

eBook

Patricia

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Patricia

PATRICIA'S FATIGUING DAY

Patricia sat on the back fence, almost hidden by the low-spreading branches of an old apple-tree. Below her, on the grass, lay a small, curly, black dog, his brown, trustful eyes fixed confidently on Patricia.

"Really, you know," the child said, gravely, "it's a very perplexing situation. Aunt Julia needn't have been so inhospitable. Why didn't I wait until Daddy got home! Daddy's so much more---convincible. But it's no use now; Daddy never goes back on Aunt Julia."

Patricia slipped from the fence. "I rather think you and I'd better go down to the back meadow to talk things over; it's getting pretty near sewing-time."

Out in the meadow, flat on her back in the long grass, Patricia set herself to the task of solving this perplexing situation.

Half an hour earlier she had appeared back from one of her desultory rambles, accompanied by this most forlorn of all forlorn dogs, explaining that she had met him on the road, and he had followed her home.

It was no unusual occurrence, but when Patricia added that he didn't seem to belong to anybody, and she thought she would keep him, Miss Kirby promptly and firmly protested.

To Patricia's pleading, that he was poor and lame and homeless, that Caesar, the pointer, was the only dog they had now, and he was too old to play much, Miss Kirby had proved adamant. Patricia might give her foundling a good meal, but keep him she *could not*.

Whereupon, Patricia, having given the wanderer what was in reality several meals condensed into one, had retired with him to think things over.

"It really seems as if you'd been meant for me," she told him now; "I found you. I can't see why Aunt Julia won't look at things in a proper light. I'm afraid she hurt your feelings. Aunt Julia generally means pretty well, but she's apt to speak out sort of quick. We Kirbys mostly do. I wonder what your name is?"

The dog stretched comfortably out in the warm grass, quite as happy and contented as if he had been everything he wasn't, sat up suddenly, with a short little bark, as if trying to give the desired information.

Rolling over, Patricia, her chin in her hands, surveyed him carefully. "You aren't very handsome just now; but then, I know lots of people who aren't very good looking. I don't see why that saying Aunt Julia is so fond of---about 'Handsome is as handsome does'---shouldn't apply to dogs as well as people. All the same, you are a very mixed number sort of a dog: you've got one and three-quarters ears, three and one-half legs,---at least you don't use that front paw very much,---and half a tail; and your hair is rather---patchy. But inside, I'm sure you're all right. And you have *beautiful eyes; they're* all there, too."

The dog blinked back at her soberly, wagging his abbreviated tail in apologetic fashion.

"You've simply got to have a home," Patricia went on; "and it's up to me to find you one. But I think you'll have to have a bath first, and your paw bandaged."

Jumping up, Patricia darted back to the house, and around to the side door, leading to her father's office. Presently, she reappeared with a cake of antiseptic soap, a box of salve, a roll of bandage, a pair of scissors, and a bath-towel; with these gathered up in the skirt of her frock she led the way down to the brook, followed by a most unsuspecting small dog.

Ten minutes later that same small dog---decidedly sadder and wetter, if not wiser---lay shivering on the sunny bank, while Patricia rubbed him vigorously with one of her aunt's largest bath-towels.

Then the cut paw was salved and bandaged, and the most hopelessly tangled knots of curls cut away. After which, Patricia, sitting back on heels, studied her charge approvingly.

"If Aunt Julia could see you *now*! Why didn't I do all this first? But---well, Aunt Julia's made up her mind; and she isn't exactly the changey kind. I wonder if you'd like it at the Millers'? They've got a lot of children, but they're ever so nice children! They've three dogs now, so one more oughtn't to count---and you'd have plenty of company."

The dog, whose only present anxiety was to feel dry once more, merely rolled over on his back by way of answer.

"Oh, but you mustn't!" Patricia protested. "You'll get all dirty again. I know it's horrid to feel too clean, but, you see, it's so necessary to make a good first impression! I reckon it was the first impression that made all the trouble with Aunt Julia this morning. Come on, we'll start right off; it's a pretty long walk to the Millers'."

They went 'cross-lots, stopping for more than one romp by the way, one quite as light-hearted and irresponsible as the other; though behind Patricia lay more than one neglected task, and before her companion stretched a possibly homeless future.

It was a nearly perfect June day, the blue sky overhead just flecked with soft, fleecy white clouds, and with enough breeze stirring to lift Patricia's short brown curls and fan her sunburned cheeks.

Out on the highroad the wild roses were in bloom, and the air was full of soft summer sounds; the very birds hopping lightly about from fence to fence had a holiday air---and to Patricia there was something very friendly in the inquisitive cock of their pert little heads, as they stopped now and then to inspect her.

"Oh!" she cried, joyously, reaching up on tiptoe to gather a spray of wild roses just above her head, "aren't we having the loveliest time, Dog?"

Her companion wagged agreeingly; he was, at any rate. The hot sun on his back felt exceedingly good; he began to entertain hopes of actually feeling really and thoroughly dry again---some time.

"That's the Millers' house---the brown one, beyond the curve," Patricia told him. And as it was the only house in sight, he had no trouble in locating it.

"I'm sure you'll be happy there," Patricia added. "It's funny there aren't any children, or dogs, about. There's Mrs. Miller."

Mrs. Miller was hanging out a wash. "Patricia Kirby!" She pushed back her sunbonnet, the better to survey the child. "Where is your hat? You're redder'n one of my big pinies!"

Patricia put her hand up to her head. "Maybe I left it in the meadow; I'm not sure I've had it on at all this morning."

"Well!" Mrs. Miller's tone was emphatic. "The children and the dogs've all gone off picnicking," she added. "I suppose you've come to see them?"

"N-no," Patricia answered. "I came to bring you a---present, Mrs. Miller. The nicest---"

She stopped abruptly, as Mrs. Miller rushed by her, with a shriek, waving her apron frantically.

On the grass spread out to bleach, lay one of Mrs. Miller's best tablecloths; and in the middle of the cloth Mrs. Miller's present was rolling and twisting his damp, dusty little self, uttering all the while short, sharp little barks of satisfaction.

But he was on his feet before any one could reach him, and with one corner of the cloth caught in his mouth, had run gayly away.

"Head that dog off, Patricia!" Mrs. Miller screamed. "What dog is it, anyway---mischievous, good-for-nothing little scamp? He doesn't belong about here! Ten to one, he followed you in. I never knew such a child for taking up with stray dogs!"

After several strenuous moments the cloth was rescued. "Is it hurt very much?" Patricia asked, anxiously.

Mrs. Miller held it up; one of the corners was torn and frayed rather badly, and the whole cloth was covered with grass-stains and dirt. "You can see for yourself," she said wrathfully; "and it a *new* cloth---never used yet!"

"But it'll wash, won't it?" Patricia suggested. "And the torn part won't show when it's on the table; and it won't show when it's folded up in the drawer." She stooped to lay a restraining hand on the wrongdoer, who already had an eye on various other articles scattered about the grass. "I wouldn't have thought he could run so, with a lame paw, would you, Mrs. Miller?"

"The sooner he runs out of my sight, the better for him," Mrs. Miller declared, warmly. "If he don't get started mighty quick I'll help him along a bit with a broom handle."

Patricia drew herself up. "I---I think I'll be going."

"But, Patricia," Mrs. Miller called after her, "what was that about a present? Something your aunt sent?"

"No, Aunt Julia didn't send him. I brought you a---a dog, Mrs. Miller."

"*That* little nuisance! Well, well, of all---"

Patricia waited to hear no more; not until she was some distance up the road did she turn to her charge, limping ostentatiously in the rear.

"That was another bad first impression, Dog! It wasn't my fault this time. Really, I'm very much ashamed of you."

Dog sat down, holding up a bandaged paw. His whole dejected little body expressed penitence of the deepest dye.

Patricia softened. "I'm not so sure whether, after all, you would have liked it at the Millers'. I'm a good deal disappointed in Mrs. Miller, myself."

She sat down on the grass beside the road to rearrange the loosened bandage. "Puppies will be puppies, I suppose. Daddy says you must always take the intention into consideration---and I don't suppose you *intended* to be bad. It's dreadfully easy to be bad, without intending to. I certainly hope it won't be washing-day at the next place. The idea of having Thursday for a wash-day, anyhow! Dear me, where is the next place?"

The dog crawled into her lap, trying to lick her face. He was not in the least anxious to decide upon any "next place." Sitting there in Patricia's lap, in the shade of a wide-spreading maple, seemed a very agreeable method of passing the time.

"I think," Patricia said, stroking the little black head, "we'll try Miss Jane. You don't know Miss Jane. She's awfully nice. She and her sister haven't any dog but they've got a cat; you wouldn't mind that---she's a very intelligent cat; Miss Jane says so."

To reach Miss Jane's it was necessary to leave the highroad for a narrow, winding lane. A quarter of a mile further on they came to the little white house. Patricia thought it very lonely looking, but perhaps her companion might think otherwise. "And I do think," she said, gravely, "that it's very good of me to bring them such a nice dog---to keep the tramps off."

A large gray cat, sunning herself on one of the gate-posts, was the only sign of life about the house.

But not for long. The next moment an exceedingly astonished, irate cat was taking an unusual amount of exercise in the prim little garden, urged cheerily on by a small, curly dog, whose three legs seemed quite as effective as most dogs' four. While down the path from the house came Miss Jane and Miss Susan, also stout, elderly, and unaddicted to overmuch exercise, anxious for their cat, anxious for their garden, most of all anxious to get this strange intruder off the premises.

"Go away, little girl, and take that horrid dog with you," Miss Jane commanded, shaking a stick she had picked up.

Patricia's eyes flashed. "I'm not '*little girl*.' I'm *Patricia Kirby!*"

"Pa-tri-cia Kir-by! Upon my word!"

Patricia's bare curls were blown and tangled; her face, hot and dusty; her blue gingham frock, fresh that morning, between water and dust was a sight to behold. She bore very little resemblance to the Patricia Kirby Miss Jane was accustomed to see in church on Sunday, or sometimes driving about with Dr. Kirby.

"Whatever are you doing alone so far from home, Patricia?" Miss Susan asked, coming up. The cat had retired to the shelter of a tall tree, from a branch of which she glared down on her pursuer, who lay hot and panting on the ground below.

Patricia pointed to the dog. "Why, I came on purpose to bring you him---for a present, you know."

Miss Jane gasped.

"He's a very nice dog," Patricia went on. "I'd love to keep him for myself; only Aunt Julia---Aunt Julia seemed to think one dog was enough. I don't think Aunt Julia is particularly---enthusiastic, about dogs. You would like him, wouldn't you?"

Not dust, heat, nor weariness could hide the persuasive charm of Patricia's quick upward smile.

Before that smile Miss Jane, who was very soft-hearted, wavered; but Miss Susan shook her head resolutely. "Augusta would never hear of it for one moment!"

"Is Augusta your cook?" Patricia asked. Cooks were that way sometimes; even Sarah had her moments of revolt---so far as Patricia was concerned.

"Augusta is our cat," Miss Jane explained. She felt grateful to Susan, and sorry for Patricia.

Patricia sighed; she had recognized the finality in Miss Susan's tone. "Do you know of any one who would like a dog," she asked, "a very nice dog?"

