

Chicken Little Jane on the Big John

Lily Munsell Ritchie



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LITTLE JANE ON THE BIG JOHN ***

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**CHICKEN LITTLE JANE ON THE BIG
JOHN**





Came half way across and held out his hand.

Chicken Little Jane

By
LILY MUNSELL RITCHIE



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CHICKEN LITTLE JANE
ON THE BIG JOHN



CHAPTER I
WITH HUZ AND BABY
JILL IN THE PASTURE

WITH HUZ AND BABY JILL IN THE PASTURE

“Chicken Little–Chicken Little!”

Mrs. Morton’s face was flushed with the heat. She was frying doughnuts over a hot stove and had been calling Chicken Little at intervals for the past ten minutes. Providence did not seem to have designed Mrs. Morton for frying doughnuts. She was very sensitive to heat and had little taste for cooking. She had laid aside her silks and laces on coming to the ranch, but the poise and dignity that come from years of gentle living were still hers. Her formal manner always seemed a trifle out of place in the old farm kitchen. On this particular morning she was both annoyed and indignant.

“She is the most provoking child!” she exclaimed in exasperation as¹² Dr. Morton stepped into the kitchen.

“Provoking—who?–Chicken Little? What’s the matter now?”

“That child is a perfect fly-away. I can no more lay my hands on her when I need her than I could on a flea. She is off to the pasture, or out watching the men plow, or trotting away, no one knows where, with the two pups. And the worst of it is you encourage her in it, Father. You forget she is thirteen years old–almost a woman in size! She is too old to be such a tomboy. She should be spending her time on her music and sewing, or learning to cook–now that school’s out for the summer.”

Dr. Morton laughed.

“Oh, let up on the music for a year or two, Mother. Chicken Little’s developing finely. She’s a first rate little cook already. You couldn’t have prepared a better breakfast yourself than she gave us that morning you were sick. You don’t realize how much she does help you, and as to running about the farm, that will be the making of her. She is growing tall and strong and rosy. You don’t want to make her into an old woman.”

“It is all very well to talk, Father, but I intend to have my only daughter an accomplished lady, and I think you ought to help me. She is too old to be wasting her time this way. But have you any idea where she is? I want¹³ to send her over to Benton’s after eggs. I have used all mine up for

settings, and I can't make the custard pies you are so fond of, till I get some."

Dr. Morton laughed again.

"Yes, I have an exact idea where she is. Set your kettle back on the stove a moment and come and see."

Mrs. Morton followed him, leaving her doughnuts rather reluctantly. Ranch life had proved full of hardships to her. The hardships had been intensified because it was almost impossible to secure competent servants, or, indeed, servants of any kind. The farmer's daughters were proud—too proud to work in a neighbor's kitchen even if they went shabby or, as often happened among the poorer ones, barefoot, for lack of the money they might easily have earned. Mrs. Morton was not a strong woman and the unaccustomed drudgery was telling on her health and spirits. Dr. Morton, on the other hand, enjoyed the open-air life and the freedom from conventional dress and other hampering niceties.

Mrs. Morton followed her husband through the long dining room and little hall to the square parlor beyond. He stopped in the doorway and motioned her to come quietly. Jane sat curled up in a big chair with two¹⁴ fat, limp collie pups fast asleep in her lap. She was so lost in a book that she scarcely seemed to breathe in the minute or two they stood and watched her.

"Well, I declare, why didn't she answer me when I called?"

"Chicken Little," Dr. Morton called softly. Chicken Little read placidly on.

"Chicken Little,"—a little louder. Still no response.

"Chicken Little," her father raised his voice. Chicken Little never batted an eyelash. One of the dogs looked up with an inquiring expression, but apparently satisfying himself that he was not to be disturbed, dozed off again.

"Chicken Little—Chick-en Lit-tle!"

"Ye-es," the girl came to life enough to reply absently. Dr. Morton turned to his wife with a triumphant grin.

"Now, do you see why she didn't answer? She is several thousand miles and some hundreds of years away, and she can't get back in a hurry—blest be the concentration of childhood!"

"What is it she's reading?"

“Kennilworth. Amy Robsart is probably waiting for Leicester at this identical moment. Why return to prosaic errands and eggs when you can revel in a world of romance so easily?”

“Father, you will ruin that child with your indulgence!”

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Mrs. Morton walked deliberately across the room and removed the book from her daughter’s hands.

Jane came to herself with a start.

“Why, Mother!”

“How many times have I told you, little daughter, that there is to be no novel-reading until your work and your practising are both done? Here I have been calling you for several minutes and you don’t heed any more than if you were miles away. I shall put this book away till evening. Come, I want you to go over to Benton’s and get me four dozen eggs.”

Jane got up inwardly protesting, and in so doing, tumbled the two surprised and grumbling pups upon the floor. She didn’t mind doing the errand. She was unusually willing to be helpful though often very heedless about noticing that help was needed.

“Can I go by the pasture, Father? It’s a lot shorter than round by the road.”

“Yes, I think it’s perfectly safe. There are only about thirty head of steers there now, and they won’t pay any attention to you. Well, I must be off. Do you want anything from town, Mother?”

“Yes, I have a list.”

“Get it ready, will you, while I go across and see what Marian’s commissions are.”

“Across” meant across the road to the white cottage where Frank and Marian and their beloved baby daughter, Jill, lived. Little Jill was two and a half years old and everybody’s pet, from Jim Bart, the hired man, to “Anjen,” which was Jilly’s rendering of Auntie Jane. Even Huz and Buz, the two collie pups, followed her about adoringly, licking her hands and face when opportunity offered, to her great indignation.

“Do way, Huz, do way, Buz,” was frequently heard, followed by a wail if their attentions persisted.

The family watched Dr. Morton drive away in the spring wagon down the long tree-bordered lane. When he was out of sight, Jane picked up the egg basket and started off toward the pasture gate.

“Where are you going, Chicken Little?” Marian called after her.

“To Benton’s for eggs.”

“To Benton’s? Let me see, that’s less than a quarter of a mile, isn’t it? I wonder if you’d mind taking Jilly along. She could walk that far if you’d go slow, and it’s such a lovely day, I’d like to have her out in the sunshine—and I’m horribly busy this morning.”

“Of course, I’ll take her. Come on, Jilly, you lump of sweetness, we’ll pick some pretty flowers. You aren’t in a great hurry for the eggs, are you, Mother?”

“Oh, if you get back by eleven it will be all right. I have to finish the doughnuts and do several other things before I will be ready for the pies.”

“That’s a whole hour—we can get back easy in an hour—can’t we, Jilly-Dilly?”

Marian in spite of her busy morning watched them till they entered the pasture, the sturdy little baby figure pattering along importantly beside the tall slim girl.

“How fast they’re both growing,” she thought. “Jane’s always so sweet with Jilly—I feel safe when she’s with her.”

“O Jane,” she called a moment later, “I wouldn’t take the pups along if you are going through the pasture. The cattle don’t like small dogs.”

Huz and Buz, after lazily watching the children walk off, had apparently decided to join them, and were bringing up the rear a few yards behind. They were fat, rollicking pups, too young and clumsy to be very firm on their legs as yet. Jane turned round and ordered the rascals home. Marian called them back also, and after deliberating a moment uncertainly, they obeyed. They were encouraged to make a choice by a small stick Chicken Little hurled at them.

“Go on,” said Marian, “I’ll see that they don’t follow you.”

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She coaxed the dogs round to the back of the house and saw them greedily lapping a saucer of milk before she went back to her work.

Buz settled down contentedly in the sunshine after the repast was over, but Huz, who was more adventurous, hadn’t forgotten that his beloved Jane and Jilly were starting off some place without him. He gave the saucer a parting lick around its outer edge to make sure he wasn’t missing anything, then watched the kitchen door for some fifty seconds with ears perked up, to see whether any further refreshments or commands might be expected from that quarter. Marian was singing gaily about her work

in a remote part of the cottage, and Huz presently trotted off round the corner of the house after the children.

They had gone some distance into the pasture, but he tagged along as fast as his wobbling legs would carry him, whining occasionally because he was getting tired and felt lonesome so far behind. Huz had never gone out into the world alone before.

Jane and Jilly were enjoying themselves. It was late May and the prairies were billowy with soft waving grasses and gaily tinted with myriads of wild flowers.

“Aren’t they lovely, Jilly?”

Chicken Little filled one tiny moist hand with bright blossoms.

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“And see, dear, here’s a sensitive plant! Look close and see what the baby leaves do when Anjen touches them. See, they all lie down close to the mamma stem—isn’t that funny?. Now watch, after a little they’ll all open up again. Here’s another. Jilly, touch this one.”

Jilly poked out one fat finger doubtfully, and after some coaxing, gave the pert green leaves a quick dab. They drooped and the child laughed gleefully.

“Do, Mamma, ’eaves do, Mamma!” she shouted. She insisted on touching every spray in sight. So absorbed were they in this pretty sport they did not notice that a group of steers off to the right had lifted their heads from their grazing and were looking in their direction. Neither did they see a small black and white pup, whose pink ribbon of a tongue was lolling out of his mouth as he, panting from his unusual exertions, approached them.

Huz had been game. Having set out to come, he had come, but Huz was intuitive. He realized in his doggish consciousness that he wasn’t wanted and he deemed it wise not to make his presence known.

While Chicken Little and Jilly loitered, he stretched himself out for a much-needed rest, keeping one eye on them and the other on the grazing steers, who stopped frequently to cast curious glances at the intruders.

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Presently the children walked on and Huz softly pattered along a few paces in the rear. All went well until they came abreast of the steers. Chicken Little was amazed to see the foremost one lift his head, then start slowly toward them.

“Oh, dear,” she thought, “perhaps he thinks we’ve got salt for him.”

Huz saw the movement, too, and some instinct of his shepherd blood asserted itself. He evidently considered the approach of the steer menacing and felt it his duty to interfere. With a sharp little staccato bark he dashed off in the direction of the herd as fast as his fat legs would carry him. His dash had much the effect of a pebble thrown into a pool, which gradually sets the whole surface of the water in motion. One by one the steers stopped grazing and faced in his direction, snuffing and hesitant. Huz yapped and continued to approach them boldly.

Chicken Little saw the culprit with a shiver of dismay.

“O Huz—you rascal! Oh, dear, and cattle hate a little dog! Come back here, Huz—Huz! Huz—shut up, you scamp!”

But Huz, like many misguided human beings, thought he saw his duty and was doing it, regardless of possible consequences. He heeded²¹ Chicken Little to the extent of stopping in his tracks but persisted in his sharp yapping. The nearest steer began to move toward him, the others, one by one, gradually following.

Chicken Little was frightened, though at first, only for poor foolish little Huz.

“Oh, they’ll kill him if he doesn’t stop! He can’t drive cattle, the silly goose! Huz! Huz! Come here! Hush up!”

Huz retreated slowly as the steers approached. The many pairs of hostile eyes and the long horns pointed in his direction were beginning to strike terror into his doggish heart, but his nerve was still good and he barked to the limit of his lungs.

The steers came on faster.

Jane’s breath grew quick and short as she watched them. The children were too far from either fence to escape the steers by flight. Even if she were alone, she could not hope to outrun them, and with Jilly, the case would be hopeless. There was only one thing to be done. She had seen enough of cattle during the past three years to know exactly what that was—she must drive them back. Putting Jilly behind her, she gathered up some loose stones and commenced to hurl them at the advancing steers.

“Hi there! Hi, hi!” she yelled fiercely, starting toward them brandishing²² her arms. The cattle paused, wavered, might have turned, but Huz, being thus reinforced, barked lustily again. The steers edged forward as if fascinated by this small, noisy object.

“Huz, Huz, why can’t you be still?”

Gathering up Jilly in her arms and bidding her hold tight and be very quiet, Chicken Little started on the run to Huz and speedily cuffed him into silence. But the steers were still curious and resentful. As she started to walk on, with Huz slinking crestfallen at her heels, the cattle moved after them.

“I’ll have to get him out of sight!”

She picked him up by the scruff of his neck and put him into Jilly’s chubby arms.

“Here, Honey, you hold Huz, and slap him hard if he barks. Bad Huz to bark!”

Jilly hugged the dog tight. “Huz bark, Jilly sap,” she remarked complacently.

The cattle stopped when the dog disappeared from the ground. Chicken Little started toward them carrying her double burden and yelling “Hi, hi!” until they gave back a little. She persisted until she succeeded in heading them away from the road. Then she started on across the pasture still carrying Jilly and Huz, afraid to set either of them down lest they should attract the cattle.

But the herd’s curiosity had been thoroughly aroused. They were uneasy, and by the time Chicken Little had walked a hundred yards further on, they had faced toward her again and stood with heads up and tails waving, watching her. She began to walk rapidly, not daring to run lest she should give out under the child’s weight. Another twenty yards and the steers were following slowly after her. She quickened her pace; the herd also came faster. Chicken Little knew cattle were often stampeded by mere trifles. Jilly, seeing the bristling horns approaching, commenced to whimper.

“Do home, Anjen, do home—Jilly’s ’faid!”

Jane soothed the child in a voice that was fast growing shaky with terror. “I mustn’t get scared and lose my head,” she argued with herself. “Father says that’s the worst thing you can do in danger. I must keep them back! Marian trusted me with Jilly—I must be brave!”

Turning resolutely she confronted the herd, yelling and waving till with great exertion she headed them about once more. This time she gained a couple of hundred yards before they followed. Jilly, peeping fearfully over her shoulder, gave her warning. When she looked back and saw

those thirty pair of sharp horns turned again in their direction, the girl gave a sob of despair.

There was not another human being in sight.

The soft, undulating green of the prairie seemed to sweep around them²⁴ like a sea. Jane looked up into the warm, blue sky overhead and prayed out loud.

“O Lord, please keep them back. I’m doing the best I can, God, but—but—it’s so far to the fence! I truly am, Lord, and Jilly’s so little!” “Hi there, hi, hi! Yes, Jilly, yes, course Anjen’ll take care of you!”

Her panic-stricken tones were hardly reassuring, the child wailed louder, casting frightened glances at the steers, then burying her face on Jane’s shoulder. The cattle were approaching on the trot, their great bodies swinging and jostling beneath that thicket of horns as the animals in the rear pushed and crowded against the leaders. The steady thud of their hoofs seemed to shake the ground rhythmically. Jilly could hear even when she couldn’t see, and clung convulsively to Anjen with one arm while the other squeezed tight the chastened Huz. Chicken Little sent up a last petition, as gathering up her remaining shreds of courage, she charged once more.

“O God, please, please, help a little!”

She never knew exactly what happened after that. Jilly was past all control. She was screaming steadily but her anguished howls were almost providential for they helped out Jane’s weakening shouts. Again and²⁵ again Jane turned the steers, her voice growing fainter and hoarser. The cattle seemed to gather impetus with each rush—the distance between them was fast lessening and the beasts became more and more unruly about going back. But in some miraculous way she kept them off until Mr. Benton, plowing in a field near the fence, was attracted by Jilly’s screams and rushed to their rescue. Driving away the steers, he lifted Jilly and Huz from Chicken Little’s aching arms, and took them all in to his wife to be comforted.

It was some little time before Chicken Little could give the Benton’s an intelligible account of what had excited the steers. Mr. Benton’s astonishment was unbounded.

“Well, Chicken Little, I’ll never say another word ’bout city folks being skeery. You ain’t so bad for a tenderfoot. How’d you know enough

to face them that way instead of running? If you'd run they'd trampled you all into mince meat! Steers are the terablist critters!"

Chicken Little was too shaky to answer with anything but a smile.

Mrs. Benton refreshed them with milk and cookies and after the children had recovered from their fright, Mr. Benton drove them home.

Frank came to lift Jilly from the buggy and Mr. Benton related their adventure with a relish.

"Clean grit, that sister of yours!" he ended. "She never even let go of that plaguey dog. The tears was a streamin' down her face and I low she'd pray one minute and let out a yell at them blasted steers the next."

The tears stood in Frank's eyes as he hugged both Jane and Jilly close after Mr. Benton drove away.

"I'll never forget this, little sister."

"Why, Frank, it was the only thing I could do. Marian trusted Jilly to me and I couldn't let poor little Huz be killed!"

Huz evidently approved this last sentiment, for he gambolled around the group, doing his doggish best to please.

Chicken Little's modesty, however, was destined to be short-lived. By the time her mother and Marian and Ernest had all praised and made much of her exploit, she felt herself a real heroine. She was a natural-born dreamer, and she spent the remainder of the day in misty visions of wondrous adventures in which she always played the leading part.





HARKING BACK TO CENTERVILLE

Mrs. Morton was sitting by the dining room window one afternoon about a week later, busily knitting.

“Here comes Father, Jane. Run out and get the mail. There should be a letter from Alice telling about the wedding and when they are coming.”

“Oh, I do hope there is!” Chicken Little flew out the door and down the path to the road where Father was unloading bundles before he drove on to the stables.

“From Alice? Yes, and one from Katy and Gertie, and three for Marian. She’s the popular lady this time.” Dr. Morton handed out the treasures.

“Hurry, Mother,” Chicken Little fairly wriggled with eagerness as she tossed the letters into her mother’s lap.

“Don’t be so impatient, child! Little ladies should cultivate repose of manner. Where are my spectacles? I was sure I laid them on the desk.”

Mrs. Morton was peering around anxiously on desk and table and mantel, when Chicken Little suddenly began to laugh.

“On your head, Mumsey, on your head! Hurry up and read the letter—I just can’t wait.”

Her mother carefully unfolded the sheets and read them to herself deliberately before satisfying Jane’s curiosity.

“They are not coming until the last of June,” she said finally. “Dick has an important case set for the tenth and they would have to make a hurried trip if they came before that, so they have settled down in the old home till the law suit is over. Then they are coming for a nice long visit. Alice says if Dick wins the case they are going clear to San Francisco, but if he doesn’t, they’ll go only as far as Denver. Oh, here’s a note for you, Chicken Little, from Dick. And Alice says, perhaps they’ll bring Katy and Gertie with them, if it is convenient for us to entertain so many, and leave them here while they go on out West. Dear me, I don’t know! Gertie hasn’t been very well, it seems, and Mrs. Halford is anxious to have her go to the country somewhere. Why, child—”

Jane had paused with Dick’s cherished note half-opened to skip and jump deliriously till she was almost breathless.

“O Mother, wouldn’t that be glorious? You could put another bed in my room, and, maybe, they’d stay all summer. Oh, goody-goody, goody, goody, goody!”

Dr. Morton coming in, caught her in the midst of her war dance and gave her a resounding kiss.

“Here, Mother, where did you get this teetotum? We might sell her for a mechanical top—warranted perpetual motion. When the legs give out, the tongue still wags.”

“I don’t care, Father, Katy and Gertie are coming. I just can’t wait!”

Jane hugged her father and did her best to spin his two hundred pounds avoirdupois around with her.

When she had sobered down a little she remarked doubtfully: “But, Mother, Katy and Gertie didn’t say a single word about coming, in their letter.”

“Probably Mrs. Halford hasn’t told them. She would naturally write to me first, to find out if it is perfectly convenient for us before she roused their expectations. I presume Alice’s letter is only a suggestion, and if I reply to it favorably, Mrs. Halford will write. I shall think it over.”

“Think it over? Why, Mother, you’re going to ask them to come, aren’t you?” Chicken Little’s eyes were big with pained surprise.

“My dear, I think it likely that I shall invite them—it would be good for you to have companions of your own class once more. But it will mean a great deal of extra work, and unless I can get someone to help me, I do not see how I can manage it.”

“Mother, I’ll help, and Katy and Gertie won’t mind washing dishes.”

“Now, little daughter, we will let the matter rest for a day or two. Don’t you want to hear about Alice’s wedding?”

“Read it aloud, Mother Morton.” It was Marian speaking. She was standing in the door with Jilly fresh and rosey from a long nap.

Mrs. Morton looked up.

“Jilly doesn’t seem any the worse for her bump this morning, does she?”

“No, that’s the blessed thing about children, they get over things so easily. By the way, Father, Frank told me to tell you that he had taken Ernest with him over to the Captain’s after a load of hay. They’ll probably have supper there and be late getting home—that is if Captain Clarke asks them to stay—he is such a queer old duck.”

“He doesn’t seem very neighborly, according to reports. I’ve found him pleasant the few times I have met him,” said Dr. Morton, “but let’s have Alice’s letter.”

Mrs. Morton adjusted her spectacles and began to read.

“DEAR, DEAR MRS. MORTON:

“If we could only have had all the Morton family, great and small, present, the Harding-Fletcher Nuptials, as Dick insists upon calling our wedding—he quotes from the Cincinnati paper—would have been absolutely perfect. Uncle Joseph and Aunt Clara couldn’t have done more for me if I had been their very own. Aunt Clara insisted upon having the big church wedding, which I fear your quiet taste would not approve, but it was very lovely. And I do think the atmosphere of a big church and the beautiful music are wonderfully impressive. Dick says it’s the proper thing to tie the bridal knot with all the kinks you can invent—it makes it more secure. He said it was miles from the vestry to the chancel and his knees got mighty wobbly before he arrived, but after thinking it over, he concluded I was worth the walk—the heathen! Oh, I almost forgot to tell you that the sun shone on the bride most gloriously and the old church³² was a perfect bower of apple-blossoms and white lilacs. My wedding dress was white satin with a train. I wore Aunt Clara’s wedding veil. It was real Brussels lace and I was scared to death for fear something would happen to it. I warned Dick off until he declared that the next time he got married the bride should either be out in the open, or have a mosquito net that wasn’t perishable. I’m not going to tell you about my trousseau because I intend to bring it along to show you. I want you to be surprised, and oh! and ah! over every single thing, because it is so wonderful for Alice Fletcher to have such beautiful clothes. Dick is looking over my shoulder and he says he thinks it’s time I learned that my name is Alice Harding. He says he’s going to have a half-dozen mottoes printed with—

‘My name is Harding.
On the Cincinnati hills
I lost the Fletcher!’

on them, and hang them about our happy home. Tell Chicken Little I’ve saved a big chunk of bride’s cake for her, and I’m dying to see her. It doesn’t seem possible that she is almost as tall as Marian.”

The letter ran on with much pleasant chatter of the new home, which was the same dear old one where Alice had been born, and where the

Morton family had spent the two happy years that were already beginning³³ to seem a long way off.

Alice had graduated the preceding year, but Uncle Joseph would not listen either to her plea that she should pay the money back from her little inheritance, or that she should carry out her plan of teaching. He said it would be bad enough to give her up to Dick just as they had all learned to love her—she must stay with them as long as possible.

Dick's letter was as full of nonsense as Dick himself. It was written with many flourishes to:

“MISS CHICKEN LITTLE JANE MORTON,
Big John Creek,
Morris County, Kansas.

“Dear Miss Morton,

“I would respectfully inform you that your dear friend Alice Fletcher is no more—there ain't no such person. She made a noble end in white satin covered with sticky out things, and her stylish aunt's lace curtain. She looked very lovely, what I could see of her through the curtain. My dear Miss Morton, I beseech you when you get married, don't wear a window curtain. Because if you do the groom and the sympathizing friends can't see how hard you are taking it. Alice didn't look mournful when the plaguey thing was removed, but her aunt wept copiously at the train and took all the starch out of Alice's fresh linen collar. And Alice said it would be a sight, if I mussed it. I don't see the connection, do you? Dear Chicken Little, I thought about you all the time I wasn't thinking about Alice, because I remembered a certain other wedding where the dearest small girl in the world introduced me to the dearest big girl in the world. I thought also of the little partner who wrote a certain letter and of many other things—I didn't even forget the baby mice, Chicken Little! Alice says she would like to have your name on her diploma along with the president's because—well, you know why. And they tell us you are Chicken Big now. Thirteen going on, is a frightful age! The worst of it is you can never stop 'going on.' I suppose I need not expect to be asked to any doll parties, but, Jane, wouldn't you—

couldn't you, take me fishing when we come? I will promise to be as grown up as possible.

“Yours,

“DICK.”

“P. S. Do you still read Mary Jane Holmes?”

“Well, it is evident Dick Harding is the same old Dick, all right. Three years and getting married don't seem to have changed him a particle,” laughed Marian.

“Three years isn't a lifetime,” retorted Dr. Morton, “if it does seem ³⁵ ‘quite a spell’ to young people. Thank heaven, it has changed you, Marian, from a fragile, pale invalid to a hearty, rosy woman! Dr. Allerton knew what he was about when he sent you to a farm to get well.”

“Yes, I can't be thankful enough, Father Morton, and I don't forget how kind it was of you all to come out so far with us.”

“Mother is the only one who deserves any thanks—the rest of us were crazy to come. We were tickled to death to have an excuse, eh, Chicken Little?” He tweaked her ear for emphasis.

“Oh, I love the farm, Father, only I wish Ernest could go away to school. He's awfully worried for fear you won't feel able to send him to college this fall. He studies every minute when he isn't too tired.” Dr. Morton's face grew grave.

“Yes, it's time for the boy to have a better chance. I wanted him to go last year, but the drought and the low price of cattle made it impossible. And I don't quite know how it will be this fall yet.”

“There mustn't be any if about it this fall, Father. Ernest is working too hard here and now is the time for his education if he is ever to have one,” Mrs. Morton spoke decidedly.

“I know all that, Mother, but college takes ready money, and money is mighty scarce these days. He's pretty well prepared for college. I've seen ³⁶ to that, if we do live on a Kansas ranch.”

“It isn't just the studies, though, Father Morton,” said Marian. “Ernest needs companionship. He doesn't take to most of the boys around here, and I don't blame him. They're a coarse lot, most of them. The McBroom boys are all right, but they live so far off and are kept so busy with farm work, he never sees them except after church once a month or at the lyceums in winter.”

“Marian’s just right, Father. The boy needs the right kind of associations; his manners and his English have both deteriorated here,” added Mrs. Morton.

“Perhaps, Mother, but the boy is sturdy and well and his eyes are strong once more, and he is going to make a more worth while man on account of this very farm life you despise. But he does need companions. I wonder if we couldn’t get Carol or Sherm out here for the summer along with the rest.”

“Father, do have some mercy on me. I can’t care for such a family!” Mrs. Morton gasped at this further adding to her burdens.

Marian studied for a moment.

“Mother, if you want to ask him, I’ll take Sherm, and Ernest, too, while Dick and Alice are here. I’d rather have Sherm than Carol, and Mother said in her letter that the Dart’s were having a sad time this year. Mr. Dart has been ill for so long.”

Chicken Little had listened in tense silence to this conversation, but she couldn’t keep still any longer.

“You are going to ask Katy and Gertie, aren’t you, Mother?”

Mrs. Morton smiled but made no reply.

“You’ll have to go to work and help Mother if you want any favors, Jane,” her father admonished.

The following week apparently wrought an amazing change in Chicken Little. She let novels severely alone—even her precious set of Waverly beckoned in vain from the bookcase shelves. She waited upon her mother hand and foot. She set the table without being asked, and brought up the milk and butter from the spring house before Mrs. Morton was half ready for them. Indeed, she was so unnecessarily prompt that the butter was usually soft and messy before the meal was ready. She even practiced five minutes over the hour every day for good measure, conscientiously informing her mother each time.

“Bet you can’t hold out much longer, Sis,” scoffed Ernest, amused at her efforts to be virtuous. “You’re just doing it to coax Mother into inviting Katy and Gertie.”

“I just bet I can, Ernest Morton. Of course I want her to invite Katy and Gertie, but I’m no old cheat, I thank you, I’m going to help the best I can all summer if she asks ’em.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Don’t you dare hint such a thing—she’s going to—I think you’re real hateful! I just don’t care whether you get to go to college or not.”

“Maybe I don’t want to.”

Something in Ernest’s tone made Jane glance up in surprise.

“Don’t want to? Why, you’ve been daffy about it—you haven’t thought about anything else for a year!”

“That’s so, too, but I guess I can change my mind, can’t I?”

Ernest lounged on the edge of the table and looked at his sister teasingly.

He was almost six feet tall, slim and muscular, with the unruly lock of hair sticking up in defiance of all brushing as of old, and a skin that was still girlishly smooth though he shaved religiously every Sunday morning to the family’s secret amusement. The results of this rite were painfully meager. Both Chicken Little and Frank chaffed him unmercifully about it.³⁹ Jane loved to pass her hands over his chin and shriek fiendishly:

“Ernest, I believe I felt one. I think—really, I think you’ll cut ’em by Christmas!” A lively race usually followed this insult.

Frank was even meaner. He came into Ernest’s room one morning while he was shaving and gravely pretending to pick up a hog’s stiff bristle from the carpet, held it out to him.

“Why Ernest, you’re really growing quite a beard!”

But Ernest was a man in many ways if he had but little need of a razor. Seeing other boys so seldom and being thrown so much with men had made him rather old for his years and more than ordinarily capable and self-reliant. He loved horses and was clever in managing them, breaking in many a colt that had tried the patience and courage of his elders. But his day dream for the past twelve months had been college. He had confided all his hopes and fears to Chicken Little. The love between the two was very tender, the more so that they had so few companions of their own ages.

So Chicken Little, knowing that he had fairly lived and breathed and slept and eaten college during many months, might be pardoned for her amazement at his mysterious words.

“Ernest, tell me—what’s the matter?”

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“Nothing’s the matter—I’ve got a new idea, that’s all.”

“What is it? Where’d you get it?”

“From the old captain. Say, you just ought to see his place—it’s the queerest lay-out. Snug and neat as a pin. He’s tried to arrange everything the way it is on shipboard. He’s got a Chinaman or a Jap, I don’t know which, for a servant. He is the first one I ever saw, though they say there are lots of them in Kansas City. This chap can work all right. We had the best supper the evening Frank and I went over for hay.”

“My, I wish I could see it. Do you suppose Father would take me over some time?”

“I don’t know. They say he hates women—won’t have one around.”

“Pshaw, you’re making that up, but what’s the idea? Oh, you old hateful, you’re just teasing—I can tell by your eyes!”

“Honest Injun, I’m not any such thing, only you interrupt so you don’t give me a chance. You know the Captain has been at sea for twenty-five years—never’d quit only his asthma got so bad the doctor told him he’d have to go to a dry climate, and bundled him off here to Kansas. Well, he seemed to take a shine to me, and he asked me a lot of questions about what I was going to do. Finally, he wanted to know why I didn’t try to get⁴¹ into the Naval Academy instead of going to college. Said if he had a son—and do you know, he turned kind of white when he said that, perhaps he’s lost a boy or something—he’d send him there.”

“O Ernest, and be an officer? I saw a picture of one at Mrs. Wilcox’s—her nephew—and his uniform was perfectly grand.”

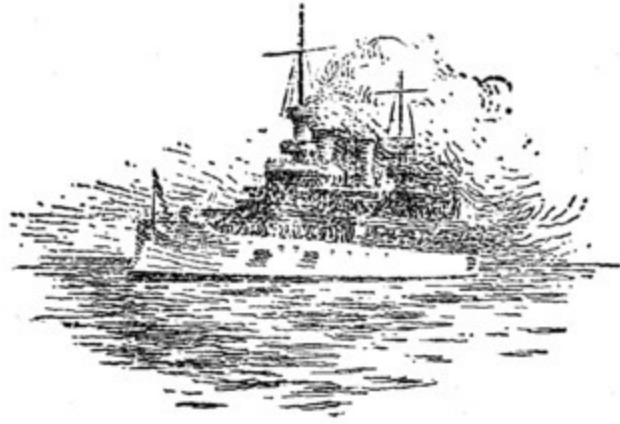
“Just like a girl—always thinking of clothes! But I’ve been thinking perhaps I should like the life. I always like to read about naval fights, and our navy’s always been some pumpkins, if it has been small. And the captain says a naval officer has a chance to go all over the world. Think of your beloved brother, who has never been on a train but six times, sailing away for China or Australia!”

Chicken Little gave a gasp, “Ernest Morton, it wouldn’t be a bit fair for you to go without me!”

“Don’t worry, I don’t suppose there’s one chance in a hundred that I could get the appointment. Father knows Senator Pratt, and the Captain said he didn’t think there was as much competition for Annapolis out here as for West Point. It’s so far from the sea. But mind, Jane, not a word to anybody till I think it over some more. I’m going to see the Captain again.”

“O Ernest, what if you should go clear round the world?”

“‘Twouldn’t hurt my feelings a bit. But mum’s the word, Sis.”





CHICKEN LITTLE PAYS A VISIT

Mrs. Morton was sitting at her desk writing a letter. Jane hovered about inquisitively. She was almost sure it was to Mrs. Halford. And if so, she must surely be inviting Katie and Gertie. If she could only be sure. She tried in vain to get a glimpse of the heading, but her mother's hand rested on the paper in such a way as to effectually conceal it. Mrs. Morton did not believe in encouraging curious young daughters. But opportunity was kind; some one called her mother away. She left the letter lying there partly finished. Chicken Little started joyfully across the room, but before she had reached the desk, something held her back. She had been most carefully trained as to what was honorable; sneaking was not tolerated in the Morton family.

"No," she said to herself regretfully, "I mustn't peep behind her back! I couldn't look anybody in the face if I did."

She slowly turned away. When her mother returned, she glanced sharply at Chicken Little quietly reading on the opposite side of the room. The girl did not realize that her face proved her innocence. It was so sober that her mother felt sure she had not meddled with the letter. Jane had not learned to conceal her emotions.

Dr. and Mrs. Morton were both going to town that day. Mrs. Morton drove away without satisfying Chicken Little's curiosity, which was probably largely responsible for what happened. Jane felt injured. She thought her mother might tell her whether she could have the girls or not. Ten days was enough time for anybody to make up her mind.

Frank and Ernest were out in the fields harrowing; Marian, busy sewing. Chicken Little soon finished the few tasks her mother had left for her and time began to hang heavy on her hands. She couldn't seem to fix her thought on a book because she kept wondering every minute if that letter was to Mrs. Halford. She wandered out into the June sunshine and wished she could have gone to town, too. Presently she began to feel aggrieved because her parents hadn't taken her with them.

Across the fields she could see the men at work and could occasionally hear them calling to the horses. She wished she had a horse to ride. The

pony that was called hers by courtesy was the mainstay for the herding and she could seldom use him at this season. Finally, after digging her heels into some loose earth beside the path, she had an inspiration. She debated it a moment with herself, then slipped back into the house, combed her hair over carefully, tied it with her best ribbon, and arrayed herself in her new blue lawn which her mother had distinctly told her was to be her second best for the summer.

She smoothed it down complacently—pale blue was becoming to her clear, rosy skin—but her conscience pricked. She succeeded in lulling this annoying mentor by reasoning that her mother wouldn't want her to go visiting in an old dress. She tried to ignore the fact that her mother hadn't given her permission to go visiting at all.

Slipping out the back way to avoid disturbing Marian, in case she should be looking out her window or Jilly should be on the watch, Chicken Little whistled softly to Huz and Buz. The puppies were three weeks older and stronger than when Huz so nearly caused disaster, and trotted after Jane on all her tramps. She was seldom lonesome when she had them rolling and tumbling along beside her.

Making a wide detour around the white cottage, she struck into a faint¹⁶ track skirting the upper fields. There was a nearer way through the lower fields along the slough, but Frank had killed several big bull snakes there the preceding week. To be sure, these were usually harmless, but they were frightful enough to be unpleasant company. Besides, Frank or Ernest might see her and ask her where she was going.

But the fates speeded her undertaking. No one saw her save a few quail and nesting plover that whirred up at her approach and tried to lure her and the dogs away from their nests by pretending to be hurt and running a few paces ahead on the ground. Chicken Little had seen this bird ruse too often to be fooled by it, but Huz and Buz pursued each bird hopefully only to come sneaking back, when the mother bird suddenly soared off as soon as they had left the nest safely behind.

"You sillies," Jane admonished them each time. "Won't you ever learn not to be fooled?"

She found it delightful to loiter herself. The whole day was before her. The wild blackberry bushes along the fence still hid bunches of bloom among the half-formed berries. Clumps of white elderberry blossoms spilled their fragrance, and the wind rustling through the long stems of

the weeds and prairie grass droned monotonous tunes. She found tufts of crisp sour sheep sorrel which she liked to nibble, while she made ladies⁴⁷ out of the flowers, and the pups snapped at the grasshoppers and butterflies. Chicken Little was taking her time for this expedition. She knew her parents would not return before evening, and if Marian hunted her up, she would think she had gone down to eat her lunch with Frank and Ernest.

It was almost noon before she entered the belt of timber along the creek at the southern boundary of their ranch. Across the stream, she knew, lay the Clarke ranch, and she had heard the house and stables were close to the timber. Jane had resolved to call on the Captain, and going on foot, had selected the shortest route. It was over two miles between houses by the road. Further, Chicken Little, preferred that her visit should seem accidental—at least to the Captain. She hardly expected to convince her family that she had wandered over there without intending to. But she felt sure the Captain would receive her more kindly if he thought she were taking a walk and got lost. She would be very hot and tired when she arrived, and ask for a drink so politely that not even a woman-hater would have the heart to let her go on without asking her in and offering her some refreshment.

She had never been in this part of the woods before. It was very different from the timber and groves near the ford where they often⁴⁸ picnicked in summer or went nutting in the fall. There, the cattle and hogs had been allowed to range, at certain seasons of the year, until most of the thick undergrowth was nicely cleared away. But the wood, here, was dark and shadowy. Dead branches and tree trunks lay where they had fallen or been torn down by storms. Weeds and flowers had grown up among these, and the wild cucumber vines and clematis festooned the rotting logs with feathery green. It was a wood full of creepy noises—noises that made one keep still and listen. The coarse grass and herbage were so rank you could scarcely see the ground. It looked decidedly snaky, Chicken Little reflected dubiously. And water moccasins were abundant along the creek, and poisonous, as her father had often warned her. Chicken Little was usually plucky when she actually saw a snake, but the snakes she feared she might see always made her panicky.

Still she hated to give up anything she had undertaken. She stood staring into the thickets for some minutes. Huz sat on his haunches beside

her and stared too, whining occasionally as if he didn't quite like the prospect either. Buz had found a gopher hole and was having a merry time trying to dig it out. She could hear the creek singing over the stones a few rods away.

"It can't be so awfully far," she said aloud, "and I guess the dogs⁴⁹ would scare away the snakes."

Something stirred among the weeds near her. Chicken Little gave a little scream. But it was only a squirrel, as Huz immediately discovered. He barked loudly and started in pursuit, which sent Mr. Squirrel flying up a tree. Jane set her lips together firmly and started forward.

"There's no sense in being so scary!" she admonished Huz. "Snakes most always run away as fast as ever they can, anyway."

Nevertheless, she picked her way daintily and gave a cry of delight when after pushing a short distance into the thicket, she found an old rail fence apparently leading off in the direction she wished to go. She climbed it promptly and worked slowly along its zig zag course—a means of locomotion that was comfortingly safe, if somewhat slow. The pups complained over this desertion for they had to worm through the tangle of weeds and brambles below.

They soon reached the creek only to be confronted by a new problem. There were neither stepping stones nor a fallen log to cross upon. Chicken Little had to hunt for a shallow place, strip off her shoes and stockings, and wade. She wore good old-fashioned high laced shoes and lacing up was a tedious process. The woods were a little more open⁵⁰ beyond. She had no further need of the fence—it had indolently stopped at the creek anyhow. But, alas, she had gone but a short way farther when she came to the creek again.

Chicken Little sputtered volubly to the dogs but the stream flowed placidly on. There was nothing for it, but to take off her shoes and stockings a second time, and wade. By the time she had laced them, she remembered having heard Frank say that the creek was very winding here and kept doubling back on its tracks. She was in for it, now, she decided, and might as well go ahead. It was long past noon. She was getting hungry. She did hope the woman-hater would offer her something to eat. She felt a little doubtful about her looks. Sitting down on the damp earth had left sundry grass stains and one long black streak on the dainty blue

lawn, and her hair was wind blown, and mussed where some twigs had caught and pulled it.

Once more Jane unlaced those exasperating shoes, drying her feet on a woefully limp and dirty handkerchief. This time she lazily wound the lacings around her ankles until she could be sure the creek was safely behind her. Presently she heard the cackling of hens and the grunting of pigs that assured her she was nearing somebody's farmyard.

"Gee, but I'm glad!" she muttered thankfully. She sat down and laced her boots neatly, then smoothing her hair and ironing out her rumples⁵¹ dress with nimble fingers, she struck off joyfully in the direction of the sounds. She was approaching the house from the rear and the barn and out-buildings were soon visible through the trees. She hurried forward joyfully only to be confronted by that horrible creek flowing once more between her and her goal.

Chicken Little didn't often lose her temper completely, but this was the last straw. "Darn," she exclaimed spitefully, "darn you, you old creek, I'd like to beat you. I won't take my shoes off again! I just won't!"

She scanned the bank carefully to see if she could find any rock or log to help her out. Nothing available could be seen, but help appeared from a most unlooked for quarter. A tall, severe-looking man rose from a rustic seat behind a tree which had hidden him.

"Can I be of any service, Miss?" he asked courteously.

With an awful sinking of the heart she realized this must be Captain Clarke himself. Oh! and he must have heard her swear. Chicken Little turned the color of a very ripe strawberry and stared at him in horror.

A faint flicker of amusement lighted the man's face.

"Just wait an instant and I will put a board over for you, if you wish to cross."⁵²

Jane distinctly did not wish to cross this particular moment. She wished to run home.

"Oh, I-I—please don't go to any trouble, I oughtn't to be here, and please I didn't mean to swear but—but—Mother would be dreadfully ashamed of me if she knew."

She was telling the whole truth most unexpectedly to herself. Captain Clarke surveyed her sharply but his voice seemed kind.

"You must be Dr. Morton's daughter. Did you get lost?"

This was an embarrassing question. Jane looked at him doubtfully before replying. If she said “yes” she would be telling a lie, and if she said “no,” he would know she came on purpose. She compromised.

“I wanted to see your house awfully,” she faltered. “Ernest said it was most like a ship and I’ve never seen a ship,” a sudden remorseful thought crept into her mind. “But you mustn’t blame Mother; she didn’t know I was coming.”

The Captain’s eyes lost their severe look—the suspicion of a twinkle lurked in their blue depths.

“I see, you didn’t wish to embarrass Mother, so you came without leave. I am honored by your visit, Miss—”

“Jane, but people don’t call me Miss, except Dick Harding, and he⁵³ does it for a joke. I’m only thirteen.”

The Captain was sliding a stout plank across a narrow part of the stream. This accomplished, he came half way across and held out his hand. “Come, I’ll help you over.”

Chicken Little didn’t in the least need assistance. She was as sure-footed as a young goat, but she was too much overcome by this delicate attention to refuse. Placing her hand gingerly in his, she let him lead her across, then followed meekly up to the low white house. It was a one-story structure, divided in the middle by a roofed gallery. The entire building was surrounded by a broad veranda, open to the sky, and enclosed by a rope railing run through stout oak posts. The Captain gravely assisted her up the steps.

“I call this my quarter-deck,” he explained, seeing the question in her eyes. “I have been accustomed to pacing a deck for so many years that I didn’t feel at home without a stretch of planking to walk on.”

“Oh, isn’t it nice? I’ve seen pictures of people on ships. My mother came from England on a sailing vessel. I’m sure I’d just love the ocean!”

Captain Clarke smiled at her encouragingly but made no reply.

Chicken Little rambled on nervously. She was decidedly in awe of her⁵⁴ host but having begun to talk, it seemed easier to keep on than to stop.

“I guess it must be wonderful out at sea when the sun is coming up. Sometimes I get up early and go out on the prairie to watch it. It just keeps on getting lighter and lighter till finally the sun bobs up like a great smiling face. I always feel as if it were saying ‘Good morning, Jane.’ I suppose it’s a lot grander at sea where you can’t see a single thing but

miles and miles of waves. Why, I should think you'd feel as if there wasn't anybody in the world but you and God. I always feel a lot more religious outdoors than I do in church. But Mother says that's just a notion. But, you know, the people are always so funny and solemn in church and the ministers most all talk through their noses or say 'Hm-n' to fill in when they don't know what to say next. But, oh dear, I guess you'll think I'm dreadful! And please don't think I swear that way often. I haven't for ever so long before."

The Captain's face twitched, but he replied gravely:

"Don't worry about the 'Darn,' child, I've heard worse oaths, though I believe young girls are not supposed to use strong language. I feel as you do about church and the outdoors. I find it irksome to be cooped up⁵⁵ anywhere. But come in, and I will have Wing Fan give you some pigeon pot-pie. We had a famous one for dinner and you surely must be hungry. Afterwards, I'll show you through The Prairie Maid as I sometimes call this craft."

Chicken Little began to feel at home. "And to think Ernest said he didn't like women and girls! Pooh, I knew he was just fooling."

Wing Fan found other things beside the pot-pie, and Chicken Little was soon feasting luxuriously with the Chinaman waiting on her most deferentially. Her host watched her with a keener interest, had she but known it, than he had shown in any human being for many months.

He was a man of fifty odd. Naturally reticent, his long voyages in command of merchant vessels had fostered an aloofness and love of solitude, which had later been intensified by a great grief. His stern bearing had repelled his country neighbors in the year he had lived on Big John. He was satisfied that it should be so, yet he was intensely lonely.

But Chicken Little knew nothing of all this. The thick sprinkling of white in his black hair and the deep lines in his face, made her entirely comfortable—they were just like Father's. She was too curious to verify Ernest's tales of the queer house, to give much attention to her host at⁵⁶ first. She stared around her with wide eyes. Yes, there were the funny little built-in cupboards and window seats, and the plate racks, and the shelves that let down with gilt chains. Every single thing was painted white. "My, how lovely and clean it all looked!" And the blue Chinese panels; she had never seen anything like them. And there were five pictures of ships.

Even the dishes were a marvel to her. Jane had seen plenty of fine china but never any so curious as this old Blue Canton with its landscapes and quaint figures. The Captain was pleased with her ingenuous admiration.

When she had finished her dinner, he took her across the gallery to his library, a room seldom shown to the residents of the creek. Even Ernest and Frank hadn't seen it, Jane learned later. This apartment was quite as marvellous as the dining-room. A long, low room it was, with many lacquered and carved cabinets and tables. The wall space above these was pictureless, but two great ivory tusks were crossed over a doorway. Above the fireplace rows of weapons were ranged—queer swords and daggers with gold and mother-of-pearl on their hilts, a ship's cutlass, several scimitars, and the strangest guns and pistols. Chicken Little was fascinated with the frightful array. A huge bearskin lay on the floor⁵⁷ among strange, beautifully colored rugs, which reminded her of her mother's India shawl. Rugs where queer stiff little men and animals that looked as if a child had drawn them, wandered about among curlicues and odd geometrical patterns. A tiger-skin, head and dangling claws distressingly lifelike, hung in the middle of one wall. She was spell-bound for a few minutes with the strangeness of it all.

