cupola room, but was talked out of it, much against her will and predilections. The upper staircase was circular, and you had to watch out going up to the cupola, or you'd get an unmerciful bump on the head as the door was very low. But once inside, it was a surprise, that held you spellbound for a minute. The room was square in shape, and had eight long narrow windows in it. From them you caught wonderful framed views of the far-reaching valley, the ruined stone mill, the great brown rock dam, covered now with the spring freshet, and beyond the placid lake with several islands dotting it and long rows of hills guarding its margins, one after the other like sentinels.

"Yes, I want this one," Kit had said. "I'm the only one in the family with genius and this should be mine. I want to walk around this crystal enclosure and play that I am one of Maeterlinck's sleeping princesses."

"They didn't walk," Jean had protested, "and you needn't imagine that you're a genius, Kit Robbins, because you're not."

"Well, I'm the only one in the family with much imagination anyway," Kit had answered pleasantly. "'Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,' you know, Jeanie dear. And if I can't be a sleeping princess I will be the Lady of Shalott." Whereupon she had swept about the room with a couch cover draped around her in approved Camelot style, and a curtain cord bound about her brow for a circlet, declaiming:

"'Four gray walls and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle embowers,
The Lady of Shalott.'"

"It would be such a hard place from which to rescue you if the house caught

fire," Helen had remarked thoughtfully, peering from one of the windows. "You couldn't very well skip down the lightning rod, Kit."

"I should prefer to have all my girls nearer to me," Mrs. Robbins had remarked. "Suppose you should be taken ill in the night! How would any of the rest know of it or be able to help you? You had better select a room on the floor below, Childie."

"Very well," Kit had said regretfully. "Of course I will not insist if the family are going to worry over me, but I shall come up here every day to comb out my golden tresses. I think we'll get Shad to build us window seats all the way around, stain the floor, and make a sort of sun parlor out of it."

"Oh, Kit, remember the place in Egypt we always wanted to see, the Ramasseum, the thinking place of the king?" Jean's dark eyes had sparkled with mischief. "Let's call this the Thinking Place. Then we can retire here when we wish to meditate, and fairly soak in the sunlight until we feel radiant and revived. Do you all like that?"

So it had been agreed upon and the cupola room became the thinking place of the four princesses.

Another discovery they made soon after was the Peace Spot. This was over on the hillside across the bridge. Here was a rocky field with any number of evergreen trees. They were assorted sizes and all varieties. There were juniper trees and hemlocks, fat tubby little spruces and slender straggly cedars. It looked like a premeditated burial ground, Kit remarked, but Helen named it the Peace Spot. They often walked over there in the late afternoons. Kit had ideas of turning it into a wonderful Italian garden some day, but just now it was their place of rest.

At first the housework had proved to be the great stumbling block in the way of perfect peace and daily comfort.

"I tell you, Motherbird, if you'll just say what you want done, we'll be your willing handmaidens," Jean had promised at the very beginning, but the willing handmaidens had found themselves tangled up in less than two days, treading on each other's heels and losing their tempers too.

Mrs. Robbins laughed at them when she happened in and found them all "looking down their noses," as Doris expressed it.

"Girls, you'll have to learn team work," she explained. It appeared that Jean had put a chicken to roast in the top of the double baking pan and the gravy had all run out of the air draft at one end. "You must learn that when you put your bread to rise it doesn't shape itself into loaves and hop into the pans and walk over to the oven." Here Kit blushed hotly, remembering how her first batch had risen to the occasion beyond all expectations, and rambled during the night all over the edge of the pan and the arm of the chair she had set it on. "And, Dorrie, precious, if you catch mice in traps alive, and then decide to tame them, we'll

have mice all over the place."

Doris had discovered a nice little brown prisoner under the pantry shelf, had taken him out into the rose garden and there let him go, all in a spirit of lofty pity that left Kit and Jean speechless.

Also, Doris had taken to rescuing flies caught on sticky paper, putting them into pill boxes until they recovered their usual blithe and debonnaire attitude towards life. Also, sundry noises having issued from her room at night, the other girls had started down the dark hall to investigate, and had stepped on turtles which Doris had found sunning themselves on logs in the pond, and had put into empty tomato cans and smuggled up to her room for future humanitarian reference.

"Go for us, Queen Mother," Jean cried valiantly. "Go for us. It's the only way we'll ever learn anything. I told Kit to fix the bread a dozen times. I was reading up tomato plants, and Helen was cutting out a stencil for her scrim curtains–conventionalized tulips–"

"Lotos buds," corrected Helen.

"Well, I'm not sure. They look like raised biscuits to me. I wish spring would hurry along and make up its mind to stay a while." She pressed her nose against the window pane and stared out at the land. Letters had come from some girl friends back at the Cove that day, and she felt a wave of loneliness and half panic at what they had undertaken.

Just then Honey came to the kitchen door, bareheaded and smiling.

"Piney said for me to tell you folks that she heard Ma Parmelee had some good Plymouth Rocks for sale. They're about as reliable a hen as you can get. Ma's going to sell off everything and go to live with her son down in Nantic. It's near towards where I live, if you'd like to drive over that way."

Mrs. Robbins thought it was a good idea, and that Jean could go with her. There had been a trip over to Rocky Glen after the purchase of Mollie's Baby, and Mr. Butterick had been persuaded to part with a buggy that just fit the mare. It was low and held three easily on its broad cushioned seat, and there was a fair space at the back where odds and ends could be packed away.

It seemed rather foolish to call the mare Mollie's Baby every time they spoke to her, so a family council had given her a brand new cognomen and already she pricked up her ears when she heard it. They called her Princess, and the Jersey heifer that came up from the State farm was called Buttercup, after her famous predecessor. Buttercup was Mr. Robbins' special pride on the farm and great things were hoped from her.

Jean gathered up the reins and Honey put some burlap sacks in the back of the wagon for the hens.

"Better tie them to something when you start off," he advised. "They always

flop around a lot in sacks."

It was a drive of about two and a half miles, up through the hills. Each new road seemed to lead them straight up to the edge of the world and then to dip again and leave cloudland behind. The woods held a haze of green now that hung over the distant hills like a mist. Once a row of young quail blinked dizzily from a pasture bar at the surprising apparition of the horse and buggy. And all at once there came the quick thud of hoofs behind them, and a young girl riding horseback drew rein beside their buggy. She was about as old as Kit, with thick brown hair brushed back boyishly from her face, and big friendly blue eyes.

"How do you do," she said, blushing in a way that seemed familiar to them, for it reminded them of Honey. "I'm Piney Hancock. Mollie wouldn't let me ride by unless I stopped to let her see Babe."

CHAPTER XI
MA PARMELEE'S CHICKS

"Oh, we're ever so glad to know you, Piney," Jean said at once. "Honey's told us all about you until we felt that we really did know you."

Piney blushed deeper than ever, just as Honey did, and brushed a fly off her pony's neck. She rode across saddle, in a home-made corduroy skirt, with a boy's cap set back on her head, and a boyish waist with knotted tie. Altogether both Mrs. Robbins and Jean approved of her at sight, for she seemed like a girl edition of Honey himself.

Piney told them they were on the right road, and to keep to the left after they passed the burial ground.

"I'm going down the other way or I'd ride along and show you where it is."

"You must come down to see us girls when you can, please. We're rather lonesome, not knowing anyone around here. Are there many girls?"

"Quite a few," said Piney. "There are the Swedish girls over on the old Ames place, and there are two French girls near us. Their father's the carpenter, Mr. Chapelle. Etoile's the older one and the little one they call Tony. Her name's really Marie Antoinette. Mrs. Chapelle's awfully funny. She told me one day the reason they changed the little girl's name to Tony was because if she ever should get on a railroad track or anywhere in danger, and they had to call her in a hurry, they wanted something short and quick to say. She talks broken English, and it

was so comical the way she said it." Piney's deep dimples were showing and her eyes were sparkling, as she imitated the voice of Mrs. Chapelle. "How I say to her ver' fast Marie Antoinette, Marie Antoinette, Marie Antoinette! She can be dead four–five–time. I call her that way, I tink so. I yell Ton-ee! Right away she jump."

"Isn't she a darling, Mother?" Jean exclaimed when they drove on. "I do hope she'll come down. Kit would love her."

"Anybody would love her," agreed Mrs. Robbins, still smiling. "You know, Jean, I think that you girls are going to find a special work up here that only you can do. A work among these girls of our own neighborhood."

"But, Mother dear, our own neighborhood up here means a radius of about ten miles."

"Even so. Cousin Roxana's old doctor covers twenty miles and has been doing it for forty years; he knows all of the families as if he were a census taker."

Jean thought for a minute. They were going up a long hill and Princess took her time. Honey had fastened two bunches of ferns to her bridle to keep away flies, and she looked as if she wore a Dutch bonnet.

"There seem to be so few real American girls up here, Mother," Jean began slowly. "I thought we'd find ever so many, but while I lived up at Maple Lawn I rode around a good deal, and you'd be surprised how many foreigners are up here. Cousin Roxy told me the reason. The old families die out, or the younger generation moves away to the towns, and the foreigners buy up the old homesteads cheaply."

"Well, dear?"

"But, Mother, you don't understand. There are all sorts. French Canadians, and a Swedish family, and a Polish family, and the old miller up the valley from us used to be a Prussian sailor. Then there are the real old families, of course–"

"Do you think of confining your circle of acquaintances to the old families, Jeanie?"

Jean laughed at the amusement in her mother's voice.

"I know what you're thinking, Mother, dear. Still I suppose we must be careful just moving into a new place like this. We don't want to get intimate with everybody. You'll like some of the old families."

"I think I'll like some of the new ones too. Have you noticed, Jean, in driving around, that the houses which are mostly unpainted and rather run-down looking belong to the old timers, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, probably, of first settlers?"

"Oh, Mother, there are some of the most interesting stories about them too, how they came out–walked, actually walked most of them–from the Massachusetts Bay Colony when there was some sort of a break up, and a few dropped

off here, and a few there, and they settled in hamlets wherever they happened to stop. I found a burial ground in the woods near Cousin Roxy's, with old slate gravestones, and dates away back to 1717."

"I'd like to see them, dear, but at the same time they were foreigners too, or children of foreigners, immigrants from a far land. Can't you understand what I mean? These newer families are like new blood to the country. It takes only a couple of generations to blend them in, Jean, and they bring new strength to us. Think what we get from the different nations. I remember out in California I had a wonderful girl friend whose people had been Polish exiles. That was a strange group of exiles who sought a haven in our land of flowers. There was Sienkiewicz the great novelist, and splendid Helena Modjeska, and many whose names I forget. Wanda was my girl friend's name, and my Mother and aunts did not like me to chum with her because she was a foreigner. I think that you children are very fortunate to be born in an age when these queer old earth lines, these race barriers, are falling down, and leaving the world-brotherhood idea instead. Up here in our lonely old hills, we are going to face this same problem that all nations are coping with, and we in our small way can help open the gates of the future."

"Why, Mother, I never heard you talk this way before," Jean exclaimed. "You always seemed just dear and sweet, don't you know. I–why, somehow I never felt you were interested in such things."

Unconsciously, she moved a little nearer to this new kind of Mother, and Mrs. Robbins' hand closed over hers.

"If we mothers are not interested in them, who should be?" she asked, her eyes full of a beautiful tenderness and compassion. "Some one has called us the torch bearers, the light bringers, but I like to think of women best as the tenders of the ever-burning temple lamps."

"You mean love and truth and–"

"I mean everything, dear, that tends for world betterment. And you girls are going to do your little share right here in Gilead Center, making a circle that shall join together the hands of all these girls from different races. We'll give a party soon and get acquainted with them all. Now let's pay attention to chickens, for I think this must be the house."

Princess turned into a side drive leading around to a house that stood well back from the road. As Jean said afterwards, the house looked as if it had been outdoors all its life, it was so weather-beaten and gray. "Ma" Parmelee bustled out to meet them, plump and busy as one of her own Plymouth Rocks.

"Twelve pullets and one rooster you want?" she said. "Well, I guess I can fix you up. I heard you folks had moved in down yonder. Thought I'd see you at meeting Sunday but I didn't."

Mrs. Robbins explained that they were Episcopalians and the nearest parish was nine miles away.

"So it is, over at Riverview, but we're all bound for the same place, so you might as well come up and help fill the pews. Land knows they need it." She led the way out to the big barn, followed by the chickens. The great doors were wide open, and the barn floor was covered lightly with wisps of hay. "Ma" scattered a measure of grain over this, and let the hens scratch for it.

"I have to work hard for what I get, and they ought to too," she said pleasantly. "Now, we'll take any that you like and put them into bags. I'm going to sell you my very best rooster. His name's Jim Dandy and he's all of that. He's pure Rhode Island Red, and two years old. You don't have to worry about hawks when he's around."

After the chickens were all safely in the bags and put in back of the wagon seat, "Ma" waved good-bye and told them not to forget the Finnish family that was moving into her house.

"I'm going to live with my married daughter, and these poor things don't know a living soul up here. Do drive over and speak to them as neighbors. There's a man and his widowed sister and her children. All God's folks, you know."

"Finns," murmured Jean speculatively, as they drove away. "There's a new blend to our Gilead sisterhood, Motherie."

Mrs. Robbins laughed at the puzzled expression on her eldest daughter's face.

"We'll let Kit drive over and see them," she promised.

Spring seemed to descend on the land all at once in the next few days, as if she had quite made up her mind to come and sit a while, Cousin Roxy said. One day the earth still looked wind-swept and bare, and the next there seemed to be a green sheen over the land and the woods looked hazy and lacy with the delicate budding leaves.

One night as Doris was out shutting up the hen houses and filling the pigeons' pan with water, she stopped short, her head upraised eagerly like a fawn, listening to a new sound away off along the edges of the woods, and deep down in the lower meadow where the brook flowed. Keenest and sweetest it sounded over where the waters of the lake above the old dam moved with soft low lapping among the reeds and water grasses. Here it became a curiously shrill trilling noise, subdued and yet insistent like the strumming of muffled strings on a million tiny harps.

"It's the peep frogs," called Honey, coming up from the barn with Buttercup's creamy contribution to the family commonwealth. "They're just waking up. That means it's spring for sure."

"Isn't it dear of them to try and tell us all about it," Doris cried delightedly, and away she ran to the house to insist that Kit and Jean and Helen come straight out-of-doors and listen too. In the twilight they walked around the terraces below the veranda, two by two. Once Helen stopped below their father's window to call up to him in the long "Coo-ee!" their mother had taught them from her own girlhood days out in California on her grandfather's ranch.

Day by day they would assure each other of his returning strength and health. The country air and utter restfulness of life as it ran here in channels of peace were surely giving him back at least the power to relax and rest. He slept as soundly as Doris herself, all night long, something he had not been able to do in months, and his appetite was really getting to be quite encouraging. The little nurse had left Greenacres the fifteenth of April both because of his gain in health and also to decrease expenses.

"And you needn't worry about anything at all, Mother darling," Kit had assured her. "Just keep right upstairs with Dad and let us girls run the kitchen, and we'll feed you on beautiful surprises."

Mr. Robbins smiled over at them, and quoted teasingly:

"The Chameleon's food I eat;
Look you, the air, promise crammed."

Piney paid her promised visit within a few days, and from her the girls received their first real information about the other girl neighbors around Gilead Center.

Honey was ploughing up the kitchen garden behind the house and Jean, with Piney at her side, sat on the low stone wall that separated it from the orchard, studying a seed catalogue diligently.

"I'd love some elephant ears and castor beans and scarlet lichens in big beds along the terraces," she said. "Think of the splashes of red up against those pines, girls. Remember the Jefferies' place back at the Cove. Mrs. Jefferies paid her gardener a hundred dollars a month."

"You'll like the rare, rich red of radishes and beets and scarlet runner beans better," Piney declared merrily. "We always lay out money on the food seeds first and then what is left can go for flowers. Anyhow, when you've got heaps of roses and snowballs and syringas and lilacs and things that keep coming up by themselves every year, you don't need to buy very much. Did you find the lilies of the valley down along the north wall? Mother says they used to be beautiful when she was a girl."

The girls were silent, remembering what Cousin Roxana had told them of the romance of Luella Trowbridge. But Doris's curiosity got the better of her

caution, and she coaxed Piney away to hunt for the delicate pale green spear points with their white lilybells hidden away under the hazel bushes.

It was Piney, too, who took them up the hill to the rocky sheep pasture and showed them where arbutus bloomed around the edges of the gray, mossy rocks. And it was Piney who pointed out to them the wintergreen, or checkerberry, as she called it, with its tiny pungent berries.

"She's perfectly wonderful," Kit declared that day at the noon dinner. "She knows the exact spot in this entire township where every single flower bobs up in its season. We found saxifrage at the base of an old oak, and white trilium and blood root, and perfect fields of bluets. And she wouldn't let us pick many either, only a few. She says it's just as cruel to rob a patch of wild flowers of all chance of blooming again next year as it is to rob birds' nests."

Here Helen chimed in.