"You might try the Millers'," Miss Jane suggested.

"I---I don't believe Mrs. Miller would care for him," Patricia answered, hurriedly. She turned to go. "Why, where is he?"

"Perhaps he's waiting outside in the road for you." Miss Susan was not ordinarily so inhospitable, but the minister was coming to supper that evening; and, like Martha of old, Miss Susan was burdened with many cares.

Patricia sighed again; the road outside the low white fence seemed suddenly very long and sunny. She was tired and discouraged; above all, she was hungry.

"Before you go, Patricia," Miss Jane said, kindly, "come round to the kitchen and have a glass of cool milk and a cookie."

The kitchen door had been left open in the excited rush of a few moments before. As the three neared it now, Miss Susan darted forward, with very much the same shriek of horrified dismay as Mrs. Miller had uttered not long since.

Mounted on a chair, his feet firmly planted on the kitchen-table was a small black dog, just finishing the contents of a large glass dish standing at the edge of the table.

"It's my custard," Miss Susan wailed, "and the minister coming to supper!"

The "very nice dog" turned round, licking his chops contentedly. It almost seemed as if he winked at Patricia.

The next instant, skilfully dodging Miss Susan, he had retired to the side yard, to finish licking his chops. Truly, it was a red-letter day for him. He wagged affably at the eloquent Miss Susan; surely he had paid her the highest compliment in his power.

"Oh, I am so sorry," Patricia declared. "He must have been very hungry---I couldn't have given him nearly enough breakfast." Then she brightened. "After all, Miss Susan, I don't suppose he's ever had custard before; and I know Dr. Vail has---lots of times."

Which view of the case did not in the least appeal to the indignant maker of the custard.

Seeing which, Patricia concluded that the best thing to do was to take her charge away as quickly as possible. And in the confusion milk and cookies were quite forgotten.

"Really, you know," Patricia admonished, once they were outside the gate, "you're not behaving at all well! Tearing table-cloths, chasing cats, and eating up custards aren't at all good dog manners."

The culprit, quick to detect the disapproval in Patricia's voice, thought it time to limp again.

"Is your paw very bad?" Patricia asked.

The dog assured her that it was.

"I don't know what we're going to do next," Patricia told him. And once back on the main road, she came to a standstill. She couldn't take her protege home; even less could she desert him. She sat down by the roadside to consider the matter---to consider various other matters, as well. Even with Patricias there comes the moment of reckoning.

Aunt Julia had said that the next time she evaded sewing-lesson she must go to bed at five o'clock. Patricia stretched out her tired little legs; at the present moment that particular form of punishment did not appear very unendurable. Just now, however, it seemed doubtful if she would be at home by five o'clock.

Also, Daddy had said that the next time she broke bounds in this way he should be obliged to punish her. Patricia fanned herself with a decidedly dingy pocket-handkerchief; she wished Daddy had said---*how*.

"I'm not saying you're not a very nice dog," Patricia patted her companion, curled up on the folds of her short skirts; "still, if I hadn't met you this morning---"

The dog blinked sleepily, licking her hand. Perhaps he was thinking of a poor, forlorn little animal who had until that morning been hunted and driven, half starved, never caressed.

"I wonder," Patricia said, anxiously, "if Mr. Carr wouldn't like you? We'll go see, at any rate."

Up the hill they trudged, to where, in his little cabin, lived old Carr, the cobbler.

He was at his bench as usual, and he paused, needle in air, at sight of his visitors.

Patricia was growing desperate; she went straight to the heart of her errand.

She and Carr were great friends, and the latter was immensely interested. Over his spectacles he surveyed the pair. Patricia's gray eyes had lost their confidence; they were almost as unconsciously pathetic as the dog's brown ones.

"Well," Carr said, slowly, "there's no denying a dog's company; and since old Sampson died---"

Patricia beamed. "Then you will take him? And you won't mind if he's rather---lively? You see, he's so very young. Maybe, I'd better tell you everything." And sitting down on one end of the workbench, Patricia made full confession of her charge's misdoings. "But I think he's sorry," she ended, hopefully.

"Sure, Miss," Carr assented; "especially as to the custard---that there wasn't more. What's his name, Miss?"

"I don't know. I've called him just Dog."

"I reckon he won't care what he's called, so long as you don't call him too late for dinner," Carr remarked. "How about Custard? It'd keep his sin afore him." He took a piece of rope from the floor. "I'd best tie him for a bit at first."

It was half-past four when Patricia reached home. Sarah was upstairs and Aunt Julia busy with callers.

Making a hasty raid on the pantry, Patricia slipped quietly up the back way to her own room. Aunt Julia had said it must be bed; and there was no particular use in waiting to be sent.

She was just getting into bed, after a hurried bath, when Miss Kirby, having learned from certain unmistakable evidence that Patricia had returned, came upstairs.

"Patricia!" she exclaimed, her voice expressing almost as much relief as displeasure, "where have you been?"

Patricia moved restlessly. "I've been---everywhere!"

"Sarah has ransacked the entire neighborhood." Displeasure was fast becoming the dominant note in Miss Kirby's voice now that Patricia was safe in bed before her. "Of course you understand," she began.

Patricia raised a small, flushed face. "Please, Aunt Julia, I'm in bed---and you didn't have to send me. I've had a most *fatiguing* day; and I'm dreadfully afraid that if you start in to talk to me the 'Kirby temper' ll make me say something back."

Miss Kirby sat down, surveying her niece in silence for a moment. Patricia had frankly stated a quite undeniable fact; and she had no desire to put the matter to the test. "Very well," she said, presently, "we will wait until to-morrow morning."

"But that would be ever so much worse," Patricia pleaded. "I do so hate waiting for things. I thought---maybe---if I went straight to bed---you'd skip the---talk part, this time. I'm very tired; finding a home for a dog takes it out of you a lot. People 'round here don't seem very anxious to have dogs. And---I went considerably beyond bounds---so I've got Daddy to settle with yet. All the same, I did find him a home, Aunt Julia---I haven't got that on my mind."

Miss Kirby rose, and going over to the bed bent and kissed the tired, wistful face. Patricia had a fashion of exciting sympathy at the wrong time, in a way that was perilous to discipline. "For this time, then, Patricia," she said. "Now I must go downstairs."

Left to herself, Patricia suddenly remembered that there was to be strawberry shortcake for supper. Oh, dear, if only Custard had chosen any other day to drift across her path! A sent-to-bed bed-supper meant simply bread and milk. Patricia wondered if Dr. Vail would mind about not having custard as much as she did about not having strawberry shortcake. She decided that when she was grown up and had little girls of her own she'd never send them to bed early on strawberry shortcake night.

She heard her father drive into the yard, heralded by Caesar's deep bark. Caesar had gone with the doctor on his day's round. Patricia knew how he was running about now, looking for her. She hoped Sarah would forget and leave the screen door open. Caesar would be sure to come upstairs then. She rather thought Daddy would delay his coming until after supper.

Sarah was taking in supper now; she could hear the dishes rattling. She was very hungry; that hasty raid on the pantry had not been very satisfactory. If Custard had felt that way she didn't much blame him for eating up Miss Susan's

custard. Probably no one had ever taught him that it was wrong to take what didn't belong to him.

There! Sarah was bringing up her supper now!

Patricia sat up in bed; even bread and milk appeared highly desirable at that moment.

But there was more than bread and milk on the tray Sarah carried. Patricia stared at the generous square of strawberry shortcake, plentifully supplied with cream, in wondering silence.

Sarah brought a small table to the side of the bed. "Miss Julia, she done send some message 'bout this 'ere cake, Miss P'tricia; but, law o' mercy, I'se clean forgot the most 'portant word. Hit were something 'bout you-uns having had a fat-fat-"

"Fatiguing day?" Patricia suggested, taking little anticipatory pickings at the corners of the shortcake.

Sarah nodded her turbaned head. "Where's you-un been all day, Miss P'tricia?" she enquired, severely.

"If you don't mind, Sarah---I'm very hungry and tired---I won't go into that at present. I had something very important to see to."

"Humph!" Sarah grunted. "Nice doings, worrying your pore aunt near to 'straction---the doctor, he ain't come home to dinner---to hear 'bout your carryings-on. What you think he's goin' say---when Miss Julia tells him?"

Patricia was absorbed in eating bread and milk. "It must be dreadful to be really starved, Sarah," she observed.

"Where you get your dinner, Miss P'tricia?"

"I didn't have any," Patricia answered.

"My sakes!" Further speech failed Sarah. She turned away.

Patricia's next visitor was old Caesar. Standing by the bed, he asked as plainly as dog may what in the world she was doing there at that time of day? He accepted solemnly his share of the good things going, then stretched himself out on the floor beside the bed, to mount guard---but not until he had told her as forcibly as he could that the summer evening was unusually fine, and that there were several little affairs in the garden requiring their joint supervision.

"But I can't go, Caesar," Patricia told him. She was always sure that her dumb friends understood quite well all she said to them. "There comes Daddy now."

"It doesn't seem to be solitary confinement, Patricia," Dr. Kirby said, as he came in and seated himself on the side of the bed.

Patricia stretched out a welcoming hand. "It's hours and hours since I've seen you, Daddy."

Dr. Kirby took the outstretched hand gravely. "From your aunt's account, there would appear to have been hours and hours in which she did not see you, Patricia?"

"I'm afraid I was gone a long while, Daddy; but I came home just as soon as I got things straightened out.

"Suppose you give me the particulars, Patricia."

And moving so as to rest her head on her father's knee, Patricia told in detail the story of her day's experiences. She had the comforting conviction that when Daddy knew all he would not be very displeased with her.

More than once, during that recital, the doctor's mouth twitched under his mustache, and he turned rather suddenly to look out of the window.

"But, Pat," he exclaimed, as she finished, "what made it so imperative for you to find that tramp dog a home?"

Patricia's gray eyes were very earnest. "Some one had to do it, Daddy."

The doctor smoothed back the soft, thick curls. "But, Pat, I cannot have you burdening yourself with the responsibility of finding homes for all the stray animals that cross your path."

"He was so miserable, Daddy---outside; and so really nice---inside. I don't believe he liked being a tramp dog."

The doctor stooped and kissed her; it was not easy to be severe with Patricia. "Still, dear, it must not happen again; you run too great a risk; stray dogs are not always very dependable as to temper."

"It's going to be mighty hard not to, Daddy."

"And Patricia, where are my scissors, and salve, and soap?"

"I'm afraid---down by the brook; so's the towel. I was glad I'd watched you bandage Caesar's paw that time."

"That is all very well; but, Patricia, you are not to meddle with any of the office things again without permission. And now, about this matter of breaking bounds to-day?"

Patricia looked up quickly. "You---you'll 'take the intention into consideration,' Daddy?"

The doctor smiled. "Yes, but," his face grew grave again, "I must also take into consideration the fact that this is by no means the first time you have gone wandering off, causing your aunt a great deal of anxiety."

"I can't think why she will worry so. I always come back all right."

"That is not the point. It must be only the yard for the rest of the week, Patricia."

Patricia drew a long breath. "Well," she said, slowly, "I *am* glad it's Thursday night 'stead of Monday morning."

* * * * *

Patricia sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes. What had wakened her?