Her host seemed to enjoy her wonder. He explained most patiently a great compass set on a tripod in one corner. After she had roamed and gazed to her heart's content, he opened the locked cabinets, and let her take miniature ebony elephants from Siam into her hands. He had her look through a reading glass at intricate ivory carvings, so tiny, it did not seem that human fingers could ever have wrought them. There were boxes of sandalwood and ugly heathen idols with leering faces. The drawers were crowded with prints and embroideries. The Captain pulled one out that had girl's things in it. She caught a glimpse of a spangled scarf, and fans and laces, even gay-colored beads. But he shut this drawer hastily. She did not have time to wonder much about this incident just then, but she thought about it a good deal afterwards. The things looked quite new as if they had never been used.

Chicken Little had natural taste and had read more than most girls of her age. She handled the Captain's curios reverently, drinking in eagerly his explanations and the strange tales of where he had found these wonders.

So absorbed were they both, that the shadows were lengthening before Captain Clarke realized the afternoon was slipping away, and that home folk might be disturbed if he kept his young guest too long. Chicken Little was distressed too.

“Oh, I’m afraid Father and Mother will get home before I do. They’ll be awfully worried!”

“You mustn’t try to go back through the woods. They are too dense to be a very safe route for a child, and it would be dark before you could reach home. I’ll have one of the men hitch up, and I’ll drive you over.”

Chicken Little commenced to fidget. It would not make her coming scolding any lighter, if her parents learned that the Captain had felt in duty bound to bring her home. But she did not wish to be rude and it was a long walk by the road.

Captain Clarke saw she was disturbed and began to laugh. Her naïvete charmed him.

“If my program doesn’t suit you, won’t you tell me what is wrong? I haven’t enjoyed anything so much in years as your visit, my dear. I should like to pay my debt by doing whatever you would like.”

Jane was radiant by the time he had finished.

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“Didn’t you truly mind my coming? You aren’t just being polite?”

“Mind? Child, if you ever come to be as lonesome and as old as I am, you will know what a comfort it has been to have anyone as young and sweet and fresh as you are, around. Just a moment, I want to show you one thing more.”

He went into his bedroom and returned with an old photograph. It was a likeness of a two-year-old child.

She took a good look at it, then turned to her host.

“It is the picture of the little boy I—I—lost. He was my only one. He—he would be seventeen now.”

“Why that’s just Ernest’s age!”

“Your brother? The one who was here the other evening?”

“Yes, he was seventeen his last birthday. I’m so sorry you lost your little boy.” Chicken Little slipped her hand into his to express her sympathy.

The Captain did not reply except with an answering pressure. She laid the picture down gently.

“He was a beautiful baby—it almost seems to me I’ve seen someone who looks like him—especially the eyes. And that merry little twist to his mouth. I can’t seem to think who it is.” Jane puckered her forehead and the Captain observed her closely.⁵⁰

“Was it some boy?” He seemed interested in this resemblance.

“Yes, how silly of me not to remember. It’s Sherman Dart, one of Ernest’s old friends back in Centerville.”

“Centerville? That is in Illinois, is it not?”

“Yes, where we used to live. And the eyes are exactly like Sherm’s and Sherm always twisted his mouth crooked like that when he smiled.”

“This boy, he wasn’t an orphan, was he?”

“Oh no, Mr. and Mrs. Dart are both living though Mr. Dart’s been sick a long time.”

The Captain seemed to have lost interest.

“Well, my dear, am I to have the pleasure of driving you home—I’m afraid your parents will be distressed about you.”

Jane had a bright idea.

“Captain Clarke,” she spoke rather hesitatingly.

“Yes?”

“Would you mind—of course it sounds awful of me to ask you—but—it’d be so much easier for me with Mother if you’d just tell her, oh, what you said about my being a comfort and not bothering.”

Chicken Little was both ashamed and eager.

The Captain threw back his head and laughed until the tears came into his eyes.

“My dear, I’ll make this call all right with your mother, never fear, for I want you to come again. I am going to ask her if you and Ernest can’t both honor me by coming to dinner next Sunday.”⁵¹

He was as good as his word but when Chicken Little went to bed her mother said sorrowfully: “Chicken Little, I shan’t scold you because I promised Captain Clarke I would let you off this time—but I didn’t think you would do such a thing—behind my back, too.”

And her mother had asked Katy and Gertie! She had told her after she came home that evening.





CHAPTER IV
A CHERRY PENANCE

A CHERRY PENANCE

Chicken Little awoke the next morning with a bad taste in her mouth. She was ashamed to have grieved her mother by her escapade the day before, especially when Mother was undertaking all this extra trouble for her happiness. But she just couldn't be sorry she had gone to the Captain's! It would be something to remember all her life. She gave a skip of delight every time she thought of all the lovely things—and the Captain's stories. No, she simply couldn't be sorry, but she knew Mother expected her to be sorry. Of course, she might have got acquainted with him some other way, but her father wouldn't promise ever to take her. "Little girls have too much curiosity for their own good, Humbug," was all she had been able to get from him.

She could see at breakfast that Mother expected an apology right away.⁶³ She could feel disapproval in her good morning and in the way she kissed her. Mother seemed to have the power to make her feel mean and guilty all over. But she wasn't sorry.

While they were doing the dishes she told her mother all about the wonderful things she had seen. Mrs. Morton listened in silence. She was waiting. Chicken Little heaved a deep sigh and did her best.

"I know it was wrong for me to go without permission, Mother, and I won't ever do it again, and I think you're just beautiful to ask Katy and Gertie. I'll help every single bit I can; you see if I don't."

"I am glad you realize you did very wrong, little daughter, is that all you have to say to me?"

Chicken Little looked at her Mother and fidgeted. Her Mother returned her look gravely. Still she couldn't—it would be fibbing if she did. The silence became oppressive.

"You may go and pick a couple of quarts of cherries, Jane." Mrs. Morton handed her the tin lard pail, searching her face once more.

It was a glorious June morning and Jane enjoyed picking cherries. Marian saw her and came too, establishing Jilly comfortably at the foot of the tree with a rubber doll and the two pups as companions. Jilly was usually a placid baby and she settled down contentedly to trimming up

her doll with dandelions. Buz, the indolent, curled himself at her feet and was asleep inside of five minutes, but Huz looked up longingly into the tree at Jane. He seemed to be racking his doggish brain as to the best method of reaching her. He kept making little futile leaps, whining impatiently. Finally, he stood up on his hind legs, planted his fore paws against the tree trunk, and barked dolefully. Jane bent down and mischievously dropped a cherry into his open mouth. Huz choked, sputtered, and after a first rapturous crunch, hastily deposited the acid fruit upon the ground. He looked reproachfully at Chicken Little.

“There now,” said Marian, “he’ll never trust you again.” Marian raced Chicken Little with the cherry picking and the pails were filled far too soon.

“Jane,” said Marian as she started reluctantly back to the house, “if Mother Morton can spare you this morning to help me pick them, I believe I’ll get some cherries to put up—there are loads ripe this morning.”

“I’d love to, Marian, I’ll take these in and find out if she’ll let me.”

She came flying back in a jiffy with two big milk pails. “All right, Mother says I may help you till noon.”

They had a merry morning. The cherry trees lined the lane which was also a public road, and several neighbors going by, stopped to exchange a few words. Mr. Benton had his joke, for he discovered Jane swinging up in the topmost boughs and reaching still higher for certain unusually luscious ones that eluded her covetous fingers.

“Well, Mrs. Morton,” he said, addressing Marian and ignoring Chicken Little, “that’s the largest variety of robin I’ve ever seen in these parts. I ’low you must have brought the seed from the east with you. You wouldn’t mind if I took a shot at it, I ’spose. ’Pears like birds of that size must be mighty destructive to cherries.”

“Why Mr. Benton, we shouldn’t like to have you kill our birds; we’re attached to them. But you are mistaken, that isn’t a robin, it’s a Jane bird—they’re rare around here.”

Mr. Benton laughed and Chicken Little got even by hurling a big cluster of cherries at him. She aimed them at his lap, but they struck him full in the face to her great glee.

“Well now, them Jane birds ain’t so bad.” Mr. Benton remarked eating the fruit with a relish.

The morning sped by briskly. Jilly created a diversion by getting her small self into trouble. Marian noticed that she was picking something off the tree trunk and putting it into the pocket of her little ruffled apron.

“What’s Jilly getting there? Can you see, Chicken Little?”

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Chicken Little twisted and peered until she could take a good look.

“Why—Marian, I do believe it’s ants! The silly baby—they’ll bite her!”

Marian hurried down the tree to rescue her offspring, but not before Jilly set up a wail of anguish.

“Naughty sings bite Jilly!” she moaned, as her Mother picked the small tormentors off her arms and bare legs. But Jilly was a sunny child, and as soon as the pain eased, found a smile and remarked complacently: “Ants bite Jilly, too bad, too bad!”

Jane braced herself firmly in a crotch where the red fruit was thickest and picked mechanically while she unburdened her mind of the previous day’s doings. She chattered about her adventures till Marian could have repeated every word of her conversation with the Captain off by heart, and might have given a pretty accurate inventory of his possessions, or at least the portion of them that Jane had seen.

Marian was genuinely interested and liked to hear Chicken Little tell it all, but she wondered what Mrs. Morton had thought about the junketing.

“But what did your Mother say, dear?” she asked finally.

“She didn’t like it.”

“You didn’t suppose she would, did you?”

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“N-o-o, but—”

“Yes?”

“I’d never have got to go if I’d waited for permission. And, Marian,” Chicken Little thought it was time to change the subject, “how do you make yourself be sorry, when you ought to be and aren’t?”

Marian wanted to laugh but she saw her young sister had not intended to be funny. She half guessed the situation.

“Why Jane, I hardly know, the old monks used to set themselves penances to atone for their sins.”

“Did it make them really sorry? Do you think?”

“Well, yes, I should think it must have or they would never have had the courage to persist in them. Some of their penances were terribly severe such as beating themselves with knotted ropes, but I shouldn’t advise anything of that kind for you. You might try to make up for your

fault in some way. Perhaps you might give up something you like very much.”

Jane didn't say anything more, and it was a day or two later before Marian learned the effect of her words.

The cherry trees seemed full as ever after they had gathered all Marian wanted, and in the evening Mrs. Morton sent Chicken Little out to gather⁶⁸ more for her. Marian offered to help her, and they were once more aloft in the trees when Mr. Benton returned from town.

Marian began to chuckle.

“He'll think we have been here all day, Jane. Let's pretend we have.”

“Dear me, Mr. Benton, back so soon. How fast the day has gone by. Jane, you must be awfully hungry, I hadn't realized it was so late!”

“Well now, time does beat everything for speed, but I 'lowed it was only our ancestors as lived in trees all the time, Mrs. Morton. But then I've heard they're gettin' a lot of new-fangled ways down east. You're not calculatin' to take up your residence permanent like in them cherry trees, are you? In case you don't want the cottage any more, we might move it over to our place just by way of being neighborly.”

“Thank you, Mr. Benton, I'll remember your kind offer if it ever gets in our way.”

It was not many days before the mail brought a grateful letter from Mrs. Halford, and ecstatic ones from the girls, in reply to Mrs. Morton's invitation. They would arrive with Alice and Dick and Sherm—for Sherm was coming, too—on the twentieth.

“Not quite two weeks. That means we must begin getting ready at⁶⁹ once, and you mustn't think because we have a servant coming, that you won't need to help, Jane. One girl can't do all the work for so many.”

Chicken Little had not yet said she was sorry and her Mother was inclined to be severe with her in consequence. Mrs. Morton was rather worried, too, because she had seemed pale and listless for two or three days past. But when she asked if she were not feeling well, Chicken Little had replied carelessly:

“Why, I'm all right, Mother.”

They were hurrying to get the cherry crop cared for before the guests arrived. There would be enough to do after they came to keep them all busy without preserving, Mrs. Morton declared. One day when they were seeding cherries, Marian noticed that Jane was eating only half ripe ones.

“What on earth are you eating those green things for, child?”

“Oh, just for fun.”

“Well, it won’t be funny if you eat many of them. I don’t know anything that’ll make you sick quicker than green cherries. They’re acid enough when they’re ripe.”

In the hurry of preparing for the guests, Marian thought nothing further about it. Three nights later, Dr. Morton wakened them at midnight to know if they had any calomel. “The Chicken’s mighty sick,” he said. “And I gave the last I had to Mrs. Benton for Mary.”

“I haven’t any calomel, Father, but I’ve got some castor oil,” Marian announced after some rummaging.

“That will go hard with Jane, she loathes it. But she’ll have to take it down I guess. I can’t imagine what ails her, she’s vomiting and has a high fever.”

A sudden recollection struck Marian.

“Maybe she has been eating too many cherries.”

“Ripe cherries oughtn’t to hurt her and they have been plentiful so long, I shouldn’t think she would overeat.”

“But I have seen her eating them when they weren’t ripe. I believe that’s what is the matter.”

“I hope so, I have been a little afraid of scarlet fever from her symptoms.” Dr. Morton seemed relieved.

When he had gone, Marian turned to Frank. She had been recalling several things and putting them together.

“Frank Morton, I verily believe that sister of yours has been eating half-ripe cherries for a penance.”

“Penance? Penance for what?”

“I don’t exactly know, but it has something to do with her running off to the Captain’s.”

“Well, if she’s as big a fool as all that, she deserves to have a stomach ache. Come, stop worrying.”

“But Frank, I’m afraid I’m the guilty one who suggested the idea to her. Goodness knows, I hadn’t the slightest intention of doing so.” Marian related the whole story.

“Well, Sis certainly gets queer notions into her head, but it may not be that at all. Anyhow, you can’t do anything to-night.”

A very pallid forlorn girl sat propped up in bed about noon the following day. The family, having discovered that it was nothing serious, and that she had probably brought it on by her own folly, were not sympathetic.

“What in the dickens did you want to go and eat green cherries for, when there were pounds and pounds of ripe ones going to waste on the trees?” Ernest’s look of utter disgust was hard to bear.

Frank came over with a handful of minute green walnuts interspersed with a choice assortment of gooseberries and green plums. He handed them to her with a mocking bow.

“In case you get hungry, Jane dear, I thought you might like to have a supply of your favorite food on hand.”

Chicken Little thanked him spunkily, but when the door closed behind⁷² him, she buried her face in the pillow and mourned over her woes.

“I’ll never try to be good again, so there, and I think they’re all just as mean as can be.”

Her pillow was getting wetter and wetter and her spirits closer and closer to zero, when the door gently opened and her father came in.

“Why Chicken Little, crying? This won’t do. Come, tell Father what’s the matter. You aren’t feeling worse, are you?”

Chicken Little swallowed hard and did her best to choke back the tears, but the tears having been distinctly encouraged for the past ten minutes had too good a start to be easily checked. Dr. Morton gathered her into his arms and patted and soothed her till she was able to summon a moist smile.

“Hurry up and tell me now—a trouble shared is a trouble half cured, you know.”

But Jane was beginning to be ashamed of herself.

“’Tisn’t anything really, Father, only I feel so miserable and the boys have been making fun of me.”

“Making fun, what about?”

“Oh, just because.”

“Because what, out with it!”

“Because I ate green cherries, I suppose.”

“How long have you been eating green cherries, Jane?”

Jane considered. “Most a week.”

“And don’t you think you deserve to be laughed at, for doing anything so foolish?”

“They didn’t laugh at the monks—and they were grown-up men.”

“Monks? What do you mean?”

“Well, I just guess they did things that made them sicker than eating green cherries, and I didn’t intend to eat enough to make me sick, but I didn’t seem to feel any sorrier and—”

Chicken Little was stopped suddenly by the expression of her Father’s face. He tried to control himself but the laugh would come.

When they had finally got the atmosphere cleared a bit, he inquired, still smiling: “Well, are you sorry now you went to the Captain’s?”

Chicken Little smiled back. “No, I’m just sorry I grieved Mother.”

“Then suppose we vote this penance idea a failure and don’t try it again.”

The next few days were so full of the bustle of preparation that Jane soon forgot she had ever been sick. Further, there was a mystery on foot. She and Ernest had not been permitted to accept the Captain’s invitation to dinner for reasons that Mrs. Morton explained with great care to that gentleman. But he had been invited over to dine with them. He was so reserved and silent on this occasion that both Mrs. Morton and Marian wondered at Jane’s devotion. After dinner he had a long conversation with Dr. Morton and Ernest, and no teasing on Jane’s part could extract the faintest hint from either as to what it had been about.

“It was about your going to Annapolis, I bet.”

“Nope, you’re a long way off. We didn’t say anything more than what you and Mother heard. Father’s written to the Senator. Captain Clarke got him all enthused; the Captain promised to write, too. But you’ll never guess the other, and it has something to do with you.”

She had been obliged to give it up. Ernest had at length reached an age where he could keep a secret. The exasperating part of it was that Ernest was going over to Captain Clarke’s every evening and she wasn’t asked once. Her pride was so hurt that she came near being sorry she had gone to see the Captain.

The evening before the fateful twentieth, Mrs. Morton and Jane were putting the last touches on the guest room and on Chicken Little’s own chamber, which Katy and Gertie were to share with her. The fresh fluted muslin curtains were looped back primly. The guest room had been

freshly papered with a dainty floral design, in which corn flowers and wheat ears clustered with faint hued impossible blossoms, known only to designers. Both rooms looked fresh and cool and summery, and the windows opening out upon the garden and orchard revealed also wide stretches of the prairie beyond.¹⁵

Chicken Little had re-arranged the furniture in her room at least six times in a resolute endeavor to get the best possible effect. Marian had given her a picture of some long stemmed pink roses that exactly matched the buds in her paper, and she had begged an old Japanese fan from her Mother. This was decorated with a remarkably healthy pink sunset on a gray green ground, and she tacked it up as a finishing touch above the bed lounge, which was destined to be a bone of contention among the three little girls for the remainder of the summer. At first, not one of the three was willing to be cast upon this desert island of a bed, while the other two were whispering secrets in the big walnut four-poster. But as the weather grew hotter, the advantages of sleeping alone became more obvious, and they had to settle the matter by taking turns. Chicken Little did her very best to make her room look like the Captain's, but except for her Mother's concession of fresh white paint, a few books on a shelf, and the foreign fan, it was hard to detect any very marked resemblance. Nevertheless, both Jane and her Mother gazed upon their handiwork with deep satisfaction.¹⁶

"If Annie will only stay through the summer," sighed Mrs. Morton, "she is doing so beautifully I'm afraid she is too good to last. But I mustn't borrow trouble. If she deserts me, our guests will simply have to turn in and help, much as I should dislike to have them."

Ernest came in to supper so excited he could scarcely eat. And Dr. Morton seemed almost as interested as Ernest. They were both provokingly mysterious during the entire meal, talking over Jane's head in a way that was maddening.

"Does Mother know?" she demanded finally.

"Yes, Mother knows. I tell Mother when I go over to the Captain's."

"Come now, Ernest, that's been harped on enough," said Dr. Morton, then turning to Jane, "If you will hurry and get into your riding habit, you shall know the secret inside of an hour."

It is needless to say that Chicken Little hurried. The black brilliantine skirt fairly flew over her head, the border of shot in its hem rapping her

rudely as it slid to the floor with a thud.

“Oh dear, I don’t see why girls have to wear such long, silly skirts and ride sidewise. It’s so much easier to ride man fashion.”

Chicken Little had been permitted to ride man fashion since she had⁷⁷ been on the ranch, for safety. But this year her Mother had decided she was too big to be playing the boy any longer, and had made her a woman’s habit, in spite of the Doctor’s protests. Jane was proud of the smart basque with its long tails and glittering rows of steel buttons, but she loathed the skirt.

Hastily fastening the black velvet band with its dangling jet fringe below her stiff linen collar, she cast a parting glance at the oval mirror and skurried down the stairs, not stopping for such small matters as gloves or cap or even her beloved riding whip. Ordinarily, she would not have budged without the whip. It had been a Christmas present from Ernest and was her special pride. Her haste was in vain. After one look, her Mother sent her back for cap and gloves. “I do not wish my daughter riding around bareheaded like some half wild thing. I don’t mind on the ranch, but when you go abroad I wish you to look like a lady.”

Jane reluctantly obeyed and did not forget the whip this time. She had a fresh rebuff when she reached the road. Instead of the saddle horses she expected to see, Dr. Morton and Ernest were awaiting her in the spring wagon.

“Why, Father, I thought you said to put on my riding habit.”

“Maybe I did. But never mind, jump in just as you are—it’s getting a⁷⁸ little late.”

Chicken Little tried to hide her disappointment. She maintained a dignified silence until they had crossed the ford and Ernest turned the horses toward Captain Clarke’s.

“Oh, it’s at the Captain’s.”

Her Father nodded and began talking carelessly to Ernest about putting the orchard in clover another year. She saw there was no information to be had, until he was good and ready. Ernest took pity on her, however, just as they turned in the Captain’s gate.

“In exactly six minutes you will see the surprise, even if you don’t recognize it.”

Chicken Little strained her eyes half expecting to see Katy or Gertie appear miraculously from nowhere. But they drove into the door yard

without seeing anything or anybody that could possibly interest her.

The Captain was evidently watching for them. He helped her down from the high wagon in his most courtly manner.

“I am consumed with curiosity to know whether you have pried the secret from that brother of yours. I infer you have from your habit.”

“Habit?” Jane glanced swiftly from her host’s quizzical face to her father and Ernest. They were both smiling broadly.

“Oh, it has something to do with horses—but—”

She never finished the sentence for at that moment one of the Captain’s hands appeared leading two Indian ponies, one a red and white piebald with a red blanket and side saddle; the other a black, with a blue blanket and a Mexican cowboy’s equipment.

She stared at the horses and she stared at the Captain, not daring to even hope what had come into her mind. Captain Clarke took the bridle off the piebald and held down his hand for her foot.

“Up with you, I have persuaded your Father to share his children with me to the extent of letting me add something to your pleasure and that of your guests this summer. Ernest, however, has left me his debtor in advance, for he has not only finished breaking these in to the saddle but he has tamed the worst-tempered colt on the place as well.”

Chicken Little was surprised to see Ernest flush up and stammer.

“Why I—I don’t want any pay—I was glad to help out a neighbor.”

“That’s exactly what I am going to ask you to do, my boy, to help me out by letting me feel that I can still give somebody pleasure. The ponies are part of a large herd I bought in Texas and cost me very little. I have argued this all out with your Father and he understands my feeling. Won’t you be as generous?”

Before Ernest could answer, Chicken Little reached up both arms and gave the speaker a hug and a kiss that were warm enough to satisfy the loneliest heart. Before she had released him, Ernest had hold of his hand and was trying to make up by the vigor of his hand shake for the embarrassing dumbness which had seized him.

Dr. Morton relieved the situation by remarking mischievously:

“Ask Ernest who’s surprised now, Chicken Little?”





CHAPTER V
THE GUESTS ARRIVE

THE GUESTS ARRIVE

The Morton family were up early the next morning. Jane was in a state of prickly excitement between her delight over her wonderful pony, all her very own, and the expected pleasure of seeing Katy and Gertie.

“If the others have grown as much as you kids, we shan’t recognize them,” said Frank.

“Anyhow, we can tell which bunch to cut out by Alice and Dick,” Ernest answered.

Mrs. Morton was horrified. “Ernest, the idea of your talking about our friends as if they were cattle! I do trust you children will not mortify me before our guests by using such vulgar expressions.”

“Never mind, Mother,” Frank consoled her, “Alice and Dick will revel in these vulgar westernisms. See if they don’t. Why Mother, it’s by slang that a language is enriched, didn’t you know that?”

“That will do, Frank. I should think you would try to help me keep up correct standards instead of hindering. You will feel very differently when Jilly is a little older.”

The train was due at two-thirty at the neighboring town of Garland—the neighboring town being some nine miles distant. They decided to have an early dinner at home, then Dr. Morton would drive the spring wagon in for the guests, Frank would take the farm wagon for the trunks, while Jane and Ernest formed a sort of ornamental body guard on their new ponies.

“My, but you present an imposing appearance!” laughed Marian coming out to the road with Jilly to see them off.

“We do look rather patriarchal,” said Frank, glancing around at the impressive array. “If we only had you and Mother mounted on donkeys, the reception committee would be complete. I will do my best to apologize for your absence.”

“If you are late, send Jane on ahead, they can see her a mile off on that calico pony.”

“The piebald is conspicuous,” said the Doctor, “I guess Captain Clarke picked him out for the Chicken so her mother could see her from afar.”

Chicken Little ignored this pleasantry. “Thank you for saying calico,⁸³ Marian. I was just wondering what to call him and that will do beautifully.”

“Oh, have some mercy on the poor beast,” put in Ernest. “Think of his having to answer to the name of Calico. Why don’t you call him gingham apron or something really choice?”

“Allee samee, his name’s Calico. If you want to call yours, Star of the Night or Aladdin or something high falutin, you just can.” Jane set her lips firmly. She didn’t specially care for Calico but she wasn’t going to be laughed out of it.

“That will do, children, it’s time to be off.” Dr. Morton suited the action to the word by clucking to the team of bays he drove, and the procession started.

They reached the station in good time. Both Ernest and Chicken Little wanted to stay on their mounts and dash up beside the train, but their father forbade it.

“Those ponies have never been properly introduced to an engine, and I don’t wish to take you back in baskets. You can show off sufficiently going home.”

So the ponies were left with the teams at a safe distance from the railroad.

The train was twenty minutes late and it seemed an age to Chicken Little. “I don’t see why you always have to wait for nice things, while the unpleasant ones come along without ever being asked,” she complained.⁸⁴

“What about the ponies? Do you class them with the unpleasant things?” queried her father. “But here comes the train.”

Jane watched it puff in with a roar and a rattle and sundry bangs, her eyes strained for the first glimpse of Katy and Gertie, Alice and Dick. She really didn’t know which one she wanted to see worst.

“Bet Sherm will be the first one out,” said Ernest.

“Bet you Katy will!”

But it was Dick who hailed them first, before he turned to help down the little girls. Alice came next, with Sherm who was still rather bashful, bringing up the rear loaded down with satchels and lunch baskets. Katy and Gertie fell upon Chicken Little instantly and Alice had to embrace the whole bunch, because they kept on hugging and kissing Jane, laughing hysterically.

“Here, where do I come in?” Dick rescued Jane from her friends and gave her a resounding smack himself. After which he held up his hands and exclaimed: “Say, Doctor Morton, what do you feed these infants on to make them grow so fast? Jane’s a half head taller than either Katie or Gertie and we thought Sherm would surely top Ernest. In fact, we had our money on him to beat any of your mushroom Kansas effects, but Holy Smoke, I have to look up to Ernest myself.”

Alice and Katie and Gertie were looking at Jane’s riding habit, Gertie in considerable alarm.

“We don’t have to ride to the ranch on horseback, do we?”

Before the doctor could reassure them, Frank replied gravely:

“Of course, what did you expect in Kansas? We’ve brought six horses and we thought two of the girls could ride in front of Dick and myself. It’s only nine miles and the horses don’t gallop all the way.”

The girls looked panic-stricken, even Alice seemed a little dazed, Frank was so very plausible. Dick helped him on delightfully.

“I told you, Alice, you’d better put your riding habit in your satchel. I suppose the horses are gentle, Frank.”

“Oh, they don’t often throw anyone that’s used to them. Naturally, they’re a little gayer in summer when they’re in the pasture so much.”

Ernest could not resist adding his bit. “I was thrown three times last week, would you like to try my pony, Katy?”

This revealed the game to Alice.

“You awful fibbers, don’t you believe a word they say, girls.”

“Honest Injun,” said Ernest, “I was.”

“It’s the truth,” Frank confirmed.

Poor little Gertie, who was already beginning to realize that she was very far from home and in a strange land besides, commenced to cry.

Dr. Morton came promptly to the rescue.

“That’ll do, boys. Save your joking till our guests are rested from their journey at least. Frank, you and Dick look up the trunks while Ernest and Sherm help me bring up the wagons. It’s all right, dear,” he put his arm reassuringly around Gertie, “you shall ride in one of the most comfortable of vehicles if we haven’t a carriage to offer you. You mustn’t pay any attention to their teasing.”

After the first two miles of their homeward journey, Chicken Little gave up her pony to Sherm and climbed in with the girls. Ernest offered

to change saddles, but Sherm declared he didn't mind the side saddle and cheerfully bore all the jokes the party cut at his expense. Dr. Morton watched him approvingly. "Good stuff," he said to himself, as Sherm returned the sallies without wincing. The boy's long legs dangling from the side saddle were a comical sight. Sherm, if not quite so tall as Ernest, was rather better proportioned and delightfully supple and muscular. He was the same matter-of-fact, straight-forward boy he had always been,⁸⁷ but his father's long illness had sobered him, though he could be hilarious, as he was proving now.

"Say, Sherm," Katy prodded, "why don't you borrow Jane's riding skirt too?"

"Yes, Sherm, go the lengths—you'd make a beautiful girl," teased Alice. Sherm laughed. "Chicken Little may have something to say to that!"

"I thought you'd be making excuses."

Sherm was not to be bluffed. "Not much, hand it over, Chicken Little."

"You never can get into it, Sherm."

"What'll you bet?"

"It'll be too small around the waist."

Dr. Morton stopped and Jane hastily slipped off the skirt, presenting rather a funny appearance herself with her habit basque and the blue lawn dress showing beneath. Sherm dismounted, turning Calico over to Ernest to hold. The entire party shouted when Jane reached up on tiptoe to throw the clumsy skirt over his head. Sherm neglected to hold it, and the shot in the hem promptly dropped it to the ground.

"Gee," exclaimed Sherm, "the cranky thing seems to have a mind of its own."

"I don't know what the girls want to wear the pesky things for," grumbled Ernest.

"They don't want to wear them—but their pernicky brothers and fathers and husbands consider them modest," Alice hit back promptly.⁸⁸

"I consider them very dangerous," said Dr. Morton.

While this bantering was going on, Chicken Little was vainly endeavoring to fasten the band around Sherm's waist.

"You'll just have to squeeze in, Sherm. I can never make it meet," she giggled.

"I'm squeezing in, I tell you."

With a triumphant pull, Jane got the band buttoned and Sherm heaved a sigh of relief—a disastrous sigh—it sent the button flying and the weighted skirt once more slid to the ground.

“Drat it!” Sherm groaned.

“Now, you said you’d wear it. Don’t let him back out, Chicken Little,” Katy urged.

“Who said anything about backing out?”

“You’ll have to get a string, Jane. Haven’t you a piece in your pocket, Frank?”

Frank produced the string and by dint of using it generously, the skirt was finally secured and Sherm still allowed some breathing room.

But the girls were not yet satisfied. Katy insisted upon lending him her leghorn hat and Alice contributed a veil. Gertie offered a hair ribbon which Chicken Little slyly pinned to the collar of Sherm’s coat.

He was a sight for the gods when he finally remounted. But he carried it off with a dash, assuming various kittenish airs and coquetries, even waving saucily at two cowboys who passed them and turned to stare in bewilderment at his bizarre costume.

The ride home passed quickly with all this fun. Gertie cheered up and enjoyed the prairie sights as much as the others. Gertie seemed the same little girl of three years before except for her added inches, but Katy had many little grown-up airs and graces and evidently felt the importance of her fourteen years.

“Almost fifteen,” she answered Dr. Morton when he inquired her age. The two girls were dressed alike still, but Katy managed in some subtle way to give her clothes a different air from Gertie’s. “I don’t know just what the difference is,” Marian remarked to Alice a day or two after their coming, “but Katy is stylish and Gertie demurely sweet in the self-same dress.”

“Personality will out, even in children,” Alice replied. “They are both unusually bright and well brought up, but Katy is ambitious and likes to cut a bit of a dash, and Gertie doesn’t. She is a home and mother girl. I am amazed that she screwed up her courage to come so far without her mother. I fear she is already a trifle homesick, though she is enjoying every minute, and is enchanted with the chickens and pups and all this outdoor life.”

Chicken Little found out these things more gradually. On the long ride home from the station they chattered busily. All three felt a little shy for the first minutes but there was so much to tell. Katy had finished her freshman year in the High School and spun great tales of their doings. Carol had graduated the week before.

“He is awfully handsome, Chicken Little. All the girls are mashed on him.”

“Are what, Katy?” demanded Alice who had been listening to Dick and Dr. Morton with one ear open for the girl’s confidences. She felt rather responsible to Mrs. Halford for Katy and Gertie.

Katy colored. “I don’t care, Alice, that’s what all the girls say, and I can’t be goody-goody and proper all the time.”

“All right, Katy, if you think Mother likes that kind of slang, I don’t mind.”

Katy didn’t say anything further to Alice, but when she resumed her story to Jane, she said: “Well, I don’t care what you call it, but they all are! And he just smiles in that lazy way of his and doesn’t put himself out for anybody. He didn’t even take a girl to the senior party, and lots of the Senior girls had to go in a bunch because they didn’t have an escort.”

“But he had awfully good marks,” added Gertie, “and Prof. Slocum⁹¹ said he could have been Valedictorian just as well as not if he had tried a little harder.”

“That’s the trouble—he’s too lazy to try. I guess if he goes to the Naval Academy as he wants to, he’ll have to get over being lazy.” Katy evidently wasted no sympathy on Carol.

The mention of the Naval Academy fired Jane. She shouted the news to Ernest who was some distance ahead with Sherm.

“Yes, Sherm’s just told me,” he called back, “wouldn’t it be scrumptious if we both got to go?”

“Oh, is Ernest going?” Katy and Alice and Dick all exclaimed nearly in unison.

Chicken Little told them all about Ernest’s plans and about the Captain. Katy wished to call on this fascinating individual immediately. But Dr. Morton suggested that he thought they would all be tired enough to rest for the remainder of the day by the time they arrived at the ranch. They were, but not too tired to enjoy Mrs. Morton’s hearty country supper.

Dick ate hot biscuit and creamed potatoes and fried chicken till Alice declared she shouldn't have the face to stay a month, if he gorged like that all the time.

"You'll stop keeping tab on his appetite before you have been here⁹² many days, Alice. You'll be busy satisfying your own. You will find country air a marvellous tonic," Dr. Morton assured her.

They were all amused to see Katy looking in shocked amazement at Gertie who had just been persuaded to have a second heaping saucer of raspberries and cream. To be sure, Katy herself had had two drumsticks and a breast. But she considered being served twice to dessert away from home highly improper.

"I wish it were a little later in the season so Ernest could bring us in quail for you," said Mrs. Morton.

"Quail?" Dick's face lighted. "Is the hunting still good around here?"

"Excellent for quail and prairie chicken, and the plover are plentiful at certain seasons," Dr. Morton replied.

"They found two deer on the creek last winter," added Ernest.

"Yes, there are a few strays left but the day for them has practically gone by."

"Dick, if you go hunting you've got to take me." Alice put her hands on her husband's shoulders and rested her chin on his hair.

"Barkus is willing if you can stand the tramp."

"We don't tramp, we drive. It's a trifle too early for hunting, but by the latter part of next week, you might try it. You can take the boys and spring wagon and have an all-day picnic. I can spare them, and Ernest for a guide."⁹³

"Can we all go?" Katy started up excitedly.

"Of course, I can shoot a little," Chicken Little sounded patronizing.

"Yes, Chicken Little can shoot but she never hits anything—she always shuts her eyes before she pulls the trigger," Ernest called her down promptly.

"It's no such thing, Ernest Morton, I killed a quail once, didn't I, Father?"

"Dick, if you'll come and unrope our trunks, I think we'd better be getting our things out," said Alice an hour later.

"Yours to command, Captain. I am perishing to have Chicken Little see my present."

“Yes, Jane, what do you think? Dick had to go and pick you out a gift all by himself—he wasn’t satisfied with my efforts. And he has the impudence to insist that you will like his best.”

“We’ve got a package for you, too, but I don’t know what’s in it. Mother wouldn’t let us see. Let’s go unpack quick, Gertie, and find out.”

“And I want to show my trousseau! Shall I get it out to-night, Mrs. Morton, or wait till morning?”

“To-night, Alice,” spoke up Marian, “I want to see it and I’ll be busy in the morning. I am pining to see some pretty clothes.”

Dick had already vanished into the upper regions and he called down airily: “Doors open, ladies. World renowned aggregation of feminine wearing apparel, including one pair of the very latest hoops and the youngest thing in bustles, now on exhibition.”⁹⁴

Mrs. Morton looked shocked, and Marian and Alice tried to control their amusement. “The heathen, I warned him to be good.” Alice laughed in spite of herself with an apologetic glance at Mrs. Morton. The girls had bolted upstairs at the first words of Dick’s invitation.

“Come on, Mother, don’t mind Dick’s nonsense,” said Marian, linking her arm in hers and gently drawing her up. “It will do you good to see Alice’s pretty things.”

Dick held the door open for them with a deep salaam. Alice held up a finger warningly with an imperceptible gesture in Mrs. Morton’s direction. He shrugged his shoulders repentantly.

“Now, Alice, if you’ll just dig out my particular parcel I’ll vamoose. Women complain that men never take an interest in their affairs and then if a misguided chap tries to act intelligent, he is snubbed.” Dick’s tone sounded injured.

Alice kissed the tip of his ear and shoved him out of the way. “You’re so big, Dick, there’s never room for anyone else when you’re around.”

Alice deftly opened trays and lids, pulling out protecting papers; she⁹⁵ handed Dick a large flat parcel.

Dick received it with his hand on his heart, then striking an oratorical attitude, addressed Jane in the formal tone he used in court.

“Ladies, Miss Chicken Little Jane Morton, I have the great honor on this suspicious occasion to present to you on behalf of my unworthy self, a slight testimonial of my deep respect and undying affection—Alice, stop winking at Marian—Mrs. Morton, is it fitting for a wife to stop the flow of

her husband's eloquence by winking? I wish you'd take Alice in hand. I think she needs some lessons in the proprieties. As I was saying, I wish to present this trifle to you, and the only expression of gratitude I desire in return, is thirty kisses to be delivered one daily, on or before the twelfth hour of each day, to which witness my seal and hand."

With another bow, he resigned the parcel to Chicken Little.

She promptly tendered one kiss in advance. Then stripped off the papers with eager fingers. A charming white leghorn hat appeared. It was faced with pale blue and trimmed with knots of apple blossoms and black velvet ribbon.

"How charming!" exclaimed Mrs. Morton.

"Dick, I didn't suppose you had such good taste!" added Marian. 96

"Try it on quick, Chicken Little."

Chicken Little's shining eyes and clear, fair skin fitted like a charm under the pale blue.

Dick was jubilant. "I saw that hat in a shop window and I thought it looked exactly like Chicken Little. Who says a man can't pick out a hat?"

He departed without waiting for any disparaging remarks.

Alice's present came next, a charming muslin with sash and hair ribbons the exact shade of the blue hat facing.

"If it only fits, Jane. I left some to let out in the hem, but you are bigger every way than I thought. I tried it on Katie."

"Changing it a little at the waist will make it perfect," Marian reassured her.

"Oh, I am so glad it is snug, and just the right length, Alice. Mother—" Chicken Little stopped suddenly, she couldn't be criticising mother before company. "You see I grow so dreadfully fast that Mother has to make everything too big so it'll last a while."

Marian supplemented this explanation later to Alice.

"Poor child, Mother Morton does make her clothes too big! And it doesn't do a bit of good for they hang on her the whole season and by the next they're either worn or faded—and she generally manages to out-grow them, in spite of their bigness." 97

The girl's parcel was found to contain candy and a duck of a fan.

But Alice's wedding things soon put everything else in the shade. The dainty sets of underwear with their complicated puffs and insertings,

frilled petticoats, silk and muslin and poplin gowns, hats and parasols, lay in a rainbow colored heap on the bed and chairs.

“Alice,” said Marian, caressing some of the dainty lingerie, “who is going to iron all these puffs and ruffles? It would take hours to do them right, especially the petticoats.”

“I know, Marian—I asked Aunt Clara the same question. And do you know what I have done?”

Her audience looked interested.

“I just went down town the minute I got to Centerville and got some nice strong muslin and I’ve been making it up perfectly plain except for a tiny edge. They are heaps more comfortable—and I wear these others for best. Why, I couldn’t keep a maid and hurl all that stuff at her every week!”

“Are they wearing hoops pretty generally?” Mrs. Morton inquired as Alice laughingly held a pair up for inspection.

“Yes, and bustles too. See this buff poplin with the panniers just has to have a bustle. Thank goodness they’re young yet, as Dick says, but I suppose they’ll keep on getting bigger.”⁹⁸

“Oh, I should think they’d be so hot and horrid.”

“They are, but the hoops are delightfully cool, only you have to be on your guard with the treacherous things or they swing up in front when you sit down, in a most mortifying fashion.”

“I have a pair to wear with my muslin dresses—it makes them stand out beautifully,” said Katy complacently. “But Mother wouldn’t let Gertie have any. She said she was too young.”

“I didn’t want the old things,” Gertie protested. “And you wouldn’t have got yours if you hadn’t teased perfectly awful, and I heard Mother say she guessed you’d soon be sick enough of them.”

“I agree entirely with your mother, Gertie, I consider them unsuitable for little girls. But they do set off a handsome dress to advantage. I remember during the war we used to wear such large ones we could hardly get through a door with them.”

“Mother Morton, I bet you were a lot more frivolous than we are now.” Marian put her hand lovingly on the wrinkled one that was smoothing the folds of a rich silk.

Mrs. Morton smiled. “Well, we had our pretty things. Alice’s dresses are lovely, but she hasn’t anything more elegant than my second day”⁹⁹

dress. It was a brown and silver silk brocade with thread lace chemisette and under sleeves. And my next best was apple green and pink changeable, trimmed in yards and yards of narrow black velvet ribbon all sewed on by hand.”

“How I should love to have seen them!” Alice smiled wistfully. “You know I didn’t have any of my mother’s things.”

“Come on, girls, it’s getting late, let’s help Alice put her treasures away. They couldn’t be nicer, Alice, and I think you are going to be a very happy woman to make up for that desolate girlhood of yours.”

Marian was already folding the garments. They were soon laid away snugly in trunk and closet and drawers, and the whole family packed off to bed to be ready for the early farm breakfast on the morrow.





CHAPTER VI
A HUNTING
PARTY

A HUNTING PARTY

The day following the arrival of the guests was spent in resting and seeing the ranch. Katy and Gertie had never been on a large farm before, and the thousand acres of field and prairie and woodland, seemed as marvellous as the tales they had read of the big English estates. Alice and Dick were also fascinated by all this space and freedom, but they saw deeper than the little girls.

“It’s a wonderful place,” said Dick, “and I don’t wonder the Doctor is proud of it. But he is too well along in years to handle such a big undertaking. I doubt if the ranch pays for ten years to come, and it means hard work and a lonely life for all of them. It’s all right for Frank and Marian, but I’m sorry for the rest of the family.”

“Mrs. Morton is growing old fast with all this unaccustomed drudgery,¹⁰¹ and she is worried about the children’s education, I can see,” replied Alice.

“Yes, there are two sides to it. I guess we’ll stick to the law and little old Centerville; we may not die rich, but we’ll be a lot more comfortable as we go along.”

Sherm took to the farm like the proverbial duck to the pond. He donned overalls that first morning and was off with Frank and Ernest to the fields before the little girls were out of bed. After breakfast Jane took Katie and Gertie to see the sights of the ranch. First to the spring under the old oak where the cold, clear water gushed from the rocks into a little basin, and then tumbled down a rocky channel under the springhouse and on for some hundred of yards farther before it widened out into the pond.

“We can go swimming in the pond but there is a nicer place in the creek above the ford.”

“Oh, I’d love to learn to swim but we haven’t any bathing suits.”

“Pooh, that doesn’t matter, we just take some old dresses—there isn’t anybody to see you, especially down at the creek. You know it’s private ground and the trees hang over the pool all around so the sun only comes in a little bit. We’ll get Marian to go with us.”

“I should think you could skate, too.”

“We do. I had a great time once last winter—Father told me the ice was too thin, but I saw a yearling calf go over all right and I thought the ice would bear me. But I guess calfie had more sense about the weak places. At any rate, I went through, near the middle. The water was up to my shoulders. Gee, it was cold and the ice kept breaking when I tried to climb out—and the men were all away. I most froze before I got to the bank, and then my skate straps were so wet I couldn’t loosen them, besides my fingers were too numb to bend. I had to walk on the skates all the way to the house. My teeth chattered till they almost played tunes by the time I got to the door.” Chicken Little shivered at the recollection.

“What’s the cunning little stone house for?” Gertie’s attention was caught by a tiny hut without windows on the edge of the pond.

“Oh, that’s the smokehouse. We’re so far from town that we put away a lot of meat every winter. The hams and sides of bacon are smoked there.”

“And that wooden building over yonder?”

“The granary—for the wheat and rye. Those open log houses are the corn cribs.”

“My, it takes a lot of buildings to make a ranch.” Katy was impressed in spite of herself.

“We haven’t been to the barns and corrals yet. I love the hay mow.”

Chicken Little had not forgotten lumps of sugar for Calico and Caliph. Ernest had given his pony a high-sounding name. The intelligent beast was proud and dainty enough to deserve it. He was shy about coming for his lump, but when he once got the taste, he nosed around Chicken Little for more.

They ended the morning’s wanderings in Jane’s own particular bower, known to the family as the Weeping Willows because she had once retired there to cry out her troubles, and had been discovered in a very moist state by Frank, who was a merciless tease.

There were two rows of the old willows. They formed a long leafy room on the edge of one of the orchards, out of sight both of the house and road. Chicken Little had been known to flee thither on more than one occasion when she did not wish to be disturbed in the thrilling place in a novel. For you really couldn’t hear any one calling from the house in this leafy fastness. Ernest had made her two or three rustic seats, and a little cupboard where she could keep her treasures sheltered from the sun and rain.

Katy and Gertie were charmed with this retreat.

“If there was only a table, I could write all my letters home out here. Wouldn’t it be romantic?” Katy loved the unusual.

“It’s lovely, Jane, let’s stay out here lots.” Gertie settled down on one of the seats with a little sigh. “I wish I had my old doll here; it would make such a dandy playhouse.”

“Gertie Halford, the idea of a great, big girl like you wanting to play with dolls.”

“I get Victoria out sometimes and dress her up,” confessed Jane. “It isn’t much fun all alone, but I like to see her sometimes. If you’d like to, Gertie, we’ll have a doll sewing bee this afternoon and you can be Victoria’s mother and Katie and I will be dressmaker’s though I never could sew decently. Mother’s about given me up in despair.”

Chicken Little had noticed a little far-away look in Gertie’s eyes ever since she came. Marian had warned her the night before that she had better keep Gertie pretty busy for a day or two, or she would be homesick.

