

eBook

Randy and Her Friends

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Randy and Her Friends

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Randy and Snowfoot (Frontispiece)

"I'll tell you just one thing more," said Randy

As she looked from the window and saw the flying landscape

As the smoke flew backward the flaming torch revealed the
sleeping children

Randy urges Polly to sing

Randy and Prue sat under the shadow of the blossoming branches

CHAPTER I

THROUGH THE FIELDS

The sunniest place upon the hillside was the little pasture in which the old mare was grazing, moving slowly about and nipping at the short grass as if that which lay directly under her nose could not be nearly as choice as that which she could obtain by constant perambulation.

A blithe voice awoke the echoes with a fragment of an old song. The mare looked up and gave a welcoming whinny as Randy Weston, Squire Weston's daughter, crossed the pasture, her pink sunbonnet hanging from her arm by its strings.

"Glad to see me, Snowfoot?" asked Randy as she laid a caressing hand upon the mare's neck and looked into the soft eyes which seemed to express a world of love for the girl who never allowed a friendly whinny to pass unnoticed.

"My! but this August sun is hot," said Randy, vigorously wielding her sunbonnet for a fan.

"And before we can turn 'round it will be September, and then there'll be lessons to learn, yes, and plenty of work to be done if I mean to keep the promise I made myself when I won the prize in June.

"A five dollar gold piece for being the best scholar, Snowfoot, and to think that I haven't yet decided what to do with it!

"I've spent it, in my mind a dozen times already, and to-day I'm no nearer to knowing *just* what I'd rather do with it than on the day it was given me. Did you ever know anything so silly?"

The horse sneezed violently, as if in derision, and Randy laughed gaily at having her plainly expressed opinion of herself so forcibly confirmed.

Leaving Snowfoot to crop the grass and clover, Randy crossed the field and followed a well trodden foot-path which led to a little grove and there in the cool shade she paused to look off across the valley, and again her thoughts reverted to the shining gold piece. Once more she wondered what it could buy which would give lasting satisfaction.

"If I were in the city," she mused, "I should probably see something which I'd like to have in the first store I came to, and I could buy it at once."

A moment later she laughed softly as it occurred to her that in the large city stores of which she had heard it would be more than probable that a dozen pretty things would attract her, and her bewilderment would thus be far greater than it had been at home with only a choice of imaginary objects.

"If old Sandy McLeod who gave the prize could know what a time I've had deciding what to do with it, I believe he would laugh at me and say in that deep voice of his,

"Hoot, lass! Since the gold piece troubles ye, I wonder if ye're glad ye won it?"

Randy in her pink calico gown, her sunbonnet still hanging from her arm, her cheeks flushed by the hot summer breeze, and the short ringlets curling about her forehead, made a lovely picture as she stood at the opening of the little grove and looked off across the valley to the distant hills.

She was thinking of the school session which would open so soon, when with her classmates she would be eagerly working to gain knowledge; of her longing for more than the "deestric" school could give, of her father's promise that she should have all the education she wished for, and the light of enthusiasm shone in her merry gray eyes.

"I shall work with all my heart this season," thought Randy, "and if I could do two years' work in one, I should indeed be pleased. I believe I'll ask the teacher to plan extra work for me, and if she will, I'll---" but just at this point she heard a clear voice calling,

"Randy! Randy!"

Turning she saw Belinda Babson running along the little foot path, her long yellow braids shining in the sun, and her round blue eyes showing her pleasure at sight of her friend.

"Why Belinda! Where did you come from?" cried Randy, "I'd no idea that anyone was near me."

"I've been sitting on the top rail at the further side of the pasture, and just watching you, Randy Weston," said Belinda, laughing.

"I was on the way up to your house when I met your little sister Prue, and she said that you were out here, so I turned this way, and just as I reached the bars I spied you a looking off at nothing and a thinking for dear life."

"I *was* thinking," admitted Randy, "and I was just wondering if I could do two years of school work in one, when you called me."

"Well what an idea!" gasped Belinda, "you don't catch me doing more than one year's work if I can help it, and I wouldn't do *that* if pa didn't set such a store by education.

"Why, Randy," she resumed a moment later, "what makes you in such a drive 'bout your lessons, anyway?"

"I'm sixteen this summer," Randy replied, "and I've no idea of waiting forever to fit myself for something better than a district school."

Belinda looked aghast, and her round face seemed longer than one could have believed possible.

"Randy Weston!" she ejaculated, "if you're planning to work like that the whole duration time you won't have a single minute for fun, and how we'll miss you!"

"Oh, don't imagine that I shall lose all the winter's pleasures, Belinda," Randy answered slipping her arm about her friend's waist. "I can study in the long evenings and I think that I shall be able to join you all in the 'good times' which you plan and yet be able to do the extra work at school."

"Well, I wish you joy," said Belinda, "but I, for one, get all the school work I want in a year as it is, and as to extra work, I guess I'll get it fast enough this winter, although it won't be lessons I'll be attending to in my spare time.

"Ma got a letter last night when she rode over to the Centre, and Aunt Drusilla writes that she's coming to make us a three months' visit, and she's going to bring little Hi with her. And yesterday morning pa said that Grandma Babson was a coming to make her home with us, so you might guess, Randy, that Jemima and I'll have to step lively and help ma a bit."

"You will indeed have to help," Randy answered, "but won't it be fun to see little Hi again?"

"Do you remember, Belinda, when he was here last summer, he tried to harness the hens and wondered why they didn't like it?"

"I had forgotten that," said Belinda, "but Jemima reminded me this morning of the day that pa lost his spectacles. Every one in the house hunted for those glasses, and at last Jemima ran out into the door-yard, and there was little Hi with the spectacles on his nose, a peering into the rain water barrel and holding onto those specs to keep them from tumbling off into the water. He said that pa said there were critters in any water, and as he couldn't see 'em he ran off with the glasses to see if they would help him. He tied our old Tom to the mouse trap because he said that he wanted the cat to be on hand when the mice ran in. He carried a squash pie out to the brindle cow because he thought she must be tired of eating nothing but grass, and if he and Grandma Babson have got to spend three months under the same roof, I b'lieve he'll drive her crazy, for she hates boys and don't mind saying so, and he can think of more mischief in one day than any other child could in a week."

Both girls laughed as they thought of little Hi's pranks and Randy said, with a bright twinkle in her eyes,

"At least, you and Jemima will be amused this winter."

"I guess we shall be in more ways than one," assented Belinda, "for I'm pretty sure that Grandma Babson and that small boy will be enemies from the start."

Belinda's habitually jolly face wore such a comical look of anxiety that Randy refrained from laughing, and to change the subject asked for a schoolmate whom she had not recently seen. "Where is Molly Wilson?" she questioned.

"Oh, Molly is so hard at work now it's only once in a while that I see her. Her baby sister is ill, and Molly has no time for anything but helping around home. Her mother says that she intends to have her go back to school if she can spare her, but whatever do you suppose Molly meant?"

"She said to me, 'Belinda, even if mother can spare me, I may not go to school. You can't think how anxious I am to be at work at my lessons again, but I'm afraid I shan't look fit and father's had such a hard summer, the farm hasn't paid for working it, he says, that I couldn't ask him for anything for myself if I never had it.'

"And oh, I never thought, Randy, I promised Molly I would not tell what she said. I didn't mean to. Whatever made me forget?"

"Never mind," said Randy, an odd little smile showing the dimples at the corners of her mouth.

"I will not tell a single girl you may be very sure, but you and I who know it will be extra kind to Molly."

"Indeed we will," assented Belinda. "I'll go over this afternoon and see if I can help her. The baby is a sweet little thing and she likes me, so perhaps I shall be some help. Oh, there's Jemima calling at the bars, I guess ma wants me. My! I wonder if some of our company has arrived?"

"Remember not to tell what I told you," cried Belinda to Randy, who stood looking after her friend, as she ran across the pasture to join Jemima.

They turned to wave their hands to Randy, who responded, then, as they disappeared behind a clump of trees, she turned her eyes toward the sunny valley and with her hands loosely clasped seemed to be watching the shimmering sunlight on the winding river below.

She had long been standing thus when a gentle whinny made her turn to offer the caress for which old Snowfoot was hinting.

The horse laid a shaggy head against Randy's shoulder and edged nearer as the girl patted her nose, then walking over to a large rock she stood close beside it and began to neigh, at the same time looking fixedly at Randy.

"Oh you cunning old thing," said Randy with a laugh.

"You're inviting me to ride, just as you always do, by walking up to that big flat rock so that I can mount. Well you old dear," she continued as she stepped upon the rock and prepared to seat herself upon Snowfoot's back,

"I've found out what to do with that precious gold piece, and I'm going to do it."

Then without saddle or bridle, but with a firm grasp upon the shaggy mane she chirped to her steed and the horse pricking up her ears at the sound, bounded forward, and proud of her charge carried her across the pasture to the bars where little Prue stood waiting to meet her.

It was evident that the little sister had wonderful news to tell, for her brown eyes were very wide open and she could hardly wait for Randy to slip down from Snowfoot's back before beginning to tell what so excited her.

"Oh, what do you think!" she began when with her hand in Randy's they trudged along towards home.

"My Tabby's caught a mouse, and father's just come back from the Centre and he's brought the cloth for a new dress for you'n me, 'n I picked holes in the bundles, an' one's blue an' one's red an' which do you s'pose is mine? And Aunt Prudence is comin' to see us next week, an' there's goin' to be a new spout to our rain water barrel, an' I guess that's all."

"Well if all that happened while I've been out in the pasture," said Randy, laughing, "I guess I'll have to stay in for a while and see what happens next."

CHAPTER II

A CHEERFUL GIVER

It was a warm August evening when a farm hand passing the Weston house paused a moment to look admiringly at the picture which the wide open door presented.

A rude frame of home manufacture, covered with netting, kept inquisitive moths from entering, at the same time allowing a flood of light to make its way out into the door-yard, where it lay upon the grass and added glory to the marigolds which grew beside the path.

"Happiest family I know on," muttered the man, drawing a rough hand across his eyes. "Makes me think of the time when I was a little feller ter hum, and had two sisters jest 'baout the size of Square Weston's girls."

Then, with a sigh, the man went on up the road, but the memory of the family group in the brightly lighted room remained in his mind for many a day.

At one side of the table with its bright cloth smoothly spread, sat Mr. Weston perusing the county paper, at times reading aloud a bit of especially interesting news to his wife who was busily at work upon an apron for little Prue. In the centre of the table stood a large lamp, a monument to the enterprise of Silas Barnes, the village storekeeper.

"You folks don't want ter go pokin' raound with taller candles when ye kin git er lamp that gives light like all fireation, do ye?" he had said.

And those farmers who could afford the luxury invested in a lamp at once. Others, whose purses were too lean for such expenditure, affected to prefer candles, declaring the lamplight to be too glaring for their taste.

Just where the light shone through the outline of her rippling hair sat Randy, reading aloud to Prue, who stood beside her at the table, insisting upon seeing each picture as Randy turned the page.

As she finished reading the story, Randy turned, and slipping her arm about Prue drew her closer, while the little sister, giving a contented little sigh exclaimed,

"That's the best story of all, Randy, read it again."

"Why, Prue, you've just heard it twice," said Randy, "you don't want to hear it again to-night!"

"Oh, yes, I do!" cried Prue. "I'd like to hear it all over again from the beginning, 'Once upon a time.' 'F I hear it this once more it'll seem 'bout true."

"I should think 'twould seem threadbare," said her father, with ill suppressed amusement.

"No, no!" cried Prue, "'tain't freadbare, it's fine, the finest in the book. Do read it, Randy, and then I'll be willing to go to bed."

So Randy began once more the story which had so charmed the little sister, and very patiently she read it, while Prue, who was really sleepy, made heroic efforts to keep her eyes open.

Often her lashes would lie for an instant upon her cheek, when immediately she would open her eyes very wide, and look furtively about to see if her drowsiness were detected.

"And they lived happily ever after," read Randy.

"And they lived---happily---ever---after," drawled Prue, as if in proof that she were indeed awake.

"Why Prue," cried Randy, "you're half asleep."

"I'm not," Prue answered, "I heard what you read. You said 'and they lived happy ever after.' Now I'm wide awake, else how did I hear?"

After Prue was safely tucked in bed, Randy returned to the cheerful room below and unfolded her plan for spending her prize money.

Mrs. Weston put aside her sewing to listen, and Mr. Weston laying his paper across his knees, watched Randy keenly as she said,

"You see I've felt that I should like to do something with this prize which it would always give me pleasure to remember, and I know that if you both think best to let me do this, I shall always look back to it with happy thoughts."

There was a pause when Randy had finished speaking, then Mrs. Weston, without a word, placed her hand upon Randy's, as it lay upon the table and the Squire, taking off his glasses and affecting to see a bit of moisture upon them, took out his handkerchief and slowly wiping the lenses he said,

"As far as our *letting* ye, Randy, the money's yer own ter do as ye please with, but fer my own opinion, ye well know I've always said 'twas' better ter give than receive.' This time ye have both. Ye've known the joy of receiving the prize, and now ye plan ter use it ter make another happy. I'm proud of yer choice, and I guess yer mother thinks as I do. I'm well able now ter give ye all ye need, and if winning and giving yer prize makes ye twice glad, why what more could we ask?"

"I'm so glad you like my plan," said Randy, with sparkling eyes. "Molly is such a nice girl, and the way I'm going to send the gift, she will never guess where it came from, I waited until Prue was asleep to tell you about it.

"She never could keep the secret, and a secret it *must* be, for Molly is proud and shy and must only think that *some one* has sent her a nice gift."

"That's right, Randy," said Mrs. Weston, "but do ye think it can be managed so that Molly won't dream where it came from?"

"Oh, yes," Randy answered, "I shall get Jotham to help me, and he will be sure to do my errand just as I direct."

"Wall, I guess that's sure enough," said Mr. Weston, with a chuckle, which Randy heard on her way up the stairs to her little bed-room.

The bright color flushed her cheeks as she thought of Jotham Potts who, since they were both little children, had been her ardent admirer, faithful and eager to do her slightest bidding. She admired his frank, truthful character, appreciated his kindness and valued his friendship, but she made no one friend a favorite, striving rather to be friendly and cordial with all.

In her dreams she sent her gift to Molly many times, and as many times wondered if it pleased her, and when she awoke in the morning she could hardly believe that it had not yet been purchased.

"I'm glad it was just a dream," thought Randy, as she stood before the tiny glass drawing the comb through the curling masses of her light brown hair, "because I've yet the pleasure of choosing the gift and of buying and sending it to her.

"I believe I'll go down to Barnes' store to-day, for now I've made up my mind what to do, I can hardly wait to do it."

It seemed as if everything favored Randy's scheme. The first person whom she saw as she ran out to the well and commenced to lower the bucket was Jotham, whistling as he strode along, deftly cutting the tops from the roadside weeds

with a switch.

"Hi, Randy! Let me help you," he said, vaulting lightly over the wall and hastening toward her as she stood smiling in the sunlight.

"You can help in another way to-day, if you will," said Randy. "Come and sit upon the wall while I tell you about it."

"Indeed I will," was the hearty rejoinder. "I've often told you, Randy, that I'd do anything for you."

"Well, this is for me, and for some one else too," said Randy, looking earnestly up into his kind, dark eyes.

"And Jotham," she continued eagerly, "you must not mind if I don't tell you *all* about it, 'tis truly a good reason why I can't."

"I'll do whatever you wish, Randy," was the reply, "and I won't ask a question."

"Oh, here's Prue coming," said Randy, "and she mustn't hear about it. You meet me at Barnes' store about four o'clock this afternoon and I'll tell you then what I wish you to do."

"All right," said Jotham, "I'll be there on time, you may be sure of that."

"O, Randy," cried little Prue, "what you tellin' Jotham? Tell me too."

"See here, Prue," said Jotham with as serious an expression as he could assume, "I was just telling Randy that I should be at Barnes' store at four o'clock."

"Oh, was that all?" said Prue, "I thought 'twas something great," and her look of disgust at finding the conversation to be upon so ordinary a topic made both Randy and Jotham laugh heartily.

"Well I don't see why you laugh," said Prue, "'twon't be funny to be going down to the store this hot afternoon. I'd rather stay at home with my Tabby cat, and fan her to keep her cool."

Immediately after dinner, little Johnny Buffum appeared in the door-yard and announced that he had come to play with Prue. He wore a blue-checked pinafore, below which could be seen his short snuff-colored trousers and little bare feet. Upon his head jauntily sat a large straw hat with a torn brim through which the sunlight sifted, where it lay, a stripe of gold upon his little freckled nose.

"I'm glad you've come, Johnny," said Prue. "Let's play school."

"All right," agreed Johnny, "I'll be the teacher."

"And I'll play I'm Randy, and Tabby can be me,---you 'member to call her Prue when you speak to her,---and Johnny, this rag doll will be you," said Prue.

"That old doll's a girl," objected Johnny. "I won't let no girl doll be me."

But Prue argued that it would be enough better to be represented by the despised rag doll, than not to be in the school at all, so half convinced, the game began and the two children were so occupied when Randy started for her walk to the

Centre, that her little sister quite forgot to coax to be allowed to "go too."

As she trudged along the sunny, dusty road, Randy hummed a merry little tune, her footsteps keeping time to its rhythm and her heart beating faster as she thought of her delightful errand.

Arrived at the store she asked Mr. Barnes to show her the piece of cloth from which her father had bought on the night that he had driven to the Centre.

"Joel!" called Silas Barnes, "show Randy Weston that second piece of cloth from the top, will ye? I've got ter finish opening this barrel o' sugar."

Joel placed the cloth upon the counter, saying,

"Is that the piece ye mean?"

"Yes, that is it," said Randy.

"Didn't yer pa git 'nough?" questioned Joel.

"Oh yes," said Randy, "but I want this for something else. I'll take eight yards."

"Why that's 'nough for a whole gaown," said Joel, but a shade of annoyance passed over Randy's sweet face and as she showed no disposition to explain, the clerk cut off the number of yards with the injured air of one whose kindly interest had been unappreciated.

When the cloth had been made into a neat parcel, Joel looked up and extended his hand for payment, when to his utter astonishment, Randy informed him that she had yet another errand.

"I'll look at some shoes now," she said with quite an air, for this was her first shopping trip and a very happy one.

"Fer yourself, Randy?" asked Joel.

"I wish them to be *my size*, so I'll try them on," was the answer.

"Well ef they're ter be your size, they're to be yourn, ain't they?" queried Joel, determined if possible to know all about this wild extravagance.

Randy had changed her gold piece for a bill before she left home, well knowing that the bill would attract less attention.

Assuming not to have heard his question, Randy took her parcels, and gave Joel her bill. Joel took the money, but he could not resist the temptation to ask one more question.

"Mebbe ye didn't know that yer pa bought a pair er shoes jest that size t'other night, did ye?"

No one person was ever known to have bought two pairs of shoes and two dresses at Barnes' store within a week, and the clerk was wild with curiosity, but just as he was about to repeat his question, Jotham entered the store, and Joel turned to see what his errand might be.

"Nothing to-day," said Jotham, "I saw Randy in here, and I thought I'd offer to take her bundles."

Together they left the store, and as they turned into the quiet, shady road Randy said,

"I think I never was more glad to see you, Jotham, than when I turned and saw you in the doorway of the store."

"Then I'm doubly glad I came," said Jotham.

"Well, Joel Simpkins thought 'twas the funniest thing that I should be buying something when father was not with me, and he asked just every question that he could think of except one. He didn't ask me where I got my money, and I do believe he would have asked me that if you hadn't come in just when you did."

"O Randy, it's a funny sight to see you provoked," said Jotham with a hearty laugh. "I know that he is an inquisitive fellow.

"You know I've been studying this summer with the young professor who has been boarding at our house, and father has arranged it so that when he returns to teach at the university I shall go back with him, not to the college of course, but as his private pupil. I shall work very hard at my studies and hope another year to enter college.

"Well, father was speaking to Mr. Barnes of my aspirations, and his plans for me, when Joel stepped over to where they stood talking, and said he,

"'Ain't that goin' ter be pooty expensive, Mr. Potts, an' likely ter put kind er high notions inter Jotham's head?'

"Father turned and looked at him, then he said,

"'I'm not likely to incur any bills which I am unable to meet, and as to Jotham's head, I truly believe it is level.'"

They both laughed to think of Joel's discomfiture, and under the shade of overhanging branches they sat down upon a large rock at the side of the road and Randy, turning toward Jotham said,

"There, now I'll tell you what I could not tell this morning, because dear little Prue cannot keep a secret, and you can, and will."

[Illustration: "I'll tell you just one thing more," said Randy.]

"I will if you wish it, Randy," said Jotham.

"Well then, these parcels are not for me, they are for someone else, and I do not wish her to know where they came from, Jotham, are you willing to go over to the Wilson farm to-night?" asked Randy.

"I'd go to Joppa if you asked it," answered the boy with a laugh.

"Then go to Molly's house after dark, and leave these bundles on the doorstep. Knock loudly, and then run away just far enough so that you will be able to see them taken in, and don't tell anyone about it. It's just a nice little surprise and you and I will keep our secret."

"It's a pleasure that you are planning, of that I am sure," said Jotham.

"I'll tell you just one thing more," said Randy, "Molly Wilson is a nice girl and she will be sixteen to-morrow."

"Oh ho! A birthday gift! Well, I don't wonder you wish it to get there to-night, but if I leave it and run, how will they know that the bundles are for Molly?"

"Oh, I must put her name on the parcels now," said Randy.

Jotham produced a pencil and thinking that Molly might recognize her writing, Randy printed in large letters this legend:

"For Mollie Wilson, from one who loves her."

After viewing her work with satisfaction, Randy said,

"There, now they are all ready, but Jotham," she added a moment later, "what will you do with them between now and twilight?"

"I'll take the packages home, and as you wish no one to know about them, I'll hide them in a safe place in our woodshed. When I start for Molly's house I have to go in the same direction that I would if I were intending to stop at Reuben Jenks' door, so I'll leave the presents at the Wilson's, and stop at Reuben's on the way home; then if I'm known to have been at Reuben's no one will guess that I was running about delivering presents."

So at a bend of the road they parted, Jotham happy in the thought that he had a part in one of Randy's plans, and at the same time doing her bidding, and Randy wondering if Molly's delight when she looked at her gifts would be as great as that which she had herself experienced in sending them.

CHAPTER III

GOSSIP

The sun shone down upon the dusty little "square," and the foliage of the big willow tree near Barnes' store looked as if frosted, such a thick coating of dust lay upon the leaves.

At the trough beneath the tree an old gray horse stood alternately taking a long draught of the clear water, and looking off across the square, as if lost in meditation.

A dragon-fly with steely wings lit upon the trough and, skilled little acrobat, balanced upon the extreme edge as if thus to take in the full beauty of old Dobbin's reflection.

Exhaling a long breath as he lifted his shaggy head, the old horse sent a shower of bright drops upon the dragon-fly who, considering the act to be a great breach of etiquette, took zigzag flight across the sunny square, and up the winding road toward the mill.