A second series of short, sharp little barks sent her hurrying to the window. On the path below, a bit of frayed rope dangling from his neck, stood Custard.

When the doctor came downstairs, twenty minutes later, he found Patricia on the back steps, with Custard in her lap, busily placing a fresh bandage on the hurt paw. "Daddy," she cried, lifting her face for his morning greeting, "wasn't it too lovely of him to hunt me up. Isn't he the most grateful dog ever was?"

The doctor patted the dog's rough head, then stooped to examine Patricia's work. "Not a bad job for an eleven-year-old, Pat."

"I could do it better, only I had to make a strip from a piece I found in Aunt Julia's scrap-bag," Patricia explained.

"Patricia!" Miss Kirby exclaimed from the doorway, "your dress is only half buttoned, and your hair is---*Patricia Kirby*, have you gone and hunted up another dog!"

"It's the same one, Aunt Julia. He has improved a lot, hasn't he? If you'd seen how glad he was to see me! I suppose he'll have to be sent back. Caesar likes him pretty well; he didn't growl at him once when I introduced them to each other."

"It's a question whether *sending* back will do any good," the doctor said. He was watching the two on the steps.

Patricia stroked the bandaged paw gently. "I can't take him---I can't go out of the yard, can I, Daddy?"

"Decidedly not."

"Couldn't you take him in the gig with you, Patrick?" Miss Kirby felt that she was playing a losing game.

"Going quite in the opposite direction."

"And Jim?"

"Goes with me." The doctor was still studying the two on the steps.

"If he stays one day we are doomed!" Miss Kirby declared.

"That only leaves you and Sarah, doesn't it, Aunt Julia?" Patricia asked, cheerfully.

Miss Kirby was not without a sense of humor. "I am afraid Sarah is out of the question," she said; "and if he waits for me to take him he will stay here---altogether."

Patricia was quick to catch the longed-for concession in her aunt's voice. Dropping Custard, she ran to hug Miss Kirby. "Oh, you darling! But, Daddy," she turned anxiously, "oh, do you suppose Mr. Carr will mind *very* much?"

"I rather think he will be able to bear the disappointment," the doctor answered.

CHAPTER II

THE GINGHAM APRON PARTY

Fortunately, the ground under the big apple tree was soft and springy, and Patricia was used to both low and lofty tumbling; so when she landed, a little surprised heap, in the tangled grass, she lay still just long enough for the small

black dog, nosing anxiously about her, to get in one or two licks of her sunburnt, bewildered face; then she sat up.

"My, Custard, that was a stunner! I reckon if Daddy was here he'd say, 'what a fall was there, my countrymen!'" Custard wagged agreeingly, and sniffed inquiringly at the strip of pink leg showing through the long jagged tear in one of his small mistress's tan stockings.

Patricia scrambled to her feet and began taking stock. There was another tear in the short skirt of her blue gingham frock, and one in one of the sleeves.

"Goodness! What will Aunt Julia say!" Patricia said ruefully; then remembered suddenly what Aunt Julia had said, no longer ago than yesterday morning, after a similar catastrophe.

"And if Aunt Julia isn't a 'Mede 'n' Persian,' she might almost as well be one---when it comes to unsaying things," Patricia told herself, as she started for the house.

Half-way up the back garden path, she came to an abrupt halt. "Custard," she gasped, "it's party day!"

As if Custard did not know that! He had never been to a party, but he was mighty glad to have been invited to this one. The pantry, always an enchanted spot to him, smelled even more delicious than usual. He had quite lost count of the number of times that Sarah had run him out of it this morning, with more haste than dignity.

Patricia sat down in an empty wheelbarrow to consider matters, not noticing that Jim had been using it that morning to bring fresh mold for Miss Kirby's flower beds.

"I didn't want to give a party anyhow." Patricia stared gravely out across the sunny drying-ground. Privately, she considered the average party a great waste of valuable time. Least of all had she wanted to give an "honor party" for Susy Vail. Susy was the rector's grandchild, and was on a visit here.

Patricia hadn't much use for Susy Vail. She was a city girl, she was quiet and shy, and she would be sure to come to the party in a stiff white dress and blue ribbons. Patricia was positive as to the blue ribbons.

"I've a good mind to run off to the woods and stay all day, Custard," Patricia said, getting up; "they can have the party without us."

Custard barked a prompt disapproval of this scheme. Maybe the party could do without him, but he was quite sure he could not do without the party.

"Come on," Patricia told him, starting back down the path.

She had got as far as the gate leading into the meadow, when a new idea came to her. Swinging slowly back and forth on the gate, she considered this idea; her gray eyes dancing, as its possibilities opened up before her mental vision.

"And if Susy Vail hasn't a gingham apron, I'll lend her one; she seems the sort of girl not to have one," Patricia confided to Custard, as they once more made their way towards the house.

If only the coast were clear!

Sarah was on the back piazza, pitting cherries, but Sarah was easily managed.

"My sakes, Miss P'tricia!" Sarah lifted her plump hands in horror, "whatever is you-un been up to now?"

"Where's Aunt Julia, Sarah?"

"Done left for Gar's Hollow just five minutes ago, your pa sent Jim back for her in the gig. What you say, Miss P'tricia?"

For under her breath, Patricia was saying jubilantly: "It's---providential!"

"N-nothing---that is, I was only thinking out loud," she told Sarah.

"Don't you go worrying 'bout dat ere party, honey; hit'll come off all right."

"I think it will---now," Patricia answered; her tone so full of some hidden enjoyment that Sarah glanced at her suspiciously.

"Miss Julia, she done left word for you-un to do everything like you know she'd want you to, Miss P'tricia."

Patricia selected a pair of earrings from the finest of Sarah's bowl of cherries. "Don't you worry, Sarah."

"You ain't 'xplained yet how you come to be in such a disrepec'ble condition, Miss P'tricia. If the rag man was to see you, he'd just up and toss you into his cart---he shore would."

"Have I got a clean gingham apron, Sarah?" Patricia was a past-mistress in the art of ignoring what she considered inconvenient, or personal, remarks.

"Looks to me like you's got more clean gingham aprons than you's got manners," Sarah said severely.

Patricia went indoors to the telephone, shutting the door behind her as she went. Sarah was too fat and too heavy on her feet to get out of a chair, once comfortably settled in it, unless the call were really urgent.

Patricia first called up Mrs. Hardy. Quite unconsciously---being on her dignity and feeling, besides, very important---she spoke more slowly than was usual, and with more than a trace of her aunt's formality.

Back over the line came a prompt: "Why, good morning, Miss Kirby!"

Patricia's eyes sparkled and the demon of mischief, always lurking in her neighborhood, immediately put idea number two into her head. Her imitation of her aunt's voice and manner this time was perfect. "Good morning, Mrs. Hardy, I just called you up to let you know that the little party we are giving this afternoon is to be a gingham apron party."

"A w-what?" Mrs. Hardy questioned.

"Miss Kirby" gave herself vigorous mental treatment for a moment or so---one giggle and the game was up. As if Aunt Julia ever giggled!

"A gingham apron party," she repeated; "it is Patricia's suggestion, so that the children may have a nice jolly time."

"That sounds exactly like Patricia," Mrs. Hardy commented, laughing. "I'll tell Nell; I'm sure she will approve."

"Miss Kirby" said thank you, then she hung up the receiver; after which, seizing Custard, she hugged him ecstatically. "I really am 'Miss Kirby,' you know," she explained. "Daddy's only got me---and I didn't say a word that wasn't perfectly true. And Mr. Baker, out at Long Farm, always calls me that. Now, I'll have to finish 'phoning."

Mrs. Lane and Mrs. Blake were next informed as to the kind of party under way for that afternoon; then came Mrs. Vail, with her Patricia made a break. "And if Susy hasn't any gingham---" she began.

"If Susy hasn't what?" Mrs. Vail interrupted. "Why, of course---"

"I only thought---I mean," Patricia felt herself floundering---and Aunt Julia never floundered. "Then we may look for Susy," she said hastily.

"Why, certainly," Mrs. Vail answered.

"That is well. Good-by."

"Miss Kirby" hung up the receiver hastily.

"I think she almost suspected---something, Custard; I reckon she's the suspicious kind---Susy Vail looks the kind of girl to have a suspicious mother. But the rest didn't." Patricia danced the interested Custard down the hall.

As she reappeared on the back piazza, Sarah asked sternly: "What you been up to now, Miss P'tricia? You've been doing a heap of talking at dat ere 'phone."

"I had some very important business to transact," Patricia answered loftily, the mantle of her aunt's manner still enveloping her. "I guess I'll go put my apron on now."

Sarah sniffed indignantly, "You needn't tell me dere ain't some foolishness afoot," she declared.

"What time was you-un 'spectin' the comin' cer'mony to commence?" she asked, when Patricia came in to her solitary dinner. Neither Miss Kirby nor the doctor would be back before late afternoon.

"Aunt Julia said half-past three to seven; I suppose they'll begin coming 'long about three."

That note of hidden jubilation in her voice worried Sarah. She had not known Patricia for all of her eleven years for nothing. "Honey, what you cog'tating?" she coaxed; as she brought Patricia a generous slice of fresh cherry pie.

"I'm thinking about---my party. It's going to be a---a---corker, Sarah! You'll see!"

Sarah groaned, both in spirit and outwardly. "Honey," she pleaded, leaning on the back of a chair and studying her charge anxiously; "Honey, dat Miss Susy's a stranger in dis yere part---why, she's come clare from Phil'delphy. I'm told the chillerns down in Phil'delphy has beau-ti-ful manners."

"I dare say," Patricia did not appear greatly interested.

"And Miss Julia, she done plan dis yere party jest for her."

"I know---I didn't ask her to---I---"

"Honey, you wouldn't---you shore wouldn't do anything to---to disbobulate your aunt's plans?"

"May I have another piece of pie, Sarah, please?"

Sarah cast a pair of imploring eyes ceilingwards. "Of all the ignoringest young uns! I isn't discoursing 'bout pie, Miss P'tricia."

"But it's mighty good pie, Sarah! Will there be cherry pie among the refreshments this afternoon?"

"Miss P'tricia! And the cherry juice all a dripping down, like's not, on you-uns clean white dresses," Sarah protested. However, she brought Patricia a second piece, which was the important thing at the moment; the future might very well be allowed to take care of itself.

Later, as she did up her dinner work, Sarah cast more than one anxious glance out of the window to where Patricia lay on the back lawn, under the shade of the big cherry tree. Patricia's very quietness was alarming.

Was it too much cherry pie? Or was she plotting something.

"Honey," Sarah came out on the piazza, "it's getting time for you to get dressed for the festiv'ties."

Patricia, tickling one of Custard's long ears with a blade of grass, smiled serenely. "But I am dressed, Sarah."

Sarah sat down heavily on the piazza bench; "I knowed it! I jest 'spicioned you-un was shore up to something!"

Patricia rolled over on her back, stretching her wiry little frame out lazily.

"You come right 'long into dis yere house, Miss P'tricia!" Sarah rose commandingly.

"But what for?" Patricia questioned.

"What for? If you wasn't a white child, Miss P'tricia, I'd shore say you was onery. I's going be 'bliged to disport you to your pa, if you continues such disbehavior."