"And she's going to teach me how to start a flower calendar. Not in a book, Motherie. We're going to take some of that dull castor-brown burlap that was left from the library and mount specimens on it, then make a folio with leather covers of dyed sheepskin."

"Piney seems to be a regular dynamo for starting activities," said Mrs. Robbins amusedly.

"She is, just exactly that," Kit answered earnestly. "I never met a girl with so many ideas up her sleeve. And they're as poor as Job's turkey, too. Piney told us so herself. And here she is, cooped up in Gilead Center without any outlet at all. She knows what she wants to do, but we girls can tell her how to do it."

"I wonder what her real name is," Helen pondered. "Maybe it's Peony. Cousin Roxy calls peonies 'pinies."

"It's much nicer than that," Jean said. "I can't think of any other name that would suit her. It's Proserpine. The minute she told me I saw her wandering along the seashore with the winds of the isles of Greece blowing back her funny short curls, and her hands up to her lips calling to the sea maids to come and play with her while her mother was away."

"That's all very pretty and poetical, Sister Mine, but Piney's going to peddle our rhubarb for us," Kit remarked. "I think that rhubarb is one of the most grateful plants we have. It seems to spring up everywhere and pay compound interest on itself every year. I found a lot of it growing and thought it was peonies or dahlias, but Piney told me it was rhubarb, and we're going to market it. She says there's a big cranberry bog on this place too, away off in some sunken meadows above the dam, and we must look out because somebody comes and picks them without asking anything at all about it. So we're going to watch the old wood road that turns into the sunken meadows. We can see it, Mother dear, from the eyrie outlook, and heaven help any miscreant who takes our cranberries!"

"I wouldn't start looking for him yet awhile, dear. Cranberries won't be along until frost," laughed Mrs. Robbins.

Doris, with Honey's help, was devoting herself to the hens. Although they had come rather late, still quite a few were setting, and Doris had several almanacs and calendars marked with the dates of the "coming offs," as Honey put it. Then there were about twenty tiny balls of fluff in the brooder from Cousin Roxana's incubator, and over these Doris crooned and fussed and wasted more sentiment than any chickens deserved.

"But they're motherless. Think of being born motherless and helpless–"

"Don't be ridiculous, Dorrie," Kit said crossly. "You can't be born motherless. You're hatched."

"And if they don't know any better, what's the difference?" added Jean.

"I don't see that at all," Doris insisted plaintively. "Every time I go there and they call to me, I just want to take them in my lap, and cry and cry over them."

One of "Ma" Parmelee's pullets had turned out to be a vagrant. Never would she stay with the rest of the chickens in the hen house or yard, or even around the barnyard. She was jet black and very peculiar. At feeding time she would show up, but hover around the outskirts of the flock and nibble at kernels of corn anxiously.

Jean named her "Hamlet" in fun, because she said she was always looking for "rats in the arras." But her real name was Gypsy. It was agreed that Gypsy had no idea of her natural obligation to society at all, that she didn't have the slightest intention of setting on any eggs, in fact that she didn't even have the gratitude to lay any eggs. All she did was appear promptly at meal time and eat her share.

"There'll be Gypsy a la Reine one of these fine Sundays," Kit prophesied darkly, but Doris begged for her life. In fact, whenever chicken was on the bill-of-fare Doris always begged off any of her flock from execution, and Honey had to go to one of the neighboring farms and purchase a fowl.

"It seems so awful to eat a chicken that you're well acquainted with," Doris explained. "And another thing, Motherie, did you know that the boys set traps around? Not now, but in the fall. At least, I think it's in the fall. I had Honey paint me some signs on shingles and I'm going to put them all over the place."

"What do they say, dear?"

"They say just this," Doris's tone was full of firmness and decision.

"*Any traps set on this-property will be sprung by ME.*"

"Do they state who 'Me' is?"

"I signed it with Dad's name, and put underneath 'Per D.'"

Jean wrapped loving arms around the youngest robin.

"Dorrie, you're a sweety," she said. "We don't appreciate you. You adopt

everything in sight, but we have to look out for most of your orphans and semi-orphans. Never mind, Dorrie. I'm for you anyway."

"We're such a devoted and loyal family tree, I think," sighed Doris. "Don't you, Motherie? I'm so glad I'm a branch."

"You're not, dear, yet. You're just a twig," Kit teased. "And Mother is the beautiful dryad who lives in her very own family tree. Isn't that interesting, though? One thing about us, girls, is this, and it is very consoling. Scrap as we may, we turn right around and become a mutual admiration society at the slightest excuse. Good-night, everybody. The night is yet young, but I've promised Honey,–or rather, Honey and I have a bet that I couldn't get up at five and help weed the garden. And we bet my three foot rule against Honey's two pet turtles–"

"Are they trained?" asked Doris eagerly.

"They will be if they're not already. Don't anyone call me, because it's got to be fair running. Good-night."

Helen and Doris decided that they were sleepy too, and the three went upstairs together, leaving Jean and her mother to read in the big living-room. Presently Mrs. Robbins glanced up and saw that the book lay idle on Jean's lap, and she was looking down at the wood fire that burned on the old rock fireplace.

"What is it, dear?" she asked. "Tired?"

Jean shook her head, and smiled half-heartedly.

"I'm awfully ashamed of it, Mother, but I do get so lonesome now and then, for everything, don't you know? All the people that we knew and the things that we used to do. Nothing happens up here."

"Well, cheer up," said the Motherbird happily. "I am lonely too sometimes, but there is so much to compensate for what we have lost that I feel we must not dare be unhappy. And Father grows better every day."

Jean dropped on her knees beside her mother's chair, arms folded close around her.

"You dear, precious, most wonderful person that ever was," she cried. "Don't even *think* of what I said! I'm not a bit lonely, and tomorrow I'm going to see Piney and make calls."

CHAPTER XII

GILEAD'S GIRL NEIGHBORS

The breakfast hour at Greenacres was supposed to be seven-thirty, but the girls rose at about six and spent the hour before out in the garden. It was so fascinating, Helen said in her rather reserved way, to be out-of-doors in the early morning. Sometimes when the air was warmer than the ground there would be a morning mist out of which rose clumps of tree tops like little islands.

The following day at five-thirty exactly, Jean wakened drowsily to find Kit standing by her bed, booted and spurred for the fray, as one might say.

"I want you to look at this clock and be a witness that I'm up on time," she said briskly, holding up a bland, nickel-plated clock from the kitchen, a relic of the days of Tekla. "It's perfectly gorgeous outside, Jean. I don't see how you girls can lie and sleep with all nature calling."

"Nature didn't call you before, did she, Kathleen Mavourneen? Go away and let me sleep."

"Well, I get the turtles anyway. I've got them named already." She seated herself blithely on the foot of the bed, "Triptolemus and Prometheus. Like them? I'll call them Trip and Pro for short."

Jean sat up in bed and hurled her pillow at the laughing, fleeing form. From the end of the hall came a last challenge.

"I'm the early bird this morning anyway, Sleepyhead."

After breakfast though, when the little dew-spangled cobwebs were gone from the meadow grass, Jean had Honey harness Princess, and declared she was going to drive over and get Piney to accompany her on a round of calls. Kit and Doris were busy out in the kitchen garden, and Helen was helping with the dusting and upstairs work. For some reason Jean wanted to go without them on this first reconnoitering expedition.

She drove down the hill towards Gilead Green, bowed with a little rising flush of color at the group in the front of the blacksmith shop, and stopped in front of the brown and white house where the Hancocks lived. It might have been the veritable witch's house in "Hansel and Gretel," all constructed properly and comfortably out of sugar-loaf and gingercakes. The clapboards were a deep cream color and the trimmings were all of brown, scalloped and perforated with trefoils and hearts. The green stalks of tiger lilies grew in thick clusters along its picket fence, and marigolds and china asters were coming up in the long beds.

"Hello, Jean," called Piney buoyantly, beating some oval braided rugs out on the back line. "Can you stop in?"

Jean leaned forward, the reins lying in her lap.

"I wanted to see if you couldn't go driving with me. Just so I can meet some of the girls. We want to give a lawn social or some sort of a summer affair to get acquainted with our neighbors. It's too warm for a house warming, so we'll have a garden party."

"Why, the idea," Piney exclaimed, dropping her stick and pushing back her hair. "I think that's awfully nice. Wait till I ask Mother if I can go."

Jean waited and presently Mrs. Hancock stepped out on the side porch and down the steps to the carriage. She was rather like Honey and Piney, curly-haired and young appearing, with deep dimples and eyes that still held an abiding happiness in their blue depths. Her face was careworn and there were lines around her mouth that told of repressed pain, but it was the look in the eyes that held you. Luella Trowbridge may have gone through trouble, but she had married the man she loved and had been happy with him. She stretched out both hands to Jean.

"Honey's told us so much about you all up there that it seems as if I know every single one of you," she said, pleasantly. "You're Jean, aren't you? Of course Piney can go along if she wants to. Don't forget the new girl over at the old Parmelee place."

"It's funny, you're speaking of a lawn social," Piney remarked, as they drove away. "We've been wanting to give one up at the church–"

"Which church?" asked Jean. "I can see so many little white spires every time I get to a hilltop. They look like fingers pointing up, don't they?"

"I suppose so." Piney was not much given to sentiment. "Anyway, here in our part of town, we've got two. Mother belongs to the Methodist but Father was a Congregationalist, so Honey and I divide up between them. Then over at Happy Valley, three miles south, there's another Congregational church, and we wanted to give a social–"

"Who wanted to?"

"We girls up here at our Congregational church. But our folks don't get along very well with the folks at the Green church, and they say we're just dead up here, dead and buried because we never get anything up. And Mr. Collins, our minister, isn't on speaking terms with the Green minister because something went wrong when old Mr. Bartlett died. He wasn't a professor, you see–"

"What's that?" Jean's eyes were wide with interest. She was getting local data at the rate of a mile a minute.

"Didn't belong to any of the churches at all, but he was awfully nice, so when he died a year ago, Mr. Collins said he'd bury him, though the Green minister had said he wouldn't; so there you are. Then the other minister is a lady–"

"Forevermore!" gasped Jean.

"She's the best of them all, just the same," Piney said soberly. "Only the two other ministers say it isn't the place for women in the pulpit, and how on earth we're ever going to have any social and invite them all, I don't see."

Jean's eyes suddenly shone with the joy of a new idea.

"I do," she said. "Let's visit all the three parsonages first off."

So they followed the road over to the Green and stopped at the white colonial house where Mr. Lampton lived. He was tall and gray-haired, and welcomed his callers with a twinkle in his eyes. It was not customary for two girls to pay a business call at the parsonage, but Jean launched upon her subject at once. His advice and co-operation were asked, that was all. Greenacre lawn would be given for the social, and the girls would look after the refreshments and the Japanese lanterns to decorate the grounds. Ten cents could be charged for ice cream and cake, and the ladies could donate the cake. The proceeds would go to church needs.

"I didn't tell him how many churches, did I?" said Jean, when they drove away with Mr. Lampton's earnest promise to help. He was invited to attend a committee meeting at Greenacres the following Saturday.

Miss Titheradge of the Happy Valley Church was delighted with the idea. Jean liked her at first sight. She was rather plump, with wide brown eyes that never seemed to blink at all, and rosy cheeks.

"It's just what I've been telling the folks up here in these old granite hills. Get together, warm your hands at the fire of neighborly love and kindness. Have socials and all sorts of good times for your young people and your old people. Bless everybody's hearts, they only need stirring up and turning over, and the old fire burns afresh. Yes, I'll help, children."

"We're sure of Mr. Collins," said Piney, as they drove away this time. "I'll see him myself, and tell him about the committee meeting at your house on Saturday. Now we can find some of the girls."

Jean never forgot that afternoon. They drove miles together, stopping at the different houses and meeting the girls who were, to Jean at least, the new material upon which she had to work.

At the old Ames place they found the two Swedish girls, tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, working out in the onion patch with their brothers. Ingeborg was the elder and Astrid the younger, sixteen and fourteen years old. They had moved up from New York two years before, but had both gone to the public schools there and were ready for anything Jean suggested.

"Ingeborg belonged to a basket ball team," Astrid said. "I can swim and row best."

The Chapelles lived in a little gray house close to the road on Huckleberry Hill, two miles below Cousin Roxana's. Etoile was shy-eyed and graceful, smiling but non-committal, and little Tony peered around her mother's skirts at the stranger in the carriage and coquetted mischievously. But they would come, ah, and gladly, Mrs. Chapelle promised.

"They like ver' much to come, you see?" she said eagerly, trying to detach

Tony from her skirt. "Ton-ee, I have shame for you, *ma petite.* Why you no come out, make nize bow? Etoile, go bring some lilacs, make quick!"

Etoile sped away to the tall rows of white and purple lilac bushes, and broke off two large bunches to put in the back of the wagon. Then Mrs. Chapelle remembered that she must send over to her new neighbor a pat of her butter. Such beautiful butter never anyone see, never. Jean must drive around through the lane and see the three Jersey cows browsing there in the clover field, Henriette, Desiree, and Susette.

Last of all came the Icelandic farm, and here Jean found only the hired men, two grave-faced, light-haired transplanted vikings, who eyed her curiously and silently. Hedda, the daughter, and her mother had driven over to sell two young pigs at the Finnish place.

"Oh, dear me," laughed Jean, "let's go home. I feel as if I had been riding like Peer Gynt, all over the world, just touching at countries here and there. Let's go right straight home, so I can talk to Mother and get a perspective on it all."

"Better ask the Mill girls over while you're about it," Piney suggested, so they made one last stop at the red saw-mill in the valley below Greenacres. "They're Americans. My chum lives here, Sally Peckham. She's got five sisters and three brothers, but Sally's the whole family herself."

The three brothers worked in the saw-mill after school hours, and Jean only caught a glimpse of them, but Sally sufficed. She came running out of the kitchen with a brown and white checked apron covering her up, and her red hair blowing six ways for Sunday, as Piney said laughingly afterwards. She was short and freckled and not one bit pretty, unless good health and happiness and smiles made up for beauty. But the instant you met Sally you recognized executive ability concentrated in human form.

"Billy, keep out of those lettuce beds," she called to a younger brother, strayed somehow from the mill. "How do you do, Miss Robbins–"

"Oh, call me Jean," Jean said quickly. "We're close neighbors. If we didn't hear your whistle we'd never know what time it is."

"Well, we've been intending to get up the valley to see you, but Mother's rather poorly, and all the girls are younger than me, so I help her round the house. We've got twins in our family, did Piney tell you? Piney and I named them. We thought of everything under the sun, Martha Washington and Betsey Ross, and Ruth and Naomi, and Mercy and Faith, and then we got it all at once. We've had twins in our family before, Josephine and Imogene, that's Mother and Aunt Jo, but we didn't want to repeat. Somehow, it didn't show any–any imagination." She laughed and so did Jean. "So we called ours Elva and Sylvia. We say Elvy and Sylvy for short. Anne and Charlotte are twelve and nine and the twins are only five. They're too cute for anything. Wish you'd all come down and see us

Sunday afternoon."

"Sally'd ask the whole world to supper Sunday afternoon," Piney said as they finally turned up the home road. "She's just a dear, and she has to work all the time. She never has a single day to herself, and she doesn't mind it a bit. She does manage to get away to sing in the choir Sunday mornings, but that's all. And even if she isn't pretty, she's got a voice that makes gooseflesh come out all over you, and you shut your eyes and just tingle when it rises and falls. I love her, she's so–oh, so sort of big, you know. Isn't her hair red?"

"It's coppery and it's beautiful," Jean answered decidedly. "I think she's dandy. Why can't the twins and Anne and Charlotte buckle in and help, so that Sally can get away once in a while?"

"Her mother says she can't do without her."

Jean pondered over that and finally tucked it away for the consultation hour with the Motherbird, as being too deep for her to settle.

It had been a very profitable afternoon, and after she had taken Piney home, she drove into the home yard, feeling as if she really had a line on Gilead Center girls. Doris came running down to meet her as she jumped out, while Honey came to take care of Princess. Doris's eyes were shining with excitement.

"Jean Robbins, what do you suppose has happened?"

"Something's sprouted," Jean guessed laughingly. Doris spent most of her time watching to see if any of the seeds had started to sprout.

"No. It isn't that. Gypsy's got little chickens. She marched into the barnyard with ten of them, as proud as anything. And nobody knows where she hatched them at all. Isn't she a darling to attend to it all by herself?"

Jean had to go immediately to see the new brood. Gypsy had cuddled them around her in the barn on a pile of hay and steadfastly refused to be removed. If ever a hen looked nonchalant she did, quite as if she would have said, "I can do it just as well as any of these ridiculous nesters that you're so proud of, and my chicks are twice as perfect as theirs."

"They're wonderful babies, Gypsy," Jean told her. "Be careful of them now. Mothers have to behave themselves, you know. No more gallivanting off to the wildwood."

"She probably will. I'm going to have Honey put them into a little coop tomorrow and her too, and let's change her name, Jeanie. Let's call her something tender and motherly. Call her Cordelia, after the Roman Mother with the jewels, that Mother was telling us about."