It looked as if Dobbin might drink the trough dry if he chose, for an animated conversation was in progress at Barnes' store, and his master was one of the leaders in every discussion, whether the topic chanced to be political, or simply a tale of village gossip.

A chubby urchin made little hills of dust, using a well worn slipper for a trowel, and Dobbin kicked and stamped impatiently, occasionally taking another drink, and still the discussion went on.

"Naow I argy, that a leetle deestric school wus good 'nough fer me, an' look at me!

"Own my farm free an' clear, got a good lot er stock an' tools on the place, an' I'm wuth two thousand dollars in cash!"

The speaker was old Josiah Boyden, one of the "*se*lectmen," and a member of the school committee. His greatest pride lay in the fact that he was a self-made man, and truly he looked as if constructed upon a home made pattern.

The group of farmers, obedient to his command, turned and looked at the speaker, while from behind the stove which, hot weather or cold, held the place of honor in the centre of the store, a shrill voice ventured to question the pompous owner of so great a property.

"Be ye goin' ter say, Josiah, that every feller what's edicated at a deestric school can git ter own sech a fort'n as yourn?"

"Huh! Wal, no, not exactly," was the admission, for while this good committee-man was fighting a suggestion which had been made relative to securing better quarters for the school which promised to be larger than on any previous year, he did not wish to diminish his own glory by inferring that any one, however bright, or ambitious, could possibly arrive at his eminence.

"I think, friends," said Parson Spooner in his soft, pleasant voice, "that our scholars should be given every comfort and advantage which our village can possibly afford to grant."

"That's it, that's it," assented Josiah Boyden, "but the thing is, she can't afford to offer nothin' extry beyond just what's set aside fer schools."

Again the squeaky voice from behind the stove made itself heard. "That's the time, Josiah, when the taown can't afford it that cap'talists, such as you say you be, oughter step right inter the gap an' help aout."

"I've got a arrant daown ter the mill," remarked the offended "*se*lectman," "an' I'm goin' right along ter 'tend to it, but I'll say in leavin', thet I won't waste my breath a talkin' to a person with a mind so narrer as ter s'pose fer a moment that private puss-strings hangs aout fer every person who feels like it ter pull. I'm public sperited, every one knows that, but I don't help support no institootion er larnin when I got the hull er my edication at a deestric school," and in intense disgust he left the store followed by an irritating chuckle which, although it came from behind the rusty old stove, reached the ears of Boyden as he stamped down the rickety steps of the store and stalked majestically across the square and up the road.

He was sure of a sympathetic listener at the mill, for it was a well worn saying in the village that the miller "agreed with everyone."

The river which kept his mill running, wound its way through the next village, where another grist mill was humming, and Martin Meers was far too shrewd to permit himself to express a difference of opinion from that held by a good customer, who in his wrath might take his grist to the rival mill to be ground.

Pondering over the "narrer minds" of those with whom he had been conversing, Josiah Boyden tramped along the dusty road, becoming more incensed with every step, as he thought of the individual who had presumed to suggest that he might contribute toward the school fund, and still the gossip at the store progressed, unhindered by the departure of the "*se*lectman."

"My Reuben," remarked Mr. Jenks, "made more progress in his studies last season than he ever made before in two winters' work, and I feel that the teacher deserves a deal of thanks fer stirring up such an interest. I don't have the sort er feelin' that Boyden has. I stand ready and willin' ter put my hand in my pocket ter help aout expenses, ef some others will 'gree ter chip in."

"But there's a 'scuse fer Boyden," chuckled Nate Burnham, the old fellow behind the stove, as he relighted his pipe, and puffed a few times to determine if it intended to burn. "There's a sort er 'scuse fer Boyden," he repeated, "fer his children have growd up, so he ain't got no use fer schools, and fellers like him don't pay fer things they ain't a usin'."

"Wal, I think we ought ter have a village improvement sarsiety fer the benefit of us as is out'n school," remarked Joel Simpkins, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets and tossing his head to shake back a refractory lock of hay-colored hair.

He was the "head clerk" at Barnes' store. To be sure he was, as a general thing, the *only* clerk, but Joel considered himself quite a personage, and never referred to himself as other than head clerk.

"Kinder had an idee that ye couldn't be improved, Joel," remarked a young farmer who had thus far taken no part in the conversation.

Joel looked sharply at the man, and vaguely wondered if possibly the remark was sarcastic, but the face into which he peered was so genuinely good natured that Joel was reassured, and he at once decided that only a very fine compliment was intended.

"I think we could fix up this 'ere square," said Joel, "ter begin with. Take that old horse trough. That could be fixed up 'n' painted, 'n' that willer tree; 'twouldn't hurt it ter give it a good preunin'. Growin' as it does daown in the ditch, or puddle beside this store, it flourishes, an' lops its limbs nigh onto across the square; an' the rickety fence beside it ought ter be straightened up 'fore some of the fellers that are perpetually leanin' 'gainst it pitch with it backward inter the ditch."

"Wal, Joel, while yer 'baout it," remarked Silas Barnes, "why don't yer suggest a brick block er two, an' pavin' stones in the square an' a few other things such as I told ye I seen in Boston. 'Tain't wuth while ter stop after ye git started ter make suggestions."

"Speakin' of the teacher," remarked Mr. Potts, "I'm one that speaks in favor of Miss Gilman every time, and Jotham seconds everything I say."

"Lemme tell ye what my Timotheus is a doin' these days. I set him ter hoeing fer me, and I tell ye ye'd like ter watch him a spell," said old Mr. Simpkins, his face beaming with pride in his youngest son.

"Fust he'd work the hoe with them long arms er his'n 'til the weeds an' dirt flew like Hail Columby, and ye'd think he'd got goin' an' couldn't halt, when all to onct he'd stop as ef somethin'd bit him, an' he'd drop the hoe and begin ter gesticulate and spaout like a preacher.

"Pooty soon he'd make a grab fer the hoe, and agin the dirt would fly like all fury. Next thing ye knew, daown'd go the hoe agin, and up would go his arms, a sawin' the air like a windmill, an' there he'd be a spaoutin' an' a elocutin' fit ter kill. Who but Timotheus would ever think of combinin' hoein' an' elocutin'? I tell ye, he's the most possessed of 'rig'nal'ty of any pusson I ever seen."

"I wonder someone don't think he's a reg'lar loony, a carryin' on like that," muttered Joel, filled with jealousy and disgust.

Old Mr. Simpkins was deaf, and Joel's muttered remark passed unnoticed.

"He ain't one er them fellers that can't do but one thing to a time. T'other day I axed him ter bring two pail er water inter the barn, and away he went ter git 'em. Anybody'd think a pail er water in each hand oughter held him daown, but no sir, that feller came across the door-yard, both pails full, an' his head in the air, his maouth wide open, and the elocutin' a goin' on continuoous."

"Ef I thought fer a moment that edication would make any er my children act like that, I vaow I'd keep 'em outer school fer one while," said a farmer who had recently arrived in the village, and roars of laughter followed this remark.

As he was deaf, old Mr. Simpkins failed to catch the meaning of the hilarity, so he construed it as it pleased him to, and when the laughter had subsided, said,

"I don't wonder ye laugh, ye didn't see him er doin' it, so ye don't know haow he looked, but I tell ye 'twas a grand sight ter see a young feller so eloquent that nothin' on airth could stop him."

"Must 'a been a 'stonishing sight," agreed Mr. Jenks, "but naow, friends, we've talked fer quite a spell on one thing or another, an we ain't much nigher ter settlin' the question of a bigger schoolroom than when we started.

"Naow instead er hagglin' 'baout it, I b'lieve we'd better have a committee meetin' called, and a reg'lar vote taken, an' I say right here and naow, that I shall vote fer better quarters fer the school an' I'll 'gree, as I said, ter put my hand right in my pocket an' give the thing a start.

"Nathan Lawton gave the use of his best room fer a schoolroom last year, an' 'twas kind an' generous fer him ter do it, but the village has been growin' just amazin', an' this year shows a bigger list of inhabitants, an' it 'pears as if most of the new comers had a family er children, so something's got ter be done 'baout that school buildin'."

"Good fer ye," squeaked old Nate Burnham, "an' I wish ye luck at the meetin'."

The village gossip was not monopolized by the frequenters of Barnes' store. Indeed it seemed as if the place had taken on new life and ambition, and if at any corner or turn of the road one chose to listen, he could often hear a few stray bits of conversation in regard to the interests which lay nearest to the hearts of the various newsmongers.

Of all the tale-bearers, and there were many, none were as harmless, and at the same time as busy as Mrs. Hodgkins.

Walking down a shady lane one might espy her endeavoring to hold a friendly confab with some busy farmer's wife who, while hanging out her washing, endeavored to hold a clothespin in her mouth, and at the same time answer Mrs. Hodgkins' frequent questions, such as,

"Naow did ye ever hear anything ter beat that?"

"Ain't ye amazed at the idee?"

Mrs. Hodgkins would on such occasions, lean against the rail fence and bombard the busy woman alternately with bits of news, and pointed questions until, the last piece of linen in place upon the line, the empty basket would be a signal for adieus.

Then Sophrony Hodgkins would meander down the lane, and if fortune favored her, would find at the next farm-house its mistress possibly at the well or sunning her milk pans in a corner of the door-yard.

Immediately she would hail her with joy and proceed to repeat her own stock of news with the addition of a few particulars gleaned from the first friend.

"Sophrony Hodgkins' stories," remarked old Nate Burnham, "remind me of the snowballs we used ter roll and roll 'til from a leetle ball we finally by rollin' an' trav'lin' got one bigger'n all creation.

"She starts in with what *she's* heard. Then she adds on what somebody else has heard, and after that, what this one an' that one and t'other one has heard, 'til the size of the yarn must astonish her."

"I'll say one thing 'bout her, though," remarked Silas Barnes, "with all her talkin' an' tellin' she never tells anything that's detrimental to somebody's character. She's full er tellin' ordinary news, but when it comes ter news that would stir up strife, Sophrony's got nothin' ter say; so let her talk, I say, ef she enjoys it; she 'muses herself an' don't hurt no one else."

On the sunny morning when Barnes' store had been the scene of the gossip and discussion in regard to the new quarters for the school, Sophrony Hodgkins had made an early start on a "c'lection tour," as old Nate Burnham would have called it. She had met Janie Clifton at the Pour Corners, and had stopped for a chat with her, had waylaid Molly Wilson in the middle of the road, in order to inquire for her mother and baby sister, had stopped for a moment at Mrs. Jenks' door just to ask if she had heard the wonderful news about Dot Marvin's old uncle Jehiel, had paused to look over the wall at the new Jersey cow which old Mr. Simpkins had recently purchased, and to casually inquire if Timotheus was intending to again be a pupil at the deestric school, bein's he'd growed so durin' the summer'n seemed more like a man than a boy, and had asked little Johnny Buffum what on airth his sister Hitty had her head tied up in hot weather for, when beet juice dropped in her ear would cure her earache in two minutes, and had been informed that,

"Hitty hadn't got no earache, 'twas a bee sting on her cheek;" all this and much more had filled Mrs. Hodgkins' mind so completely that she was amazed to find that eleven o'clock had arrived, and that she must turn about and hasten home if she wished to have dinner ready when the kitchen clock struck twelve.

"I'll git something on the table when Joel gits in from the field, though land knows what it'll be with only an hour ter git it in," she muttered between short, puffing breaths, for Mrs. Hodgkins was stout, and she had already taken a long walk.

The dinner was indeed an odd one, made up from what were termed by Mrs. Hodgkins "odds and ends," but Joel Hodgkins was a patient man, and his appetite was one which never needed tempting, so he partook of the viands which his wife offered him with an apparent relish, and was soon at work again in the field.

Then Mrs. Hodgkins donned a fresh apron preparatory to going out, remarking as she tied her sunbonnet strings with a twitch,

"I reely must go over to Almiry's, it's only a step er two, and what's the use of havin' a niece in the neighborhood ef not ter tell news ter, an' what's the use er hearin' news an' keepin' it ter yourself?"

"I'll git home in time ter bake a batch er gingerbread fer tea," she continued, "Joel's paowerful fond er gingerbread an' it'll sort er pay him fer eatin' such a dinner with such endurin' patience."

Almira Meeks lay back in the big old fashioned rocker, too tired, she declared, to care "whether school kept or not."

Meek in name and in nature, there was not a day that she did not overwork, and when the forenoon's tasks were completed, she would lie back exhausted in the big old chair, only to be reprimanded if her husband chanced to come in, for "havin' so little energy." It was with delight that she welcomed Aunt Sophrony, saying:

"Do tell me all the news. I'm nearly always too tired to go out and hear any."

"Ye do look tuckered," remarked Mrs. Hodgkins, "but hearin' the things I've got ter tell will interest ye, an' make ye feel reel perky. Ye needn't feel ye've got ter talk, fer I kin talk 'nough fer two.

"When I started aout this morning, the fust pusson I see was Janie Clifton, an' what on airth do ye think she's been up to?"

Almira shook her head, to show her utter inability to guess what Janie's latest notion might be.

"Well, she got an idee that we was all behind the times up here, an' needed a leetle fixin' up, an' she wondered ef she could slip inter the chink an' fill the place she thought she see a gapin', an' take in a leetle money at the same time.

"She's 'mazing sot when she gits her mind on a thing, an' she talked it over ter hum and carried the day; and she's been daown ter Boston these past few months a learnin' dressmakin', when we all thought she was a visitin'.

"Naow she's set up fer herself, an' any of us that has an idee of lookin' spreuced up, and has a leetle cash ter go with the notion, can buy the goods fer a gaown at Barnes', an' go right up ter the room over his store and be measured by Janie fer a fashionable fit.

"Ef some of our husband's doesn't git fashionable fits when they hear the extravagance Janie's a teachin' we'll be lucky.

"I'll tell ye naow, Almiry, I'm goin' ter have a gaown cut by Janie come fall, ef it takes all the egg money ter pay fer it!"

"Why Aunt Sophrony!" was all the astonished Almira could ejaculate. Such splendid courage was quite beyond the meek little woman's comprehension.

"Miss Wilson's baby has cut another tooth, that makes five, an' she's a doin' well too," continued Mrs. Hodgkins, "but that ain't a flea bite to what I heerd next.

"Ye know the Marvin's old Uncle Jehiel, him that lived with them five year an' then went off, nobody knows where, without sayin' a word to 'em? Well, he's been heard from! A lawyer has writ ter Jack Marvin's father sayin' there's a will, an' sech a will I'll be baound wuz never heerd of before!

"He's left five hundred dollars ter come ter Jack when he's twenty-one, ef by that time he's given any sign of 'mountin' ter anything as a scholar, a farmer, a preacher or a storekeeper.

"Did ye ever hear anything like the choice?"

"An' then he says, the old rascal, that ef by that time he hasn't made something of himself in one or t'other er them things, that the money can be given ter his cousin Dot, whatever she's done or hasn't done, bein's he's never expected anything of her, she bein' only a girl.

"That made me bile when I heerd it, fer the old critter ought ter think pretty well er girls and women. They say, as er boy he lived with his aunt who gave him a good edication; a cousin er his'n, a woman by the way, set him up in business, an' this money he's made his grand will fer was left him by his wife, so ye'd think he'd feel thankful and kind toward all women, but ye can't caount on folks."

"T'd a thought he'd a left the money ter be divided between Jack an' Dot, 'twould a sounded pleasanter," said Almira.

"Ef ye ever saw old Jehiel Marvin ye'd never expect anything very pleasant of him," responded Mrs. Hodgkins.

"But lemme tell ye the greatest!

"Timotheus Simpkins ain't goin' ter the deestric school this year, fer the reason that his father says he's learned all there is ter learn, an' there ain't nothing left that the teacher can tell him, so he's goin' ter stay aout and help on the farm an' spend all his spare time on literatoor!

"That's what old Mr. Simpkins says, what on airth do ye s'pose he means?"

Aunt Sophrony waited for her niece to solve the mystery, but the problem was too great for her to grasp, and as Mrs. Hodgkins rose to go, Almira begged her to question Timotheus if she chanced to meet him, and find out just what he intended to do with his spare time, and to learn if possible in what way "literatoor" was to form a part of his daily life.

CHAPTER IV

THE DISTRICT SCHOOL

The meeting held for the purpose of deciding that the town could or could not afford to furnish suitable accommodations for its pupils proved to be a most exciting affair.

Josiah Boyden filled with indignation that the matter should have been thought worthy of consideration after he had spoken so vehemently against it at Barnes' store, sat pompous and important near the door, fully determined to crush any suggestion which might be offered.

Mr. Potts and Mr. Jenks early in the evening inquired the amount which the town had set aside for the school. Upon learning the sum, each at once agreed to contribute a quarter of the balance needed if others would make up the remaining half.

"I have two scholars for the school," said Mr. Weston, "and if Mr. Potts, who intends to have a private tutor for his son, is willing to give a quarter of the sum needed, I'm sure I'll do the same."

"Three cheers for three quarters!" squeaked old Nate Burnham, from a seat in the corner, and in the midst of the din old Sandy McLeod arose and thumped his cane upon the floor for order.

"I'll gie the remainin' quarter, an' add ten dollars to't that my Margaret sent, sayin' in her gentle way, 'It may gie some added comfort to the place wherever 'tis chosen.'"

Wild applause greeted this characteristic speech. Sandy's eyes twinkled as he sat down and he remarked to his next neighbor, "That mon Boyden has a scowl that wad sour meelk."

After much discussion, it was decided that a large, vacant farm-house, centrally located, could be purchased and fitted for a schoolhouse at a less expense than the building of a new structure would incur, and in spite of Josiah Boyden's fuming and Nate Burnham's chuckling, in spite of much murmuring on the part of a few frugal minded farmers, the moneyed element carried the day, and under the twinkling stars the triumphant members of that assemblage took their homeward way, filled with the joy of victory.

The money pledged was as promptly paid, and work upon the building was commenced at once, and when September arrived it stood ready to receive the scholars, a better schoolhouse than the average country village could boast.

One of the first to inspect it was Mrs. Sophrony Hodgkins. It would have made her very unhappy to have had its good points described to her and have been unable to say,

"Oh, yes, I know, I saw it fust."

Accordingly on the day that school was to open, she made an early start and before any pupils thought of arriving she had inspected every part of the building, decided that she approved of it in every particular, and had sallied forth to describe it to all her friends.

As she sped along the road, a brisk, bustling figure, the little squirrels raced along the wall, sure that she intended to capture them; but one less timid than his mates, sat upon his little haunches on an old stump, and chattered and scolded as she passed as if offended by the stir which she was making.

A slouching figure leaned upon the top rail of the fence at the side of the road and its attitude, together with the singular expression of the face beneath the hat brim, piqued Mrs. Hodgkins' curiosity.

"What on airth!"---she began, but the figure did not move.

"Going ter be deaf like his father, I wonder?" she murmured, then raising her voice she exclaimed,

"I say, Timotheus, what on airth be ye a dreaming of this bright mornin' 'stead er gittin' ready fer school?"

A moment longer the boy stood staring at the sky, then as if slowly, and with an effort coming down to earth again, he looked down upon the woman who had interrupted him as he said,

"I heered ye, Mis' Hodgkins the fust time ye spoke, but when I'm a thinkin' a thought, I ain't apt ter answer."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mrs. Hodgkins, "I hope fer the good of yer family, ye don't think 'em often."

"I'm allus er workin' ter improve my intellec'; that's why I ain't er goin' ter school. Got so I knowed all the teacher knowed last year, so 'tain't nothin' but a waste er time ter think of goin' this year."

"Yer father said ye was goin' ter devote yer time ter literatoor; what d' he mean by that, Timotheus?" asked Mrs. Hodgkins.

"Wall, I'll have ter help on the farm, but between chores, I expect ter be readin' what literatoor we own. On the shelf in our parlor we've got the almanic, a New England Primer, a book er Martyrs, a book called Book er Beauty, another with a yaller kiver called the Pirate's Den, and one more called The Letter Writer, 'n' I guess by the time I've read all them I'll know a heap. Father says he expects I'll do somethin' wonderful yet, 'n' I guess he's 'baout right."

"Well of all the"---but here she checked herself, and bidding him a hasty good morning, she hurried on, lest her disgust should make itself heard.

Timotheus Simpkins still leaned upon the rail fence, as if he had forgotten her; apparently he was once more "thinkin' a thought."

"I guess I better write that daown before I fergit it," he remarked a few moments later, as he started towards the house, his hands clasped behind his back and his gaze riveted upon space. Some great thought was evidently about to be transferred to paper.

If Timotheus failed to appreciate the opportunity offered the young people of the town to obtain an education, he stood alone in his ignorance and egotism.

At the hour for the opening of school all the pupils of the year before were present and many new ones waited to be assigned to their respective classes.

Prue and Randy were surrounded by their friends upon their arrival, and between the Babson girls stood little Hi Babson, their cousin, whose mother had determined that during his three months' visit he should attend school. Taking his hand, Belinda walked to the teacher's desk with a view to introducing him.

"This is my little cousin," she began, but was promptly interrupted by Hi who remarked,

"I ain't little, I'm a big boy."

"And he wants to come to school, Miss Gilman."

"No I don't want ter come ter school, an' I wouldn't only ma made me," remarked Hi, determined to have his attitude plainly understood.

Miss Gilman smiled as she looked at the rebellious little face, saying, kindly, "Perhaps you will enjoy school when you are acquainted with some of the scholars."

"I know Randy Weston's little sister, and I'd like ter sit side of her; she's some fun, 'sides she's littler'n I be," said Hi.

Miss Gilman thought best to humor this, his first request, so he took his seat beside Prue who smiled sweetly upon him, and the small boy at once decided that school with Prue for a friend might be as attractive as staying at home under the watchful eyes of Grandma Babson.

"It's only quarter of nine," Phoebe Small was saying, "and I rushed about like everything, thinking I should be late."

"I didn't have to hurry," said Randy, laughing, "for I was so sure that I was late when I awoke, that I never looked to see what time it was, but flew around doing what I could before breakfast toward getting ready for school. Then I began to wonder why mother didn't call me, and I looked at the clock. It was an hour before breakfast time!"

"Oh what a waste of strength," said Jack Marvin, with a well affected yawn. "I got started first and called fer my cousin Dot, and by tugging her all the way I managed to get her here, too."

The Langham twins, to whom Jack was very attentive, looked at each other in amazement. They admired Jack, but was he untruthful? The idea that he was joking never occurred to them.

Reuben Jenks described them as "joke proof," as they had never been known to see the point of any witticism, and if it chanced to be explained to them they would stare placidly at the speaker and then invariably remark,

"Why I don't call that funny."

"I'm going to tell Miss Gilman that my name is Dorothea. I'm tired of being called Dot, 'specially as I'm round and dumpy," remarked Jack's cousin resolutely.

"I'll call you Dorothea every time as loud as I can roar it, see if I don't," said Jack, but as Miss Gilman touched her bell just at this moment, Jack was obliged to wait for an opportunity to address his cousin by her full name.