Patricia scrambled to her feet, and came slowly over to the edge of the lawn. Then, lifting her apron, she asked quietly: "Is my frock torn, Sarah, or isn't it?"

"You knows it is, Miss P'tricia!"

Patricia stretched out one slender leg. "Is my stocking torn, or isn't it?"

Sarah groaned.

Wheeling suddenly round, and still holding up her apron, Patricia demanded: "Is my frock dirty, or isn't it?"

"Miss P'tricia, you's shore possessed to-day!"

"Aunt Julia said yesterday morning, that the very next time I got myself torn or dirty, needlessly, I must put a clean gingham apron on and go that way for the rest of the day."

"But, honey---you know Miss Julia never 'tended you to come to your own party in any such fixings! A gingham apron at a party! You come 'long upstairs with me, Miss P'tricia; I'll resume all the 'sponsibility."

"Aunt Julia said 'the very next time'; this is the very next time."

"She done lay out your dress 'fore she went, honey---so crisp and nice and all the pretty pink ribbons," Sarah spoke coaxingly.

"Aunt Julia didn't know---I hadn't tumbled out of the apple tree then."

"I'se going phonegraph your aunt right off!" Sarah declared.

Patricia caught her breath. Then she remembered. "But they haven't any 'phone at Gar's Hollow!"

Sarah wrung her hands. "And all them little ladies in white dresses, and the hostess o' the 'casion looking like 'straction!"

"I always *feel* like distraction when I'm all stiff and starchy and uncomfortable," Patricia said; "I'd rather look it than feel it."

"Oh, I ain't overlooking that you're powerful reconciled to going to your own party dressed like you is now, Miss P'tricia! Anyhow, you're going to have a good wash-up and your hair combed; Miss Julia ain't laid down no commands against that."

"W-well," Patricia slowly conceded, "only I'll see to it myself, Sarah."

Patricia's thick mop of brown curls was of the tangly order; and when things had gone wrong, Sarah's touch was not always of the gentlest.

An hour later, Sarah, from her post of vantage on the side porch, saw six little girls coming up the path. There were no boys invited. Miss Kirby thought it so much nicer for little girls to play quietly by themselves.

A moment, Sarah stared at them in amazement; then her fat sides shook with laughter. "I shore might've knowed it! So that's what she was so busy phonegraphing 'bout! That chile shore weren't born yesterday. Gingham aprons, every last one o' them!"

Some of the six wore sunbonnets, the rest plain garden hats; and all wore stout serviceable shoes and stockings. Never had those six little girls gone to a party before in such unparty-like costumes.

Patricia came dancing to meet them, bareheaded as usual. "Let's go down to the barn right off," she proposed. "Goodness, how funny you do look!" she giggled.

"So do you," Nell Hardy retorted; then the seven stood still a moment to survey one another.

"Oh!" Mable Lane cried, "whatever put such an idea into your head, Pat?"

"I---I happened to think of it, that was all," Patricia answered vaguely. "Come on---we'll play hide and seek, and no going out of the barn."

"Are---are there any horses there?" Susy asked.

Patricia shook her head. "Not today; Daddy's got Sam and Dick's gone to pasture."

They played hide and seek all over the delightful big dusty old barn; until Patricia, trying to reach goal by a short cut down from the loft, came to an abrupt halt in her descent, caught on a projecting beam.

"Go back!" Ruth Martin advised; but Patricia, wriggling herself free, dropped in a laughing heap on the barn floor.

"But you've torn your apron, Pat!" Nell exclaimed.

Patricia glanced up at the bit of blue gingham hanging from a nail in the beam.

"Look's like this was my busy day," she observed; "I'll go put another on."

"I put it on over the first," she explained, on her return. "You see, Aunt Julia said---I mean, I thought it would be---fun; and, anyhow, it saved time, it takes a lot of time to unbutton these aprons. Let's go down to the brook and wade." She glanced at Susy, who was looking rather doubtful. "Aren't you allowed to wade in brooks?"

"I---don't know," Susy began, then her mild little face took on a look of sudden resolution, "but I'm going to."

Patricia smiled in prompt friendliness. "Mostly, when I'm not sure I just take the chance," she encouraged.

Sitting on the edge of the brook, the seven took off shoes and stockings. "It's the queerest, nicest party," Bessy Martin declared.

It was a gay little brook, running between a broad, sunny meadow and the old Kirby apple orchard, broad enough in places to make the crossing of it on stepping stones delightfully uncertain, and again narrowing to a mere thread. To Patricia, it was like some live thing, one of the dearest and most intimate of playmates.

"Let's play Follow my Leader," Nell suggested, and they drew lots to see who should be first leader.

It fell to Kitty Hall, next to Susy the quietest of the seven; the lead she set them was a very mild affair, limited to the shallowest and narrowest parts of the brook.

But with Patricia's turn, matters took a change for the better, or worse, according to the point of view. Patricia hopped and skipped, and did everything except walk demurely on two feet, out of the safe, pleasant shallows straight for the "pool," which was quite knee deep at this time of year.

Once there, she turned to view her followers, and it wouldn't have been Patricia, if she hadn't slipped and, with a little shriek of surprise, sat right down in the pool.

There was a moment's hesitation, then Nell boldly followed suit; one by one, ending with Susy, the other five dropped down in the cool rippling water, which seemed to laugh, as if it saw the joke.

"Oh!" Patricia cried, "I never meant---" She was on her feet as quickly as possible. Susy was just the kind to go and catch cold, why she had begun to shiver and shake already.

The next few moments were strenuous ones for Patricia's followers. Never had she led them such a chase, through all the hottest, sunniest parts of the big meadow.

"We've got to run, so as not to catch cold," she panted; and run they did, their wet skirts flapping against their bare legs, hats and sunbonnets sent scattering in every direction. While Custard, regarding it as a game gotten up for his especial benefit, urged them on, barking and leaping about them, taking little pretend nips at the seven sets of bare toes, choosing Susy's the oftenest, because she always squealed the loudest.

At last the seven dropped down breathless in the middle of the meadow. Patricia felt of Susy's skirts anxiously. "They're 'most dry; let's---" She turned over on her face, and the six followed suit once more.

"The sun feels good, doesn't it," Susy said, she was on one side of Patricia. "I'm having a be-au-ti-ful time!"

Patricia raised herself on her elbows, and, chin in hand, surveyed Susy closely. "Truly true?"

"Truly true," Susy insisted.

Patricia smiled approvingly; and, when she liked, Patricia's smile could be very approving indeed. "I guess maybe I'm going to like knowing you," she said.

Susy's little pink and white face had lost its look of peaceful placidity, her yellow curls their smoothness. Wet, bedraggled, but happier than ever before in her life, and joyfully conscious that she had for once boldly strayed from the narrow path of harmless routine, she smiled back at Patricia.

"I guess we're all dry now," Patricia said presently. "It seems to me as if it must be pretty near supper time."

Nell spread out her limp skirts. "Pretty looking set, we are, to go to supper!"

But Patricia was thinking. "A gingham apron party supper ought to be different," she said slowly; "Nell, let's you and me go get the refreshments and bring them out here."

It was a glorious suggestion. Six pairs of eyes opened wide with delight.

"B-but Sarah---" Mabel asked. Mabel had a knack of asking such questions.

"Oh, I reckon Sarah'll ask a heap of questions---Sarah's mighty inquisitive at times," Patricia answered. "I rather think the best way will be just to go ahead and not bother her about it."

"But how?" Mabel insisted.

"You leave that to Nell and me---we'll manage. The rest of you must wait here; keep Custard with you. Oh, dear! I thought you were beautifully dry, Susy Vail; what did you go sneeze for? Well, you'll just have to keep moving, that's all. You see that she does, Mabel."

Patricia's commands seldom fell on deaf ears and Mabel promptly insisted on a game of tag; while Patricia herself, accompanied by Nell Hardy, started on a brisk run across the meadow.

At the garden gate, Patricia called a halt. "Duck," she ordered, dropping on the grass. From half-way up the path, came Sarah's voice: "Oh, Miss P'tricia! Miss P'tricia!"

"She'll go back presently, if she doesn't hear us," Patricia whispered with elaborate caution; "then we must get to the house as quickly and as quietly as possible and secure the re---the booty. Oh, go away!" she added sternly, as Custard came sniffing about them.

But Custard only wriggled and danced about and over them, urging them as eloquently as he could to get up and continue their way indoors. Wasn't the pantry indoors? Custard could have told his mistress long ago that it was quite supper time.

At half-past six, the doctor and Miss Kirby drove into the yard. As the gig drew up before the side door, Sarah, voluble and indignant, appeared. From the mass of information she hurled upon them, one fact only was quite clear---Patricia was missing.

She was so often missing, that the announcement failed to excite any great apprehension in the mind of either her father or her aunt.

"But the party---" Miss Kirby began.

"She done take the party with her!" Sarah wailed.

Miss Kirby looked more indignant than surprised; to have come home and found that nothing untowards had happened would have been the surprising thing.

"I ain't laid my eyes on her since them six gingham aprons came gavorting up the walk!" Sarah proclaimed dramatically. "That young-un's a limb, for shore!"

Miss Kirby sat down on the piazza bench. "Gingham aprons, Sarah," she repeated. "Patrick, what can she mean?"

The doctor shook his head, smiling, "That remains to be discovered."

"For the love o' goodness, Miss Julia!" Sarah implored; "the nexest time you sets out to give a party for that there young-un, I hopes and prays you stays home to sup'intend the obsequies yourself!"

The doctor turned to send Sam on to the barn.

"Gingham aprons," Miss Kirby murmured.

"Ain't Miss P'tricia done 'tire herself in one for the 'casion!" Sarah exclaimed; "and ain't she done tell all the others over that 'phone to do the very same---I ain't never held with thet there 'phone, nohow---'tain't nothin' better'n devilment, anyhow. My sakes, such doings, Marse Doctor! You and Miss Julia just come cast your glance over this supper table!"

They followed her into the dining-room.

"It certainly looks very pretty," the doctor said, glancing at the table.

Sarah groaned. "Where's them plates o' sandwiches gone? I ask you that! Where's them plates o' biscuits gone? I ask you that! Where's the little cakes, what I iced so pretty, gone? I ask you that! Ain't I done fix them all in place and then I goes out to call them---ginham aprons---to come in,---and I done galivant all over the place and all up and down the street and I ain't seen the least speck o' one o' them---but when I comes indoors---the party done vanish! And that ain't all---the cherry pie I done make for you's and Miss Julia's supper done vanish too. But they ain't got the ice cream---I reckon the freezer was too heavy."

"That at least is something to be thankful for," the doctor said, "there would probably have been---consequences---had they secured both the cherry pie and the ice cream."

"And the table looking so stylish," Sarah mourned, "with the flowers and all the fixings. Where's that plate o' chicken gone? I ask you that!"

"Patrick," Miss Kirby said, "you really must go look that child up! such behavior is---"

"I'm going," the doctor assured her, and as he went Miss Kirby saw him put his handkerchief to his eyes more than once.

Through the garden he went, through the orchard. Half-way across the meadow beyond the orchard he came upon Custard dining at second table, and too busy to do more than wag a welcome.

A few yards further on stood an old apple tree, and from the top-most branch came, in Patricia's clear notes:

"If I could find a higher tree
Farther and farther I should see,
To where the grown-up river slips
Into the sea among the ships."