Unfortunately, Chicken Little’s kindness precipitated the catastrophe she was trying to avoid. She was so motherly she reminded Gertie afresh of the dear little mother she had left so many miles behind and the tears came in spite of her.

Chicken Little coaxed and comforted, and Katy coaxed and scolded, but Gertie’s tears were apparently turned on for keeps and the Weeping Willows was earning its name again. Gertie cried till she got all shivery, declaring solemnly whenever she could command her voice sufficiently to talk, that there wasn’t a thing the matter—only—only—she—was a little bit homesick.

She wouldn’t hear to Jane’s going to fetch Alice or Mrs. Morton or Marian. “She’d be all right in a minute, if they’d just let her alone.”

But the minutes went by and she still cried, and in spite of the warm June sunshine, her hands felt cold and her shoulders shook as if with an ague. Chicken Little and Katy were both getting worried when help came in the shape of Marian and Jilly.

Marian understood at a glance, and dropping to the ground beside her, drew her into her lap and chafed the cold hands while she bade Jilly hug poor Gertie. Jilly was a born comforter and she half smothered the patient with her energetic hugs and moist, warm kisses.

“Too bad, too bad—ants bite Gertie, too bad! Jilly fine ’em.”

Jilly had not forgotten her own sad experience with the ants and not seeing any visible cause for Gertie’s woes, evidently thought they were the guilty ones again.

Jilly was irresistible. Gertie had to laugh, even if the tears running down her face, did leave a salty taste in her mouth. She hugged the small comforter. Jilly, however, was not to be turned from her hunt. She insisted upon pulling down Gertie’s stockings and making a minute search for the culprits. Her little tickling fingers and earnest air completed Gertie’s cure,¹⁰⁶ and Jilly adopted her as her own particular property from that day on, seeming to consider her in need of protection.

Marian declared they must all come and have dinner with her. Ernest and Sherm were already there and they had a merry meal in the little cottage, for Marian made them all help—even the big boys. She tied a blue apron around Sherm and set him to stirring gravy while Ernest watched four cherry pies almost ready to come out of the oven. She had despatched Katy and Jane to the springhouse after milk and butter. Gertie, assisted by Jilly, set the table.

Sherm had burned a nice fiery red during his morning’s plowing. He was immensely proud of his efforts.

“I tell you Sherm’s some farmer for a tenderfoot,” said Ernest, telling about the number of corn rows he had done.

“Better come stay with us, Sherm.”

“Haven’t I come—I love the ranch. But I suppose I’ve got four years of college ahead of me.”

“You’ll have time enough after that, Sherm,” said Frank, “but if you should want to try ranching, you’d better come out this way.”

“No ranching for me.” Ernest thumped the table with his fork emphatically. “You can have my berth, Sherm, and welcome. The only¹⁰⁷ thing I care for here, is the hunting. By the way, Frank, are you and Marian going hunting with us?”

“I’d like to. What do you say, Marian?”

“Why, if there’s room for so many.”

“I wish we could ask Captain Clarke,” Chicken Little spoke up.

“My, you are daffy about the Captain, Jane. He wouldn’t go—you couldn’t hire him to if he knew Alice and I were to be of the party. Queer

he is so charming with Jane, and with the men and boys, and so very reserved and stiff with women.”

“He probably has some reason for disliking your sex. Perhaps, if we’d let him go with the children and the boys, he might be persuaded to come. He’d only see you at luncheon time. What’s the matter, Katie?”

“I’m not a child,” said Katy with dignity.

“All right, you may come with us grown-ups and let the Captain have the children and the boys.”

“You’d better find out whether the Captain is willing before you plan so definitely, Frank.”

“We’ll send Chicken Little and Sherm over on the ponies as a special deputation to invite him. You must coax your prettiest, Sis.”

“I’d love to. I just know I can get him to come. Will you go with me, Sherm?”

“Nothing I’d like better,” responded Sherm heartily.

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The next few days fairly twinkled by. The girls roamed the woods and the fields with Dick and Alice, and went in bathing, and fed chickens, and even made little pats of butter down in the cool springhouse. Gertie mourned because she could not send hers home straightway to Mother. Chicken Little and Sherm waited until Sunday to go over to the Captain’s.

Sherm found Caliph and the Mexican saddle rather more to his taste than Chicken Little’s outfit had been on the ride from town. He had about all he could do for the first five minutes to manage Caliph for he had had little opportunity for riding at home. But he had a cool head, and with a few suggestions from Jane, he soon convinced Caliph that he had a new master as determined as Ernest, if not quite so skilful a horseman. They did not talk much. Sherm considered Jane a little girl and Jane stood rather in awe of Sherm. But they enjoyed the brisk ride none the less. The swift motion with the wind in their faces, the wide stretches of prairie bounded on the distant horizon by a faint line of timber, were novel and delightful to Sherm. To Jane, they were familiar and dearly loved. Besides, she liked having Sherm with her.

He glanced at her from time to time. Chicken Little glanced back with sweet, friendly eyes. It was she who finally broke the ice.

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“I do hope the Captain will go. I’m most sure he’ll like you, because his little boy looked a lot like you. He showed me the picture.”

“He seems to like you all right from what they say.”

Chicken Little laughed merrily.

Sherm couldn't quite see the connection.

"Well, what's so funny about that?"

"Will you cross your heart never to tell, Sherm? Frank and Ernest would tease the life out of me if they knew."

"Cut my heart out and eat it, if I ever breathe a word."

Chicken Little related the swearing episode which she had not seen fit to trouble even Marian with, at home. "I guess," she concluded, "he felt sort of sorry for me right at the start and that made him like me."

"'Twouldn't be such a hard job as you seem to think, Jane," Sherm surprised himself by saying.

Chicken Little flushed and looked up hastily at Sherm who also felt his face getting warm to his great disgust. Sherm hated softies of any kind.

"Oh, I believe there's the Captain now over by the pasture fence."

Captain Clarke was riding round the pastures inspecting the barbed wire fencing. He soon hailed them.

"Hello, Little Neighbor, is the piebald behaving himself?"

Jane introduced Sherm as soon as they came abreast.

"Captain Clarke, this is Ernest's friend, the Sherman Dart I told you about."

Captain Clarke scanned the boy's face curiously. His own went a little white after an instant's inspection.

"You are right—he is marvellously like what my boy might be to-day. I beg your pardon for my rude scrutiny. Possibly Jane has told you of the resemblance. You will come up to the house and let Wing give you some lemonade. It is hot this afternoon."

Chicken Little declined to take him from his course and told him their errand. He hesitated. "You say Mr. and Mrs. Harding and your brother and his wife are going. Would you think me very rude and unappreciative if I declined, dear? I am poor company for anyone these days and—"

Chicken Little looked so disappointed that he paused ruefully.

"Please, just this once, Katie and Gertie want to see you dreadfully and you could go with us. Pretty please."

She thought she saw signs of weakening. Sherm also noticed the Captain's hesitation.

"We've all sort of set our hearts on having you, Sir. Chicken Little and Ernest have talked so much about you we feel acquainted, and Dr.

Morton says you're a dead shot. I've never hunted anything but squirrels myself."

Captain Clarke stared at Sherm as if in a dream for a minute. The boy was embarrassed by his silence and smiled his little crooked smile to cover it. Their host passed his hand over his eyes and sighed. Then he smiled.

"It's no disgrace to surrender to a superior force. I am yours to command. But I stipulate that you two stand by me."

Chicken Little gave a bounce in her saddle to emphasize her delight and Calico took this as a hint to go on.

"Whoa, Calico! Thank you—bushels! Oh, I just know we'll have the best time! Would you mind if we children all went with you because nobody's going to be willing to be left out?"

"I can take five nicely and have plenty of room for guns and lunch baskets besides. By the way, please tell your mother that Wing Fan will never forgive me if he is not permitted to get up the lunch for all the young people at the very least."

"Have you a gun with you?" he asked Sherm as they were going. 112

"No, but Ernest said I might take his."

"I have a new shotgun. I should be glad if you would share it with me."

They found Alice and Dick, Marian, Katie, Gertie and Jilly, not to mention Huz and Buz, waiting for them on the Morton side of the ford.

"What luck?"

Sherm didn't give Jane a chance to reply.

"Oh, Chicken Little just put on her company smile and the Captain held out his hands and said: 'Handcuffs, please.'" He was meeker than Buz.

"Sherman Dart, you old—" Chicken Little flicked Caliph lightly by way of revenge, and Sherm had his hands full for several seconds, for Caliph resented the indignity.

It was arranged to start early the following Saturday morning. Mrs. Morton and Annie were up soon after daylight busy with the mysteries of fried chicken and fresh rolls. The men of the party were equally busy cleaning guns and routing out all sorts of hunting toggery. The girls tried to help everybody impartially, succeeding for the most part in making a general nuisance of themselves.

At exactly seven-thirty Captain Clarke drove up with a wonderful team of blacks. His hunting jacket was belted in with a formidable looking cartridge belt, two shotguns were slid in on the floor of the spring wagon, and lunch baskets and a great earthenware jug of lemonade were wedged in under the seats. He gave a shrill hunting halloo as he drew up at the gate.

Mrs. Morton was a little disturbed at the gay looking team.

“Are you quite sure they are safe with the guns? You know young people are often reckless and this is a very precious load.”

“My dear madam, I think I can answer for Jim and Jerry. I took them out for an hour yesterday and used the gun over their heads to make sure they hadn’t forgotten their manners.”

The Captain met the strangers of the party in his usual courteous reserved fashion, but his eyes lighted when Chicken Little ran down the walk. He established Ernest and Katie and Gertie on the back seat and swung Jane up in front to the driver’s seat with Sherm on her left.

“Ernest, I’ll handle the ribbons going, if it suits you, and you can drive us back. I have an idea you will have the sharpest eye for game of any of this crowd. We ought to do our best work the next two hours for snipe. We probably won’t find many prairie chickens until we get over on Little John. By the way, boys, be careful not to disturb the mother birds—there are still some on the nests. I really don’t like to hunt quite so early in the season as this, although a good many of the young birds are shifting for themselves already—bird parents have a beautiful faith in Providence. They don’t worry long about their young.”

A light shower had fallen the night before and the air was fresh and fragrant with the smell of wet grasses and moist earth.

The rattle of wheels close behind assured them that Frank and his load were near.

“Kansas certainly takes the cake for climate,” Dick called to them, happily reckless about corrupting the young folk with his slang. Alice promptly reproached him.

“Mrs. Morton would send you home by the first train if she heard you.”

Dick assumed an air of mock woe. “Oh, I say there, Chicken Little, don’t mention that little matter of the cake—that particular cake isn’t respectable, Alice says.”

It was Frank who got the first shot.

“Here, Marian, take the lines quick. Hold them tight—they may jump when I fire. Turn out of the road—to the right—slowly now. Stop!”

Frank drew the gun to his shoulder and took careful aim while the others were still vainly trying to see something to shoot at. A snap, a flash, and a bird whirred up a hundred paces away, flew a few feet from the ground, and fell.

Frank ran to the spot and held up a good-sized plover. Marian and Alice examined it pitifully.

“What a slender delicate thing it is! It seems a shame to kill it. I like the excitement of hunting but I always want to cry over the victims,” said Alice with a sigh.

Sherm caught sight of a covey soon after. He and Ernest slipped out of the wagon and stole up as close as possible. Ernest got two with the scattering bird shot, but Sherm missed.

“You were too anxious, lad. Stop an instant always before you fire to make sure your hand is steady,” the Captain consoled him kindly.

Sherm profited by this advice and brought down his next bird. Captain Clarke left the game to the boys until their first zest for the sport was satisfied. Chicken Little frequently discovered the birds before either of the boys, and was eager to have a turn herself, as was also Katy. Gertie put her hands to her ears every time a gun was fired and openly hoped they wouldn’t find any more game to shoot at. Captain Clarke advised the girls to wait a little, and watch the boys carefully to see exactly how they aimed and rested their guns, and he would help them both a little later. But Ernest soon undertook Katie’s education and was surprised to find he had a very apt pupil. Katy had as steady a nerve and as true an eye as either of the boys. Ernest began to be alarmed lest his pupil win his honors away from him.

“You must have shot before, Katy.”

“I have with a revolver. Uncle Sim used to let me shoot at a target. And he had an archery club last summer.”

The Captain did his best for Chicken Little but she did not do nearly so well as Katy, though she made one shot the Captain considered quite extraordinary.

“It’s a pretty long range for a novice, little neighbor, but you can try it.”

Two birds flew up where she had seen one. “Oh, dear, I missed,” she lamented.

“I’m not so sure,” said Sherm. “Let’s go see.”

He helped her down and they made a brisk run toward the spot where the grouse had risen. After a few minutes, Sherm stooped and picked up a bird considerably to the right of where Chicken Little had aimed.

“Well, I’ll be jiggered!” he exclaimed with a puzzled expression. “You did get one.”

He stood looking down thoughtfully at the ground. Chicken Little hurried to him elated, but her joy was short-lived. Snuggled among the grasses was an empty nest.

“Oh, do you ’spose she was on the nest? But I couldn’t have seen her ^{if} she had been—and it’s empty.”

By way of reply, Sherm stooped again and picked up a baby grouse from a clump of weeds. Fear had frozen it into a motionless wee brown image.

“Oh, the poor little darling! I took its mother.” Chicken Little looked ready to cry.

Bending down Sherm parted the weeds and grasses cautiously.

“Here’s another—and another. We must hunt them, Chicken Little, and take them home or they will all starve. Gee, what can we put them in?”

Jane slipped her hat elastic from under her braid, and taking a handful of long grass to line it with, soon made a snug nest. They tucked the mottled downy bunches into it.

“What in Sam Hill are you people doing over there?” called Ernest.

“Little grouse—come help us find them,” Sherm called back. “Be careful now or you’ll step on them,” he warned as Ernest and the girls came running up. “They are the slyest little codgers—you don’t see them until you are right on them.”

Gertie was on her knees peering before the words were out of his mouth. She lifted a fourth mite from its hiding place, and a fifth, and a sixth, almost as fast as she could pick them up. “Oh, aren’t they dear?⁸ May I hold them, Jane, when we get back to the wagon?” Gertie was caressing them with hands and eyes.

There were ten chicks cuddled in the hat, when after a thorough search of the weeds, Ernest announced that they must surely have them all. But to make sure they went over the ground in all directions once more.

Jane was very sober. Sherm tried to cheer her.

“You couldn’t help it, Chicken Little. You didn’t mean to.” Sherm smiled his funny smile as he said this.

“Why are you smiling? Oh, I know—I believe so, too.”

“What secrets are you talking?” Katy was curious.

“Yes, speak United States, it isn’t polite to leave your guests in the dark this way,” growled Ernest.

Jane haughtily declined to explain just then. When they returned to the wagon, they found the Captain as much interested in the shot, as he was in the prairie chicks.

“That was really a wonderful hit, little girl. I congratulate you.”

Jane stole a glance at Sherm. He wasn’t looking at her, but he was smiling. Jane smiled, too.

“Yes, Captain Clarke,” she replied demurely, “it was rather astonishing.”

This was too much for Sherm who chuckled openly. Captain Clarke¹¹⁹ looked from one to the other inquiringly. The others were completely mystified.

“Well, I’d just like to know what you two are up to.” Katy wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Can’t a fellow laugh without having to give an account of himself?” Sherm parried, still trying to stave off the mirth that possessed him.

Chicken Little’s face was sweetly sober. “He’s appreciating my—skill—the rest of you don’t seem to realize what a feat—” A sound, something between a crow and a suppressed steam whistle interrupted her. Sherm whooped until he was red in the face. Chicken Little regarded him reproachfully, but continued: “You see most anybody can hit the chicken they aim at, but it takes a fine shot to hit one you didn’t know was there.” She grinned mischievously up at the Captain who grinned back delightedly.

“Really, Chicken Little?”

“Really.” She joined in the general laugh.

“What did you want to tell for?” Sherm had enjoyed having the joke to himself.

She didn’t answer then, but later she whispered: “Because the Captain—I didn’t want him praising me that way!”

Noon found them fifteen miles from home with a bag of six snipe and ten prairie chickens, and appetites that fairly clamored. Frank found an ideal camping place in a grove of walnut trees beside a small creek.

“I camped here once two years ago and there’s a fine spring somewhere near. Come along, Katie, we’ll go hunt it. Ernest, picket the horses—there’s oats under the back seat. And Sherm, if you’ll just start a fire for the coffee.”

Marian and Alice spread the luncheon out on a long tablecloth laid over the dust robes on the ground. Gertie and Chicken Little fed the little grouse with some moistened bread crumbs, finding it difficult at first to induce them to eat. But they would swallow, when the girls pried open their tiny beaks and stuck a crumb inside. Captain Clarke showed them how, and patiently helped them until each tiny craw was at least partly filled.

Marian and Alice watched him furtively.

“He is gentle as a woman,” Alice whispered, “and his face lights up wonderfully when he smiles, though it is stern usually.”

“Yes, I can see now why Jane is so fascinated. Do you know his smile is very much like Sherm’s? See—no, just wait a minute. Now—watch his upper lip—his mouth twists crooked exactly like Sherm’s. Chicken Little spoke of his baby’s picture having the same smile.” Marian dropped her eyes hastily as the Captain chanced to turn in their direction.

“I imagine lots of people have that kind of a smile only we never noticed them,” replied Alice.

“Of course, I didn’t mean to suggest anything. Will you cut the lemon cake?”

After the luncheon was eaten, the shady grove tempted them to linger on with its woodsy coolness. The younger folk dragging the Captain, a willing victim, along with them, went off on an exploring expedition while the others stretched out luxuriously on the coarse grass that grew rank along the slope.

It was four o’clock before they could tear themselves away for the homeward ride.

“You’d better hurry,” Frank called to the stragglers, “it will be almost dark before we get home even if we don’t stop to shoot.”

They picked up a few quail on the divide soon after they started, but their zest for the sport seemed to have waned. Chicken Little declined to

try any further.

“I know, it’s the baby grouse,” said Katy.

“Yes,” said Captain Clarke, “I think the baby grouse have rather taken the zip out of it for all of us.”

The moon was just peeping above the tree tops as they crossed the home ford. A huge grotesque shadow of the horses and wagon with its load, was reflected upon the silvered surface of a deep pool just beyond the ripples where they had stopped to let the horses drink. The blacks having satisfied their thirst, began to dash the water about with their hoofs.

“They love it, don’t they?” Katy watched them.

“Yes,” said the Captain thoughtfully, “I guess every living thing enjoys this beautiful world of ours—when it is given the chance.”



CHAPTER VII



PIGS

PIGS

“Take a hand to a wooster? Take a hand to a wooster!”

Dick Harding was standing out in the road near the white cottage one morning about two weeks after the hunting party, trying to decide whether he would take a walk or a ride to settle his breakfast. He glanced down into Jilly’s sober little face lifted to his appealingly.

“Take a hand to a wooster? Charmed, I’m sure. Point out the rooster. But what has his rooster-ship done, and how can I make him keep still long enough to lay hands on him, Jilly Dilly?”

Jilly clasped five fat fingers around two of his, smiled confidently and made her plea once more: “Take a hand to a wooster.”

Dick looked puzzled, but Jilly was pulling and he meekly followed her guidance. “I haven’t the faintest idea what you are getting me into, young lady, but go ahead, I’m at your service.”

Jilly pattered along not deigning to reply to his remarks. Jilly considered words as something to be reserved for business purposes only.

She led him to the chicken yard, pressed her small face against the wire netting that enclosed it, and contemplated the fowls ecstatically. Dick contemplated also, trying to pick out the offending rooster.

“Which rooster, Jilly?”

But Jilly only smiled vaguely. “Feed a wooster,” she commanded after another season of gazing.

“Yes, to be sure, but what would you suggest that I offer him? There doesn’t seem to be anything edible round here.”

The chickens seconded Jilly’s suggestion, coming to the fence and clucking excitedly.

Jilly looked pained at Dick’s indolence and, taking his hand, led him over to a covered wooden box, which was found to contain shelled corn. The chickens were duly fed, but Dick still puzzled over the unchastized rooster until Marian enlightened him later.

“I shall have to give you a key to Jilly’s dialect,” Marian laughed—“she merely wanted you to go with her to see the chickens.”

Chicken Little was enjoying her guests. Her resolve to help mother was carried out only semi-occasionally when there were raspberries or currants to be picked or peas to be shelled, under the grape arbor so they wouldn't be in Annie's way in the kitchen. At first, Mrs. Morton had counted on having the girls help with the breakfast dishes, but they developed such a genius for disappearing immediately after breakfast that she gave it up as more bother than it was worth. ¹³⁵

They tramped and rode, and waded and splashed and finally swam, in the bathing hole down at the creek, under Marian's or Alice's supervision, till Katie and Gertie were brown and hearty.

"Mrs. Halford wouldn't know Gertie—she's fairly made over," Alice observed one morning.

Gertie was fast losing her timidity and had so much persistence in learning to ride that she bade fair to have a more graceful seat in the saddle than Jane herself. Sherm was deep in farm work and the girls saw little either of him or of Ernest, except in the evenings and on Sundays. Dick ran the reaper in the harvest field for Dr. Morton for three days, but his zeal waned as the weather got hotter.

"This is my vacation and I don't want to sweat my sweet self entirely away 'in little drops of water.' Think how pained you'd be, dearest," he told Alice.

"I never dreamed there was so much farming to a ranch," Alice remarked to Dr. Morton one day. "I thought you attended to the cattle—" ¹³⁶

"And rode around in chaps and sombreros, looking picturesque, the rest of the time," interrupted Dick. "My precious wife is disappointed because she hasn't seen any cowboys cavorting about the place shooting each other up or gambling with nice picturesque bags of gold dust."

"Dick Harding! I didn't. But we'd hardly know there were any cattle round if we didn't go through the pasture occasionally."

"Our big pastures take them off our hands pretty well in summer, but in winter they have to be fed and herded and looked after generally, don't they, Chicken Little? Humbug has played herd boy herself more than once. You are thinking of the big cattle ranges in Colorado and Montana and Wyoming, Alice. This country is cut up into farms and the ranges are gone. And we have to raise our corn and wheat and rye, not to mention fruits and vegetables. It's a busy life, but I love its independence."

A day or two after this conversation, Ernest came in late to dinner, exclaiming: "Father, the white sow and all her thirteen pigs are out."

"The Dickens, have you any idea where she's gone?" Dr. Morton looked decidedly annoyed. "I told Jim Bart that pen wasn't strong enough to hold her—she's the meanest animal on the place."

"One of the harvest hands said he thought he saw her down along the slough. I am sorry for the porkers if she is—they aren't a week old yet."¹²⁷

"Go down right after dinner and see if you can see anything of her. The old fool will lose them all in that marshy ground. And I don't see how we can spare a man to look after them. It looks like rain and that wheat must be in the barns by night."

Ernest came back from his search to report that the sow and one lone pig had wandered back to the barnyard and Jim Bart had got them into the pen.

"One pig! You don't mean she has lost the other twelve? That's costly business!"

"Looks that way. They're such little fellows—I suppose they're squealing down there in the slough in that swamp grass—it's a regular jungle three or four feet high."

Dr. Morton studied a moment, perplexed. "Well, the grain is worth more than the pigs. I guess they'll have to go until evening and then we'll all go down and see how many we can find. They won't suffer greatly before night unless they find enough water to drown themselves in."

"Oh, the poor piggies!" exclaimed Chicken Little. "Why, they'll be most starved and maybe the bull snakes might get them."

"I hardly think they could manage a pig. But I can't help it, unless you think you could rescue them, daughter." Dr. Morton said this last in fun,¹²⁸ but Chicken Little took it seriously.

"What could I put them in, Father?"

"Oh, you might take a small chicken coop," replied her father carelessly. The wagons coming from the barn were already rattling into the road and he was in a hurry to catch one and save himself the hot walk to the fields.

Chicken Little was thinking. She sat twisting a corner of her apron into a tight roll. "I believe we could do it," she said presently, "and the bull snakes are perfectly harmless if they are big, ugly-looking things. Will you help me, Katie?"

“Ugh, are there really snakes there, Jane?”

“Yes, but we’ve never seen any poisonous ones along there, though I saw a water moccasin once right down by the spring, so you never can tell. But snakes sound a lot worse than they really are, ’cause they’re such cowards they always run.”

Katy considered. The task did not sound attractive, but Katy was plucky. “I guess, if you can do it, I can.”

Jane had not thought of asking Gertie and she was surprised to hear her say: “I’m coming, too.”

“Oh, Gertie, won’t you be afraid?”

“Yes, I’m afraid, but I don’t want the little piggies killed—just think how you’d feel if you were lost in such a dreadful place and there were snakes and awful things. If I see a snake I’ll yell bloody murder, and I guess it’ll let me alone.”

Jane threw herself on Gertie and hugged her. “Gertie Halford, I think you’d make a real, sure enough book heroine, because you do things when you think you ought to, whether you’re scared or not.”

“I wish Dick hadn’t gone to town to-day,” said Katy.

Chicken Little had her campaign already planned. “I’m going to get Ernest’s and Frank’s and Sherm’s rubber boots for us. They’ll be lots too big, but we can tie them around the legs to make them stick on. They will be fine in the mud and water if we have to wade in the slough. Yes, and they will protect us from the snakes, too. We won’t put them on till we get down there; they will be too hard to walk in. And we can take Jilly’s red wagon and put the smallest chicken coop on it. It isn’t heavy.”

Mrs. Morton had gone to town with Dick and Alice for the day or the girls would probably not have been permitted to carry out their unusual undertaking. They quickly made their preparations with much joking about the boots, and twenty minutes later came to the banks of the slough. The slough was in reality a continuation of the spring stream, which spread out in the meadows below the pond until it lost all semblance of a stream and became merely a marshy stretch, whose waters finally found their way into the creek. In the meadows adjoining, the finest hay on the place was cut each year.

The girls sat down on the grass and fastened on the boots. The effect was somewhat startling, for they reached well above the knee on Chicken

Little, who was the tallest of the three, while poor Gertie seemed to be divided into two equal parts.

Both Katy and Jane giggled when she got laboriously to her feet.

“There’s more boots than girl, Gertie,” laughed Jane.

“You don’t need to be afraid, Sis, you’ll scare anything, even a snake!” Katy remarked unfeelingly, though her words reassured Gertie wonderfully.

“I don’t feel so afraid in these,” she said.

Chicken Little was slowly making her way in to the slough. “Jim found the mother pig near here, Ernest said, but the little scamps may be most anywhere. Let’s listen and see if we can hear any squeals or grunts.”

“Yes, I did—I’m most sure, but it didn’t sound very close by,” Gertie answered.

Chicken Little listened. “Which way did the sound come from?”

“Toward the creek, but I don’t hear it any more.”



They had a pretty chase.

“We’d better search pretty carefully as we go along so we won’t have to come back over the same ground,” remarked Katy, who had a genius for organizing—even a pig hunt. “You are the tallest, Jane, so you take the tallest grass next the water, and I’ll come along half way up the bank and Gertie can walk through the meadow grass—that way we can’t miss them.” 131

“No, for they must be on this side of the slough: they’re too little to wade across it.”

Chicken Little made the first find, two discouraged little porkers, hopelessly mired and grunting feebly when disturbed. They had no trouble in catching these, but holding their wet, miry little bodies was a different matter. They were slippery as eels. Chicken Little and Katy, who each had one, found them a handful.

“Oh, mine most got away! And I’m all over mud—we’ll be a sight!” Katy giggled hysterically. “I wonder what mother would think if she could see me now.”

“Well, it will all wash off. It wouldn’t be so bad if it wasn’t so hard to clump along in these old boots. It takes forever to get any place.”

They had sent Gertie on ahead to open the coop door. With a sigh of relief, Katy shoved hers into it. Jane was not so lucky. Instead of going in, as a well-regulated pig should, the small, black-and-white sinner shot off to one side and made for the slough again. They had a pretty chase before he finally tangled himself up in the grass and was captured once more. 132

They plodded back to take up the search where they had left off, going through the shorter grass till they should reach the point where they had found the pigs. They were clumping along, chattering gaily, when Katy jumped and let out a yell that could have been heard a block away.

“Oh, there’s the biggest snake I ever saw—over there near that rock—don’t you see?”

Gertie turned white, but Chicken Little encouraged her by starting toward the monster, which was indeed a huge bull snake fully five feet long, as Ernest and Sherm found by actual measurement that evening.

“Pooh,” said Chicken Little, “it looks dreadful, but it won’t hurt you. If I can find some stones I’m going to try to kill it.”

“Don’t you dare go near it.” Katy grabbed her dress and held on tight.

“But we’ll all be scared to death all the time, for fear we come across it again, if I don’t. There are some rocks over there big enough, if I can get them out of the ground.”

She went resolutely over and, prying with a stick, secured two good-sized rocks. Armed with these, she started toward the snake coiled up asleep in the hot July sunshine. Katy and Gertie watched her breathlessly.³³ Chicken Little advanced with caution. She didn’t like the job herself, though she was sure the snake wouldn’t do anything worse than run. She had seen her elders kill them more than once, and they had always been cowardly. Nevertheless, her heart thumped and her breath came fast, as she crept nearer. She must go close and aim at the head if she hoped to do any execution. Step by step she crept forward till she was within four feet of that ugly coil. Stopping, she raised the heavy stone and took careful aim. At this instant her presence disturbed the snake. It raised its oval head, fixing her with its beady, bright eyes. A thrill of horror shot through her. What if it should fascinate her so she couldn’t move? She had heard of such things. She heaved the stone, shutting her eyes tight as it left her hand.

Katy and Gertie both screamed and jumped back. Jane opened her eyes quickly to see the snake uncoil and start to glide away. She saw something else, too. She saw that her stone had wounded it just behind the head. Her courage flowed back in a trice. She raised the other stone and moved forward. The snake was slipping over the ground at a swift pace. She had to run, catching up with it as it came to its hole, a few feet distant. She smashed down the second rock almost in the same place she had hit before. The reptile moved feebly about six inches farther till its³⁴ ugly head was hidden inside the hole, then thrashed its heavy body through another undulation, and lay still.

Chicken Little stood looking at it in dazed surprise for several seconds. She was white and trembling with excitement. Seeing that it did not move, Katy and Gertie crept a little closer. No one said a word for a full minute, then Chicken Little came to life, her face convulsed with loathing.

“Ugh, the nasty thing—I hate them. I don’t see what God wanted to make such horrid, wicked things for!”

“Well, the Bible says they weren’t wicked till Eve ate the apple,” Katy replied, staring curiously down at the snake. She had never seen such a

big one outside of a circus. “But I think they must have always looked wicked, anyhow. How did you ever dare, Chicken Little, to tackle it? I was expecting it to wind right round you like that picture of Laocoon in our mythology.”

“I shouldn’t have dared if I hadn’t seen so many of them before. I guess being brave is mostly being used to things. But I hate snakes worse than anything in the world—I don’t feel a bit sorry about killing them!”

“Oh, dear,” said Gertie, shuddering, “I s’pose we have got to find the rest of the pigs.”

Katy and Chicken Little each echoed the sigh. They all started ahead¹³⁵ resolutely. But they kept closer together for a time. They went some little distance without finding any further signs of the lost animals.

“You don’t suppose we could have passed them, do you?” Katy inquired anxiously.

“We couldn’t, if they are on this side of the slough.”

A few rods farther on something moved in the swamp grass. All three jumped and screamed: their nerve had been sadly weakened by the bull snake.

A squeal and chorus of grunts reassured them.

“Here they are—a lot of them. Oh, dear, I wish we’d brought the coop along so we wouldn’t have to go back.” Jane parted the tall grass and discovered five of the fugitives huddled together. They were much livelier than the first ones and showed symptoms of bolting if the girls approached nearer.

“I’ll go back for it,” said Katy. “I’ll go through the short grass and I won’t be afraid.”

Chicken Little and Gertie watched and waited.

“Isn’t that little white one with the pink ears and curly tail cunning? I didn’t suppose pigs could be so pretty.”

“They are only pretty when they are weenties. As soon as they grow old enough to root in the mud, they are horrid.”

When Katy returned they anchored the red wagon with the chicken¹³⁶ coop and the two captured piglets as close to the slough as possible. All three crept upon the pig cache cautiously.

“Pick out which one you’ll grab, for they are going to run sure,” Chicken Little admonished.

They made a dash and each got a pig, but, alas, the two free ones made a dash also—a break for liberty worthy of an Indian. They selected routes immediately in front of, and immediately behind Chicken Little, whose attention was absorbed with trying to hold a squealing, squirming pig. The result was disastrous to all concerned. Pig No. 1 tripped her up neatly and she sat down hastily and unexpectedly upon Pig No. 2, who gave one agonized squeal, in which the pig in her arms joined. Fortunately, her victim did not get her whole weight or there would have been one pig the less in this vale of tears. Chicken Little squashed him down gently into some two inches of oozy mud and water. It splashed in all directions, baptizing Katy and Gertie and the fleeing pig as well as completing the ruin of Jane's pink gingham frock, fresh that morning.

The sight of her amazed and disgusted face generously decorated with mud, was too much for Katy. She giggled till the tears stood in her eyes. Chicken Little was indignant.

“I guess you wouldn't think it was so funny, if it was you,” she replied¹²⁷ with dignity. Dignity did not become her tout ensemble. Katy went off into fresh screams of mirth. Chicken Little had stood about all she could that afternoon. Her face flamed with wrath, and, gathering up the struggling pig in her arms, she hurled it at Katy, as the only missile within reach. Piggy just missed Katy's head, tumbling harmlessly into the ooze. Chicken Little was instantly remorseful, not on Katy's account but on Piggy's.

Katy was furious. She didn't say a word, but walked deliberately over to the coop, deposited her pig very gently and started toward the house.

Gertie tried to stop her, but she shook her off. Chicken Little, too angry to care what happened, relieved herself of the rest of her ill-temper.

“Go off and be hateful if you want to—a lot I care, Miss Katy Halford. I should think you'd be ashamed to act so when you are most fifteen.”

A swift retort rose to Katy's lips, but she decided it would be more impressive to remain dignifiedly silent. She stalked on. Gertie hesitated as to which of the belligerents she should follow, but finally decided in favor of the one who needed her worst. She put her pig in the coop and came to help Jane up. The latter was already ashamed of her outburst, but¹²⁸ was far from being ready to acknowledge it. The other three pigs had not gone far and they soon had them safely in the coop. They were debating as to whether they should give up hunting for the others, when a hail from

the road brought aid and comfort. Katy had met Dr. Morton coming from the field on an errand and had told him what they were trying to do. He was delighted and surprised to see the seven rescued pigs.

“Why, Chicken Little, I didn’t really suppose you were in earnest or—” Dr. Morton stopped suddenly, he had just taken a good look at his only daughter—the look was effective. He threw back his head and roared.

“Oh, if you could just see yourself, Jane!”

This was adding insult to injury and Chicken Little burst into tears. “You can just hunt your old pigs yourself—I don’t think it’s nice of you to laugh when I tried so hard!”

“Come, come, I beg your pardon, but you are enough to make an owl laugh, Humbug. It was fine of you to try to rescue the pigs. You girls deserve a great deal of credit, for it is a disagreeable, muddy job. I guess I’ll have to make it up to you. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You may have this litter for your very own, and we’ll send the little girls their share over the cost of keeping, when the pigs are sold. How will that do?”

Chicken Little was not in the mood to be easily appeased.

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“Yes, but you say things are mine till you want to sell them, and then I never see the money.”

This was touching a sore point. The Doctor had been a little remiss on the subject of the children’s ownership of their pets. He was nettled by this accusation.

“My dear, when I say a thing I mean it. I was about to add, though, that if I give you the entire proceeds of the pigs I shall expect you to attend to feeding them until they are big enough to be turned in with the drove.”

“I thought the mother fed them.”

“Well, the mother pig has to be fed.”

“Do you really, truly, mean it, Father?”

“Truly.”

Chicken Little forgot the late unpleasantness. “Oh, goody, let’s call Katy back and tell her!”

Katy was not so far away as might have been anticipated. Her wrath was dissipating also.

Dr. Morton lingered to help them a few moments and to satisfy himself that they could not do themselves any damage that a bath and the wash tub could not repair, then left them once more to their own resources.

By four o'clock they had all but one of the missing pigs safely stowed in the coop. They were very tired and hot, and decided to save the joy of hunting for the last pig for Ernest and Sherm in the evening.

It was well they did. The wee stray would have led them a chase. He had found his way almost to the creek, and it took the boys a good hour of wading and beating the swamp grass to discover him.

Just as Chicken Little was dropping off to sleep that night, Katy roused her.

“Do you suppose we’ll get as much as five dollars apiece from those pigs?”





C H A P T E R VIII
A PARTY AND
A PICNIC

A PARTY AND A PICNIC

Gertie looked wistful. Dick and Alice were going on to Denver that morning to return a month later for the little girls. All three were to drive into town with Dr. Morton to see them off. The mere thought of anyone going away made Gertie a little homesick. She went out to the chicken yard, where nine of the young prairie chickens were flourishing under the care of a much-deceived hen, who had adopted them with the mistaken notion that they were her own egg kin. The little mottled things seemed very much out of place among the domestic fowls. They were wild and shy and astonishingly fleet on their reed-like legs. Gertie loved to watch them. Two of the chicks had died the first night, and one, two days later. But the rest survived, and, in the course of time, flew away to join their wild mates.

“Dear me, I wonder what we can do next?” said Chicken Little, as they watched the train pull out with Dick waving from the rear platform.

Dick’s and Alice’s going seemed to have finished things, at least for the time being. Her question was answered as soon as she got home.

“Jane,” said her mother, “I have just received an invitation for you and the girls that I am a little doubtful about. Ernest and Sherm are invited, too, but not to remain for the night.”

“Stay all night? Where, Mother, where?”

“With Mamie Jenkins. The Jenkins family are hardly as refined as I could wish for your associates; still they are good religious people, if they are plain, and Katy and Gertie might enjoy going to a country party.”

“A party? O Mother, please let us go.”

“I don’t mind so much your coming to the party, but they want to have you stay overnight and attend a picnic some of the young people are getting up for the next afternoon.”

Katy was as eager as Jane for the festivity and Mrs. Morton was at length persuaded to pocket her scruples and permit the girls to accept Mamie’s invitation. Ernest and Sherm were also delighted at the prospect of a frolic. They were to take the girls over and leave them for the night,

returning the next afternoon for the picnic, which was to start from the Jenkin's farm.

But when the day of the party arrived, Gertie backed out, begging to be left at home with Mrs. Morton. The thought of meeting so many strangers frightened her.

"I doubt if she would enjoy it. She would be the youngest one there—most of them will be from fourteen to twenty. The neighbors live so far apart, they have to combine different ages in order to find guests enough for a party."

At first, Chicken Little would not hear to Gertie's remaining behind, but finding that she would really be happier at home, stopped urging her. Jane and Katy were soon joyfully planning what they should wear. They were to go in their party frocks, each taking another dress along for the morning and the picnic. Jane was to wear Alice's gift. Katy had a dainty ruffled muslin with cherry-colored sash and hair ribbons.

"I was afraid I wasn't going to have a single chance to wear it here," she remarked naïvely.

The boys were busy shining their shoes, and performing certain mysteries of shaving with very little perceptible change in their appearance. Ernest felt that he could not possibly go without a new necktie, but as no one was going to town before the event, he had to content himself with borrowing one from Frank.

It took the combined efforts of Marian and Gertie and Mrs. Morton to get the revellers dressed to their satisfaction. Gertie waited on the two girls as patiently as any maid. Marian was in great demand by the boys to coax in refractory cuff buttons and give a "tony" twist to the ties.

"Is tony the very latest, Ernest?"

"That's what Sherm says. Just make the bow a little more perky, can't you, Marian? I don't want to look like a country Jake."

"Ernest, you are just the boy to go to Annapolis; you are so fussy about your clothes."

"Golly, I hope I do get to go. Father hasn't heard from the Senator yet, but he may be away from home."

Sherm was struggling with his tie, getting red and hot in the process. He had just tied it nearly to his satisfaction, when he carelessly gave it a jerk and had it all to do over again.

“Cæsar’s Ghost!” he exclaimed vengefully, “what do they make these things so pesky slippery for?”

Marian laughed and Sherm colored in embarrassment over his outburst.

“Please excuse me, but this is the fifth time I’ve tied the critter.”

“Let me try.” Marian turned him to the light and had the bow nicely exact in no time.

The girls found their source of woe in their hair. Katy, having learned that most of the young people would be older than themselves, decided to put her hair up, and look grown up, too. Mrs. Morton was horrified and made Katy take it down. Katy, though rebellious, dared not oppose her hostess openly. She contented herself with taking a handful of hair pins along and putting it up after she reached Mamie’s. To be sure the heavy braids piled upon her small head looked rather queer, especially with her short skirts, which she could not contrive to lengthen. But Katy made up for this defect by an unwonted dignity, and actually persuaded a majority of the people she met that she was sixteen at the very least.

Country folk gather early and they found the fun well started when they arrived. The Jenkins family had come to the neighborhood about a year before from Iowa.

The farmhouse was new and rather more pretentious than most on the creek. Lace curtains with robust patterns draped the windows in fresh-starched folds. A green and red ingrain carpet covered the floor, while the entire Jenkins family—there were four olive branches—done in crayon by a local photographer, adorned the walls. It would be more truthful to say, adorned three walls. The fourth was sacred to a real oil painting in an unlimited gilt frame, which had come as a prize for extra subscriptions to the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*. Mrs. Jenkins regarded this treasure almost with reverence. “I do think it is real uplifting to have a work of art in the house, don’t you, Mrs. Brown?” she had been heard to remark to a neighbor who failed to notice this gem. The family bible and a red plush photograph album rested on the marble-topped table, usually placed in the exact center of the room. To-night, it was pushed back against the wall to make more room for the games.

Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins were rigid Methodists and would not tolerate any such worldly amusement as dancing. Kissing games were substituted, and

if, as the Jenkins believed, these were more elevating, they were certainly coarser and rougher than the dancing would have been.

Mamie had attended the Garland High School for one year and had acquired different ideas. She would have much preferred the dancing, but her parents were firm. Mamie deemed herself a full-fledged young lady at fifteen. Her highest ambitions were to have “style” and plenty of beaux.

Ernest and Sherm had to find a place to tie the horses. They lingered also a moment at the pump to wash the leathery smell of the harness from their hands—a fastidious touch that would have subjected them to much guying if the other boys had seen them.

So Chicken Little led Katy into the crowded room, unsupported. There was no hall or entry and they were plunged directly into the thick of the party. Many of the country lads and lasses were her mates at the district school and greeted her cordially, eyeing Katy, however, with frankly curious stares. Mrs. Jenkins relieved her embarrassment by taking them upstairs to remove their wraps. She introduced herself to Katy before Jane could get out the little speech of presentation her mother had urged her not to forget, since Katy, being a stranger, should be made to feel at home as quickly as possible. Chicken Little hated introducing people and had been dreading the ordeal, but kindly Mrs. Jenkins took Katy by the hand and presented her to the whole roomful at one fell swoop.

“This is Miss Katy Halford, young folks, and I want you all to introduce yourselves and see that she has a good time or she’ll think you are a lot of green country jays who haven’t any manners.”

“King William was King James’s son” was in full swing. The young folks made places for the two girls in the ring and promptly drew in Ernest and Sherm as soon as they entered. The lilting tune was sung lustily while the supposed victim in the center, a handsome lad of sixteen with bold, black eyes and dark curls, surveyed the girls, big and little, with an evident enjoyment of his privileges.

Several of the older boys interrupted their singing to give him advice.

“Take the city girl, Grant, buck up and show your manners.” “Bet you knew who you’d choose before you left home.” “Don’t let on that you don’t know which girl you want—Mamie’s biting her lips already to wash off that kiss.”

The boy returned or ignored this badinage as he saw fit.

Mamie, however, was indignantly protesting that he needn't try to kiss her. Grant looked in her direction and smiled as the fateful instant arrived. Indeed, he started toward her, then mischievously whirled around and seizing Chicken Little, who was whispering to Katy that Grant was Mamie's beau, kissed her with a resounding smack.

Chicken Little was taken so unawares that she had time neither to blush nor to protest or struggle, as was considered etiquette on such occasions. She didn't even try to rub it off, as was also customary. She just looked at him with such a funny mixture of surprise and dismay that everybody roared, including Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins and some of the older neighbors who had come in to see the fun.

"Here, Chicken Little, you need practice," and "Chicken Little acts as if she didn't know what kisses were. You'll have to have a rehearsal beforehand next time, Grant!" "Why, Grant? What's the matter with the rest of us?" These comments were open and noisy.

Ernest took all this coarse bantering at his young sister's expense good-naturedly. He knew no offence was intended. He had been present at a number of these rural frolics. But Sherm, town-bred and unaccustomed to this form of amusement, was distinctly displeased both at the kiss and the talk. He got Chicken Little off to one side as soon as he could.

"Say, Chicken Little, don't let the boys kiss you."

Chicken Little looked concerned. "I don't like them to, Sherm, but I can't help it if I play—and they'd think I was awfully stuck up and rude if I refused."

"Does your mother know they have this sort of games?"

Chicken Little made a little grimace. "Don't go and be grown-up and horrid, Sherm. Everybody does it here. They'll stop this pretty soon and play clap in and clap out or forfeits."

Her big brown eyes were lifted so innocently and sweetly that Sherm couldn't say any more, but he felt a curious desire to fight every time a big boy so much as stared at Jane.

"She's such a kid!" he explained the feeling to himself, "and Ernest isn't looking after her at all."

Katy entered into the romping heart and soul. Katy was playing young lady. Her pink cheeks and laughing eyes and little flirtatious ways were very popular with the boys—so popular that Mamie was vexed because

many of her mates seemed to have eyes only for the city girl, as she called her behind her back.

Mamie eased her mind by treating her special friends haughtily. She got even with the recreant Grant by choosing Ernest the very first time in Post Office. She even put some of the girls up to boycotting the boys who were hanging round Katy, for one entire game, persuading them to choose Ernest and Sherm alternately till the others were jealously wrathful without being quite sure whether it was accident or conspiracy. Considering his scruples about kissing, Sherm submitted most meekly. He had the grace to color when Chicken Little remarked carelessly: "It wasn't so bad as you thought it would be, was it, Sherm?"

"Oh, it's different with boys," he retorted loftily. "Little girls like you don't understand."

"Little girls! I suppose you think yourself a man grown. You needn't feel so big because you're most seventeen. I heard Dick say a boy of seventeen wasn't really any older than a girl of fifteen, because girls grow¹⁵¹ up quicker. So there, you're not much more than a year older than I am!"

Sherm's "little girl" rankled not only that evening but for weeks afterwards. She told Katy and Mamie in strict confidence after they had gone upstairs that night.