As the scholars were taking their places in the seats which had been assigned them, Molly Wilson entered, looking very pretty in a gown of a dark, rich red and a pair of new boots which squeaked with every step.

"Her new dress is just like yours," whispered Dot Marvin to Randy, but Randy, whose cheeks were suddenly very pink, seemed not to have heard, and Dot was obliged to be contented with looking from Molly's dress to Randy's and wondering how it happened that they chanced to be alike.

The scholars from the youngest to the oldest were loud in their praise of the new school, and delighted that Miss Gilman was again their faithful teacher, but in the merry throng there was one who found it difficult to be content, and that was Phoebe Small. That the schoolroom was warm and cheerful, that there was plenty of room, and ample opportunity for study counted for little since she had set her heart upon going to boarding school, and therefore an ordinary day school seemed a very tame affair.

At recess she confided to Dot Marvin that she didn't see why ma couldn't approve of having her daughter at a boarding school since she (Mrs. Small) attended one when she was a girl.

"I'd 'nough sight rather be at home," drawled Dot, "even with my cousin Jack to tease me. When he goes a little too far I can hit back by teasing him 'bout the Langham twins. That always stops him. But Phoebe," she continued, "I shouldn't think you would like to go away to school. They'd all be strangers and seems to me you'd be lonesome and homesick."

"That's what ma said, but I wanted to try it. I can't, it seems, so I've got to stay here and try to think I like it," said Phoebe, with an expression upon her face of extreme dissatisfaction.

In another part of the yard an animated conversation of quite a different character was in progress. Little Hi Babson and Prue Weston were swinging upon the gate.

"Why how naughty," Prue was saying. "I shouldn't a thought you'd dare to."

"Well, I did," Hi answered. "I didn't want ter come ter school, so ter pay 'em fer makin' me, I hid the clock key so they can't wind the clock. I dropped it inter the m'lasses jug, 'n' I guess to-morrer mornin' they won't know what time ter send me ter school.

"I've took the basket er clothes-pins and lowered 'em down the well; I've took an hid Grandma Babson's best cap, 'cause she said 'That boy needs a lickin'!' Want ter know where I put it? Up in the barnloft on the hay. I did somethin' else too.

I put a wad er paper in the dinner horn. Won't they be mad when they try to blow it? I guess they'll be sorry they made me go ter school."

"Oh, but that's naughty!" cried Prue. "I'd think you'd be most afraid to be so *very* naughty. What'll they do when you get home?"

Hi's face lost its hilarious expression.

"I ain't got home yet," he said.

The boys and girls had returned to their lessons with all the eager enthusiasm which had been a characteristic of the school when Miss Gilman had first taken it, but the young teacher could not but contrast this "first day" with that of the year before. Then, there had been little order; now, there was perfect concord with every pupil striving to do his best.

Here and there an unruly member of the primary class caused a disturbance, but as a whole, the pupils were both quiet and studious.

When school closed Randy and Prue with a troop of friends walked along the road toward home, talking of the little events of the day and exulting over their fine schoolhouse, the large yard and full classes.

"Didn't it seem odd to see so many new scholars this year?" said Randy. "We must get acquainted with them and help them to enjoy our little pleasures."

"That is what you and Jotham did when I moved here last year," said Molly Wilson, "and oh, Randy, I never could begin to tell you how in my heart I thanked you when you came and spoke to me that first lonesome day at school."

"I knew that I should be glad to have some one speak to me if I had only strangers about me," said Randy, sweetly.

"How we shall miss Jotham this year," said Reuben Jenks.

"He's going on with his studies with the professor here at home this month, but the first of October he's to be in Cambridge. The tutor goes back there to teach at the college and Jotham is to board near the university, he says, and have private teachin'."

"You'll miss him, Randy, won't you?" queried little Prue.

"We shall all wish that he were with us," was Randy's discreet answer. Suddenly Prue exclaimed,

"You've got a new dress, Molly; it's a beauty, and it's just like my Randy's."

"So it is," said Molly. "I had a birthday a short time ago, and I had a pair of mittens which mother had knit for me to wear this winter, some candy, some shoes and this lovely dress."

"Who gived you the dress?" asked Prue, innocently.

"That's what I'd like to know," was Molly's answer. "It was sent to me, and on the bundle it said, 'From one who loves you.' I'd give much to tell the one who sent it how lovely I think it is."

"I like mine better than any dress I've had," said Randy, "and since you think it pretty it's nice that yours is like it."

"I don't know as I'd care what gowns I had if I'd been allowed to go to boarding school," said Phoebe Small. "This school is pleasant enough, I like the teacher and of course I like the girls and boys."

"Specially the boys," remarked Reuben Jenks, when a scowl from Phoebe silenced him.

"I think it would be great fun to go away somewhere. I don't know as I care where, and see a new school and new faces. 'Twouldn't prevent keeping all my old friends just because I made new ones," said Phoebe in a disconsolate voice. "It's just no use to wish," she continued, "for I wished last night when I saw the moon over my right shoulder, and I don't, know how many times I've wished when I've seen the first little star at night. This morning I found a horse shoe, and stood on it wishing with all my might that ma would let me just try boarding school for one term and I guess that old horse shoe just about finished it, for I ran in and asked ma again, and she put down the pan that she had in her hand and says she,

"Phoebe Small, if you ask me that again, I believe I shall fly. I've said no to it repeatedly and I meant it. Now, hurry and get ready for school; you'll find there's something yet to be learned there, I'll be bound."

"Never mind, Phoebe," said Randy, "it's disappointing if you so wished to go, but think how we should have missed you."

"O Randy, to think that you would have missed me makes me almost glad to stay here," said Phoebe, with a bright tear upon her lashes.

It was over a year since Phoebe had resolved to conquer her "unruly tongue" as she described it, and although at times a sharp saying escaped her lips she was really a very different girl from the Phoebe of the year before. That she was in earnest was evident, for if some careless speech chanced to hurt one of her friends, she promptly acknowledged her fault, and grasped the first opportunity to do some little kindness which should thus give proof that her regret was sincere.

Of Jotham the boys and girls saw but little, his new studies requiring strict application, and only at rare intervals was it possible for him to find a few leisure moments for Randy, and when October came it was with regret that he said "good-bye," although his heart was full of anticipation.

"You will miss me, Randy?" he had asked, and Randy had answered frankly,

"I shall, indeed. Every one who has ever known you will miss you, Jotham."

At the village school the weeks had passed with cheerful monotony. Lessons were learned and recited with a regularity which failed to be tedious since the pupils possessed much enthusiasm.

The little ones, especially Prue Weston and Hi Babson furnished amusement for the older classes, Prue with her unique answers, and Hi with his countless pranks.

Upon one occasion, Miss Gilman, thinking to make a little problem clear by using names of well known objects asked, "If I had five pears and gave you two, Prue, how many would that leave?"

"'Twouldn't be half," said Prue, "so 'twouldn't be fair."

At another time Prue was much interested in a little picture in her arithmetic which represented a man walking beside a horse and cart.

"If it takes a horse two hours to drag a load of stones to town," said Miss Gilman, "how long---"

"But," interrupted Prue, "if it took the horse as long as that, why didn't the man hitch on another horse?"

Laughter greeted this original solving of the problem by practical little Prue, and Miss Gilman decided that examples expressed in ordinary numbers would be far better for this little girl who found an odd question for every pictured problem.

Thus the days passed. The Sundays spent at the old meeting-house, and the week-days filled with work at home and at school, with a running accompaniment of gossip filling the spaces.

But one morning something occurred which filled the scholars with excitement, and aroused the interest or curiosity of nearly every one in the village.

Randy Weston had received a letter from Boston, and such a letter, too!

CHAPTER V

RANDY'S JOURNEY

"Jest the moment I git these dishes done and a few other little chores that I can't leave standin', I'll run over to Almiry's and see 'f she's heerd 'bout the Boston letter that Randy Weston got. My! but that was a letter wuth gittin'.

"I don't b'lieve Almiry's heerd 'bout it, an' I'm baound to be the fust one ter tell her," said Mrs. Sophrony Hodgkins.

Soon her tasks were completed, and she went the shortest way across the fields to tell the news, as if she feared that it might spoil if kept too long.

Mrs. Jenks, on her way home from the village paused at the gate to ask her friend, Mrs. Marvin, if she had heard the news, and found that she had already been told of the contents of the letter, and was glad to hear of Randy's good luck.

"'Tain't every girl I'd be so glad fer," said Mrs. Marvin, "but Randy's such a sweet girl I like ter think of this plan which will, no doubt, give her pleasure."

"So do I," said Matilda Jenks, "an' I fer one shall be on hand ter wish her joy."

In the little workroom over Barnes' store, Janie Clifton sat humming cheerfully, her needle flying in and out of the long ruffle which she was hemming.

"I'm making the people here look better than they ever did before," thought Janie, with pardonable pride in her ability. "I make Mrs. Brimblecom look ever so much less hefty, and I'm sure Mrs. Hodgkins says she never looked as well in any gown she ever wore, as in the one I finished for her last week.

"And that skinny woman, now whatever was her name? She looked almost plump in her new dress last Sunday."

As she stopped to thread her needle, she gave utterance to the thought which at that moment occupied her mind.

"I b'lieve I'll go over to call on Mrs. Weston to-night, and p'raps she'll ask me to help her, in fact, I should think she'd *have to*."

A passing figure caused her to look out of the window.

"Well what a looking piece of headgear!" she remarked. "Lucky I took up millinery when I was learning dressmakin'. I'll go over to the Weston's to-night, see if I don't," and she nodded approvingly to her reflection in the long mirror, a bit of furniture which Janie had felt to be a necessary adjunct to her rooms.

Even old Mrs. Brimblecom had a word to say.

"I declare, Jabez," she remarked at the dinner table, "I'm reel glad fer Randy Weston. This doos seem ter be a chance fer her ter see somethin' an' gain a leetle extry in the way of edication."

"Umph!" remarked Jabez, as he helped himself to a third potato, "'S you say, it's a chance fer her, an' she's a likely sort er girl,---pass the salt, will ye?---but I hope it won't poke her head full er notions,---I'll thank ye fer a biscuit,---so's when she comes home she won't remember who any of us be."

At the table Jabez Brimblecom's conversation was always a mixture of gossip and numerous requests for food, so that his wife, accustomed to this trait, was able to understand what he wished to say, and could make connected meaning out of what seemed to be a jumble of ideas.

"Oh, Randy will be Randy wherever she is," said Mrs. Brimblecom.

"Wal, I guess she will,---I'll take a leetle more tea," replied Jabez.

"And one of the best girls I ever knew," said his wife.

"I've always known ye set a store by Randy,---I'm ready fer pie naow," replied Jabez, and when he had finished his dinner, he darted out of the house as if in another moment the farm would have been ruined had it not received his immediate attention.

Every one who met Randy stopped her saying, "Got a letter from Boston, didn't ye?" until Prue who was usually with her would say,

"Why, Randy, how *does* everybody know you got a letter?"

"In the same way that everyone knows everything in this village," Randy would answer with a laugh.

In the midst of all this excitement Randy walked as if on air. Could it be true, really true that she, Randy Weston, was actually going to Boston?

The letter which had filled Randy's heart with delight had come from her friend Helen Dayton, the lovely young girl who had spent one summer as a guest of Mrs. Gray, a near neighbor of the Weston's.

She had made a flying trip to the village at Christmas, bringing with her the choicest of gifts for Randy and Prue, assuring Randy that they should soon meet again. Randy had thought much of the promise, but never dreamed of so delightful a fulfilment.

Near Miss Dayton's home a fine private school had been opened, which offered every advantage for girls of Randy's age. One of Helen's friends had been chosen for one of its teachers, and it had occurred to her that Randy might attend this school during the winter months, making her home with herself and her aunt.

"I should like to meet this young girl who has so pleased you, Helen," her aunt had said, "but how would she like city girls, do you think, and on the other hand, would they like and appreciate her?"

"I would trust Randy to make friends anywhere," Helen had said, and seating herself at her dainty desk, she wrote the letter containing the invitation and full particulars in regard to the school.

Randy, with a heart filled with anticipation, promptly answered the letter telling of her eager acceptance, and rode to the Centre with her father to mail it.

Then followed such a wonderful series of shopping trips to Barnes' store, and over to the next town which boasted an establishment called the Dry Goods Emporium.

With Mrs. Weston and Randy went Janie Clifton to advise them in regard to the wisest choice of pretty things for Randy's appearance in the city.

Fortunately Janie was possessed of good taste and while learning her trade in the city she had, whenever possible, snatched a few moments to study the best models of gowns and millinery which the great stores displayed. She had invested in all the leading fashion books and fashion plates, and her room over Barnes' store was gay with pictured figures of women and children in rainbow attire.

To say that Mrs. Weston was astonished when she had first looked upon the fashion plates would be to express it very mildly.

"Well, Janie Clifton!" she had ejaculated, "I can't think er lettin' you make Randy look like that!" as she pointed to the figure of a young girl in a street costume of flaming red, her head adorned with a walking hat which was decorated with a phenomenally long quill.

"Look at the toe er that shoe!" was the next remark. "The whole foot ain't bigger'n my spectacle case, and 'bout as much shape to it."

But Janie comforted her by assuring her that the plates usually showed the extreme in fashion, and that Randy could be made to look very nice indeed without following exactly any one pattern in every detail.

Thus far Janie's orders had been but a single dress for a customer, so she was much elated when commissioned to make three for Randy, and also to select and trim two hats for her. Mrs. Weston's idea of "one for best and one for everyday" had, by cautious urging upon Janie's part, been stretched to the extent of adding "one more for second best."

During the drive over to the "Emporium," Janie asked abruptly, "Didn't Miss Dayton say somethin' 'bout a party in that letter she sent to Randy?"

"Why yes," said Mrs. Weston, "she says that while Randy's there, she'll give a little party for her, but why did ye ask?"

"Well, I was thinkin' that means a party dress," remarked Janie.

"A party dress!" gasped Mrs. Weston in astonishment. "Why that would be her best dress, wouldn't it? Probably that's what the other girls would wear."

Now it happened that during her apprenticeship Janie had helped to make a number of party dresses for young girls, so it was with a deal of assurance that she answered her patron.

"I don't know what a lot of city misses would think if Miss Dayton was kind enough to give the party for Randy, and Randy appeared in just her *best dress*," said Janie with a bit of emphasis.

"Well, well I didn't know ye was expected ter dress different fer a party, excepting that ye'd likely 'nough dress up some. Her father said when we started out this morning,

"'Git whatever Randy needs ter make her look right, and at the same time honor Miss Dayton, since she's kind 'nough to ask Randy to her home,' so if she needs a party gown why we'll choose one, but I tell ye again, Janie, don't ye make her look like one er them wooden-lookin' girls er prancin' about on the fashion plates, fer I couldn't stand that."

With a commendable determination to make for Randy a dainty party gown which should at the same time be sufficiently simple in style to please Mrs. Weston, Janie chose a thin white muslin with white ribbons for its only trimming.

"I like that for a party dress, only it seems a little cool fer winter," remarked Mrs. Weston, "but I s'pose she will wear extry flannels under it."

"Not if I know it," said Janie under her breath, for she had her own ideas for making the dress, and thick flannels to completely hide the transparency of the muslin were not included in her plan. Janie laid the muslin and ribbon aside and commenced work upon the other gowns.

The "best" gown was a dark blue cloth with velvet trimmings, and the hat which she was to wear with it was of the same shade with dark blue feathers drooping over the brim.

Randy felt this to be almost too fine to wear and she touched the soft feathers with caressing fingers before placing the hat upon her pretty head.

"Oh, it looks just a little like Miss Dayton's hats," exclaimed Randy, as she looked in the mirror at this triumph of Janie's millinery skill.

For the long ride in the cars and for general street and school wear, there was a cute little suit of gray wool, and a hat of gray felt with some smart gray wings.

Randy was delighted with the suit and her eyes sparkled when she experienced the joy of "trying it on."

The party gown, the first which she had ever seen, was to her a dream of loveliness. It was very simply made, as befitted this fair little country maid. The skirt made quite plain, the waist cut out ever so little in the neck, just enough to show the round, white throat, the modest elbow sleeves and white satin ribbon trimmings filled Randy with speechless delight as she stared at the sweet reflection in the mirror.

When at last she spoke she said,

"Oh, Janie, how *could* you make me look so nice?"

"I guess some of the good looks are your own, Randy," Janie answered, which caused Randy to blush most becomingly.

Monday was a busy day at the farm-house, and Mrs. Weston had said, "I can't spare the time to go over to Janie's this afternoon, but she wants ye ter try on one of yer gowns and ye can run over there after school. She'll know whether it looks right or not without any help from me."

So leaving Prue to trudge home with Johnny Buffum as an escort, she had experienced great delight in seeing herself for the first time in a dainty party gown.

"Won't mother be surprised when I try on the pretty party dress for her to see?" thought Randy as she hurried on toward home.

Like many another bit of gossip set afloat in a country town, the story of the letter from Boston together with descriptions of Randy's costumes gained with every repetition, until one day on the way from the Centre, Randy was astonished to be thus addressed,

"Wal, how be ye Randy? I hear ye're havin' a tremenjous lot er gaowns made ter take ter Boston with ye."

The speaker was a woman whom Randy had seen but a few times, and she was therefore surprised when the team stopped at the side of the road and its occupant accosted her.

"It is true that mother is having Janie Clifton make some things for me," said Randy.

"Wal, I live on the other side er the place," the woman continued, "an' so I'm a leetle out er the way er hearin' news, so I'd like reel well ter know; *be* ye goin' ter have twelve gaowns, five cloaks, an' a half er dozen hats as they say ye be?"

"No, that isn't true," said Randy, her flushed cheeks showing that she resented being thus questioned by a woman who was almost a stranger. Turning, she hurried on toward home, and the curious one, giving the horse a smart clip drove off muttering,

"Gitting uppish 'fore she gits ter Boston. Do'no what she'll be when she's stayed there a spell."

At school, her mates were glad that Randy was to have so delightful a winter, and many and varied were the comments and speculations regarding it.

"It'll be stupid here without you, Randy," said Dot Marvin, "I don't know but that we shall all go to sleep, while you're a flyin' round in the city."

"I don't expect to do much flying," said Randy, laughing. "I shall be working at school there instead of this school at home. You must all write to me and tell me what you are doing, and I'll be glad enough to answer you."

"Indeed we will," said Reuben Jenks. "Let's write Randy a long letter, each one of us writing a part of it and send it along to Boston, just to show her what we can do when we try."

"Oh, what fun!" said Randy, "it will seem as if you were with me when I read a long letter in which all my friends are represented."

"Lemme print something in it, Reuben, will you? I want to be in the big letter, too," cried little Prue.

"I guess I will let you," Reuben answered heartily. "What kind of a letter would it be if you didn't have a hand in it, Prue?"

"I'd like to be going to Boston if it wasn't for one thing," said Molly Wilson, "and that's those city girls."

"Oh, ho, Molly. I thought you were shy, and it ain't city girls you hanker for? Then it must be city boys," said Reuben.

"'Tis not, Reuben Jenks," said Molly, with unusual vim; "'tis not any such thing, it's just that I'd be 'fraid those horrid city girls were watching everything I did and thinking me countryfied."

"Well, I shall not let that idea make me uncomfortable," said Randy, stoutly. "I *am* a country girl, and if they say so, they will not be telling me anything new or surprising; beside, I think that there must be nice girls in the city as well as among us here. I intend to like them, and I hope that they will like me."

"They'll be precious queer girls if they don't," said Jack Marvin.

"I wanted to go to boarding school," said Phoebe Small, "but I didn't mean a city school. Seems to me I'd rather 'twouldn't be city girls to get acquainted with. Don't you wish they were not city girls, Randy?"

"I believe that there are just as pleasant girls in Boston as there are here, and I look forward to meeting them," said Randy.

She spoke bravely and truthfully, yet afterward when in her little chamber the conversation recurred to her, Randy found herself wondering if the meeting between herself and these girls who were to be her classmates during her stay in Boston would, after all, be as delightful as she had fondly believed.

Randy's pleasure at the thought of meeting them had been genuine, and so friendly and sincere was she, that until the idea was suggested by Dot Marvin it had never occurred to her that the meeting could be aught but delightful.

"I ought not to think that there could be anything which is not charming where Miss Dayton is, and I believe I'm silly to let Dot's remarks make me the least bit uneasy. I'll start intending to like every girl I meet, and who knows? Perhaps I shall," she said with a laugh, and a nod at her happy face reflected in the tiny mirror.

During all the planning and preparation for Randy's departure, Prue had been eager to see the pretty new dresses, had insisted upon seeing the hats and gloves, and had talked of little else at home or at school. Indeed, the little girl had been so happy in the thought of the promised pleasure for her sister, that she had not seemed to realize how much the parting would really mean.

But when the morning arrived on which Randy was to start, and dressed in her smart gray suit she stood waiting for her trunk to be placed in the back of the wagon, Prue seemed all at once to understand that Randy's long stay in Boston meant loneliness for her little self. As the thought swept through her mind, its full meaning came to her, and she did what she had never been known to do in all her sunny little life. Throwing herself upon the great braided rug near the door she cried out,

"O Randy, my Randy, I can't let you go!"

Randy stooped and gathered the dear little sister to her breast, saying,

"I'm not going to stay always, dear. Look up, Prue, while I tell you. I'll write you nice long letters, and you shall write to me, and I'll send you something 'way from Boston. Won't that be nice? Come, kiss me, Prue. I want to think of you smiling instead of crying, dear."

Choking back her sobs, Prue made a brave effort to smile, but it was not much of a success, and Randy found it difficult to say good-bye with even a semblance of cheerfulness. She possessed a singularly loving and tender nature, and this was the first time that she had left home, so that while her heart was full of anticipation, it was impossible for her to go without feeling keenly the parting.

Tears filled her sweet eyes, as turning to her mother she said,

"The planning has been so delightful, and I have been anticipating so much that I have looked forward to this morning when I should start, but now the time has come I almost wish I'd never said I'd go."

"I know just how ye feel, Randy," said Mrs. Weston, "an' I must say 'twas easier ter plan ter have ye go than ter say good-bye. Ye must cheer up, though, and look bright an' happy when ye meet Miss Dayton in Boston. The long ride in the cars will be new to ye, and ye must remember that yer Aunt Prudence is ter be with us while ye're away, ter help me an' ter keep me from bein' too lonesome, fer mercy knows how I shall miss ye.

"I want ye should go, though; it's a great chance fer ye, and don't forget ter write, Randy. I couldn't stand that," and Mrs. Weston's voice had in it a suspicion of a sob.

"Oh, I could not forget you all," said Randy, then with a kiss and a clinging embrace she clambered into the wagon to a seat beside her father, and her mother's waving handkerchief and Prue's little face with its quivering lip were photographed upon her mind as she rode to the Centre to take the train.