The doctor stood still, making a trumpet of his hands. "Ship ahoy!" he called.

The next instant seven girls came wriggling and scrambling down from the various branches. "Oh! Daddy," Patricia cried joyously, "we're having the jolliest time---we're pirates! I'm captain---

"My name is Captain Kidd,
And most wickedly I did,
As I sailed, as I sailed!"

"And, according to report, before you sailed, young lady. Suppose you make explanation regarding certain late extremely piratical proceedings."

"You mean about the supper, Daddy? You see, we didn't feel very partified---at least, we thought we didn't look exactly---

As she hesitated, the doctor, glancing from one to another of the seven, nodded comprehendingly. "I quite agree with you, Pat; you do not look very---partified."

They were so dusty, so disheveled; all but Patricia had shoes on---Custard had made off with both of Susy's, and Patricia had most willingly offered hers---the opportunity to go barefoot was too good to be lost; Nell had only one stocking, Kitty none at all, Ruth was wearing Patricia's, Custard had certainly made the most of his chance to carry off things that

afternoon.

"But we've had a be-au-ti-ful time," Susy said, slipping a hand into the doctor's. She quite forgot that he was a comparative stranger, remembering only that he was Patricia's father---Patricia, who had invited her to this most wonderful of parties, where one had been so busy having fun that there had been no time for feeling shy and strange.

Dr. Kirby smiled down at the little guest of honor. "Upon my word, I believe you have," he said.

"Aunt Julia says," Patricia possessed herself of his other hand, "that to feel sure that one's guests have honestly enjoyed themselves is to know that one's party has been a success. So I reckon mine's been a perfectly tremendous success."

"Suppose you come up to the house---all of you---and see if you can reassure Aunt Julia and---Sarah," the doctor suggested.

Patricia sighed. "I---I sort of wish Aunt Julia---looked at things the way we do, Daddy."

They went on up to the house. On the back steps, Miss Kirby was waiting; in the kitchen doorway stood Sarah.

"Patricia Kirby!" Aunt Julia exclaimed. "Well of all the---"

"Miss P'tricia," Sarah broke in wrathfully, "where's that cherry pie I done made for Marse Doctor's supper?"

Patricia slowly drew up her uppermost apron. "It's here---most of it; Custard got the rest. I---I stumbled and fell---into it. You see, we were playing pirate---and we were smuggling."

The doctor, much to his sister's indignation, sat down suddenly on one of the garden benches. "Oh, Pat, Pat!" he gasped.

"Patricia Kirby, how many gingham aprons have you on?" Miss Kirby demanded.

"Three, Aunt Julia; you said I must wear the first one all the afternoon---and I tore it---and then the pie sort of stained the second; I got kind of interested to see how many it would take to get me through the afternoon. I had to make it a gingham apron party, Aunt Julia, on account of what you said yesterday. You see, I got pretty well torn and dirty this morning---and, of course, I needn't have climbed that tree."

"Casabianca," the doctor murmured; Miss Kirby was past murmuring anything; all her efforts were directed towards at least a semblance of self-control.

"I shore told you, that young-un was a limb," Sarah muttered.

"Sarah was very anxious to fix me all up properly, Aunt Julia," Patricia went on, "but of course, after you had said---and I thought you'd feel better if the rest wore gingham aprons too. Sarah was very kind about it though," with a smile in her direction.

"You go 'long, Miss P'tricia," Sarah protested.

Miss Kirby bit her lip. "That is all very well, Patricia, but---"

"We've had such fun, haven't we, girls?" Captain Kidd appealed to her fellow pirates.

"Oh, we have," they chorused back.

"And having supper out in the meadow when we hadn't expected it was the best part," Nell added.

"What would you suggest?" Miss Kirby turned to her brother.

His smile told her that he knew quite well that she was shifting upon him the responsibility of deciding. As a strict disciplinarian--in theory--it would never do for her to countenance such unlawful proceedings. He rose to the occasion promptly. "Soap and water for these highly reprehensible young folks, after that--the ice cream--seeing that the cherry pie came to a timely end. And for us--supper."

"Isn't Daddy the dearest?" Patricia demanded, as she led her guests upstairs. "Daddy's always so understandified."

CHAPTER III

THE WAY OF A GRANDMOTHER

Patricia sat on the back steps carefully arranging purple and white asters in an old blue and white punchbowl, the pride of her Aunt Julia's heart.

"It's the 'Washington bowl,' Custard," she explained to the small curly black dog, watching her intently. "Daddy says it's called that because it is just as easy to prove that Washington never did have punch from it as that he did." Patricia paused to rearrange one particularly wobbly aster, too short as to stem and too big as to head. "Anyhow, it's one of the very nicest things we've got."

Custard sighed restlessly; to spend this breezy October afternoon in fussing over flowers, when just beyond the gate a whole world waited to be explored, seemed to him a most un-Patricia-like wasting of time.

Then as Patricia rose slowly to her feet, the bowl of flowers in her hands, he sprang up at her with a sharp little bark of delight.

"Down!" she warned sharply. "Custard Kirby, if you make me drop this punchbowl I don't know what Aunt Julia *will* say!"

It seemed to Patricia as if that journey upstairs to the spare bedroom never would be made in safety; but it was accomplished at last, and her burden placed right in the center of the low reading-table, standing at one side of the south window.

With a long breath of relief, Patricia sat down on the edge of the bed, looking about the big pleasant room with approving eyes. It was exactly the sort of room she should like to have when she got to be a grandmother. There were fresh muslin curtains at the windows, the fine old-fashioned mahogany furniture shone from its recent polishing; on the broad hearth a light fire was laid ready for the lighting, and at one corner of the fireplace stood a big chintz-covered armchair. Of course there was a footstool beside it. Patricia had seen to the footstool herself, hunting it out up garret that morning. She had wondered why Daddy's eyes twinkled at sight of it--Daddy would tell her nothing about grandmother, she must wait and see. And Patricia so hated waiting for anything, from surprises to scoldings.

"Yes, it certainly does look grandmotherey, Custard," she said; "and the flowers help a lot. I know she'll love asters; they're such an old-ladyish flower. Mind, sir, you're not to go rushing at her! And the very first time you run off with

any of her things you're going to get your ears boxed."

Custard wagged tentatively; boxing his ears appeared to him to belong to Miss Kirby's special department.

"Miss P'tricia!" Sarah stood in the doorway, indignation in the very points of her knotted turban---"Miss P'tricia, ain't yo' never be'n tole not to sit on beds? 'Tic'larly beds all ready fo' comp'ny!"

Patricia slipped hurriedly to her feet; but by this time Sarah had caught sight of something else. "Land sakes, Miss P'tricia! Ef yo' isn't gone an' tuk Miss Julia's punchbowl---what she don't 'low no one but herse'f to tech!"

Patricia put an arm around Sarah's waist, or rather, around as much of it as she could encompass. "Aunt Julia wasn't in---and I wanted the very nicest bowl I could think of. It is so perfectly lovely to have a grandmother coming!"

There was a world of unconscious longing in Patricia's voice; no one, not even Daddy, knew quite what the coming of her grandmother meant to the little motherless girl. And a grandmother she had not seen since babyhood. The coming weeks seemed to Patricia full of untold possibilities.

"It do look pretty," Sarah admitted, as she went to smooth out the bed covers. "'Pears like it was time yo' was gettin' your dress changed, honey. Yo' best let me giv yo' hair a brush; seems like yo' never did get the kinks out."

Patricia submitted with most unaccustomed patience to the finishing touches Sarah insisted on giving her toilet. "I reckon yo'll do now, honey," Sarah said at last.

"Only half an hour more and she'll be here, Custard," Patricia said to the dog, sniffing inquiringly at the tips of her best shoes; "Daddy's to meet the five-thirty train."

Patricia settled herself circumspectly in the hammock, smoothing out her crisp white skirts. "Oh, I do wonder what she'll be like, really I haven't even a photograph---grandmother doesn't like being photographed---and I haven't seen her since I was three years old. Custard, do you suppose she'll have an ear trumpet, like the Barkers' grandmother? It's very embarrassing talking into an ear trumpet. I rather hope she's short and---stoutish. I've been thinking over all the people I know, and it seems to me that the short, stout ones are mostly more good-natured than the other kinds."

Custard wagged agreeingly; he was short, and not his worst enemy could accuse him of being thin. So far this coming of a grandmother did not appeal to Custard; never before had he been refused a share of the hammock; and those one or two preliminary nips he had taken at the toes of Patricia's shiny shoes had been promptly squelched. To be talked to and confided in was all very well, but a game of tag in the meadow behind the house would have been a great deal more fun. Nor was Custard quite sure what a grandmother was; he hoped it was something good to eat.

Patricia had never known such a long half hour; she made one or two trips down to the gate, walking carefully on the edge of the grass, so as not to get her shoes dusty. It was very odd that Aunt Julia didn't come home---Good, she was coming now.

"Isn't the train late?" Patricia demanded, the moment her aunt was within earshot.

Miss Kirby smiled. "It isn't due yet, Patricia, for five minutes." She didn't look in the least excited, going calmly up the garden path to the house.

But then it wasn't *her* grandmother who was coming; besides, Patricia's gray eyes danced mischievously, she didn't know about the punchbowl.

Patricia decided to wait down by the gate---explanations were such tiresome things.

Then, in a few moments, far down the quiet village street she caught sight of a familiar gig, duly attended by old Caesar, the pointer.

The gig was quite close now. Patricia's heart gave a great jump, then seemed to stand quite still.

She hadn't come!

There was a lady in the gig with Daddy; but---

Patricia turned sharply, and regardless of her shoes ran swiftly back up the driveway and through the garden to the meadow beyond; never stopping until she dropped, a little breathless heap, beside the brook.

Custard barked excitedly, thinking it some new move in this grandmother game; then suddenly he poked his cold black nose in under the tossed thatch of Patricia's brown curls. For Patricia was crying---and doing it quite as earnestly and as thoroughly as she did most things.

At last she sat up, dabbing her eyes.

"She didn't come! And we were all ready---and now it can't be just the same---when she does come. Custard, do you suppose it's a---a judgment on me, for taking the punchbowl?"

Custard looked sober.

"I'll go put it right back. Oh, dear, I do hope that other person hasn't stayed to supper!"

Patricia went back to the house, forlorn, bedraggled; very different from the Patricia whom Sarah had sent downstairs not an hour before, imploring her to "try and keep smarted up for once."

On the back porch she met her father.

"Patricia," he asked, "what does this mean? Why did you run away when you saw your grandmother coming?"

Patricia gasped. "But, Daddy, she didn't come! I didn't see her! Oh, do you mean, was that---I expected she'd have on a bonnet tied under her chin---and a shawl---and glasses." Patricia was half crying again, her head on her father's shoulder.

It was hard to relinquish the picture of the grandmother she had been carrying in her mind for the past fortnight; a sort of composite picture of all the grandmothers she knew in Belham.

And the doctor, understanding, comforted her, sending her to freshen herself up again for supper, with the promise that it would all come right---she would see.