"I'd show him if I were you, Jane," advised Mamie the experienced.

Chicken Little needed no urging, but she was in doubt how to proceed.

"My, I wish I was awfully beautiful and grown up. I'd make him fall so many billions deep in love with me he couldn't squeak." Jane felt positively vindictive whenever she thought of Sherm's patronizing tone. She had neglected to mention to the girls the little conversation that had preceded her remark to Sherm. She didn't consider it necessary to tell everything she knew.

Mamie tittered. "Pooh, you sound as if you had been reading Sir Walter Scott. They don't do things that way nowadays. When I was in town last winter at school I had lots of boys gone on me, and I'm not a raving, tearing beauty either."

Mamie looked as if she expected her guests to contradict her, but they were too much impressed with her conquests to do anything so rude. A little disappointed, but finding their absorbed expressions encouraging, Mamie preceded to retail her adventures. Boiled down, these were mainly¹⁵² a box of candy and various walks taken at recesses and noons, with an

occasional escort to a party. They were sufficiently thrilling to the others, who had never been permitted even such mild forms of dissipation.

“My, wouldn’t I catch it if Papa ever caught me walking with a boy!”

Katy painted the paternal wrath with a real relish. It seemed to furnish an adequate excuse for her having nothing to relate and put her on a little pinnacle of superior breeding as well. Her parents looked after her. It was only more ordinary people who permitted their daughters to run about at fifteen.

Mamie was keen enough to realize this and she promptly resented Katy’s patronizing tone.

“Oh, Pa would have been mad, too, if he had known. But I was staying with my aunt. She didn’t care what I did, just so I was on time to meals and didn’t run around after dark.”

Katy was determined to keep up her end. “We used to have wonderful times at the church oyster suppers. One night last winter Dr. Wade—you don’t remember him, Chicken Little, he’s only been in Centerville about a year. Well, he took me in for oysters and bought me candy and three turns at the grab bag. And he is a grown-up man—he’s been a doctor for over two years.”

Katy would hardly have told this story if Gertie had been there. She neglected to mention that Dr. Wade had kindly included Gertie and five other young girls in these courtesies. Or that he had remarked to Mrs. Halford that he loved to be with children because he missed his own brothers and sisters sadly. But Gertie was not present to mar the effect of this story with further particulars. Mamie began to rack her brain for forgotten attentions worthy to be classed with this superb generosity. Poor Chicken Little was hopelessly out-classed. Nothing more thrilling than being singled out in games and Blackman at school had happened to her.

“Grant Stowe said you had the prettiest eyes of any girl here to-night. I heard him tell Jennie Brown so when she asked him whether he liked blue eyes or brown best. She is the awfulest thing—always fishing for compliments.”

This was generous of Mamie, for Grant was the one who had passed her by so recently. But Katy’s eyes were also distanced and Mamie had been very much thrilled by hearing that Ernest might go to Annapolis. Further, he had chosen her twice that evening. She felt amiably disposed toward Ernest’s sister.

When the tales of past glories were exhausted, the conversation grew intermittent, being punctuated by frequent yawns. They were just on the point of dropping off to sleep when Mamie suddenly opened her eyes and sat up in bed with a jerk. 154

“Music! Don’t you hear it? I shouldn’t wonder if some of the boys were out serenading. Oh, I do hope they’ll come here.”

Katy and Chicken Little listened breathlessly.

“It is!”

“Yes, and it’s coming nearer.”

All three hopped out of bed and crouched down by the window. The moon was setting, but there was still a faint radiance. The strains were growing more distinct.

“I bet it’s Grant Stowe and his two cousins from the Prairie Hill district. They are staying all night with him and are going to the picnic tomorrow. Don’t you remember that red-headed boy?”

“It sounds like a banjo and guitar,” said Katy. “Oh, I do love a guitar. It always makes me think of ‘Gaily the troubadour.’” Katy gave a wriggle of delight at this romantic ending to the night’s festivities. She was already planning to tell the girls at home about the wonderful serenade.

The tinkle tinkle of the thin notes grew stronger and clearer and they found that a third instrument, which had puzzled them, was a mouth organ.

“I didn’t suppose anybody could really make music with a mouth organ, but it goes nicely with the others.” Chicken Little, like Katy, was more excited over the serenade than the party. It seemed so delightfully young ladyfied. 155

The trio had one awful moment, for the music seemed to be dying away and still there was no human in sight. Suddenly it stopped altogether. They listened and waited—not a sound rewarded them.

“I think it’s downright mean if they’ve gone by.” Mamie’s tone was more than injured.

The words were hardly out of her mouth when a stealthy foot-fall came directly beneath their window, and guitar, mandolin, and mouth organ burst forth into “My Bonnie,” supported after the opening strains by half a dozen boyish voices.

The boys had crept in so close to the wall of the house that the girls had not discovered them. The young ladies ducked at the first sound, and

hastily slipped their dresses over their night gowns so they could look out again.

“O dear,” said Mamie, “I almost forgot my curl papers.”

They were arrayed in time to reward the serenaders with a vigorous clapping of hands, Father and Mother Jenkins joining in from the window of their bedroom downstairs.

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” floated up next, followed by “Over the Garden Wall,” which, if not choice, had the distinction of being sung in New York, as Grant Stowe proudly informed them.

It was three o’clock past, before they finally settled down in bed once more. Faint suggestions of dawn were already apparent.

“It’s not much use to go to bed, Father always gets up at six,” mourned Mamie.

A brilliant idea struck Katy. “Suppose we stay up all night. Grace Dart said she did once when her father was so sick, and she said it was the most wonderful thing to see the sun rise when you hadn’t been to bed at all.”

This proposal met with instant favor. They clambered out of bed and lit the small oil lamp, wrapping themselves in quilts and petticoats impartially, for the air was growing chilly. The next three hours were the longest any of the three had ever known. In spite of fortune telling, and a thrilling story which Mamie read in tragic whispers, the minutes shuffled along like hours. Yawns interrupted almost every sentence and much mutual prodding and sharp reproaches were necessary to keep their heavy eyes open. They were too sleepy to care whether the sun rose in the usual sedate way or pirouetted up chasing a star. In fact, they forgot all about the expected sunrise. They wanted just two things—sleep and something to eat.

The call to breakfast was even sweeter than the serenade had been. Father and Mother Jenkins were concerned at their jaded appearance.

“Seems like parties don’t agree with you young ones none too well. I reckon we won’t have them very often,” Father Jenkins remarked tartly. His own eyes smarted from loss of sleep.

“I don’t believe you ought to go to the picnic this afternoon if you are feeling so played out,” Mother Jenkins added. “Your Ma will think I haven’t taken good care of you. It was them good-for-nothing boys a-coming that wore you plumb out.”

Generous cups of strong coffee—a luxury not permitted to either Chicken Little or Katy at home—woke them up and they got through the morning nicely. Not for worlds would they have missed that picnic.

But even the coffee could not carry them through the afternoon. They were the butts of the entire party on account of their dullness and heavy eyes.

Ernest expressed his disgust with his sister openly. “Well, I think Mother’d better keep you at home till you’re old enough not to be such a baby.” Jane had been nodding in spite of herself.

“Looks to me as if you girls had stayed up all night!” exclaimed Grant Stowe.

Mamie roused enough to retort: “Well, I guess you didn’t get any too much sleep yourself.”

“We can keep awake if we didn’t. But if it has this kind of effect on you, we’ll leave you out the next time we go serenading.”

It had been arranged that they should catch fish for the picnic supper. The girls had brought a huge frying pan and the butter and corn meal to cook them in. As soon as the teams were cared for, the boys got out fishing tackle and bait and the party broke up into small groups for the fishing. Grant Stowe offered to help Chicken Little with her line. She found this courtesy on his part embarrassing, for Katy and Mamie exchanged looks, and she was so utterly sleepy, that she would have preferred Ernest or Sherm so she wouldn’t be expected to talk. Chicken Little had gone to school with Grant the preceding winter. He was always a leader in their school games and a great favorite.

Grant found a snug place beside a deep pool that promised catfish at the very least, and might be expected to yield a few trout. He made her comfortable on the spreading roots of an elm growing upward with difficulty from a steep bank. Grant smiled at her as he handed her the rod and tossed the baited hook into the stillest part of the pool.

“There, you ought to get a bite soon. This is one of the best places on the creek for catfish. Say, what did you girls do to yourselves that you are so used up to-day? You didn’t take a five-mile walk or anything after we left, did you?”

Jane laughed. “Don’t you wish you knew?”

“Oh, I’ll find out, but I wish you’d tell me.” Grant looked at her from under his long black lashes. His tone was distinctly wheedling.

Chicken Little laughed again and shook her head.

Grant threw his own line in, seating himself a little lower down on the bank; and quiet reigned for several minutes.

But the boy was determined to get the secret from her. After a tedious silence, he began in a low tone so that he would not disturb the fish: "You know, Chicken Little, I always did think you were the prettiest girl in school, but you were such a kid you never took the trouble to look at a fellow. Seems to me you might be nice now and tell me what you did."

He neglected to mention the fact that he had bet Mamie a silk handkerchief against a plate of taffy that he would find out what they had been up to before night. He received no response.

"Oh, come now, be a trump and tell a fellow."

He glanced around this time with a tenderly reproachful look. This tenderness speedily vanished. Jane was peacefully asleep, her head supported against the tree trunk.

The boy's face flushed wrathfully for an instant, but he had a saving sense of humor. "Serves me right for trying to get the best of a kid, I guess," he said to himself. He let her sleep on undisturbed until the sound of voices announced the approach of some of the others, when he hastily wakened her. He did not intend to be laughed at for the rest of the day.

Chicken Little found it hard to wake up and was heavy-eyed and stupid the remainder of the afternoon. Fortunately for her and Katy, Ernest had orders from his mother to be home by dark.

Patient Gertie was waiting expectantly to hear about the good times, but she could hardly extract three words from either of the revellers. Parties and boys and finery were all stale, but their neatly made bed looked like heaven.





CHAPTER IX BREAD AND POLLIWOGS

BREAD AND POLLIWOGS

Three days elapsed before Katy and Jane could settle down to the quiet, daily life of the ranch. If Gertie had found them disappointingly mute that first evening, she never had to complain again. They went over and over the thrilling events of the night and the picnic the next afternoon, till Gertie got sick of hearing what "Mamie said" and how *he* looked and how wonderful the serenade had been. Indeed, these events seemed to grow in importance the farther off they were. Gertie was seldom pettish, but Katy's seventeenth repetition of what Grant Stowe's cousin said to her while they were fishing left her cold.

"Shut up, Katy, I'm sick of hearing about it. I don't care what he said and I just know he thought you were a silly little girl trying to seem grown up when you aren't! You know Mother wouldn't like you to act so,¹⁶² and I guess Mrs. Morton'd be ashamed of you, too, if she knew."

"Gertie Halford, if you dare tell!"

"Thank you, I'm no tattle tale! I intend to forget all about it as soon as ever I can. But I know Sherm thought you were silly from something he said."

Chicken Little related the most presentable of their doings to Marian. Marian didn't say much at the time, but some days afterwards she told them tales of the adventures of her own early teens. She ended a little meaningly: "Do you know, I believe girls can be sillier from thirteen to sixteen than at any other age? They're exactly like that little buff cochin rooster you laugh at, because he tries to crow and strut before he knows how. I hope you girls won't be in a hurry to grow up. There are so many nice things you can do now that you will have to give up after a while."

July was growing unpleasantly hot. The mornings were dewy and fresh, but by noon they were glad to hunt a shady place. The apple orchard was a favorite haunt, and the Weeping Willows when the wind was from the right direction. They took books and crocheting, sometimes the checker board or dominoes, and spent the long summer afternoons there, with Jilly tumbling over their feet and Huz and Buz dozing¹⁶³ alongside or lazily snapping at the plaguing flies.

They had been picking blackberries mornings for Mrs. Morton's preserving. The rescued litter of pigs was also taking much time. The mother pig had developed an appetite that was truly appalling. It seemed to take endless gallon pails of sour milk and baskets of fruit parings to satisfy her. Dr. Morton would not let them feed corn in summer.

"Dear me," said Katy, "how big do little pigs have to be before they can be turned into the corral with the others?"

"Oh, six or eight weeks, I guess."

"They are getting awfully smelly!" remarked Gertie, holding her nose, "and they aren't a bit pretty any more."

"I know and Father said last night we'd have to begin and feed the pigs some, too, before long." Chicken Little sighed. This speculation in pigs had its unpleasant side.

"I guess we'd have to bring a lot more stuff if Ernest and Sherm didn't help us out. They give them things to eat lots of times. But I think Jim Bart might keep the pen a little cleaner," Katy observed.

"He's so busy he doesn't have time."

Another morning occupation was bread-making. Dr. Morton had offered a brand new dollar to the girl who would bring him the first perfect loaf of bread. They were taking turns under Mrs. Morton's teaching, but it did seem as if more things could happen to bread. Katy would have had her perfect loaf, if she hadn't let the dough rise too long. The loaves were beautiful to look at, but slightly sour, alas! Chicken Little spoiled her prize batch by sitting down to read and letting it burn.

Gertie's first and second were very good, but a trifle too solid. Katy won out on her third, and produced a loaf so light and crisply brown that Marian said she was envious.

The others wanted to stop when Katy secured the dollar, but Mrs. Morton persuaded them to persist until they could equal Katy's.

"You may send one to Captain Clarke, if you wish."

This stimulated their waning interest and they tried to produce that perfect loaf. A week went by before Mrs. Morton nodded approval, saying: "Yes, that is nice enough for a present. I am sure the Captain will like it."

The girls had planned to take it over on the ponies, but Mrs. Morton wanted to send over two gallons of blackberries also, which was more than they could manage.

“I am sending Ernest and Sherm down the creek this evening on an errand,” said Dr. Morton, “and they can stop at Captain Clarke’s and leave the things. You girls can go some other time.”

Chicken Little decided to send some of her spare pinks. She came in with a great handful just as the boys were ready to start.

“Where is your loaf, Chicken Little?” asked her mother.

“O dear, I forgot to wrap it up. It won’t take a minute.”

“Take one of the fringed napkins to wrap it in, then put paper around that,” called her mother.

“Where did you put the bread, Mother?”

“In the bread box, of course, child, where did you suppose?”

“There isn’t anything but old bread in the box.”

“Well, ask Annie.”

“She’s gone to Benton’s.”

“Well, I think you’re old enough to find four loaves of bread in a small pantry.” Mrs. Morton got up, disgusted.

Sherm stood waiting with the tin pail of berries and the bunch of flowers in his hands. Ernest was holding the team out at the road.

When Mrs. Morton disappeared Sherm remarked placidly: “Well, I guess I might as well take these things out. I’ll come back for the bread.”

Mrs. Morton could be heard exclaiming about something in the kitchen. Sherm smiled a fleeting smile and departed.

Sounds of hurried footfalls, of boxes and pans being moved, came from the kitchen. Somebody ran hastily down cellar. “It isn’t here, Mother.” Jane’s tone was emphatic.

“What do you suppose is the matter?” exclaimed Katy. She departed to see, followed by Gertie. The sound of fresh disturbances floated in from the cuisine. Dr. Morton grew curious and went out to investigate. Sherm came back as far as the front door and stood waiting.

Presently, Mrs. Morton entered, flushed and annoyed.

“It’s the queerest thing I ever heard of—that entire baking of bread has vanished. Annie is perfectly honest and she knew we were expecting to send a loaf to the Captain. You haven’t seen any tramps about, have you, Sherm? You don’t suppose the dogs could—” Mrs. Morton glanced suspiciously at Buz asleep on the path outside.

“Nonsense, Mother, the dogs couldn’t get away with whole loaves of bread and leave no trace. They are not overly fond of bread, anyhow.”

“Possibly Annie may have put it in some unheard-of place—girls are so exasperating. I’ll go look again.”

A third search was no more successful than the previous ones had been.¹⁶⁷ They were obliged to send the boys on without the bread.

Both Chicken Little and Gertie mourned, for they had combined forces in this baking and were immensely proud of their effort.

“We never can get it so nice again—I just know!”

Mrs. Morton had been studying. “You don’t suppose the boys could have meddled with it, do you?”

Katy looked up with a gleam in her eye. “They were laughing about something fit to kill just before supper and they wouldn’t tell what it was.”

“But why—I don’t see.” Mrs. Morton was puzzled.

“To tease the girls, possibly. But I don’t see how they could make away with four big loaves without being noticed.”

“If Ernest Morton took that bread, I’ll never forgive him as long as I live!” Chicken Little’s jaw set ominously. “You just watch me get even.”

“Come now, Chicken Little, we’re merely guessing the boys took it. Annie may have put it away in a new place, forgetting that you would want it to-night,” her father tried to pacify her.

Gertie didn’t say much, but it was plain that she sympathized with Jane. An hour later the three girls went out to the road to watch for the boys’ return. The lads were evidently taking their time. Nine o’clock¹⁶⁸ came—half-past nine—still no boys! Mrs. Morton came out and sent the girls in to bed. They were just dropping off to sleep when the lads drove up.

At breakfast the next morning the entire family fell upon Ernest and Sherm and demanded news of the bread. Annie had returned and assured Mrs. Morton that it had been safely stored in the bread box before she left the house the evening before.

“Bread? What bread?” asked Ernest, rather too innocently.

“Ernest Morton, you did something with that bread I was going to send the Captain. You have got to tell me where you hid it.”

“Chicken Little Jane Morton, I give you my word of honor I didn’t touch your old bread and I don’t know where it is.”

Ernest assumed a highly injured air. Sherm took a hasty swallow of water and nearly choked.

The family had come near believing Ernest, but Sherm's convulsed face roused their suspicion afresh.

"If you didn't, you got Sherm to," said Katy shrewdly. "That's what you were laughing about last night—I know it was."

"That's like a girl always suspecting a fellow of being up to some deviltry. Maybe you think we'll keep on feeding your old pigs if you treat us this way."

Dr. Morton scanned the boys closely, but did not say anything.

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Jane and Katy turned on Sherm.

"Did you take the bread?" Chicken Little had fire in her eye.

Sherm tried guile. "Chicken Little, do I look hungry enough to steal your bread? Mrs. Morton has been feeding me on good things ever since I came, why should I want to make away with four loaves of bread?" Sherm was almost eloquent.

"Nevertheless," observed Katy, "you don't deny that you took it."

Try as they would, they could get no satisfaction from the boys.

"Well, I know they did and I'm going to make 'em wish they hadn't." Chicken Little puckered up her brow to think hard.

"Of course they did or Sherm would have denied it instanter. Let's think up something real mean." Katy stood ready to second any effort.

Gertie had been in a brown study. "The boys are going off some place to-night. I heard Ernest ask your mother if she had cleaned that spot off his Sunday suit, where somebody spilled ice cream on him at the party."

"I bet they're going to see Mamie Jenkins ... they're trying to sneak off without our knowing it." Jane's indignation was not lessened by this news.

Katy leaned forward and whispered something.

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Jane and Gertie clapped their hands.

"All right, the very thing."

At dinner the boys were rather surprised to find that the young ladies had dropped the subject of the bread. They were inclined to take it up again, but nobody seemed interested. Ernest was a little vexed to have his father say before them all: "It will be all right about Sherm's riding the bay, only don't stay out late, boys."

The girls went upstairs soon after dinner and there was much giggling from their room for the next two hours.

“Where ever can we put the clothes where they can’t find them? They make such a big bundle.”

“O Chicken Little, I’ve thought of something that will be better than hiding!” Katy’s eyes sparkled with mischief as she unfolded her scheme. “Let’s hurry and fix a cord.”

“There’s a hook there already we can use. Mother had a hanging basket outside the window one summer.”

“We can pretend to take a walk,” added Katy.

“Pshaw, I want to hear them—it will be half the fun,” Gertie objected.

“I said pretend—we will sneak back through the orchard. Of course, we’d have to be here to do it, Goosie.”

That night Mrs. Morton had an early supper at the request of the boys.⁷¹ Immediately after, they armed themselves with sundry pitchers of hot water and retired upstairs. The girls also disappeared.

All went well for some minutes except that Ernest cut himself in his haste to shave. Presently, a call for mother floated downstairs. Mrs. Morton had gone across the road to visit with Marian. Receiving no reply, Ernest called again lustily. Dr. Morton, coming in just then, replied:

“Your mother is not here, what do you want?”

“Send Chicken Little then.”

“She’s gone for a walk with Katy and Gertie.”

“Thunderation! I’ve got to have somebody. Won’t you please call Mother?”

At this moment three girlish forms slipped into the grape arbor immediately below the boys’ window, and concealed themselves in its deepest shadow.

Mrs. Morton came patiently home to attend to the needs of her favorite son.

“What is it, Ernest?”

“Where did you put our Sunday clothes?”

“Dear me, aren’t they in the closet?”

“In the closet? Do you suppose I’d call you home if they were in the closet? They aren’t anywhere!” Ernest’s tone verged on the disrespectful.

Mrs. Morton toiled upstairs with a sigh. Was there to be a repetition of the bread episode?

Ernest had spoken the truth, the aforesaid clothes were not anywhere.⁷² The boys exchanged glances both wrathful and sheepish. Ernest had

already exhausted every swear word that his mother's presence permitted. Sherm, also restrained by her presence—he had retired to bed while she searched their room and closet—thought all the exclamations he hesitated to utter. Three young young ladies in the arbor beneath listened to such fragments of conversation as floated down to them with unholy glee.

“Well, Ernest, they're certainly not here; I'll go look in Chicken Little's room.”

Ernest accompanied her. Sherm scrambled out of bed and speedily resumed his ordinary wearing apparel. He was startled to perceive a bulky object suddenly darken their window. It was a peculiar-looking bundle from which coat sleeves and trousers' legs dangled indiscriminately. He had no difficulty in recognizing their missing clothes. He rushed to the window and raised the screen, calling to Ernest excitedly. He half expected to see the things disappear as mysteriously as they had come, but the bundle remained stationary. It had been raised to the window by means of a pulley contrived from an old clothes line and the hanging basket hook. The end of the cord was hidden in the arbor.

The boys secured their possessions, hastily assuring themselves that they were all there. Mrs. Morton started thankfully downstairs, but had barely reached the foot when a vigorous exclamation and a loud “Mother!” recalled her.

Mrs. Morton had never seen Ernest so furious. Sherm didn't say much, but his face was wrathfully red.

“What now?”

“Look at this!” Ernest's voice was tragic as he held the garment up to view. His trousers' legs had been neatly stitched across twice on the sewing machine. Sherm's, ditto. All four pair of sleeves were also carefully stitched with a tight tension, so they could not be readily ripped out.

Mrs. Morton looked aghast. “It will take an hour to get that out!”

“Confound those kids! Mother, you can just make those smarties come rip that stitching out!”

“My son, whom are you addressing?”

“Well, Mother, I didn't mean to be disrespectful, but this is a little more than I can stand! Wait till I get my hands on Jane!”

“You would do well to remember, Ernest, that you started this practical joking yourself. I hope it will be a lesson to you to refrain from such

pranks in future.”

“We didn’t do anything but carry the bread over to the Captain without telling them. That’s where they wanted it to go.”

Mrs. Morton gasped. “Did you take the whole baking?”

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“Sure, wasn’t that what you wanted?”

Mrs. Morton considered a moment before replying.

“Well, Ernest, you boys have brought this annoyance upon yourselves—I think you will have to accept the consequences. I am too tired to fuss with the stitching to-night. If you go to Jenkinses you will have to wear your every day suits.”

“But Mother!”

Mrs. Morton was already descending the stairs; she did not respond.

Ernest turned in despair to Sherm, who was examining the neat stitching ruefully.

Sherm grinned; “Guess we might as well take our medicine. Score one for the kids!”

“I think they might take a joke the way it was intended.”

“They seem to have taken the joke and a few other things besides.”

Sherm chuckled. Ernest laughed, too, a little sulkily.

“We’re elected to stay at home all right, but I’ll get ahead of them if it takes a month!”

By the time the boys had rearranged themselves and come downstairs, the occupants of the grape arbor had vanished. They didn’t return until the enemy had departed for a ride to soothe its ruffled feelings.

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The girls retired to bed early, as innocent young people should.

“Did you have a good time at Mamie’s last night?” asked Chicken Little at breakfast the next morning.

“Mamie’s? We didn’t go to Mamie’s.”

“No? I thought you intended to.” This from Katy.

“You girls do get the queerest notions in your heads,” observed Ernest loftily.

Gertie giggled. The boys looked at Gertie; they hadn’t suspected Gertie. Katy also giggled, likewise Chicken Little. There is something exceedingly contagious about giggling.

Ernest became even loftier.

“You girls seem to spend about half your time cackling—I hope you know what you are cackling about.”

“We do,” retorted Chicken Little, still sweetly.

Ernest and Sherm exchanged glances. After breakfast Ernest asked his mother if she had told the girls what happened the night before.

“Not a word. They didn’t ask me.”

“Humph!” The boy was puzzled.

At noon they took another tack.

“I forgot to tell you that Mamie sent her regards to you and Katy,”¹⁷⁶ Ernest remarked casually.

“She said she was sorry you didn’t come, too,” added Sherm.

Jane lifted her eyebrows at Katy. Katy shook her head.

“By the way, Sis, I forgot to tell you that Captain Clarke invited us all to come over to supper to-morrow night. He said to tell you he appreciated that bread very much. And while I think of it, if you can spare a little of your valuable time, I’d thank you to rip that stitching out of our clothes. I want to wear mine to the Captain’s.”

“All right, we’ll rip out the stitching if you’ll bake us a batch of bread as good as the one you took.”

“Not much, Mary Ann! We took the bread to the Captain, all right.”

“Yes, but we only intended to send one loaf—and, besides, you made us a lot of trouble.”

“Mother, haven’t the girls got to take out that stitching?”

“I think Jane’s proposition is a fair one, Ernest,” observed Dr. Morton dryly.

The boys retired to their room early that night where they worked most industriously with scissors and penknife and clothes brush. They had paid a hurried visit to Chicken Little’s room when they first came upstairs. This visit did much to sweeten their hour of labor.

The girls were spending the evening at Frank’s. They were late in¹⁷⁷ getting home. The night was hot and they hated to go to bed until it began to cool off. Dr. and Mrs. Morton were sitting on the front porch.

“Go to bed, children. Father was just starting over to call you.” Mrs. Morton kissed them each goodnight.

Dr. and Mrs. Morton followed them in and had barely settled themselves for the night, when an unearthly shriek rent the air, followed by another and yet another.

“What in thunder are those children up to now?” Dr. Morton spoke in the tone of one who considered that patience had ceased to be a virtue.

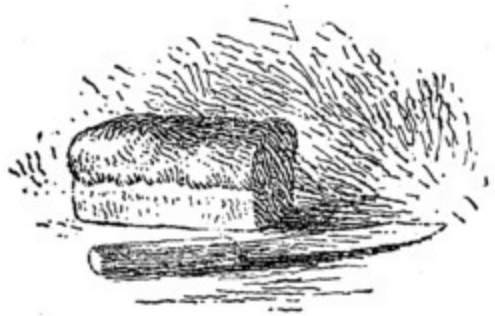
“O Mother, come quick—there’s snakes or frogs or something in our bed and we haven’t any light!”

Mrs. Morton hurriedly lit a lamp and went to the rescue, followed by the doctor armed with a stick.

Holding the lamp aloft they went into the room, the three girls, who had retired in a panic to the head of the stairs, bringing up the rear. Katy had scrambled into bed and out again in haste, dragging the coverlet and sheet half off on the floor. The interior of the bed was fully exposed to view. It was already occupied—not by snakes, but by a handful of fat, squirming, little polliwogs.

“Ugh, I thought it was a snake—they were so slimy and cold!” Katy shivered at the recollection.

Dr. Morton grimly gathered up the polliwogs, then, leaving his wife to restore order, went into the boys’ room and held a conversation behind closed doors. No report of what was said ever reached the girls, but the practical jokes ended then and there.





CHAPTER X

SUPPER AT THE CAPTAIN'S

SUPPER AT THE CAPTAIN'S

Their late unpleasantness had made the young people unusually polite to each other. Irritating subjects were carefully avoided the next day. When they set out for the Captain's, Sherm gallantly handed Katy in to the front seat to sit beside Ernest, while he sandwiched himself between Jane and Gertie. The boys had finally concluded that the real joke was on them and were trying to make up.

The Captain received them at the gate.

"I can't be grateful enough for that bread. I haven't had such bread since I was a boy at home. I believe I am indebted to both Chicken Little and Gertie for the treat. Wing Fan is consumed with envy and asked me to-day if I would ask the honorable miss to tell him how she make the so wonderful bread."

"I'd be delighted to," replied Chicken Little, "only it took more than ¹⁸⁰ telling for Gertie and me. We tried ever so many times before we got it just right, but, of course, Wing understands more about cooking than we did."

"Well, judging by the bread, you seem to know a good deal about cooking."

Sherm could not resist. "Yes, and the girls are first rate at sewing, too!"

This was too much for them all. They laughed until the Captain begged to be let in on the fun.

Their host had an unexpected treat for them. "You are to help me christen my new row boat. It came four days ago, but I have been saving it until you could all go with me."

He led the way down the creek to a long, deep pool, where a blue and white skiff floated gaily at anchor. A piece of white cardboard was tacked over the name so they could not see it.

"I covered it up to see if you could guess it. I'll give one of those Siamese elephants to the one who gets it first."

A lively contest followed. The girls suggested all the poetical names they could think of from Sea Rover to Bounding Billow. The boys, after a

few wild guesses, settled down to the names of places in the neighborhood, and women's names.

The Captain laughed at their wild hazards.

"It isn't the name of any ship or famous naval hero?" Ernest asked this¹⁸¹ question for the second time.

The Captain shook his head. "Some of your neighborhood guessers were the nearest. There's one thing I'm sure of, Chicken Little won't guess it."

This was hint enough for Sherm. "Chicken Little," he sang out instantly.

"Bright boy, the elephant is yours."

"Did you really?" Chicken Little eyed the long strip of cardboard that concealed the name, incredulously.

The Captain took out his penknife and deftly ripped the covering off. There it was—the letters an inch tall in white paint: "Chicken Little."

"I think we should have a proper christening ceremony while we are at it. Ernest, would you mind stepping up to the house and asking Wing for a bottle of ginger ale?"

When Ernest returned with the bottle of amber-colored liquid, Captain Clarke turned to Gertie.

"We must divide the honors, will you break the bottle over the bow while Sherm pushes off? Champagne is customary, but this is better for a prohibition state, and for young folks in any state."

Gertie took the bottle and waited for directions. The others looked on curiously. Sherm untied the boat, and, holding the cord in his hand, also¹⁸² waited.

"Perhaps we'd better consider Ernest the crew; that cord is hardly long enough to permit the *Chicken Little* to float off in style, and we don't want to have to swim, to bring her back. Jump in, Ernest; you know how to handle an oar in fresh water, don't you?"

"I think I can manage it."

Captain Clarke explained to Gertie exactly how to strike the blow that should send the ginger ale foaming over the bow, and repeated the formal words of christening until she knew them by heart. Gertie was so interested she forgot to be shy, and performed her office with much spirit, repeating the "I christen thee, *Chicken Little*," as solemnly as if she were standing beside a battleship instead of a blue-and-white row boat. It was a

pretty ceremony, but it took so long that Wing Fan came to announce supper before they were all fairly packed away in the boat for their promised ride. The six were a snug fit.

Supper was served on the uncovered veranda. A stream of late afternoon sunshine filtered through the trees, and, with the lengthening shadows, cast a sunflecked pattern of branch and foliage on the white linen tablecloth and shining glass and silver. Some of Chicken Little's own clove pinks, mingled with feathery larkspur and ribbon grass, filled a¹⁸³ silver bowl in the center of the table.

"How did you keep them fresh so long?" Chicken Little asked curiously.

"Wing Fan performed some kind of an incantation over them. You'll have to ask him."

Wing was delighted to have Jane notice them. "Velly easy keep—put some away in box with ice all same butter."

Captain Clarke had been the first person on the creek to put up ice for summer use and Wing was the proud possessor of a roomy ice box.

"It seems like home to have ice again." Katy was stirring the sugar in her tea for the sheer satisfaction of hearing the ice tinkle against the sides of the glass. A sudden thought disturbed her. "Though there couldn't be anything nicer than your spring house for keeping things. I don't believe our melons at home ever got so nice and cold all through as yours do down in the spring stream."

"That's a wonderful spring you have over on the place." Captain Clarke came to Katy's rescue. "And that big oak above it is the finest tree in this part of the country. I'll venture it has a history if we only knew it."

"Yes, Father is very proud of the old oak. He says it is at least two hundred years old. He wouldn't take anything for it," Ernest replied.

"Everybody calls Kansas a new country," said Sherm, "but I guess it is¹⁸⁴ pretty old in some ways. Kansas had a lot of history during the war."

"Yes, and lots of the people who helped make the history are living down at Garland now. The old Santa Fe trail runs clear across our ranch. You can tell it still—though it hasn't been traveled for almost twenty years—by the ruts and washouts. And even where the ground wasn't cut up by the countless wheels, it was packed so hard the blue stem has never grown there since. It is all covered with that fuzzy buffalo grass. In winter

this turns a lighter brown than the prairie grass and you can see the trail for miles, distinctly.” Ernest loved history and politics.

“What was the Santa Fe trail? I have heard you speak of the trail so much and I never knew what you meant.” Katy asked eagerly.

The Captain answered: “The old trans-continental wagon road to the gold fields of California. You know there was a time when Kansas didn’t have anything so civilized as a railroad and people traveled by wagon and horseback—even on foot, all the way to the coast.”

“Yes,” added Ernest, “and lots of them died on the way or got killed by Indians.”

“Indians?” said Katy, “why, we haven’t seen a single Indian and Cousin May said she’d be afraid to come out here because there were lots of them still about.”¹⁸⁵

“Not in this part of Kansas—you needn’t lose any sleep. The Kaw reservation isn’t so very far away and parties sometimes come this way to revisit their old hunting grounds, but the Kaws were a peaceable tribe even in their free days.”

“There are lots of Indian mounds and relics around here,” put in Chicken Little. “Father got those arrow heads, and that stone to pound corn, and his tomahawk heads out of a mound over on Little John.”

“Yes, and there’s a tree on the main street in town that used to be a famous meeting place for the Indians. Oh, we must take you all to see the old Indian Mission. It was used as a fort, too, more than once, they say. The walls are fully two feet thick.”

“Whew, I didn’t know you had so many interesting things round here!” exclaimed Sherm.

“We are so used to them we hardly think of them as being interesting. Have I ever told you about the hermit’s cave?”

“Hermit’s cave? No, where is it?”

“On the side of that big bluff just west of town. Oh, that’s some story. The hermit lived there until about ten years ago. Some said he was a Jesuit priest who lived a hermit’s life to become more holy, and others that he was an Italian Noble who had fled from Italy to escape punishment for a crime. Nobody ever really knew much about him except that he was highly educated and read books in several different languages. But the cave is still there, in the ledge of rocks near the top of the bluff.”¹⁸⁶

“Oh, I’d love to see it.” Gertie liked romantic things.

“So would I,” Katy added.

“Me too,” echoed Sherm.

“Count me in,” said the Captain, “or rather let me take you all to town some day to explore these marvels.”

“They really aren’t much to see—they’re more interesting to tell about. But I’d be glad to see them all again myself,” Ernest replied.

Wing Fan had prepared so many good things for them that none of the party felt energetic enough for rowing immediately after supper. They were glad to linger over the peach ice cream which was Wing’s crowning triumph, and nibble at the Chinese sweetmeats about which they were rather doubtful.

“I don’t believe I ever tasted such good ice cream,” exclaimed Katy.

“I think Wing Fan must say magical words over everything he cooks—his things are so different and taste so good. I never thought I liked rice before, but his was delicious.”



And he brandished it fiercely.

“Wing Fan knows all about the family history of rice. He talks to each grain separately,” laughed the Captain.

The boys didn’t praise Wing’s efforts in words, but their appetites kept Wing on the broad grin. He could not resist looking proudly at his employer when Sherm accepted his third saucer of cream.

The Captain invited them into the library to pick out Sherm’s elephant. They were all so interested in the curios and asked so many questions they came near forgetting the boat ride. Ernest picked out a ship’s cutlass the first thing. The Captain took it down for him to examine and he brandished it fiercely.

Captain Clarke smiled. “I fear you wouldn’t do much execution if you handled it that way, Ernest. A cutlass has tricks of its own. Here, this is the way.” He showed the boy how to get the proper hold and how to swing it.

Ernest struck an attitude. “Behold your sailor brother as he skims the briny deep, Chicken Little.”

“Pooh, naval officers don’t carry cutlasses, do they, Captain Clarke?”

“No, I believe the sword used now is straight. But this cutlass has a history I think might interest you.”

“Tell us.”

“If you like. It won’t take long. Boys, will you draw up chairs for the girls?” Captain Clarke reached out his hand for a big easy chair nearby at the same moment that Sherm laid his hand upon it to draw it nearer for their host himself. The two hands rested in almost the same position on the opposite arms of the chair. They were singularly alike. Katy, the observing, noticed this instantly.

Captain Clarke studied Sherm’s hand for a minute, then his gaze shifted to his own.

“I doubt if my hand was ever as good looking as Sherm’s,” he said easily. “You have a hand that denotes unusual strength and will power, according to ‘palmology.’ You will have to live up to it.”

But Katy was persistent. “It’s almost exactly like yours, Captain Clarke, only yours isn’t so smooth and has more lines. Don’t you see it’s a square hand with unusually long fingers. The thumbs are shaped just the same, too.”

“You should be an artist, Katy, you are such a close observer,” replied the Captain.

They settled down comfortably for the story. Chicken Little noticed Sherm regarding his own hand rather critically and glancing from it to the Captain’s, who used frequent gestures as he warmed with his talk.

Gertie could not take her eyes from the cruel steel blade of the cutlass. “I wish there were no awful things to kill people with. I don’t believe God meant people to kill each other in battle any more than to kill each other when they get mad.”

Captain Clarke smiled at her disturbed look. “That is one of the most terrible questions human beings have ever had to answer, little girl. I thought as you do once, Gertie, before the Civil War broke out. I loathed the histories and pictures of fighting. My schoolmates used to dub me a sissy because I hated the sight of blood. But when President Lincoln called for volunteers to save our country, when I realized that it was a choice between having one great free country with liberty in it for both

blacks and whites, or letting our own race and kin leave us in hatred to continue the wickedness of human slavery right at our doors, it didn't take me long to decide. War and all unnecessary suffering inflicted by human beings upon each other, are hideous. But have you ever thought how much more of such suffering there would be if parents didn't inflict suffering upon their children to make them control their ugly passions? If our courts didn't punish people for being cruel to other people? And when it isn't a child or one or two grown men or women who try to be cruel or unjust, but a whole nation, what then? Surely other nations should come to the rescue of the right, even if it means war. You wouldn't let a big dog kill a little one without trying to save it, would you, Gertie?"

Gertie mutely shook her head.

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"Neither should Christian nations allow weaker peoples nor any part of their own people to be unjustly treated, when it is in their power to prevent it. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' will some day be a question every nation must answer as well as every individual."

"But most of the world's wars have been to take other nations' rights away from them, not to protect them," objected Ernest.

"Yes, on one side, but in every war there has always been the side that fought to protect its loved ones and its homes from the brutality of conquerors. There is hideous wrong in every war, but the wrong is in the hearts of those who would rob and oppress those weaker than themselves, not in the patriots and heroes who resist. But I didn't mean to deliver a lecture. I'd rather tell you about the brave boy who wielded this cutlass."

Chicken Little drew her chair closer.

"It was in '65—soon after I was mustered out of service at the close of the war, I was offered the command of a freighter going round The Horn to the Orient. I hated to leave my wife and little boy for a year's voyage, especially after being away so long during the war, but it was the only opening worth while I could find. I guess I had the get-rich-quick idea, too, but never mind, that has nothing to do with the story. We had a terrible voyage. Storms and bad luck of every kind. The rigging was shrouded with ice for weeks—two men were frozen to death on watch. I don't know that I blame the men as I look back. I had been so hardened myself by the terrible discipline and sights of war, I guess I didn't take much trouble to make my crew see the necessity of some of our hardships. At any rate, they mutinied and would have killed me while I

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slept, but for my cabin boy. He was only sixteen, but he discovered the conspiracy and roused me. With the help of the other officers and a few loyal sailors we stood them off. Hot work it was.” The Captain stopped an instant, musing.

The young people waited, expectant. Captain Clarke held up the cutlass reverently. “Charlie used this to good purpose after he had fired his last round of ammunition. I was wounded—had propped myself against the rail and was aiming my last precious bits of lead at the ring-leader, when some one jabbed a bayonet at me from the side. Charlie knocked it up, cutting the dastard down with a second blow that was a marvel. Those two strokes saved my life and saved the ship. Do you wonder this ugly thing looks beautiful to me?”

“And the boy?” Katy asked softly.

“Commands a vessel of his own in the Pacific trade. I had a letter and a Satsuma jar from him a few weeks ago. But we are neglecting the *Chicken Little!* That will never do.”

A crescent moon was visible in the sky as they came back to the place where the boat was moored.

“I fear I detained you longer than I intended with my yarn,” said the Captain. “It will soon be dark and that moon is too young to be very useful.”

“Oh, it will give a good deal of light for two or three hours. I know every inch of the road, and even if I didn’t, the horses do,” Ernest replied.

“Will you boys take the oars together or one at a time? Chicken Little, you girls may take turns in the bow and the rest of us will make a nice tight fit here in the stern.”

The boys preferred to try their luck singly. Ernest picked up the oars awkwardly. He had had little experience in rowing and he felt self-conscious under the Captain’s eye. His first stroke sent a shower of drops flying over them.

“Here,” called Sherm, “that isn’t a hose you’re handling!”

“Anyhow, the drops feel lovely and cool.” Katy was inclined to defend Ernest.

“A longer, slower stroke will do the work better and not blister your hands so quickly,” admonished Captain Clarke. “Our future admiral must learn to row a boat skillfully. You boys are welcome to use it whenever you see fit.”

Ernest set his lips together firmly and soon had the boat skimming¹⁹³ along rapidly, though still rather jerkily, his strokes being more energetic than regular. The woods were already echoing with soft night noises, frogs croaked; the clicking notes of the katydids mingled with the whining of the wind through the boughs overhead. Part of the pool disappeared in the shadows; the rest broke into shimmering ripples with every stroke of the oars.

“Oh, I love the night time!” exclaimed Chicken Little. “Seems as if everything in the world had done its day’s work and was sitting down to talk it over—even the frogs. Don’t you s’pose they’re glad or sorry about things when night comes, just as we are?”

Sherm looked at Chicken Little, who was leaning over the side of the boat, trailing her hand in the water.

“Chicken Little, you work your imagination overtime—it will wear out if you aren’t careful.”

She rewarded him with a grimace.

“You are getting a much evener stroke, Ernest,” observed the Captain.

“I bet he’s getting a blister on his hand, too,” said Katy.

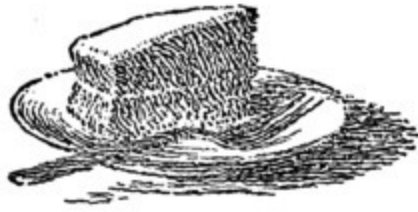
“Yes, Ernest, you’d better let me have a turn.” Sherm slid over to the rower’s seat and reached his hand for the oars, which Ernest yielded reluctantly.

Sherm had spent one summer near Lake Michigan and was a better¹⁹⁴ oarsman than Ernest. The boat skimmed along smoothly. “Good for you, Sherm, you have a strong, even stroke,” the Captain praised.

Presently the girls began to sing, Ernest and Sherm joining in. Captain Clarke listened happily to the young voices until they struck up “Soft and Low over the Western Sea.” They all loved it and were crooning it sweetly, but the Captain’s face went white as they sang: “Father will come to his babe in the nest.” “Don’t!” he exclaimed involuntarily.

They all looked at him in surprise. He regained his self-possession instantly, saying with a smile: “Go on—don’t mind my twinge of rheumatism—I slept in a draught last night. That is one of the loveliest things Tennyson has ever written.”

The young people finished the song and began another, but they wondered. The spell of the evening was broken. Soon after, they started home.





CALICO AND COMPANY

Mrs. Morton passed the muffins for the fifth time to Ernest. Ernest's appetite for muffins was prodigious. Sherm was also ready for another. Chicken Little hadn't quite finished hers, but at the rate they were disappearing—she thought she'd better. Katy said: "Yes, thank you," and Gertie, who ate more slowly than the others, had only had one. Dr. Morton was merely waiting to be urged. Mrs. Morton rang the bell doubtfully. Annie had filled the plate three times already. Annie appeared with a questioning grin.

"Shall I bring some bread, Ma'am? They ain't no more muffins."

Dr. Morton laughed. "Our appetites do credit to your cooking, Annie."

Mrs. Morton sighed, then smiled as she surveyed the rosy, tanned¹⁹⁶ faces.

"There is certainly nothing like country air to make people eat. I wonder when Alice and Dick will be getting back. Dick said the first week in August probably."

"Oh, dear," said Chicken Little, "I want to see Alice and Dick again, but I don't want Katy and Gertie and Sherm to go home. They can only stay a few days this time, Alice said so."

"I don't want to go home a bit," replied Katy.

"There's nothing to do at home till school begins."

"I'd like to go home and see Mother, and then come back." Gertie looked a little wistful. She did want Mother within reach.

"I wish we could keep you all till September." Dr. Morton liked to have the clatter of the young people about. "If we only knew some one going back to Illinois at that time to look after you. I don't suppose Mrs. Halford would like to have you girls travel so far without some grown person along. But I don't see why Sherm can't just as well stay till time to get ready for college."

"I'd like nothing better, and I'm not dead sure I'm going to college this fall. Father seemed a little doubtful when I left, and the folks haven't said anything about it in their letters. If I can't, I guess I'll try for a clerkship¹⁹⁷ in the post-office when I go back."

Dr. Morton studied a moment. "How would you like to work here on the ranch if you don't go to college, Sherm?"

"Do you mean it, Dr. Morton?"

"I surely do. Of course, Ernest's going is not quite settled yet, but I have practically made up my mind that he must go off to school somewhere. We shall need some one to take his place and it would be very pleasant to have you. Chicken Little here wouldn't be quite so homesick for Ernest, perhaps, if you would let her adopt you in his place."

Jane jumped up and down in an ecstasy.

"Oh, Sherm, please do—I thought I'd just die with lonesomeness this winter with all of you gone, and Ernest, too."

Sherm looked pleased at her eagerness. His news from home was still depressing and Sherm, if not homesick, had his lonely hours.