They talked but little on the way to the depot. Randy found it a task to keep her tears from falling, and the expression of her father's face told more plainly than words what this parting cost. When her trunk had been taken charge of and Randy had chosen a seat, her father bent to kiss her, saying as he did so,

"God bless ye, child! I never knew 'till ter-day what it meant ter say good-bye ter ye. I only hope the visit will bring ye joy enough ter repay ye fer this partin' and then I shall be satisfied. Write often to us, that we may know ye are safe, and spend the money I put in yer little wallet.

"Ah, don't say a word, Randy, I could well afford it, an' I put it there jest fer a little surprise."

As Randy was about to speak, the conductor entered saying, that those persons who intended leaving the train must do so at once, as it was about to start.

With a hasty kiss and embrace, Randy saw her father leave the car and she waved her hand to him as he stood upon the platform, then in a sudden panic of desolation she hid her face in her handkerchief and cried like a little child. A long time she crouched upon the seat, her head against its plush back and her eyes hidden by her handkerchief, but after a time it occurred to her that she was not doing as her father would wish.

"I'm crying like a child," thought Randy, "and father and mother have done every generous thing which they could think of to make me enjoy the long ride and the visit.

"Father would wish me to be brave, and mother would not like to see me crying."

Accordingly she sat up, and wiping her tears, made a determined effort to look as she felt sure that a girl should look who was starting out for a delightful visit.

As she looked from the window and saw the flying landscape, it seemed as if the rumbling wheels were saying, "Going away, going away," and again the tears lay upon her lashes, but after a time the novelty of the situation dawned upon her, and her sunny disposition found much that was amusing in what was going on about her.

Mrs. Weston had put up a tempting lunch in a pretty basket, so when a boy came through the car bearing a large tray covered with doubtful looking viands, and shouting in stentorian tones:

"Poy, coiks, tawts an' sanditches," Randy was not tempted to buy, but she watched the boy and wondered how he had the courage to walk the aisle loudly bawling his wares.

At one station a woman entered carrying an infant whose pudgy face lay upon her shoulder, and about whose tiny body her right arm was tightly clasped. In her left hand she carried a large and apparently heavy bag. Four other children trotted after her down the aisle, and like a rear guard a burly looking man followed the children carrying a tiny parcel.

"What a horrid man," thought Randy, as he proceeded immediately to make himself comfortable by occupying the larger part of a seat.

He did permit one child to sit beside him, but he allowed the other three to crowd around his wife who held the sleeping infant in her arms, and kept a watchful eye upon the big bag which sat on the floor at her feet.

Randy's attention was about evenly divided between watching the passengers and enjoying the beauties of the autumn landscape as the flying train passed first a village nestling at the foot of a mountain, then a forest, then a lake whose surface reflected the gorgeous coloring of the trees upon its shore, then another village, then a winding river which, mirror-like, repeated the blue sky and the floating clouds. This endless panorama was to Randy a most wonderful thing, and the beauty of it all as it passed before her, filled her with delight.

At noon the train stopped at a large depot which was far more pretentious than any which she had yet seen, and Randy wondered why nearly everyone left the car. When she noticed that many of the passengers had left their parcels in their seats, she was amazed at what seemed to be gross carelessness. That they went forth in search of lunch never occurred to her, but realizing that she was hungry and that nearly all the seats were vacant, she opened her basket and was touched when she saw that her mother had remembered her little freaks of taste, and had made up a lunch of what she knew would tempt her. In one corner was a tiny paper bag on which was printed in little Prue's best manner,

"For my Randy."

Poor little Prue! The bag of candy which her father had brought from the Centre to cheer the little girl and help to turn her attention from the thought of loneliness when Randy should say "good-bye," proved inefficient. Nothing could make Randy's departure less hard for little Prue, and she had evidently found a bit of comfort in tucking the little bag into a corner of the lunch basket, thus contributing her mite toward Randy's pleasure.

"Dear little Prue," murmured Randy, "she shall have the loveliest doll I can find in Boston."

The afternoon ride seemed longer and less amusing than that of the morning. The novelty was wearing off, and Randy was beginning to feel weary.

When it grew dusky and in the towns along the way bright lights appeared, a sudden fear took possession of her. What if she should be unable to see Miss Dayton when she stepped from the train at Boston?

CHAPTER VI

NEW FRIENDS

A brakeman passed down the aisle and commenced to light the lamps, and Randy peeping from the window saw that the stars were shining. She knew that at home old Snowfoot and the cows were under the shelter of the great barn, and that father and mother and dear little Prue were seated around the table. Tears filled her eyes and she quickly drew the curtain and began to look about the brightly lighted car with the hope of seeing something which should hold her attention and thus help to dispel the wave of homesickness which swept over her.

An old lady with a kindly face turned just in time to see Randy's handkerchief at her eyes, and she hastened to speak a word of comfort.

"Traveling alone, dear?" she asked so gently that Randy forgot to be surprised, and she bowed her head in assent in place of the word which, for the moment she could not speak.

"I thought so," said the old lady, "but don't cry, your friends will probably be at the depot in Boston when you arrive, will they not?"

"Oh, yes," said Randy, "but it isn't that. I was thinking of those I'd left at home," and away went the little handkerchief again to her eyes.

"Ah, that is it," said the sweet old voice. "Well, the homesickness will wear off after a time, and now in regard to to-night, your friends will doubtless be waiting when this train gets in, but if by chance they are not, you shall come to my home with me until we can get word to their address that you are in Boston."

"Oh, how good you are," said Randy.

"I am only doing what I would have some one do for my daughter in a like position," was the reply, and looking up, Randy saw a beautiful light in the kind eyes which looked into hers, and without a word she laid her hand in that of her new friend.

"Boston! Boston!" shouted the brakeman, and with a start Randy found herself suddenly upon her feet, and with the other passengers making her way toward the door.

The great train-house, the crowd, the trucks loaded with trunks and bags, the lights, the noise and bustle so confused Randy that she failed to see the face for which she was eagerly looking.

"Do you see your friends?" asked the gentle voice, but as she stepped upon the platform she was rejoiced to hear her name called by the voice which she so well knew.

"O Randy dear, you did come didn't you?" and for a moment Helen Dayton held her young friend closely; then she noticed the old lady who stood smiling at what was so evidently a happy meeting.

Hastening toward her, Helen extended her hand as she said,

"I am so glad to see you, Mrs. Seymour, are you acquainted with this dear friend of mine? I thought you were conversing when you stepped upon the platform."

"We have had no introduction," said the old lady, smiling, "but we became acquainted on the car just before we reached Boston."

"And she promised to take me to her home if you did not arrive," said Randy.

"I am glad that I was prompt, that you might know how eager I was to see you, but had I been late, I could have asked for no kinder friend, or more charming home for you, Randy, than this which was so sweetly offered you to-night."

After formally introducing them, and thanking Mrs. Seymour for her kindness, Miss Dayton led Randy through the depot to a side entrance, where her carriage stood waiting.

The coachman opened the door, and soon the little country maiden was being whirled through the city streets, and the blaze of lights from the huge store windows caused Randy to ask in wide-eyed wonder if there was "anything special going on."

"Oh, no," said Helen, "the streets are brightly lighted every night, and the people are walking, hurrying, rushing back and forth, looking into the windows of the great stores, as eagerly as if the doors were open for customers; then hastening away to some place of amusement, or to their homes."

Randy leaned luxuriously against the cushioned back of the coupe, and with her hand in Helen's, she continued to watch the hurrying throng, and to wonder vaguely if there were a sufficient number of houses to shelter them all if they happened to think of retiring.

After what seemed to Randy to be a very long ride, the carriage stopped.

Together they ascended the broad sandstone steps, and as the butler opened the door, the soft light in the hall showed the glowing red of the walls above the carved oak wainscoting, and the odor of flowers floated out to greet them.

Then down the stairway came a beautiful old lady, whose grace and dignity bespoke the grand dame, as with gentle courtesy she moved toward Randy, extending her hand in greeting. Without waiting for an introduction she said,

"My dear, I am sure that you are Randy, and I am going to tell you that I am Helen's aunt, and that I think I have been as eager to have you with us as Helen has been."

Randy placed her hand in the one extended toward her, and looking frankly up into the fine old face she said,

"It is nice to have you so glad to see me, will you let me love you while I stay? I think I cannot help it."

"While you stay, and always," was the quick response accompanied by a firm pressure of the young girl's hand, and Randy felt as if at once among friends.

Miss Dayton who had been giving the coachman instruction in regard to Randy's trunk, turned in surprise to see her aunt and Randy engaged in conversation.

"I waived the ceremony of an introduction," said the elder woman with a smile, "and I do assure you, Helen, that we are already quite well acquainted."

"While I thought Randy was just behind me waiting until her belongings were safely housed," Helen answered with a gay laugh, for she saw at a glance, that her friend had found favor in Aunt Marcia's eyes; those discriminating eyes which never failed to recognize the frank and the true, or to detect the sham, however skillfully concealed.

"How lovely she is," thought Aunt Marcia, as Randy with Helen ascended the staircase toward the room which was to be Randy's own, during her stay in Boston.

"How handsome your dear old aunt is," said Randy to Helen, as they walked along the upper hall. "Her hair is like the frost, and her eyes just twinkle, twinkle, like stars when the night is cold."

"Why, what a pretty thought," said Helen. "Aunt Marcia was a great beauty, and a portrait of her when she was presented at court, hangs in the drawing-room. Sometimes I think she is even handsomer now, with her fine gray eyes and waving hair. If you are pleased with her, Randy, I assure you that she is delighted with you; and now here we are at the room which is to be yours while you are with us."

"Oh, what a lovely room," cried Randy. "Roses, pink roses on the walls, and real roses in the vase on my table, and such a dear little bed. Why, the quilt has roses on it, too! 'Tis like a fairy tale, and makes me feel like a princess. Oh, if mother and father and little Prue could see---"

Again a sob arose in her throat, although she bravely repressed it.

"Not a tear to-night, Randy dear," said Helen, "but instead let me tell you what will cheer you, and make you feel nearer to them all to-night. This little desk is for your use, and all your letters home will be written here, where you will find paper and pens and ink awaiting you. Now, would you not like to write just a little note, saying that you arrived safely, and Thomas shall post it, so that it shall reach its destination as soon as possible. You are too tired to-night to write much of a letter, but to-morrow you can write twenty pages if you choose."

"And if I did, in all the twenty pages I could not tell them how much I miss them, and yet how glad I am to be here," said Randy. "Isn't it odd to be glad and sorry at the same time?"

"Well, I'll write the little note now, that they may receive it as soon as possible."

"And when it is written, come down to the hall where I will meet you, and when we have given the note to Thomas, we will have dinner."

"Dinner!" said Randy, "why I thought everyone had dinner at twelve o'clock!"

"In the city we have dinner at six, and lunch at one, and never a supper at all," said Helen, smiling at Randy's frank look of surprise. "To-night dinner will be later, because your train was delayed, and I wished you to have time for your note."

Randy hastened to write the little letter, and then proceeded to freshen her toilet, and when with the envelope in her hand she tripped down the hall where Helen stood waiting, she looked every inch the fresh, sweet Randy of the New England

hills. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, and the soft little ringlets curled over her temples in a manner most bewitching.

Oh, how grand the dining-room looked to the girl who had never seen anything finer than the parson's house in the country village.

The dinner was a simple one, but to Randy the room with its fine furnishings, the rare flowers in the centre of the table, the noiseless tread of the servant with his silver salver, the soft light from the great chandelier, all seemed a part of the fairyland of which she had so often read in the old volume of "Grimm's Tales" at home.

It was remarkable, however, that with all that was new and beautiful about her, Randy seemed as much at ease as if always accustomed to her present surroundings.

So innocent was she in her frank enjoyment of all the beautiful things which she saw, and the absence of affectation in her manner made her sincere admiration so delightful, that Helen felt that Randy was even more charming than when they had last met, and Aunt Marcia completely captivated, at once decided that never before had a young country girl appeared to so great advantage when transplanted to a city home.

After dinner Helen sang some pretty ballads for Randy, and Aunt Marcia told with evident delight reminiscences of her youth.

Randy admiring the full length portrait of the dear old lady as she had appeared in earlier days, looked frankly up in her face and said,

"You were lovely then, but I think you are grander now," which of course delighted Aunt Marcia.

When at last Randy lay in her dainty bed, the light from the great street lamps shone across the room, and on the wall before her, she could see the rose vines upon the paper, and counting the blossoms, she fell asleep.

When the sun came in at her window, Randy awoke with a start, and turning toward the little clock which ticked upon the table she was surprised to find that it was quite time to dress. When Miss Dayton had told her that breakfast would be served at eight, Randy had wondered at the lateness of the hour, remembering that at home, seven o'clock was considered to be as late as any energetic person would think of breakfasting.

"To think that I shall have just time to make myself presentable, and at home I should have been awake long ago, and by this time have dressed Prue and myself and have eaten breakfast. Whatever made me sleep so soundly?"

On the stairway she met Helen, and together they entered the dining room, where before the crackling fire in the grate stood Aunt Marcia, waiting to greet them.

During breakfast, Helen proposed a drive to the shopping district when she could make a few purchases and at the same time show Randy the wonders of the great stores.

"The school will not open until next week," said Helen, "and we will make this week a succession of little pleasure trips. We will visit the places of interest and endeavor to make you wholly at home in our city, and before school opens I shall invite some of the girls who will be your classmates to meet you, so that on the opening day you will feel that you have some acquaintances in the school."

At ten o'clock Randy seated beside Miss Dayton in the coupe, was riding through the city streets and feeling the wildest excitement as she saw other fine carriages threading their way among scores of pedestrians, hurrying throngs passing in and out of the great stores, electric cars and carriages, and indeed everything which was new and strange to her.

While Helen and Randy were driving about the city, an animated conversation was in progress in a home not far from Miss Dayton's.

The leader, was a tall, slender girl of about Randy's age, whose dark eyes spoke of truth and loyalty. She made a graceful picture when having braided her long, dark hair she proceeded to tie it firmly with a bright scarlet ribbon.

"Of course I shall call upon her," she was saying. "I wonder that you ask such a question. She is Miss Dayton's friend, and that, in itself, is enough to make me wish to go. Miss Dayton is all that is lovely and I would do much to please her; but aside from that, this girl is a stranger and I am asked to give her my friendship. I shall call upon her the day which she has set, and I shall go intending to like Miss Randy Weston."

She gave the ribbon a determined twitch and a tactful person would have considered the matter settled, as Nina Irwin usually meant what she said; but Polly Lawrence was as tactless as she was fickle, which was saying much, therefore she persisted in her questioning.

"Isn't Randy a queer name, Nina? No name in particular is it?"

"Very likely her name is Miranda, and Randy is just a cute little pet name," said Nina. "Some people might question if Polly was much of a name, when you were really named Mary, and here is Margaret whom we all call Peggy, much to her disgust."

"That comes of having brothers," remarked Peggy. "No one ever thought of calling me anything but Margaret until Jack started it, and every one seems bent upon doing as Jack does. Even Polly has decided to wear nothing but red, since that is Howard's color. Alas! My big brother is turning things topsy turvy, when every friend I possess is wearing red, regardless of the color of her hair or complexion."

"I've *always* liked red," remarked Polly, "and as to this call, I suppose I shall make it. No girl can afford to offend the beautiful Miss Dayton, as it might mean the loss of some fine invitations."

"I intend to please Miss Dayton because I like and admire her, and not for any invitations which I might otherwise miss," said Nina. "In her kind little note she speaks of Miss Weston as charming, and if she charms Helen Dayton, she surely will be able to interest me."

"We might call together," remarked Peggy, with a lazy little drawl. "If I promise to call for you, Nina, I shall surely get there, you are so energetic."

"I'll call for you, Peggy, and together we'll call for Nina," said Polly. "I confess I've no great interest in a country girl, so, if I'm going, I'll go with you, and perhaps the three of us will be able to make the call a bit lively."

"I, for one, anticipate meeting this friend of Miss Dayton's, and as she asked us to call on an afternoon of this week, I think we might go to-morrow," said Nina.

Accordingly on the following day, the three girls sat in the reception room, each wondering just what Miss Randy Weston would be like.

"Do you fancy that she is light, or dark? Let's guess, girls," whispered Polly, but at that moment Miss Dayton entered with Randy's hand in hers. With a bright smile of welcome, Randy extended her hand to each girl as she was presented, and as Nina gave the hand a cordial pressure, Randy said,

"I am so glad that you have come, because you see I have left all my friends at home," there was a little tremor in her voice, "and to find new friends here, will make it less lonely when I enter the school next week."

"You have gained three friends to-day," said Nina, "and when we meet at school you will soon know all the other girls."

"We could call for you on the first day," ventured Peggy, completely won by Randy's sweet face and frank manner.

"Oh, if you would," said Randy, with such evident delight, that Polly more than half wished that she had made the suggestion.

How they talked and chattered that afternoon, and when the three girls took leave of Randy and Helen and walked briskly down the avenue, Nina, with twinkling eyes, said to Polly,

"I think she is one of the sweetest girls that I know, and Polly, did she seem *very* countrified to you?"

"Now, Nina," Polly answered in a crestfallen tone,

"Who knew that she was a regular beauty, and who for a moment supposed that she would be dressed like a city girl?"

"I said that if Miss Helen Dayton called her charming, I had no doubt about it," said Nina, "and I am willing to say that she is even more pleasing than I had imagined."

"It is her pretty, truthful manner that makes me like her," said Peggy, "and I mean to be her friend while she is here."

Miss Dayton had seen at once that Randy was making a pleasant impression upon the girls, and wondered if Randy was equally pleased with them.

"Well, Randy," she said after the girls had left, and together they stood before the fire-place.

"Oh, I liked them," was Randy's quick reply. "They were so friendly. I like Nina Irwin best, but they were all so pleasant that perhaps I should not like one better than the others."

"Nina has always been a favorite with me," said Helen, "and as you really liked the others I do not see that it matters that of the three Nina is the favored one."

"They were evidently pleased with you, so you see you already have three friends for school and two for home, for Aunt Marcia and I claim your dearest love."

"Oh, I love you best," said Randy, "I care for you next to the dear ones at home."

CHAPTER VII

THE LITTLE TRAVELERS

The crisp air stirred the bright yellow leaves which clung lovingly to the birches, and a few dull red leaves still rustled upon the stout branches of the oaks, but many of the trees were bare, and under foot there lay a thick carpet of dried foliage through which the children delighted to scuff their way toward school.

The squirrels scampered about the woodland, busily hoarding their winter store of nuts, and in the field the crows flew around the ancient scare-crow, cawing derisively at his flapping garments as if laughing at his attenuated figure and mockingly asking him to partake of the husks of the garnered corn.

Overhead the sky was blue and cloudless and upon the eaves of the farm-house the tiny sparrows chirped a greeting to little Prue who stood irresolutely upon the threshold, a wistful expression in her pretty brown eyes, as she twisted one of her short curls and looked over her shoulder to say good-bye to Tabby who lay in her accustomed place upon the large braided rug beside the kitchen stove.

"Good-bye Tabby," she called, "it isn't any fun to go to school, now Randy isn't here."

Aunt Prudence, who, true to her promise, had arrived at her brother's home on the day after Randy's departure, now appeared in the doorway.

"Just starting for school Prue?" said she, "why you said good-bye to yer mother an' me some time ago."

"Well, it takes me longer to get started than when Randy was here," said Prue. "It's diffe'nt now. I used to hurry to keep up with my Randy, but now I don't care when I get there long as Randy isn't in the school 't all. I want a letter from her, too, and I wonder why she doesn't be sending me one."

"Why, Prue, Randy sent you one yesterday, don't you remember? You took it to bed with you last night," said Aunt Prudence.

"But I want another one this morning," said Prue, and seeing tears upon her cheeks, Aunt Prudence, with unusual gentleness, sat down upon the threshold beside the wee girl, and endeavored to make it clear to her, that having received a letter from Randy upon the afternoon of one day, it would be impossible for another one to arrive on the morning of the next.

"Well, I've got my Randy's letter buttoned inside my jacket," said Prue, "but all the same I want another now, and oh I want my Randy more than anything."

It required a deal of coaxing to induce Prue to start for school and she went reluctantly, saying as she turned to wave her hand to Aunt Prudence, "I used to like school, but tisen't any fun 't all without my Randy."

She walked down the road swinging her little lunch basket, and thinking of the dear sister whom she so wished to see. At recess Prue left her little mates and Hi Babson, searching for her, found her outside the yard sitting disconsolately upon an old stump, her basket beside her, and her luncheon untouched.

"What's the matter, Prue," said Hi, "I want yer ter play squat tag with us."

"I don't want to play," said Prue, "I want my Randy."

"But she's in Boston, ain't she?" asked Hi.

"Yes, and I *want* her, I'm tired of going to school without her."

"I'm tired of goin' ter school at all," said Hi. Then a peculiar light appeared in his small black eyes.

"I'll tell yer what we'll do," said he, "We'll go and *see* Randy, you 'n me. I know the way to the deepot, Prue, Yes sir, we'll go'n see Randy. I guess she'll be glad 'nough ter see us 'n wont you be glad to see her, though?"

Little Prue's eyes grew round with delight. Since Randy was to be away from home, of course the best thing would be to go to her.

"Do you *truly* know the way?" asked Prue, eagerly, laying her little hand upon Hi's arm.

"Guess I do. Ain't I been to the deepot times 'nough?" was the confident reply. "You jest come 'long with me, Prue, an' I tell ye we'll find your Randy. I'm bigger'n you be 'n I know."

"When will we go, Hi?" asked Prue, now confident that her little champion could take her safely to Randy.

"Now," said Hi, "right off now. I don't know my lessons, so I don't want ter go back ter school, an' teacher's a ringin' the bell this minute. Pick up yer lunch basket, I've got some cookies I hooked out 'n the cupboard an' a big apple that Belindy gave me, an' we'll eat 'em when we're in the cars." So the two children trudged down the road; Prue happier than she had been for days because of the delightful prospect of seeing Randy, and Hi, knowing that he was naughty in staying away from school, but easing his little conscience by thinking that he was comforting Prue.

It was true that he was larger than Prue, but they were of the same age, and as unlike as two children could possibly be.

Prue was lovely in face and disposition, small of her age and graceful in her movements. Hi was a plain, sturdy looking country boy; stubborn, full of mischief and large for a boy of six.

Down the road they walked, a resolute little pair; Prue chattering and laughing, Hi rather silent until well out of sight of the schoolhouse, when his spirits rose and he cheered the way by telling his little companion wonderful tales of the delights of a journey in the cars.

Having twice enjoyed a long car ride, he considered himself quite a traveled personage, and he continued to enlarge upon the pleasures of the trip to Boston until Prue's eyes danced, and she skipped along the road unable from sheer delight to walk without an occasional little hop.

"If we stay with Randy, we won't have ter go ter school," said Hi, "an' you'n me can play all day."

"And see my Randy every day," said Prue, "and oh, Hi, you don't know how lovely she looked in her new clothes she had to go to Boston with."

"Randy looked nice in anything," said Hi, "and I'll like ter see her, but the best of it is, I ain't er goin' ter school. I hate school, anyway."