So Cordelia she was, and Gypsy seemed to acclimate herself both to maternity and to her new cognomen. It only proved, as Kit remarked, what children would do for a flighty and light-minded person, and she trusted that some day Doris would have twins to occupy her mind.

Jean changed her dress and ran down into the kitchen to help get supper and tell her experiences of the day, which proved so entertaining and comical that Mrs. Robbins finally came out and asked if they were ever to have anything to eat.

"Dad's tray is all ready, Mother mine," Jean replied, sitting up on the tall wood box behind the stove, "I'm just waiting for the scones to bake, and Kit's fixing a beautiful jelly omelette. Mother, dear, you never saw anything so funny as these precious inhabitants, but they're all gold, just the same, and I like them. And we're going to have a lawn party here and invite all the warring factions. Isn't that nice? All the folks that aren't on speaking terms with each other we've asked to serve on the committee, so they'll have to come here for tea and chat sociably and neighborlike with each other."

CHAPTER XIII
COUSIN ROXY TO THE RESCUE

"We've forgotten to write Mr. McRae and tell him how much we like the house," Helen said a few days later.

"He doesn't know anything about the house, or care either," protested Kit, struggling with some raspberry canes that needed disentangling and tying back against the woodshed boards. "He's never even seen it. Do you suppose he has the least bit of sentiment for it the way we have or Piney has? I wouldn't bother to write to him."

"Oh, I would," Helen answered serenely. She was down on her knees in the clover diligently hunting four-leaved ones. "It isn't his fault that he's never seen the place. Maybe we could coax him back."

"We don't want to coax him back. It must be our one endeavor to keep him right out there in Saskatoon forever. We must tell him the cellar's damp and the roof leaks and the whole place has gone to rack. If we don't he may come East and take it away from us, and we want to save up and buy it and give it back to Piney and her Mother and Honey."

"What's Honey's real name?" asked Doris irrelevantly. "I never thought to ask him. Somehow it does seem to suit him, doesn't it?"

"He wants to study electrical engineering or else be a rancher," Kit said. "I never asked him what his real name is. You're awfully inquisitive, Dorrie."

"What do all boys see in ranches, I wonder. Back at the Cove, Otis Phelps always wanted to be a cowboy and he's got to be a lawyer, his father says."

"Maybe he'll escape West some day and be whatever he likes. I think one of the very worst things in life is to have to be something you don't want to be." Kit surveyed her work admiringly. "Of course, in the ups and downs and uncertainties, as Cousin Roxy would remark, we must be prepared for all things, but if you can dig inside of yourself and find out what you're best fitted for, then you ought to aim everything at that mark. If Honey wants to be an electrical engineer, he ought to get books now, and swallow them whole, and if he wants to be a rancher, he ought to go West–"

A voice came from midair apparently, overhead on the woodshed roof which Honey was patching with waterproof paint and tar. It was a mild and cheerful voice and showed plainly that Honey was personally interested in the conversation.

"I can't go West just now, Mother needs me; but I'm going as soon as I can."

The three girls stared up at him with laughing faces.

"Honey Hancock," exclaimed Doris, "why didn't you sing out to us before?"

"Wanted to hear what you had to say," said Honey simply. "Thought maybe I'd get some good advice. And my first name's Guilford. The whole thing's Guilford Trowbridge Hancock. I'm named for my grandfather. Piney called me Honey when I was a little shaver, so I suppose I'll be that all my life."

"Piney and Honey," repeated Helen musingly, "when you're really Proserpine and Guilford. Nicknames are queer, aren't they? I think that babies should all be called pet names till they're old enough to choose their own. Still Guilford's a good name. It's a name to grow up to, Honey. You ought to be stout and dignified, don't you know, like Mr. Pickwick."

"Guess I don't know him, do I?" asked Honey. "Piney wants to be something too, but girls can't do that. She wants to be a builder and look after land. She wants to go to the State Agricultural College too, and take the forestry course. Do you know what she does? She read some place that the chestnut trees were dying out, so she takes a pocketful of sound chestnuts with her whenever she goes out for a walk in the woods, and every once in a while she sticks her finger in the ground and plants a chestnut. What do you think of that?"

Kit drew in a deep breath.

"I think she's wonderful. We'll do that too. And acorns and walnuts. I don't see why she can't go to the State College if she likes, or why she can't take the forestry course. It isn't whether you're a boy or a girl that matters in such things. It's just whether you can do the work that counts."

"She can shut her eyes and walk through the woods and tell the name of every tree just by feeling its leaves."

Jean appeared on the back porch and called down to them to come up and wash for dinner. This noon-time wash-up was really a function after one had been working and grubbing in the garden all the morning. Honey would bring in a fresh pail of well water first. Some day Kit intended demanding water piped into the house from Mr. McRae, but now they used the well.

Just as Honey came into the summer kitchen with the pail of water, Ella Lou's white nose showed outside the door by the hitching post and Cousin Roxana's voice called to them.

"No, thanks, I can't stop," she called. "I want Betty and Jean."

Mrs. Robbins came downstairs from her husband's room, cool and charming in her black and white lawn, with her hair piled high on her head, and little close curls framing in her face.

"Why, Roxy, come in and have dinner with us," she exclaimed.

"Don't talk to me about things to eat, Betty," answered Cousin Roxana briskly. "Never had such a set-to in my life. Why, I'm so turned over I can hardly talk. The poor thing, all alone up there on that hill with nothing but woods around her. Enough to make anybody lose heart, I declare it is. Get your bonnet right on, Betty. We can't stop for anything. I wouldn't eat dinner with King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba."

"What is it? Please tell us," Jean pleaded, and all three girls crowded around the carriage.

"Don't waste time, Jean. Get your hat on. She may be dead by now. It's that little Finnish woman up on the Parmelee place where you bought your chickens. Her husband's only been dead a little while, took sick on the ship coming over and died at Ellis Island, I heard. And she's pined and pined with four children on her hands, and this morning she just tied– Oh, my land, I can't talk about it. Do come along. Thank the Lord the water wasn't very deep in the well and they've got her out. And we call ourselves church folks and Christians."

"Had I better take anything with me, Roxy?" asked Mrs. Robbins, hurrying down the porch steps with a motor cloak thrown around her. "Medicine, do you think?"

"No, I've got everything. Always keep emergency things on hand. You never can tell up around here what's going to happen. Bennie Peckham ran a big wooden splinter through his palm the other day, and didn't I have to get it out for him? And Hiram stepped square bang on a piece of glass and cut his foot so he's still going around like old Limpy-go-fetch-it. Have to be prepared for anything when you live out here. This morning Hiram stood his fishing pole up against the side of the house and the line got loose, and one of my best ducks swallowed the bait. I got it out, though. Go long there, Ella Lou, pick up your feet."

Ella Lou started away as if she knew what lay ahead. Jean sat between

her mother and Cousin Roxana, listening with wide eyes as the latter's tongue rambled on. It was a beautiful day. The air was heavy with fragrance. Bluebirds preened and fluttered on nearly every fence rail, and robins hopped along the meadows, chirping mate calls. In the roadside thickets the swamp apples were all in radiant pink blossom, whole bouquets of rare color, with overhead the white dogwood flowers and wild crab-apple.

"It seems fearful that anyone should want to die a day like this," said Mrs. Robbins. "How old is she, Roxy?"

"Old enough to know better, to my way of thinking, with all those children dependent on her for love and care and upbringing," said Roxana promptly. "But that's neither here nor there. We mustn't judge another because we don't know how we'd act in their place. There are four children and her brother. The brother's been around peddling vegetables, potatoes and apples, but everybody's got all they need around here, and he didn't have the gumption to drive fourteen miles to town with them. If I'd been his sister, I'd have hitched up and taken them myself. Men folks are all right in a way and I suppose if the proper one had come along, I'd have married the same as the rest of women folks, but from what I can tell of them at a distance, they're fearful trying and uncertain."

The hill dipped into a deep valley mottled with cloud shadows. When they came in sight of the old Parmelee place, there were the four children grouped forlornly around the barn door as if the presence of tragedy at the house had frightened them away from it. Cousin Roxy waved to them and smiled.

"Come here," she called. "Yes, that tallest boy. 'Most twelve, aren't you, son? Old enough to hitch a horse. What's your name?"

"Yahn," answered the boy shyly.

"Yahn? Guess that's Johnnie in plain American, isn't it?" She jumped to the ground as nimbly as any girl, and handed him the hitch rope. "Doctor got over yet?"

Johnnie shook his head sadly, and the youngest girl broke suddenly into frantic, half-stifled sobbing.

"There's your work cut out for you, Jean," Roxana said briskly. "You amuse these children while your Mother and I go into the house."

So Jean took the three youngest for a walk over into the woods, and told them stories until the frightened, blank look left their eyes and they clung around her confidingly. Yahn and Maryanna, Peter and Rika. From Yahn, who could speak a little English, she found out that the family had only been in the wonderful new land a year, that their mother had been sad for weeks, and would never smile.

"She says she don't know nobody and nobody want to know her. Too many woods all around, too."

"Never mind, she's going to know everyone now," Jean promised hopefully.

Over in the house Cousin Roxy was promising about the same thing to the discouraged little Finnish settler. Weak and listless, she lay on the bed in the room. A morning glory vine rambled up the window casing, and framed in a view of the orchard in full bloom. Pink and white petals drifted from their boughs like fairy snow. Mrs. Robbins looked at them wistfully and remorsefully. She had only lost in worldly goods. This woman had lost husband and hope and happiness, and the old well back in the orchard had been her solution of life's problem. If little Yahn had not seen her fall into it, she would have been dead now. When her eyes opened, and Cousin Roxy questioned her, she only shook her head, and whispered: "Too tired."

"Upon my heart, Betty, I think I'll just bundle her up and take her home with me for a while to rest and feed up, and you can take a couple of the children down with you. Maybe Johnnie and the other boy could stay here with the uncle. Anyway, we'll pull her through."

When the old doctor came he agreed it was the very best thing to do. The Finnish brother had stood helplessly around in the kitchen, getting hot water ready when he was told to and eyeing the form on the bed with perplexity.

"She haf plenty to eat," he kept saying, until Cousin Roxana took him by the shoulder and almost shook him.

"Don't be so silly," she exclaimed. "Man can not live by bread alone, and neither can a woman. She needs to be heartened up once in a while. And put a cover on your old well."

Helen, Kit, and Doris were all watching for the return, and when Jean handed them out Maryanna and Rika, the two little Finns, Kit gasped.

"It's our first chance at what Mother's been telling us about," Jean declared, flushed and enthusiastic, as she turned her two charges out to play with Doris. "It doesn't matter whether your neighbor happens to be a Finn or a Feejee. He's your neighbor and it won't do to let him or his sister take tumbles into old wells because they're strangers in a strange land."

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAWN FÊTE

For two weeks the little Finns remained at Greenacres, getting rosy and happy.

The girls hunted up their old toys; Rika rambled around with a little red express wagon, and Maryanna hugged a big doll to her heart all day long and slept with it at night.

Up at Maple Lawn the tired mother grew steadily better, partly from Dr. Gallup's medicine, partly from Cousin Roxy's persistent infusion of hope, womanly courage, and endurance into her mind. As she grew stronger she began to help Cousin Roxy around the house, and Hiram in caring for the cows. This was odd for a woman, it seemed to Miss Robbins, but Karinya told her it was what she had always done in the homeland when she was a girl, dairy work on a farm, and she liked it best. And out of this grew a plan that Mrs. Robbins helped with. There were three good Holstein cows over at the Finnish home, and when Ella Lou took back the Mother and two kiddies, Cousin Roxana put up a business proposition to the brother and sister. They were to make butter, the very best butter they could, and Mrs. Robbins would get customers for them back at the Cove in Long Island. Homemade butter up here in the hills ranged from ten to twelve cents below the city market price, and was better in every way. So prosperity began to dawn for the little woman who had been too tired to live, and Cousin Roxana kept an eye on the upland farm all summer long, with Jean to help with the children.

After the children went home, the girls turned their attention heart and soul to the lawn party. The first thing to be sure of was a full moon. This came along the last week in June, so they made their arrangements accordingly.

The committee meeting turned out a success in every way. Saturday afternoon Mrs. Robbins and the girls set the dark green willow chairs and table under one of the pines on the lower terrace, and prepared to conquer. The three ministers arrived, each one surprised to find the other two present, but all very gracious and pleasant.

"Why, they were almost cordial before they left," Kit declared after it was over. "I think the prospect of having anyone besides Cousin Roxy make an effort for a good time inspired them. I'm to have charge of a fishpond, and Helen will sell flowers with fortunes attached to them, and Dorrie can help with the ice cream. I know that will suit her."

"I'm to be gypsy fortune teller," Jean announced. "Mother, dear, may I have your Oriental silk mantel scarf, please, and the gold bead fringe off the little boudoir lamp in your room?"

"You may have anything to help the cause along," Mrs. Robbins answered happily. "I've sent down to New York for Chinese lanterns to decorate the grounds with, and Hiram's going to play the violin for us. I'm sure it will be very sociable and just what they need up here."

Honey and Piney took almost as much interest in the affair as the girls

themselves. All that day, when it finally did arrive, they worked, putting wires around the trees out on the lawn, and hanging up the many-colored lanterns. Two tents were erected, one for Jean as the gypsy, and the other for lemonade, made in two big new tubs. Helen said she had cut and squeezed lemons until her whole mouth was puckered up, and her finger nails felt pickled. Kit was everywhere at once, it seemed. She inspired the two ministers to join hands in brotherly ardor and erect long plank tables for refreshments. She showed Honey how to twist young birches together and make an inviting arch over the entrance posts at the end of each drive. She beguiled Hiram, who had come down from Maple Lawn to help around a bit, into moving the piano out on the front veranda.

"When you're tired of playing the violin for them, Mother or one of us girls will play the piano. Music sounds ever so nice at night."

It did seem as if all Gilead Center, Gilead Green, and Gilead Proper had turned out to show its neighborly spirit. There were teams hitched along the road, and teams hitched in the barnyard and the front yard and everywhere. The Chinese lanterns made the grounds look wonderfully enticing and Hiram sat up on the veranda in a kitchen chair tipped back against the wall, and played bewitchingly, so Helen said.

"I shouldn't wonder, Miss Robbins, if we had as many as a hundred folks here tonight," said Mr. Lampton.

"More likely two hundred, Mr. Lampton. It only goes to show what really lies back in our hearts and needs digging up–sociability. Bless their hearts, how I do love to see them all enjoying themselves." Cousin Roxana moved her glasses half an inch higher up on her nose and surveyed the scene. Miss Titheradge was helping Mr. Collins pass the ice cream, and the two were chatting happily together.

Up on the veranda Mrs. Robbins hovered between the Morris chair, where Mr. Robbins sat, and her various guests, welcoming each in her own charming way, and blending the different social elements together with tact and understanding.

Helen and Kit followed Jean's lead. First Jean rounded up the girls whom she had met on the drive with Piney and introduced them to the other Greenacre girls. Doris could not be located from one minute to another. She was like a firefly, bobbing around with a big orange colored Chinese lantern on the end of a long mop handle. But Helen and Kit led the other girls over to the refreshment tent and had them all don little white aprons and help serve ice cream and cake. It was much better than standing around, shy and silent, not knowing what to do next. Kit found one girl, Abby Tucker, leaning disconsolately against a pear tree at the side of the drive. Her white dress was too short for her, and her hair was cut short to her neck and tied with a bow on top very tightly. She looked lonely

and rather indignant too.

"Don't you want to come over and help us with the ice cream?" asked Kit.

"No, I don't," said Abby flatly. "They always ask me to help pass things to eat at the church suppers. I want to have a good time myself tonight. Though we aren't going to have a good time."

Kit looked at her doubtfully. She thoroughly realized the state of mind that will not let itself be happy, that in fact, finds its happiness in being unhappy, but Abby's moroseness baffled her.

"Don't you like it here?" she asked.

Abby nodded.

"Don't you know anyone?"

"Know most of them. My father's a blacksmith and they all come over to get shod."

"Then what is it?" Kit laid her arm around the stooped shoulders and at the touch of real human sympathy, Abby's reserve melted.

"My new shoes pinch awful," she exploded.

Kit never stayed upon the order of her going. She took her straight up to the house to her own room, and ransacked closets and shoe boxes until she found a pair of low shoes to fit Abby, and the latter came down again smiling and radiant, ready to serve ice cream, or make herself agreeable in any way she could.

Piney came up to the veranda where Mrs. Robbins sat, personally conducting her mother to meet her. She was a tall, fair-haired woman with deep dimples, like the children's, and a happy face. Seated in a willow rocker on the veranda with the roses and honeysuckle shedding a perfume around, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Seems so nice to sit up here again, Mrs. Robbins," she said. "Piney's told me all about how you've fixed the place up till it seemed as if I couldn't wait to see it. I used to drive over once in a while after Father died, and get some slips of flowering quince and rose bushes to set out. You know I love every blade of grass in the garden and every pine cone on those trees."

"It's too bad you and the children could not have had it."