"I would pay you regular wages—whatever is customary for boys of your age. I should have to make some inquiries," continued Dr. Morton.

"Yes, and we could go to the lyceums—they most always have one every winter over at the Fair View Schoolhouse. It's heaps of fun when there's snow on the ground. Frank puts the big wagon bed on runners and we fill the bottom with straw and buffalo robes and all snuggle down together. You just must stay, Sherm!"

"Perhaps he will, if you don't talk him to death, Chicken Little. You haven't given him a chance to get in a word edgeways." Ernest reproved his sister sharply after the manner of brothers slightly older.

"What about you?" retorted Chicken Little. "Sherm, we'll all keep quiet and let you have a chance."

"I'd like to, if college is ruled out, and Mother and Father will let me. They may want me at home, especially if Father grows worse." Sherm gave a little gulp. He was very fond of his father.

"I'll write to him to-day, Sherm, and you might write, too, for I'm going in to town about noon. Any commissions, Mother? Why don't you drop things and come along? A change will do you good—you haven't been off the place for two weeks or more."

"I don't know but I will. Chicken Little, you girls might get up a little picnic lunch for yourselves and the boys, and have it out in the orchard. Annie has a big ironing to-day and it would help her out not to have a dinner to get. Then we'll have a hearty supper this evening."

“Yes, and Chicken Little, did you girls feed the porkers last evening? I⁹ heard them squealing and grunting in the night.”

“Golly!” said Chicken Little, sitting up with a start and looking at Katy. Katy looked guilty, and Gertie concerned.

Dr. Morton did not need any further answer. “Well, you’d better run right out. Remember dumb beasts must never be neglected, daughter.”

“And Jane, I don’t want to hear you say Golly again. By-words of any kind are objectionable for young girls, and that is particularly rough and coarse,” Mrs. Morton added severely.

“You never say it is coarse when Ernest says it—and he uses it an awful lot.”

“My dear, you are not a boy,” Mrs. Morton replied with a dignity that was final.

“I don’t care,” said Chicken Little when the trio got out doors, “it’s not one bit fair to let boys do so many more things than girls! You just wait, if I ever have a daughter she’s going to do every single thing her brother does. So there!”

Sherm overheard and later in the day when he and Jane were talking together, he remarked: “Chicken Little, I don’t think it is exactly fair either to hold the girls in so much tighter than boys, but your mother is right, allee samee. I have heard the fellows talk often enough to know they think a lot more of a girl who isn’t slangy, than of one who is. Of¹⁰ course, mild ones like ‘Oh dear’ don’t matter, but you see a man kind of likes to have a girl, well—different.” Sherm was getting in a little beyond his depth.

The girls carried two pails of sour milk and a great basket of parings to their greedy pigs and watched them feed without interest.

“The only reason I’m glad to go home is I won’t have to feed these horrid pigs any more. I never saw anything grow and eat like they do. They ought to be worth a lot of money after all the stuff they’ve eaten.” Katy kicked her toe against the log pen to emphasize her remarks.

“I don’t think they’re worth so very much yet.” Chicken Little was regarding them with no very friendly eye.

“I wouldn’t mind so much if they weren’t getting so ugly and smelly,” said Gertie plaintively.

Frank, happening by just then, was amused to see their disgusted expressions.

“Say, Frank, how soon will these pigs be big enough to go in the corral with the others?”

Frank’s eyes twinkled. He came up and scanned the ten muddy, impudent pigs, who were already coming up to the sides of the pen, grunting for more. “Well,” he said judicially, “I think perhaps you will be rid of them inside of two or three months, but they’ll eat a lot more from now on.”

The three set up a united protest.

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“Father said it would only be a few weeks when we caught them, and it’s been five already,” Chicken Little remonstrated hotly.

“Well, don’t go for me. You asked for my opinion and I gave it to you.”

Frank grinned so broadly that Jane grew suspicious. “Pooh, you’re teasing, I’ll ask Father to-night.”

The girls scoured the pantry and spring house for provender for the picnic. Sherm and Ernest would be in from the meadow where they were cutting down thistles about half-past twelve. Bread and butter and cold ham were flanked with cookies, pie, and musk melons. Annie wanted them out of her road as speedily as possible, so they took their stuff all down to the orchard and stowed it away in the shade.

“Now what?” demanded Katy.

“I don’t know. Wish we could think of something new.” Chicken Little stared up and down the rows of apple trees, seeking an inspiration.

Her glance fell upon a lone apple tree standing in the center of an open space, apart from all its fellows. Katy’s glance followed hers.

“Why is that old tree all by itself that way?”

“I don’t know—they were all big trees when we came here. It is a bell-flower and we call it Old King Bee. Say, I’ve got an idea. Let’s get Calico and Caliph and play riding school—you remember that article in ‘The Harper’s’ about a riding school in New York, and you said you wished you could go.”

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“Would Ernest let us take Caliph?”

“I don’t know, but I know I could ride him if I tucked my skirts up and used the man’s saddle. There can’t a soul see us here; it’s so shut in by the trees.”

“It would be fun. Let’s try to ride bare back and do stunts to surprise the boys. I wish we could take our skirts clear off—they catch so on the saddle horn and in the stirrup buckles.”

“I tell you what we’ll do.” Chicken Little’s eyes danced impishly. “There are lots of Ernest’s old trousers in the lumber-room closet that he outgrew ever so long ago. I believe we could find some to fit all of us. Let’s go see.”

A swift rummage of the dusty closet set them all sneezing, but they triumphantly brought forth an armful of defunct trousers and carried them up to their room. For the next fifteen minutes such giggles and exclamations and shrieks of laughter escaped from their room that Annie left her ironing to see what was up. An astonishing sight met her gaze. Once started upon the dressing-up craze, the girls had not been content with one garment. Chicken Little had daringly ransacked not only Ernest’s bureau, but Sherm’s possessions, in quest of shirts and ties.

She had decked herself in a blue checked cheviot shirt, tucked into blue serge trousers, liberally patched at the knees. Sherm’s best red tie was neatly knotted at her throat, and an old straw hat adorned with a red hair ribbon, topped her brown braids. Katy was resplendent in a tan colored shirt, with a bright green tie popularly supposed to belong to Ernest. Her own black sailor finished her off nicely. Gertie had a faded pink shirt, which dated back to Centerville days—all Ernest’s more recent garments being too big for her slim little figure.

Annie threw up her hands. “You’re a pretty-looking lot. I’d just like to have the Missus see you now. I bet you’d catch it.”

But Annie had troubles of her own and retired to her ironing.

The trio slipped out the back way—they didn’t care to have Marian see them, and they didn’t wish to bother with Jilly. The stable was deserted. They quickly saddled Caliph after making friends—with sundry lumps of sugar. Calico was equipped only with a saddle blanket and girth. Gertie decided that she would let the others experiment first, so she walked back to the orchard.

“Let’s try them down the lane first. They will be easier to manage on a straight road than in among the trees, if they are fractious.”

Jane helped Katy upon Calico’s back and showed her how to press her knees against the sides to secure her seat in the place of stirrups.

“You can put your hand under the girth if you begin to slip.”

Katy took a turn or two and decided she could stick on if Calico didn’t trot. He was a single footer and had a very easy gait except on the rare occasions when he insisted upon breaking into a hard trot. Chicken Little

led Caliph to the fence. She wanted to be sure that she was well in her seat before Caliph discovered she was a girl.

But Caliph liked Chicken Little, and not having any skirts to make him suspicious, seemed inclined to take her for what she seemed. He noticed only that he had a lighter hand on the reins. He dashed off as lightly and smoothly as if Ernest or Sherm were on his back, and Chicken Little was in a transport of pleasure and triumph to think she could ride him. Katy had a harder time, but she stuck on pluckily for three turns up and down the lane.

They didn't dare linger too long lest some neighbor come by and see them. So they presently turned off upon the faint track that led through the gate into the orchard. Gertie was awaiting them under the big tree. Katy slipped off Calico to give Gertie her turn. Chicken Little led the way²⁹⁵ on Caliph and they went round and round the tree, faster and faster, till both were ready for a rest. The ponies were fresh and seemed to enjoy the sport as much as they did.

Katy tried Calico next, enchanted to find she could stick on at a canter. By this time they were ready for something new.

"Do you suppose we could ride backwards?" Katy was in a daring mood.

They could and they did, though Calico was a little doubtful as to whether he approved of this innovation. It was not exactly comfortable for anyone concerned and they soon gave it up. But when Chicken Little tried to make the intelligent pony dance on his hind legs, Calico waxed indignant. Instead of rising gracefully, he gave two short, plunging leaps, descending with forelegs rigid and head down, a maneuver which sent his mistress flying over his head.

The turf was soft and she was up in a trice, gripping Calico's rein before he could make use of his freedom. The crowning feat of the morning was another of Chicken Little's brilliant ideas. They had tethered the ponies by their bridle reins and were letting them graze on the orchard grass while they stretched out and rested. Suddenly Jane sat up with a start and began to take off her shoes.

"What on earth are you going to do now, Jane Morton?" demanded²⁹⁶ Katy sharply.

"Wait and see. I'm most sure I can. I want you to lead Calico very slowly."

Katy obediently followed directions. Chicken Little put her hand on the girth and vaulted on his back. She rode once around the tree tamely, then slowly got to her feet on Calico's slim back, bidding Katy steady her. She succeeded in going about three feet with this precarious footing before she lost her balance and slid harmlessly down on the pony's back. Calico did not look specially pleased at the jounce she gave him as she lit. She persevered until she could go round the tree, then insisted upon trying it alone. Katy and Gertie both remonstrated.

"You'll get killed! Calico doesn't like it a bit."

"I won't—I tried once all by myself last summer on old Kit, but Calico's harder, because he isn't so fat. You wouldn't hurt me, would you, Calico?" She put her arm around his neck and squeezed him hard.

Calico whinnied and began to nose her for sugar. She produced two lumps, and stroked him, talking to him in whispers while Katy hooted.

"A lot of good that will do."

Chicken Little got up again with Katy's help, then started off slowly by herself. Calico moved carefully at a snail's pace. She made the entire circuit of the tree successfully this time. Again she went around, increasing the speed of Calico's walk. She was so jubilant she grew reckless and clucked, which was Calico's signal to canter. He responded promptly and with equal promptness, she slid down on him kerplunk. Calico laid back his ears in disapproval, and looked around inquiringly.

By this time Katy had plucked up her courage and wished to try it. She was entirely willing, however, to have Chicken Little at the pony's head. Katy slipped, too, but she was lighter, and Calico was growing used to it and did not mind so much. Chicken Little patted him each time and he soon ceased to notice the bumps. Gertie preferred to be a spectator at this stunt, but the others persisted until Jane succeeded in going round the tree once with Calico pacing.

"Golly, I wish Ernest and Sherm could see us!" Chicken Little was already sighing for new worlds to conquer.

"You said Golly again."

"Golly, I did, didn't I? It's awfully hard to quit anything like that. Say, I want you girls to pinch me every time I say it, then I'll remember."

"You'll get mad if we do," replied Gertie, wise beyond her years.

"No, I won't! Honest to goodness I won't. I truly want to stop it."

“All right,” said Katy firmly, “but you will get more pinches than you²⁰⁸ are expecting.”

Katy and Gertie and poor Calico were all ready to settle down for a rest. But Chicken Little was burning to show off before Ernest and Sherm. She untied Caliph and took several turns around the tree, going faster and faster.

“Pooh,” she said after a while, “I bet I could ride Caliph anywhere. Suppose we go meet the boys. You and Gertie can both ride Calico bare back. I guess they’ll be surprised. It’s most noon; I can tell by the sun.”

“But Jane, we can’t go to meet the boys this way.” Gertie looked distressed.

“Oh, I forgot. What can we do? I’d be afraid to ride Caliph with even a short skirt—he’s never had a woman on him before.”

“What if the boys do see us? Nobody else is likely to come along just at noon. Anyway, your father thinks it’s dangerous for girls to wear long skirts to ride in. I heard him say so.” Katy was plausible and Chicken Little wanted to be persuaded.

“I don’t care, if you don’t.”

“All right, let’s do it. I think you look real nice that way, Chicken Little, honest I do.”

“Well, they’re heaps more comfortable. I feel so light. You make an awfully cute boy, Katy, and Gertie is just sweet. And you couldn’t ride²⁰⁹ bare back half so well sidewise.”

It took some persuasion to secure Gertie’s consent, but she finally gave in.

They rode gaily out into the lane. Calico was too tired to make any protest to his double burden. Once in the lane, they waited in the shade. But the boys did not come. They waited until Jane was sure it must be one o’clock and their appetites suggested two at the very earliest. Calico waited patiently enough, but Caliph was uneasy over the flies. Finally, they decided to give the boys up and go back and have their picnic alone.

“We might take one gallop down the line to the creek to make sure they’re not in the meadow,” Katy suggested.

“I bet they finished the weeds sooner than they expected and went fishing.” Chicken Little strained her eyes in the direction of the meadow.

They started the horses off at a smart pace, then faster and faster, till they broke into a swift gallop.

“Isn’t it glorious?” Chicken Little called back. She was several lengths ahead.

She did not hear Katy’s response. A jack rabbit, frightened by the approaching horses, broke cover from some wild blackberry bushes that grew over the stone wall, and dashed across the road directly in front of Caliph. The spirited beast shied violently, then leaped forward, throwing Chicken Little neatly off into the exact middle of the dusty lane. Her pride was more hurt than she was. She tried to stop him by calling “Whoa” lustily. But Caliph seemed to have a pressing engagement elsewhere. He quickly disappeared around a bend in the lane.

The girls looked at each other in dismay.

Chicken Little got hastily to her feet. There was no time to nurse bruises. She must catch Caliph somehow.

“Golly, he’s got that beautiful Mexican saddle on and he may take a notion to roll. I knew I hadn’t any business to take it, but I wanted to ride him just as Ernest does.”

Katy and Gertie noticed the “Golly,” but there seemed to be more important business on hand.

“Do you suppose you could take Calico and catch him?” asked Katy anxiously.

“I don’t know, but I guess I’ll have to try.”

Katy and Gertie climbed down and Chicken Little swung herself up.

“Maybe one of you’d better come, too, to hold Calico and ride him home if I catch Caliph.”

“I’ll come, and Gertie had better run and change her clothes and go back to the orchard to give the boys their lunch, if they come before we get back. Don’t tell them where we’re gone.”

“Nor about Caliph, Gertie, you can say we’ll be back in a minute.” 211

Katy had mounted behind Jane while she was giving this last direction and poor Calico started off at a gallop. They crossed the creek and came to the place where the road forked just beyond the timber without seeing hide or hair of Caliph.

“He must have streaked it. I don’t think he’d take the road to town—he must have gone straight home to the Captain’s. Oh, dear, I’ll have to tell him I used Ernest’s horse without permission, and I’ve got these awful clothes on! It just seems as if the Captain has to know every single bad thing I ever do.” Chicken Little heaved a long sigh and clucked to Calico.

They had almost reached the Captain's gate when they saw Wing Fan approaching on horseback, leading the truant Caliph. Chicken Little was immensely relieved to find, as they came near, that neither saddle nor bridle had suffered from the run away.

Wing Fan was also greatly relieved to find that no one had been hurt.

"Me velly 'fraid honorable brother have bad fall. Captain Clarke no home. I bring horse, find out."

Wing held Caliph while Jane mounted, and rode a little way with her to make sure he would not be fractious, but Caliph seemed to have had his fling and bowled along smoothly.

In the meantime Ernest and Sherm had arrived and were plying Gertie with questions between mouthfuls. Gertie parried as long as she could, shutting her lips together tight when they began to press her too hard.

"I'd just like to know what they are up to now. That precious sister of mine can get into more scrapes than any kid I ever saw."

"And Katy isn't far behind her," added Sherm, hoping Gertie would try to defend her absent sister and let something out.

Chicken Little and Katy took the horses to the barn, carefully unsaddled Caliph, and rubbed both horses down and fed them, before going back to the orchard. They forgot all about their unusual dress.

They arrived there, tired and flushed, in time to help the boys finish the last melon.

"You mean things to eat the melons all up." Chicken Little almost forgot her own offense in her disgust over their greediness.

The boys did not waste time defending themselves; their attention was concentrated on the girls' peculiar costume.

"Well, what in the demnition bow wows have you been doing now, Chicken Little Jane Morton?" Ernest's gaze wandered from his sister to Katy, who suddenly became self-conscious and tucked her feet and as much of her trouser-clad legs as she could manage, underneath her.

Chicken Little gave a start of surprise, then faced Ernest boldly.

"Oh, just having a little fun."

By this time Ernest was beginning to grasp details. "Suppose next time you start out to have fun you let my things alone. Isn't that Sherm's best tie you've got on?"

Chicken Little clutched the offending tie and glanced hastily at Sherm. The boy was regarding her with a peculiar expression, both admiring and

disapproving. There was no denying that Chicken Little made a most attractive boy.

The swift color swept into the girl's face as she caught Sherm's glance. "Oh, dear, and he had told her only that morning that girls should be different!" She liked Sherm—she didn't want him to think she was a bold, awful girl. Some way their prank seemed to need excusing. She replied to the look in Sherm's eyes rather than to her brother's accusation.

"We—I wanted to ride Caliph—I just knew I could if I didn't have a lot of horrid skirts to frighten him. And we did beautiful stunts and we couldn't, if we hadn't put on your old things. I bet if you had to wear cluttering things like skirts all the time you'd be glad to take them off some times, too." Chicken Little's big brown eyes sought Sherm's²¹⁴ appealingly.

Ernest answered before Sherm could say anything.

"Well, you can settle with Mother about the skirts, but I'll thank you to let Caliph and my best ties alone."

"Did you ride him?" asked Sherm. "You're welcome to my tie, Chicken Little. It's very becoming."

Chicken Little felt subtly consoled. "Yes, I rode him, but he threw me once," she confessed.

"He threw me once, too," said the boy. "You'd better be a little careful."

Sherm grinned and Chicken Little smiled back happily.





DICK AND ALICE GO ON ALONE

Dr. and Mrs. Morton got home about four o'clock. The girls had studied some time as to whether they should make a clean breast of the morning's doings, but Ernest, urged on by Sherm, had discouraged them.

"You needn't be afraid I'll peach, Sis. You're an awful good rider for a girl and I don't mind your taking Caliph so long as you didn't get hurt. And I guess it was sensible of you not to try him with skirts. But you'd better be careful. You're getting most too big for such tom boy business."

"It wasn't anything really wrong," argued Chicken Little.

"I know my mother wouldn't have cared way off out here in the country." Katy added her mite to the whitewashing.

"I don't think it was wrong, but I guess your mother wouldn't be pleased to hear about it," observed Gertie sagely.

"She isn't going to," said Chicken Little with decision. "I shall tell Father instead."

Father only laughed. Mrs. Morton did not learn of it until the girls had gone home to Centerville, when Chicken Little, wishing to convince her that she could ride Caliph safely, let it out, and received the long-delayed scolding.

Two days after the riding school, a letter came from Dick and Alice, saying they would arrive Sunday and must leave for Centerville the following Saturday. The same mail brought a letter for Sherm from his mother, and another from Mrs. Dart to Dr. Morton. The doctor did not mention the contents of his until the boy had finished reading his own. Then he stepped over to his side and laid his hand gently upon his head. Sherm was looking pretty sober. "Can you be content to be our boy this winter, Sherm?"

"Thank you, you're mighty good to want me. I—I guess there's no college for me this winter. Father's no better. I wish—excuse me." Sherm finished abruptly and bolted out of the house.

Chicken Little looked after him with some concern. She turned inquiringly to her father.

“Poor lad,” he said in response to her look, “his father is no better—will⁷ be a helpless invalid to the end, I judge, more from what Mrs. Dart doesn’t say than from what she does. I’m afraid their affairs are in bad shape. Dart’s illness must have cost enormously and they have had no man to look after their business. She writes that Sue is to be married quietly next month. She says they are sadly disappointed not to have Sherm home for this event, but feel that he will be better off to stay with us this winter, and she can hardly afford to have him come so far just for a short visit. There is something sort of queer about the letter—something mysterious, as if she were keeping the really important facts to herself. See what you make of it, Frank.”

He handed the letter to Frank, who had just walked in with Jilly perched on his shoulder.

Chicken Little did not wait for Frank’s verdict, she slipped out the door in search of Sherm. Her first guess was the stables and she made a hurried survey of stalls and hay mow. He was not there. She tried the orchard next, then the arbor. Perhaps he had taken one of the ponies and gone for a ride. No, she remembered both Calico and Caliph had whinnied as she went by their stalls. He might have walked down the lane. She went clear to the ford and hunted among the trees for a short distance up and down the bank. He was nowhere in sight. Coming back, she caught sight of the tops of the Weeping Willows and, remembering that Sherm sometimes²¹⁸ went there Sundays with a book, she stole up quietly. He had thrown himself down on the ground under the interlacing branches. No, he was not crying—just lying perfectly still, staring up into the boughs above him with such misery in his face, it hurt her to see him.

She hardly knew what to do. She knew Ernest generally preferred to be let alone when things went wrong, but then Ernest had never come up against any real trouble. She suspected that Sherm’s was very real. Chicken Little watched him for several minutes, undecided. He did not stir. Finally, she decided she didn’t care whether Sherm wanted her round or not, she wasn’t going to go off and leave him to grieve all alone.

“Sherm,” she called softly. The boy raised up on his elbow. “What do you want?” he asked rather gruffly.

His manner didn’t suggest any longing for her society, but she persevered. “I won’t bother you but just a minute, Sherm, but I’m awful sorry—about your father—and college and everything.”

Sherm did not answer or look at her. The tender note of sympathy in her voice was imperilling his self-control. He didn't mean to play the baby, especially before a girl. But the braver the boy was, the more Chicken Little burned to comfort him. She stood for a moment staring at him helplessly, the tears welling up into her own eyes. Then on a sudden impulse she dropped down beside him, and before he could protest, began to stroke his hair. Sherm tolerated the caressing fingers for a few minutes, but his pride would not let him accept even this comforting. He dabbed his eyes fiercely. "Don't, Chicken Little, don't! You're a trump to stand by a fellow this way. I am all right—I just got to thinking about Father—and Sue's going."

Sherm would have carried it off beautifully if he hadn't attempted a smile, but his heart was too sore to quite manage that. The smile vanished in a hasty gulp, and, burying his face on his arm, he had it out.

Chicken Little's eyes were redder than Sherm's when she got up to go back to the house. Sherm noticed her tear-stained appearance. "Wait a minute," he ordered brusquely. He ran down to the spring stream just beyond the willows and soaking and rinsing out his handkerchief, brought it dripping to her. "Mop your eyes, Jane, they look awful. There—that's better. I'll be along pretty soon!"

Mrs. Morton had not considered it necessary to inform Katy and Gertie that she had also written to their mother, asking if their visit might be prolonged until the last of August. Mrs. Morton was firm in the opinion that every detail of children's lives should be settled by their elders for their best good, and she expected the children to be properly thankful. Her expectations had not always been realized with her own children—all three having often very definite ideas of their own as to what they wanted and what they didn't want. But in this instance she was not disappointed. The joy was general when Mrs. Halford wrote that the girls might remain until the twenty-eighth, when a business friend of Mr. Halford's would be coming through Kansas City, and would meet the girls there and bring them on home. To be sure, Gertie had a bad half hour thinking how much longer it would be before she could see Mother, but she soon forgot all this in the bustle of preparation for Alice and Dick.

Marian and Frank had arranged several excursions for their last days at the ranch. They had seen fit to include the young folks in only one of these—a day in town when they were to go to the old Mission and look up

some interesting Indian Mounds in the neighborhood. Captain Clarke was to be of the party, and, true to his promise, insisted upon driving the boys and girls in himself.

The afternoon Alice and Dick were expected, the girls were down the lane watching for the first glimpse of the bay team, to greet them. They had arrayed Jilly in white with a wreath of forget-me-nots on her blonde curls and a small market basket full of hollyhock blooms to scatter in the pathway of the expected guests. Frank was responsible for the hollyhocks. Flowers were becoming scarce, it had been so dry, and Chicken Little was bemoaning the fact that they could hardly find enough to trim up the house.

“Hollyhocks, sure. There’s a whole hedge of them right at your hand. Nothing could be more appropriate for returning honeymooners. Further, they’re gaudy enough to compete with the two inches of dust in the lane. If we don’t have rain pretty doggoned soon we won’t have any crop.”

Both Mrs. Morton and Marian looked up anxiously.

“You don’t think—?” Marian hesitated. She did not wish to burden Katy and Gertie with family worries.

“No, I don’t think, not being in the weather man’s confidence. But a rain inside of the next three days would mean hundreds of dollars to the Morton family and the whole Eastern half of Kansas as well.”

Chicken Little’s mind flew instantly to Ernest’s cherished hopes. “Oh, can’t Ernest go to college if we don’t have rain?”

“Don’t bother your head, Chicken, we’ll find some way to take care of Ernest. Go back to your decorations.”

Ernest and Sherm had spent the preceding evening erecting a remarkable arch over the front gate with “Welcome to Our City” done in charcoal letters a foot high on a strip of white paper cambric, depending from it, and an American flag proudly floating above. The girls completed this modest design by trimming up the gate posts with boughs.

Mrs. Morton’s preparations were more practical. Three peach and three custard pies crowded a chocolate cake and a pan of ginger cookies on the lowest pantry shelf. The bread box lid would not shut, the box was so full, and a whole boiled ham was cooling down at the spring house, not to mention six dismembered spring chickens which had been offered up in place of the regulation calf.

“I shouldn’t mind if they had cooked two of the pigs,” groaned Katy. They were giving their charges an extra big feed, being fearful lest they should forget them in the excitement of the guests’ arrival.

“Neither would I,” Chicken Little replied with a sigh. “I’m sick of the sight of ’em!”

Gertie threw a carrot and hit the one time beauteous white one with the curly tail, so smart a rap on his snout that he squealed his disapproval while his relatives bagged the carrot.

“I don’t care if I don’t get any money for my share of ’em,” said Katy after a pause of disgusted contemplation of the pigs. “I’d have to spend it²⁰³ for something useful like as not, or give some of it to the heathens. Let’s give them back to your father.”

“I’d just as lief, only Frank and the boys would tease us everlastingly if we backed out now—and we’ve worked so hard!”

“I don’t care. I’d just as lief quit.” Gertie’s discouraged expression was so funny that Chicken Little laughed and Gertie, the patient, flared. She hated to be funny.

“Stop it—I am not going to help you feed those horrid pigs another time, Chicken Little Jane Morton. I’ve just been doing it to help you out. And I don’t think it’s a suitable occupation for girls—or company!” Gertie climbed down from her perch on the log pen and departed with dignity.

“Humph, I guess I never asked you to help me. Besides, you expected to get as much money as I did. You can just go off and sulk if you want to.”

“Well, I don’t think that is a nice way to talk to your guests.” Katy climbed down and departed to soothe her sister.

Chicken Little whacked her heels against the logs and made a face at the nearest pig to relieve her feelings. She loathed the creatures. She wished she could wipe them off the face of the earth. Katy was half way to the house when she had an inspiration. “Katy!” she called eagerly,²⁰⁴ “Katy, I’ve got an idea.”

Katy continued her way without glancing ’round.

“It’s something you’ll like.”

Katy wavered and unbent enough to ask: “What is it?”

“Come here and I’ll tell you. I’m not going to yell it.”

Katy considered and finally returned reluctantly.

When she came back to the pen, Chicken Little glanced round to make sure that no one was about, to overhear, then, to make sure, whispered excitedly into Katy's ear.

Katy's face lighted. "All right, let's. Gertie won't care."

They had entirely made up this slight unpleasantness by afternoon. Perched on rocks under the shade of the cherry trees they waited impatiently for Dick and Alice. Jilly had been coached in her little speech so often that there was no doubt at all that she would get it wrong. She had been told to say, "Welcome, Uncle Dick, welcome Auntie Alice." She had said it faultlessly three times already when approaching wheels started them to their feet expectantly. They were disappointed by seeing a neighbor drive round the bend in the lane. When the familiar bays did come into view with their swinging trot, Jilly was so enchanted she started off pell mell to meet them, spilling her blossoms out generously as she ran. The girls overtook her before she quite got in the path of the horses and reminded her of her responsibility.

Dr. Morton pulled up and Dick leaped to the ground, punctuating her attempted "Weecome" by tossing her into the air and kissing her noisily.

Jilly struggled free. Her coaching had not been in vain.

"Oo muttant—I ain't said it, and oo pillin' ve fowers."

Dick set the mite on her feet with exaggerated courtesy. "Of course—to be sure. I beg your most humble pardon, Miss."

Jilly drew in a long breath and began at the beginning again. She plunged a fat hand into the market basket and aimed two hollyhock tops in the general direction of Dick's diaphragm, repeating impressively: "Wee-come, Unky Dick." She took no notice of his profound bow, but looking up at Alice, who was leaning out the side of the seat watching with amused eyes, she showered another handful upon the wheels and horses hoofs impartially. "Wee-come, An-tee Alish," she said solemnly, then, with a rapturous look of triumph, turned to the girls for approval.

She got it, with numerous hugs and kisses for interest.

Dick surveyed the remainder of the reception committee critically.

"Chicken Little, I hate to mention it, but is there anything left on the ranch to eat? I have been a little nervous all the time we have been away, remembering the execution Katy and Gertie and Sherm were doing when we left and now—" He gazed sorrowfully at the girls' plump cheeks. "I

know they have gained ten pounds apiece. Be frank with me, Jane, is there anything left?"

"If there isn't, Dick, you might commandeer one of Chicken Little & Co.'s pigs. They are fat enough to sustain you for a few hours," replied Dr. Morton, glancing at the girls.

Katy and Jane also exchanged glances.

Dick was quite overcome when he caught sight of the triumphal arch and the flag.

"Support me, Chicken Little, this reception is so, ah, flattering it makes me faint with emotion. Young ladies, Dr. Morton," he placed one hand over his heart and bowed low to each, "and esteemed—" he hesitated, not seeing anyone but Jilly to include in this last salutation, "esteemed fellows," he bowed once more, including trees, bushes, and any other objects handy, with a courtly sweep of the arm, "it is with deepest gratitude I—"

"Heart-felt sounds better, Dick," interrupted Alice, laughing.

Dick gazed at her reproachfully. "'Tis always the way when I try to soar, my wife seizes my kite by the tail and pulls it down with a jerk. I thought lovely woman was supposed to inspire a man to higher—"

Dick was interrupted in the middle of his complaining by Mrs. Morton's coming out to greet them.

The next few days fairly flew by. Each member of both families had thought of a variety of things that Alice and Dick must do before they went home. Unfortunately, there were only twenty-four hours in a day and it seemed necessary to spend part of these in sleep.

"We ought to have at least one more hunting party," declared Chicken Little.

"We ought—I shall feel the lack of that hunting party for years to come, Jane. There will be a vacuum in my inner consciousness. I shall wake up in the middle of the night sighing for that hunting party. But you see today is Wednesday, and we must leave Friday, and Frank and I have sworn by every fish in the creek to take to-morrow off for a fishing trip. Chicken Little, there is only one way out of the dilemma. Painful as it will be for you, you'll have to invite us to come again."

The worst of it was that Frank firmly declined to take a single petticoat along. Neither Marian nor Alice could move him from this ungallant resolve.

“My dear wife,” Frank replied, “I love you, but I don’t love to have²²⁸ you round when I’m fishing.”

“Never mind,” said Marian with decision, “if we can’t go we won’t get them any lunch. Will we, Mother Morton?”

Mrs. Morton was rather horrified at such a breach of hospitality, Dick and Sherm being included in the boycott, but Marian and Alice both urged, and she finally promised neither to get up a lunch herself nor to permit Annie to.

Marian and Alice looked triumphant. Frank motioned to Dick and the two promptly disappeared. Marian quickly followed.

“The villain! He’s gone over home to confiscate that batch of doughnuts I baked this morning. I hope he doesn’t find them.”

Mrs. Morton took the hint and locked up her pies and cake. But the two boys and Dr. Morton had joined the foraging party and food disappeared most mysteriously at intervals during the remainder of the day. A custard pie already cut and served on plates on the kitchen table, reassembled itself in the pie tin and walked out of the kitchen door when Annie changed the plates in the dining room. One entire loaf of bread vanished from the earth while Annie was trying to expel Ernest from the kitchen with a broom.

The foragers were so capable that even Mrs. Morton ceased to worry²²⁹ about the men folks going hungry.

But Marian’s blood was up. “We’ve just got to do something to get even. The best pool for fish on the whole creek is on Captain Clarke’s land and I know they are not going there. Let’s take the spring wagon and drive over and get the Captain to go fishing with us. He’ll take us to his own pool and with him to help, I’d be willing to wager we can beat these top-lofty fishermen at their own game.”

Alice and the girls were instantly enthusiastic, but Mrs. Morton preferred to stay at home and keep cool.

Marian and Chicken Little left the others to put up the lunch, while they went out to the stable to hitch up the bays. They were soon on their way, with a can of bait and a pocket full of fish hooks and stout cord to rig up impromptu fishing lines, the men having taken all the poles with them.

The others had gone soon after daybreak. It was nearing ten when Marian drove up to the Captain’s hitching post.

“What if he isn’t at home?” said Chicken Little.

“He’s got to be,” laughed Marian.

Wing Fan came out, grinning. He did not share his master’s reputed dislike for ladies.

He ushered them all into the big library and went off to notify the Captain, who was down in the meadow superintending the hay cutting. 230

“I am afraid we are an awful nuisance, but my prophetic soul tells me he will enjoy the joke and be pleased to have us come to him.” Marian was bolstering up her courage.

“Of course he will. You don’t suppose anybody could resist this crowd, do you?” Alice encouraged.

Captain Clarke was both pleased and amused. They were so excited they all talked at once, and it took several minutes for him to get command of the situation.

“They have the advantage in fishing early in the day, but I’ll impress Wing Fan and we’ll have more fish, if I have to get out a net and seine them. We’ll go down to the long hole now and see what we can do, and Wing will come as soon as he gives the men their dinner. If there is a fish in the creek you can depend on Wing to lure him. He just goes out and crooks his little finger and they begin to hunt for the hook,” he explained to Gertie.

The Captain proved to be an expert fisherman himself. He showed them all his little stock of fisherman’s tricks and they had a good catch by noon when Marian and Alice stopped to prepare the lunch. About two o’clock Wing Fan appeared, his face one broad, yellow smile.

“Big missee and little missee have most,” he assured them. 231

Chicken Little and Katy and Gertie laid off and perched some distance up the bank behind Wing to watch his methods. He didn’t seem to do anything different, but the fish certainly came to his hook in a most astonishing manner.

They fished until four, and the catch exceeded their wildest expectations. They wanted to leave some with the Captain, but he wouldn’t hear of it. “If the men have more than you, you can send me some of theirs. I should like to see if the flavor is better.”

They expected their fishermen to drift in about five, and knew they would bring their fish to the house to display them before taking them down to the spring stream. Hurrying home, they put away the team and

took their fish down to the spring house. Captain Clarke had saved a considerable part of their take alive for them, in a wooden cask, which Wing carefully loaded into the spring wagon. They got a piece of chicken wire and fastened it across the opening where the water flowed out underneath the spring house, and then, removing the milk and butter crocks from the rock-lined channel, turned all the living fish into the water. The others they spread out on the rock floor to make the best showing possible. The spring house seemed alive with fish.

“They’ll never beat that!” Alice’s eyes were dancing. 232

“I don’t see how they can.” Marian chuckled. “My lofty spouse will have to come down off his high horse this time.”

“Don’t breathe a word, girls. I don’t want them to have the least inkling of what we have been up to, till they see this array.”

The fishermen arrived, hot, dusty, and hungry. After all their efforts, their supplies had hardly kept pace with their appetites. They displayed their booty proudly. Frank had three trout and five catfish on his string. Dick, one trout, and three catfish. Dr. Morton and the boys had pooled theirs, and boasted twelve altogether. But most of the fish were small. The ladies obligingly went into ecstasies over their skill. Chicken Little and Katy admired and ohed and ahed until Marian was afraid they would rouse suspicion.

“Do you want them all here at the house or shall we put part of them down at the spring?” Frank asked, with emphasis on the all.

“Oh, since there are so many, perhaps you’d better put some away for breakfast,” Marian replied, after an instant’s consideration.

Frank, Dick and the boys started for the spring. The three girls rose to accompany them. Alice and Marian looked languidly uninterested.

The spring house was very dark and shadowy, coming in from the bright sunshine outside. Frank was in the lead. He stopped just in time to avoid stepping on a fish. He and Dick got their eyes focused to take in the display at almost the same instant. 233

“Well, I’ll be darned!” Frank looked at Dick in wild amaze. Dick stared, speechless, for fully twenty seconds. Then he broke into a roar. The boys, a few paces behind them, rushed in to see what the fun was. Ernest took one good look over Frank’s shoulder. “Jumping Jehosaphat!” he ejaculated, making room for Sherm. Sherm gazed his fill and glanced at Frank.

Dick came to first and hazarded a guess. “The ladies—God bless ’em—they’ve been to town and bought out a market.”

“Nonsense, there isn’t a fish market in the burg—men sometimes peddle fish round at the houses, but they never get out here. They’ve been fishing on their own hook.”

Dick turned on Chicken Little, who was watching them demurely. “If you don’t tell us how you worked this I’ll—” He advanced threateningly.

“Fished,” she replied laconically. And neither coaxing nor threats extracted any further information from the ladies that evening.

After supper Marian remarked carelessly: “Frank, there are more fish than we can use, don’t you think it would be nice to send some over to the Captain?”

But it was Marian herself who finally let the cat out of the bag the following morning just before Alice and Dick left. The train would not leave until evening, but they were all going in to make a tour of the Indian remains and to do some shopping. Frank was driving for the guests and Marian; the youngsters were with the Captain. Marian reached down under the seat to push a satchel out of the way of her feet, and to her surprise, came in painful contact with a fish hook. She pulled up a bunch of line and several hooks.

“Oh, I wondered what became of our lines,” she said carelessly. “Wing must have put them in for us.”

She looked up to find both Dick and Frank regarding her with interest and Alice looking reproachful.

“Methinks,” remarked Dick, gazing at the heavens thoughtfully, “I see a great light.”

“I knew they’d let it out,” Frank replied meanly. “Women are clever, but a secret is too many for them every time.”

The day was cloudy but sultry. Collars wilted and little damp spots appeared between their shoulder blades if they ventured to lean against the backs of the seats.

Leaves were curling in the corn fields; the prairies were parched with the heat. Frank got out and examined several of the ears of corn just heading out in a field they passed.

He looked sober when he returned. “Forty-eight hours more like to-day will finish that field. It’s a trifle better on the bottom lands.”

Marian and Alice scanned the heavens. "That cloud bank off to the south looks hopeful," said Marian after several minutes' silence.

Whether it was the weather or their unusual exertions of the preceding day or the menace of the drouth, that weighed upon them, it would be hard to say, but their interest in the Old Mission and the Indian mound on the Cook place was languid. Perhaps Ernest had been right when he declared that they were more interesting to hear about than to see. "It looks just like other houses, only the walls are thicker and the stone chimneys go clear down to the ground outside!" Katy exclaimed, distinctly disappointed at the appearance of the one-time fort.

"Of course, it was just a schoolhouse. They used it for a fort because it was stronger than any of the other houses, and, being all of stone, the Indians couldn't set it on fire so easy."

The Indian mound looked as if somebody had made a nice symmetrical sand pile about twenty feet high out in the middle of the prairie and then grassed it over neatly.

"If we could cut into it after the fashion of a birthday cake," said Captain Clarke, "you would find some very interesting things inside, I imagine, weapons and iron utensils. I should think Mr. Cook would take the trouble to explore it some day."

"I guess he isn't interested in anything unless he sees a dollar close by," Ernest replied.

They had dinner at the one decently kept hotel in Garland, and scattered along the comfortable veranda afterwards to rest and cool off.

Ernest pointed out the place near the top of the bluff where a dark spot in the rocky ledge revealed the location of the hermit's cave. "Who is ready for the climb?" he asked, rejoining the others.

"I pass," said Dick from the depths of a willow porch chair.

"And I," Marian echoed.

"I am just dying to go, Ernest, but it wouldn't be proper for me to desert my liege Lord." Alice shot a mischievous glance at the occupant of the willow chair.

"I couldn't think of leaving our guests," Frank stopped smoking long enough to say.

"Put it to a vote, Ernest, and save us the trouble of inventing excuses," remarked the Captain dryly.

“Resolved—That we stay right where we are until train time. All in favor—” He was not permitted to continue. A chorus of “Ayes” drowned him out, the Captain leading.

And they stayed until train time.

“What is it,” queried Ernest as they started homeward, “about a railroad train that makes one so crazy to go along?”

“Is it the train, or merely your love of adventure?” suggested Captain Clarke.

“I think it’s because a train always seems so—oh, jolly—and exciting,” ventured Katy.

“That’s only part,” said Chicken Little, who had been studying; “it’s wondering what’s at the other end of the track that tempts you so.”

“Pooh, I know what’s at the other end of this track and it tempts me like sixty.”

“Home?” Katy and Jane asked together.

“No, supper!”





CHAPTER XIII
CHICKEN LITTLE ANDERNEST

CHICKEN LITTLE AND ERNEST

The household was awakened in the middle of the night by peals of thunder and the rush of rain against the windows. Chicken Little was drenched before she could get the window down next their bed.

“I don’t care,” she said, as she hunted out a dry gown, “it’s raining and Ernest can go to college.”

They slept late the following morning. The rain was coming down in a steady, business-like way that gladdened the heart of every farmer on the creek. Dr. Morton was jubilant.

“This will save the corn and make thousands of dollars difference in the hay yield in the country,” he remarked at the breakfast table.

“That’s what I don’t like about farming,” said Ernest. “So much depends on things that you can’t help. A man can work like a dog, and along comes a drouth or chinch bugs or too much rain during the haying season and, presto, all his fond hopes are knocked sky high.”

“Well,” replied his father, “I guess there are mighty few businesses or professions where you don’t have to take chances. By the way, Son, I’m beginning to be afraid your hopes of Annapolis may be disappointed. I don’t understand why Senator Pratt ignores my letter this way.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you, Father, Captain Clarke heard at the hotel yesterday that Senator Pratt has been seriously ill for several weeks, but they’ve been keeping it quiet. They say he’s just beginning to take up his affairs again.”

“We may hear then in a day or two. I believe I’ll go to town to-day—it’s too wet to do any work.”

The day dragged for the young people indoors. They tried dominoes and authors, but the boys soon found these tame and settled down by themselves to chess as more worthy of a masculine intellect.

The rain ceased and the sun came out about two o’clock. Gertie was in the midst of a letter home, but Katy and Chicken Little hurried outdoors into the moist, fresh air joyfully.

“Let’s go get some of those summer sweetings. I’m hungry for an apple. My, doesn’t the air taste good?” Chicken Little was taking deep

breaths.

They picked their way daintily to avoid the wet weeds and high grass.²⁴⁰ The sky once more serene, receded in deep bays above the arches of foliage. Every now and then a bird, startled by their coming, flew out from the branches overhead, sending down showers of drops on their hair and shoulders.

They found the sweeting tree and Chicken Little soon had an apron full. It was too wet to linger and they had started back, when Chicken Little stopped still and made a wry face. "Katy Halford, we haven't fed those pigs!"

"No sir, we haven't!"

"Say, this would be an awful good time to do it—everything's so wet, we could loosen one of the stones easy. And I guess they'll do the rest fast enough."

"If we don't give 'em much to eat they'll want to get out worse."

The days since Alice's and Dick's coming had been so full they had found no opportunity to carry out Jane's scheme for ridding themselves gracefully of their burdensome boarders. Katy had explained the plan to Gertie, who heartily endorsed it. She went back to the house after her now, while Chicken Little began scouting to see if there were anyone about. The coast seemed clear. Jim Bart had gone to look after the pasture fences, and Marian told her that Ernest and Sherm had taken the wheelbarrow and started to the south field after a load of watermelons.²⁴¹ "They'll be back in half an hour if you want them for anything, Jane."

Jane didn't want them for anything: she merely wanted them safely out of the way.

She sped back to the house. "Hurry, girls, everybody's gone, and Marian's putting Jilly to sleep in the bedroom on the other side of the cottage, so she won't see us. I'll go get the milk and those pea pods Annie saved."

Katy and Gertie undertook the feeding, while Chicken Little went to the tool house for pick and spade. The log pig pen was merely one corner of the big hog corral, fenced off for the benefit of the new litters to protect them from the older hogs. Stones had been securely embedded underneath the lowest rail to keep the pigs from burrowing out beneath. Chicken Little went into the corral and inspected these, carefully trying one or two with the pick.

“Here’s one that isn’t very big and it’s loose at one corner. Let’s try it.”

The stone had been put there to stay and did not yield readily. Jane dug till she was tired, then Katy took a hand. Gertie had been posted as a sentinel where she could watch the road.

They strained and tugged, but the stone was obstinate. Jane was getting red in the face.

“The old hateful—I’ll get it out or bust!”

“Perhaps I can help you, Chicken Little.”

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The girls glanced up in dismay. Sherm stood there grinning. He had come back across lots.

“What you trying to do, anyhow? Have your pets been getting out?”

There was nothing to do but take Sherm into their confidence.

“Please promise you won’t tell, Sherm—they’d tease me to death if they know. But we’re sick of those pigs. I never want to lay eyes on a pig again. So we thought we’d just loosen a stone so they could get into the corral with the others and Father’d think they’d dug out themselves. Nobody can ever pick ’em out from the others. They are every bit as big as old Whity’s pigs and Father turned them in two weeks ago.”

Sherm chuckled. “Mum’s the word. Hand over the pick and we’ll do such an artistic job that the porkers themselves will think they are responsible for the whole business. I don’t blame you. That’s not girl’s work!”

The pigs rose to the occasion beautifully. The tiny opening called as loudly as a pile of corn. They continued the excavating so promptly and expeditiously that by the time Dr. Morton returned from town, every piglet had deserted its maternal ancestor and was joyously rooting for itself in the corral.

“I don’t see how those pigs got out,” said Dr. Morton disgustedly. “I thought that small pen was secure.”

The girls listened attentively.

“They were there at four o’clock, I saw them,” Sherm remarked.

“Oh, I suppose the heavy rain loosened the earth and it was easy rooting.”

“Possibly,” said Sherm.

The incident might have awakened more interest if the Doctor had not returned, bringing a fateful letter. The long-expected letter from Senator Pratt had come. He would be most happy to give Ernest the appointment

immediately, if he thought he could pass the mental examinations. An extra examination was to be held on the 30th at Annapolis. He was sending a catalogue and some special literature as to the ground to be covered, by the same mail. He would, however, recommend that Ernest go immediately to some reputable physician and see if he could pass the physical examination. They had a naval surgeon there in Topeka, if he cared to incur the expense of a visit to the Capital.