"I like school when my Randy's in it, but I don't like anything where my Randy isn't," said Prue, stoutly, "and now we're going to see her."

As she danced along, her hand tightly clasping that of her companion, she hummed merrily, and Hi accompanied her with a discordant whistle, cheerfully unaware that he was quite off the key.

"Does it take long to get to Boston?" asked Prue, abruptly.

"No, I guess not," said Hi, "but it's a little longer'n I thought to the deepot."

"Don't you know the way?" she asked when upon reaching a fork in the road Hi stopped and stared about him as if puzzled as to which to choose.

"Oh, yes, I know the way to the deepot," said Hi, "only I was a thinkin' which was the nearest way. Last time I went there with Uncle Joshua he said, 'We'll go this way 'cause it's a short cut,' an' I guess this is it, Prue, so come along."

And away they went down the road which led directly away from the Centre. Naughty little Hi was far from sure that they were walking in the right direction, but he knew that they were not going toward school, and that in itself was delightful, and a glance at Prue's smiling face assured him that he was making her happy, so on they trudged, singing and whistling as before.

The sun was high overhead, and the light breeze blew the curls about Prue's little face, until Hi looking at her said,

"You're the nicest girl I know Prue; will ye give me some er your lunch, if I'll give you half er my apple?"

"Oh, yes," assented Prue, "I'm getting hungry too. Here, let's divide this gingerbread first."

Upon the low stone wall they perched, and a pretty picture they made, sharing their lunch and throwing the crumbs to the sparrows that twittered in the dusty road.

"We've been walking so long, we must be most to the deepot, Hi," said Prue.

"I guess so," the small boy answered, "so now we've finished the lunch, we'll just start along. Gim me yer hand, Prue; I'm a big boy, 'n I'm takin' care er you."

"Yes, you're taking care of me real good," Prue answered sweetly, "and I love you fer taking me to my Randy, but Hi," she continued, "I'll *have* to sit down a minute, my feets are so tired."

"Oh, there's time 'nough," said Hi. "We'll rest a while, an' then, after we've walked a little ways, fust thing you'll see'll be the deepot. Then when we git inter the cars, we shall sit on the soft seat and jest rest 'til we get ter Randy's."

"Well, then, let's hurry," said Prue, "I'm some rested now, and if we run we'll get there all the sooner."

But Prue was more weary than she knew, and her little legs refused to run, so, settling into a jog trot the two tired children pushed onward, each step carrying them farther from the depot and at the same time farther from home.

* * * * *

When the pupils filed into the schoolroom after recess, Miss Gilman missed Prue and Hi, and questioned a number of scholars in regard to them.

"I seen 'em a-settin' on a stump back er the school," volunteered one small boy, "Want me ter go'n look for 'em?"

Permission given him, the boy ran out, delighted with the thought that he might thus elude one recitation; but a long search failing to discover the missing children, he was obliged to return with the information that he had looked everywhere and they weren't "anywheres 'raound the place."

"Possibly they have gone home," said Miss Gilman, but a vague uneasiness took possession of her, and when the afternoon session commenced with both children absent, she determined to call after school at the Weston's and see if Prue were safe, at the same time sending the Babson girls home in haste to learn if Hi could be found.

When Prue did not return at noon, Mrs. Weston was not alarmed, as the little girl often stayed at the school when, as on this day, she had in her little basket a hearty lunch, and before Prue could have possibly reached home in the afternoon Miss Gilman, with a desperate attempt to appear calm, called to ask if the little girl had been unable to attend the afternoon session.

"Ill? Why no, indeed! Why, what is it you say, Miss Gilman? That Prue has not been at school since the morning recess?"

The color left Mrs. Weston's cheek, and she leaned heavily upon the table, while Aunt Prudence, speaking with more confidence than she really felt, exclaimed,

"Now it's no use gettin' frightened. She's likely enough in someone's house as safe as can be, and what we've got ter do is ter harness up an' call at the houses where Prue is acquainted an' she'll be with us before dark, I'll warrant ye."

Just at this point, Belinda Babson breathless and excited, ran in at the door crying wildly,

"Oh, Miss Gilman, Mrs. Weston! Little Hi isn't at our house and a man just told father that he saw Hi and Prue sitting on the stone wall away over on the mill road, and that was long before noon time. Where can they be now? Mother's just wild and Aunt Drusilla's lost every idea she ever had. She's just wringing her hands and crying, and a saying that she's afraid that they're lost and wont be found."

Mr. Weston, coming in from the barn, heard Belinda's words and saw her frightened face.

With a grave expression in his kind gray eyes, he said,

"There, there mother, I wouldn't get too frightened. Prue's out of sight? Well, I'll start out ter find her, and we'll hope that she is not so far off but that I shall soon bring her home." But to the mare he muttered as he adjusted the harness,

"This is bad business, Snowfoot. Two little folks lost and no idea where ter look for 'em."

And while two households were wild with fear, while Mr. Weston and Joshua Babson were driving in every direction, stopping at the door of the farm-houses to enquire if the children were there, or had been seen, the two little ones who were the cause of all this commotion were still walking wearily down the road, Prue hoping yet to see the cars which should take her to Randy, and Hi beginning to think that he had lost his way. The last glint of yellow had faded from the western sky, as Hi proposed that they cut through the woods to "gain time," he said.

"Oh, I'm 'fraid to go into the woods when it's getting dark," wailed Prue.

"But me'n Uncle Joshua did the day we went the shortest way," said Hi, "an' this looks just like the place. *I ain't 'fraid so you needn't be, an' we've got ter go the quickest way because it's gittin' late.*"

Prue gave her hand to Hi, and together they entered the woods, trudging wearily on toward the place where, between the distant trees they could see the western sky. Their tired little feet stumbled on, tripping over fallen twigs, and gnarled roots of the great trees. Prue was crying now and Hi, anxious to keep up, at least a semblance of the big boy and protector, made desperate efforts to swallow the lump in his throat which was growing larger every moment. Prue had lost her lunch basket, but she held Randy's letter tightly clasped in her hand, and the basket was forgotten in her eagerness to keep a firm hold upon the treasured missive.

"Oh, Hi, I've *got* to sit down again, I'm so tired, and I'm cold, too," she cried.

Hi, with all his faults, was a kind-hearted little fellow, so with a deal of gallantry he pulled off his jacket, saying,

"This'll make ye warm, Prue, I'm a big boy so I don't mind."

Hi heaped a mass of dry leaves together, saying,

"We might lay down on these leaves jest a few minutes 'til we're a little warmer, an' then when we're rested we'll go on again. *We must* be 'most there now, Prue."

By snuggling closely beside her, the boy endeavored to make up for the loss of his coat, and so completely tired out were the two little wayfarers, that sleep overtook them, and in their dreams Prue saw her beloved Randy, while Hi seemed floating through space upon one of the red plush car seats on the way to Boston.

After fruitless calls at the farm-houses Mr. Weston, now thoroughly alarmed called upon his neighbors for assistance, and searching parties with lanterns and torches commenced to scour field and wood.

In and out between the great trees they wandered, their torches and lanterns looking like giant fire-flies; and in every direction they searched for the two little travelers; now at the margin of the woodland, then in again to the heart of the forest. One man recounted to his companion how several years before two children had been lost, and although desperate search was made, they were not found until the pond was dragged. Another farmer, determined not to be outdone, told, with bated breath, of a bear which had been seen coming down the mountain, and that when two hunters had given chase, he had disappeared in the woods.

"I shouldn't like to have the children meet him," said the man.

"Be still!" commanded his companion, "do ye want Square Weston ter hear ye? He's 'nough worried now without yer tales er bears an' drowndings."

As Mr. Weston passed them, his lantern revealed the pallor of his face, and one man muttered to the other,

"Ef they're not ter be faound alive, then I hope it'll not be the Square that finds 'em."

"That's so, man," the other returned, "'tho' it would be a hard job fer any of us ter larn that aught had befallen little Prue, and even that little scamp, Hi Babson, I'd hate ter think of a hard fate fer him, he was so brimmin' over with fun."

One man had strayed from the party, and with his torch held above his head was slowly making his way through the underbrush, when, emerging from the thicket, his foot touched something which but softly resisted it. Thinking it to be some old and mossy log, he shifted his torch to the other hand, and was preparing to step over the obstacle whatever it might be, when, as the smoke blew backward, the flaming torch revealed the sleeping children, Prue still holding Randy's letter in her hand, Hi with a protecting arm about his little companion.

"Well, of all the pretty sights!" he ejaculated. "Safe an' saound an' warm I'll bet ye, but haow on airth come they over here?"

Then with another look at the sleeping children, he hastened to rejoin the party and to tell the joyful news that the little ones were found.

When the crowd of torch-bearers hastened to the spot and gathered about the wanderers, Prue and Hi sat up and rubbed their eyes, evidently wondering what had caused such a commotion. [Illustration: As the smoke blew backward, the flaming torch revealed the sleeping children]

"How did ye git lost?" asked a farmer of Prue.

"We wasn't lost," answered Prue, "How could we be lost when we knew where we was going? We was going to Boston to my Randy, and we're 'most to the cars, but we're just resting a little while first."

To Uncle Joshua Babson, little Hi looked for pardon for this latest prank.

"I wasn't naughty *this* time," he said, "I knew the way to Boston, and Prue felt so lonesome 'thout Randy that I was goin' ter take her there."

"Never mind that, my boy," Uncle Joshua answered, "the main thing is ter git ye home, an' stop yer mother's frettin'. She's in the mood ter forgive most anything, sence yer safe and sound."

Tired little Prue lay in her father's arms, crying softly, her face hidden upon his breast.

"There, there, don't cry, Prue, ye're all safe now. See, I have ye in my arms, an' soon we'll be home with mother an' Aunt Prudence."

"But if you take me home now," wailed Prue, "it'll be to-morrow 'fore I could start again to find Randy, and we meened to get there to-night."

"But mother's 'bout sick a worryin' sence ye went off with Hi and didn't tell where ye was goin'. Did ye think of it, Prue, that mother misses Randy, so couldn't spare ye, too?"

"Oh, I never thought," Prue answered, "I wanted to see my Randy, but I didn't 'member that if I went to Boston there wouldn't be any girls 't all in our house."

With his lantern on his arm and his little daughter clasped to his breast, Mr. Weston tramped along the rough road escorted by two neighbors who with their torches made a path of light before him. As they reached the house, two white-faced women saw them, but while Aunt Prudence hastened to open the door Mrs. Weston drew back.

"Alive or,---"

"I want some supper," exclaimed a very energetic little voice and the mother sprang forward to take her lost one in her arms.

"Oh Prue, don't ye leave us again," she cried, her tears dropping upon the soft curls.

"But I was going to get my Randy and bring her home to you," said Prue, "and I forgot that when I was away to Randy's there wouldn't be any girls to take care of you 'n Tabby."

That night, as an especial favor, Prue was allowed to take Tabby to bed with her, and as she lay with her arms about the cat, she thought that, although her journey to Boston was prevented, there yet were comforts at home, and Tabby accustomed to sleeping in the shed, must have thought the millennium had come.

CHAPTER VIII

JUST A ROSE

It had been an easy task to convince little Prue that she must not again attempt to run away to Randy, but must try to be a little comfort to those at home; but no amount of reasoning could make her less lonely, until such a delightful thing happened.

A box addressed to Miss Prue Weston arrived one morning, and when its cover was removed, there lay the loveliest dolly, evidently sound asleep. As Prue lifted her from the box, her eyes opened wide, causing the little girl to jump and exclaim,

"My! Did you see her wink? Is she alive?"

It was the first modern doll which Prue had seen, and she could hardly believe that aught but a living thing could open and shut its eyes, or smile so radiantly, thereby showing little pearly teeth. Oh the wonder of the soft curling hair, the turning head, and jointed arms and legs!

Her dress was made from a lovely shade of blue satin, and her hat was a fine specimen of doll's millinery. In her hand she held a tiny envelope which enclosed a letter from Randy to Prue,---printed, that the little sister might have the pleasure of reading it for herself.

"DEAR LITTLE PRUE:---I send this pretty doll to you. Her name is Randy Helen Weston, named for two whom I know you love dearly. You will make me very happy while I am here in Boston, if you are good at school, and a little comfort to mother at home. Let the Randy doll help you to wait cheerfully until I return, and I shall be glad that I sent her. Print little letters to me, telling me what is happening at home and at school, and remember that I am

"Your loving sister,
RANDY."

All the children were invited to come on Saturday and see the wonderful doll, and Randy Helen Weston was made to open and shut her lovely eyes, to turn her head, to extend her beautifully jointed arm to her callers; to cry, to stand alone upon her daintily-slippered feet, and, in fact, to astonish them as much as possible and allow them to depart, glad of Prue's happiness, or green with envy, according as their dispositions prompted them.

Prue was wild with delight, and was about to print a letter for Randy, when it was proposed at school that the long letter from her schoolmates should be written and little Prue was invited to have a part in it.

The letter was a most amusing one, and Randy and Helen laughed heartily as they saw the characteristics of the writers, as manifest, as if each had been present.

They had taken half sheets of paper and pasted the ends together so that a long strip of writing paper was obtained. Then each friend had written and signed his contribution, and truly the result was unique. Prue had been given ample space for her part of what she termed the "party letter," and with great care she printed it. Her spelling was phonetic.

"DEAR RANDY:---Nobody ever had a dolly so lovely as mine you send me. I ust tu take Tabby tu bed wiv me but now I take mi dolly. 1 day Tabby washed her hare, I meen my dollys hare I gess she thort it waz 1 of her kittns. Tabbys got tu kittns. They has not got thay ize open yet, so I tryd tu pick um opn, but arnt Prudence sed that wood be cruil. If thay cant git thay ize opn thayselfs why aint I good tu pick um opn wiv my fingus

"Yor little
PRUE."

"What *will* Prue do next, I wonder?" said Randy.

"The idea of thinking that because those little cats could not open their eyes, it would be a fine idea to 'pick' them open!"

Randy pitied those kittens, but she could not help laughing as she thought of Prue's efforts to help them.

"She is probably wild to have those kittens see her new doll," said Miss Dayton.

The long letter from her schoolmates at home had reached Randy on a stormy Saturday morning, when the wind was blowing the snow against the windows with such force that it sounded like hail. She thought of the horses harnessed to the rough snow ploughs "breaking out" the roads at home, of the pine trees laden with what looked to be giant masses of white fruit, of the snow-capped mountains and of little Prue, with hood and mittens, at play with Johnny Buffum, and she wished to be borne there by some magician, if only for a moment, that she might see it all as she had seen it, ever since she could remember.

Randy was, from the first, one of the most promising scholars at the private school which she had entered a week after her arrival in Boston, and her letters to father and mother, Aunt Prudence and to her friends at the little district school were full of enthusiasm for study and ambition to excel.

Saturdays she spent in recreation, but this day she had especially wished might be fair. Aunt Marcia had predicted snow the night before, but Randy had laughingly refused to listen to it, preferring to believe that the sun would shine.

There was to be a fine concert in the afternoon, and Helen had secured tickets for Randy, Aunt Marcia and herself, and as this was the first concert that Randy had ever dreamed of attending, she was naturally anxious for a fine day.

"It blows a gale," said Aunt Marcia, at the breakfast table. "Really, Helen, if it is such a hurricane as this, I would not advise you to go this afternoon."

"There are always concerts which are well worth attending," said Helen, "so if it continues to blow and snow like this, I think we shall stay cosily at home and attend some other concert next Saturday."

To Helen one concert more or less meant little; but Randy watched the sky with anxious eyes, and just before eleven, a tiny bit of blue sky was visible. How she watched it! At half past eleven it was a large blue opening, and when the soft chiming of the clock announced in silvery tones that twelve o'clock had arrived, there was no doubt that the afternoon would be fair.

Lunch was served earlier than usual, and Randy hastened to her room to dress for the concert. Twice she stepped from the dressing case to the window to see if the blue sky was still visible, and when at last the sunlight lay upon the carpet she laughed, and pinning her blue hat with its soft feathers securely in place she hurried from the room and down the stairway where in the hall she waited for Helen.

Usually Randy thought it luxurious to nestle close to Helen in the carriage, but this afternoon she wished that she might have walked, just because her excitement made it difficult for her to placidly ride to the great hall where Miss Dayton had told her that she should hear the sweetest of music. As they rode along, Randy wondered if all the carriages which she saw, were conveying their occupants to the concert, and she was conscious of a mild regret for pedestrians who were wending their way in an opposite direction.

"They are not to enjoy the concert," she thought.

"A penny for what is in your mind, Randy," said Helen, laying her hand upon Randy's arm.

"I was just wondering how many of the people whom I see on foot and in carriages are going to the concert," said Randy.

"Does the concert mean so much to you?" said Helen.

"I cannot tell you how much," Randy answered, "but I have watched the clouds, and hoped it would be fair this afternoon, and when I saw the sunlight upon the floor, just before we started, I danced across my room and down the stairs to meet you. I have heard you play and sing, oh, so sweetly, I have heard little Janie's bird-like voice at home, and Sandy McLeod has often played his pipes for me, but to-day I am to hear the violins and listen to the great singer of whom you have told me. Oh, I can hardly wait to get there, and to hear the music."

"Well you haven't much longer to wait," said Helen, as the carriage stopped before the entrance to the great hall.

As the crowd surged toward the doorway, Randy began to think that all the people whom she had seen and many more had decided that the concert was too great a treat to miss.

Once in their seats, Randy looked about her, and found great delight in studying the faces and costumes of the vast audience. She smiled as she thought of that summer day when in old Nathan Lawton's front parlor she took part in the school exhibition and received the prize in the presence of an assemblage of fifty persons, and considered it a "crowd."

A slight commotion caused Randy to turn just in time to see the members of the great orchestra taking their places. Then some late arrivals attracted her attention. Two ladies with a beautiful little girl were seating themselves on the opposite side of the aisle, and the child's face, with her soft curls and brown eyes reminded Randy of the little sister at home. Then a strange hush pervaded the hall, and as the director swayed his baton, twenty bows were drawn across the strings of as many violins in one grand chord of sweetest harmony.

Randy started, and laid her hand upon Helen's, while with parted lips she gazed at the musicians who were making the fairy-like music which so enthralled her. Her sensitive lips quivered, and her breath came quickly as the orchestra played the varying movements of a grand sonata.

Enraptured with the music, tears filled her eyes during the gentle adagio, and a bright smile chased away the tears when the next movement, a brilliant polacca, filled the hall with its tripping measures. When the last chord had died away Randy turned toward Helen and whispered, "Oh, I never heard anything like that! Will they play again?"

With a smile, Helen pointed to the other numbers upon the program which the orchestra would perform, and Randy, with a contented little sigh, leaned back to await the next number, when the Prima Donna, a vision of loveliness, came forward to sing.

Randy watched and listened and wondered, vaguely, if an angel could sing like that.

Her solo ended, the singer, bowing low, retired, but not for long, for others beside Randy realized the beauty of the song and the wonderful voice of the vocalist, and round after round of applause pleaded for her return.

Yet more applause, and again she stood before them, gracefully bowing her acknowledgment of the compliment.

Again the sweet notes filled the hall, and Randy leaned eagerly forward to catch each silvery tone.

When the song was finished, Helen said "Was not that a wonderful bit of music?"

"Oh, yes," said Randy, "how I wish that I could tell her that I think her voice is like the violins."

"I know her very well," Helen replied, "and I will tell her how her singing has entranced you."

"Tell her," said Randy, eagerly, "that I think nothing in all the world was ever half so sweet."

Then another number by the orchestra held Randy's attention and thus through the afternoon until she felt as if her pulses were throbbing with the rhythm of the music. She marveled that between the numbers many of the vast audience talked and chatted merrily. The lovely little girl across the aisle was fast asleep. Why were they ready to talk after listening to such grand music, and how could anyone, even a child, sleep when there was yet another witching air to be sung, another composition for those wonderful musicians to execute!

Miss Dayton found it an interesting study to watch Randy's face, and to see portrayed there the varying movements of each composition.

Just before the last selection was rendered, Helen penciled a hasty note upon her card, and giving it to an usher, bade him take it to the great singer and wait for a word in reply. The man took the card and hastened to the room at the rear of the stage returning almost immediately with the card which bore upon the reverse side these words,

"A cordial welcome after the concert to Miss Helen Dayton and her friend."

Leaning toward Helen, Randy read the invitation signed by the name of the singer, and she caught her breath as she realized that she was about to meet one who seemed to her so far above the realm of ordinary mortals.

When the audience began to leave the hall and Helen led the way to the dressing room, Randy walked beside her, sure that no girl was ever before so favored. To hear the wonderful voice was rapture, to talk with the singer,---Randy could hardly believe that in a few moments she should experience so great a pleasure.

When at last they reached the pretty room, they found the great vocalist chatting merrily with the lovely child who had sat opposite Randy and had slept through half of the afternoon.

"And so you became tired," the lady was saying.

"Not when you were singing," said the little girl, frankly, "but when the violins and flutes and all the other things had played and played, they made me sleepy, and I just lay back in my seat and shut my eyes a minute when mama said:---"

"Come Marguerite, it is time to go, if you wish to see Madam Valena.' and that made me open my eyes wide, I did so wish to see you."

Quite like a miniature lady she made the little courteous speech, but she was every inch a child as she clambered up into a chair where, upon tip-toe she offered her lips for a kiss. Then away like a gay little butterfly she flew to join her friends.

Helen, taking Randy's hand, led her across the room and presented her.

The singer and Miss Dayton's mother had been firm friends, and Helen was always accorded a most cordial welcome.

The table was heaped with flowers, and Randy, seeing such a profusion of blossoms, wondered that she had thought for a moment of offering the lovely rose which she held in her hand, to one to whom a single blossom must seem of little value.

With the cordial greeting and firm handclasp, Randy realized that the sweet face bending over her, belonged to a woman as lovely in character, as in person, and she gathered courage to speak the words which were nearest her heart.

"I did not know that any living being could sing as you sang this afternoon," she said, "it made me think of the birds in the trees at home, of the brook in the woods, of the white rose in my hand, and I longed to give it to you, but when I saw all these lovely flowers, I felt that you would not care for my one blossom, you would not understand,---" with a queer little break in her voice, Randy ceased speaking and looking up into the brilliant face was surprised to see two bright tears upon her cheek.

"Not care for your flower? I want it more than all of these," she said, gently taking the rose from the slender hand which held it, and placing it in the folds of lace upon her breast.

"With all the honors which I have won, with all the praise for my work which I have received, no compliment ever offered me was more genuine, or sincere, and this rose I shall keep in memory of the girl who gave it.

"Let me give some of my flowers to you, in return for your words which have moved me more than you think.

"O! Helen," she continued. "I received my first inspiration from the birds and the brook at home, when as a little country girl I listened to their voices, and longed to make my tones as pure as theirs. This young girl has brought it all back to me so clearly, that I see myself, a little barefoot child, wading in the brook and mocking the birds which sang in the branches above me."