"Well, I don't know. I never fret much over what has to be. Maybe this boy Ralph is all right. He's my nephew, but I've never seen him. His father was a claim settler out in Oregon first off, when Cousin France married him. We called her that. Her name was Francelia. Good stock, I guess. I wish Honey could know him, he's so set on being a rancher. I suppose settling and ranching's about the same thing?"

"Not quite," Mrs. Robbins told her. Then came a chat about her own father's ranch in California, and when Piney came back after her mother, she found her

all animated and interested over Honey's future.

Kit and Etoile were arranging a dancing class for alternate Saturday afternoons, the ones between to be given up to lawn tennis and basket ball. Ingeborg and Astrid and Hedda Hagerstrom stood listening and agreeing with shining eyes and eager faces, but silent shy tongues. Hedda was short and strong looking, with the bluest eyes possible and heavy blond braids. She stared at Kit with wide-eyed wonder, Kit, radiant and joyous in her prettiest summery dress, with sprays of flowering almond around her head like a pink blossomy crown.

"You'll come, won't you, Hedda?" she asked. "And bring any other girls over your way."

"There's only Abby over my way. We live on the same road."

"Then bring Abby, but tell her to wear old shoes. We ought to find enough girls to make up a good team out here."

"Do you like hikes?" asked Sally Peckham. "I think it would be fun to have a hike club, and each week tramp away off somewhere. There's ever so many places I want to see."

"It's a good idea, Sally," Piney exclaimed. "First rate. We could call ourselves the Pere–pere–what's that word that means meandering around, Jean, don't you now?"

"Peregrinating?"

"That's it. Peregrinating Gileadites."

"I think 'Greenacre Hikers' would be better," said Ingeborg. "I'd love to go along, wouldn't you, 'Trid?"

Astrid was sure she would. So while Hiram played "Good-night, Ladies," and the three ministers smiled and shook hands together and with their hostess and host, the girls of Gilead planned their first campaign for summer outings.

It was after twelve before the last team had driven away. Hiram and Kit went around with a couple of chairs, mounting them to reach the lanterns and blow out the candles inside. Doris was found sound asleep in the library on the couch. Jean and Helen hunted in the grass for lost spoons and ice cream saucers.

"How much do you suppose we made?" asked Mrs. Robbins. "I'm so proud of it, I had to tell our executive committee. Forty-five dollars and thirty-five cents. Isn't that good for Gilead?"

"Good land alive!" Cousin Roxana exclaimed, her shoulders shaking with laughter. "I didn't suppose you could ever find so much money around loose in Gilead. They're all of them tighter'n the bark to a tree. I do believe, Betty, they paid ten cents admission to the grounds just to see what you all looked like."

"I don't care if they did," Jean said happily. "We got acquainted with all our

neighbors, and now I feel as if I could go ahead and organize something."

CHAPTER XV
KIT PULLS ANCHOR

The following Saturday had been set as the first day for the girls to meet at Greenacres. Sally was the first to arrive, as she lived nearest, and she brought with her Anne and Charlotte, who, in a process known in large families, had become Nan and Carlie.

Hedda and the two girls from the old Ames place, Ingeborg and Astrid, arrived together and helped Kit and Helen plan the tennis court. Below the terraces the lawn lay smooth and even out to the south wall, but it had been decided to sacrifice a slice of the hay field across the road rather than the garden, and Hiram had ploughed up a good sized oblong of land for them, harrowed it smooth, and then the girls had pondered over the problem of rolling it. It must be rolled flat, wet down, and rolled again until it was fit to use.

"We could fill a barrel with sand, and roll that," Doris suggested, thoughtfully.

"Got something better than that," Honey said. "Over at Mr. Peckham's they've got a road roller. Mr. Peckham's the road committee in Gilead township–"

Kit caught him up,

"The whole committee, Honey?"

"Ain't he enough? Ought to see him get out and clean up with those boys of his. He'll let us take it, I'm sure, and it will roll that court down as smooth as can be. I'll go after it this afternoon when I finish with the potato patch."

"Don't I wish we had the old garden hose," Helen said, after they had carried buckets of water from the well unremittingly for nearly an hour, and emptied them on the harrowed patch. "I'm half dead."

"Cheer up, sister mine," Kit told her briskly. "Think of the result. 'Finis coronat opus!' From dawn till dewy eve we will play out here."

"We've got a croquet set down at the house, but the boys are always using the mallets to pound something over at the mill, and the balls get lost. I like this best." Sally stood with arms on her hips, smiling happily. "What else are you going to do up here?"

"Next we're going to start weekly hikes," Kit told her. "You girls have lived here for years, haven't you–"

"We just came up a while ago," Ingeborg corrected.

"I know, and so did Hedda, but Etoile and Tony and Sally and the rest of you all grew right here, didn't you? Well, then. What do you know about the country for ten miles around?" Kit paused dramatically. "Do you know every wood road and cow path through the woods? Do ye ken each mountain peak and distant vale? Where does Little River rise? Have any of you followed the rock ledge up into the hills?"

"Nobody but the hunters go there, and they don't come till fall," said Hedda gravely. She hardly ever smiled, this transplanted little daughter of far-off Iceland. Her manner and expression always seemed to the girls to hold a certain aloofness. Up at her home, later on, they saw a finely carved model of a viking ship which her father had made back in the home island, and Jean declared after that she always pictured Hedda standing at its high prow, facing the gale of the northern seas, her fair hair blowing behind her like a golden pennant, her blue eyes fearless and eager.

"But we'll go. With something to eat and trusty staves. That makes me think, girls, we haven't seen many snakes. Aren't there any up here, Sally?"

"Lots. But mostly black snakes. They're ugly to look at, but they don't hurt you. And little garter snakes, and green grass snakes. I never think about them."

"Are you afraid of anything out here, Sally?" Doris asked, interestedly. She had eyed Sally admiringly from the first moment of their acquaintance, and privately Dorrie held many fears. It was all very well to say there wasn't anything to worry over, as Kit did; but one may step on toads in the dark, or hear noises in the garret that make one shiver even if they do turn out to be just chipmunks after corn and huts.

"Nothing that I know of," Sally replied serenely. "I never felt afraid in the dark. Just as soon go all over the house, up stairs and down, and into the cellar, as not. And I go all over the barn and garden at night. Guess the only thing I'm really afraid of is a bat."

"Everybody's afraid of something," Etoile said, her eyes wide with mystery. "I have the fear too, oh, but often. I am most afraid of those little mulberry worms, you know them? They come right down at you on little ropes they make all by themselves, and they curl up in the air and then they drop on you. Ugh!"

Kit fairly rolled with delight at this, over on the grass.

"How perfectly lovely," she laughed. "Tell some more, Etoile."

"We've got a haunted house on our road," Astrid said in a lowered voice. "The little spring house between the old mill and our place. It's been there years and years, my father says. He knows the old man at the mill, and he told him. As

far back as they can remember it has always been haunted. First there lived an old watchmaker there. He had clocks and watches all over the house, and they ticked all the time."

"Maybe they kept him from being lonely," Helen suggested.

"He was very strange, and when he died, then two old Indian women came to live there. And there was a peddler used to go through and put up over night there, and he never was seen any more."

"You can see the grave in the cellar where they buried him," Ingeborg whispered. "Right down at the foot of the stairs. And at night he comes up and goes all around the house, rattling chains. Yes, he does. My brother went down with some of the boys and stayed there just to find out and they heard him."

"Let's go over there on our hike and stay over night, girls," Kit exclaimed. "I think it would be dandy."

"Don't you believe in ghosts, Kit?" asked Sally. "I don't like to believe in them, but I just thought they had to be believed in if they're really so."

"Remember in Dickens's 'Christmas Carol,'" Jean joined in, "hew old Scrooge insisted that he didn't believe in ghosts even when the ghost sat right beside him, and rattled his chains?"

"Oh, don't, Jeanie," Doris begged, arms close around the big sister's neck. "Don't talk about it."

"We'll stay over night at the spring house, girls," Kit promised happily. "It's a shame to have a real ghost around and not make it welcome. If there are any ghosts they must be the lonesomest creatures in all creation because nobody wants them around. Suppose we say that next Friday we'll walk up to the house and camp out for the night. Who's afraid?"

The girls looked at each other doubtfully.

"Can I bring our dog along?" asked Ingeborg. "Then I am not afraid, I don't think."

"Bring anything you like. I'm going to take an electric flashlight. Here comes our roller, now. We'd better finish the tennis court."

That night the girls talked it over themselves up in Jean's room. It was always the favorite council hour, when all the queen's hand-maidens combed their silken tresses, as Helen said.

Somehow it did seem as if you could think clearer and weigh matters better, after you were undressed, with a nightgown and kimono on, sitting cross-legged on the bed or couch. Mrs. Robbins always stopped on her way to bed to look in at either one room or the other, and chat for a while. She listened with an amused smile to the story Ingeborg had told.

"The fear of the dark, they say, comes from away back in the first dawn of the world," she said. "It is the old dread of the unknown the cave man felt

when darkness fell over the land and wild beasts prowled near. But this other idea about the ghost is queer, isn't it, girls? Do you really want to stay over night there?"

"I think we'd better, Mother dear," Jean answered comfortably, "We'll be the warrior maidens, and slay the dragon Fear which hath most wickedly enthralled our fair land. That's a nice little house, and everyone's afraid to live in it."

"Ingeborg told me after you girls came up to the house, that there was one door in the sitting-room nobody could keep shut. It swung open all the time."

"Never mind, Helen," Kit said. "I'll take it off its hinges, and cart it right down cellar. Then I guess it will behave itself."

Cousin Roxana told the story of the old spring house when they saw her. She could remember Scotty McDougal, the old watchmaker who had lived there.

"Land, yes, I should say I could. He used to wear an old coonskin cap with the tail hanging down, and carried an old gun along with him wherever he went. After he died, two old women moved in from somewhere in the woods towards Dayville. They were Injun, I guess, or gypsy, real good-hearted folks so far as I could see. Used to weave carpet and rag rugs and make baskets. There was a story around that they could tell fortunes and see things in the future, but that's just talk. I never pay any attention to such things at all. The Lord never has seen fit to let His way be known excepting through His own messengers. Probably, if you could clear the house of its name, somebody'd be willing to live in it. It belongs to Judge Ellis."

"Who's Judge Ellis?" asked Kit, who always caught at a new name.

"Who is he?" Cousin Roxy laughed heartily. "Meanest man in seven counties, I guess. He ran for Senator years ago, and was beaten, and he took a solemn oath he'd never have anything to do with anybody in this township again, and I guess he's kept it. He lives in the biggest house here."

"All alone?" asked Doris.

"All alone excepting for a housekeeper and his grandson. He's just a fussy old miser, and the way he lets that boy run wild makes my heart ache."

"How old a boy is he, Roxy?" asked Mrs. Robbins, quick sympathy shining from her eyes.

"Oh, I should say about fifteen. Name's Billie. He's a case, I tell you. What he can't think of in five minutes isn't worth doing. Still, he's a good boy too, at that. Five of my cows strayed off from the pasture lot last summer and he found them after Hiram had run his legs off looking for them. And once we lost some turkeys, and he found them over in the pines roosting with the crows. He knows every foot of land for ten miles around here and more, I guess. You never know when he's going to bob out of the bushes and grin at you. The Judge don't pay any more attention to him than if he was a scarecrow. Seems that he had one

son, Finley Ellis, and he was wild and the Judge turned him off years ago. And one day he got a letter, so Mr. Ricketts told me, from New York, and away he went, looking cross enough to chew tacks. When he came back he had Billie with him, and that's all Gilead ever found out. Billie says he's his grandfather, and the Judge says nothing."

"I'd like to see him," Jean exclaimed.

"Who? The Judge?"

"No, no. Billie, this boy. What does he look like?"

"Looks like all-get-out half the time, and never comes to church at all. You'll know him by his whistling. He can whistle like a bird. I've heard him sometimes in the early spring, and you couldn't tell his whistle from a real whip-poor-will. There is something about him that everybody likes."

"I hope he comes over this way," Mrs. Robbins said.

"Oh, he will. The Judge never lets him have any pocket money, so he's always trying to earn a little. He'll come and try to sell you a tame crow, most likely, or a trained caterpillar. I was driving over towards their place one day and I declare if I didn't find him lying flat in the middle of the road. Ella Lou stopped short and I asked him what he was doing. 'Don't drive in the middle of the road, Miss Robbins,' he said, "cause I've got some ants here, taming them.' Real good looking boy he is too."

"My, but he sounds interesting," Kit remarked fervently. "I almost feel like hunting him up; don't you, Jean?"

Jean nodded her head. She was putting up currants and raspberries, and the day was very warm.

"Why do you keep a fire going in the house?" Miss Robbins asked her. "Put an old stove out in the back-yard, the way I do, and let it sizzle along. Good-bye, everybody. I hear all the ministers are still speaking to each other."

"Come down and play tennis with us," called Helen.

"Go 'long, child." Cousin Roxy chuckled. "How would I look hopping around like a katydid, slapping at those little balls! Get up there, Ella Lou."

"Well," Kit exclaimed, as the buggy drove away, "it seems as if every single day something new happens here, and we thought it would be so dull we wouldn't know what to do with ourselves."

"You mean Billie's something new?" asked Helen.

"Doesn't he sound interesting? I'm going out to ask Honey about him."

"You'd better help me finish these berries, Kathleen," Jean urged. So Kit gave up the quest temporarily, and sat on the edge of the kitchen table, stripping currants from their stems, and singing at the top of her clear young lungs:

"'Oh, where have you been, Billie Boy, Billie Boy,

Where have you been, charming Billie?'
'I've been to seek a wife, she's the comfort of my life,'
But she's a young thing, and cannot leave her mother.'

"'Did she bid you come in, Billie Boy, Billie Boy,
Did she bid you come, charming Billie?'
'Yes, she bid me come in, with a dimple in her chin,
But she's a young thing, and cannot leave her mother.'

"'Did she offer you a chair, Billie Boy, Billie Boy,
Did she offer you a chair, charming Billie?'
'Yes, she offered me a chair, with the ringlets in her hair,
But she's a young thing and cannot leave her mother.'

"'Can she make a cherry pie, Billie Boy, Billie Boy–'"

"Oh, Kit, do stop," begged Jean. "It's too hot to sing."

Kit looked out at the widespread view of Greenacres, rich with the uncut grass, billowing with every vagrant breeze, like distant waves. It was hot in the kitchen, hot and close.

"I'll bet he'd let her stay right in the kitchen keeling pots and making cherry pies, too," she said suddenly.

"Who?"

"Who?" wrathfully. "All the Billies of the world. They can ramble fields and whistle like whip-poor-wills, but we've just got to stay and make cherry pies forever and ever, amen."

"Why, Kit, dear–"

"Don't 'dear' me. I want to get out and tramp and live in a tent. I hate cooking. I don't see why anybody wants to eat this kind of weather. I'd nibble grass first."

"Yes, you would," laughed Helen. "You'll be the first at supper to lean over sweetly and ask for preserves and cake. I see you nibbling grass, Miss Nebuchanezzar."

But Kit had fled, out the back door and over to the pasture where Princess rambled.

"Kit's fretful, isn't she?"

"She's pulling on her anchor," answered Jean. "We all do. Some days I get really homesick for the girls back home and everything that we haven't got here,–the library and the art galleries and the lectures and the musicales and

everything. I think we ought to write down and ask some of the girls to come up."

"I don't. Not until Dad's well."

Doris was out of hearing. Jean looked over at Helen, who in some way always seemed nearer her own age than Kit.

"Helen, honest and truly, do you think Dad's getting any better?" she asked in a low voice.

Helen hesitated, her face showing plainly how she dreaded acknowledging even to herself the possibility of his not improving.

"He eats better now, and he can sit up."

"But he looks awful. It fairly makes my heart ache to look at him sometimes. His eyes look as if they were gazing away off at some land we couldn't see."

"Jean Robbins, how can you say that?"

"Hush. Don't let Mother hear," cautioned Jean anxiously. "I had to tell somebody. I think of it all the time."

"Well, don't think of it. That's like sticking pins in a wax statue back in the Middle Ages, and saying, 'He's going to die, he's going to die,' all the time. He's getting better."

Jean was silent. She felt worried, but if Helen refused to listen to her, there was nobody left except Cousin Roxy. Somehow, at every emergency Cousin Roxy seemed to be the one hope these days, unfailing and unfearing. Dauntless and cheerful, she rode over every obstacle like some old warrior who had elected to rid the world of dragons.

But when Jean found an opportunity of speaking to her of her father, Cousin Roxana's face looked oddly passive.

"We're all in the Lord's hands, Jeanie," she said. "Trust and obey, you know. There are lots worse things than passing over Jordan, but we've just got that notion in our heads that we don't want to let any of our beloved ones take the voyage. Jerry's weak, I know, and he ain't mending so fast as I'd hoped for, but he's gained. That's something. You've been up here only a couple of months. It took years of overwork to break him down, and it may take years of peace and rest to build him up. Let's be patient. Dr. Gallup seems to think he's got a good deal more than a running chance."