On the upper landing Patricia came face to face with grandmother; a grandmother who was tall and slender and dressed in some delicate gray material that rustled softly when she walked, and gave forth a faint scent of violets. There was very little gray in the dark wavy hair, that framed a face altogether different from the placid wrinkled one of Patricia's imaginings; but when Mrs. Cory said, "O Patricia!" and held out her arms, Patricia went to her at once.

They sat down on the broad window seat to get acquainted; Patricia hoped grandmother would not see she had been crying and how tumbled her clean dress was. Though Mrs. Cory saw, she said nothing, she had the gift of knowing what questions not to ask; only asking instead, "Patricia dear, who put that delightful bowl of flowers in my room?"

Patricia's color deepened. "I did---grandmother; I thought you would like them---they were," Patricia caught herself up, doubting now the appropriateness of those "old-ladyish" flowers.

Fortunately Custard appeared at that moment, wagging ingratiatingly; and grandmother at once responded to his overtures with a friendliness that warmed not only the heart of Custard but of Custard's small mistress.

Patricia went to bed that night with her thoughts rather in a whirl. "I suppose," she decided finally, "that she is one of those 'up-to-date grandmothers' one reads about; anyhow, she's a dear and I love her, and oh, Aunt Julia did behave beautifully about the punchbowl---she seemed to appreciate what a delicate situation it was---and I'll never, never take it again without asking."

On the whole, this "up-to-date grandmother" proved a most charming possession; a grandmother who took long walks with one, who played croquet with one, who planned delightful trips in town to shops and even to matinees. And how delightful to know that one was the object of both envy and interest to the other girls; to be able to show the tiniest of enameled watches, straight from Paris; to have a grandmother who had actually been in Egypt, and had seen the king and queen of England. Patricia held her head very high in these days.

Yet at times there was an odd, barely defined feeling of something like regret at the bottom of Patricia's heart.

This new grandmother was the best of chums and companions, but somehow it was hard to realize that she was really a *grandmother*. And before Patricia's inward gaze would pass the picture of a little white-capped old lady, quietly knitting at one corner of the fireplace; an old lady whose big Dutch pocket held an unfailing supply of ginger nuts and peppermint drops, whose stories were all of those far-off days when "I was a little girl."

But only at times; as a rule these days were too full for Patricia to find time for inner visions.

"You're the luckiest girl, Patricia Kirby," Patricia's particular chum, Nell Hardy, declared one morning on the way to school. "I think Mrs. Cory's perfectly lovely; she always acts as if she was ever so glad to see you."

Patricia swung her strap of books thoughtfully. "Daddy says she has a beautiful manner. I'm going to be just like her."

Nell's quick glance was hardly flattering. "When?"

"Anyhow, she's *my* grandmother!" Patricia retorted; she shook out her short skirts, if only she could have silk linings. Clothes were beginning to take on new meanings for Patricia.

"We'd better hurry," Nell said, "or we'll be late."

"Grandmother never really hurries."

"Maybe she did when she was going to school; there's the bell now!"

"Bet I'll be there first," Patricia said, darting ahead.

But she wasn't; it seemed as if all the babies and dogs in town chose that particular moment to get right in her path, avoiding with equal skill Nell's eager rush. What with picking up a baby here and stopping to speak to one there---Patricia never could get by babies---Patricia reached the schoolhouse just too late to join her line and had to wait outside until the opening exercises were over.

It was by no means the first time; and Miss Carrol looked very grave as Patricia slipped into her place a little later, trying to ignore Nell's bob of triumph.

It was after supper that evening that the doctor called Patricia into the office. "Patricia," he said, as she came to stand before him, "I met Miss Carrol this afternoon."

"Yes, Daddy." Patricia's thoughts flew rapidly backward; had she been doing anything very dreadful?

"She tells me that you have been tardy very frequently of late, Patricia."

"Y-yes, Daddy."

"And yet you usually appear to start in good season?"

"Yes, Daddy; it---it doesn't seem to be the *starting* early. It's---such a lot of things always do seem to happen on the way."

"What kind of things, Patricia?"

"Well, you see, Daddy, there are such a lot of babies all along, they just expect to be noticed; and sometimes I go for some of the girls and they've something to do and I wait to help; and sometimes I go an errand for old Mrs. Daly---you know she hasn't any one to go at home. If you were with me you'd understand, Daddy."

The doctor smiled. "Oh, I understand all right, Patricia; still, this being late for school has got to stop. Suppose every one in the room came just a little late?"

"They don't," Patricia said; "most of the girls hate it."

"And you must learn to hate it too; as a means to that end, if it happens again this week it must be only the yard on Saturday, Patricia."

"Daddy!" Patricia made swift calculation on the tips of her fingers; it was Monday night---twice four made eight---eight pitfalls to be avoided or else---Not once since her coming had grandmother failed to take Patricia somewhere on Saturday afternoon.

All of this was in Patricia's gray eyes, as she lifted them appealingly to her father. "Daddy, if you *could* make it something else?"

"Are you going to give up the fight beforehand, Pat?"

"But you see, Daddy," Patricia quoted gravely, "I 'know my limitations.' And besides, it isn't just me---grandmother'll be so disappointed; you know we always go somewhere together Saturday afternoon."

"Which means a double reason for coming up to the mark, Patricia," the doctor answered; and Patricia, with a little sigh, turned away.

She and Custard were alone in the sitting-room a little later, when Mrs. Cory came in. Grandmother glanced at the sober face. "Is anything wrong, dear?" she asked.

"I'm positive I can't make it," Patricia said forlornly.

"Make what?"

And Patricia explained.

"Of course you can, dear," grandmother said cheerily; "and indeed you must; I've got a very special reason for wanting you to---I'm not going to tell you what it is, however, until Saturday morning at breakfast."

"Over four days to wait! Grandmother, mayn't I have just the first letter?"

Grandmother shook her head.

The next morning at breakfast she announced that she felt the need of more regular exercise, and she thought she should take a short walk every morning.

"Ah!" Dr. Kirby said, "about what time?"

"I should think---about half past eight," Mrs. Cory answered.

"A short walk *before* breakfast is considered more beneficial by some."

Miss Kirby looked interested. "There are a good many pretty walks about Belham," she said.

When Patricia came down the path, her strap of books over her shoulder, and a get-there-early-or-die expression on her face, Mrs. Cory was just turning out of the gate.

"Are you going in my direction, grandmother?" Patricia asked; and grandmother replied that she was.

Later, sauntering slowly homewards, Mrs. Cory met the doctor. He drew rein. "Well?" he asked.

She laughed softly. "Patrick, if you'd been with us! It was like making a royal progress. There were exactly six babies, and I quite lost count of the dogs, not to mention several old ladies, all waiting to pass the time of day with Patricia. My only wonder is that she ever gets to school at all. Patrick, I don't believe you realize what a dear child she is."

"Don't I!"

Mrs. Cory stood a moment looking down the pleasant tree-bordered street. She had not been in Belham before since the death of Patricia's mother, more than eight years ago, having been abroad most of the time. Now she found herself

regretting this long absence. She had been missing a good deal---she would like to have had some share in Patricia's life all these years.

"I was beautifully early this morning," Patricia announced proudly at the table that noon.

"And you will be this afternoon?" grandmother asked.

"I'm not so apt to be late afternoons," Patricia answered; "I suppose it's just happened that way."

The next morning after breakfast, Patricia lingered. "Are you going my way *this* morning, grandmother?"

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Cory answered.

Patricia caught the smile in her father's eyes and wondered.

Half-way to school she suddenly stopped. "Grandmother, you're doing it on purpose---to *make* me get there early!"

Mrs. Cory smiled. "You see I didn't want to lose my treat, Patricia."

When Friday noon came Patricia had not one tardy mark for those four days; and on that same Friday noon she met her Waterloo.

It was the Dixon baby who caused her downfall.

He was one of Patricia's most ardent admirers; and when he saw her coming that noon he made as straight for her as his very shaky two-year-old legs would allow. Of course he tumbled down and scratched his snubby little nose; and of course Patricia stopped to pet and comfort him, carrying him back to the house. "Mrs. Dixon," she called from the gate, "oh, Mrs. Dixon!"

But Mrs. Dixon had just stepped over to a neighbor's. Patricia tried to put her charge down, but he stoutly refused to be put.

"You'll be late, Patricia," Nell warned, coming up.

"Danny won't let me leave him; and I don't know where his mother is," Patricia almost wailed.

"Mercy, put him down and come on!" Nell advised. "He's a little nuisance."

"You don't know Danny's powers for hanging on," Patricia said; "besides, he did hurt himself."

Five minutes after school had opened Patricia made her appearance.

"Patricia," Miss Carrol said, "I had begun to hope that you were not going to end the week as you began it."

Patricia took her place without answering.

Miss Kirby and Mrs. Cory had gone in town that afternoon, not to return until the late train, and it so happened that the doctor did not come home to supper; so there was no one but Sarah to notice the depths into which Patricia was plunged.

For Patricia never did anything by halves.

"Is yo' sick, honey?" Sarah asked anxiously, when Patricia refused a second piece of chocolate cake.

Patricia shook her head. "I'm just disgusted with life."

"Land sakes!" Sarah exclaimed; "and only this noon looked like yo' was walkin' on air!"

Patricia went to bed early that night; even Custard's powers to comfort had proved inadequate. To-morrow stretched ahead a long, blank, dreary waste.

She was a little late to breakfast the next morning; as she slipped into place, after kissing him good-morning, the doctor glanced at her rather closely. She was a most subdued Patricia.

And then grandmother came in, also a little late. "Patricia," she said, almost at once, "after breakfast I want you to run over and ask Mrs. Hardy if Nell may go in town with you and me to-day---to the circus."

Patricia caught her breath---so that was the "special reason!"

Then she pushed her chair back. "I---can't go!" she cried; and was halfway upstairs before any of the others could speak.

Mrs. Cory turned to Miss Kirby. "What can be the matter?"

Miss Kirby shook her head. "Do you know what it means, Patrick?"

The doctor looked guilty. "I am afraid it means---that Patricia has been late to school again."

"But I thought," grandmother began, then stopped; as soon as she had finished her breakfast she went up to Patricia's room.

Coming down a few moments after, she went straight to the office.

"Patrick," she said, "I have been finding out how Patricia came to be late; and remember, please, that Patricia herself has given me only the barest facts, with no thought of making out a case for herself, but reading between the lines---" and then the doctor was given the opportunity to also read between the lines.

He listened gravely. "I know," he said at last, "it was a very Patricia-like action; still I am afraid I must stand by my word."

"Patrick, I think I shall claim my prerogative."

"Your what?"

"Prerogative---as a grandmother. From time immemorial it has been the right of the grandmother to come to the rescue of the grandchildren."

"But Patricia knows---"

"It is my chance, you see,"---Mrs. Cory had been told why Patricia had run away that first night,---"my chance to prove to Patricia that even if I don't wear a cap and spectacles and all the paraphernalia of the good old-fashioned grandmother, at heart I really am one---just as soft-hearted and unreasonable as any one of them."

"But---"

"Patrick, didn't *your* grandmother ever get *you* out of a tight place?"

The doctor looked thoughtfully out at the leaf-covered lawn; it was going to be a perfect fall day. "Yes," he said, "she did, more than once---bless her---in the most reprehensible way."

"The way of a grandmother the world over," Mrs. Cory commented softly.