A maid approached, and laid a long fur wrap about Madam Valena's shoulders, at the same time announcing that her carriage was waiting.

Clasping the great cluster of brilliant blossoms closely, Randy said as they parted,

"I shall never forget you," and looking from her carriage window the singer smiled as she said,

"I shall keep your rose in memory of you."

As they rode homeward Helen told Randy much of Madam Valena's life as her mother had known her, of her close application to study, and of her success, and when at home they found Aunt Marcia seated before the fire place, placidly watching the dancing flames, Randy rushed in, and sitting upon a low hassock, she related all the wonders of the afternoon, ending with,

"And oh, I wish that you had been there to see and hear it all."

"Why, Randy, child!" exclaimed Aunt Marcia laughing, "I thought it rather cold this afternoon, and stayed cosily at home instead of accompanying you and Helen, but now your eyes shine like stars, and I begin to believe that I missed much by not attending the concert. I knew the program was a fine one, and Madam Valena is truly a most charming person."

"Indeed she is," assented Randy, "and she looked so queenly, I never thought she would really talk to me, but oh, do you know that she was once a little country girl? When I looked at her I could not imagine it."

"I know a little country maid, who no one would suppose had not spent all her life in the city," said Aunt Marcia, with a smile, "only that she enjoys every pleasure with a keen delight unknown to the girl who feels that she has seen all that there is to be seen many, many times."

"I shall never feel that way," said Randy, "how could I tire of the sweet music, or of watching the crowd in the city streets? I was never tired of listening to the birds at home and I'm sure," she added with a laugh, "I even enjoyed watching the people coming into our little church. There is always something new everywhere; and I am looking for it."

"That is a part of the secret of your happiness, Randy," said Aunt Marcia, "you intend to be delighted and usually succeed."

"Why, I am still holding the flowers which Madam Valena gave me," said Randy, "I must place them in water," and she hastened to find a suitable vase in which to arrange them. They formed a brilliant bit of color in the centre of the table when dinner was served, and caused Randy to talk once more of the concert.

"It was all so charming that I suppose I stared; at least Polly Lawrence said that I did."

"I saw Polly with you just as we were leaving the hall," said Helen, "what did you say that she said?"

"She said, 'Why Randy Weston, you are staring at everybody and everything as if you'd never attended a concert before!'"

"How singularly rude," said Aunt Marcia, little pleased that Randy should be thus spoken to.

"And what did you say to that, Randy," asked Helen, wondering if Polly's speech had cut deeply.

With a frank smile Randy answered,---"I said, 'Well this *is* my first concert. Possibly *you* would be surprised if you had never before experienced such a pleasure.'"

Helen and her aunt were much amused that Randy could answer so readily a remark which was intended to embarrass her, and they realized that Randy's frankness in admitting herself a country girl quite unused to city pleasures, would disarm a girl like Polly, more successfully than any amount of artifice or pretense.

CHAPTER IX

A SCOTCH LINNET

The sky was a cold, leaden gray, and down from the mountains swept a pitiless wind, which whistled through the bare branches of the trees and tossed a few dried leaves before it, as it hurried on as if with a fixed determination to reach every corner of the village and chill everything which it could touch.

It leveled the few standing cornstalks and caused the dry twigs to rap a tattoo upon the windows of the farm houses. It attacked the shivering form of a lonely little cur who took his tail between his legs and scurried away down the road in search of some sheltering barn or shed; it nipped little Hi Babson's ears and snatching his cap, tossed it over the wall and across the field where it lay, held fast in a clump of bushes.

Hi secured the cap, and as he pulled it down about his ears he looked back in the direction from which the gust had blown, and shaking his little fist exclaimed,

"Nasty old wind! I hate ye and ye know it. 'F I'd a been 'lowed ter stay home an' whittle like I wanted ter, I wouldn't a lost my cap. I scratched my fingers gittin' it, an' *that* makes me mad."

Again he shook his little fist at his enemy, the wind, but as it did not cease blowing, he drew on his mittens and sulkily plodded on toward school. His cold fingers smarted where the briars had torn them, and he felt resentful that he should be on his way toward the despised school house, quite forgetting that by the fireside with his beloved whittling he usually managed to cut his fingers.

Whistling lustily, Jack Marvin came down the road, overtaking Hi as he stumbled along, a most disconsolate little figure.

"Hello, Hi," said Jack. "Why, look here little feller," as he noticed tears in the bright black eyes.

"Most frozen, and didn't want ter come ter school, either? Say, gimme yer hand, mine are warm, an' you'n me'll be in school in no time. What's that? Ain't done yer sums? Well, now, little chap, you jist come along quick, an' 'fore ye know it ye'll be gittin' warm in the school room an' I'll show ye 'bout yer sums 'fore the bell rings. My, but it takes you'n me ter make good time over the road!"

Jack Marvin never could bear to see a child in tears, and his kind heart was delighted when little Hi skipped along beside him, laughing gaily, in spite of the traces of tears upon his cheeks.

Hi looked up to Jack as one of the best among the "big boys," and to race along beside him and be assured of help with his lessons, took every care from the little fellow's mind, and he laughed and whistled in company with Jack.

The boys turned up their collars or ducked their chins beneath the folds of woollen mufflers; and the girls drew their wraps about them and hurried on, eager to reach the schoolhouse and gain shelter from the icy blast.

About the great stove they hovered, scorching their faces, while they endeavored to get thoroughly warmed before the hands of the clock should point to nine. Two girls were missing from the group around the stove. Randy Weston, who had been at school in Boston for three months, and Phoebe Small, whose incessant teasing had at last prevailed, and who had six weeks before experienced the joy of going away to boarding school. It was not that Phoebe did not love her home, or enjoy the friendship of her mates, but she had long entertained the idea that a boarding school was the only school worth attending.

She had wished Randy good luck when she started for Boston, but she could not stifle a feeling of envy, and it seemed impossible for her to stay quietly at home attending the district school.

In vain Mrs. Small insisted that Phoebe would be homesick, that Randy was with friends, while at boarding school all would be strangers. Phoebe invariably answered,

"Well I'd just like to try it and see how it would seem. I could write letters home to the girls as Randy does, and I think that would be just grand."

At last it occurred to Mrs. Small that the best thing for Phoebe would be to grant her wish.

"I know that she will be homesick before she's been away a week," she said to her husband, "but she cannot be convinced, and perhaps if we allow her to try it, she will get all and more than she wants of it, and come home with a mind to be contented."

So one bright morning Phoebe was driven to the station on her way to a school for girls which was under the direction of two ladies who were friends of Mrs. Small. Immediately upon her arrival she sent a note to her mother in which she told in glowing words of the pleasure of her ride in the cars, and her reception by the two elderly ladies who presided over the school.

Then, after a week had passed another letter came the general tone of which was less cheerful. Then a fortnight slipped by, and a brief letter told only of her studies, and said not a word of the delights of boarding school life. Then, as time passed and the mail brought no letter from Phoebe, her mother became anxious.

"I do hope she's well, and I must say I wish I'd never consented when she begged to go," said Mrs. Small a dozen times a day, to which her husband would reply,

"Oh, she's all right. If she was sick they'd let us know. Most likely she's had 'nough of it, and hates ter say so."

"Well, all the same, if I don't get a letter from her to-day, I'll go after her to-morrow." Mrs. Small answered, as the wind whistled around the corner and down the chimney.

While this conversation was in progress at the Small homestead, the same subject was being discussed at the village school. Because of the intense cold, Miss Gilman permitted the scholars to enjoy the recess indoors and they formed little groups about the great stove, eating their lunch and discussing those topics which lay nearest their hearts.

"I guess my Randy knows 'most everything now," Prue was saying. "She has such long lessons, and studies late, and she's seen the big stores, and she's been to a concert full of fiddles where she saw a great big Primmy Dommy!"

"Why, what's that?" asked little Hitty Buffum. "Wasn't she 'fraid when she saw the Primny what yer call it comin'?"

"I do'no," said Prue, "she didn't say, but whatever 'twas, I guess 'twas pretty big, my Randy said so."

Evidently the children considered that in Boston one might see strange creatures of every type, and Randy Weston had been privileged to see one of the largest. Just at this moment Hi Babson joined the little group.

"Want ter know what I done Saturday?" he asked, his black eyes gleaming with mischief.

"I hadn't learnt my lessons fer Monday, and ma said I must stay up in the spare room 'til I knew 'em all by heart. I didn't like ter stay up there alone, but when I found I got ter, I set down on the mat an' 'twan't long before I'd learnt half of 'em. Just 'bout that time I heard a awful scratching an' then I 'membered that Uncle Joshua set a mouse trap down by the beaury. When I looked, there was a little mouse in it, an' all to once I knew what I'd like ter do.

"The bedclothes was pulled down over the foot-board, an' I could see the slit in the tick where they poke in their hands to stir up the straw. I put the trap with the mouse in it, in there among the straw, an' then I went down just as quiet as I could, an' got old Tom an' tugged him upstairs.

"When I put him on the bed an' held his head over the hole in the tick, you'd oughter seen his tail switch! The mouse was a runnin' 'round in the cage, an' Tom dove into the slit a scatterin' the straw all over the bed. My! Didn't it fly?"

"Why you naughty, bad boy," said little Hitty Buffum.

"What *did* they say to you," asked Prue.

"Ma didn't say much," said Hi. "I laid down on the floor and rolled over an' over, a laughin' like anything 'til ma come in, an' she jest looked at that bed, drove Tom out'n the room an' then she took hold er me, an' I,---I had ter stop laughin' ter cry 'n Grandma Babson said, 'That boy'll yet come to the gallus.'"

A group of the larger girls were comparing the letters which Randy had sent with those which they had received from Phoebe Small.

"Randy says that she misses the folks at home, and her friends here at school, but aside from that her letters are cheerful, and she feels that she is getting on so rapidly that it makes her contented," said Molly Wilson, "and she must enjoy the pleasant things which Miss Dayton plans for her Saturdays."

"We miss Randy," said Belinda Babson, "but of course we're glad that she is having such a lovely winter."

"She writes just as she talks, and when we get one of her letters it seems as if she were with us," said Jemima.

"I didn't know what to make of Phoebe Small's last letter," said Dot Marvin. "She commenced by saying that she could never do as she wished, that she didn't like her roommate and that the two ladies who kept the school watched them so closely that the girls could hardly breathe without asking permission. Then she wrote, 'I don't want to say that I'm homesick but,---' and then she signed her name. She didn't finish the sentence, but there were two blistered places just above the name, as if the paper had been wet, and I am sure that she was crying while she wrote."

Miss Gilman touched the bell, and the pupils took their places. Recess was ended, and for the remainder of the forenoon, recitations occupied their minds in place of the much discussed letters.

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By the great fireplace heaped with blazing logs sat old Sandy McLeod energetically tugging at the straps of his great "arctics."

"It's a cauld day, lass," he was saying to little Janie.

"Will it be too cauld to venture out an' meet the music maester?"

His eyes twinkled, for he well knew that Janie was wild to sing for this man who would say if her voice were indeed worth training.

The teacher of whom Sandy spoke was a man well known in musical circles, whose instruction was eagerly sought, and upon whose judgment one could safely rely. He had been chosen director of a flourishing musical society in a large town some miles distant from Sandy's home, and on those days when he was present to direct rehearsals, he also tried the voices of those who asked permission to join the vocal club. Sandy had one day asked if he might bring little Janie to him, saying quietly,

"It's worth yer while, mon, ye ne'er heard sae blithe a voice as Janie's."

Half doubting, yet amused at the old Scotchman's manner, he had made an appointment for hearing Janie, and afterward wondered why he had done so, as he felt sure that he was to listen to the vocal efforts of a child whose singing chanced to please an old man whose knowledge of music was probably meagre.

Janie submitted to all the wrappings with which Margaret McLeod saw fit to envelop her, and when in his great fur coat, Sandy stood in the doorway and called to Janie that the sleigh was ready, she hurried toward him, an animated bundle of dry goods.

It was a long, cold ride, but Janie and her enthusiasm were both warm, and when they reached the building and mounted the long flight of stairs to the hall, her cheeks were glowing, and her eyes brilliant with excitement. She was granted a few moments for a hearing before the hour for the club rehearsal.

The teacher was seated at the piano when they entered, and as he arose to greet them he found it a task to refrain from laughing at the odd little figure wound so snugly in shawls and scarfs. When, however, her wraps removed, Janie stood before him, a typical little Scotch lass, with bright blue eyes and flaxen braids, he was aware of a charm about the pretty child which compelled him to believe that it was barely possible that she could sing.

"What are some of your songs, child?" he asked kindly.

"I'll sing, 'Comin' thro' the rye,' if it please you," answered Janie, simply.

"Very well," was the reply, and he played a brilliant little prelude. The music inspired Janie, and never had she sung as she sang that day. At the end of the first verse, the man paused, with his hands resting upon the keys, and surveyed the tiny figure as it stood before him, the little chin lifted, and the sweet eyes looking into his so eagerly, as if asking for a word of approval.

"Come nearer," he said, "and sing another verse."

"Willingly," said Janie, and again the fresh voice rang out,

"If a body meet a body
Comin' frae the town
If a body kiss a body
Need a body frown."

At the last sweet note the man at the piano turned, and lifting her in his strong arms he exclaimed,

"Child, you have the voice of an angel! Mr. McLeod, I ask your pardon for doubting your statement that this little girl could sing."

"Oh, it's of no account whatever," answered Sandy, stoutly, "since ye're weel convinced."

The members of the club were beginning to arrive, and standing Janie upon a chair, the director stooped, and looking into the little face he asked.

"Would you be willing to sing once for these ladies and gentlemen, Janie?"

"Oh, I could na refuse if it was to gie them pleasure," she replied.

The director in a few words told those present that he had been listening to the child's singing, and that she had consented to sing for them. Some of the faces wore a look of curiosity, some of skepticism, others of genuine interest, but when turning toward them Janie commenced to sing, she held them spellbound, and when she stepped down from the chair they crowded around her and petted and praised her until Sandy was afraid that she would be completely spoiled.

Janie was delighted to have so pleased her audience, but her greatest joy lay in the fact that Sandy had arranged that once a week she should sing with the teacher, and had promised that there should be a piano for her to practice with.

With greatest care Sandy replaced Janie's numerous wraps, much as if she had been a valuable painting, or a choice bit of sculpture, and taking her hand, led her gently down the long stairway to the street. Then, lifting her into the sleigh, and tucking the bear skin about her, he drove briskly over the road toward home, not allowing the horse to slacken pace until he reached his own door.

Margaret McLeod was watching for them, and quickly left her seat at the window to welcome them.

"Weel, Janie, lass, and did the music maester think ye could sing?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" cried Janie. "I'm to study with him, and Sandy, our Sandy has promised to buy me a piano, so I shall know if I sing the right key, and I'm to sing the lang exercises wi' ne'er a song 'til,---weel I dinna when.

"There's' in a' the world nae ane like our Sandy."

"I've often thought the same mysel," said Margaret, with a droll smile at her husband.

"And between ye, ye mean tae spoil me completely, wi' yer flattery that I own is sweet tae hear."

"Ye canna be spoiled," said Margaret McLeod; "ye weel know ye're on a pinnacle sae high o'e'r ither men, there's nae chance o' spoiling ye."

"Oh, the prejudice o' a lovin' woman," Sandy replied, "is past the understanding o' an ordinary mon, but 'tis sunshine tae live in the light o' it."

Later, when Mrs. McLeod was making preparation for tea, little Janie followed her about, helping to set the table, at the same time telling over and over the fine things which the director had said of her singing, and yet again repeating the delightful fact that there was to be a fine piano "in that verra house."

"I wondered if the mon was a bit daft," said Sandy, "when he said tae Janie, 'Mind ye sing the lessons I gie ye, an naething else.'

"She's been singing the blithe Scotch ballads since she was a' most a bairnie, an' her voice has grown sweeter a' the time. I say again, I hope he's na daft."

"Sandy, Sandy!" cried Margaret, "ye must na question the great music maester. I doot not he knows a deal mair about music than we do."

"He says that he will make me sing just wonderful," said Janie.

"An' na doot he will," said Sandy, laying his hand lovingly upon Janie's head.

* * * * *

It seemed as if the gale increased in force as it blew the dust and twigs against the window, and hurried on with a shrill whistle around the corner.

After the table had been cleared, they took their places before the great fireplace, Sandy, Margaret and Janie making a group in the centre, while at one side sat the great brindle cat, Tam o' Shanter, and at a respectful distance, on the opposite side of the hearth stone, stood the Scotch Collie, Sir Walter Scott.

Tam, with his forepaws snugly tucked in, and his great yellow eyes blinking at the bright flames, was a picture of contentment.

Sir Walter looked eagerly at Sandy, and longed to go and sit beside him, but that would necessitate rather close proximity to Tam, and Tam usually resented such familiarity, so the dog kept his place, and as he listened to the conversation, seemed to understand what was being said.

"I'll put fresh logs on the fire," said Sandy, "tae keep the cauld oot, and I'm hopin' that there's nae ane abroad this night."

At the little depot at the Centre, the station master stood upon the platform looking anxiously up the track, hoping to see the light of an approaching train.

"Most three hours late," muttered the man. "I'd like ter know if it ain't er comin' ter-night."

As he turned to re-enter the depot, a faint whistle made itself heard above the clamor of the wind and turning he saw the headlight of the engine coming around the bend.

"There she is naow," he remarked, and as the train stopped, the mail bag was quickly thrown out upon the platform and instantly picked up and carried into the depot.

The station agent did not dream that anyone would arrive so late in the village on such a night, so having secured the mail bag, he allowed the train to depart without even a glance at its receding form.

One passenger, however, stepped from the car who evidently was not expecting friends to meet her, as she immediately left the platform and walked briskly up the road as if familiar with the place, and sure of the direction which she must take to reach her destination.

What had been a high wind during the day, now became a gale, and the solitary figure wrapped her cloak closer about her and pushed resolutely on, never pausing, yet at times looking hastily over her shoulder as if fearful of a possible pursuer. As she passed a deserted farm house, a sudden gust of wind blew one of its dilapidated blinds against the window, shattering the glass with a resounding crash. With a scream the girl sprang forward, then, half wild with fright she ran with a headlong pace up the road.

The promise of the leaden sky was now fulfilled, the falling sleet cutting the girl's white cheeks, and serving to make the night more cheerless.

Again she tried to draw the folds of her cloak about her, but the wind snatched it from her fingers and blew it back and she was obliged to stop and, for a moment, turn her back to the gale until she could securely fasten the clasps which held it. Her hands shook with cold and fear, and when she turned about and tried once more to run she found that her limbs were weak with terror and that her progress must be slow. The great branches of the trees groaned in the wind, as if crying out against such rough handling, and the snow fell faster as the girl dragged herself along the lonely road.

* * * * *

"The cauld increases," said Sandy. "I'll stir the fire an' throw on anither log."

"It's snawin'," announced Janie, as she emerged from behind the window shade and ran to the fireplace, where she seated herself beside Sir Walter, her arm about his neck.

"Ain't ye glad ye're na scurryin' after the sheep at hame, ye big auld dear?" asked Janie.

The collie laid his head lovingly against her shoulder, as if agreeing, and Tam, seeing the caress, looked as if he thought Janie's taste in her choice of pets deteriorating.

"Ah, Tam, Tam," she cried with a laugh, "are ye sae selfish ye want a' my love? I love ye baith, an' I wad ye loved each ither."

"Hark, Sandy! Did some one knock?" asked Mrs. McLeod, as she looked toward the door.

"Nae ane's aboot this night---Ay, Margaret, ye're right as usual, there's a faint sound, an' I'll be seein',---"

"Oh, Mr. McLeod, let me come in," said a girl's voice.

"That I will, ye puir waif,---by all the saints, it's Phoebe Small! Here Margaret! Janie! the lass is faintin'!"

"Oh, no I'm not," Phoebe answered, but her white face was not reassuring and Sandy and Margaret were obliged to lead her to the great chair by the fire.

Janie loosened her boots which were covered with snow, and removing them, set them to dry in a corner of the fireplace. Then she brought a cricket and, handy little maid, lifted Phoebe's feet upon it, that the heat from the fire might warm them.

Soon Margaret McLeod had made a cup of tea, and it seemed to Phoebe that nothing had ever tasted so delicious. Sandy stood beside her, offering the lunch which Margaret had prepared, insisting gently that she must eat heartily before going out into the night.

"For I shall take ye hame, lass, I know that's where ye wad be, and warm in the bear skin I'll wrap ye, an' in the sleigh 'twill be nae time before we'll be at ye're door."

"I could not stay away another day. The road from the depot was so lonely, and I was so afraid,---"

Phoebe was crying now, and Sandy laid his rough hand gently upon her shoulder.

"Never mind, lass, how ye got here, don't ye try tae tell it noo. If ye're warm enough we'll be startin', an' ye can tell the folks at hame all about it on the morrow."

Little Janie examined Phoebe's boots, and finding them to be dry, insisted upon putting them on and lacing them, and by the time that she had finished the task the sleigh stood at the door.

The ride was a short one, and soon Sandy was at the door of the Small homestead, one arm about Phoebe who seemed too weary to stand, and the other hand executing a rousing knock upon the panel of the door.

Mrs. Small answered the summons and without ceremony Sandy entered, gently pushing Phoebe before him.

"This package was delayed in arrivin'," he commenced, but there seemed to be no need of finishing the sentence.

As Phoebe stood held close in her mother's embrace, she cried,

"Oh, I never, never will go away to school again."

"You never shall," said Mrs. Small, "but Phoebe, child, how is it that you are here, and with Mr. McLeod at this time of night?"

"Oh, I told them yesterday that I must come home, but they said at the school, that you had paid for the term in advance, and that I could not leave until the end of that term.

"I said nothing, but this morning I ran away to the depot and when I had bought my ticket and was in the cars riding toward home I was happier than I had been for weeks. But the train was late and it was very dark when I left the cars at the Centre and started to walk home."

"The lass reached our door," said Sandy, "an' she was about faintin' when I lifted her in, and set her doon before the fire. An' noo, as I'm not necessary to ye're happiness," said Sandy with twinkling eyes, "I think I'll bid ye 'good night,' and be drivin' hame tae Margaret."

"I'm so glad to be at home again," said Phoebe, when Sandy had gone.

"I cannot tell you, Phoebe, how we've missed you," her mother answered. "Your father had to visit Boston yesterday and will be back to-morrow. When Sandy arrived with you, I was sitting here alone and wondering how long you would be willing to stay at boarding school."

"I never wish to see or hear about one again," said Phoebe. I shall never be discontented again.

"It was a hard lesson," said Mrs. Small, as she kissed Phoebe, "but perhaps it was a good one after all."

CHAPTER X

THE PARTY

Randy had become a favorite among the girls at the school, and one and all declared that her frankness had been the trait which had first won their admiration.

"She always means what she says," said Nina Irwin. "I value a compliment which Randy gives, for she never flatters. If she says a pleasant word, it comes straight from her heart, and her heart is warm and loving."