Jean wound eager, loving arms around the plump figure, and laid her head down on Cousin Roxy's shoulder.

"You dear," she exclaimed. "You're the best angel in a gingham apron I ever saw. I feel a hundred times better now. I can go back and work."

"Well, so do, child, and comfort your mother. Hope springs eternal, you know, in the human breast, but it takes a sight of watering just the same to make

it perk up."

CHAPTER XVI
GUESTS AND GHOSTS

It would never do to leave Piney out of any jaunts, Kit said, as the end of the week drew near again, and so Honey was commissioned as despatch bearer.

"Tell her we're going to walk from here over to Mount Ponchas, and back by way of the Spring House. We want to start at five Friday night."

"Ought to start at daybreak for a hike," Honey replied. "Never heard of starting near sundown. You'll fetch up by dark at the rock ridge and sleep in a deer hollow."

"Maybe we will," Kit responded hopefully. "I hadn't thought of that, Honey. It sounds awfully nice. If you could just get a peep at our lunch you'd want to hike too, no matter where we fetched up."

"I've camped out along the river. Not this river. The big one down at the station, the Quinnebaug. We boys go down there when the bass is running and fish for them nights. Eels too."

"Do you know a boy named Billie Ellis?" Kit asked suddenly. "Does he ever go along with you?"

"Billie Ellis? I should say not." Honey was very emphatic. "Judge Ellis wouldn't let him go along anywhere with the rest of us fellows. He caught a big white owl the other day over in the pines back of the Ellis burial ground."

"I wish he'd come over our way some time. I'd love to know him. He sounds so kind of–well, different, don't you know?"

"He's different all right," laughed Honey, good-naturedly. "I remember once three years ago it was awfully cold, and we boys had been skating and went into the blacksmith shop to get warm, Abby Tucker's father's shop. And who should come in but Billie Ellis without any hat on, and only an old sweater and a pair of corduroy knickers on, and shoes and stockings. We asked him how he ever kept warm such weather, and what do you suppose he said?"

"What?" Kit's face was eager with interest.

"Said he had seven cats he kept specially to keep him warm. Said the Judge wouldn't let him have any fire, so he trained the cats to cuddle around him and keep him warm all night! Good-night. I'll tell Piney you want her to go along

with you."

Kit sat out on the terrace after he had passed up the hill road. Jean and Helen were upstairs with their father, and Doris was practising her music with her mother in the big living-room. Somehow, Mother's fingers made scales sound sweet. Honey had been gone about fifteen minutes when Kit heard the sound of a carriage coming along the level valley road. It couldn't be anyone for Greenacres, she thought; but just then the carriage turned in at the wide drive entrance and came up to the veranda steps.

"You had better wait," she heard a voice say, such a dandy voice, young and full of happy sounding. Then somebody bounded up the steps, three at a time, and crossed the veranda, with her sitting right there on the top terrace below the rose and honeysuckle vines. Kit was always precipitous in her conclusions. It flashed across her mind in one brilliant, intuitive wave that this was Ralph McRae, from Saskatoon. Doris's madcap verse ran riot through her brain:

"Oh, Saskatoon,
Don't come too soon–"

There was no door-bell or even knocker, and the double doors stood wide open,

but the screen doors were locked, inside, so Kit stood up and called.

"Just a minute, please. I'm coming."

He waited for her, cap in hand and smiling. It was shadowy, but she saw his face and liked it. As she told the other girls later, it looked like all the faces you could imagine that had belonged to the real heroes' best friends, the Gratianos, and Mercutios, and Petroniuses of life.

"Is this Miss Robbins?" he asked, and Kit flushed at the tone. As if she didn't long seventeen hundred times a month to be *the* Miss Robbins like Jean.

"No. I'm only Kit," she answered. "You're our Mr. McRae, I think. How do you do?"

He took her proffered hand and shook it warmly, until there were little red lines around her rings, and Kit led him around to the side door and let him in while she lighted a lamp.

"Mother's in here," she said, leading the way into the living-room. Mrs. Robbins sat by the west window. She loved the quiet rest hour after sundown, and Doris was playing with the soft pedal down. "Mother, dear," Kit said. "Mr. McRae's come from Saskatoon."

"Just as if he'd stepped over the whole distance in about seven strides," Doris told later, after Mr. McRae had been safely disposed of in the guest chamber, and the family could discuss him safely. "I think he's awfully nice looking, don't you,

Jean?"

"I can't think about his looks, Dorrie," Jean replied laughingly. "All I can do is wonder what he has come after. Does he want the house and farm? Or has his conscience troubled him so much about Piney and her mother and Honey that he's going to lay Greenacres on their front doorstep in restitution? Or did he just want to see what we all looked like?"

"Ask him," suggested Kit blandly. "He seems to be a very approachable young man so far as I can see."

"He wanted to go up to Cousin Roxy's for the night and Mother wouldn't let him. That shows that she likes him."

"Mother'd spread her wing over any lone wanderer after nightfall, Helenita. Wait and see what the morrow doth portend. We'll go for our hike just the same."

The next day Mr. Robbins sat out in a big steamer chair on the veranda with the stranger, and seemed to enjoy his company wonderfully.

"I do believe, Mumsie," Jean said, "that poor Dad has been smothered with too much coddling. Just look at him brace up and talk to Mr. McRae."

"I hope we can persuade him to stay with us while he is in Gilead."

"He doesn't act as if he needed much persuading. They've rambled all the way from salmon culture to Alaska politics and whether alfalfa would grow in Connecticut. Now they're settling Saskatoon's future. It appears that if no cyclones hit it, Saskatoon will be a booming town. I'm glad we don't need any cyclone cellars here."

"Jeanie, you tempt Providence with your jubilant crowing. Come and help me put up our lunch. Bacon and biscuit are going to be the staff of our existence, with gingerbread and cheese for the reserves."

It had been agreed that the girls should meet at Greenacres that afternoon. Honey had been sent up to Maple Lawn with a note announcing the arrival of Ralph McRae, and inviting Cousin Roxy down for tea. She drove down about four, fresh as a daisy in her black and white dimity and big black sun hat with sprays of white lilacs on it. Ralph helped her out and stood smilingly while she ran her fingers through his thick brown hair and patted his shoulder.

"Just the sort of boy I expected Francelia'd have," she said happily. "Well set up and manly too from all appearances. Going to stay around a while, Ralph, and get acquainted?"

"Why, I'd like to, Miss Roxy. It was rather lonesome out West with none of my own people there. I've always wanted to come back here and see all of you. Mother used to talk a lot about you all to me when I was little. She didn't have anybody else to tell things to."

"Like enough," Roxy responded rather soberly for her. "You must meet your cousins."

"I didn't know I had any."

Miss Robbins glanced over to the woodpile where Honey was sawing some chestnut tops for dry wood to mix in with the birch.

"Come over here, Honey," she called briskly. "This is the boy cousin and Piney's the girl, both children of your mother's own sister Luella. Guess we'll get this straightened out some time. Honey, this is Ralph McRae, your own blood cousin."

Ralph took the tanned, supple hand of the boy in his, and held it fast, looking down at Honey's cheery, freckled face.

"I think we're going to be pals, old man," he said, and Honey's heart warmed to him. Nobody had ever before called him that.

When Piney arrived with the other girls, she too was introduced, but she proved less pliable than Honey. Straight and tall, she faced her new cousin, every flash of her eyes telling him that she resented his having all while they had nothing, and Ralph could make no headway with that branch of the family.

At five they were ready to start. Sally could not go, nor Nan, Carlie, or Tony. But the older girls were all there, and at the last minute Abby Tucker came hurrying along the road with a large paper bag.

"Thought I'd never get here, but I did," she said triumphantly. "I made popcorn balls for all of you. And I've got some red pepper too. Going to throw it at the ghost."

"Why, you cold-blooded person," Kit exclaimed. "Red pepper at a poor harmless ghost! Shame on you."

But Abby only smiled mysteriously and gave the girls to understand that red pepper was the very latest weapon for vanquishing ghosts.

Jean had told each girl to bring a blanket. These were spread down and rolled up army-fashion until they looked like life buoys, then slung over the girls' shoulders. The commissary department consisted of Kit, Hedda and Ingeborg, who counted over their supplies almost gloatingly. Etoile had brought jam turnovers and deviled-egg sandwiches. Hedda had brought loaf cake and cheese,–cream cheese with sweet red peppers chopped up in it.

"So funny for Hedda to bring Italian stuff. You'd expect pickled walrus from her," Kit remarked.

"I like this," Hedda answered gravely. "I never tasted walrus."

Ingeborg and Astrid brought sandwiches, made of rye bread with home-cured roast ham. And Piney appeared with a big bag of cherries, white-hearts and deep red ox-hearts.

"There's a loaf of gingerbread too, with raisins in it," she said.

"You're equipped for a journey over Chilkoot Pass," Ralph told them teasingly. "How many weeks will you be gone?"

"We'll be home tomorrow about sundown, good sir," Kit retorted haughtily. "Should you see the distant light of a signal fire you may come after us."

"Piney can tell direction by the sun," Honey said. "You won't get lost with her along. Better keep out of the woods though. Mount Ponchas is due south."

The girls left the grounds of Greenacres and turned into the open road. At each clear point they paused to wave back to the group on the veranda, but Jean and Ingeborg led at a good pace and the rest fell into it, following the river road to the old spring house. Helen started to sing with Piney, and the others joined in. The first mile seemed to vanish before they knew it, and even by the time they reached the old red saw-mill, where Mr. Rudemeir lived, they were not tired. He was the old Prussian sailor Honey had told them of. They met him driving a couple of heavy Percheron horses along the river path, and he waved an old pipe in friendly fashion.

"He's mighty nice," Piney said fervently. "Last summer there were some girls boarding up the valley, and they couldn't swim. One went out beyond her depth and he saved her life."

"Bless his heart, let's give him a cheer," Kit proposed. "He needs encouragement."

So they gave a rousing cheer, and the old man looked back in surprise, grinned, and waved again to them.

"Wait a minute," Jean said suddenly. "We've forgotten matches. Run back and ask him for some, Dorrie, please."

"He asked where we were bound for," said Doris when she returned. "When I told him he said he guessed we'd have our hands full."

"It's getting a little dark." Etoile glanced back over the shadowy road behind them.

"We've got a lantern and some candles," Astrid said comfortably, "and Tip for sentinel. There isn't anything to be afraid of that I can see."

"'Speak for yourself, John,'" Kit quoted. "If we don't see or hear something I'm going to be awfully disappointed. And if we do hear anything coming slowly upstairs, don't flash the electric light right at it until it has a chance to show itself. I hope it will be a lovely pale green, like the ghost in Hamlet."

Etoile stopped short in the middle of the road, her eyes wide with dread.

"I think perhaps I'd better go right back now, girls."

But Kit and Ingeborg wound their arms around her waist and promised faithfully to guard her if she would only stick the night out. They went on up the long wood-road, past the falls above the mill, past Mud Hole where the boys fished for eels, past Otter Island where Hiram came to fish, and on to the old spring house. It was set far back from the road in a garden overgrown with weeds and tall timothy grass, and tiger lilies grew rankly in green clumps along

the gray stone walls. The little wooden shelter over the well was knocked over and the boards that protected the windows had been pulled half off. Jean went to the kitchen door and found it unlocked. Only wasps and spiders were to be seen, and one stout old toad that backed hurriedly out of sight under the stone doorstep.

"Let's look it all over before it gets really dark," she said, and they went in and out of each bare room, upstairs and downstairs, into the old musty cellar, even into the low-roofed loft over the summer kitchen.

"Now, we know there's nothing here, don't we?" Kit said, after the tour of inspection was over, and they sat out on the grass near the well, with their lunch spread around them. "How perfectly wonderful things taste after you've tramped, don't they? More ginger cookies, please, Hedda."

"Which room are we going to sleep in?" asked Abby. "I'd just as soon sleep out here all night on blankets, wouldn't you, Etoile?"

"We don't care if you want to," Helen agreed. "Try it on the little side porch. Then you can watch the cellar entrance because the ghost may decide to come up that way."

It was getting quite dark by the time the supper remains were cleared away. Candles were lighted and set on the mantel in the front room and in the kitchen. Kit and Hedda had returned from a successful foraging expedition around the barn and corn house, and had brought back armfuls of hay to spread under their blankets on the floor. Tip, the brown water spaniel, took the whole affair very seriously and made the circuit of the grounds over and over again, chasing imaginary intruders.

"Well, girls, I guess we're all ready to go to bed, aren't we?" Kit called finally. "It's eight-thirty by Jean's watch, and we'll have to get an early start."

They agreed it was the best plan and went into the big living-room where the fireplace was. The nights were still very cool up in the hills, so Hedda and Doris had been appointed wood gatherers and a fine dry wood fire blazed on the stone hearth. After they were ready for the night, they sat around this in a semi-circle, eating popcorn balls and telling stories, until all at once there came a sound that silenced every one and left them wide-eyed and scared.

CHAPTER XVII

BILLIE MEETS TRESPASSERS

It was unlike any sound the girls had ever heard back at the Cove; almost like a human being in distress and yet like some animal cry too.

"It's a fox," whispered Astrid, getting nearer to her big sister.

"No, it isn't," said Abby. "That's a deer. They always yell like that when the moon's full."

"It was right near, I think, right outside." Kit sat up eager and tense. "Shall I flash the light, Jean?"

"Not yet. Wait until it comes again. I think it was only some night bird."

So they waited breathlessly. Every tiny creaking noise in the old house was intensified by the heavy silence. Jean rose and went to the window. The moon was not up yet, and it was hard to distinguish objects, but down in the garden she thought she saw something that looked like a cow lying down.

"I can't tell just what it is. It may be only a stray cow or horse," she said softly.

"Throw something at it," suggested Kit, hopefully. "Let's all throw something."

"Just to see whether it jumps or not," Astrid assented. She hunted around and found some loose half bricks in the chimney place.

"Where's Tip? He hasn't barked once," remarked Abby.

"Dogs are always frightened when they see ghosts. Let me fire away at it first, girls." Astrid took aim and the half brick flew down at the dark object with a deadly thud, but there was no stampede. She leaned far out the window, staring at it anxiously. "It seems to me I can see it move and it has horns and a sort of woolly tail, girls."

"Sounds like a yak," Kit chuckled. "I'm willing to do this much. I'll go to the door and open it, and you girls stay here with bricks to throw, and when I flash the light on it, if it jumps you can save me."

But before she could carry out the plan the sound came again, longer and more thrillingly penetrating than before. It was a wail and a challenge and a moan all in one, not just one cry, but a prolonged succession of them. As soon as it stopped Piney exclaimed:

"Now I know. That's an owl and it comes from the little garret over the 'ell' where we couldn't climb because there weren't any stairs. Don't you know, girls?"

"Sure, Piney?" Etoile's tone was almost trembling. "Never I hear such a cry."

"Oh, I have. It's an owl, I know it is, one of those big ones. Riding through the woods at night coming home from town I've been half scared to death by one of them. Sounds like seventeen ghosts all rolled into one. Come along, Kit. You and I'll go hunt it up."

The rest followed gingerly, a strange procession bearing candles, Kit leading with the flash, light. Tip stumbled up drowsily from the kitchen door and barked at them.

"Oh, yes, it's all very well for you to bark now," laughed Jean. "Why didn't you go after that noise?"

They reached the "ell" room and found a trapdoor in the ceiling. Abby remembered seeing a ladder out in the back entry behind the door and this was brought in.

"And see this, girls," she exclaimed, running her finger over it. "No dust on the rounds. That shows it's been used lately."

"Aren't we perfectly wonderful scouts? Abby, I love the way you never miss anything." Kit leaned the ladder up against the wall, and mounted it, with Piney close behind and the other girls at its base. "What if it shouldn't be an owl–"

She stopped with her palm against the trapdoor. Raising it about an inch she flashed the light, and there was a great fluttering and flopping overhead.

"What did I tell you!" Piney cried excitedly. "Do it again, Kit. It can't hurt you and the light blinds it."

So the trap-door was lifted again with the light of the electric hand lamp turned on full and Kit cautiously pulled herself up into the aperture. It was tent shaped and low, not more than four feet at its highest. But instead of being bare like the rest of the old house, there were certainly evidences of human occupancy. There was a tin can filled with fresh water, and a strip of rag carpet laid down on the floor. A box of fish hooks and neatly rolled lines lay on one side, and there was a small frying pan and a horn handled steel knife and fork. Rolled up in one corner was a pair of old overalls, and some books much the worse for wear lay beside them. Kit's glance took in everything, and last of all, backed into a corner and blinking hard, was the ghost itself,–a big white owl.

Piney pulled herself up too, and reached out after the books gently so as not to frighten the owl any more. With a couple in her hand, they lowered the door again, and joined the others.

"It's an owl and a hermit's nest," Kit told them excitedly. "Open the books, Piney. Is there any name inside?"

Piney read off the titles,

"'Treasure Island' and 'Peveril of the Peak.' He's got a nice collection, hasn't he, whoever he is? There isn't any name inside. There's a bookplate in each though."