Ernest was so busy poring over the catalogue that he could hardly be induced to stop long enough to eat his supper.

“I’m more afraid of the mathematics than anything else. I wonder if I couldn’t get Prof. Smith to coach me. I could study all week and go in Saturdays to recite.”

“The first thing to do is to get that doctor’s certificate. We’ll go to town to-morrow and have Dr. Hardy look you over, and if he doesn’t find anything suspicious, we’ll run down to Topeka to see the surgeon and call on the senator at the same time. I think I could go Monday.”

The entire family held its breath or at least tried to, for the next few days. Mrs. Morton quite forgot how badly she had wanted Ernest to have an education, when she learned that he could only come home once a year, and then only for a short month. She sighed so much and was so distraught, that the family were almost afraid to rejoice with Ernest, when he came home jubilantly waving his physician’s certificate.

“Never mind, Mother, that surgeon may send me packing. Don’t worry till you are sure I’m going. Even if I am vouched for as up to the scratch physically, I may flunk, alas! Wouldn’t that be nice after Father had put up a lot of money to send me on? You’d be ashamed of me, Mother, you wouldn’t want to see me come home.”

“I am not expecting you to fail, son,” said Dr. Morton, “though I wish we could have arranged matters sooner to give you more time for review. But with the exception of a little extra mathematics, the requirements are certainly no worse than for college entrance exams. And you’ve tested yourself out twice on those. Aren’t you glad I insisted on more geometry?”

“He doesn’t need to come home if he does fail. He can visit some of our friends in Centerville till college opens. It would only be a few days,” Frank consoled him. “However, I am not expecting you to fail, old boy. I

have always flattered myself that the Morton family are not lacking in brains, and you know how to study.”

“I most wish he would fail so he could come to see us. Mother would love to have him spend the Christmas vacations with us,” put in Katy naïvely.

“Thank you, Katy, I’d enjoy nothing better, but I’ve kinder set my heart on showing this naval outfit that a wild and woolly Kansan can measure up with some of those down-easters.”

The naval surgeon confirmed Dr. Hardy’s judgment. The senator had been cordial, and after some questioning, said he would send Ernest’s name to the department immediately. He also gave him some helpful suggestions as to what subjects to put the emphasis on.

Two weeks seemed a pretty short time for preparation. Ernest thanked his lucky star that he had done a little studying through the summer in preparation for his college entrance, and was not rusty. The entire family waited on him and followed him round till Frank declared they would ruin the boy, if he didn’t get off soon. Chicken Little sadly neglected her guests whenever it was possible to hang round Ernest. But Ernest was so busy, she seldom had a word alone with him. The two were very dear to each other despite their occasional bickering, and Chicken Little was almost jealous of every one who came near him during those last few days.

“Ernest,” said his father the Saturday before his departure, “will you take one farewell turn at herding to-morrow? Jim Bart wants to get off for the day and I’d like to have the cattle clean off that stubble field. I think I will plow early and put it in winter wheat this year. I have promised to drive Mother and the girls to town to church in the morning. We are to have dinner with the parson and won’t be home until evening.”

That evening Ernest overtook Chicken Little coming up from the spring with the butter and cream.

“Say, Sis, don’t you want to stay home and help me herd to-morrow? The girls wouldn’t mind this once.”

“Oh, I’d love it. We just haven’t had a good talk for ages—but I don’t know what Mother’ll say.”

“I’ll fix Mother,” he answered confidently.

Later, he whispered: “It’s all O. K.”

“Gee, I guess Mother’d give you the moon if she could, she feels so bad about having you go so far away.”²⁴⁷

“Poor Mother, it’s mighty rough on her out here on the ranch. Say, Sis, I don’t mind if you want to wear some of my old truck to-day—we’ll just be down in the field and your riding skirt will be a nuisance in among the cattle.”

This was a mighty concession for Ernest, who had a considerable share of his mother’s respect for the conventions. Chicken Little appreciated it.

She reached up and gave him a big hug.

“It’s going to be awful hard to have you go, Ernest.”

Ernest didn’t say anything in reply, but he squeezed his young sister tight, as if he were realizing himself that he was about to miss something precious from his life.

The two were up early the next morning and off with the herd before the rest of the family were fairly through breakfast. Sherm was going in with the others to church. Annie had put up a lunch for Ernest and Jane; they did not expect to get back to the house until late afternoon.

The day was an August masterpiece, warm, but not too warm, with a fresh breeze blowing and shreds of blue haze lingering over the timber along the creek.

“It has almost a fall feel,” said Chicken Little.

A brisk half-hour’s work, in which Huz and Buz took an active part,²⁴⁸ hindering rather more than helping in the cattle driving, was sufficient to transfer the herd from the pasture to the stubble field. Chicken Little was thankful she had discarded her skirt, for they had many a chase after refractory animals through the timber and underbrush. Calico and Caliph, being mustangs, seemed to enjoy the sport as much as their riders.

“Cricky, Caliph is almost human when it comes to heading off a steer, and he’s never done much cattle driving either. He must have inherited the range instinct.”

“Humph, what about Calico?” retorted Jane. “He turned that roan Father always says is so mean, three times.”

The cattle scattered over the stubble eagerly. Ernest picketed the ponies so they could graze after their good work and he and Chicken Little threw themselves down under a red bud tree near the edge of the field to rest.

“They won’t stray much till they get their stomachs full,” said Ernest, “and that won’t be before afternoon. I brought a book along—Cooper’s

‘Naval History.’ It’s great, though Father says it’s better romance than history. Do you mind if I read you a bit?”

Chicken Little backed up against a tree and settled herself comfortably²⁴⁹ and they were soon fighting with Paul Jones, so utterly absorbed that the herd had drifted down to the farther end of the field before they realized it. A half dozen adventurous beasts were already disappearing into the timber, apparently headed for the Captain’s cornfield, which lay just beyond the creek.

“The pesky brutes! Why can’t they be content with a good square meal at home?” Ernest hated to be interrupted.

“Perhaps they like to go visiting as much as we do. Besides, they don’t often have a chance at green corn.”

It took some time to recover the truants. By the time they were settled once more under the tree, the sun was nearing the zenith and they were growing hungry.

“It’s only half past eleven, but I’m starved. Let’s eat now.” Ernest eyed the packet of luncheon hungrily.

“All right, go fill the water jug, and I’ll get it out.”

After lunch they read for awhile, but, presently, the sun seemed to grow hotter and they commenced to feel drowsy. They decided to take turns watching the cattle and napping. The cattle also seemed to feel the heat and were hunting patches of shade, lying down to chew their cuds contentedly. The air seemed palpitating with the incessant humming and whirring of insects. Bees, and white and yellow butterflies flittered in a mat of weeds and wild blackberry vines, which had entirely covered an angle of the old rail fence near them.²⁵⁰

Ernest’s nap was a long one. The boy had been studying hard for his examinations and was thoroughly tired. He was lying on his side, his face resting on his hand, and his old straw hat drawn over his face to keep off the flies. But the nagging insects soon discovered his neck and hands. Chicken Little fished his bandanna out of his pocket to protect his neck, covering the hand that lay on the grass with her own handkerchief.

He woke at length with a start, smiling up at Chicken Little when he discovered the handkerchiefs.

“Thank you, Sis. Whew, I must have slept for keeps,” he added, glancing at the sun. “It’s four o’clock. The folks will be along about six.”

He sat up and took a survey of the field. The cattle were all quiet. Chicken Little was braiding little baskets with a handful of cat tail leaves she had brought from the slough. Ernest reached over and patted the busy fingers.

“Sis, I’m mighty fond of you—do you know it?”

Chicken Little looked up at him affectionately. “I suspected it, Ernest,” she answered demurely.

The boy was going on with his own thoughts. “I’m mighty glad to get away from the ranch. I don’t believe I’m cut out for this sort of thing. Guess, maybe, I’m not democratic enough—you remember that party at Jenkins’? Well, I’ve been thinking about it a good deal since. I guess Sherm sort of set me to thinking with his fuss about the kissing games. At any rate, I’ve made up my mind I don’t intend to be like any of the boys on this creek, and I don’t propose that you shall be like any of the girls if I can help it. It isn’t that they aren’t smart enough and good enough. The people round here are mighty touchy about one person’s being just as good as another. Maybe one person is born just as good as anybody else, but, thank goodness, they don’t all stay alike. I mayn’t be any better than the Craft boys, but I know I’m a sight cleaner, and I don’t murder the king’s English quite every other word, and I know enough to be polite to a lady. And if I take the trouble to make myself decent, and they don’t, I don’t see any reason why I should be expected to pretend they’re as good as I am.”

Ernest was waxing wroth. The insistent equality of the Creek was on his nerves.

“I don’t care if people do think I’m stuck up—I’m going to try to associate with the kind of people I like. It isn’t money—it’s just nice living. If it wasn’t for people like the Captain and one or two others we’d forget what lady and gentleman meant. And that isn’t saying that there aren’t lots of good kind people on the Creek, too. But they’re so dead satisfied with themselves the way they are—they don’t seem to know there is any better way to live.”

Chicken Little was listening eagerly.

“I know what you mean. Lots of it’s little things. I noticed that night at the Jenkins’. Mamie’s prettier than me and the boys like her better, but I don’t want to be like her all the same.”

“I should think not, Chicken Little, and you needn’t worry. You’re nothing but a kid yet, but by the time you’re eighteen, Mamie Jenkins won’t hold a candle to you. And while I think of it, Sis, the less you see of Mamie the better. And I don’t want you playing any more kissing games—you’re too big.”

“Humph, you just said I was nothing but a kid. You’re as bad as Mother.”

Ernest was not to be diverted. “None of your dodging. I want you to promise me you won’t.”

Chicken Little considered.

“It isn’t that I want to play them,” she argued, “but if I don’t, I’ll have to sit and look on and all the old folks’ll ask me if I’m not well, and the girls’ll say I’m stuck up. It wasn’t as easy as you seem to think, Ernest Morton, but I’ll promise, if you’ll promise not to kiss any girl while you’re gone.”

“Nonsense, Jane, you don’t understand. It’s different with a boy.”

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Chicken Little fixed her brown eyes upon Ernest’s face musingly.

“How is it different?”

“Chicken Little Jane Morton, haven’t you had any raising? You know as well as I do it isn’t nice for a girl to let boys kiss her.”

Chicken Little considered. “You needn’t be so toploftical; girls don’t want most boys to kiss ’em.”

“Most?”

“That’s what I said. I hated it when Grant kissed me at Mamie’s party, but I don’t know that I’d mind if Sherm—”

She got no further. Ernest bristled with brotherly indignation.

“Has Sherm ever—”

“Of course not, Sherm wouldn’t! I guess it’s because I know he wouldn’t, that I shouldn’t much mind if he did.”

Chicken Little said this soberly, but her face grew a little red.

Ernest’s brotherly eyes were observant.

“Oh, Sherm’s all right, but Sis, I want that promise.”

“I told you I’d promise if you would.” Chicken Little drew her lips together in a firm way.

“But I can’t—it would be silly—I might look ridiculous sometime if I refused. The fellows would guy me if they knew I made such a promise.”

“Well, I just told you they’d guy me if I refused to do what the others do.”

“But, Chicken Little, it isn’t nice.”

“I guess I know that as well as you do. And I don’t know that I shall ever play that kind of games again, but I’m not going to promise if you won’t. Boys don’t need to think they can do everything they want to, just because they’re boys. You don’t want anybody to kiss me, but I’d like to know how you are going to kiss a girl without making somebody else’s sister do something that isn’t nice, Ernest Morton.”

The discussion ended there. Ernest was not very worldly wise himself, and Chicken Little’s reasoning was certainly logical.

They had but little time to talk after that. The cattle began to roam restlessly once more and they were in the saddle pretty constantly for the remainder of the afternoon.

Ernest took the trouble to lift her down from Calico when they reached the stable that evening, an unusual attention. He also gave her a shy kiss on the cheek and whispered: “I’ll promise, Sis. I don’t know but you are about half right.”



CHAPTER XIV
OFF TO ANNAPOLIS

OFF TO ANNAPOLIS

“Golly, I sha’n’t have any fingers left by the time I finish this needle case! King’s excuse, Katy, you needn’t mind. I know I said it, but if you tried to push a needle through this awful leather and pricked yourself every other stitch you’d say Golly, too.” Chicken Little edged off as she saw Katy approaching.

Katy was not to be deterred. “You said to pinch you every single time, Jane Morton, and you’ve said it twice. Besides, your mother said she hoped I could cure you.” Katy gave Chicken Little’s arm two vigorous pinches to emphasize this statement.

Chicken Little did not take this kindly office in the spirit in which it was intended. She hated to sew and she had been toiling all morning on a little bronze leather case to hold needles, buttons, and pins—a parting gift to Ernest.

“Katy Halford, I told you not to! I think you are real mean to do it²⁶⁶ when I’m having such a hard time. I’ll thank you not to any more, if I do say it.”

“You don’t need to go and get mad! You told me to.”

“Yes, and I just now told you not to!”

“I guess you’d say King’s excuse every time if I’d let you. A lot of good it’s going to do, if you sneak out of it whenever you want to.”

“I don’t sneak out of it—this is the very first time, and you know it!”

“I don’t know any such thing, but I don’t think it’s very good manners to be telling your guests they’re saying something that isn’t so! The day before they’re going home, too!” Katy forgot the dignity of her fifteen years.

“Well, I think it’s quite as good manners as to tell your friends they’re sneaks!” Jane’s tone was icy.

Gertie came between the belligerents. “Please don’t quarrel, girls. It’d be dreadful the very last day, after we have had such a beautiful summer. I never did have such a good time in all my life. I most wish I could live on a ranch always.”

“I shouldn’t like to live on a ranch, but we have had a jolly time, Chicken Little,” Katy recovered herself enough to say graciously.

Chicken Little was not to be outdone. “I suppose I was ugly, Katy. If¹⁶⁷ always makes me cross to sew. I wish nobody had ever invented needles. O dear, I shall be as lonesome as pie when you are gone. It isn’t much fun being the only girl on the ranch, I tell you. Sometimes, I don’t even see another girl for weeks.”

“But your school begins soon, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, and I’ll have Sherm. I just don’t believe I could bear to have Ernest go if Sherm wasn’t going to stay.”

“I’m awful glad Mr. Lenox put off coming for another day so we can go on the same train with Ernest.” Katy had been exulting over this for the past twenty-four hours.

“Ernest will be on the train for three days. I feel as if he would be as far away as if he were going to China.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Mrs. Morton’s entrance.

“Would you rather have chocolate or cocoanut cake for your lunch, girls? Annie has killed three chickens, and I thought you could take a basket of those big yellow peaches; I only wish I could send some to your mother. And I’ll put in cheese and cold-boiled ham and a glass of current jelly. Mr. Lenox may want to get a meal or two at the stations, but you are so hurried at these—and it’s always well to have plenty of lunch in¹⁶⁸ traveling. Dr. Morton told Ernest that he’d better get all his breakfasts at the eating houses to have something hot. And by the third day his lunch will be too stale—even if there is any left.”

Ernest was creepy with excitement between joy at going and his haunting fear that he might disgrace the family by failing to pass the examinations.

“Buck up, old chap,” Frank admonished, “you’ve got facts enough in your head if you can only get them out at the right time. My advice is to forget all about exams and enjoy your trip. One doesn’t go to Washington and Baltimore every day. You ought to have several hours in St. Louis if your train is on time. Be sure to eat three square meals every day and keep yourself as fresh as you can and I’ll back you to pass any fair test.”

“If you have time in St. Louis I want you to be sure to go and see Shaw’s Gardens. They used to be wonderful and they must have been greatly improved since I saw them,” said Mrs. Morton.

Each individual member of the Morton family, except Jilly and Huz and Buz, took Ernest aside for a parting chat with advice and remembrances. Jilly and the dogs secured their share by getting in the way as often as possible.

Chicken Little had her turn first. She tendered the needle case doubtfully.

“Mother said you would have to sew on your own buttons at the Academy and that you’d find this mighty handy, but I’d loathe to have anybody give me such a present. And, Ernest, here’s the five dollars I got last birthday. You take it and buy something you really want.”

Ernest demurred about accepting the money, but Jane insisted.

“Little Sis, you’re sure a dear—” Ernest found himself choking up most unaccountably. He gave her a good old-fashioned hug in conclusion to save himself the embarrassment of words.

Dr. Morton took his son into the parlor and closed the door immediately after dinner. They stayed an hour, during which time the Doctor gave Ernest much practical advice about his conduct and sundry warnings not to be extravagant or careless in handling his money. No sooner had they emerged, Ernest looking important and rather dazed, when his mother laid her hand upon his arm, saying: “My son, I also wish to have a little talk with you. We shall be hurried in the morning so perhaps we would better have it now.”

Ernest returned to the parlor with his mother. Chicken Little lay in wait outside in the hall. She and Katy had a beautiful plan for a last boat ride that afternoon. She knew Ernest would be going over to say good-bye to the Captain anyway.

Chicken Little waited and yawned and waited and squirmed for a solid hour and a quarter. The steady hum of her mother’s voice was interrupted occasionally by brief replies from Ernest. At last, Chicken Little heard a movement and roused herself joyously. But her mother began to speak again—this time with reverent solemnity. Chicken Little forgot herself and listened a moment.

“Umn, I guess she’s praying—they must be most through. Golly, I bet Ernest’s tired!”

When the door opened a moment later there were tears on Mrs. Morton’s lashes and Ernest looked sober. He held a handsome Oxford

bible in his hand. Mrs. Morton glanced at Jane suspiciously, but passed on into the sitting room.

Chicken Little surveyed her brother wickedly.

“Did Mother give you a new bible?”

“Yep.”

“I thought you had one.”

“Got two—Mother forgot, I s’pose.”

“Bet you’d rather have had a new satchel—that bible must have cost a lot.”

“Yes, I would, but don’t you dare let on to Mother. I wouldn’t hurt her feelings for a farm! She’s awful good, but she doesn’t understand how a fellow feels about things. I’d rather be licked any day than prayed over. I guess if I attended all the ‘means of grace’ she wants me to, I wouldn’t have any time left for lessons. I’m going to try all-fired hard not to do anything to hurt Mother or make her ashamed of me, but I’m not calculating to wear out the pews at prayer meetings—not so you’d notice it.” Ernest grinned at Chicken Little defiantly.

Jane replied soberly:

“A prayer meeting’s a real treat to Mother. She hasn’t had a chance to go to one for so long she is just pining for the privilege, but I bet she didn’t feel that way when she was young! But she thinks she did, so there’s no use fussing.”

Marian’s admonition to Ernest was brief and to the point. She stood him up against the wall and looked him so squarely in the eyes that she could see her own reflection in the pupils. Ernest’s six feet of vigorous youth was good to look at. His hazel eyes gazed back at her steadfastly. Marian smiled up at him.

“Ernest Morton, I’m downright proud to be your sister, and if you can look me in the eye as fearlessly and unashamed when you come home, I shall be still prouder. I want to tell you something I overheard in a store the other day about Father. Some men were evidently discussing him in connection with a business deal, and one remarked emphatically: ‘Old man Morton may have his weaknesses like the rest of us humans, but his word’s as good as his bond any day, and there’s precious few men you can say that of.’ It’s worth while to have that sort of a father, Ernest, but it makes the Morton name somewhat of a responsibility to live up to, doesn’t it?”

Marian gave him a pat and pulled his head down to kiss him.

Katy and Gertie had been busy all day with their own preparations for departure. Marian was helping them with their packing, because Mrs. Morton had her hands full with the lunch and Ernest's clothes and trunk. Chicken Little vibrated between the two centers of interest. Jilly also assisted, contributing articles of her own when she caught the spirit of packing. Her mother rescued a cake of soap and one of her shoes, but after Katy and Gertie arrived at home, they discovered one of Jilly's nighties reposing on top of their Sunday hats and her rag doll neatly wedged in a corner of their trunk. Ernest was not overlooked either. When he unpacked at Annapolis, his recently acquired New York roommate was decidedly amazed to see him draw forth a small, pink stocking from the upper tray and a little later, a soiled woolly sheep along with his shirts. Ernest found his explanations about a baby niece received rather incredulously until a choice packet containing half a doughnut, a much-mutilated peach, two green apples, and a mud pie appeared. Jilly had evidently prepared a lunch for her uncle. They both went off into rumbles of mirth over this remarkable exhibit and began a friendship which was destined to be enduring. ²⁶³

Jane's boat ride scheme found favor, but Mrs. Morton declared they must put it off till after supper. They drove over and found the Captain smoking contentedly on the veranda.

"I was hoping you young people would come to-night," he said, "though I intended going to the train to see you off in any event. I shall miss these young ladies sadly, and Ernest seems to belong to me a little, now that he has decided to be a sailor, too."

"If I get in, I shall owe it to you, for I should never have thought of Annapolis if you hadn't suggested it," Ernest replied.

"Well, I trust I have not influenced you to a decision you will some day regret. You seem to me to have many of the qualifications for a naval officer."

"Do you think he is sufficiently qualified to row the *Chicken Little*, Captain Clarke?" asked Jane suggestively.

The Captain's eyes twinkled. "If he isn't, I think Sherm is. We might let the one who gets there first prove his skill."

The boys were not slow in acting upon this hint. They sprinted their best without waiting for a starter, and reached the skiff so exactly together

that the question of precedence was still unsettled. The boys did not wait²⁶⁴ for an umpire. Ernest untied the boat and both attempted to fling themselves in with disastrous results. The *Chicken Little* had not been built for wrestling purposes. She tipped sufficiently to spill both boys into the creek. The water was shallow, but Sherm was wet well up to the waist, and Ernest, who had been pitched still farther out, was soaked from head to foot. They appeared ludicrously surprised and sheepish.

The girls and the Captain laughed most unfeelingly. But Chicken Little immediately began to consider the consequences.

“Poor Mother, she’ll have to dry that suit out and press it before it can be packed. It’s a blessed thing you didn’t wear your new suit as you wanted to, Ernest Morton.”

“My, but you are wet!” exclaimed Katy. “Oughtn’t you to go right home and change?”

“Come with me into the house, boys. I think Wing and I can fix you up.” The Captain cut a laugh in the middle to offer aid.

The lads were so ludicrously crestfallen; they were doubly comical.

Wing, fortunately, had a good fire in the kitchen and soon had their wet garments steaming before it, while the Captain hunted out dry clothes for them. Some spirit of mischief prompted him to array Ernest in an old uniform of his own, with amazing results, for Ernest was considerably²⁶⁵ slimmer than the older man, and fully two inches taller. The ample blue coat with its gold braid hung on him as on a clothes rack. The sleeves were so short they left a generous expanse of wrist in view, and the trousers struck him well above the ankle.

The Captain saluted him ceremoniously, chuckling at the boy’s absurd appearance. The girls were openly hilarious.

Chicken Little struck an attitude. “Behold the future admiral! Ladies and gentlemen, permit me to introduce Admiral Morton, of whose distinguished exploits you have often heard. His recent feat of capsizing the enemy’s frigate single-handed, has never been equalled in the annals of our glorious navy.”

She was not permitted to finish this speech undisturbed. Ernest had chased her half way round the house before she got the last words out.

He clapped his hand firmly over her mouth to restrain her from further eloquence.

Jane struggled helplessly. “Katy—say, Katy, come—help—”

Katy, nothing loath, flung herself on Ernest from the rear and the three had a joyous tussle, with honors on the side of the future admiral, till Sherm, who had been a little slower in dressing than Ernest, came out the front door.

Jane called to him despite the restraining hand and her shortening²⁶⁶ breath: "Sherm, he's choking me—"

"Choking nothing—it's Katy who is choking me—just wait till I get hold of you, Miss Halford!"

Katy had both hands gripped fairly on his coat collar and was tugging Ernest backward with all her might, while Chicken Little struggled to get away.

"Come help,—Sherm, please!" Chicken Little loosened herself from the gagging hand enough to plead again.

"Keep out, Sherm. Three against one is no fair."

Sherm watched the fray a moment, undecided.

"You may have bigger odds than that, Ernest," laughed the Captain. "You might as well be getting your hand in."

Sherm sauntered leisurely over and helped Chicken Little wrench loose, then, whispering something hastily, took her by the hand and they both made for the creek.

Ernest, relieved of his sister, swung quickly round, catching Katy by the shoulders before she could save herself.

"I've a mind to—" At this moment he detected Sherm's game. "No, you don't, smarties!"

Katy likewise saw and acted even more quickly than Ernest. She was very light and swift, and she darted past Sherm and Chicken Little like a²⁶⁷ flash, reaching the boat twenty seconds ahead.

"Come on, Ernest!" She slipped the rope deftly from the post, not waiting to untie it, and, pushing off, leaped lightly into the row boat.

Ernest needed no second invitation. Katy motioned to him to run farther along the bank and paddled the skiff in close enough for him to climb on board. Sherm and Chicken Little, dazed by the suddenness of this maneuver, were still some feet away.

"Katy Halford, you're a pretty one to go back on your own side that way," Jane scolded.

"Katy, I didn't think it of you—after asking me to come and help you, too!" Sherm was also reproachful.

“I didn’t ask you, Sherman Dart. It was Chicken Little.”

“Of course,” Ernest encouraged. “Katy’s been on my side all the time. Haven’t you, Katy?”

Katy nodded, laughing.

The Captain, who had followed the young people at a more sober gait, smiled at this outcome of the skirmish.

“When a woman will she will, you may depend upon it,” he quoted. “The trouble is to find out what she wills.”

Ernest, secure in the rower’s seat, could afford to be generous. He brought the boat in and took them all on board. Gertie had been a quiet spectator of the frolic. She had little taste for boisterous fun.

Captain Clarke handed her in with a flourish. “Gertie is my partner.”

Sherm had his revenge. Ernest rowed energetically—so energetically that he was tired enough to be willing to resign the oars before a half hour had gone by. Under the circumstances he did not quite like to ask Sherm to relieve him. Sherm seemed to be oblivious to the fact that it required energy to propel the boat. He was strumming an imaginary banjo as an accompaniment to the familiar melodies the girls were softly singing, occasionally joining in himself. Katy did not fail to observe that Ernest dropped one of his oars to regard a blister ruefully, and she did her best to help.

“Say, Ernest, let me try one oar. I believe I could row with you if you would take shorter strokes.”

Ernest hadn’t much faith in Katy’s skill, but the experiment gave him an excuse to rest a minute. He moved over and handed her the oar with a little smile of gratitude.

“You’re a trump, Katy,” he whispered.

Darkness dropped softly in the timber. They heard a distant splash where a muskrat had taken to the water. Every one wished solemnly by the evening star. And two of the wishes came true in record time. The Captain wished that he might find the son so long lost to him. Katy wished—she didn’t quite put the wish into words—but she did want Ernest to have what he wanted. One by one the other stars twinkled forth and the darkness deepened till their faces were dim, white blurs, and the girls’ pink-and-blue dresses faded into patches of dusk in the blackness. Fireflies winked in the gloom. At the Captain’s suggestion, Katy and Ernest rested on their oars. They stopped singing and listened to the

night's silences—silences broken by rustling movements from a thicket on the farther bank or by eery creakings of the branches overhead. The little group felt vaguely the bigness of things, though no one but the Captain knew exactly why.

It was ten o'clock before they went back to the house. Wing had performed a miracle in the meantime; the boy's suits were not only dried, but neatly pressed.

Mrs. Morton let them all sleep late the next morning in view of the long journey ahead for Ernest and the girls.

Poor Sherm found this last day trying. His father's health was not improving and a fear lay close in his heart that he should never see him again. It was almost more than he could bear to hear the girls talk about going home. He eased the ache by keeping at work. Dr. Morton had already initiated him into Ernest's duties. The others were too busy to think much about Sherm but Chicken Little, who sat beside him at the table, noticed that he scarcely tasted his dinner. She started to remark about it, but a glance at Sherm's drawn face warned her in time.

Presently, she had a gracious thought. "Sherm, let's ride Caliph and Calico in to the train, then the others won't be so crowded and Marian and Jilly can go, too."

Sherm somehow felt better immediately. The brisk gallop they took at starting helped still more. Sunflowers and golden rod lined the roadside for miles; brown cat tails nodded above the swales. A bobolink, swaying on a weed stalk near by, answered Sherm's chirrup to the ponies with a volley of golden notes.

"Chicken Little," he remarked, apropos of nothing, after they had ridden a few miles, "you are a mighty comfortable person to have 'round."

"Maybe you won't think so in a day or two. I shall be so lonesome I may be tempted to follow you about like Huz and Buz."

"You can't scare me that way, Chicken Little, I think the ranch is going to be a pretty loose fit for all of us for a few days. But your school begins about the middle of September, doesn't it? That will help."

"Yes, I wish you were going to school, too. Say, Sherm, why couldn't you arrange to take one or two special studies under the new teacher? They say he only lacks one year of graduating from college and knows a

lot. He's teaching to save the money for his last year. Perhaps you might take some of your freshman work."

"I wish I could—I hate to get behind the rest of the boys. But your father is hiring me to work, not to study."

"I know, but when winter comes you won't need to work all the time, and you'll have all your evenings—Jim Bart does."

"If I could only keep up my mathematics and Latin, I wouldn't be losing so much." Sherm was considering.

The nine-mile ride to town seemed shorter than usual to most of the party that afternoon. Ernest, in spite of his joy in actually going away to school, found home and home folk unexpectedly dear now that he was leaving them for many months. Poor Mrs. Morton could hardly tear her eyes from the son who was taking his first step away from her. Chicken Little was feeling disturbingly sober; no Ernest, no Katy, no Gertie—how could she ever stand it?

"Sherm, if I start to cry, just wink, will you—that funny way you do sometimes. Ernest bet I would—and I won't, but I know I'm going to want to dreadfully."

Chicken Little was as good as her word. She didn't—that is, as long as Ernest could see her. She kissed him good-bye and gave him a playful box on the ear. She threw kisses, smiling as the group at the car window slid by, then the lump in her throat grew startlingly bigger.

"Race you to the horses, Chicken Little," said Sherm. "If it's all right with you, Mrs. Morton, we'll go straight home."

Chicken Little raced with Sherm and with her tears. She beat Sherm but the tears won out. She could hardly see to untie Calico's rein. Sherm took the strap out of her hand, fastened it, and swung her up.

"Shut your eyes and open your mouth," he commanded, as soon as she was securely seated.

Jane obeyed meekly and Sherm popped a big chocolate drop in.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, smiling through the trickling tears, "was that what you stopped down town for? My, what a baby you must think me!"

Sherm reached over and patted her hand. "I think you are several pumpkins and some squash, Chicken Little. Have another?"



SCHOOL

The days crawled by during the next two weeks.

“I hate them so by night, I want to shove them off into to-morrow by main force,” Jane told Marian complainingly, the third day after Ernest and the girls had gone.

“You’ll be all right in a day or two. It’s always hardest at first,” Marian consoled her.

“I suppose it doesn’t make any difference whether I’m all right or all wrong—the folks have gone just the same.”

“And you might as well make the best—”

“Oh, yes, I might as well! ‘Count your blessings, my brethren, etc.’ I’ve done counted ’em till I’m sick of hearing about them! Marian, if you don’t find me something new to do I shall bust!”

Marian was particularly busy that morning and not so patient as usual.²⁷⁴

She waved her hand around the room ironically. “I shall be charmed, Chicken Little, will you finish these dishes or sweep the sitting room or sew on that dress of Jilly’s? I can furnish you an endless variety to choose from.”

“I said something new.”

“Jilly’s dress is brand spanking new.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know, Jane, I have had the feeling myself, but I don’t imagine the heavens are going to open and shower down something new and choice on you because you’re lonesome and bored. If you can’t amuse yourself, you might as well be useful and have something to show for a tedious day.”

Chicken Little drummed on the window for several minutes without replying, then swung round with a grimace.

“Hand over the dress—I can run up the seams on the machine all right, I suppose.”

The family waited, excited and expectant, for the report on Ernest’s examinations. They had had a long letter telling of his journey and safe arrival. Katy and Gertie and Mrs. Halford had each written long letters

full of Centerville news and references to their pleasant summer. Mrs. Halford could not say enough concerning the girls' improved appearance. Katy wrote the most interesting item. "What do you think? Carol Brown²⁷⁵ left for Annapolis, too. Do you suppose Ernest will know him? P. S. We showed him your picture and he stared at it awful hard and said—you've got to get me a trade last for this—'Say, Chicken Little's going to be a hummer if she keeps on!' Don't you think I'm nice to tell you?"

Jane gave the letter to Sherm to read, forgetting this part. Sherm snorted when he came to it, glancing up curiously at her.

"Do you like that sort of stuff, Chicken Little?" he asked later.

It was almost two weeks after Ernest went, before Dr. Morton, on his return from town one September evening, came up the walk excitedly waving a telegram.

"Oh!" exclaimed Chicken Little.

"He must have passed or Father wouldn't look so pleased," said Mrs. Morton.

The doctor came in slightly breathless.

"Well, Mother, I'm afraid you have lost your boy."

Mrs. Morton looked startled for a moment, then, reassured by her husband's smile, fumbled nervously for her glasses to read the yellow paper he handed her.

She was maddeningly deliberate. Jane, perched upon the arm of her chair, tried to anticipate her, but her mother held it so she could not see.²⁷⁶

"It's Mother's place to see it first, daughter."

Reproving Chicken Little steadied Mrs. Morton's nerves, and she read the few words aloud with dignity.

"Sworn in to-day—hurrah!" Ernest.

"That means that he—?" She looked inquiringly at her husband.

"That means he has passed both physical and mental examinations and has been regularly sworn in to Uncle Sam's service."

"But I thought he was just going to the Naval Academy—why does he have to be sworn in as if he were enlisting?"

"Because he, practically, has enlisted. He enters the government service when he enters the academy, and he simply takes his oath of allegiance."

Mrs. Morton's questioning was interrupted by the entrance of Sherm, Frank, and Marian, who came in demanding news.

"Don't worry, Mother," said Frank, patting her shoulder, "your precious lamb is in good hands. He'll be back next September such a dude the family won't know how to behave in his presence." Frank couldn't resist teasing even when he tried to comfort.

Mrs. Morton sighed. "A great many things can happen in a year." 277

"Yes, Mother dear, they can, but most always they don't. The only things you can depend on are bad weather and work."

A letter soon followed the telegram, giving details of the examinations, and a glimpse of Ernest's new life, which comforted his mother, because he was forming punctual habits and had to go regularly to chapel whether he wished to or not. He had met Carol unexpectedly, to their mutual joy. "He's an awfully handsome chap—knows it, too, but I think he has too much sense to let it spoil him. It's jolly to have some one I know here," Ernest wrote.

School began for Chicken Little at the little brown schoolhouse a mile distant, on the fifteenth of September. Chicken Little and the whole Morton family rejoiced, for she had been a most dissatisfied young person of late. Her mother watched her walk away down the lane, immaculate in her new flower-bordered calico, lunch basket in hand, with positive thankfulness.

"Glad to have her out of the way, aren't you, Mother? Jane is too restless a girl to be idle," laughed Marian.

Jane had spoken to her father about her plan for Sherm and he had heartily agreed. But Sherm was not to begin until the first of November 278 when the most pressing of the farm work would be over.

Chicken Little promptly talked the matter over also with the new teacher, Mr. Clay, a young man of twenty-one, fresh from his junior year at college. He was wide awake and attractive, and while ignorant, as they, of many of the niceties of polite society, seemed a very elegant being to the majority of his new pupils. Mamie Jenkins had concluded to stay at home for the fall term instead of going to the Garland High School. For some reason it took an astonishing number of consultations with the teacher to arrange Mamie's course satisfactorily, especially when she learned that Sherm would be coming soon. She quizzed Chicken Little carefully as to what studies Sherm would take.

“Geometry and Latin, I think. I asked Mr. Clay and he said he could. Maybe bookkeeping, too.”

“I was just thinking I ought to go on with my Latin. I had Beginning Latin last year, and I really ought to take Cæsar right away before I forget.”

Jane regarded her thoughtfully. She happened to know that Sherm was planning to study Cicero. How mad Mamie would be if she started Cæsar all alone! She had half a mind to let her go ahead. Mamie had spent the entire morning recess telling her how the boys bored her hanging round. Yes, it would do Mamie good to have to recite alone. Chicken Little shut her lips firmly for a second. When she opened them, she replied that she understood Cæsar was a very interesting study.

Mamie bridled and said condescendingly: “It’s a pity you haven’t had Latin so you could come into the class, too.”

“Oh, I see enough of Sherm at home!” returned Chicken Little maliciously. Mamie had the faculty of always rubbing her up the wrong way.

Mamie gave her shoulders a fling. “Of course, I always forget you are just a little girl, Jane. You’re so big and—” Mamie didn’t finish her sentence. She merely glanced expressively at Jane’s long legs. “I think I’ll go in and talk to Mr. Clay. He must be sick of having all those kids hanging round him.”

Mamie sailed off in state, leaving Jane feeling as if she had run her hand into a patch of nettles. She was standing there in the sunshine looking after Mamie resentfully when Grant Stowe came along.

He nodded toward the schoolhouse door through which Mamie had vanished. “What’s Miss Flirtie been saying to make you so ruffled? She’s begun to sit up nights now fixing her cap for the teacher. Bet you a cookie he’s too slick for her.”

Chicken Little laughed, but retorted: “Humph, how many times have you sat on her front porch this summer?”

Grant reddened. “Oh, we’re neighbors, and a fellow has to kill time summer evenings. Father and mother always go to bed with the chickens and it’s no fun listening to the frogs all by yourself. Suppose your folks wouldn’t let anybody come to see you—I hear they’re all-fired particular.”

Jane did not have an opportunity to answer. One of the little girls came begging her to play Blackman with a group of the younger children.

Grant suggested that she choose up for one side, and he would for the other. She had just begun to choose when Mr. Clay appeared at her elbow. "May I play on your side, Jane?"

"Teacher's" entrance into the game acted like magic. The few big boys who had come on this first day, edged near enough to be seen and were speedily brought into the sport. Mamie, venturing languidly to the door to see what had become of Mr. Clay, suddenly decided she was not too big to play "just this once."

Teacher and Jane were both swift runners and Grant had hard work to make a showing. Mamie sweetly let herself be caught by teacher the first rush, to Grant's openly expressed disgust. The big boys warmed into envious rivalry with Mr. Clay right from the start, but he soon convinced them that they would have to work, if they worsted him at any of their games or exercises.

Chicken Little found team work with him very delightful and could scarcely believe the noon hour was over, when he pulled out his watch and announced that he must call school. She turned a radiant face up to him.

"Oh, it's such fun to have you play—I wish you would often."

"Thank you, it's fine exercise, isn't it?"

Mamie began her Cæsar the next day, requiring much help from "Teacher." She also came to school in her best dress. Mamie had faith in first impressions. Chicken Little had been tempted the night before to betray Mamie's schemes to Sherm, but she stopped with the words on the tip of her tongue. She couldn't exactly have explained the scruple that would not let her "give Mamie away," as she phrased it.

"Is the teacher any good?" Sherm had asked, meeting her at the ford on her way home, and taking lunch basket and books with an air of possession, which was the one trick of Sherm's that annoyed Chicken Little. He never asked leave or offered to relieve her of burdens; he merely reached over and took them.

She minded this more than usual to-day; Mr. Clay's manner had been so delightful. She couldn't even thank Sherm. They trudged along in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Sherm asked dryly: "Left your tongue at school, Miss Morton?—you're not very sociable."

Chicken Little responded by making a face at him, which brought an ominous sparkle into the boy's eyes. Things hadn't gone very well with

him that day and he had waited for Jane for a little companionship.

“Well,” he demanded gruffly, “what’s the matter? Did Mr. Clay stand you in a corner the first day or did the handsome Grant neglect you for Mamie?”

The last thrust put fire in Chicken Little’s eye. She turned and looked at him squarely.

“Sherm, if I slapped you some day would you be surprised?” she demanded unexpectedly.

Sherm flashed a sidelong glance at her. “Not as surprised as you’ll be, if you ever try it.”

Chicken Little considered this remark. Just what did he mean?

Sherm’s face was flushed a trifle angrily. He looked as if he might mean most anything. She replied demurely with a provoking shrug of her shoulders.

“I didn’t say I should—but I wanted to dreadfully a minute ago.”

The tall lad beside her seemed genuinely surprised at this statement.

“I suppose you know what you are talking about, Chicken Little, but I’m blamed if I do.”

“It’s the way you take my books and—”

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“Yes?” Sherm was still more surprised. Then an idea popping into his mind, “Oh, I presume you’d like to have me take off my hat and make you a profound reverence as your favorite heroes do in novels. What in thunder you girls find to like in those trashy novels is more than I can see!”

Chicken Little bristled. “Hm-n, Walter Scott and Washington Irving, trashy! Shows how much you know, if you have graduated from High School, Sherman Dart! Besides, I didn’t mean any such thing. Only, you sort of take my things without asking—as if—as if—” She was getting into rather deeper water than she had anticipated.

“Yes, as if what?”

“Oh, I don’t suppose you mean it that way—but you act as if I was only a silly little girl—and didn’t count!”

Chicken Little was decidedly red in the face by the time she finished.

Sherm didn’t say anything for a moment, but he continued to look at her. He looked at her as if he had found something about her he hadn’t noticed before.

“Who put that idea into your head?—Mamie?”

She shook her head indignantly.

“Grant Stowe?”

“Nobody, thank you, I guess I have a mind of my own.”

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“New teacher start in by giving you a lecture on deportment?”

Chicken Little stamped her foot. “You’re perfectful hateful—and I sha’n’t walk another step with you!”

They were near the gate leading from the lane into the orchard and she suited the action to the word, by darting through it and running off under the trees.

Sherm looked after her a moment, undecided whether to stand on his dignity or to pursue. He had considered Jane a little girl—most of the time. Some way she was alluringly different to-day. He suddenly resolved that he would not be flouted in any such fashion. It took him about two minutes to catch up with Chicken Little and slip his arm through hers.

“No, you don’t, Miss. You are going to sit down here under this tree and tell me exactly what’s the matter!”

Chicken Little struggled rebelliously, but Sherm held her firmly.

“I can’t—Mother told me to come straight home from school; she wanted me.”

“Fibber! Your mother and Marian went over to Benton’s this afternoon. You needn’t try to dodge—you and I are going to have this out right now. So you might as well be obliging and sit down comfortably.”

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“It wasn’t anything to make such a fuss about.”

“Then why are you making such a row?”

Chicken Little flung herself down upon the grass.

Sherm stretched his muscular length on the sward in front of her and began to chew a grass stem in a leisurely fashion while he watched her.

Chicken Little pulled a handful of long grasses and commenced plaiting them. Her hair was windblown and her face rose-flushed from her run. She declined to look at Sherm.

“Chicken Little—O Chicken Little, are you very mad? Chicken Little?”

Chicken Little kept her brown eyes fixed upon the pliant stems.

“Chicken Little,” Sherm murmured softly, “you have the prettiest eyes of any girl I know.”

Chicken Little caught the touch of malice in his tone and shot an indignant glance at him from the aforesaid eyes.

Sherm laughed delightedly. "Chicken Little, you don't need to tell me what's the matter with you—I know."

Chicken Little shot another indignant glance. "There isn't anything the matter except what I told you—of course, it wasn't anything really—only ___"

"Yes, there is, Chicken Little, that was only a symptom."

"Stop your fooling."

"Don't you want me to tell you?"

"No!"

"Bet you do—honest, don't you?"

"I haven't the least curiosity—so you can just stop teasing." Jane was positively dignified.

"Well, I'm going to tell you, whether you want to hear it or not. You're growing up, Chicken Little, that's what's the matter with our little feelings. But don't forget you promised to give me part of Ernest's place this winter. It was a bargain, wasn't it?" Sherm reached over and took possession of her busy fingers. "Wasn't it? Chicken Little Jane, wasn't it?"

Jane looked at this new and astonishing Sherm and nodded shyly.

Sherm gathered up her books with a laugh. "Come on, your mother wants you."

"She does not—and I'm going to sit here till I make a grass basket for Jilly."

September and October slipped away quietly, their warm, hazy days gay with turning leaves and spicily fragrant with the drying vegetation and ripening fruits. Chicken Little found school under Mr. Clay unwontedly interesting. He departed from the regulation mixture of three parts study and one part recitation and tried to lead his pupils' thoughts out into the world a little. Indeed, some of his innovations were regarded with suspicion by certain fathers and mothers in the district. When he advised his advanced history class to read historical novels and Shakespeare in connection with their work, there was much shaking of heads. But when he took advantage of the coming election to waken an interest in politics, the district board waited on him. If the visit of the school board silenced Mr. Clay, it did not discourage his charges, and partisanship ran high. The favorite method of boosting one's candidates being to write their names

on the blackboard at recesses and noons, and then stand guard to prevent the opposing faction from erasing them.

The fun grew furious. The Mortons were staunch Republicans, and Chicken Little strove valiantly to write “Garfield and Arthur” earlier and oftener than the Democrats, led by Grant Stowe and Mamie Price, could replace them with “Hancock and English.”

Grant was the biggest and strongest and bossiest lad in school. His favorite method of settling the enemy was to pick them up bodily and set them outside the schoolhouse door while he rubbed out their ticket. Or⁸⁸ better still, to hold the door while Mamie or some other democrat turned the entire front board into a waving sea of “Hancocks and Englishes.”

The Republicans were in the lead as to numbers, but they were mostly the younger children. But few of the older boys could be spared from the farm work to enter school so early in the fall. So Chicken Little captained her side, aided by quiet suggestions from Mr. Clay who did not wish to take sides openly.

Many were the ruses employed to capture the blackboards. Jane stayed one evening after school to have things ready for the morrow, but, alas, Grant Stowe was in the habit of waiting to walk a piece home with her. He waited down the road till he grew suspicious, and, coming back, caught her in the act.

He took swift revenge, none too generously, by forcing her to erase every line, then rubbed it in by guiding her hand to make her write the names of the opposition candidates. Despite all Chicken Little’s struggles, he persisted until the hated names were finished in writing that decidedly resembled crow tracks, but could be read by anyone having sufficient patience.

Chicken Little was furious but helpless. Mr. Clay had gone home early in order to drive into town that evening. Grant treated her anger as a good⁸⁹ joke. She finally wrenched her hand loose and gave him a resounding smack across the cheek, that made her tormentor’s face tingle.

It was Grant’s turn to be vexed now. He caught her arm and twisted it till she winced. “Say you’re sorry!”

“I won’t!”

Grant turned the supple wrist a twist farther. “Now, will you?”