Randy had made rapid progress in her studies, and it seemed as if her zeal increased as the months sped by. She had attended many concerts since the memorable one when she had given her single rose to Madame Valena, "and now the finest thing is yet to happen," she said in a letter to her mother.

Miss Dayton had sent out invitations for a little party to be given in honor of Miss Randy Weston, and in consequence there was much excitement at the private school.

To receive an invitation from Miss Dayton meant much, and Randy's friends talked of little else.

"What shall you wear, Nina," asked Polly Lawrence.

"Whatever mama suggests," replied Nina, with a laugh.

"Because," continued Polly, "I think we ought to dress, well---in a very showy manner, for Miss Dayton."

"Why, I do not see that," remarked another girl. "Miss Dayton dresses richly, but I should not say that 'showy' was a fitting word to apply to her refined taste."

"Indeed!" said Polly, sharply. "Well, I shall wear my red gauze over satin, and I fancy Peggy will not choose a very simple frock for the occasion."

"Just my blue silk, dear," Peggy remarked lazily, "and since you've all seen it you will not have to enthuse over it."

"What do you suppose Randy will wear?" asked Peggy.

"Something becoming, without a doubt," said Nina Irwin, "since everything becomes her."

At this point Randy entered, and the subject of conversation changed from dress to the lessons for the day.

"You always come with lessons prepared, Randy Weston," said Polly, "and you look decidedly cheerful, too."

"Why shouldn't I look cheerful, if I am ready for the recitations?" asked Randy, in surprise.

"Because," Polly answered, "it makes me cross to have to study, and you must work persistently to keep up such a record as you have this year."

"Miss Dayton helps me," Randy answered.

"But she cannot *learn* for you," said Nina Irwin, "and you seem to get on as well in those studies which are new to you, as in those which you had commenced in the district school."

"But I like all my studies," said Randy, "and anyone would be interested in new ones. There is another reason why I am working so diligently.

"Father and mother sent me here, believing that I would study faithfully. I should not be true to them if I wasted my opportunity. And little Prue is trying to be patient, although her funny little letters show how she misses me. I'll show you the last one which she sent me, only don't laugh at her original spelling, Nina. Remember, she is a little girl. Here it is:"

"DEAR RANDY:---

"How long wil it bee fore you cum hom I luv you an I wanto see you Me n Jonny slided on my sled an we ran intu a fense an got hurted I lern my lesons, but I cant spel big words yet When I say I want my Randy ma dont cry but her ize is wet and ant Prudence wipes her glassis Hi put sum gum in Jonys cap an it got stuk to his hare. When you cum hom I wil be so glad for I luv you

"Yor litle
PRUE."

"The cunning little thing," said Nina, "her funny letter shows just how they miss you at home, and how dearly she loves you, Randy."

"That is what I meant when I said one day to you, Nina that it was hard, and at the same time delightful to be here. I love father, mother and dear little Prue more than it is possible to say; I love the dear home, too. Of course it is not like the homes which I have seen here, but nothing can make it less dear to me," said Randy.

"I enjoy all the pleasures which Miss Dayton plans for me, and I have become attached to the school and to the pleasant friends which I have made here in the city; but sometimes in the midst of my study, sometimes when listening to rare music, the thought of home brings the tears, and for the moment, I am homesick, so homesick that I think I cannot stay.

"Then I remember that father and mother wish me to excel in my studies, and I crowd back the tears, and by reminding myself that with the spring I shall return, I try to be cheerful."

As the bell called the girls to their seats, Nina whispered as she passed,

"O Randy! The longer I know you, the more truly I love you;" and the whispered words made Randy very happy.

* * * * *

On the day of the little party the decorators converted the drawing-room into a veritable rose garden, glowing and sweet, the lovely pink blossoms sending out their fragrance as if doing their utmost to honor Randy, who, until that season, had known only the garden roses which blossomed near the farm-house door.

The lights were softened by delicate pink shades, and upon a pedestal beneath Aunt Marcia's portrait, stood a huge jardiniere filled with roses the glowing petals of which seemed to repeat the color of the brocaded court gown in the picture.

In her little room, Randy, with sparkling eyes, and quick beating heart, stood before her mirror, mechanically drawing a comb through her soft brown hair. Her mind was far away and she did not seem to see the girl reflected there.

"If they were all here to-night,---" she murmured, and as the words escaped her lips, two bright tears lay upon her cheek.

"Oh, this will never do," said Randy, quickly drying the tears, and endeavoring to summon a smile.

"Mother and father would surely say,

"Be cheerful to-night, Miss Dayton will wish it. Remember she is giving the party for you."

So, smiling bravely, she arranged her hair in the pretty, simple manner in which she usually dressed it, and proceeded to array herself in the white muslin which Janie Clifton had declared to be just the thing for a city party, and just the thing for Randy.

And Janie had spoken wisely. Nothing could have been more becoming, or served more surely to show Randy's fine coloring than the sheer muslin with its white satin ribbons.

As she stood looking at the transparent folds of the skirt, the tip of her shoe peeped from below the hem, and Randy laughed merrily. She had quite forgotten to change her street shoes for the silken hose and white slippers which Miss Dayton had given her.

"How *could* I forget them, the first pretty slippers which I ever owned?" She hastened to put them on, afterward surveying them with much satisfaction. They were such pretty slippers, decorated with white satin bows and crystal beading.

"Like Cinderella's," thought Randy, as she held back her skirts, the better to see them, and when later she paused on the stairway to look down upon the many rose hued lights in the hall below, she turned a radiant face toward Helen Dayton as she said:---

"Oh, how kind you are to give this lovely party for me, just me. I feel like Cinderella, only," she added laughing, "I am sure that I shall not lose my crystal slipper when to-night the clock strikes twelve."

"Nor shall you part with them at any time," Helen replied, "but keep them in remembrance of this night when you enjoyed your first party."

A fine trio they formed as they stood waiting to receive their guests; Aunt Marcia looking like an old countess in her stately gown of black velvet and diamonds, Helen, resplendent in turquoise satin and pink roses, and Randy in her white muslin and ribbons, a single rose in her hair.

Soon the young guests began to arrive, and very cordially were they greeted, Randy's bright face plainly showing how heartfelt was the pleasure which her words expressed as each new friend was presented.

One guest had been bidden to the party who had not yet arrived, and Helen Dayton could not refrain from occasionally glancing toward the door, with the hope of seeing the delinquent. The buzz of conversation and light laughter seemed at its height, when a late arrival was announced.

Miss Dayton heard the name, but Randy who was at the moment chatting with Nina Irwin, did not.

The young man in faultless evening dress made his way across the room to Aunt Marcia, then to Miss Dayton, then, with a merry twinkle in his eyes he turned to Randy who, still, talking with Nina, was unaware of his approach.

"Miss Randy," said a familiar voice, and Randy started, turned, then with eyes expressing her surprise and delight she said,

"O Jotham, truly you cannot guess how glad I am to see you."

"And do you think I can tell you with what pleasure I have looked forward to this evening?" Jotham answered.

"I have been longing to call upon you, but my days and evenings have been so completely occupied with study, that this is my first bit of recreation since I came to Boston in the fall, and until I received Miss Dayton's invitation, I did not know where I might find you."

Then Jotham was presented to Nina who in turn led him to a group of her friends where, surrounded by a bevy of bright faced girls, he seemed as much at ease as if his life had consisted of naught but social pleasures.

Randy turned, and meeting Helen's gaze she said,

"It seems to me that Jotham looks like a prince to-night."

"He has a charming manner," said Miss Dayton, "and I have always thought that he possessed a noble mind, that priceless gift which only One can give. Coronets can be purchased, but who can barter for true worth?"

In the shadow cast by a statue and leaning against its pedestal, stood Polly Lawrence, her flushed cheeks vieing with the scarlet gauze which she wore, a most unpleasant expression upon her small face, while her nervous fingers plucked to pieces a red rose which she had taken from her bodice and she angrily tapped the floor with her satin slipper. And what had occurred to mar the evening's pleasure for Polly Lawrence?

Merely the fact that she was not the only girl in the room to receive attention, and also that she had chosen a gaudy costume for the occasion, and was conscious that her choice had been unwise.

Shallow by nature, and without keen perception, she yet possessed sufficient good sense to see that she had not impressed her friends with the magnificence of her apparel, and her vanity received a thrust when a friend said to her,

"How sweet Randy Weston looks in her white gown and ribbons! One would know that she would never wear a gaudy dress."

Polly had made no reply, but in exasperation she thought,

"Every one admires Randy. I do believe that they would think she looked sweet in white calico."

There was, after all, a bit of excuse for Polly. Reared by her aunt, a woman with a character as shallow as that of her niece, Polly's vanity had never been curbed, rather it had been encouraged. She was allowed to choose her own costumes, her aunt rarely venturing a suggestion; and the milliners and dressmakers, reading the girl's vain character, encouraged Polly to purchase that which was most expensive, regardless as to whether it might be suitable or becoming.

Furs, designed apparently for a dowager, at once became her own, if only she could be assured that no girl of her acquaintance owned a set as costly, and upon all occasions it appeared to be her intention to wear more jewelry than any other person present.

Later, when all had repaired to the dining-room, Polly's displeasure was somewhat appeased when she found herself placed beside Peggy's brother, who was a thoroughly good fellow, and ever a gentleman, therefore he immediately proceeded to make himself very agreeable to Polly, although had he been given his choice of a companion he would most surely have chosen quite a different girl.

Beside Randy sat Jotham who declared himself to be "as happy as a king," and his tutor, the young professor, seemed equally charmed beside Helen Dayton, with whom he was exchanging reminiscences of college days.

"Do you remember a certain girl, Miss Dayton," he asked, "who on a memorable class day gave the pleasure of her company to a diffident student who in ecstasy at playing escort to the lovely girl and her dignified Aunt Marcia, nearly forgot all which he ever knew, managing only to stammer through an effort at conversation which must have completely bored her?"

"Pardon me, the girl could not truly have been bored," Miss Dayton replied, "else it would not be true that to-night she remembers every event of that delightful day with a pleasure which she has never found words to describe."

"Is that really true?" he asked, but other voices making a merry din allowed the answer to be heard only by the one for whom it was intended, and soon Helen was leading the conversation into channels in which all might take part, causing the gifted ones to show their sparkling wit, and coaxing the shy guests to talk, who would otherwise have been silent.

Miss Dayton possessed in a wonderful degree, the ability to help each person present to appear at his best, with the result that all were made happy and glad to proclaim that no home boasted as sweet a young hostess as Helen Dayton, or as grand a mistress as gracious Aunt Marcia, who dearly loved young people, and who was never happier than when in their company.

Peggy Atherton, aware that she was becomingly attired in her blue silk and forget-me-nots, was doing her best to coax a diffident youth to join in the conversation, and at the same time naughtily enjoying his blushing answers to her bright speeches.

Randy saw Peggy's roguish eyes, and wondered what it might be which so amused her, when a pause in the general conversation allowed the following to be heard,---

"Were you at the last symphony?" Peggy asked sweetly.

"Yes,---no,---that is I think I was, but I can't quite remember," was the halting answer.

"Oh, you *would* remember if you were really there," persisted Peggy, "because the program was extra fine and the solos were something to dream of."

"Yes, yes the music was er,---very er,---musical, and the soloist, that is, the one who sang a solo, was er,---the only one who er---sang alone, I believe."

Randy stifled a wild desire to laugh, for she saw plainly that Peggy was teasing the youth, who in his extreme diffidence, was appearing as if he were a simpleton, which was indeed far from the truth.

Peggy well knew that he was a bright young student, and she secretly admired his intellect, but she was an inveterate tease, and it amused her to see him blush, and to hear his faltering answers.

She did not mean to hurt him; only a thoughtless mirth tempted her to torment him; but to Randy, Peggy's conduct seemed very cruel, and she determined to save the luckless youth from further discomfort. Turning to Jotham, expecting as usual to find in him an ally, Randy said,

"I saw you talking with Cyril Langdon just before we left the drawing-room. He is ill at ease, because Peggy is teasing him, but when he chooses to talk he is very interesting. Do make Peggy stop, she is spoiling his evening. Ask him,---oh ask him about the Tech. athletics or anything, Jotham, can't you?"

Jotham, as usual, glad of an opportunity to please Randy, succeeded in drawing Cyril into a conversation which proved interesting to all, and made the boy forget his discomfiture.

Peggy was aware of a vague wish that she had been more merciful, and resolved another time to help, rather than hinder a conversation.

Later, when the gay little party returned to the drawing-room, Randy begged Miss Dayton to favor her friends with some music. Helen, ever ready to give pleasure, seated herself at the piano, Professor Marden standing beside her, ostensibly to turn her music, but in truth to watch her graceful fingers upon the keys.

Her audience was enthusiastic, and not to be satisfied with one selection. Helen smilingly acceded to their requests, and when she arose from the piano she was greeted with generous praise.

Among the happy faces Randy saw one less bright than the others. It was Polly Lawrence, and Randy wondered what had caused a frown upon the usually smiling face. "It would never do to ask her why she isn't enjoying my party," she said to herself, "but I do wish she looked happier. I am so happy this evening, that I wish everyone else to enjoy every moment of it. I believe I'll ask her to sing for us. She sings nicely, and perhaps she would be pleased to, if she knew we wished it."

Accordingly, Randy hastened to Polly who was standing apart from the guests, and looking as if in anything but a pleasant mood. Her face brightened, however, when told that it would be a pleasure to hear her sing, and after a little urging, she consented. She possessed a light soprano voice which had been carefully trained, and when she chose, she could sing most acceptably.

On this especial evening, it pleased her to do her best, and she delighted her friends with a number of songs, for which Miss Dayton played the accompaniments. Polly received unstinted praise for her singing, and she therefore, upon her return, told her aunt that the party was a success.

At the end of the drawing-room, Nina Irwin was merrily chatting with a number of her friends, and Polly hastened to join the group, where she was soon laughing as gaily as the others, and apparently as happy.

Near the centre of the room Miss Dayton and Randy, Jotham and Professor Marden stood, evidently engaged in the discussion of a most interesting subject, and as Aunt Marcia joined them, she was asked to give her opinion.

"What has been my greatest pleasure in life?" She smiled as she repeated the question, and turned for a moment and looked long and earnestly at her portrait, then she said,

"When that picture was painted and was first seen by my friends, some one remarked,

"Oh, how dearly above all else Marcia prizes a gay life!"

"I have always enjoyed social pleasures," she continued, "but if I were to say that one thing, above all else, gave me true delight, I should say, that to make others happy had ever been my greatest joy."

"Pardon me, if I venture to say that that is the charm which has preserved your beauty," said the young tutor, gravely bowing to Aunt Marcia, who, sweeping a low courtesy, acknowledged the courtly speech which was uttered in such evident sincerity.

"And, in return let me say, that the young man who thinks it worth while to pay a graceful compliment to one who is quite old enough to be his grandmother, proves himself to be a worthy descendant of his talented father, a perfect gentleman of the old school," replied Aunt Marcia; and Helen saw the quick flush of pleasure on the professor's cheek. His love for his father amounted almost to worship, and Aunt Marcia could have chosen no word of praise which would have moved him so deeply, or pleased him more surely, than to thus have declared him, to be a "worthy descendant."

Other young people joined this central group, and Nina at the piano played softly a dreamy nocturne which seemed a gentle accompaniment to the conversation.

In the shadow of a tall jar of ferns Jotham was looking at Randy, and thinking that while the white party gown was very charming, it was also true that Randy at home in a pink sunbonnet had been well worth looking at.

"How serious you look," said Randy, "are you thinking that to-night's pleasure will mean many hours of hard study to-morrow, Jotham?"

"No, indeed," he answered with a laugh, "I am not allowing a thought of study to mar to-night's enjoyment. I was just wondering, Randy, why some girls are very dependent for a good appearance, upon what they wear, while one girl whom I know, can look equally well in a party gown or a gingham dress and sunbonnet."

Randy blushed as she said, "O, Jotham, has Professor Marden been teaching you to pay compliments, along with your other studies?"

"Indeed, no," was the answer. "He meant every word which he said to Miss Dayton's aunt, as truly as I meant what I said to you, and Randy," he continued, "you and I have been here in the city all winter, have seen its life and stir and bustle, and you have seen much of the social side of the problem which is puzzling me. Is it so much better, this city life, than the home life in the country? There, every busybody is interested in his neighbor; here, we are met on every hand by strangers who do not know, or wish to know anything in regard to us. Here a hundred strangers in the great railway stations are objects of but little interest. Randy, do you realize the commotion which one arrival with a hand-bag causes

at the little station at home? I tell you, Randy, one is large in a little country town, and small, so small in a great city."

"One is never small, wherever he may be, in the hearts of his friends, Jotham," was the sweet reply, "but in regard to home, there is no place like it. I enjoy all the brightness, the study, the fine pictures which I have seen and the rare music which I have heard; but, Jotham, I am at heart a country girl, and while I like to be here, if I were to choose 'for always,' as little Prue says, I'd choose the mountains and the streams at home.

"I shall not leave behind the knowledge which I have gained. I shall be all the happier because of it, but home is home, isn't it, Jotham?"

"Indeed it is," answered Jotham, heartily.

And now the carriages were beginning to arrive, and in twos and threes the guests departed, assuring Randy and Helen that the evening had been one of rare pleasure.

Jotham and his tutor left together, promising their charming hostesses that they should soon find leisure for a call. And when the last guest had departed, and Randy, Helen, and Aunt Marcia looked about the flower scented rooms, Randy said, with a happy sigh,

"Oh, what a lovely, lovely party! I was sorry to see them go. I am not even tired. No one could be tired during such an evening."

"Dear Randy," said Helen, "it was indeed a pretty party, and well worth my effort to make it a success. You were an ideal little hostess, Randy, you did your part to perfection."

"Why, I was only just myself. I was not at all fine," said Randy in amazement.

"That is just the secret of your success," Helen replied. "Always be just your own true self, and no one in all the world would ask for more."

CHAPTER XI

TIMOTHEUS AND HIS NEIGHBORS

"Whao! Whao! I tell ye. Be ye deaf, or be ye jest contrary?"

"I b'lieve them critters 'd like ter see me wait 'til June fer plaoughin'."

The ill-matched pair came to a standstill, and so listless was their bearing, that one would say that having decided to halt, nothing would induce them to again draw the plough.

"There, ye can rest naow, fer a spell, 'til ye git yer wind, an' then I'll set ye at it agin."

One of the horses snorted derisively, but Jabez Brimblecom cared little for that. He drew from his hip pocket a large envelope, and opening the letter which it contained, adjusted his spectacles and laboriously read it for the third time.

"Wal, all I got ter say 'baout it is, that it's pooty full er big words, an' flourishes, but biled daown, it 'maounts ter jist this; Sabriny's sot her mind on makin' us an' everlastin' long visit. I shan't hev ter stand much on't, however; I'll be aout doors

most of the time, when I *have* ter, an' I vum I'll be aout all the rest of the time because I *choose* ter.

"Sabriny's a team, an' so's Mis' Brimblecom. They never did pull together. Not but that they *pull* 'nough, only it's allus the opposite ways. I don't stay in doors much arter she arrives! No, Siree!

"G'lang there! G'lang I say!

"Well, fust ye won't stop, an' then ye won't budge! I vaow I never see a pair er critters like ye, 'cept my wife an' cousin Sabriny!"

When at last the pair concluded to move, they started forward with a most surprising lurch, and Jabez Brimblecom found his hands full in guiding the plough, and the two horses who, having decided to bestir themselves, tramped diligently back and forth, leaving the long rows of furrowed earth as evidence of their willingness to work when their ambition was aroused.

Again they stopped to rest and again Mr. Brimblecom fumbled in his pocket for the envelope, but he did not take it out.

"Why didn't she write the letter 'stead er gittin' that husband er hern ter write fer her? I'd 'nough rather she'd told Mis' Brimblecom she wuz comin', 'stead er leavin' me ter tell her. She'll be mad's a hornet, an' I vaow I won't blame her.

"G'lang there! Wal, I'll be switched if she isn't comin' daown ter the bars naow. Wonder what's up?"

"Jabez! Jabez! *Ja--bez!*"

"All right, I'll be there," was the answer, but in an aside he remarked apparently to the horses,

"'F I git my courage up, I'll tell her 'baout Sabriny naow and be done with it;" but his bravery was not put to the test. Before he could reach the bars where his wife stood waiting, she cried out vehemently, "Jabez Brimblecom, what do ye think? Mis' Hodgkins used ter know yer cousin Sabriny when they both wuz girls, an' she says she's jest got a letter a sayin' that Sabriny's comin' here ter make er long visit. She's goin' ter spend two weeks with Mis' Hodgkins, an' all the rest er the summer with us. Jabez, I'd rather heerd of er cyclone a hittin' us, fer ye well know that there'll be no peace 'til she packs an' starts fer home."

"I know it, I know it," Jabez answered, with feeling.

"I got er letter in my pocket, an' I been hatin' ter show it to ye, but mebbe ye might as well read it and make what ye can out'n it."

Mrs. Brimblecom wiped her glasses and commenced to read the letter.

"Naow what's the use'n his talkin' baout the 'wonderful mountain air,' an' the 'sparklin' springs,' an' er sayin' that they'll do such a sight fer Sabriny?

"We know what the air is, an' fer that matter, so does she; she's allus lived here. An' as ter the springs; she never so much as looked at 'em when she was here before, but she spent a lot er time tellin' me how she couldn't sleep on my corded beds. She said she had ter sleep on springs an' I was baout tired a hearin' tell of our short comin's; an' I told her if springs was necessary to her well-bein', she'd no doubt be best off ter hum where she'd been braggin' she had plenty of 'em."

"I didn't blame ye fer gittin' riled," said Jabez, "but I s'pose we'll hev ter welcome her, even if we're driven ter speed her departur;" and they both laughed good-naturedly, and mentally decided to make the best of the self-invited guest.

"Wal, she ain't here yit," said Mrs. Brimblecom, "and the fust two weeks she spends with Mis' Hodgkins, an' p'raps by the time she arrives here, I'll be cooled daown 'nough ter be kind er perlite, though I shan't say, 'I'm glad ter see ye Sabriny,' fer that'd be a lie."

"I shall say, 'I hope I see ye well, Sabriny,' fer massy knows I wouldn't want her ter be sick fer ye ter wait on," remarked Jabez, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Wal," he continued, "I must git this piece er plaoughin' done. I can't set daown an' luxooriate an' wait 'til we see Sabriny acomin'."

With a loud "G'lang there," he aroused his placid horses, and across the fields they sped, and Mrs. Brimblecom, with the letter in her hand, hastened back to the house where, after placing the large envelope under the cushion of her rocking chair, she busied herself with household tasks.

Later, when she felt that she had earned a few leisure moments, she drew the letter from its hiding-place and sat down to study it.

"'F I hadn't hid ye under the cushion, like as not when I wanted ter read ye, ye'd be lost," she remarked.

A few moments she read in silence, then her disgust moved her to speak.