"Let me see." Helen and Kit both tried to look at the same time. The bookplate was pasted in each, but it was a hard one to decipher. It looked like some cryptogram with its intertwined letter forms, and they gave it up for the night.

"Well, there was certainly fresh water in that tin," Kit said positively, "and that shows the haunted house is inhabited by something tangible, I mean something besides the owl. Let's go to bed very calmly and sleep. I'm sure we've laid the ghost."

It did seem as though they had, for the remainder of the night was peaceful and safe except for the owl crying out lonesomely at intervals until about four o'clock, when the dawn came. Rolled in their blankets, the girls slept soundly until the sunlight threw broad golden beams into their quarters.

There was no rope on the windlass at the well, so Ingeborg proposed that they go down to the river and wash there. It was lots of fun. They found that the dark and fearsome object they had heaved bricks at the night before was only a big gray rock half sunken in the ground.

Along the river margin turtles sunned themselves in rows on the half-submerged logs, and a muskrat scuttled clumsily for cover at sight of the invaders.

"I wish we could go right in," said Jean, looking up and down the winding course of the river as she parted the alders; "but it isn't really safe when you don't know the water. This looks full of unexpected holes and snags. Where does it run to?"

"Down past the two mills, and rises away up in the Quinnebaug Hills," Piney told her, kneeling on a flat rock and splashing herself well. "Did you see that black snake hustle out of the way then? They're awful cowards. Yes, Jean, this comes from Judge Ellis's place about two miles beyond here, three and a half by road."

"Judge Ellis? Billie's grandfather?"

"You talk just as if you knew him, Kit."

"Well, I feel as if I do, and when I do I'm going to take him right under my wing and be a mother to him," said Kit defiantly.

"Who? The Judge?"

"No. This Billie person. Or I'll trot him home to Mother and let her be nice to him."

"Here are some fishpoles, girls, hidden in the bushes," Doris called out. "Know what I think? There are boys around."

All at once upstream they heard somebody whistling. At first it sounded almost like a bird trilling high and clear, but birds do not sing "Marching Through Georgia," so the girls sat there on the bank, sheltered from view by the alders, and waited until a flat bottomed row-boat came into view. Standing at the stern, one bare foot on the back seat and one on the cross seat, with a long punting pole in his hands, was a boy of about fifteen. His head was bare and his overalls were rolled above his knees. Whistling recklessly, sure of himself and the solitude, he came down the river and guided the boat to shore near where the girls sat. He

hauled it up half-way out of the water, dropped the pole into it, and started up the bank before he caught sight of them.

"That's Billie Ellis," Piney said quickly, and waved her hand to him in friendly greeting. "Hello, Billie."

"Hello," Billie returned. "Where'd you come from?"

"We came from Whence and are going Whither," Kit spoke up merrily. "Got some fish for breakfast?"

Billie hesitated, trying to appear nonchalant, but plainly very much rattled at these persons who had taken up squatter rights on his domain. He rolled down his overalls very slowly and deliberately to gain time, and this gave the girls a chance to see just what he looked like, this Billie person, as Kit had dubbed him. He was taller than Honey by a good deal, with short-cropped curly hair rather nondescript in color, and big brown eyes, eyes as startlingly frank and uncompromising in their gaze as those of a deer. He was tanned a nice healthy brown, and his smile was extremely satisfying if one were looking for friendliness. Altogether, the Greenacre girls approved of Billie at sight. To the others he was more or less familiar, even while none of them knew him well.

"Where you all going?" he asked.

"Just walking over the country," Abby told him. "Where are you going, Billie?"

Billie flushed at this direct query.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered lamely. "I come down the river a lot."

"We fed the owl," Kit said innocently. "Just some bread and ham. I suppose it thought it had a new kind of mouse."

Billie glanced at her with quick boyish indignation. They had not been satisfied with finding out his landing place and swimming hole. They had gone into the old house and discovered his secret den and the big white owl. He had always regarded girls as semi-dangerous, but this was worse than even he had expected. He turned to Piney as the one in the crowd that he knew best.

"What did you go into the house for?"

"Shelter for the night," Piney answered promptly. "The door was open and we went in. If folks don't want company they should keep their doors locked. Anyhow, nobody lives here and we didn't hurt a thing. We wanted to see the ghost."

Billie grinned at this admission, a quick mischievous grin that made his whole face light up and seem to sparkle with fun.

"Did he come up and rattle his chains for you?"

"No, he didn't, and I don't believe he ever did for anybody else."

"Maybe not," Billie agreed blandly. "How far up the river are you going?"

"To Mount Ponchas."

"That's only seven and a half miles. You can go along up the hill road from here, and when you come to the state road that has telegraph poles on it, you turn off and go west. It's three hills over and you pass through one village, Shiloh Valley. When you come to Ponchas don't forget to look for the grave of the Cavalier."

"Where's that?" asked Jean. "We haven't heard of it at all."

This was touching Billie's heart in the right spot. He knew every rod of land for miles around Gilead and loved its old historic lore. The girls did not know it then, but life was rather a dull affair over at the Judge's place. There were only the Judge himself; Mrs. Gorham, his housekeeper; Farley Riggs, his general business man; and Ben Brooks, the hired man. It was rather an unsympathetic household for a boy of fifteen, especially one who had been unwelcome; but he had made friends with Ben and had found him a treasure house of information.

There might be other sections of importance in the United States besides Gilead Center, Connecticut, but Ben held them in slight esteem. He had been born and brought up there and had never even wanted to go away. The sun had always risen and set for him beyond the encircling Quinnebaug Hills. He was about forty when Billie first came, genial, optimistic, rather good-looking, and an insatiable reader.

Billie's two favorite occupations were ranging the country on personal hikes of exploration and sitting up in Ben's room over the corn house in the evenings, looking at his books and magazines and listening to him talk on current topics and historic events. No topic was too intricate for Ben to tackle. No government ever evaded him when it came to diplomatic tricks or ways. He was on to them all, as he told Billie.

So now Billie remembered how Ben had told him about the mysterious stranger who had come to Gilead back in the earliest days of the settlement. The colonists had suffered much from Indian raids until there came into their midst a man whom they called the Cavalier. With his negro body-servant, he had lived amongst them and taught them defense against their savage foes, taught them the best way to win over the soil and reclaim the wilderness. Yet when he died they knew no more of him than on the first day when he rode into their village. His grave lay over on the south side of Mount Ponchas where he had wished it to be, near a rock where he had often held council with the Indians.

"Be sure to see it when you get there," Billie advised. "I wish I was going along with you."

"Come over to our place, won't you, Billie?" Kit asked in her most neighborly way. "I'd like to ask you about some arrow heads we found. Will you?"

Billie nodded his head nonchalantly. It was like giving a bird an invitation to call on you, or handing your card to a rabbit. But he watched them as they

went up the hill road from the river, and when Doris turned and waved, he waved back. At least he was interested in his trespassers, even though he could not quite forgive them for having discovered his pet hiding place.

CHAPTER XVIII
HARVESTING HOPES

It was noon before they reached Ponchas, although they might have gone ever so much faster if every new flower by the way had not coaxed them to linger. Then they came to a big mill in the heart of the woods, where the men were cutting out chestnut trees for ties. Then Shiloh Valley was so pretty it was hard to leave it. There was a little white church, with a square steeple and green blinds, standing on a large church green, a dot of a schoolhouse opposite, one lone store, and about nine houses. But each house was set in its own little domain independent and aloof, with its barn and granary, tool house and smoke house, woodshed and corn crib, and one had a silo and a forge besides.

The only person they saw was a little girl coming out of the store, and she stood and watched them out of sight, with wide surprised eyes, just as if, Doris said, they were a circus.

"I suppose we're the most interesting sight she's seen in weeks. Wish I could run back and coax her to go with us."

But Ponchas beckoned to them in the distance, a violet tinted cone of rock, and they kept steadily on until, as the shadows pointed north, they camped for luncheon at its base. Helen and Ingeborg went hunting the Cavalier's grave, but Hedda found it when she brought water from the spring house that had been built over a live spring gushing out at the base of the rock. Nearby was a heap of gray moss-covered rock piled into a cairn, with a rugged rock cross at the head twined with wild convolvulus. On it were cut the words:

"He succored us
The Cavalier
1679."

"Well, I do think they might have told us more than that," Jean said, when the other girls came to look at it. "Perhaps, though, this would have pleased him better. Let's name him, girls."

"Sir John Lovelace," said Helen.

"Oh, no, give him something sturdy; call him Modred or Gregory," Kit protested. "Gregory Grimshaw."

They stood for a few moments in silence gazing at the quiet resting place, wondering what the real story was of the stranger it sheltered.

"I think his servant could have told if he had so wished," Etoile said wisely. "I will ask my father about him. He knows many of the old stories of the places around here. He came here from Canada when he was a very little boy. There were gray wolves around in the winter time, and the spring came earlier then. He has found arbutus the first week in March."

"What kind of wild animals are here now?" asked Doris anxiously. "Nothing that's dangerous, is there?"

"Wild cats sometimes," Astrid said. "Deer, foxes, 'coons, muskrats, woodchucks, otters, rabbits, squirrels. What else, Ingeborg?"

"I can tell you of something that really happened over where I live," Abby interrupted. Under the excitement of the trip and its novelty, Abby had fairly bloomed. From a listless, rather unhappy girl she had become a sturdy, cheerful hiker. Kit had taken her under her wing from the start.

"It's fun getting hold of somebody so awfully hopeless," she had said, "and trying to make her see the sun shining and the flowers growing right under her nose. Abby's going to be happy. She's like some little half-drowned kitten."

It was because nobody had ever taken any interest in her before. Her father was the blacksmith, a silent, rather morose man who had quarreled with his own brothers and never spoke to them. Her mother was a frail, nervous woman, so used to being yelled at that she jumped the moment anyone spoke to her. Jean had driven over there one day to get Princess a new set of shoes, and Mrs. Tucker had come out from the kitchen door, a thin, flat-chested woman with straggly hair and vacant eyes.

"How be ye," she said wistfully, looking up at the pretty new neighbor. "How's your Ma? And Pa? Sickly, ain't he? I suffer something fearful all the time. Sometimes my head feels as if it was where my feet are, and my feet feel as if they were where my head is. I can't seem to make any doctor understand what I mean, but that's exactly the way I feel, and it's fearful confusing."

Then Abby had come out and sort of shooed her mother back into the house as one would a fretful hen.

"There was a circus up at Norwich," said Abby now. "And a real live panther escaped and the hunters said they found his tracks down our way. Then one night

when I was in bed, they knocked on our door and said the tracks led right into our woodshed. And my father got out his shotgun and went with them, but I went down in the kitchen with Ma, because she's nervous, and when I started up the back stairs I saw its eyes shining at me right under my bed."

"How could you see your bed on the back stairs?" asked Piney doubtfully.

"I left my door open and when I got on the middle stair I could see right in under my bed, and there it was."

"Abby Tucker! What did you do?" exclaimed Hedda. "You never told me."

"What do you suppose I did? I fell right downstairs. Guess you would have too, if you thought you saw a live panther under your bed. But it wasn't. It scooted out past me and it was our big tiger cat Franklin."

"Did they find the real one?" asked Etoile.

"He is not anywhere around now, is he, Abby?"

"Oh, land, no," laughed Abby. "They got it over in the pine woods and it was half starved and cold. It went back to the circus."

"Well," exclaimed Kit, with a sigh. "I used to think things were monotonous in the country, but I've changed my mind. There's something new happening here every minute."

Just then Doris gave a little squeal of dismay, and jumped up.

"Something bit my hand," she said. The girls searched in the grass and found the breaker of the peace. It was a shiny pinching beetle.

"Don't kill it," Abby warned. "They bury the dead birds, Ma says. They're the sextons of the woods."

"Maybe it thought I needed to be buried too," said Doris ruefully. "It nipped me good and plenty."

When they started back they sang along the road, first old songs that all of them knew, and then Hedda sang two strange Icelandic songs her mother had taught her, lullabies with a low minor strain running through them.

"Day has barred her window close and goes with quiet feet,
Night wrapped in a cloak of gray,
Comes softly down the street,
Mother's heart's a guiding star,
Tender, strong and true,
Lullaby and lulla-loo, sleep, lammie, now."

The other was about the reindeer that would surely come and carry the baby away if it didn't go to sleep. She had a strong, sweet voice, and sang with much feeling. After hearing the other girls, Jean said they ought to have a glee club,

even if they met only once a month.

"Just for music. Mother says that music is the universal language that everyone understands. Let's meet at our house next week, and give the afternoon to it."

"I think we ought to meet somewhere else, not all the time at your home, Jean," Etoile demurred in her courteous French way. "We would be very glad to have you with us any time."

"Then we will come, won't we, girls?" Jean agreed. "And Sally will enjoy that because she can sing too, and it will be near home for her. I think we are organizing splendidly."

But the next few weeks were filled with home activities and it was hard to squeeze in time for all that they had outlined. There were berries to can and preserve, and Mr. McRae prolonged his stay, but only on condition that he be allowed to take hold of the farm, with Honey's help, and manage the haying and cultivating for them.

"I had no idea a man could be so handy," Kit declared. "He's mended the sink so we don't have to cart out all the waste water, and he's burned up the rubbish at the end of the lane, and he put new roofing on the hen houses, and he climbed up into the big elm and put up Doris's swing for her. I think he's a perfect darling."

"Kit, dear, don't be so positive and so extreme," Mrs. Robbins warned gently. "It's very kind indeed of Ralph to help us, but don't let your speech run away with you."

"I wish he belonged right in the family. I've always thought that every family should have a carpenter and a gardener in it. Mother dear, to see him climb down the well, right down into that thirty-foot black hole and fish out the bucket after Helen had dropped it in, was a sight for men and angels."

"He's very capable," Mrs. Robbins agreed laughingly. "I think by the time he goes we will have everything on the place mended and repaired. I never saw a landlord like him."

"He's a good doctor too, a doctor of the soul," Jean said soberly. "Dad's been fifty per cent. better since he came. I wish when he goes back to Saskatoon that he'd take Honey with him. Piney's able to help her mother, and Honey's heart is set on going West. They're own cousins and it would be splendid for him."

"Honey's only fourteen, girlie. I think he's rather young to leave the Mother wings, don't you?"

Jean pondered.

"I don't know, Mother. Mothers are wonderful people and darlings, but I do think that every boy needs a good father and if he can't get a father, then the next best man who can talk to him and teach him the–what would you call it?"

"The code of manliness?".

"That's it. And Ralph seems so manly, don't you think so?"

"Do you call him Ralph, dear?"

"Well, he asked me to, mother, and I didn't want to refuse and hurt his feelings. I suppose it made him feel more at home. And Cousin Roxy says he's only twenty-four. I don't think that's old at all."

It took three days to cut the hay on the Greenacre land, and the girls had a regular Greek festival over it. They all went down and followed the big rake and helped pitch the hay up on the wagon. Then Helen got her kodak and took pictures of them pitching, and riding on the load up the long lane, and of the big sleepy-eyed yoke of oxen.

"You know," Jean said, "it looks like some scene from away back in the colonial days. I love to watch the oxen come along that lane with the top of the load brushing the mulberry tree branches."

"I'm so glad that you found out what those trees were," Kit teased. "Ever since we came here, you and Helen have been watching for apples to grow on them. I told you they were mulberry trees."

"It's so nice," Helen said dreamily, "to have one in the family who is always right."

Kit quickly fired a bunch of hay at her, but she dodged it and ran.

"Going to cut about nine ton or more," Honey said, coming up with a pail of spring water. "That ain't counting bedding neither. You can get fifteen a ton for bedding."

"What's bedding?" asked Kit.

"Oh, all sorts of stuff, pollypods and swamp grass and such. Say, if you go down where Ralph's cutting now, you'll see a Bob White's nest and speckled eggs. Don't take any, though."

"Isn't it lovely out here, Kit?" Jean wound her arm around Kit's waist as they crossed the meadow land. "I was lonesome at first but now I think I'd be more lonesome for this if I were away from it long."

"I love it too, but wait until the north wind doth blow. What will all the poor Robbins do then, poor things?"

"We'll pull through," Jean said pluckily. "I don't feel afraid of anything that can happen since Dad really is getting better."

"Isn't it funny, Jean, how we're forgetting all about the Cove and the things we did there?" Kit pushed back her hair briskly. She was warm and getting "freckler," as Doris said, every minute. "I wonder when fall comes, if we won't miss it all more than we do now."

"All what?"

"Places to go, mostly, and people who help us instead of us always helping

them. Mother's turned into a regular Lady Bountiful since we came out here."

"I think they've all helped us just as much as we've helped them," Jean said slowly. "We're getting bigger every minute. You know what I mean. Broader minded. At home we went along in the same little groove all the time. I think work is splendid."

"Well, you always did have the faculty, you know, Jean, for staring black right in the face and declaring it was a beautiful delicate cream color. I suppose that's the stuff that martyrs are made of. Now, don't get huffy. You're a perfect angel of a martyr. I like it out here and I think the work is doing us good, but I'm like Helen, I don't want to stay here all my life, nor even a quarter of it. Mother said she wanted to let one of us older girls go back with Gwennie Phelps."