“No sir, not if you twist till you break it—I won’t! I’m not going to be bullied!”

Grant began to be afraid she meant what she said. But his pride would not let him give in to a girl. “All right, little stubborn, I’ll kiss you till you do.”

As Grant loosened his hold on her wrist, Jane jerked away and fled toward the door in a panic. She was more than half afraid of Grant in this humor—and then her promise to Ernest.

“Oh, dear, I knew better than to do that, but he made me so mad!” she mourned.

Grant was close upon her. She fairly hurled herself out the door and most unexpectedly bumped into Sherm, who caught her in time to save her catapulting down the steps.

“Save the pieces, Chicken Little, what’s your hurry?”

“O Sherm,—oh, I’m so glad you came—I—”

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Before she could finish Grant reached the door, stopping short on seeing Sherm.

Jane clutched Sherm’s arm tight. “Don’t let him, please don’t let him!”

Her words were not entirely clear, but Sherm promptly shoved her behind him and confronted Grant angrily.

“Big business you’re in, frightening girls—you bully!”

Sherm had taken a dislike to Grant that evening at Mamie’s and exulted in this opportunity to pick a quarrel. Grant was equally ready. He scorned explanations and replied by pulling off his coat. Sherm swiftly peeled his also. Chicken Little was alarmed by these warlike preparations.

“Don’t, boys, don’t! I guess it was part my fault, Sherm. Grant didn’t mean any harm. We were scrapping over the election and—”

“I don’t care whether it was your fault or not, Jane. If Grant doesn’t know enough to be a gentleman, it’s time he learned.”

Sherm sprang forward and the boys clinched. They were pretty evenly matched. Grant outweighed Sherm, but the latter was quicker and had had some training in wrestling. This was the popular method of settling quarrels, boxing not having come into vogue. Inside of three minutes both were down, rolling over the ground an indiscriminate, writhing heap of arms and legs.

Chicken Little was utterly dismayed. She didn’t want either of the boys hurt, but they heeded her remonstrances no more than if she had been a mosquito. She even tried pulling at the one who came uppermost, but

they both pantingly warned her off. Chicken Little set her jaw firmly. She flew into the schoolhouse to the water bench, and seizing the water bucket, flew out. Pausing long enough to take good aim, she dashed its contents over the boys' heads with all her might.

Grant being underneath at the moment, with lips parted from his exertions, received the full force of the water in his mouth and nose, and nearly strangled from the dose. Sherm had to let him up and apply first aid to help him recover his breath—the lad was purple. When he began to breathe readily once more, both boys got to their feet, glaring reproachfully at Chicken Little. Each was restrained by the presence of the other from expressing forcibly his opinion of the young lady. The heroine was in wrong with both the villain and the hero. However, the heroine did not care.

“You boys ought to be ashamed of yourselves, both of you—fighting like a pair of kids. I wish you could see yourselves! You look exactly like drowned rats!”

The lads could not not see themselves, but they could see each other,³⁹² and the exhibit was convincing. Sherm's mouth puckered into its crooked smile.

“Well, if that's the way you feel about it, Chicken Little, it's all right with me. So long, Grant.”

Sherm picked up his coat and cap and set off, leaving Jane to follow or linger as she saw fit. She turned to Grant.

“I didn't mean to get you into trouble, Grant.”

“Don't mention it, and, truly—I didn't intend to frighten you, Chicken Little. I guess you aren't like most of the girls on the Creek—I didn't suppose you'd take it that way. Good-bye, Sherm,” he called. Grant also picked up his belongings and departed.

Chicken Little rescued the water pail and carried it into the schoolhouse. She secured her hat and lunch basket, and was starting for the door when a wonderful idea buzzed in her brain. Slipping to the window she glanced out. Grant was striding rapidly off up the road. She ran to the board and hastily erased that hateful “Hancock and English” and as hastily wrote the names of the other presidential candidates in letters a foot high across the front board, underlining them heavily and putting hands pointing toward them on each of the side boards. This done, she locked the schoolhouse door, as she had promised Mr. Clay,³⁹³

and, taking the key over to a neighbor's a few rods away, joyously departed homeward.

Sherm was not in sight when she started. A little farther down the hill she saw him waiting beside a haystack. He had evidently been watching to make sure she did not get into further trouble. He walked briskly on as soon as he caught sight of her.

Young Mr. Dart looked a trifle sulky at supper that evening. Chicken Little tried to attract his attention in various ways without success. Sherm was resolved to ignore her. Finally, she addressed him directly.

“Won't you please pass the water, Sherm?” she asked with exaggerated meekness.

Sherm grinned in spite of himself. The other members of the family looked at Jane inquiringly. Jane, having received the water, ate her supper in profound silence.

He came on her unexpectedly down by the spring a little later. It was growing dark and he did not see her until he was almost beside her. He hesitated a moment, then joined her. She glanced up demurely.

He regarded her an instant in complete silence. Chicken Little tossed her head.

Sherm came a step closer and Jane prepared to fly if necessary, but Sherm contented himself with staring at her till he made her drop her eyes.

“You mischievous witch, I'd like to shake you hard!”





CHAPTER XVI
THE PRAIRIE FIRE

THE PRAIRIE FIRE

The prairies were brown—a dead, crisp brown, as if they had been baked by hot suns through long, rainless days and nipped by a whole winter of killing frosts.

“I don’t understand why the grass is so dry by the middle of November,” said Dr. Morton. “Of course the summer was pretty dry, but then we had rains in September.”

“Yes, Father,” Frank replied, “but there has been less rainfall for the past two years than Kansas has known for a decade. I imagine the ground is baked underneath on the prairies, and the rains only helped for a time.”

“Well, whatever caused it, we shall have to feed earlier than usual. I am afraid we may have some bad fires, too, if we don’t have rain or a snowfall soon.”

“There was a fire over on Elm Creek night before last,” spoke up Sherm. “Grant Stowe’s cousin was telling us about it at school.”

“I saw smoke off to the north yesterday,” said Chicken Little.

“Oh, I hope we sha’n’t have any bad fires this fall!” exclaimed Mrs. Morton. “I do think a big prairie fire is one of the most terrifying sights, especially at night. I couldn’t sleep that first fall for dreading them. I used to get up in the middle of the night and look out the windows to see if that awful glare was anywhere on the horizon.”

“Don’t go borrowing trouble, Mother. There hasn’t been a bad fire on Big John for years. The country is so thickly settled a fire doesn’t have the sweep it used to.” Dr. Morton tried to reassure her.

“They must be wonderful things to see. I hope there won’t be any bad ones, but if one shows up anywhere within ten miles, I propose to be on hand,” Sherm said eagerly.

“You won’t be so keen after you have fought one or two, Sherm.” Frank smiled with the wisdom of the initiated. “Say, Father, I think Jim and I had better fire round those stacks on the north eighty. It would be hard to save them if a fire got started on the divide.”

“Yes, I don’t know but you’d best do it this afternoon. Burn a pretty wide strip. And we ought to run a guard on the west from that field of

winter wheat to the county road. If a fire ever got in there, it might come down on the house.”

Chicken Little spoke up. “May I go, too, Frank? I love to watch you.”

“You will be in school, but you can come home that way if we are still at work. You can easily see the smoke. We won’t try it if the wind rises, and I believe it is going to.”

“Chicken Little, if you see the smoke you may tell Mr. Clay I won’t come for my recitation this afternoon. I am going to find out how this back-firing business is done.”

Sherm had begun his studies some two weeks previous and was making rapid progress, studying evenings, and going to the school a half hour before closing time to recite.

Chicken Little found this arrangement extremely pleasant, because Sherm was always there to walk home with her. They took all sorts of detours and by-paths through the woods, instead of coming along the road to the ford. They discovered unexpected stores of walnuts and acorns and wild rose hips, and scarlet bitter-sweet just opening its²⁰⁸ gorgeous berries after the first hard frosts.

Jane helped Sherm press autumn leaves and pack a huge box of nuts to send home. His mother wrote back that his father hadn’t showed as much interest in anything for weeks, as he did in the nuts. They seemed to carry him back to his own boyhood.

Mr. Dart seldom left his bed now, and Sherm’s mother told but little of his condition. Sherm understood her silence only too well. Chicken Little noticed that he always worked hard and late the days he heard from home. She began to watch for the letters herself, and to mount guard over the boy when he looked specially downcast, teasing him into going for a gallop or wheedling him into making taffy or playing a game of checkers. She got so she recognized Sherm’s blue devils as far off as she could see him.

Sherm did not notice this for some time or suspect she was looking after him, but one day he remarked carelessly when she thought she had been specially clever:

“Chicken Little, don’t make a mollycoddle of me. A man has to learn to take what comes his way without squealing.”

“Yes, Sherm, but if you get thorns in your hand, it’s better to try to pull them out than to go on pushing them in deeper, isn’t it? I know when I

was a kid, it always helped a lot to have Mother kiss it better.”

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“How’d you get so wise, Chicken Little?” The lad smiled his wry smile.

“Don’t make fun of me, please, Sherm.”

“Make fun of you? Lady Jane, I’ve been taking off my hat to you for a week. How in the dickens you girls find out exactly what’s going on inside a chap beats my time. It’s mighty good of you to put up with my glooming and try to cheer me along. Maybe I don’t look grateful, but I am.” Sherm was eager to make this acknowledgment, but found it more trying than he had anticipated. He revenged himself by starting in to tease.

“Say, I wish you’d try your hand at this splinter—I can’t budge the critter.”

Jane flew for a needle, unsuspecting. The splinter didn’t look serious, but she painstakingly dug it out.

“Is that all right?” she demanded, looking up to encounter a wicked glint in Sherm’s gray eyes.

“Hm-n, aren’t you going to put any medicine on it?”

“Medicine?”

“Well, you know you said it helped.” Sherm was grinning impishly.

“Sherman Dart, I think you’re too mean for words!” She was about to turn away affronted when she had an inspiration.

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“Mother,” she called, “O Mother!”

Mrs. Morton had been placidly sewing in the sitting room while the young people were studying their lessons by the dining-room table. She came to the door, inquiring.

“Mother, Sherm’s had a splinter in his finger and he wants you to kiss it better.”

Sherm started to protest, but Mrs. Morton did not stop to listen.

“Jane, I think that kind of a joke is very ill-timed, making your poor mother get up and come to you for nothing. You must remember I am not as young as I once was.”

Mrs. Morton departed with dignity.

“Now will you be good?” chuckled Sherm.

“Oh, I guess I’m square,” Chicken Little retorted, going back to her lessons.

Mrs. Morton had said truly that she was not so young as formerly. She had not been well all fall. Dr. Morton had persuaded her to see another physician, who, having assured her that she was merely run down, had prescribed the usual tonic. He had told Dr. Morton, however, that her heart action was weak and warned him to guard her against shocks of any kind and to have her rest as much as possible. This had agreed with the doctor's own diagnosis of her condition, and the family had been trying²⁰¹ to save her from all exertion. So Chicken Little was a tiny bit conscience-stricken.

High winds and more pressing farm duties had interfered with running the fire guards. It was not until the week before Thanksgiving that the men got at it, then they succeeded only in protecting the stacks. They had intended to finish the job the following morning, but one of the neighbors, passing through the lane, stopped to tell Dr. Morton of a sale of yearlings to be held the next afternoon in the neighboring county.

"It must be part of the Elliott herd. They're three-quarters bred shorthorn; I'd like mighty well to pick up a bunch of them. We have plenty of feed for any ordinary winter." Dr. Morton was talking the matter over with Frank after supper.

"Suppose we ride over, Father, it's only about twenty miles. We can start early—we don't need to buy unless they are actually a bargain."

They were off at six the following morning, planning to return the same day. Dr. Morton, however, warned his wife not to be anxious if she did not see them before the next afternoon. If they bought the steers, they would not try to drive them home the same day.

The morning was bright and pleasant, but the wind rose toward mid-day and was blowing a young gale by the time Chicken Little returned²⁰² from school at half-past four. Mrs. Morton began worrying lest the doctor and Frank had not wrapped up sufficiently.

"Why, it isn't cold yet, Mrs. Morton. In fact, it is astonishingly warm for November. And there's the queerest, yellowish haze I have ever seen." Sherm said this to reassure her.

"Probably dust," replied Mrs. Morton carelessly, relieved from her anxiety about her family.

Chicken Little hurried through her supper and went over to see Marian. Presently Marian threw a shawl over her head and they both climbed the hill back of the house. The wind was still blowing fiercely. Sherm saw

them on the ridge and followed to see what was tempting them to a stroll on such a night.

“What’s up?”

Marian answered. “Why, Jane thinks all this yellow haze comes from a prairie fire. We’ve been trying to see if we could see any trace of it. It seems to me I do smell smoke—there’s a kind of pungent tang to the air, too.” Marian sniffed uneasily.

“Like burning grass or leaves?”

Marian’s face paled. “Sherm, that’s exactly what it is! What can we do? And the menfolks all away except Jim Bart, and he’s gone to Benton’s on an errand. He’ll be back in a few minutes though.” 303

“Don’t worry, Marian,” said Jane, “if it’s a prairie fire it’s miles and miles off. It must be on the other side of Little John. It can never cross the creek—besides, the wind is blowing the wrong way for it to sweep down on us.”

“That’s so—but the wind might change any minute, and in a gale like this I’m not so sure it might not jump Little John. I do wish Frank had finished that back-firing.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t be possible to do it until the wind lulls, but Mrs. Morton, I’ll sit up and watch to-night—at least until the wind goes down. It often falls about midnight,” said Sherm, looking troubled.

“It looks to me as if we were in for a three-days’ blow,” Marian replied despondently. “But I’d be much obliged if you would, Sherm, I don’t quite like to ask Jim Bart to, for he’s had such a hard day. Do you think you can keep awake? And, Chicken Little, don’t let on to Mother—we mustn’t worry her.”

“Sherm,” said Jane, after they went into the house, “I’m going to stay up, too; I’ll slip down again after Mother goes to bed. It’s a lot easier for two people to keep awake than one.”

“No, Chicken Little, I don’t believe you’d better. Your mother wouldn’t like it. And we’d be dead sure to laugh or talk loud enough for her to hear us. I hope the wind will go down early. If it doesn’t and I find I can’t stay awake, I’ll call you and let you watch while I doze on the couch here.” 304

Jane stayed up as late as her mother would let her, and Sherm made the excuse of having special studying to do, to sit up later. After Mrs. Morton had retired he made frequent excursions to the hill top. A lurid glare lit up the horizon to the northwest. He could still catch the tang of smoke and

whiffs of burning grass, but these were not so pungent as earlier in the evening. The fire seemed farther away. By eleven, the glare was decidedly fainter and the wind had subsided noticeably. At twelve, he concluded it was safe to go to bed.

Chicken Little waking about two, stole down stairs and finding everything dark, made the rounds of the windows, but the distant fire showed only a faint glow in the night.

When they arose the next morning there was no trace of the fire to be seen. Sherm hailed some men passing, for news. They reported that it had swept the north side of Elm Creek and said it had burned up a lot of hay. There was a rumor that two of the upland farmers had lost everything they had and that a man and team had been caught in it. But they hadn't been able to get any details.

"Though it wouldn't be surprising," one of the strangers added, "that fire was traveling faster than any horse could run."³⁰⁵

Chicken Little had come out and was standing beside Sherm. Her eyes grew big. "Do they really think somebody got burned?"

One of the men nudged the man who had spoken.

"No, Sis, it was just a rumor—I don't 'low it was true. When folks can't give you any name or place—it most generally ain't so."

The men drove on.

It was Saturday. Jim Bart had gone down to town for the weekly supplies and Sherm was busy with odd jobs. He asked Jane to go up to the hill top occasionally to make sure there were no fresh signs of the fire, though Jim Bart had assured him the danger was over. Sherm noticed that the wind had changed. It was blowing freshly from the very direction where they had seen the fire the preceding night.

Chicken Little obediently made trips once an hour until noon; she could detect nothing to occasion alarm. After dinner her mother set her to making doughnuts and she forgot all about it.

Mrs. Morton was not so well to-day and Jane persuaded her to go to bed. Drawing the blinds to, she put a hot iron to her mother's feet and left her to sleep. The clock striking four attracted Jane's attention as she came back into the sitting room, the last doughnut was draining in the collender while Annie mopped the kitchen floor.³⁰⁶

She stood irresolute for an instant, undecided whether to read or to fetch some walnuts from the smokehouse for Sunday. Dr. Morton always

liked to have a basket of walnuts handy on Sunday afternoons. "I guess I'll get the nuts, and perhaps I'd better run up the hill to be sure that old fire hasn't had a change of heart. Father says often some little side fire smolders and burns after the main fire is all out. Though I guess one would have showed up long before this if there'd been any this time."

She argued with herself for two or three minutes, finally deciding that it wasn't much trouble to go take a look, even if it were foolish. Just outside the door she met Sherm and he walked up to the crest with her.

Half way up the slope Chicken Little suddenly stopped, sniffing suspiciously. "Sherm, I believe I smell smoke again."

Sherm stopped also to draw in a long breath. He did not wait to announce his observations, but broke into a run for the top of the hill. Chicken Little followed him a length in the rear. Sherm took one look and gave vent to a surprised whistle. Chicken Little stared, fascinated, at a tiny line of fire burning merrily on a hillside not a mile distant.

"Jumping Jehosophat!" exclaimed Sherm, "how did it ever creep up on us this way?" 307

Jane was thinking rapidly. She scarcely noticed what he said.

"Sherm, Frank left the water barrels and the mops and everything on the wagon, didn't he?"

"Yes—what—"

"Are the barrels filled?"

"Yep, do you think—"

"Sherm, run hitch the bay team to the wagon quick. I'll get Marian and warn Annie not to tell Mother—she's asleep still. Hurry, Sherm, every minute's precious!"

Sherm's "All right" drifted from him on the run. He was already on his way to the stable. He realized that Jane knew more about fire fighting than he did.

Jane hurried to the cottage. Marian listened to her news, white to the lips.

"Annie can take Jilly. Perhaps I'd better ride over after Mr. Benton."

"Marian," protested Chicken Little, "there isn't time. And if Mr. Benton's home, he has probably seen it, too, and is trying to protect his own place. No, we've got to work fast. Unless we can run a fire guard before the fire reaches that tall grass on the division line, the whole place is a goner! It isn't coming very fast yet. Here, I'll run with Jilly over to 308

the house and you put on a pair of Frank's trousers—your skirts might catch. I'll get that old pair of Ernest's. Hurry, Marian, hurry!"

Chicken Little gathered up Jilly and started on the run.

Both Marian and Jane reached the stable yard just as Sherm drove the heavy farm wagon clattering out of the gate. They hurriedly climbed in and Sherm lashed the horses into a gallop. As they passed the cottage, Marian exclaimed: "Did you get matches either of you?"

Sherm slowed up the team and examined his pockets.

"A handful."

"Stop a moment—I'll run fetch a box. It takes a lot." Chicken Little was over the wheel before the words were fairly out of her mouth.

She was back in a jiffy with the matches, which she proceeded to divide among them, while the horses leaped forward again.

"Stop on the backbone where the Santa Fe trail strikes the road."

Precisely four minutes later Sherm pulled up the panting team. Chicken Little promptly took command. She had been out many times with her father and brothers and knew exactly what to do.

"Wet your mop—take a bucket of water and fire right along the trail, Marian,—that buffalo grass burns slow. Call if it starts to get away from you. I'll begin there by the hedge. Drive about fifty yards farther on, Sherm,—the horses will stand. Fill all the buckets and wet the extra mops. We're liable to want them in a rush."

"All right, Jane, save your breath—you'll need it. Careful there, Mrs. Morton, beat out the flames along the trail as you go. Never mind how fast it whoops the other way. Cæsar's ghost! that fire is getting close!"

The waving, irregular lines of flame on the hillside were coming steadily on, now leaping up several feet high as the breeze freshened, now creeping close to the ground when the gusts died away. The wind was fitful.

Marian and Sherm both had their trail of fire flickering into a blaze before Chicken Little got hers kindled. Her hands shook so she could hardly hold the match. The first flickered and went out, a second, then a third, blackened, before she could coax the stubbly grass to burn. She caught up a bunch of weeds, set it blazing in her hand and dragged it swiftly along the ground. Tiny swirls of yellow flame wavered in her wake, crackled feebly for an instant in the shorter herbage, then, reaching out tongues into the longer blue stem beyond, leaped forward like a

frolicsome animal. Sherm's and Marian's lines of fire were eating their way merrily toward hers on each side.³¹⁰

It was easy to beat out the flame in the Buffalo grass, which formed their safety line toward the house, and the three soon had several hundred feet of fire running to meet those menacing flames on the neighboring hillside. For a while it seemed almost pretty play save for that haunting dread of disaster. But the dripping mops were heavy for girls' wrists and arms, the constant stooping and rising and the lifting of the heavy buckets pulled painfully on aching muscles. They must backfire for a third of a mile before they dared hope the place was safe.

A field of winter wheat adjoining the wagon road where they had started, and extending down to the bank of Big John, was the best of protection to the lower half of the farm. West from this, there was neither track nor field to break the tindery sweeps of prairie grass, until the strip of breaking on the north boundary of the pasture was reached. The old Santa Fe trail along which they were firing, fortunately extended to within some two hundred yards of the breaking, and was their safeguard against the ever-present danger of letting the fire get away from them to the rear.

Older heads would have selected that hundred yards of high grass as a starting place, while they were fresh and best able to cope with its perils.³¹¹ Chicken Little was leaving it to the last. Swiftly as the three worked, the head fire was rapidly gaining on them. Again and again, one of them glanced toward the house in the hope that Jim Bart might have returned, or some neighbor have seen their danger and be on the way to help. Not a human being was in sight in any direction.

Marian straightened up with a groan and glanced despairingly at the head fire. Sherm's gaze followed hers anxiously.

"We've got to do better than this, girls. Here, Chicken Little, make a torch of some of those resinous weeds—those long crackly ones—and fire just as fast as you can. I'll follow with the mop and yell if I can't manage it."

The plan worked well for a time—their haven of hope, the brown strip of breaking, seemed to move steadily nearer. But Chicken Little and Marian were fast becoming exhausted. The main fire was now so close that its smoke was beginning to drift in their faces. Prairie chickens and quail, startled and confused by the double line of flame, whirred above

their heads, uncertain how to seek safety. A terrified jack rabbit leaped up almost at Sherm's feet. Rabbits, ground squirrels, one lone skunk, and even an occasional coyote, darted past them. Back at the road where they had begun, the head fire was already meeting their line of back fire and dying down in sullen smoke. Still, that hundred yards of blue stem was untouched.

They paused a moment at its edge in hurried consultation.

"Let's souse all the mops—dripping wet—and trail across first," suggested Chicken Little in short, labored gasps. She had been running for several minutes.

"Yes, and then fire back. Christ!—we must hurry!" Sherm, too, was breathless. "Can you stick it out a few minutes longer, Marian?"

Marian Morton's face was drawn and colorless. She nodded and rested a moment, leaning on her mop.

For the next sixty-five yards the blows of the wet mops rained down with the precision of clock work. Twice the flames started in quick eddies back of their line, but, panting, the girls almost sobbing, they beat them back. The smoke was growing stifling. The wind, freshening, blew it from both fires full in their faces. They could see only a few feet ahead.

"Light another torch and run, Chicken Little—there's no time to lose—we must chance it!"

Chicken Little obeyed silently. Half way to the breaking she stumbled and fell. Her torch of twisted grass flew from her hand, scattering the burning fragments about her. Before she could get to her feet, the grass was ablaze all around. Quick-witted Sherm threw her a mop, then beat his way toward her. Marian, summoning her last remaining strength, ran to help, but sank to the ground in a faint before she could reach Jane.

Sherm and Chicken Little, beating, stamping madly, did not see her fall. The flames fairly licked up the long grass. They beat them out around Jane only to see them spread in an ever-increasing circle. Chicken Little's legs gave way under her and she sank helplessly down, watching the rushing fire. Sherm struggled on with parched throat and stinging eyes, but he, too, was fast becoming exhausted in the unequal fight, when a strong pair of hands seized the mop from his straining arms and rained swift blows on the flaming grass. Answering blows resounded from four other stout pairs of hands and an irregular line of charred vegetation was soon all that was left to tell the tale of the danger they had escaped.

“Thank God, we got here in time!” Captain Clarke ejaculated fervently, raising Marian’s head and dashing water in her face to restore her.

“We’re so shut in by the timber at our place, I didn’t dream the fire was in this part of the country till one of the hands went up in the pasture. We mounted and came double quick, I tell you. And we’d have got here quicker, if I’d known what straits you were in. You’re a plucky lot! Easy there, Mrs. Morton, you are all right, and the fire is safe to smoke out at its leisure. Here, drink a drop of this whiskey.”

Sherm had gathered up Chicken Little and carried her beyond the smoke, then dropped down beside her with a sigh to recover his breath. He felt numb and so dazed he hardly heeded what the Captain was saying.

“Pretty well done for, yourself, aren’t you, lad?” one of the men inquired. “You sure knew exactly what to do, if you are a tenderfoot.”

Sherm roused himself enough to twist the corners of his mouth into his wonted smile.

“Me? I didn’t do anything—Chicken Little was the boss of this gang.”





CHAPTER XVII
THE LOST OYSTER SUPPER

THE LOST OYSTER SUPPER

Thanksgiving came and went its turkey-lined way rather lonesomely. Christmas preparations also lacked their usual zest.

“Everything seems to have caved in round where Ernest was,” Chicken Little confided to Marian. “You see, we always talked everything over and planned our Christmas together. Sherm takes Ernest’s place in lots of ways, but, of course, he isn’t interested in what I’m making for Mother, or in helping me make \$5.25 go clear round the family and piece out for Katy and Gertie besides.”

“If sympathy is all you need, Jane, I can lend you a listening ear.” Marian crocheted another scallop.

“I’d be thankful for a few suggestions, too, I can’t think of anything to send Ernest. When he has to have everything regulation, and the government furnishes him with every single thing it wants him to have, why—it’s awful.”

“Yes, I agree with you—I’ve been racking my brains for Ernest, too. Mother is patiently knitting him a muffler, which I know he won’t be permitted to wear, but I haven’t the heart to discourage her—she gets so much comfort out of it. Uncle Sam should be more considerate of fond female relatives. He might at least tolerate a few tidies and hand-painted shovels or a home-made necktie.”

“Or a throw or a plush table cover with chenille embroidery. Mamie Jenkins is making one for Mr. Clay. He will be too cross for words. He loathes Mamie, though he tries not to show it, and plush is his special abomination. He says it reminds him of caterpillar’s fuzz.” Chicken Little’s eyes danced maliciously.

Marian looked at her young sister-in-law meditatively.

“Mamie doesn’t seem to be dear to your heart just now. Is she too popular or too affected or too dressy?”

“Oh, she’s just too utterly too too all around. I do have lots of fun with her—she can be awfully nice when she wants to be, but—”

“But?”

“Oh, I don’t know—she swells up so, lots of times over things I’d be ashamed to tell—they’re so silly.”²¹⁷

“Yes, I guess Mamie’s pretty cheap, but as long as you make friends with her, don’t rap her behind her back. It was all right to tell me—I quizzed you anyhow. I wish you didn’t see so much of her.”

“Why, she’s the only girl at school I can go with, who is anywhere near my own age. The Kearns twins aren’t even clean—I don’t like to go near them.”

“I shouldn’t think you would. Our public school system has its drawbacks as well as its virtues. Well, Jane, be nice to Mamie, but don’t—don’t be like her.”

“You needn’t worry; she’s going to town to school after Christmas, so I sha’n’t see much more of her.”

Mrs. Morton was still far from well, and she hung on Ernest’s letters almost pathetically. Ernest, boy fashion, was inclined to write long letters when he had something interesting to tell and preserve a stony silence when he didn’t. Life at the academy was monotonous and he had to work hard to keep up with his studies. Further, his father and Frank suspected he was having many disagreeable experiences which he kept from his family. These were still the days of rough hazing at the academy and Ernest, being a western boy, big and strong and independent, was likely to attract his full share of this unpleasant nagging. He revealed something of his experiences in a letter to Sherm. Sherm showed the letter to Chicken Little and Chicken Little, vaguely worried, told her father. Dr. Morton talked it over with Frank.²¹⁸

“There isn’t a thing you can do about it, Father. Most of it does the boys more good than harm anyway. I talked to a West Pointer once about the hazing there. He said some of it was pretty annoying and at times decidedly rough, but that if a fellow behaved himself and took it good-naturedly they soon let him alone. He said it was the best training he had ever known for curing a growing boy of the big head. Don’t worry—Ernest has sense—he’s all right.”

To Chicken Little, Ernest confided, two weeks before Christmas, that he was getting confoundedly tired of having the same things to eat week after week. “Say, Sis, if you and Mother would cook me up a lot of goodies for Christmas, I’d like it better than anything you could do. Send lots, so I can treat—a turkey and fixings.”

This letter did more for Mrs. Morton's health than the doctor's tonic. She tied on her apron and set to making fruit cake and cookies and every delicious and indigestible compound she could think of that would stand packing and a four-days' journey. Chicken Little and Sherm spent their evenings making candy and picking out walnut meats to send. Dr. Morton³¹⁹ made the nine-mile trip to town on the coldest day of the season to insure Ernest's getting the box on the very day before Christmas.

The family at the ranch had a quiet holiday week. The day after New Year's, Jane was invited to come to town and stay over night to attend an amateur performance of *Fatinitza*, a light opera the young people had staged for the benefit of a struggling musical society. Chicken Little was excitedly eager to go. Mrs. Morton deliberated for some time before she gave her consent. Marian and Frank and Sherm all teased in her behalf, before it was won.

Sherm drove her in, and Frank, having business in town the following day with a cattle buyer from Kansas City, volunteered to bring her home. Jane wore her Christmas present, a crimson cashmere with fine knife plaitings of crimson satin for its adorning. Frank lent her his sealskin cap and she felt very grand, and looked piquantly radiant, as she revolved for her mother's inspection before slipping into her big coat. Sherm, standing waiting, inspected her, too.

"Scrumptious, Lady Jane, you look like that red bird I've been trying to catch out in the evergreen by the gate."

Mrs. Morton shook her head disapprovingly. "No compliments, Sherm, Jane is just a little girl and she must remember that pretty is as pretty does. Don't forget, dear, to thank Mrs. Webb for her hospitality when you³²⁰ come away. Are you sure your ears are clean?"

"Oh, Mother, I'm not a baby!" Chicken Little protested indignantly. "You talk as if I were about five years old."

"My dear daughter, your mother will speak to you as she sees fit. Have you got the high overshoes? I think, perhaps, you'd better take Father's muffler. Sherm, have you both buffalo robes?"

Chicken Little relieved her feelings by making a little moue at Sherm. He winked discreetly in return.

"Why," she said disgustedly after they were started, "won't mothers ever let you grow up? I am a whole inch taller than Mother now, and half the time she treats me as if I didn't have the sense of a chicken."

“Well, you see you’re the only girl in the family, and you’ve been the littlest chicken so long your mother kind of likes to shut her eyes to all those extra inches you’ve been collecting. By the way, Miss Morton, I don’t notice that muffler your mother mentioned, and I think you’ll be cold enough before we get to town to wish you had it.”

“You don’t suppose I was going to wear that clumsy thing? I can snuggle down under the robes if I get cold.”

“No, I didn’t suppose, so I brought the red scarf Mother gave me³³¹ Christmas, for your ears. They’d be frosted sure without anything. Did you think your pride would keep you warm, Chicken Little?”

Chicken Little was inclined to resent this delicate attention; Sherm seemed to be putting her in the same class her mother had. But her ears were already beginning to tingle as they left the timber and got the full force of the wind on the open prairie. Sherm was swinging the bays along at a good pace. The cutter glided smoothly over the frozen snow. She submitted meekly while he awkwardly wrapped the muffler over her cap with his free hand. The soft wool was deliciously comfortable. She neglected, however, to mention this fact to him.

“Too stubborn to own up, Lady Jane?”

Jane stole a glance at the quizzical face turned in her direction. Then she evaded shamelessly.

“Sherm, don’t you just adore to skate?”

Chicken Little was in a pulsing state of excitement that evening as she listened to the pretty, lilting music and watched gorgeously clad young people, many of whom she recognized, moving demurely about the little stage. To others it was merely a very creditable amateur performance; to Chicken Little, it opened a whole new world of ideas and imagining. She had been to a theatre but twice in her whole life, once to Uncle Tom’s³³² Cabin and once to a horrible presentation of Hamlet, which resulted in her disliking the play to the day of her death. She loved the light and color and harmony of it all. She delighted in it so much that she sighed because it would be so soon over.

“What are you sighing for, Jane? Don’t you like it?” her hostess inquired.

Chicken Little gave a little wriggle of joy. “Like it? I just love it—it’s like butterflies keeping house. Don’t you wish everything was like that—

pretty and gay, with all the lovers getting things straightened out right?”

“Dear me, Jane, do you get all that out of this poor little comic opera? I must have you come in to all our amateur things if you love music so.”

“I don’t love music so very much—I hate to practice. I shouldn’t care for their singing very much by itself, it’s seeing the actors and thinking how they feel—and their pretty clothes and—”

Mrs. Webb laughed.

“Chicken Little, I envy you—you are going to see so many things that most people shut their eyes to.”

Jane studied about this, but she hardly liked to ask what things Mrs. Webb meant, because that lady seemed to expect her to know, and she felt she would appear stupid not to. She lay awake a long time that night; the music seemed to be splashing over her in little waves of melody. Even after she had once fallen asleep, she awakened to find her brain still humming the insistent measures. The next morning she went downtown with her hostess and met Mamie Jenkins in a store.

“Why, Chicken Little, I didn’t know you were in town? Your brother didn’t say anything about your being here.”

“Frank? Is he in already?”

“Yes, I just saw him. Say, did you know a crowd of us are going out to his house to-night to an oyster supper?”

“No, who’s going?”

“Oh, a lot of the town boys and girls, and Grant Stowe and me. John Hardy asked him if a crowd of us couldn’t come out to-night and surprise your sister, and Frank said come along, he’d have some hot oysters for us. The boys have got a big bobsled from the livery stable. I bet we have a lovely time. Why don’t you and Sherm stay in and go out with us—I guess there’ll be room. Anyhow, you can always crowd more into a bobsled, it’s more fun when you’re packed in.”

Mamie giggled expressively.

Jane was surprised to learn that Sherm had come in with Frank and she was also extremely doubtful whether her mother would approve of her waiting to come out with the party. John Hardy’s crowd was one of the gayest in town and they were very much grown up. But her outing the previous evening had given her a taste for grown-up things; she was eager for the lark and resolved to tease Frank to let her stay in.

Frank studied the matter for several minutes, but finally consented rather reluctantly. He saw Sherm was also keen for the fun.

“All right, Sis, that set are pretty old for a kid like you and I’ll have a time squaring myself with Mother. But you don’t have many good times and Sherm’s steady enough to look after you. They are planning to start early. I guess you’ll get home by eight.”

Frank left for the ranch about three o’clock to warn Marian of her surprise party. Mrs. Webb had insisted that Sherm stay with them for an early supper. The party had arranged to start at six. With a good team they should reach the ranch easily by eight, have two hours for merry-making, and get back to town by midnight.

The cold had moderated through the day; by five o’clock, the sky was leaden gray and it looked like snow. Some of the fathers and mothers were doubtful as to whether they ought to risk so long a drive. But the weather was ideal, if it only didn’t snow, and there might not be another night during the holidays when they could all go.

The expedition had bad luck from the start. The livery man, disliking²³⁵ the weather prospects, had had an inferior team harnessed to the big sled. John Hardy and the other young men stood for their rights and after a long wrangle, succeeded in getting what they wanted. But this had consumed precious time. They drove out of the livery barn at six-thirty instead of six, as they had intended. Then two or three of the girls were not ready. One of the last called for, having sat with her wraps on for over three-quarters of an hour, had finally removed them and her party frock as well, in disgust, thinking the jaunt had been given up on account of the weather. By the time she had dressed herself afresh it was a quarter past seven. There was still one young man to be picked up at the hotel. He, too, had grown tired of waiting and had started out to hunt the sleigh. Ten minutes more were consumed searching for him. The clock in the schoolhouse tower was striking the half hour as the sleigh load passed the last house in the little town, and turned into the country road leading to the ranch.

Sherm pulled out his watch. “Whew, Frank and Marian will have a nice wait for us! We can’t possibly make it till after nine.”

The next two miles went with a dash. The moonlight was a dim gray half light instead of the silvery radiance they had counted upon.

“Those clouds must be beastly heavy—there is scarcely a star to be seen,” ejaculated John Hardy, who was on the driver’s seat with a sprightly girl of nineteen for his companion. “What’ll you bet the snow catches us before we get home to-night?”

“I’ll bet you it catches us before we get out to Morton’s,” retorted one of the other young men.

“Well, I’m glad I am taking my turn at driving going out, if that’s the case. I shouldn’t like the job of keeping the road on these prairies in a nice blinding snowstorm.”

“Oh, that’s just because you’re a town dude,” said Grant Stowe boastfully. “It is just as easy to follow a country road as a street in town if you only know the country.”

“All right, Grant, if it snows, we’ll let you drive home.”

“If it snows?” exclaimed one of the girls. “I felt a flake on my nose this very minute.”

The party surveyed the sky.

“Oh, you are just dreaming, Kate.”

“Somebody blew you a kiss and it cooled off on the way,” teased another.

“Just wait a minute, smarties. There—there was another!”

“Yes, I felt one, too!” exclaimed Mamie.

“You’re right, it’s coming.” Sherm stared at the sky in some concern.

“Better whoop it right along, John,” advised one of the young men thoughtfully.

“I am not so sure that we shouldn’t be sensible to turn round and call this frolic off for to-night,” John Hardy replied.

There was a chorus of No’s.

“Nonsense, who’s afraid of a little snow? Besides, we’d disappoint the Mortons and Jane’s mother would be frantic if she didn’t come. Don’t crawfish, John Hardy.”

“I’m equal to anything the rest of you are. I merely thought it might be rough on the girls, and occasion some alarm to other fond relatives in town, if we failed to get back to-night.”

“Oh, stop your croaking!”

“There will be no trouble getting back.”

“Of course not, the horses can find the way if we can’t.”

“Here, start something to sing and shut off these ravens!”

The crowd sang lustily for the next twenty minutes, then the snow began coming down steadily and the majority of the young people commenced to disappear under the robes and blankets.

“The pesky stuff is getting inside my collar!” exclaimed one of the men who had insisted upon keeping his head out.

“Why don’t you tear yourself from the scenery and come under cover?” asked Mamie pertly.

“Yes, Smith, I’m only holding one of Mamie’s hands. You may keep the other warm.”

“He’s not either. Don’t you believe him, Mr. Smith,” Mamie protested.

John Hardy spoke to the girl beside him. He had been watching the road ahead too closely for several minutes to do any talking.

“Hadn’t you better go back with the others—there’s no need for you to get wet and cold.”

“Oh, I am all right—it isn’t cold—very.”

“I am afraid it is going to be—the wind is rising and it’s coming right in our faces. We’re a pack of fools to go!”

“We must be nearly half way there, aren’t we?”

“I think so—I have never been out to the Morton ranch. Well, if worst comes to worst, I guess they’ll keep us all night.”

The crowd was beginning to quiet down. By the time they had covered two more miles the wind was blowing the snow in their faces with stinging force. John Hardy was having trouble to keep the horses in the road. They, too, recoiled from the snow drifting in their faces. He finally persuaded his companion to go back under the robes. Sherm volunteered to take her place.

“I don’t like the look of things,” said Hardy in a low tone as Sherm climbed up beside him. “Can you tell where we are?”

Sherm stared at the snow-covered waste ahead and tried to recognize some familiar land mark in the white gloom.

“Yes, I think so. That was Elm Creek you crossed some time back. We must be about half way from Elm to Big John.”

“How far now?”

“Three miles.”

“Can you see the time?”

“Nine-twenty.”

“The dickens, we ought to be there!”

“It oughtn’t to be long now. Let me take the reins—your hands must be cold.”

“Just a minute till I start the circulation. I feel sort of responsible for this gang, because I got up this fool enterprise.” Hardy clapped his hands together vigorously.

“It wouldn’t be bad except for the wind!” Hardy said presently.

“That’s the worst of Kansas, there always is a wind!” Sherm had not yet been entirely converted to the charms of the sunflower state.

When Hardy took the reins again, Sherm still peered ahead, watching the road. He had been finding something vaguely unfamiliar about the landscape, though this was not strange since neither house nor tree nor haystack was visible through the storm until they were almost upon it. Then it loomed up suddenly shrouded and spectral. This feeling of strangeness grew upon him and he felt uneasy.

“Stop the team a minute, Hardy.” Sherm got down and went to the horses’ heads, peering all about. He scraped the snow away with his foot and examined the ground.

He let out a shrill whistle of dismay, as he uncovered grass spears instead of the hard-trodden road bed.

“Say, Hardy, we’re off the road. I thought so from the way the sled was dragging.”

Hardy climbed hastily down with an exclamation that sounded profane. The boys in the sleigh also piled hurriedly out. They soon assured themselves of the sorrowful fact.

“What can we do?”

“Isn’t there a house somewhere near where we can inquire?”

“What did you fellows go to sleep for when you were driving, anyhow?”

“You’ll have to go back on your tracks till you find the road again.”

Questions and offers of advice were numerous.

Sherm had walked a short distance back, exploring. He returned in time to hear this last remark.

“The trouble is, Grant, the snow hasn’t left us any tracks. Two hundred yards back you can hardly see where we came.”

The others began to wake to the seriousness of the situation.

“Haven’t you any idea where we are, Dart?”

“Not the faintest notion, except that we are somewhere between Elm and Big John. Perhaps Jane might know. She usually has a sixth sense for direction.

“Chicken Little,” he called, “do you mind getting out and seeing if you can tell us where we are?”

Chicken Little was on the ground with a spring before Sherm could help her. She strained her eyes through the gloom. She, too, examined the ground, then, accompanied by Sherm and Hardy, waded through the snow for several hundred yards in each direction, the men kicking the snow in the hope of finding the track. Finally, Chicken Little gave it up.

“I don’t know a blessed thing more than the rest of you. But I have the feeling we must be near Charlie Wattles’ place—you know that old darkey. You see the wind was right in our faces most of the way, and it isn’t now. It’s coming obliquely—course the wind may have changed. Let’s try heading west a while—and see if we can find the road. Let me sit up there with you and Sherm; I might see something I’d recognize.”

“Chicken Little, you’d freeze,” objected Sherm.

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“Not any sooner than you will, Sherman Dart.”

“We can wrap her up in a blanket and she might help us—we have got to get out of this some way. It’s ten o’clock.”

They drove about slowly for half an hour, but they could find nothing that looked like a road. Some of the sleigh load were openly apprehensive and inclined to blame Hardy for their plight, but for the most part they were plucky and good-natured, trying to turn off their growing fear with jests.

Chicken Little glued her eyes to the dimness ahead.

Sherm suggested that they give the horses their head.

“They’ll try to go back to town if we do, and I don’t believe they could hold out—that off one is blowing pretty badly now. This snow is heavy as mud to pull through.” Hardy looked dubious.

“Turn due west, Mr. Hardy—we can’t be far from Big John.”

Hardy obeyed and they drove another half hour, seeing nothing save the fluttering snowflakes and the snowy wastes opening out a few feet ahead as they advanced.

“Chicken Little, your theory is all right, but it doesn’t seem to work,” Sherm remarked regretfully.

In the meanwhile, time had also been moving along at the ranch. The big sitting room at the cottage was brightly lighted and glowingly warm from an open wood fire. By eight o'clock, coffee was steaming on the back of the kitchen stove, the extension table pulled out to its full length, was set with soup plates and cups and silver. Piles of doughnuts and baskets of apples and walnuts stood awaiting the sharp appetites the Mortons knew the cold ride would bring to them. Marian had the milk and oysters ready for the stew and sat down to rest a moment before the arrival of the guests. She hardly noticed the clock until the hand pointed to half-past eight.

"My, they're late!" she exclaimed.

Frank got up and went to the door. He encountered Dr. Morton just coming in.

"When did you say those youngsters were coming? It's snowing like fury." He paused on the porch to give himself another shake.

"I don't believe they'll try to come out to-night. I guess you've had all your trouble for nothing. I only wish Chicken Little and Sherm had come home with you."

Frank, being a good many years nearer to understanding the rashness of youth than his father, disagreed with him.

"I bet they tried all right, but they may have had to give it up. I wonder how long it's been snowing this way. I haven't been out since supper."

Dr. Morton sat and visited for a half hour, then said he guessed he'd better go back to Mother. She was worrying a little about her baby being out such a night.

"She needn't," he concluded, "even a child like Jane would have sense enough not to start on a nine-mile ride in such weather."

After his father had gone, Frank put on his coat and went down the lane with a lantern. He came back presently and sat down by the fire without saying anything.

Marian saw he was worried. "You don't think they've got lost, do you, Frank?"

"I don't know what to think. I hope Father is right and they had sense enough not to start. But I wish to goodness I hadn't let Jane stay in."

They sat there listening for every sound until the clock struck ten. Frank had twice gone to the door, imagining he heard sleigh bells. He got to his feet again at the sound of the clock.

“You might as well go to bed, dear. We sha’n’t see them to-night, but I’ll sit up till eleven myself to make sure.”



A half hour later when they were warmed

Marian waited a little while longer, then took his advice. Frank sat by the fire and pretended to read until five minutes of twelve, then he, too, gave up the vigil as hopeless.

At ten minutes past two they both sat up with a start at the sound of sleigh bells. An instant later there was a vigorous pounding on the door.

Frank stared into the darkness for one confused instant, then leaped out of bed, and wrapping a dressing gown about him, flung open the door.

Twelve numbed and snow-covered figures stumbled into the room. Two of the men were half carrying one of the girls.

“Fire up quick, Frank, we’re most frozen! And get some hot water!” Sherm exclaimed, suiting the action to the word by stirring up the coals

of the dying fire and piling on wood.

It was not until a half hour later when they were warmed and fed, that the Mortons had time to listen to any connected account of the night's adventures. Frank had speedily summoned his father to prescribe for frosted cheeks and fingers and toes. Later, it was discovered that John Hardy had a badly sprained wrist. Marian and Mrs. Morton made the girls comfortable and finished preparing the belated oyster supper.

"I am glad we didn't lose this oyster supper altogether," said Grant Stowe feelingly. "I never tasted anything better."

"Same here," a half dozen laughing voices echoed.

"I wasn't so darned sure an hour ago that some of us were ever going to taste anything again," said John Hardy soberly.

"Things didn't look exactly rosy, specially when we got spilled out," one of the girls added.

"What, did you have an upset?" Dr. Morton looked as if this were the last straw.