"And upon my word I don't believe it did me any harm!" the doctor went through to the foot of the stairs. "O Pat!" he called.

Patricia came promptly, bravely blinking back the tears.

"You mustn't lay it up against *me*, Pat," the doctor said; "it's all your grandmother's doing. She simply insists on taking you to that circus today."

"Daddy!" Patricia's arms were about his neck instantly; "Daddy, I *will* try---ever 'n' ever so hard! You'll see!"

The doctor laughed. "Wish I were going too, Pat. In my young days it was *after* the circus that one appreciated most the advantages of owning a grandmother."

"Where is grandmother, Daddy?"

"In the office."

Patricia flew to the office. "Oh," she cried, her arms around her grandmother's neck this time, "you're the very grandmotherest grandmother that ever could be!"

And then and there vanished forever from Patricia's heart that picture of a placid, wrinkled little old lady, knitting quietly at one corner of the fireplace.

CHAPTER IV

PATRICIA'S CHRISTMAS FAMILY

"There!" Patricia stepped back, with a sigh of satisfaction. "It's all ready for the presents. Custard Kirby," she bent to pat the small curly black dog, stretched lazily out on the hearth-rug, "on your honor, have you ever seen a prettier Christmas-tree? Good! There's Daddy!"

Patricia ran to open the front door. "Come and admire, Daddy," she urged.

Dr. Kirby went with her to the library; in the center of the broad square room stood the tree, its slender tip just escaping the ceiling.

"And I trimmed it nearly all myself!" Patricia explained, proudly. "Aunt Julia had to go out. Maybe you don't think I've been busy to-day, Daddy! I don't know but what it is a good thing that Christmas doesn't come more than once a year."

"I should be bankrupt if it did," the doctor said, pulling one of Custard's long ears. "An only daughter is rather an expensive luxury."

"As if I were anything more than a plain every-day necessity! And not such an incapable after all, am I, Daddy?"

"Not when it comes to Christmas-trees."

"Daddy, see, it's beginning to snow!"

"We're going to have a white Christmas, all right," the doctor said; then, as the telephone rang sharply, he went to answer it.

Patricia heard him give a sudden exclamation, ask one or two rapid questions; then he hung up the receiver and came back to the library door.

"Patricia," he said, "there has been a bad accident down at the curve---the eastern express---they are bringing the injured up here to the hotel. Phone your aunt for me; and remember, *you* are not to leave the house."

"O Daddy!" Patricia followed him into the office; but all he could tell her was that it seemed to be a pretty bad affair, and that he was likely to be away from home some hours.

"A sad Christmas eve for a good many, dear," he said, kissing her good-by.

Patricia watched him, as he drove off a few moments later, through the fast falling snow. Christmas eve---and down there at the curve! Patricia choked back a sudden sob, as she went to telephone to her aunt, who was down at the church, helping with the Christmas decorations.

Miss Kirby decided instantly to go right down to the hotel, where help would be needed. And *she* also warned Patricia that she was not to leave home.

"But oh, I want to go, Custard!" the girl protested; "I know I could help." She closed the library door; the sight of the Christmas-tree, its gay ornaments glittering in the firelight, hurt her.

Patricia went to curl herself up on one of the sitting-room window-seats. Jim had gone with her father; Sarah was down at the gate talking over the accident with the maid from next door. Presently, across the street, a familiar figure came into view, through the gathering twilight. Patricia hurried to the door. "O Nell!" she called.

Nell Hardy came running over. "Patricia, you've heard?"

"Yes; they sent for Daddy. Aunt Julia's gone down to the hotel."

"So's Mama; she wouldn't let me go with her. O Patricia! If it had been the local!"

"Don't, Nell! Come on in and stay; I'm under orders not to leave the house."

They went into the sitting-room, where Patricia brightened up the fire and lit the big lamp, with its crimson shade. Then she came to sit beside Nell on the broad old lounge. "Nell, aren't you wild to help too? If only Daddy hadn't--Oh, I know---" The next moment Patricia was out in the hall at the telephone.

Nell waited wonderingly.

"Come on, Nell!" Patricia stood in the open doorway, her eyes dancing. "Five of them coming!"

"What are you talking about, Pat?"

"Children." Patricia was leading the way upstairs. "I got Mrs. Brown, down at the hotel, on the 'phone. I wish you could have heard her!"

"Children! I should say so, Miss Patricia! Five of them crying in my own sitting-room at this minute. No, not hurt; frightened out of their wits, and their own people too hurt to look after them. And when I asked if I might have them up here, Nell, I wish you could have heard her. She's sending them right up in one of the hotel rigs."

"But, Patricia---"

"There aren't any butts in this affair. We'll take Aunt Julia's room and mine. It won't do to turn Daddy out of his, and I must have communicating ones."

"But your aunt---" Nell began again.

"Oh, Aunt Julia'll understand." Patricia was kneeling before the deep fireplace in her aunt's room, piling it generously with wood from the box in the corner.

"Miss P'tricia, what yo' up ter?" Sarah demanded, unexpectedly, from the doorway. "Yo' know Miss Julia don' like a fire in her room nights---an' de house like summer now, wid de furnuss!"

"Aunt Julia isn't sleeping here tonight," Patricia answered, calmly; "and I particularly want the room cheerful; you know, there's nothing like an open fire for making things cheerful."

"Miss P'tricia, what yo' be'n doin'?"

And Patricia explained.

Sarah rolled her black eyes ceiling-wards. "Who ever heerd tell o' sich doin's! I'd jus' like ter know who done gib yo' commission ter do this, Miss P'tricia! An' whatever is yo' goin' do wid five strange young uns?"

"Make them happy and comfortable, I hope," Patricia laughed. "There they are now. Start a fire in my room, please, Sarah, and make up a bed on my lounge. Come on, Nell," and Patricia was out of the room and downstairs in a flash.

Before the steps stood the carriage from the hotel, and from within it five white, frightened little faces looked anxiously out.

Patricia made straight for the youngest one, a two-year-old girl. "You poor baby!" she cried, softly.

Heedless, impulsive, Patricia had at least the gift of winning her way right to a child's heart; and without a moment's hesitation the child put a pair of clinging little arms about her neck.

She and Nell took the five into the warm, bright sitting-room, where they took off hats and coats and gently rubbed the cold little hands. "Why, you're not much more than babies, any of you!" Patricia glanced pityingly from one to another of her proteges.

"I'm seven," the oldest answered. "I'm Norma Howard; she's my little sister Totty." She pointed to the baby on Patricia's lap. "She keeps crying for Mama---Mama was hurt," Norma hid her face against Patricia.

Patricia slipped an arm about her. "I shouldn't wonder if my Daddy were looking after her right now. He's the best doctor in the whole world!" She turned to the two little boys, staring up at her from the depths of the doctor's big chair: "And are you brothers?"

"No'm," the larger one responded; "we've only just 'come 'quainted. He's only five; I'm five 'an half. I'm Archibald Sears; his name's Tommy---I want my mother!"

Tommy's blue eyes filled. "So do I," he cried.

Totty took up the wail; and the little four-year-old girl on Nell's lap promptly followed suit.

"What shall we do?" Nell asked, imploringly.

But at that moment Sarah appeared. She took Tommy up in her strong, motherly arms, soothing him in practised fashion. "There, there, honey! Yo's goin' have yo' mother pretty soon. What yo' wants now's yo' supper, ain't it, honey? I reckon ain't no one had de sense ter gib yo' chillens a mite ter eat."

Tommy tucked his head down on Sarah's broad shoulder with a pathetic little sigh of comfort. In the home which at this moment seemed very far away to Tommy was an old colored mammy. He refused to let Sarah put him down, so she took him with her while she got ready the five bowls of warm bread and milk, which she declared the best possible supper for all the children under the circumstances.

"But whatever put such a notion in yo' head, Miss P'tricia, is more'n I kin figger out," she declared a few moments later, guiding the sleepy Tommy's spoon in its journey from bowl to mouth. "What yo' reckon yo' pa's goin' say?"

"I think," Patricia glanced about the table, "that just at present Daddy would say---bed."

"H'm," Sarah grunted, "yo' knows what I means. Well, it's sure got ter be a bath for them all 'fore it kin be bed; so we'd best get started."

She headed the little procession upstairs, Tommy in her arms, Patricia bringing up the rear with Totty.

"If it hadn't come about in such a dreadful way, wouldn't it be perfectly lovely?" Patricia said. "Think of it, Nell---*five* children to spend Christmas with one!"

Nell laughed. "Your Christmas isn't over yet, Pat; it won't be all smooth running."

"You can't scare me. Nell, we'll hang up their stockings for them. They must have their Christmas."

"What yo' goin' do fo' night things fo' dem, Miss P'tricia?" Sarah asked, suddenly; "'pears like ain't none o' 'em come much laden down wid luggage."

"N-no," Patricia answered; "probably their things weren't very get-atable. We'll have to take some of my gowns, Sarah."

Whereupon Archibald lifted up his voice in swift protestation; he didn't want to wear a girl's things; he wanted to go home; he wanted to sleep in his own bed; he wanted his mother!

At that all-compelling word four other voices rose in instantaneous lamentation, even Norma catching the general infection.

"Sarah, can't you do something?" Patricia implored. "Nell, what does your mother do when your brothers cry like this?"

"They---don't cry like this," Nell answered, trying desperately to quiet Lydia.

"Mebbe next time, Miss P'tricia," Sarah's tone was strictly of the "I-told-you-so" order, "yo' won't go 'vitin' a whole tribe o' young uns, widout resultin' any one."

Patricia, walking the room with the screaming Totty, came to a sudden halt before Archibald, lying face down on the floor. "If you'll stop crying I'll let Custard come up," she said.

"Who's Custard?" Archibald rolled over on his back to consider the matter.

"My dog."

"Where is he?"

"Downstairs---in the kitchen."

"Does he like boys?"

"Not when they cry."

Archibald rubbed his eyes. "I'm not crying now."

But at that moment, Custard, who considered that he had been kept in the background quite long enough, came upstairs on his own account. As Sarah said, he seemed "ter sense the situation," for he trotted about making friends, lapping the tears from Tommy's face, and standing up on his hind legs to let Totty pat his head.

Sarah promptly took advantage of the lull to whisk the boys off to the bath-room; half an hour later, all five children, well wrapped in shawls and blankets, were gathered about the fire in Patricia's room for the hanging of the Christmas stockings.

That ceremony over, Sarah pounced on Tommy and Archibald, carrying them off to bed in Miss Kirby's room. "An' mercy knows what Miss Julia done say when she find yo' here," she muttered, tucking them in snugly.

Archibald sat up in bed. "I want---Custard!"

"Yo' go 'long ter sleep, young sir," Sarah expostulated. "What yo' think Marse Santa Clause goin' say ter such goin's-on?"

"I want Custard!"

"Let him have him, Sarah!" Patricia exclaimed.

"Miss P'tricia! 'Low that onery dog on yo' aunt's bed!"

Patricia let the insult to her pet pass.

"*On it, in it, under it*, if it'll keep him quiet!"

Sarah lifted Custard in far from respectful fashion, dropping him, an astonished, but entirely acquiescent heap, between Archibald and Tommy.