"Back with her?" repeated Jean in dismay. "You haven't asked her up here this summer, have you, Kit?"

"I didn't. Helen did before we came away. Mother said she might. You know Mother's always had the happiness of the Phelps family on her mind."

"But Gwennie! I wouldn't mind Frances so much."

"Frances does not stand in need of missionary work. Gwennie does. Anyway, she's coming up the first week in August, and Mother says that either you or I can go back with her for two weeks before school opens. Do you want to go, Jean? Because I really and truly don't give a rap about it. I'm afraid to go for fear I'll like it and won't want to come back. I'm just dead afraid of the schools up here this winter." Kit's tone was tragic. "This year means so much to me in my work. I was getting along gloriously, you know that, Jean, and from what the girls here tell me, the schools can't touch ours in finish."

"How are they in beginnings?" Jean asked laughingly. "You poor old long-sufferer, I know what you mean. Why don't you ask Dad and Mother to let you board down at the Cove with the Phelpses, and keep up your old class work right there until you finish High School anyway?"

"Seems like a desertion," said Kit. "We're here and we should stick it out. I think you'd better go back with Gwennie."

"We ought to talk it over with Mother thoroughly. She thinks she's giving us a week of extra pleasure, probably, and to us it's a temptation that we're afraid we can't withstand, isn't that it?"

"Well, I feel like this, it's like taking a soldier out of the trenches and throwing him into a seaside week end."

"Kit, you always exaggerate fearfully. You're a regular Donna Quixote, tilting at windmills."

"But are you willing to go back?"

"I think we'll let Helen go. She will enjoy it and not take it a bit seriously. Helen's poise will carry her through any crisis triumphantly."

Kit agreed that the thought of Helen was really a stroke of diplomatic genius. The waves and billows of circumstance only buoyed Helen up, lighter than ever. They never went over her or disarranged her curls a particle. Whenever Kit had one of her customary "brain storms" over something and Helen suggested that she was "fussy," Kit always retaliated with the statement that she was the only member of the family with any temperament. Jean had imagination, and Doris gave promise of much sentiment, but when it came to real temperament Kit believed that she had the full Robbins allowance.

"You can call it what you like, Kit. I'd leave off the last two syllables, though," Helen would say serenely.

"There you are," Kit always answered. "Only geniuses have any temperament and when you've got one in the family you deny it. You'll be sorry some day, Helenita. When you are darning stockings with a fancy stitch for your great grandchildren I shall face admiring throngs all listening for pearls of wisdom to fall from my lips."

"What do you think you're going to be anyway?"

"Haven't made up my mind yet, but something fearfully extraordinary and special, Ladybird."

So now when the proposition was made after supper that Helen return for a visit to the Cove with Gwen Phelps, Helen agreed placidly that it would be rather nice, and Jean and Kit looked at each other with a smile of deep diplomacy.

CHAPTER XIX

RALPH AND HONEY TAKE THE LONG TRAIL

The last week in July saw the end of Ralph McRae's visit at Greenacres. He had been East nearly two months and Honey was to go back with him. It was impossible to measure or even to estimate the inward joy of Honey over the decision. Through some odd twist of heredity there had been born in him the spirit of those who long for travel and adventure. Every winding road dipping over a hillcrest had always held an invitation for him to follow it. He had listened often to the distant whistle of the trains that slipped through the Quinnebaug valley, and longed to be on them going anywhere at all. At home in the little parlor there were some old seashells that a seafaring great-grandfather had brought back with him, and Honey loved to hold them against his ear, listening to the murmur within. He

had never looked upon the sea. To do so was a promise he had made to himself. Some day he would go and see it, and now Ralph told him that they would go part way by sea, up from Boston to Nova Scotia, and around to the mouth of the St. Lawrence, and up it to Lake Ontario, and on through the Great Lakes, and so up to the ranch in the Northwest.

"I wish I were going too," said Piney. "I wish you were going, Mother, and both of us youngsters. I'd love to take up a claim out there and work it."

"Oh, dear child, what strange notions you do have for a girl," Mrs. Hancock sighed. "I never thought of such things when I was your age. I wanted to be a teacher, that was all."

"Why didn't you?"

"Well, your grandfather said I was needed at home, and so I stayed on until I met your father when I was eighteen. Then I married."

"And maybe if he'd let you be a teacher, you wouldn't have wanted to get married. I want to study all about trees and forestry and conservation, and I want to ride over miles and miles of forests that are all mine. I'm going to, too, some day."

"How old are you now, Piney?" asked Ralph.

"Going on sixteen."

"Maybe next year when I bring Honey home, we can coax Aunt Luella to take a trip out with you. How's that?"

Mrs. Hancock flushed delicately, and smiled up at her tall nephew.

"How you talk, Ralph. That would cost a sight of money."

"Well, I tell you, Aunt Luella," said Ralph, his hands deep in his pockets, as he leaned back against the high mantelpiece in the sitting-room, "I want to hand over Greenacres to you and the children. I haven't any feeling for it like you have, and it seems to me, after talking it over with Mr. Robbins, that it rightfully belongs to you. He would like to buy it, he says, inside of two or three years. They like it over there, and propose to stay here in Gilead, but if you want to take it over, I'm willing to transfer it before I go west."

It was said quietly and cheerfully, quite as if he were offering her a basket of fruit that she was partial to, and Luella Trowbridge Hancock sat back in her rocking-chair, staring up at him as if she could hardly believe her ears.

"Ralph, you don't mean you'd give up the place yourself? Why, whatever would I do with it? I love every inch of ground there and every blade of grass, but you see how it is. Honey's set on going west and Piney wants to go to college and I don't know what all. I couldn't live on there alone, and they haven't got the feeling for it that I have. The younger generation seems to have rooted itself up out of the soil somehow. I wouldn't know what to do with it after I'd got it, and I wouldn't take it away from Mrs. Robbins and the girls for anything. Why,

they love it 'most as well as I do."

"I know, Aunt Luella, but I wanted you to have the refusal of it," answered Ralph. "Now, then, here's the other way out. Supposing I make it over to you, and you have the rental money, and then sell it to Mr. Robbins when he is able to take it over. You'd have the good of it then."

"That's the best way, Mother," Piney spoke up. "They have all been so nice to us, and it's just as Ralph says. They do love it."

"You could come back east every now and then and visit if you did make up your mind to live out at Saskatoon."

"Land alive, the boy speaks of journeying thousands of miles as if he was driving up to Norwich. I went to Providence once after I was married, and that's the only long trip I've ever taken from home."

"Then it will take you a whole year to get ready," laughed Ralph. "Honey and I will be back for you next summer, and Piney shall have the best pony I've got all for her own to make up for Princess."

The night before their departure Mrs. Robbins gave a dinner for them, with Cousin Roxana and Mr. and Mrs. Collins from the Center church. Piney was rather morose and indignant at the fate that had made the first Hancock child a girl and the second one a boy.

"Honey'll like the horses and the traveling, but what does he know about land and learning about everything? He's only fourteen."

But Honey did not appear to be worrying. He sat between Ralph and Helen, and really looked like another boy in his new suit of clothes with his hair cut properly. Helen was quite gracious to him, and Jean gave him a second helping of walnut cream cake.

"We're going to miss you, Ralph," Mrs. Robbins said, smiling over at him. She had heard the new business arrangement whereby Greenacres was to become really the nest. It had been her suggestion first that Ralph give the place to Mrs. Hancock, but since she had decided she would rather have the sale price instead, a wave of relief had swept over the Motherbird. The roomy old mansion had been a haven of refuge to her and her brood during the storm stress, and now that fair weather was with them, she found herself greatly attached to it.

Ralph colored boyishly. He could not bring himself even to try and express just what it had meant to him, this long summer sojourn with them at Greenacres. He had come east a stranger, seeking the fields that had known his mother's people, and had found the warmest kind of welcome from the newcomers in the old home. He looked around at them tonight, and thought how much he felt at home there, and how dear every single face had grown.

First there was Mr. Robbins's thin, scholarly one with the high forehead and curly dark hair just touched with gray, his keen hazel eyes behind rimless

glasses, and finely modeled chin. Then the Motherbird, surely she was the most gracious woman he had ever known excepting his own mother. Her eyes were so full of sympathy and understanding that they sometimes made him feel about ten again, and as if he wanted to lean against her shoulder the way Doris did, and be comforted. Just the mere sound of her soft, engaging laugh made trouble seem a very unimportant thing in life. And Jean, almost seventeen, already a replica of her mother in her quick tenderness and her looks. Ralph's eyes lingered on her. She was a mighty sweet little princess royal, he thought. Then Kit, imperious, argumentative Kit, so full of energy that she was like a Roman candle.

It had been Kit's voice that had spoken the first words of welcome to him the night of his arrival. He thought he should always remember her best as she had stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight and given him her hand in comradely fashion.

Helen beamed on him from her place next her mother. He came as near being a knight errant as any that had come along the highway so far, and Helen would have had him in crimson hose and plumed cap if possible. To her Saskatoon meant nuggets and gold dust, and it did no good at all for Jean to tell her she would have to adventure along the trail farther north before she would find gold, and that the only gold where Ralph lived was the gold of ripening harvest fields, miles upon miles of them.

Doris snuggled against his shoulder after dinner and told him over and over again to send her a tame bear, one that she could bring up by hand and train.

"Well, I guess you'll have your hands full, Ralph," Cousin Roxana exclaimed, "if you fill all these commissions. I declare it seems as if you belonged to all of us."

The days that followed were very lonely ones without Honey and Ralph. Hedda's big brother came to work at Greenacres. He was a strong, big, silent boy named Eric. About the only information even Kit was able to glean from him was that he had gone barefooted in the snow in Iceland and often stood in the hay in the barn to get warm.

The first week of August brought Gwen Phelps, and that auspicious event should have satisfied anyone's craving for novelty.

"I don't know why it is that Gwen always riles me, as Cousin Roxy says," Kit told Jean after they were in bed the night of Gwen's arrival, "unless it is the way she acts. You know what I mean, Jeanie, as if she were the queen, and the queen could do no wrong. Helen kowtows to her until I could shake her. Did you hear her telling that she was going to Miss Anabel's School out at Larchmont-on-the-Sound? It's fifteen hundred for the term, and extras, and it's nearly all extras. I know a girl who went there–"

"Kit, you're getting to be as bad a gossip as Mrs. Ricketts," Jean declared

merrily.

"Well, I don't care. It isn't the way to bring a girl up. What if her father were to lose everything like Dad, and she'd have to pitch in and work, what on earth could she do?"

"Solicit customers for Miss Anabel," laughed Jean. "Go to sleep, goose, and don't covet your neighbor's automobile nor his daughter's extras."

But before the week was over, Gwen was running around in a middy blouse, short linen skirt, and tennis shoes like the rest of them. She and Sally struck up a fast friendship. The sight of a girl hardly any older than herself handling most of the cooking and housework in a large family left a lasting impression on Gwen, and she respected Sally thoroughly.

"Why, she bakes the bread and cake and everything, and even does the washing," she told Helen. "And she says it isn't hard once you get the swing of it. Hasn't she wonderful hair, Helen? It's coppery gold in the sun. Think of her in dull green velvet with a golden chain around her waist like Melisande."

"Wouldn't it look cute over the wash machine?" Kit agreed beamingly. "Gwennie, you'll have to learn the fitness of things if you live out here."

"I think I'd like to live here," Gwen replied stoutly. "I like it better than the mountain resort where we went last summer down in North Carolina. But of course you couldn't stay up here in the winter time."

"We are going to, though," Kit said. "Right here, with five big fires going, and cord upon cord of wood going up in smoke. If you come up then, Gwen, we'll promise you some of the finest skating along Little River you ever had, and plenty of sleigh rides."

"You haven't a car now, have you?"

"Oh, but I could have shaken her for that," Kit said wrathfully, later on. "When she knew we had to sell ours to her father."

"But she didn't mean anything, Kit," Helen argued. "I think you're awfully quick tempered."

"I'm not. I'm sweet and bland in disposition. Don't mind me, Helenita darling. I'm only madly jealous because I want everything that money can buy for Mumsie and Dad and all of us. I do get so tired of doing the same thing day after day. I'll bet a cookie even Heaven would be monotonous if it were just some golden clouds and singing all the time. I hope there'll be work to do there."

Jean drove them down to the station, and when she returned the house seemed quite empty without Helen and Gwen. But she was soon too busy to miss them.

Kit had been lent to Cousin Roxana for a few days to help her with her canning and preserving. Doris had her hands full with a new calf, so only Jean was left to help her mother study out the problem of new fall dresses to be evolved

from last year's left overs.

"When the royal family lose their throne and fortune they always have to wear out their old royal raiment before they can have anything new, Mother dear. One peculiar charm of living up here is that you are about five years ahead of Gilead styles. Kit will look perfectly stunning in that smoke gray corduroy of mine and she may have my old blue fox set too. I'm going to make my chinchilla coat do another winter, and fix over my hat till I defy anyone to recognize it. Hiram gave me a couple of beautiful white wings. I don't know whether they came off a goose or a swan–no, a swan's would be too large, wouldn't they? Anyhow, they are lovely and I shall wear them and feel like the Winged Victory."

Mrs. Robbins smiled happily at her eldest. They were in the sunny sitting-room, surrounded by patterns and pieces. The scent of camphor was in the room, for Jean had been unpacking furs and hanging them out to air.

"Clothes seem of such secondary importance in the country, probably as they were intended to be. Cousin Roxy said the other day the only fashion she ever bothered about was whether her crown of glory would be becoming to her, because she hadn't the slightest idea how to put on a halo and she'd probably get it on hind side before in the excitement of the moment. Isn't she comical, Jean? But her heart's as big as the world."

Jean sat on the floor straightening out patterns that had become crumpled in packing.

"I wonder why she never married, Mother. She's so efficient and cheery."

"She was engaged," answered Mrs. Robbins. "Your father has told me about it. To Judge Ellis."

"Judge Ellis?" Jean dropped her hands into her lap and looked up in amazement. "Why, the very idea!"

"Have you ever met him, dear?"

"No, not him, but his grandson Billie Ellis. We met him when we went on the hike over to Mount Ponchas. He must have married some one else then, didn't he?"

"I believe so. They had a dispute a few days before they were to have been married, and Cousin Roxana broke the engagement. They never spoke to each other afterwards. She wanted to go up to Boston on her wedding trip and on to Concord from there, and the Judge wanted to go to New York, as he had some business to settle there and he thought he could attend to it on the honeymoon trip. Roxana said if he couldn't take time away from his business long enough to be married, she wouldn't bother him to marry her at all. Even now it's rather hard deciding which one was right. I'm inclined to think the very fact that they could have a dispute about such a subject shows they were unfitted for each other. If they had really loved, she would not have cared where the honeymoon was held,

and he would have granted any desire of her heart."

"Well, if that isn't the oddest romance! Won't Kit love it."

"I hardly think I would talk much about it, dear. Roxy has never even mentioned it to me and it might hurt her feelings. She's such a dear soul I wouldn't worry her for anything."

So when Kit returned home from Maple Lawn, Jean told her nothing, but Kit brought her own news with her.

"What do you suppose, Jeanie. We were rummaging in the garret after carpet rags and there are old chests up there, and Cousin Roxy told me I could look in them at the old linen sheets and things, and in one I found"–Kit paused for a good effect–"wedding clothes!"

"I know," Jean said.

"You know? Why didn't you tell me, then?"

"Mother thought I had better not."

"Humph. I found it out just the same, didn't I? But she wouldn't tell me who he was, and I coaxed and coaxed. I think he must have been a soldier who died in the Civil War."

"Oh, Kit, when Cousin Roxy's only fifty-two! Do figure better than that. You'll have her like the Dauphins, betrothed when they were about three years old."

"And another thing I found out. Who do you suppose comes to see her regularly? The Billie person. She lets him run all over the house, and likes him immensely. We got real well acquainted. He calls her Aunt Roxy, and if you could ever see the amount of doughnuts and cookies and apple pie and whipped cream that boy consumes, you'd wonder how he ever managed to get home! They must starve him over at the Judge's. Cousin Roxy says he's so stingy that he'd pinch a penny till the Indian squealed."

Jean was fairly aching to tell all she knew, but a promise was a promise, and she kept it. That night, though, she dreamt that the Judge and Cousin Roxy were being married and that she was chasing them around with large portions of apple pie and whipped cream. Kit heard her say in her sleep, very plaintively,

"Please take it."

"Take what, Jeanie?" she asked sleepily, but Jean slumbered on without revealing the secret.

CHAPTER XX

ROXANA'S ROMANCE

Two weeks before school opened Helen came home. She was not changed at bit, Doris said admiringly, just as if she had been gone a year.

"Oh, I like it here so much better than at the Cove," she told them. "I wouldn't give our precious Greenacres for all the North Shore. Only I do kind of wonder about school, Mother dear."

"Doris will go to the District school at the village and Kit and Helen can drive over to the High School together. It is only five miles, and they can arrange to put the horse up at one of the stables. In severe weather Eric will take them over."