"Sabriny feels better in a 'higher altitude,'---well, why doesn't she git one, whatever 'tis, an' git inter it an' stay there, 'stead a pesterin' me with her visits." Mrs. Brimblecom perused a few more lines, when again she spoke.

"She seems ter 'have little energy,'---wal, I don't want ter be mean, but I can't help a hopin' that she won't gain any. Sabriny without energy would be er sight that'd cheer me. Her tremenjous vim nearly wore me aout last season. Ef she'd jest manage ter leave her energy ter hum, I do'no's I'd mind her comin'."

While good Mrs. Brimblecom was studying the letter, Mrs. Hodgkins had sallied forth to tell the great news, that the visitor was expected, and as she passed the village store, old Mr. Simpkins, in the doorway, was taking leave of Silas Barnes.

"Yes, sir, he's a great feller, he is. There ain't another as 'riginal as he is on the globe, I bet ye. He's done a lot er bright things time an' time 'n again, but this time beats the other times all holler."

"What's he done naow?" asked Barnes.

"Hey?" remarked Mr. Simpkins, with his hand at his ear.

"I say, what's he done *naow*?" roared Barnes.

"Oh, I ain't tellin' yit. Even his brother Joel don't know, an' won't know this week, but next week the taown will be 'bout wild with the news er what Timotheus has done. Ye'll be 'bliged ter wait 'til then," said Mr. Simpkins.

"I guess I'll be able to stand it," remarked Silas Barnes in an undertone.

"Hey? Did ye say ye'd understand it? Wal, I ain't sure whether ye will er not. It's most too much fer *me*," Mr. Simpkins replied, as he made his way cautiously down the rickety steps.

"Fer goodness sakes, what's Timotheus been a doin' naow, I wonder," muttered Mrs. Hodgkins. "I shan't ask, an' be told ter wait, as Silas Barnes was.

"I'd like ter know one thing," she continued, "an' that is whether the boy is 'specially bright as his *father* thinks, or whether he's a little lackin' as *I* think, an' I do'no who's ter decide."

Up the road she trudged, and as she turned the corner, a most surprising sight caused her to stop and ejaculate. "Land er the livin'! What ails him naow?"

Timotheus Simpkins, unaware that he was observed, was executing a most fantastic jig in the middle of the road.

"I've did it naow, I bet ye 'n even Joel 'll have ter admit I'm a sight bigger'n anybody 'n taown. Good-bye ter farmin' and hooray fer literatoor, I say."

"Wal, be ye losin' yer senses, er clean gone crazy?" asked Mrs. Hodgkins in disgust.

Timotheus paused in his wild pirouette, and gave Mrs. Hodgkins a withering glance.

"It ain't wuth while ter explain Mis' Hodgkins, bein's I don't feel ye'd be able ter' understand the magnitood er what I've done."

"*Dew tell!*" remarked Mrs. Hodgkins with fine contempt, "I hope the taown is still big 'nough ter hold ye, *Mr.* Simpkins."

Her irony was wasted, however.

"I'm glad ye reelize the time's come ter 'dress me as 'Mr.,'" remarked Timotheus, and Mrs. Hodgkins vouchsafed no answer, but hurried along the road, "afeared ter speak," as she afterward said, "lest I'd say a deal more'n I orter."

In the long drawing-room Randy and Helen Dayton were chatting merrily with Jotham and Professor Marden when Aunt Marcia joined them, expressing pleasure in being at home to share the call.

In two weeks the private school would close, when Randy would say "good-bye" to her city home and the two dear friends who had entertained her, to the schoolmates of whom she had become so fond, and then she would be speeding over the rails every mile of which would take her nearer home, the dear country home. As Jotham was to leave the city at the same time, he asked the pleasure of accompanying Randy upon the journey, and his offer was gladly accepted.

"And have you heard the latest news from home, Randy?" asked Jotham. Without awaiting a reply he continued,

"Timotheus Simpkins has 'blossomed aout,' as his father expresses it and a specimen of his 'literatoor' is printed in the county paper. Father sent me a marked copy, and if you like I will read the article."

"I should indeed like to hear it," said Aunt Marcia; "from what Randy says of him I think Timotheus must be an unique character."

"He is truly an odd specimen," said Helen, "I cannot imagine what he would write."

"Read it, do read it," said Randy, and Jotham read the following:

"THORT.

"Thort is the gratest thing that has ever been thort of. I don't know of eny thing bigger than thort that I have thort of, less twas riginalty, an reely *thats* thort. When I'm busy thinkin' thorts I aint apt ter have my mind on eny thing else mostly. Most of the books what I have read I think was writ without enough thort. Take the almanic; if *Id* writ the almanic whare they say, 'bout this time expect rain,' *Id* a said, bout this time expect weather. *Id* a put some thort on the matter and *Id* a knowd that yed natraly have weather er some kind, cause theres *allus* weather round about these parts, but most folks havent no power ter have thort, an thats why theres so few folks that is great. I mean ter spend my time in thort an' casionally do a little ploughing. I thort so continuoal that I had ter leave school in order ter git time ter think in, so havin learnt all there was ter learn, I left school ter the fellers as thort so little that they didn't need much time fer it an now I shall put on paper such thort as most folks can tackle, but some er my thort is so thortful that most any body couldn't understand it, an so no more until Ive thort again.

"Yours thortfully
TIMOTHEUS SIMPKINS."

"Poor Timotheus," said Helen Dayton.

"And why 'poor Timotheus'?" asked Professor Marden. "With his stock of egotism, I think the fellow must be happier than the average man. I know of no one who considers himself the only thinker in the universe, except this young Simpkins. He must, indeed, be supremely happy."

"And the joke is," said Jotham, "that he received a small sum for the article, and a personal letter from the editor. The money, (I believe it was the immense sum of two dollars,) pleased Timotheus, but the letter puzzled him extremely. He considered the article to be a serious, as well as a lofty effort, whereas the editor evidently supposed it to be humorous, and believed the unique spelling to be a part of the fun. Timotheus told my father that 'the money showed that his "literatoor" was wuth something but that the editor man must be dull ter think that it was anything but a tremenjous hefty comp'sition.'

"Old Mr. Simpkins considers Timotheus a prodigy, and seems to feel contempt for his elder son, Joel, who as he expressed it, 'ain't intellectooal like Timotheus,' and Joel usually retaliates by saying, 'It's lucky one son er the Simpkins family has got jest plain common sense.'

"The paper is not published in our town," continued Jotham, "it is a county paper, and its editor and publisher lives in a distant village, so that, unacquainted with the Simpkins family, he supposed Timotheus to be a would-be humorist, little dreaming that he was offending a genius, by seeing fun where fun was not intended."

"Timotheus, however, had the joy of feeling that his literary work had a market value," said Professor Marden, with a laugh.

Randy and Helen were much amused, but although Aunt Marcia's eyes twinkled, she said,

"Poor boy! I wonder when and how he will outgrow his egotism? There surely is no chance for him to learn until he is made to realize how little he knows, and who would care to attempt the task of opening his eyes?"

"There are a plenty of persons in our town," said Jotham, "who have repeatedly tried to enlighten him, but they have been obliged to relinquish the effort. It is useless to tell him that talented people think it necessary to obtain a fine education. He only insists that he is a genius, and that there is nothing left for him to learn."

"We must not worry for Timotheus," said Helen, "he is as happy as one could wish; rather we should remember the old adage, 'Where ignorance is bliss, *etc.*'" and the little company agreed that perhaps after all, Timotheus Simpkins should be congratulated rather than commiserated.

When the callers arose to depart, Jotham said,

"Then on two weeks from to-day, Randy, I may call for you, and together we will travel toward home?"

"Yes, oh yes," Randy answered, an odd little note in her voice, "and how hard it will be to say good-bye to these two dear friends, how delightful to know that late in the afternoon I shall greet the dear ones whose faces I so long to see. How I wish you both were going back with me, then I should not say good-bye at all."

"And since we cannot accompany you," said Aunt Marcia, laying her hand gently upon Randy's arm, "we count ourselves fortunate that we are going to our summer home soon after you leave us. You have been a ray of sunlight in our home, Randy, and we could not easily or quickly become used to your absence."

"Oh, is it unkind to be glad that you will miss me?" asked Randy looking quickly from Aunt Marcia to Helen. "I am puzzled, for I know that I would do anything to make you happy; then why, when I love you so truly, am I glad to have you grieved when I go?"

She glanced at Professor Marden who, while apparently answering her questioning, looked fixedly at Helen Dayton as he said, "That is not an unkind thought, Miss Randy; if we can be assured that when absent we are missed, we are then doubly sure that our presence is welcome."

"No one should have so faint a heart as to for a moment doubt that he is welcome," said Aunt Marcia, receiving in return a grateful smile from Professor Marden, who bowed low over Miss Dayton's hand, and then with Jotham walked briskly down the avenue.

"Professor Marden is a most charming young man," said Aunt Marcia, as she stood at the window watching his receding figure. "He is very like his father, who was once my most valued friend."

Helen turned quickly to look at her aunt, expecting that she was about to tell more of the elder Marden, but she had left the window and stood by a large jar of roses, rearranging the blossoms with infinite care, and when she again spoke it was not of the Mardens, father or son, but of their engagements and the weather for the morrow.

CHAPTER XII

HOME

At last the long anticipated hour had arrived and Randy and Jotham were speeding over the country toward home.

Nina Irwin, Peggy Atherton, Polly Lawrence and a host of their schoolmates had, on the day before bidden Randy an affectionate good-bye. They had exchanged promises in regard to correspondence, had vowed never to forget each other, and Nina had slipped a little parcel into Randy's hand, saying,

"Just a little gift, dear Randy. Open it when the train has started and you are on your way home."

"O Nina, I shall prize your gift, whatever it may be," said Randy. "How can I wait until to-morrow to see it? And I have something to tell you," she continued.

"I had a letter from home yesterday, and mother says that I must be sure to give you her invitation to spend a few weeks of the summer with us. She tells me to remind you that our home is a farm-house, but that it is large and comfortable, and that the welcome awaiting you is very cordial.

"Father says, 'Tell Miss Nina that I am anxious to see my daughter's dear friend of whom she writes such pleasant things.' Even Aunt Prudence says, 'I think I shall approve of Miss Irwin,' and little Prue says, 'Tell the Nina girl I want her to come!'"

"There was never a sweeter invitation, Randy Weston. Of course I'll come," said Nina, "I wouldn't miss it for the world. Just a farm-house! Why, Randy, that is half the charm. Haven't I been to hotels summer after summer, but I never stayed over night in a farm-house. I shall enjoy every hour of my stay with you.

"Tell your mother how gladly I accept her invitation, and tell Prue that the 'Nina girl' has no little sister, and that she is very eager to see Randy's little Prue."

On the morning of the journey Aunt Marcia folded Randy in a warm embrace as she said,

"Dear child promise me that you will come again, thus only, can I see you depart;" and Randy had promised at some future time to again visit Boston.

With Helen she had entered the coupe and together they rode to the station.

Jotham had been obliged to relinquish the pleasure of calling for Randy and had written to say that, accompanied by his tutor, he would meet her at the depot, so it happened that Jotham and Randy, after saying good-bye to their two friends, rode out from the station and into the glad sunshine on their homeward way, and Helen, her beautiful eyes filled with tears, entered the carriage followed by Professor Marden who seated himself beside her.

"Come and lunch with Aunt Marcia and me" she had said, "then I shall feel that while one dear friend departs, another remains."

Upon entering the car, Jotham had turned over the seat opposite the one which they had chosen, and upon it they laid wraps, bags, a box of candy, and Helen's last gift to Randy, a great cluster of roses.

Randy had enjoyed her sojourn in the city with all the enthusiasm of her nature, but now her face was turned toward home, and with a smiling face she said to Jotham,

"I have you for company, and the day is sunny, I have my gifts, too, and best of all, I shall soon see every one at home. O, Jotham, are you as glad as I am, to-day?"

There was a suspicious tremor in his voice as he replied,

"I am every bit as happy as you are, Randy; I have worked very hard this winter and been cheered by Professor Marden's genuine interest in me. He has been kindness itself, and the letters from home have been a great comfort. I am already

looking forward to next season's study, and in the meantime I shall enjoy the summer vacation. I'll show father that while he is kind enough to allow me to spend my winter in study, I have not forgotten how to help in the summer work upon the farm."

"Look, Randy," continued Jotham, "the little towns and villages look more like home as we ride away from the city."

Randy looked from the window and noticed that the houses were farther and farther apart, the broad fields in which cows were grazing, the winding rivers dazzling in the sunlight, the hills blue and hazy and over all the blue sky and fleecy clouds.

When Randy opened the little parcel containing Nina's gift, she was delighted to find a photograph, encased in a silver frame of exquisite workmanship. Nina's card was fastened to the frame with a bit of ribbon, and upon the card appeared this message: "You now see that I can be with you always."

"Nina knew that I would rather have her picture than any other thing," said Randy.

How swiftly the hours flew! At noon the car was very warm, for it was late in May, and it seemed almost like June sunshine which lay in long bars upon the red plush seats.

Later, the air became cooler, and Randy had tired of the flying landscape until aroused by Jotham, who exclaimed,

"Look out, Randy! This is the next town to ours."

"Do you mean that we are so near home?" asked Randy, with sparkling eyes. Just at this point the brakeman's voice announced the station, and proved that Jotham had spoken truly.

How beautiful were the orchards, with their blossom-laden trees! "Ah home is home after all," thought Randy.

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As she stepped from the car a shrill little voice cried,

"O Randy, my Randy! I thought you'd never come, but you did."

Randy held her little sister closely, and laid her cheek against the soft curls. Then she turned to her father and saw a wealth of love in his eyes as he said,

"*Now* the home will be complete. It has been 'bout half empty with ye away, Randy. I'm glad ye're home again. I ain't able to say *how* glad, an' Jotham, my boy, I'm glad to see ye, too. Ah, here's yer father. I haven't a right ter a minute more er yer time."

With eager questioning Randy asked, "And mother and Aunt Prudence?"

"Oh they're feelin' pretty spry now the day's come fer ye to arrive. They're full er preparations fer yer home-comin', an'---"

"An' the big cake has got pink frostin' on top of it, an' my dolly has got on her best dress 'cause she knew you was comin', an' I've kept askin' Aunt Prudence all day what time it was, an' how long it would be 'fore you'd be here, an' Tabby's got a

ribbon on her neck, an' the house an' barn has been painted, an' the cars an' engine ride behind our barn now, an' I guess that's all," said Prue, with a sigh, as if regretting that there was so little news.

"Why that is a great deal of news," said Randy, "how did you remember it all?"

"Oh, I've been savin' it up, purpose to tell you when you comed," said Prue.

As they drove along the shady road toward home, they passed Jabez Brimblecom who thus accosted Randy:---

"Wal, wal I'm glad ter see yer home agin, Randy, or must I say Miss Weston, since ye've been to Boston?"

"Oh please call me Randy, or I shall think you are a stranger, instead of an old friend."

"Wal, Randy it *is* then, an' glad I be ter hear it. My wife said when ye went off that she knew ye, an' that Randy'd be Randy anywhere 'n she's 'baout right 's usual."

Every one whom they met had a word of greeting for Randy, until she exclaimed,

"Oh, it is almost worth while to go away, if everyone is to be so glad of my return."

"And we're the gladdest of all," said Prue.

"Indeed we are," said Mr. Weston, "an' now, Randy, do ye see two women at the corner of the wall? I tell ye, they couldn't wait 'til ye arrived at the door."

Mr. Weston stopped Snowfoot, and Randy jumped from the wagon, and running to her mother, threw her arms about her neck.

"O Randy, child, this is the first day of real happiness since ye started fer Boston. Not but what we've gotten on pretty well, but ye left a space, so ter speak, a space that nothin' could fill. Well, ye're here now, an' we'll find it easy to be cheerful."

"And *you're* glad to see me, too, Aunt Prudence?" asked Randy, wondering if so dignified a person would like a kiss.

"Glad!" was the answer, "that's no name fer it," and she fervently kissed Randy's cheek. "I must say, ef ye'd stayed away a week longer yer ma an' me would been 'bout ready ter give up housekeepin'. I tell ye, Randy, we shall all feel nigh on ter giddy, now ye've arrived."

The remarkable sight of Aunt Prudence kissing Randy made a great impression upon Prue.

"If I goed to Boston, Aunt Prudence, would you kiss *me* when I comed back?" she asked.

"Why bless ye, Prue, I'll kiss ye now, 'thout yer havin' ter go away," and she did, much to Prue's delight.

Arrived at the house, Prue exhibited her doll dressed in all her finery, Tabby decorated with a gay ribbon, and was about to drag Randy out to the barn that she might see the new railroad which ran through the pasture lot, when Mrs. Weston suggested that the railroad would be there in the morning and that as Randy had been riding all day it would be far better to wait until the next day to see it.

So little Prue sat beside Randy and listened to all which she had to tell with the greatest interest.

"Oh, I wish Johnny Buffum was here to hear all 'bout Boston," sighed Prue, "then he'd know what a big girl my Randy is," and the little girl wondered why they laughed.

At tea she led Randy to the table and exclaimed,

"There, didn't I say the cake had pink frosting onto it?" and Randy agreed that it was indeed pink and that it looked very tempting.

Mrs. Weston and Aunt Prudence had arranged a fine little spread, composed of Randy's favorite dishes and as she looked at the dear faces around the table, she knew that she could not be happier at the grandest feast, though it were given in her honor in palatial halls.

* * * * *

"Randy is here, Randy is here!" It seemed as if each person as soon as he learned the news, repeated it to his neighbor, and that neighbor repeated it to the next person whom he chanced to meet on the road, and soon the entire village knew that Randy was once more at home.

Prue followed her about as if she feared to lose sight of her, and promised to recite an endless number of lessons to Randy if only she might be permitted to stay out of school.

"I can't go to school and not see my Randy all day. I don't want to be anywhere where my Randy isn't." Prue pleaded so earnestly that at last Mr. Weston said,

"It is so near the end er the term, why not let her stay at home, mother?"

Even Aunt Prudence interceded for her, and Prue's joy was unbounded when she was told that she might consider that her vacation had commenced.

The day after Randy's return was bright and sunny, and with little Prue she wandered beneath the sweet scented apple blossoms drinking in their beauty, and wondering if in all the world there was a fairer place than the orchard with its wealth of bloom, when suddenly Prue exclaimed,

"You're *'most* as glad to see me as anybody, Randy?"

"Me 'n Tabby is just 'special glad you've got home." The little eyes looked anxiously up into Randy's face.

"You precious little sister," Randy answered, "I've been longing all winter to see you, and when I have sat before the fire with Miss Dayton on a stormy afternoon I have wished that Tabby with her paws tucked in, sat blinking at the flames. There is no one, Prue, whom I am more truly glad to see than you."

While Randy and Prue were in the orchard, Mrs. Hodgkins "ran in fer a chat," as she expressed it.

"Wal, I hear tell that Randy's come back. What's she goin' ter do next year, er don't she know yet? Did ye know't I had comp'ny?" She continued, asking a second question without awaiting an answer to the first.

"Wal, I *have* got comp'ny, and comp'ny she means ter be considered.

"It's Mis' C. Barnard Boardman, as she calls herself; she's Sabriny Brimblecom that was, an' a pretty time I'm havin' with her. She's delicate, or she thinks she is, an' I'm 'baout wild with her notions 'baout food, and her talkin' of 'zileratin' air, whatever that may be.

"She can't lift her finger ter help me, an' the ruffles an' furbelows I have ter iron fer her makes me bile, while she sets aout in the door-yard a rockin' back'ards an' for'ards as cool as a cucumber. She ain't goin' ter stay but a week longer with us, an' then she goes ter stay with her brother Jabez, an' land knows, I pity Mis' Brimblecom, fer Sabriny says she's goin' ter stay the whole summer. She's what ye might call savin', fer she's savin' her board, an' when she left the Brimblecom's the last time she spent the summer with 'em, she put a little package in Mis' Brimblecom's hand just as she went aout the door, 'Jest a little gift in return for your kindness,' said Sabriny, in her lofty way.

"After she was gone Mis' Brimblecom opened the parcel an' she an' Jabez just looked at each other, an' didn't speak. Sabriny's gift was *a wire tea strainer*! Barnes sells 'em fer ten cents daown ter the store."

"I should try, in some way, that she'd understand, ter make her realize that her room was better'n her company," said Aunt Prudence.

"You *think* you would," said Mrs. Weston, "but you've a kind heart, an' while you'd feel like tellin' her ter go, you wouldn't do it."

"Mis' Brimblecom's one er the best women that ever lived, an' it's provokin' fer her ter be pestered with Sabriny," declared Mrs. Hodgkins.

"Wal, I must be goin'," and away she went, stopping on the way to greet Randy who stood by the wall upon which sat Prue and Tabby.

Long after Mrs. Hodgkins had left them, Randy and Prue sat under the shadow of the blossoming branches, and it seemed to Randy that little Prue had grown more lovely in face and figure. Her curls were longer, and her sweet eyes darker, her hair had kept its sunny hue, and her coloring was wonderfully like that of the apple blossoms.

Prue was quite unaware of Randy's loving scrutiny, and she caressed Tabby, humming contentedly, and looking about at the sunlight, the blossoms and the butterflies. Suddenly she pointed down the road exclaiming,

"Look, Randy, look! See old Mr. Simpkins coming this way."

As he espied Randy he hastened toward her.

"Glad ter see ye, glad ter see ye, Randy. Ye're lookin' fine. Haow be ye, an' haow's Boston?"

Randy assured him that the city seemed to be intact when she left it, but he did not hear.

"I expect ye haven't heared that Timotheus is a lit'rary feller naow, doin' farm work only 'casionally, so ter speak.

"Oh, ye did hear?" he questioned as Randy nodded assent.

"Wal, he's a feelin' pooty big over his two dollars, but he's kind er riled with the editor man fer thinkin' his writin' that he writ was funny. Timotheus has fixed the attic fer a room ter stay in when he's a writin', an' there he stays, day in, 'n day aout, a workin' away at his literatoor. It's odd haow boys in one family will hev different idees. Naow Joel likes store work best. Wal, here's some er the boys and girls a comin' ter see ye, so I'll be goin' along."

A laughing troop came hurrying along the road, and they hailed Randy with shouts of delight when they espied her sitting upon the wall with Prue. As they crowded about her, plying her with questions, Randy tried to answer them all promptly, but gave it up with a laugh, exclaiming,

"Oh, I'm glad to be with you all, and am pleased that you came over this morning to see me. Sit down upon the wall and tell me all the news, and I will try to answer all your questions."

They seated themselves, a merry, laughing row, upon the wall; the Babson girls, Dot and Jack Marvin, Jotham, the Langham twins, Reuben Jenks, Mollie Wilson, Phoebe Small and even Sandy McLeod's little Janie, and gaily they chattered, the petals of the apple-blossoms falling about them, a perfumed shower.

Randy's home coming had indeed been a glad one, and in "Randy and Prue" one may learn more of Randy's sunny nature, and of the little sister's winsome ways.