Lydia, already asleep, was disposed of in Patricia's bed, and Norma and Totty settled comfortably on the wide lounge.

"An' now, honey," Sarah said, "It's goin' get you and Miss Nell yo' supper."

They went downstairs, where Sarah made Patricia and Nell comfortable at a small table drawn up before the sitting-room fire.

"But what are you going to fill those stockings with, Pat?" Nell asked, after Sarah had left them alone.

"I can manage all right for the girls; I've loads of toys stowed away up garret. I've always had heaps of things given me, but if I could get out-of-doors, and had something alive to play with, I'd let the other things go every time. I am a bit puzzled about Archibald's and Tommy's."

"I'll run home and get some of the little boys' toys," Nell offered. When supper was over, while Patricia went, as she called it, "shopping up garret," Nell made a hurried trip home and back.

"There," she exclaimed, coming in breathless, her head and shoulders white with snow, "will these do?" She laid a toy engine, a trumpet, a tin sword, and a small box of lead soldiers on the table.

"Beautifully!" Patricia was placing a small jointed doll in the top of Norma's stocking. "This is going to be about the realest Christmas I've ever had."

"It's going to be a mighty sad one for a lot of people."

All the fun and laughter vanished from Patricia's gray eyes. She looked about the pleasant, homelike room, with its trimmings of evergreen and holly, and a swift, sharp, realizing sense of what was going on down at the hotel came to her. For a moment the girl's lips quivered and the hand that held Tommy's empty stocking trembled. "But, Nell," she said slowly, "I am sure---oh, I know they would want their children to have their Christmas. It would be too dreadful, afterwards---if they could remember nothing but---sadness and---sorrow. O Nell, I wonder if there were any children hurt?"

"I don't know," Nell answered. "Let's---not talk about it, Patricia. Shall I put the trumpet in Archibald's stocking?"

"I suppose so, he's larger than Tommy. I don't know what Aunt Julia will do if he wakes up early and starts to blowing it. Poor Aunt Julia! She's got a lot of surprises coming her way." Patricia stuffed out the toe of Lydia's stocking with the regulation nuts and raisins. "There," she said, a moment later, "I reckon these are ready to hang up again."

They tiptoed upstairs softly; the children were all sleeping quietly, and even Custard barely opened the corner of one eye at Patricia's coming.

Custard was having the time of his life. Hitherto, beds had been strictly forbidden ground with Custard; and just what could have brought about this most delightful state of affairs was quite beyond his powers of imagination, but he was wisely wasting no time in idle speculation.

Patricia stroked him a bit dubiously. "I am afraid Aunt Julia will rebel at this, old fellow; but Archibald's got fast hold of you, and I simply can't risk waking him up."

"I must go now, Pat," Nell said, as they went downstairs again; "I told Papa I'd be back soon."

"Somehow," she added, as she and Patricia stood a moment on the front steps, "I can't make it seem like Christmas eve---not even with your five stockings, Pat."

Patricia looked out at the white whirl of snow; the street seemed deserted, but here and there, where a blind had been left undrawn, a light shone out.

Then, from the house next door, came the sound of a Christmas carol:

"Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King."

Clearly, joyously, through the still, snow-laden air, sounded the words---

"Risen with healing in His wings,
Light and life to all He brings.
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!"

Patricia drew a long breath. "But it *is* Christmas eve, Nell. And, O Nell, at least *we* didn't have any one there---on the express."

"N-no," Nell said gravely, "still---"

"Maybe it won't be exactly a 'merry Christmas'," Patricia began---"Nell, listen!"

From upstairs came a prolonged wail.

"Totty!" Patricia cried.

* * * * *

It was more than an hour later when the doctor and Miss Kirby drove slowly up the snow-covered drive. "I am afraid Patricia has had rather a lonely Christmas eve," Miss Kirby said.

"It looks as if she had gone to bed," her brother answered; "the door would have been open by this time, if she were on hand."

Miss Kirby went directly upstairs to take off her things; in the upper hall she caught the flicker of firelight through her own and Patricia's half-opened doors; and although ordinarily she did not care for a fire in her room at night, the knowledge that there was one awaiting her now brought a sense of comfort. Probably Patricia had thought she would be cold and tired---Patricia was really very considerate at times.

Three minutes later Miss Kirby was standing in the middle of her room, staring with wide, amazed eyes at her very much occupied bed.

Two children and a *dog*!

Involuntary, she lowered the light, so as not to awaken the sleepers. Two children and a *dog*! Could it be the effect of over-wrought nerves? Then she recognized Custard.

Custard was blinking sleepily up at her, but he did not move. He may have realized the desirability of not disturbing his companions, or he may have concluded that possession was nine-tenths of the law; with a little audacious sigh of comfort, he tucked his head down and dropped off to sleep again.

Miss Kirby turned towards Patricia's room. A moment after, the doctor heard her calling to him softly from the landing.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Come and see!" Miss Kirby was almost hysterical.

"Patricia isn't--?"

"Come and see!" Miss Kirby led the way to her room, pointing dramatically to the bed.

The doctor surveyed the trio within it. "Upon my---" his lips twitched. "No one from around here! Evidently, Patricia has---"

"Suppose you look in Patricia's room," Miss Kirby suggested.

Going to the door, the doctor gave one brief, comprehensive glance; then he turned: "And how many in my room?"

Miss Kirby gasped. "I'll go see."

"None," she reported, "and none in the spare-room. Patrick, these must be children from---the hotel. Oh dear, was there ever such a girl!"

The doctor looked about him, more slowly this time, seeing Lydia in the bed, Norma on the lounge; seeing the little, flushed contented faces; seeing the stockings hanging ready for the morning from the mantelpiece; seeing, and here his glance rested longest, Patricia in a low chair before the fire, Totty in her arms, both fast asleep; noting the tired droop of

the dark head against the baby's yellow one.

He might have known Patricia would never be content to sit idle, when just at hand was so much of pain and suffering to be relieved.

"Isn't it exactly like Patricia?" Miss Kirby sighed, wearily.

"Yes," the doctor's voice was very gentle, "I think it is---exactly like Patricia." Crossing the room, he carefully loosened Patricia's grasp, taking Totty from her.

Patricia stirred and opened her eyes. "Daddy! Oh, I am glad you're back! But, please, please, be very careful not to wake Totty; I'm so afraid she'll get to crying again."

The doctor laid Totty beside Norma. "Suppose you come downstairs, Pat, and explain this invasion of the premises to your aunt and me," he said, holding out his hand to her.

Sitting on the arm of her father's chair, Patricia told her story.

"Have---you been in your room, Aunt Julia?" she asked.

"I have, Patricia."

"I am sorry about Custard, Aunt Julia; but Archibald wouldn't be comforted without him; he wanted his---mother."

Miss Kirby thought of the long dining-room down at the hotel, turned into a hospital ward; where on this Christmas eve more than one mother was lying very near the borders of the undiscovered country.

"And I had to take your room, Aunt Julia," Patricia went on, "so as to have two communicating ones. I hope you don't mind much?"

And Miss Kirby had not the heart to admit how much, in her present weariness of mind and body, she did care.

The doctor patted Patricia's cheek. "I thought Mrs. Brown was keeping those children wonderfully out of the way. I wish their poor mothers could have known how well they were being cared for."

Patricia drew a quick breath of pleasure. "And we'll keep them over Christmas, Daddy?"

"That depends---upon various things. By the way, where do you sleep to-night, Pat?"

"Oh, I'll go into the spare-room, with Aunt Julia," Patricia responded, cheerfully.

Miss Kirby stifled a sigh; and hoped that Patricia's activities would not recommence too early the next morning.

It was not Patricia who woke Miss Kirby the next morning.

Custard, waking early, and finding himself in such unaccustomed surroundings, decided to look for his young mistress. Having been permitted on one bed seemed to Custard sufficient warrant for getting on another. Miss Kirby woke with a start to find a little wriggling object standing between herself and Patricia, while a small moist tongue did active and

alternate service on both their faces.

Her shriek of dismay awoke Patricia.

"Aunt Julia!" Patricia was shaking with laughter, "I'll tell Daddy---how you woke me up, playing with Custard!"

"He's the most---" Miss Kirby dived beneath the bed-clothes. "Take him away, Patricia!"

From across the hall came the shrill blast of a trumpet. Custard, his forefeet firmly planted on Miss Kirby's chest, his head cocked enquiringly, promptly barked a defiant response.

The next moment the spare-room seemed full of children, all, like Custard, in search of Patricia, and making, at sight of her, as swift an onslaught in her direction as the extreme length of their nightgowns would permit.

So, after all, Christmas morning began merrily for them, at least.

The doctor, coming home later from an early visit to the hotel, stopped outside Patricia's open door. "Merry Christmas, Pat! Got your hands full?"

Patricia was kneeling on the floor, buttoning Tommy's shoes. "Merry Christmas, Daddy," she answered, gaily; "I certainly have."

Norma came slowly up to the doctor; she remembered him from last night; for in all the hurry and confusion of the moment he had found time for a few comforting words to the frightened, bewildered children. "Have---have you made Mama better?" she asked, wistfully.

The doctor sat down, taking her on his knee. "What is your mother's name, dear?"

"Mrs. Howard."

The doctor brushed the child's soft curls; and Patricia, seeing the gravity of his eyes, caught her breath. "Your mother was resting very quietly when I left her just now, dear," he said, gently; then he turned to Archibald. "Did you find that trumpet in your stocking, young man?"

Archibald nodded. "I want my---"

"I found this!" Lydia held up one of Patricia's many dolls. They all crowded about him, claiming his attention, Totty demanding to be taken up.

"Got your hands full, Daddy?" Patricia laughed.

* * * * *

About the candle-lighted tree Patricia's small guests circled admiringly. It *had* been a merry Christmas for the little travel-wrecked strangers; and now, with the tree, had come the culminating point of this long happy day.

"Isn't it pretty?" Norma came to lean against Patricia. "I wish Mama could see it."

"You must remember to tell her all about it," Patricia answered.

"Will I see her to-morrow?" Norma asked longingly.

"Perhaps," Patricia said; and when presently her father had to leave them, to go down to the hotel, she went with him to the door. "Daddy, you'll be back soon?"

"As soon as possible, dear."

"And---you think---with good news for them---all?"

"I hope so, dear."

Patricia went back to the library with sober face. "But at least," she thought, taking Totty on her lap, "they'll have had their Christmas."

It was far from soon before the doctor returned. Patricia's charges were in bed and asleep. Custard, who had been looking forward to bedtime all day, had retired to his basket---a disillusioned dog. To-night Archibald was finding all the solace needed in a gaily painted Noah's Ark. Miss Kirby was lying down in the sitting-room,---she had not found it a day of unbroken calm,---so that Patricia was alone in the library when her father returned.

He drew her down beside him on the lounge. "It *is* good news for them all, Patricia, I think Norma and Totty may see their mother to-morrow. I have brought you a great deal of love, Patricia, from more than one mother; love and gratitude."

"Oh, I am glad they're all better!" Patricia said. "Daddy, I've been thinking; I don't see how we're ever going to get along after this without a Christmas family."

The doctor bent to kiss her. "What I've been thinking is what your 'family' would have done for their Christmas without you. I'm proud of you, Pat."

"O Daddy!" Patricia's eyes were shining.