Jean was silent for a few moments. Right ahead of them she could see the winter. It would take many cords of wood to heat the big house thoroughly. There would be plenty of potatoes and winter vegetables down in the cellar, plenty of jellies and preserves and pickles, but the running expenses were still to be considered, and Eric's wages, and feed for the pony and Buttercup.

"Mother," she said suddenly when they were alone, "have we really any money at all to depend on? Please don't mind my asking. I think about it so much."

"I don't mind, daughter. Aren't we all part of the dear home commonwealth? Nearly all that Father had saved has dwindled away during his illness. Stocks have depreciated badly the past year. Several that we depended on are not paying dividends at all, and may never recover. We have just about enough cash from the sale of the automobile and other things, Father's law books and some jewels that I had–"

"Mother!" Jean sprang to her side, and clasped her arms close around her. She knew how precious many of the old sets of jewelry had been, things that had come from her grandmother on her mother's side. "Not the old ones?"

"No. I saved those," the Motherbird smiled back bravely. "They are for you girlies. But I had my earrings and two rings which Father had given to me and I sold those. Oh, don't look so blue, childie." She framed Jean's anxious face in her two hands. "Jewelry doesn't amount to anything at all unless it has some dear associations. Do you know the old Eastern legend, how the Devas, the bright spirits, drove the dark evil spirits underground and in revenge they prepared gold and silver and precious stones to ensnare the souls of men? I was very glad indeed to turn those diamonds into Buttercup and Princess and many other things that have made our new home happier."

"Wouldn't it make a lovely fairy story," Jean exclaimed, smiling through her tears. "The beautiful queen with a magic wand touching her diamonds and

turning them into a cow and a pony and household helps."

"Then," continued her mother, "you know I have a half interest in the ranch in California. That brings in a little, not much, because it isn't a rich ranch by any means, just a big happy-go-lucky one that Harry, my brother, runs. I hope that you girls will go there some time and meet him, for he is a splendid uncle for you all. I receive about a thousand a year from that. It isn't a cattle ranch. Harry raises horses. He is unmarried, and lives there alone with Ah Fun, a Chinese cook, and his men. I used to go out to the ranch summers when I was a girl. We lived near San Francisco."

"And now you're clear away over here on a Connecticut hilltop."

"Dear, I would not mind if it were a hilltop in Labrador, if there are any there, or Kamchatka either, so long as I was with your father. When you love completely, Jean, time and space and all those little limitations that we humans feel, seem to fall away from your soul."

It seemed to Jean as though her mother's face was almost illumined with love as she spoke, so radiant and tender it looked. She laid her cheek against the hand nearest to her.

"You make me think of something that John Burroughs wrote, precious Mother mine, something I always loved. It is called 'Waiting.' May I say it to you?"

She repeated softly and slowly:

"Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
Nor care for wind or tide or sea;
I rave no more 'gainst time or tide,
For lo! my own shall come to me.

"I stay my haste, I make delays,
For what avails this eager pace?
I stand amid the eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

"Asleep, awake, by night or day,
The friends I seek are seeking me.
No wind can drive my bark astray,
Or change the tide of destiny.

"What matter if I stand alone,
I wait with joy the coming years;
My heart shall reap where it has sown,

And garner up its fruit of tears.

"The waters know their own and draw
The brook that springs in yonder height;
So flows the good with equal law
Unto the soul of pure delight.

"The stars come nightly to the sky,
The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high
Can keep my own away from me."

"Whoa, Ella Lou!" came Cousin Roxy's voice out at the hitching post. "Anybody home?"

Kit sprang out of the Bartlett pear tree and Helen emerged from the vegetable garden as if by magic. The Billie person sat beside Cousin Roxy as big as life, as she would have said, and looked at the girls in friendly fashion.

"The Judge is very sick," Miss Robbins began without preamble. "I'm going down there with Billie, and I may have to stay over night. He's pretty low, I understand, and wants me, so I suppose I'll have to go. Good-bye. If you've got any tansy in the garden, Betty, I'd like to take it down."

Jean hurried to get a bunch of the desired herb, and Mrs. Robbins stepped out beside the carriage.

"Is he very sick, really, Roxy?" she asked.

"Can't tell a thing about it till I see him, and then maybe not. A man's a worrisome creetur at best and when he's sick he's worse than a sick turkey. I suppose it's acute indigestion. Dick Ellis always did think he could eat anything he wanted to and do anything he wanted to, and the Lord would grant him a special dispensation to get away with it because he was Dick Ellis. I guess from all accounts he hasn't changed much. I'll get a good hot mustard plaster outside, and calomel and castor oil inside, and tansy tea to quiet him, and I guess he'll live awhile yet. Go 'long, Ella Lou."

"Well, of all things, Mother," Jean exclaimed, laughing as she dropped into the nearest porch chair. "And they haven't spoken to each other in over thirty years. I think that's the funniest thing that's happened since we came here. I want to go and tell Dad. He'll love that."

"What is it?" Kit teased. "I think you might tell us too. I didn't know that Cousin Roxy knew the Judge."

"They were engaged years ago, dear," Mrs. Robbins explained, "and quar-

relled. That is all. Now he thinks he is dying and has sent for her. And I suppose underneath all her odd ways, that she loves him after all."

It was the first romance that had blossomed at Gilead Center and the girls felt as eager over it as though the participants had been twenty instead of fifty years of age. They waited eagerly for Ella Lou's white nose to show around the turn of the drive, but night came on and passed, and it was well into the next afternoon before Billie drove in alone.

"Grandfather'd like to have Mr. Robbins come down and draw up his will. Cousin Roxy says he's been a lawyer, and there isn't another one anywhere around."

"But, Billie, he isn't strong enough," began Mrs. Robbins. She was sitting out on the broad veranda, a basket of mending on her lap, and in the big steamer chair beside her was Mr. Robbins. "Is the Judge worse?"

"Oh, no, he's better. Aunt Roxy fixed him right up. He'd just eaten too much, she said."

"I think I should like to go, dear," said Mr. Robbins. "You could go with me, or Jean, and I should like to meet him again. I knew him when I was a boy up here."

It was his first trip away from the house since they had moved there, but now that the time had come, it seemed an easy thing to do, as if the strength had been granted to him to meet just such a crisis. Mrs. Robbins accompanied him, and they drove over through the village and up two miles beyond until they came to the Judge's home, a large square colonial residence on a hill, surrounded by tall elms and rock maples. The green blinds were all carefully closed excepting in the south chamber where Roxy held supreme sway now. She sat by his bedside, wielding a large palm leaf fan, spick and span in her dress of white linen, and there was a bunch of dahlias on the table.

"Come in, come in, boy," the Judge said in his deep voice. He stretched out his hand to Mr. Robbins, and nodded his head. Such a fine old head it was, as it lay propped up on the big square feather pillows, a head like Victor Hugo's or Henri Rochefort's. The thick curly white hair grew in deep points about his temples, and his moustache and imperial were white and curly too. There was a look in his eyes that told of an indomitable will, but they softened when they rested on his visitor.

"Sit down, lad; no, the easy chair. Roxy, give him the easy one. So. Well, they try their best to get us, don't they? I thought last night would be my last."

"Oh, fiddlesticks," laughed Miss Robbins. "Just ate too much, and had a little attack of indigestion, Dick. You'll live to be eighty-nine and a half."

The Judge's eyes twinkled as he gazed at her.

"Still contrary as Adam's off ox, Roxy. Won't even let me have the satis-

faction of thinking you saved my life, will you?"

"A good dose of peppermint and soda would have done just as well," answered Roxana serenely, turning to introduce Mrs. Robbins. "He says he wants to make his will, but I think it's only a notion, and he wants company. Still I guess we'll humor him. It seems that he was going to leave everything he had to me. And I just found him out in time. The very idea when he's got Billie, his own grandchild, flesh and blood, and such a darling boy too. He can leave me Billie if he likes, but he can't leave me anything else; so you make it that way, Jerry."

"Leave her Billie, Jerry," sighed the Judge, "leave her Billie, and me too, if she'll take us both."

"Wouldn't have you for a gift, Dick," she answered, cheerful and happy as a girl as she looked down at him. "You're a fussy, spoiled, selfish old man, just as you always was, and I couldn't be bothered with you. But I'll keep an eye on you so you don't kill yourself before your time with sweet corn and peach shortcake, though I suppose it's a pleasant sort of taking off at that. I'll take Billie and Betty with me around the garden while you and Jerry fix up that will, and mind you do it right. Billie's going to have all that belongs to him."

As the door closed behind her, the Judge winked solemnly at Mr. Robbins.

"Finest woman in seven counties. Ought to have been the mother of heroes and statesmen, but there she is, mothering Billie and bossing me to her heart's content. Do you think she'd marry me, Jerry?"

"I don't know, Judge," Mr. Robbins answered, smiling. "Roxy's odd."

"Well, maybe so. Go ahead and make the will as she says. Everything to Billie, and make her guardian. All except," he stopped and his eyes twinkled merrily, "the house in Boston. Jerry, lad, it's got all our wedding furniture still in it just as it was thirty years ago. I bought it and moved the stuff up there after she gave me the mitten, and it's waited for her to change her mind these many years. I married for spite, and my poor wife died after Billie's father was born. Served me right, I guess. Anyhow, the house is there and she can take it or leave it as she likes."

So the will was drawn up and Mrs. Gorham and Mrs. Robbins witnessed it. Billie, standing down in the garden, showing Miss Robbins the flowers, did not realize what was happening. He only knew that somehow the barriers of ice were lifted between himself and his grandfather, and that a new era had dawned for all of them.

He watched them drive away, and went back upstairs to the long corridor. Roxana heard his step and opened the door of the sickroom.

"Come in here, Billie dear," she said. It was the first time that Billie had ever been in his grandfather's room. He stood inside the door, a sturdy, manly figure, barefooted and tanned, with eyes oddly like those old ones that surveyed

him from the pillow. He hesitated a moment, but the Judge put out his hand, a strong bony one, yellowed like old ivory, and Billie gripped it in his broad boyish one.

"I'm awfully glad you're better, Grandfather," he said, a bit shyly.

"So am I, Billie. Last night I thought my hour had come, but I guess it was only a warning. A meeting with the Button Moulder perhaps. Do you know about him? No? You must read 'Peer Gynt.' A boy of your age should be well up on such things."

"And when has he had any chance to get well up on anything, I'd like to know?" demanded Roxana, in swift defense of her favorite. "The boy finished the district school a year ago. Been learning everything he knows since then from Ben, your hired help. If the Lord has spared you for any purpose, Dick, it is to bring up Billie right and teach him all you know."

"Well, well, quit scolding me, Roxy. Do as you like with him. I'll supply the money." The Judge pressed Billie's hand almost with affection. "What do you want to be, lad?"

"A lawyer or a naturalist," said Billie promptly.

"Be both. They're good antidotes for each other. Talk it over with him, Roxy, and do as you think best."

He closed his eyes, and Billie took it as a signal to leave the room, but the Judge spoke again.

"Where you do sleep, Bill?"

Billie colored at this. It was the first time anyone had ever called him Bill. He felt two feet taller all at once.

"In the little bed-room over the east 'ell,' sir."

"Change your belongings to the room next this. It faces the south and has two bookcases in it filled with my books that I had at college. You will enjoy them."

Billie went out softly, down the circular staircase to the lower hall and, once outdoors, on a dead run for the barn. Ben was husking corn on the barn floor, sitting on a milking stool with the corn rising around him in billows, whistling and singing alternately.

Billie poured out his news breathlessly, and Ben took it all calmly.

"Well, I'm glad for ye. I always believed the Judge would come out of his trance some day and do the proper thing. That Miss Roxy's a sightly woman. Knows just how to take hold. Guess she could marry the Judge tomorrow if she wanted to. Mrs. Robbins is a fine woman too. I never see her before."

Somehow this didn't seem to fit in with Billie's mood, and he left the barn. All the world looked different to him. He was wanted, really wanted, now. He wasn't just somebody the Judge had taken in because they were related and he

had to out of pride. He was to have the big south chamber right next the Judge's own room and study all he wanted to. Best of all, since he had grasped that yellow old hand in his, he knew that he could go to him with anything and that he really was going to be a grandfather to him.

It was nearly two miles over to Greenacres if he went cross lots, but he started. The goldenrod was high and in full bloom on every hand and purple asters crowded it for room. The apple trees held ripening fruit, and the fragrance of Shepherd Sweetings and Peck's Pleasants was in the air. It was the last week in August when all the summerland seemed to rest after a good work done, and the hush of harvest time was on the earth.

In the woods he startled a doe and two fawns and they leaped ahead of him through the brush. Farther along in the pines a partridge whirred up under his nose almost, and coaxed him away from her young. Some young stock, Jersey heifers and a few Holsteins, grazed in the woods, and lifted grave eyes to watch him pass. Usually he would notice them, but today all he thought of was the Judge's words, and the longing to talk them over with somebody.

"Why, there's Billie," Kit exclaimed, looking up from some apples she was paring for pies. Helen was reading on the circular seat that was built around one of the old elms back of the house. "Come over here and help."

Billie climbed the stone wall and came, flushed and triumphant. Throwing himself down on the grass beside Kit, he told what had happened, and she made up for all that Ben had lacked in enthusiasm and imagination.

"Billie Ellis," she cried, setting down the pan of apples, and hugging her knees ecstatically. "Isn't that wonderful? Why, you can be anything at all now that you want to be. Oh, I'm so glad for you!"

Billie looked at her peacefully.

"I knew you'd take it like that," he said. "I just wanted to tell somebody who would almost bump the stars over it, the way it made me feel. Kit, you're a good old pal, know it?"

"Thank you, kind sir, thank you." Kit spread out her blue chambray skirt and dropped a low curtsey. "When you come into your kingdom, forget not your humble handmaid, Prince Otto."

"Who was he?" demanded Billie hungrily. "Gee, I'm tired hearing of people all the time that I don't know about. I'm going to read my head off now."

"So do, child, so do," laughed Kit. "He was a king who left his throne to wander among his people and see how they lived."

"It must have been awfully hard to go back and stay on the throne. I want to study hard and be somebody that Grandfather will be proud of, but I like everyday folks mighty well."

Helen dropped her book and shook back her curls from her face. She had

hardly ever noticed him before, but now he seemed more interesting. Still Kit was forever spending the largesse of her sympathy on anyone who needed it just as Doris did on animals and birds and chickens. So after a moment she went on with her book, "Handbook of Classical History," preparing for her entry into High School with Kit the following week. The joys and sorrows of the Billie person had small place in her mind.

But Kit took him into the kitchen and gave him a big square of gingerbread with whipped cream on it, and listened to him plan out the future without a single word of depreciation or discouragement. The world was golden, and Fortune had handed him a lighted flambeau and told him to take his place with the other Greek lads and race for the prize.

"I just know you'll win out, Billie," she told him confidently, when she said good-bye on the back steps. "Come down any time and we'll help you out on your studies."

Jean and Doris had gone to the village for some groceries. Cousin Roxy was coming to take supper with them. Kit set the table, with sprays of early asters in the center, singing softly to herself Cousin Roxy's favorite hymn.

"I've reached the land of corn and wine,
And all its riches freely mine,
Here shines undimmed one blissful day,
For all my night has passed away.
Oh, Beulah land, sweet Beulah land–"

"Does it seem like that to you, child?" asked her mother, coming lightly down the long staircase and into the dining-room, mellow with late afternoon sunlight.

"It's everything all rolled up in one," Kit answered happily. "It's Beulah Land and the Land of Heart's Desire and the Promised Land, it's the whole thing in one, Mother dear. Don't you feel that way too?"

And with her arm around the second daughter, the Motherbird led her out on the wide veranda. They could see for miles, up and down the valley and over the distant hills. Helen dropped her book when she saw them, and came up the steps to hug up close too, on the other shoulder. And down the river road they heard Jean and Doris driving and singing as they came.

"Remember what we called them when we first came up, girls?" asked Mrs. Robbins. "The hills of rest. Somehow when I look at them, the winter doesn't frighten me at all. They look as if they could shelter us.

"'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,

From whence cometh my help,'"

she quoted softly. "They have given us security and happiness."

"And Dad's health," added Kit. "We've all worked hard, but I do think we've got some results anyway, don't you, Helen?"

"Lots of preserves," said Helen dreamily.

Cousin Roxana joined them, chin up and smiling.

"He's sound asleep," she said. "Now that everything's kind of quieted down, I don't mind telling you something. After Billie had gone, the Judge and I talked over things before I had Ben hitch up Ella Lou, and I don't know but what I'll have to move over there and take care of the two of them. Land knows they need it."

"Oh, Cousin Roxy, marry the Judge?" gasped Kit.

"Well, I might as well," laughed Roxana. "We've wasted thirty years now, and he'll fret and fuss for thirty more if I don't marry him. I'll sell Maple Lawn, or you folks can have it if you like, rent free."

There was a moment's hesitation. No words were needed though. With two pairs of arms pressing her until they hurt, the Motherbird said gently that she thought the Robbins would winter at Greenacres.

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