"Yes, that's how Hardy sprained his wrist!"

"Chicken Little had just assured us that if we would drive a little farther west, we should surely find something, when we struck the sidehill and went over as neat as you please." Mamie enjoyed this thrust at Jane.

"Well, we found something, didn't we?" defended Sherm.

"I should say we found out how deep the snow was."

"Yes, and the sidehill made Jane sure we were near the creek, and then she saw the trees and—"

"Yes, and then she found it wasn't the creek at all, but the Wattles' place."

"Whew!" exclaimed Frank, "you didn't get over to black Charlie's? Why, that was three miles out of your road!"

"Yes, Frank, and you ought to have seen him. He was scared to death when we came pounding on his door in the middle of the night." Chicken Little giggled at the recollection.

"And there was a trundle bed full of pickanninies and they kept popping their heads up. They were so ridiculous—with their little pigtails sticking up all over their heads, and their bead eyes."

"Well, old Charlie warmed us up all right and started us back on the road again," said John Hardy gratefully.

“And there’s another thing sure,” said Marian, interrupting this flow of reminiscence, “you can’t go back to town to-night, and you must be tired to death, all of you. Mother Morton, if you will take the girls over with you, Frank and I will make some pallets by the fire for these boys, and let them get some sleep.”

The real sport of this excursion came the next day when Frank Morton hitched an extra team on in front of the livery horses and drove the party back to town himself, to make sure they did not come to grief again in the piled-up drifts. But Chicken Little and Sherm were not along. They watched them drive off with never a pang of envy.

“I have had enough bobsled riding to do me for this winter,” said Jane wearily. Her evening at Fatinitza seemed a thousand years away.

“Ditto, yours truly!” And Sherm yawned luxuriously.



CHA XVIII
AN APRILFOOL FROIC

AN APRIL FOOL FROLIC

Mrs. Morton and Marian were sitting by the great open fire at the cottage sewing for Jilly. Jilly herself had constructed a wonderful vehicle of two chairs hitched to the center table, and she was vainly trying to persuade Huz and Buz to occupy seats in this luxurious equipage. Lazy Buz, having once been dragged up into a chair, stayed put, though he looked aggrieved, but Huz had his eye on the braided rag rug in front of the fireplace. The moment Jilly's gaze was attracted elsewhere, he would jump softly down and curl up on the rug.

Marian had risen three times to restore him to Jilly because she mourned so loudly, but she finally began to sympathize with the pup.

"Let him be, Honey, you've got Buz for company. Huz doesn't want to play."

Jilly opened her mouth to wail. Then she suddenly changed her mind, climbed down, and going over to Huz began whispering vigorously into his ear. Her warm breath tickled Huz and he flopped his ear to drive away the annoying insect. Jilly beamed, calling joyfully to her mother: "Huz say ess, Mamma, Huz say ess."

"But Jilly, Huz can't talk."

"He nod he's ear, Mamma. Huz nod he's ear."

The unfortunate Huz went up into the chair once more.

Mrs. Morton glanced out the window where the March wind was whipping the bare branches of the cherry trees into mournful complaining. Eddying leaves fluttered from the heaps accumulated in fence corners or beneath the friendly shelter of the evergreens. A huge tumble weed went whirling down the road, passed on by each succeeding gust. In and out of the cedars, the robins were flying, prospecting for new nests. She pushed back her hair and sighed.

"It doesn't seem possible that April is almost here. Ernest has been gone nearly a school year. I am beginning to realize that I sha'n't see much more of my boy."

"But, Mother Morton, he is doing so beautifully and he likes the life. You couldn't keep him with you much longer, even if he were not in the

academy. Besides, you still have Jane.”

Mrs. Morton sighed again.

“That is the worst of this ranch life. Jane is growing so fast I shall soon have to be sending her away to school. If we only lived some place where she could be right with me till she finished her education.”

“Oh, Mother Morton, I am glad she can’t. It is the best part of a girl’s education to go away from all the home coddling and have to rely upon herself. I wouldn’t give anything for what I learned by being away from family and friends, and having to exert myself to make people like me, instead of taking it for granted.”

“I don’t doubt what you say is true, Marian, but Ernest is gone, and you don’t know what a wrench it is going to be to send my baby away, too.”

“Are you thinking of sending her next year?”

“I think I must, unless I can persuade Father to move to town for the winter so she can go to the High School. It isn’t merely the studies—I am most dissatisfied with her associations here.”

“I know—the Creek is certainly a little crude. Still I think Jane is pretty sensible. And she is learning a lot about human nature—human nature without its party clothes. It’s good for her, Mother, if she doesn’t get too much of it.”

“What’s good for whom?” Dr. Morton, coming in, was attracted by Marian’s earnest tone.

“Jane, and the effect District Thirteen is having on her,” Marian explained.

“I was just saying, Father, that she is getting too old to be associating with Tom, Dick, and Harry the way she is doing up at the schoolhouse.”

“There you go again, Mother. You don’t go about enough among the neighbors to know what good kindly people they are. Of course, they are plain, but the Tom, Dick, and Harry you complain of, are more wholesome than lots of more stylish youngsters I know. I wish you’d try to be a little more neighborly. I am constantly hearing little thrusts about our family being stuck up. Frank will bear me out in this.”

Frank had followed his father and was warming his hands in the blaze.

“Oh, the Creek thinks the Morton family has a good opinion of itself, all right. But I have been thinking for some time that it wouldn’t hurt us

any to have some sort of a merry-making and invite all the neighbors in.” Frank looked at Marian.

“What could we have, Frank?” Marian inquired, her brow puckered a little.

“Well, April Fool’s Day is next Wednesday—why not get up a frolic for that evening?”

“Just for the young folks?”

“No, men, women, and children. Invite the families. Send out an invitation to the whole Creek. There will be a lot who can’t come. Cook up plenty of stuff and we can play tricks—they won’t need much entertaining. How would that suit you, Chicken Little?”

Jane had just strayed in to join the family group and was listening with interest.

“I think it would be bully.”

“Jane, where did you pick up such a coarse expression? Father, that’s just what I complain of. How am I to teach my daughter to be a gentle woman, when she is constantly hearing vulgar language?”

“Chicken Little is old enough to know better than to use such words, but she probably got that from Ernest or Sherm, if the truth were known.” Frank laughed.

Chicken Little looked injured.

“Why, bully isn’t a by-word—or strong language—and Ernest said it a lot. You never said anything to him about it’s being vulgar.”

“My dear daughter, can I never make you understand that little ladies may not do everything their brothers do?”

“I don’t care, Mother, I’m sick of hearing about ladies, and if bully is so vulgar, I don’t see why it isn’t vulgar when a boy says it. You expect Ernest to be a gentleman, don’t you, just as much as you do me to be a lady?”

“Come, Chicken Little, don’t speak to your mother that way,” Dr. Morton reproved her.

Mrs. Morton was more severe.

“You may go to your room and remain until you can address your mother respectfully, my daughter.”

Frank’s plan was carried out. There were no formal invitations issued. Frank and Dr. Morton and Jim Bart spoke to every neighbor they met for the next few days, inviting them to come to an April Fool frolic at seven

on the evening of April first, and asking them to pass the invitation along to the other residents of Big John. Chicken Little and Sherm rode over to give Captain Clarke a special invitation, fearing he might not have become sufficiently used to Creek ways to come on the more general bidding.

The Captain was charmed and begged leave to send Wing over to help that evening. Wing delighted in every new experience he was having on the Creek. He grinned joyously at the prospect.

The entire Morton family entered into the preparations for this novel party with enthusiasm. Even Jilly and Huz and Buz caught the excitement of something unusual going on, and hung round, and got under everybody's feet, more successfully than usual. Jilly had the privilege of scraping icing bowls while Huz and Buz looked enviously on. They³⁴⁴ licked their sticky chops ecstatically when Jilly turned the bowl over to them after she had done her best with the big tin spoon. Her mother reproached her for letting the pups eat out of one of the family dishes, but Jilly couldn't see why her mother was so particular.

Mrs. Morton and Annie and Marian baked cakes and doughnuts and cookies and mince pies and custard pies, and roasted turkeys and whole hams, until pantry and cellar and spring house were all overflowing. It would be a never-ending reproach, if there should not be an abundance for all who might come, and no one could even guess how many would come.

"It looks like enough for a regiment," said Mrs. Morton wearily, dropping into a rocking chair on the afternoon of the thirty-first day of March.

"Yes, but country men do have such astonishing appetites. I am sure it would feed all Centerville for twenty-four hours. Of course, some of the things are not eatable," Marian replied.

They had carried out the April Fool idea as much as possible without spoiling the supper. Six nice brown doughnuts had wads of cotton concealed in their tempting rings. These were to be mixed with the good ones. Pickles just out of the brine, were to be put in the same dish with deliciously perfect ones. There was to be just enough of the false to keep³⁴⁵ the guests on the alert and make fun.

While they were sitting there resting, Frank and Dr. Morton came in from a trip to town. Frank tossed a package into Marian's lap with a

laugh.

“These ought to do the work for somebody. I’d like to fool old Jake Schmidt. It would be worth ten dollars to see his face—he is such a screw about driving a bargain.”

Marian untied the string and opened the parcel, revealing a handful of the most luscious-looking little cucumber pickles that ever lured the unwary.

“They certainly look all right,” said Marian, “what’s the matter with them—salt?”

“Feel them.”

Marian picked one up gingerly as if she were afraid it might prick her or explode in her hand. Then she threw back her head and laughed merrily.

“Frank, they are just perfect. I never should have guessed it. You can fetch Jake all right with one of these. Let me know when you do, I’d like to be round to see the fun.”

“Aren’t you afraid you will hurt somebody’s feelings with all these pranks? They don’t seem quite dignified some way for grown up people.”

“That’s just why we want to have them, Mother. The Creek thinks the Morton family is entirely too grown up and stiff. They’ll be good-natured, never fear.”^{B46}

That evening Chicken Little and Sherm put their heads together.

“We just must find some way to fool Frank—I sha’n’t be happy if we don’t.” Chicken Little bit her lips and studied. “Can’t you think of something, Sherm?”

“Not right off the bat, but if we keep our eyes open, we’ll find a way. It would be jolly if we could do it before the crowd. They would so love to see Frank have to take his own medicine. Say, this party is going to be a Jim dandy!”

It had been decided to have the gathering at the cottage, as the big sitting room and the bedroom adjoining would hold more people than Mrs. Morton’s parlor, sitting room, and dining-room all three. Further, the parlor, being separated from the other rooms by a short hallway, was of use only for some little group who wished to be by themselves. Sherm and Chicken Little were busy all day trimming up the pictures and the windows with evergreen and bitter sweet berries, mixed with trailers from the Japanese honeysuckle, which still showed green underneath where it

had escaped the hardest freezes. Marian flitted in occasionally with suggestions, but the two did most of the work alone. Chicken Little began by giving Sherm precise directions as to how he was to arrange each branch and spray, but, presently, he began to try little effects of his own so much more charming than hers, that she called Marian in to see.

“You certainly have a knack for decoration, Sherm. I never dreamed you were artistic. Why didn’t you tell us? That spray against the curtain is exquisite. Have you ever taken drawing lessons?” Marian was both surprised and interested to discover this unexpected talent in the self-contained lad.

“No, I have never taken real drawing—I used to copy little geometrical designs at school along with the rest.”

“Well, you surely ought to have lessons. I shouldn’t wonder if you had the making of an artist in you.” Marian hurried back to her custards.

Chicken Little went on tying evergreen into ropes, but Marian had put several new ideas into her head.

“Do you want to be an artist, Sherm?”

“No, I want to be an architect.”

“You never said anything about it before.”

“What’s the use of talking? Doesn’t look as if I would ever get the education to be one now.”

“Why, you can’t tell. Even if your father can’t send you, maybe you could work your own way—Mr. Clay has.” Chicken Little looked troubled; Sherm’s tone revealed a yearning she had not suspected.

“Yes, I could work my way if I had the chance. I guess Father is never going to be well again and—” He paused for a moment as if it were hard to go on. “Even if he lives, I may have to keep at work to support the family. Mother never says anything, and Father never told me much about his business—I don’t know how much we have, but I’m afraid there isn’t a great deal left.”

There was a hopeless ring in his voice that hurt Chicken Little. She wanted to double up her fist and attack somebody or something in Sherm’s behalf.

“I think they—your mother ought to tell you.”

“Oh, Mother doesn’t realize I am most grown—she—she doesn’t think I amount to much I guess.” The boy had been brooding; his manhood

affronted because he had not been permitted to share in the family councils.

“Don’t feel that way—she doesn’t mean to leave you out, Sherm. You know it’s awfully hard to write things and you have been away most a year.”

“That’s just it. I’ve been away most a year, and Mother doesn’t even hint at my coming back!”

“But Sherm, she’s so worried all the time about your father.”

“All the same, I bet your mother wouldn’t forget about Ernest if your father was ill. I am the only boy in the family and I know I could help, if they’d only trust me. It’s being left out that hurts, Chicken Little. But forget everything I’ve said. I didn’t mean to blab this way. I s’pose Mother’s right—I can’t even keep my own affairs to myself.” Sherm shut his lips together tightly.

Jane tactfully changed the subject.

“I suppose you’d have to know a lot to be an architect.”

“Yes, right smart—I’d need a college education, and then I’d like to go to Paris and study at the Beaux Arts.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, it’s a school for architects and artists. I don’t know very much about it myself. The New York architect who designed the new court house at home told me I ought to go there, if I ever wanted to be a real honest to goodness architect. I had a talk with him one day. He said if I ever got ready to go, to write to him, and he would give me some letters to people in Paris.”

“My, wouldn’t that be grand to study in Paris? I most wish I was a boy—they can do such wonderful things.”

The neighborhood gatherings began early. By half-past seven, hitching posts and trees and fence were all in use for the teams. Frank was pleased.

“If there is anything in numbers, this party is going to be a success. Sure you have plenty to eat?”

Marian groaned. “Frank, I am dead sure we have all the food we can possibly serve between now and midnight. I don’t see how we are ever to manage.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll impress about a dozen of the young folks as waiters—they will like nothing better. The boys each have one more pair of hands than they know what to do with. Look at the Raddon boys over by the fireplace. They have put their hands in their pockets, and taken them out, and dropped them by their sides, and picked up every bit of bric-a-brac on the mantel, and smoothed back their hair, and Heaven knows what else, during the last ten minutes. Hands are an awful responsibility! It will be a Godsend to them to give them something to do.”

Chicken Little came out, after helping with wraps and seating guests, in a gale of merriment.

“Oh, Marian, do take a peep at Mrs. Brown. She has a purple skirt and a blue polonaise and a red bow on her hair, and she’s got her hair banded in front and pulled back tight as can be behind.”

“Hush, Jane, they’re our guests.”

“I know, and I didn’t mean to be making fun—but Marian, she’s a sight! And Jake Schmidt’s wife and sister have the loveliest hand embroidered caps and aprons, with exquisite lace, that they brought from the old country, and some of the other women are sort of turning up their noses at them. I wish you’d go and say something extra nice to them.”

Marian found her way to where Christine and Johanna Schmidt were shrinking into a corner, painfully aware that their festal dress was very different from their neighbors’. Marian asked after the children and said one or two pleasant things to make them feel at home, then, raising her voice a trifle so that the whole room might hear, she lifted a corner of Johanna’s apron, exclaiming: “Where did you get this exquisite apron? I don’t believe I have ever seen such a beautiful one. May I look at the lace?”

Johanna colored with pleasure. She forgot her shyness and explained eagerly. Marian did not leave her until she had made every woman in that part of the room admire both hers and Christine’s old country handiwork, and they had promised to show her how to make the lace. There was no more smiling at their unusual dress. Others followed Marian’s example in asking to be taught the beautiful craft. Old Jake himself, who had never before considered his women folk as amounting to much, was so gratified by the attention they were receiving, that he was more offensive than usual.

“Never mind,” said Frank, “I’ll fix Jake.”

The early part of the evening passed in visiting and games. Supper was served at ten. There was a stir when the refreshments appeared. Word had gone about that there was to be some hoaxing in connection with the supper and everybody was firmly resolved not to be fooled. Marian allayed suspicion by starting them off with delicious coffee and rolls and cold ham and turkey. Having tasted these gingerly, and found them delicious, both young and old grew less wary. Chicken Little came in demurely with a great dish of pickles. The Creek loved pickles. It helped itself plentifully. Captain Clarke got the first taste of brine, but after one surprised grimace, he went on eating it heroically, while he watched the others. Old Jake promptly fixed his eye on a nice firm-looking green one. He lifted the fork awkwardly and attempted to take the pickle. The pickle slid from under the fork as if it had been greased. Jake was terribly afraid of being a laughing stock; he glanced sily around to see if any one had noticed. Frank was watching from the opposite side of the room, but Jake did not see him. He grasped the fork firmly in his great fist and speared the pickle as if he had been harpooning a fish. The pickle resented such violence. It shot out of the dish and half way across the room with old Jake, the fork still clenched firmly, gazing stupidly after it.

“April Fool, Jake!” called one of the men who saw the joke. Some one picked up the pickle and passed it from hand to hand. After that, people avoided the wooden pickles, but several took liberal bites of brine-steeped ones.

The fun was well under way by this time. So many people had been victimized that many refused the dainties they coveted, for fear of being deceived, only to find their next neighbor enjoying them. The guests began to try to catch each other, and the young men would get Marian to point out the traps. But, so far, Frank had escaped, though Sherm and Chicken Little had been plotting all day. They took Captain Clarke into their confidence, but even he failed, until he had the happy thought of getting Wing to help. Wing had been working busily in the kitchen assisting Annie.

Frank had steadily refused cotton wool doughnuts and sanded pie and every doubtful delicacy, but he was extremely fond of cup custard. When Wing approached him, urging that he be served now, Frank hesitated a moment, then said: “Just bring me a custard, Wing. And Wing, don’t let anybody meddle with it.”

Wing came grinning to the conspirators.

“Oh, dear,” said Chicken Little, “I think the custards are all right.”

Marian overheard. “Trust me, Chicken Little, I have one very special one for Frank—I didn’t intend to have him crowing.”

Wing bore in a most tempting custard. Frank inspected it carefully to make sure it had not been tampered with. In so doing he attracted the attention of those round him. He took a generous spoonful and made a hasty dive for the kitchen amid lively applause from the whole room.

“What was in it?” The Captain was still shaking.

“Mustard—Marian made it bad enough so he couldn’t hide it!” Chicken Little was dancing up and down in glee.

“Wing, you rascal, I’d like to choke you.” Frank was still sputtering.

Wing assumed a mournful expression. “Me velly sorry—nobody touch, samee you say.”

It was the second of April before the last rattle of wheels died away down the lane.

“Well, Mother, I think it paid for the trouble,” said Dr. Morton, as they were starting homeward, his arms laden with chairs.

“Yes, I guess, perhaps, I have been inclined to stand too much aloof. That little Mrs. Anderson is really a cultured woman. She comes from Maine. I asked her to come and spend the day Tuesday.”

Marian’s comment was brief.

“Frank, I am dead, but I’m glad we did it.”

“So am I—put out the light.” Frank was already half asleep.



CHAPTER XIX
SHERM HEARS BAD NEWS

SHERM HEARS BAD NEWS

“Sherm, don’t you just love this room?” Chicken Little gazed about Captain Clarke’s big library with a real affection. “I don’t know why it is, but this room makes me feel the same way a sunset, or the prairie when it’s all in bloom, does. I can’t just tell you, but it makes me so satisfied with everything ... as if the world was so beautiful it couldn’t possibly be very bad.”

“I know—it’s the harmony, like in music. The colors all seem to go together ... everything seems to belong. I like that, too, but it doesn’t mean just that, to me. I see the Captain every time I step in here. It’s a part of him—almost as if he had worked his own bigness and the kind of things he loves, into furniture and books and—fixings.”

“Yes, there’s so much room to breathe here—I s’pose being at sea so much, he had to have that. And he picked up most of these things on his voyages—he must have wanted them pretty bad or he wouldn’t have carried them half around the world with him.”

The young people had come over to the Captain’s for supper. School had closed the day before, and Chicken Little was the proud possessor of an elaborate autograph album, won as a spelling prize. Captain Clarke had attended the closing exercises at her request. He had invited them over to celebrate, this evening. He declared he had never learned to spell himself and he wanted the honor of entertaining some one who knew how.

Chicken Little had brought the album along for the Captain’s signature. “And write something, too, won’t you? Something specially for me,” she had begged winningly.

“Have they all written something—specially for you, Chicken Little? I should like to read them.”

“I haven’t asked very many people yet, just Mr. Clay and Grant Stowe and Mamie Jenkins’ little sister—Mamie’s in town you know. I asked Sherm, but he hasn’t thought up anything.”

The Captain glanced at Sherm and smiled whimsically. “Now, if I were as young as Sherm, I shouldn’t have to think up things—the trouble would

be to restrain my eloquence.”

Sherm grinned and looked uncomfortable.

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The Captain was merciful; he changed the subject.

“Isn’t the middle of May a little early to close school?”

“No, it is the usual time. You see the older children have to help at home as soon as the weather gets warm.”

“Of course. What are you going to do this summer?”

“Wish Ernest was home,” Jane answered pertly, but there was a wistful look in her eyes.

Before the Captain could reply, Wing came to the door to announce a man to see him. The Captain was gone some time. When he returned, he explained that it was a buyer from Kansas City after his corn, and he should have to leave them to entertain themselves for a while.

“I’ll tell you what you can do,” he paused in the doorway as the idea occurred to him. “You two may rummage in the drawers of the cabinet. Take out anything you like the looks of. I think you will find a lot of interesting stuff there. Make yourselves at home.”

They lingered, discussing the room for several minutes after his departure, then Jane went over to the cabinet.

“Come on—there are heaps of wonderful things here. He showed me some of them the day I ran off and came to see him on my own hook. That’s a year ago! My, I feel as if it were a dozen—it seems as if I were just a little girl then.”

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“And now?” Sherm adored to set Jane off.

“None of your sarcasm, Mr. Dart.” Then soberly: “Truly, Sherm, I know I’m a lot older. Things seem so different to me.”

“I know you are, too, Lady Jane. I was only teasing you.”

They had a beautiful half hour among the Captain’s treasures. Sherm gloated especially over the prints—their wonderful composition and soft color.

“Say, the Japs know a thing or two, don’t they? That wouldn’t be my idea of what to put into a picture, but it’s awfully satisfying.” He held the print off and closed one eye to see the outlines more vividly.

“Sherm, you surely were intended for an artist.” Chicken Little had gone on to the drawer below. “Oh, Sherm, I believe this is the drawer the Captain didn’t show me before. Do you suppose he wants us to go through it?”

“He said all of them. What’s in it?”

“Oh, sashes and scarfs and things. I thought maybe they used to belong to his wife.”

Sherm lifted a Roman scarf of crimson and yellow and rich blue, and examined it admiringly. “It doesn’t look as if this had ever been worn. I guess he wouldn’t have told us to go ahead if there had been anything here he didn’t want us to find. Say, Chicken Little, this would look dandy on you. Here, I’m going to fix you up for Captain Clarke to see.”

Sherm shook out the glowing silken folds and proceeded to wreath the scarf around Chicken Little’s head, turban fashion. Her brown eyes glowed and the color in her cheeks grew deeper, as she met the admiration in Sherm’s eyes. He was staring at her, enchanted at the result of his efforts. Jane moved restlessly.

“Hold still there, can’t you? I want to try it another way. Didn’t I see one of those sleeveless jacket affairs in there?”

Jane rummaged and brought to light a crimson silk Turkish jacket embroidered in gold thread. She noticed that it, too, seemed perfectly fresh.

“Sherm, I do wonder how Captain Clarke happened to buy all these woman’s things. Do you suppose he bought them for his wife and she was dead when he got home with them?”

“I wonder. Perhaps we oughtn’t to be handling them. See all those queer beads, and there’s a bracelet! Isn’t it a beauty? See, it is like silver lace. I guess those blue stones must be turquoises.”

“Isn’t it dainty? That must be the filigree work we read about.”

Sherm was staring thoughtfully at the contents of the drawer. “One thing sure,” he muttered, “he must have thought a heap of her.”

Chicken Little had continued exploring. “Here’s a photograph and two locks of hair in a little frame. Oh, Sherm, it’s her! Yes, it must be, this is the same baby. I wonder why he doesn’t have this on his bureau, too.”

Sherm took the picture and stared at it so long that Jane grew impatient.

“What is it, Sherm? What’s the matter?”

Sherm started, passing his hand over his forehead and eyes as if he were dazed.

“Funny, the face seems sort of familiar. I had such a queer feeling about it for a minute.”

“I know why it looks familiar—there’s a tiny bit of resemblance to you—not as much as in the pictures of the baby. I suppose the baby got it from the mother. Still, I think it looks like Captain Clarke, too, don’t you?”

“Let’s put these things back, Chicken Little. Poor little lady, I wonder what happened to her.” Sherm laid the picture gently back in the bottom of the drawer and helped Jane fold and lay away the other things. They had both forgotten the Roman sash which still adorned her dark hair.

Captain Clarke, coming in soon after, started when he saw her and glanced at the cabinet.

“Dressing up, Chicken Little? That gew gaw was evidently intended by Providence for you. Won’t you accept it as a present to keep that autograph album company?”³⁶¹

Chicken Little put her hand to her head in dismay. Captain Clarke must have thought she wanted it. She stammered awkwardly:

“Oh, Captain Clarke—I—couldn’t take it. I oughtn’t to have put it on.”

Sherm calmly took the matter out of her hands.

“She didn’t put it on, Captain Clarke. I’m the guilty party. I thought it would be so becoming to Chicken Little—her dark hair and eyes—you know. I didn’t realize till we came across the picture that it belonged to your wife—and—you might not like to have us handle it.”

“It was never Mrs. Clarke’s,” the Captain said evenly. “I bought it for her, but she”—he hesitated an instant—“she—died before my return. I told you to rummage the drawers, and that scarf is entirely too becoming to Chicken Little’s bright eyes to be wasted in a drawer any longer. You will be doing me a favor, my dear.

“You seem to have an eye for color, Sherm. Juanita loved color, too, that is why I picked up so many gay things for her.” Captain Clarke seemed to have formed a sudden resolution. He plunged his hand down among the rustling silks and brought up the picture. His hand trembled a little as he handed it to Chicken Little. “I have never shown you her picture before. She had eyes something like yours.”³⁶²

Chicken Little took the picture and tried to look as if nothing had happened. She described the scene to Marian afterwards. “O Marian, I felt as if I were standing in a story book. The Captain’s face was as white, but he went on talking just as if I knew all about his wife, and—I do wonder! I felt so sorry for him. Sherm said he wanted to kick himself for being so thoughtless.”

“Don’t worry about it, Jane, and don’t be trying to make a mystery out of what was merely a big sorrow. It must have been an awful blow to him to come home and find wife and baby both dead, but it happened years ago. I expect it did him good to talk to you and Sherm about it.”

Chicken Little forgot about it after a few days, except when she went to the box where she kept the scarf. She always thought of the picture of the young mother and baby whenever she saw it.

“I don’t believe I ever can wear it,” she told Sherm.

“Oh, yes, you will, some of these days; the Captain would be hurt if you didn’t.”

Sherm hadn’t heard from his mother for over a week when a neighbor came one evening and handed Dr. Morton a yellow envelope. “No bad news, I hope,” he said.

It was addressed to Dr. Morton and read: “My husband died this morning. Break news to Sherm—he must await letter.”

Sherm, too, was older than he had been a year before. He was coming up the lane whistling, swinging his supple young body along at a good pace, as if he enjoyed being alive. Dr. Morton watched him, dreading to have to tell him the bad news and wondering how he would take it. “It’s a pity,” he thought, “Sherm’s a fine manly fellow and ought to have his education and a chance at life, and I am afraid this means more than losing his father.”

He waited until the boy came up to him. He was still holding the telegram in his hand, but Sherm did not notice it until he spoke.

Dr. Morton’s voice was very kind. “My boy, I am—afraid—” He got no farther. Sherm saw the telegram and understood. “Father?” he questioned. Dr. Morton nodded.

Sherm stood motionless, as if he were trying to realize that the blow he had so long dreaded, had fallen. Presently he looked up at the Doctor.

“There isn’t any train before to-morrow, is there?”

“No, Sherm, and I don’t think your mother expects—here, read the message.”

Sherm’s hand shook. He read the meager words through twice, then crushed the paper in his fist.

“I am going home to-morrow,” he said doggedly. “I’ve got enough saved up for the railroad fare. He was my father—I haven’t seen him for a

year. They might have told me! I am not a child any longer!”

Dr. Morton laid his hand on his shoulder. “Don’t, Sherm—don’t add bitterness to grief. Your mother may not have known in time. Death often comes suddenly at the last in such cases. And, my boy, I would think twice before setting out rashly. Your mother asks you to wait for her letter—she must have some good reason. The message was sent this morning. There will probably be a letter to-morrow.”

“I don’t care whether there’s a letter or not, I’m going.” There was a hard look on the boy’s face.

Chicken Little came running up, with Jilly panting alongside. “My, we had a good race, didn’t we, Jilly Dilly? Why—what’s—” She stopped short at sight of their grave faces.

Dr. Morton told her.

She stood a moment awestruck; Chicken Little had never had death come so near her before. Then she turned to Sherm, her face so full of tender pity that his face softened a trifle.

“Don’t worry about me, Chicken Little,” he said gruffly, “I am all right. If you’ll help me knock my things together after a while, I’ll be grateful. I guess I’ll take a—walk—now.” His voice broke a little at the last.

He did not wait for an answer, but walked hurriedly away. Jane gazed after him, undecided whether to follow or not. Dr. Morton divined her thought. “I wouldn’t, dear. Let him have it out alone first—you can comfort him later on. I want you to help me persuade him not to rush off before he receives his mother’s letter. I must say I don’t blame Sherm for resenting his mother’s attitude. I think she is making a big mistake.”

Dusk came and the darkness closed round while Chicken Little strained her eyes in vain for Sherm. It was almost ten before he came back. She was standing at the gate watching for him. The rest of the family had gone to bed. “Chicken Little can comfort him better than any of us,” Dr. Morton had told his wife. “He will be glad not to have to face any of the rest of the family to-night.”

“You shouldn’t have stayed up, Chicken Little,” Sherm called, as soon as he caught sight of her. “I forgot I asked you to help me—I’d have come home sooner if I’d remembered. The duds can wait till morning—I can get up early.” He spoke quietly.

“Do you think you ought to go, Sherm?”

Sherm's eyes smouldered. Jane could not see him very distinctly, but she could fairly feel his determination. 366

"It's no use talking, I'm going!"

They went up the walk in silence. The lilacs and the white syringia in the borders were in bloom. She hoped Sherm did not notice the heavy fragrance—it was so like a funeral. He did not say anything till they got to the foot of the stairs.

"Thank you, Jane, for—for waiting." His voice broke pitifully.

When Dr. Morton discovered the next morning that Sherm was not to be moved from his purpose, he decided to go into town early and see if by any chance there might be another telegram or a letter. Letters from the east sometimes came down by a branch line from the north. There was nothing, and he finally resolved to telegraph Mrs. Dart as to Sherm's state of mind. Sherm was to come later in the day with Frank in time to catch the evening train, which was the only one that made close connections at Kansas City. It was late afternoon before he received a reply. The message was emphatic. "Sherm *must* await letter."

"Mrs. Dart evidently knows her own mind," thought the Doctor. He drove a little way out of town and waited for Frank and Sherm. Chicken Little was with them. He gave the boy this second message, explaining what he had done. Sherm read it over and over, as if he hoped in some way to find a reason for his mother's decision lurking between the lines. 367

At length he said stolidly: "I'll wait till to-morrow. Perhaps the letter will come to-night."

They talked it over and Sherm and Chicken Little went on to town with the light buggy to wait for the mail, while Dr. Morton and Frank drove home.

There was a handful of letters in the box. Sherm took them out hastily.

"I guess this is it," he said, stuffing one into his pocket. "And here's three for you."

"Three? Whoever from?" Jane held out her hand. "Ernest and Katy—and here's another with an Annapolis postmark. Who do you suppose?"

Sherm glanced over her shoulder. "That's Carol Brown's handwriting."

"Carol?—writing to me? How funny!"

They hurried out to the team.

"Let me drive while you read your letter, Sherm."

Sherm shook his head. "Read yours first—this will keep."

“The idea—I wouldn’t be so piggy selfish.”

“Please, Jane, I’d rather get out of town before I tackle it.”

“Sherm, I wish I could—” She didn’t need to finish. Sherm understood.

“Read Carol’s first,” he said.

She read it with a beaming face. Sherm was looking at her without seeing her. She started to tell him the contents of the letter, then suddenly stopped. She couldn’t rejoice over being asked to a hop when Sherm was in such trouble. Laying the letter in her lap, she took up Ernest’s. Sherm noticed the movement and, remembering, asked her what Carol had to say.

She handed him the letter. He read it through absently. The houses were thinning along the road. The prairie stretched ahead of them in solitary sweeps of tender green, dappled with flowers. Jane reached for the reins.

“Read your letter, Sherm.”

He obeyed in silence. Chicken Little kept her eyes on the road ahead. A sharp exclamation from Sherm startled her:

“God, it can’t be true!”

Sherm swearing? She looked at him in amazement. The boy was not swearing; he had cried out in utter agony. He dropped the letter on the floor of the buggy and buried his face in his hands.

“Sherm, Sherm, what is it?” Chicken Little was frightened.

He did not answer. He did not seem to have noticed that she had spoken. She reached over and touched him. “Sherm! Sherm!” He shook off her hand impatiently.

Chicken Little hesitated a moment, then flicked the horses into a swift trot. She must get him home. Perhaps he was going to be ill. The boy did not move or look up for miles. When the horses splashed through the ford at Elm Creek, he roused himself and looked dully at Jane.

“Sherm, please tell me. It will make it easier for you to tell somebody, and I’m worried to death.”

He stooped and picked up the letter. Smoothing it out, he thrust it into her hand. “Read it.” He took the reins.

Chicken Little ran over the letter hurriedly. It bore a date some days previous.

“MY DEAR BOY:

“Dr. Jones has just told me it can be only a question of days now. I have been studying whether to send for you or not. Father settled the question for me. He said he wanted sorrowfully to see you, but in view of the things that must be told you, it would be too painful an ordeal for all of us. He said to tell you you were very precious to him—as precious as if you had really been his own son.”

Chicken Little gave a little cry. “Sherm, what does she mean?”

“Read it all.”

“For, Sherm, you are not our own. If Father could have lived, we never intended you to know this—at least not until you were a man and had made a place for yourself. But Father’s illness is leaving us penniless. Sue’s husband has offered Grace and myself a home with them, but he thinks you must be told the truth—that it is only fair to you. We took you when you were about two and a half years old under very peculiar circumstances. It was while we were still living in New York, and Sue was a tot of five. We were going up to my father’s in Albany and were a little late. Father told the hackman to drive fast; he’d give him an extra dollar if he’d catch the train. The man had been drinking and drove recklessly. He was just dashing round the corner to the station—the train was already whistling—when he knocked down, and ran over, a woman with a child in her arms. The child was pitched to one side and escaped with a few bruises. The woman never regained consciousness. You have probably guessed that you were that child. We could never find out who she was, though we advertised for several weeks. We decided to bring you up with Sue, and when we moved to Centerville, soon after, no one knew you were not our own child. We had you baptized Sherman after the great general who had just won his way to notice then. I have saved the clothing you wore, and a brooch and wedding ring of your mother’s. I will send them to you, together with a hundred dollars, which is all I can give you to start you on your way.” The remainder of the letter was filled with her grief over parting with her husband, and her separation from Sherm himself.

Chicken Little swallowed hard—something seemed to be gripping her by the throat.

“And your father isn’t your father, Sherm?—or your mother or Sue or Grace?” The tragic extent of what had happened was dawning slowly upon Jane.

Sherm’s lips trembled.

“No, I—haven’t any father—I’ve never had a father!... I haven’t got anybody.... I haven’t even got a name that belongs to me!” Sherm’s voice grew shriller and shriller till it broke with a dry sob.

Chicken Little slipped her hand into his and the boy clung to it spasmodically, as if that slim, brown hand were all he had in the world to cling to. The tears were raining down Jane’s cheeks, but Sherm’s eyes were dry and burning. The team trotted along evenly. They turned mechanically into the stable yard when they reached the ranch. It was growing dusk.

Sherm helped her out, saying: “Will you please tell them, Chicken Little? I won’t come in just yet.”

She ran to the house and poured out her tale. Her father hurried to the stable. Sherm was not there. Jim Bart, who was milking in the corral near by, said he had saddled Caliph and gone off down the lane. Dr. Morton talked it over with Frank and they decided that Sherm had done the wisest thing possible in going for a gallop.

“He doesn’t mean to do anything rash or he wouldn’t have taken Ernest’s horse,” Frank declared.

But as hour after hour went by, the family grew more and more anxious. At eleven o’clock, Frank saddled Calico and tried to find him. He returned some time later in despair.

“You might as well try to look for a needle in a haystack. Poor lad, I have faith he will ride the worst of it off and Caliph is a pretty steady little beast now. He’ll bring him home.”

A few moments after his return, a messenger came from Captain Clarke, saying that he had been wakened by Caliph neighing at the gate and had gone out to find Sherm dazed and apparently completely exhausted. He had got him to bed where he was sleeping heavily. Captain Clarke was afraid they must be worried. He would care for him till morning, but he would be glad to have some inkling of what had happened so that he might know what to say to the boy when he waked.

Dr. Morton got out his medicine case and went back with the man.



CHAPTER XX
THE CAPTAIN FINDS HIS OWN

THE CAPTAIN FINDS HIS OWN

Chicken Little climbed the hill of sleep painfully that night, and slept late the following morning in consequence. While she was eating breakfast, Frank came in with two tear-stained, dusty letters, which he had found in the bottom of the buggy.

“Is this the way you treat your correspondence, Sis?”

“The idea—it’s Ernest’s and Katy’s letters and I never read them. Sherm’s trouble drove them clear out of my mind.”

“Evidently, one is torn part way open, and the other hasn’t been touched.”

“Hurry up and tell us what Ernest has to say. I was wondering why he hadn’t written.” Mrs. Morton paused expectantly.

“He says a lot of things,” replied Jane, skimming rapidly through the letter. “He says they are going to start on their summer cruise next week and the boys are tickled to death to go, though they’re probably just going to cruise around to Navy yards and see dry docks and improving things. He says that it’s rumored that Superintendent Balch is going away and Old Rodgers is coming back as superintendent. And this year’s class graduated three Japs—the Japanese government sent them over. He gives the names, but I can’t pronounce them. One is I-n-o-u-y-e.”

“Skip the Japs and give us the rest.” Frank was waiting to hear the news.

“That’s about all that would interest you.”

“My dear, anything concerning Ernest interests me,” protested her mother.

“But it isn’t about Ernest; it’s about Carol Brown.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Oh, nothing much—he just took a fancy to my picture and asked Ernest a lot of questions.” Chicken Little folded the letter and hastily slipped it back into the envelope, devoutly hoping her mother wouldn’t demand to see it. She tore open Katy’s. Before she had read two lines she gave a little cry of delight.

“Oh, Mother, do you think I could? Oh, wouldn’t it be just too wonderful? Oh Mother, you must say Yes!” 375

“Jane, what are you talking about? Calm yourself and tell me.” Mrs. Morton looked up over her spectacles severely.

“Why, she says her mother wants me to come and live with them next year and go to the High School and that Alice and Dick want me to come there. And, perhaps, I could stay part of the time at one house and part at the other, and for me to tell you and let you be thinking about it, and Alice and Mrs. Halford are both going to write you all about it, and—oh, Mother, wouldn’t it be too wonderful?”

Mrs. Morton looked both surprised and worried. “It is certainly most kind of them all, but I shall have to think the matter over.”

“Well,” said Frank, “that doesn’t have to be settled to-day. Jane, Marian wishes to know if you want to go over to the Captain’s with her to see Sherm. She is going to start in a few minutes.”

Chicken Little jumped to her feet. “I’ll be ready in a jiffy!”

Sherm had still not wakened when they arrived. He had roused once toward morning; Captain Clarke had spoken to him, telling him where he was, then he had dropped quietly off to sleep again.

Captain Clarke asked Chicken Little a good many questions.

“I should like to see that letter,” he said. 376

“It’s in his coat pocket. I tucked it in—I was afraid he’d lose it.”

Dr. Morton, who was still there, sat for several minutes in a brown study.

“I think,” he said presently, “that under the circumstances we should be justified in reading it without waiting for Sherm’s permission.” He looked at Captain Clarke.

The latter nodded assent.

Both read it and discussed it briefly. Still Sherm did not waken.

“I believe I’ll drive over to Jake Schmidt’s while I am waiting—I have an errand with him. Marian, don’t you want to ride over with me?”

“Captain Clarke,” said Jane rather timidly after they had gone, “would you mind showing me that picture of your baby again?”

Captain Clarke rose and brought the photograph. Chicken Little studied it carefully, then glanced up at the Captain. Sherm certainly was like the picture—as much like it as a boy who was almost a man grown could be. Should she dare to ask him? Chicken Little felt herself growing

hot and cold by turns. Her heart was beating so she thought the Captain must surely hear it. One minute she was sure she didn't dare, the next, she remembered Sherm's broken-hearted words about not belonging to anybody, and she was sure she could screw her courage up—in just a minute. Captain Clarke helped her out. He had been observing her restless movements for several minutes and was wondering if she could possibly have guessed what was in his own mind.

“Out with it, little woman, what's troubling you?”

Chicken Little got up from her seat and went and stood close beside him. “I want to say something to you awfully, only I am afraid you—won't like it,” she said earnestly.

“My dear child, don't be afraid of me.”

Chicken Little summoned up her resolution.

“I wanted to ask—to ask you, if you wouldn't adopt Sherm. You see he looks like your little boy would have looked, and he hasn't got anybody or any name, and he isn't going to want to live hardly, I am afraid. And I thought... You don't know how fine Sherm is. He's so honorable and kind—so—so you can trust him. I just know you'd be proud of him after a while.”

Chicken Little was pleading with eyes and voice and trembling hands. The Captain gazed at her a moment in astonishment, then he tenderly drew her toward him.

“Chicken Little, I doubt if Sherm would agree to that. But if he is willing, I should be proud and happy to call him my son. But don't get your hopes up—I fear Sherm is too proud to let us find any such easy solution of his troubles. But we'll find a way to put him on his feet, you and I—we'll find a way, if it takes every cent I have!”

“I think perhaps the first thing to do, Chicken Little,” he continued after some pondering, “is to try to find out something about Sherman's real parentage. It hardly seems possible that a comfortably dressed woman could have disappeared with her child without making some stir. I am in hopes, by getting somebody to search through the files of two or three of the leading New York newspapers immediately following the day of the accident, we might secure a clue. I shall write to Mrs. Dart at once for particulars, and then send to a man I know and pay him to make a thorough investigation.”

They were so interested discussing what could be done, that Sherm entered the room before they knew he was awake. The boy was calm, but looked years older, and very white and worn. Captain Clarke greeted him cheerfully.

“I hope you rested. Jane tells me you had a staggering day yesterday. Chicken Little, would you mind telling Wing to serve Sherm’s breakfast?”

As soon as she disappeared, he gripped the boy’s hand, saying confidently, “I don’t wish to talk about your trouble just now and I have no words to comfort you for your loss, lad, but I want to tell you not to ³⁷⁹begin to worry yet about your identity. I believe we shall find a way to get track of your people and that you will find you have an honorable name, and, possibly, a living father to make up a little for the kind foster-father you have lost.”

“I don’t see how we could—after all these years.”

“Will you leave the matter to me for a few days? And Sherm, make an effort to eat something for Chicken Little’s sake—she is worrying her heart out over your trouble. You have some good friends right here—don’t forget that. Dr. Morton watched by you all night. Brace up and be a man. I know you have it in you, Sherm.”

Letters came to Sherm in a short time from Sue Dart, from Dick and Alice Harding, and from Mrs. Halford, who painstakingly wrote him all the details of his supposed father’s last days. She evidently knew nothing of his not being the Dart’s own son. Sue’s letter seemed to comfort him a little. He did not show it to anyone, even to Chicken Little. He confided to her, however, that the folks were sending his things to him the next day. They had already broken up the home and were going back to Chicago with Sue the following week.

When the express package arrived, Sherm took it straight to Jane.

“You open it,” he said.

Chicken Little took his knife and cut the string and folded back the ³⁸⁰paper wrappings carefully. It seemed some way as if she were meeting Sherm’s mother.

The quaint little old-fashioned garments were musty and faded. A frock of blue merino braided in an elaborate pattern in black lay on top. There was a cape to match, and a little cloth cap. Beside these lay a funny pair of leather boots with red tops—almost like a man’s—only, oh, so tiny!

Chicken Little hardly knew whether to laugh or cry at these.

“Oh, Sherm, did you ever wear them? How you must have strutted! I can fairly see you.”

Sherm smiled and took them up tenderly. Did he, too, feel as if there were another presence haunting these relics of his childhood?

The tiny yellowed undergarments came next, all made by hand with minute even stitches. A pair of blue and white striped knitted stockings was folded with these, and last, at the bottom, a little pasteboard box appeared, containing a ring, a brooch, and a flat oval locket on a fine gold chain.

Sherm examined the ring first. Inside was inscribed William-Juanita. May 1860.

The brooch contained a lock of dark hair under a glass; the whole set in a twisted rim of gold. The locket held miniatures of a white-haired man and woman with foreign-looking faces. Both Sherm and Chicken Little²⁸¹ looked these over in silence. Presently Sherm sighed, then laid the trinkets all back in Chicken Little’s lap.

“I don’t see anything there that could help much,” he said hopelessly.

Chicken Little slowly folded up the little garments and laid them neatly back in their wrapping. Her brow was puckered into a frown.

“I am trying to think where I have heard that name Juanita—some place lately. I don’t remember ever to have known anybody by that name. It’s Spanish, isn’t it?”

“I guess so, but what you’re thinking of is the song, ‘Juanita.’”

“Oh, I expect it is. Sherm, do you mind if I take these things over and show them to Captain Clarke? He said he would like to see them when they came.”

“No, take them along. If you’ll wait till I get the feeding done, I’ll go with you.”

“All right, let’s take Calico and Caliph.”

Sherm lingered out on the veranda while Chicken Little displayed the contents of the package to the Captain. He examined each little article of clothing for some identifying mark.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything to help on those,” he said, disappointed. “Let’s have a look at the jewelry.”

Chicken Little unwrapped the ring from its layers of tissue paper, and²⁸² handed it to him. Captain Clarke took it, regarded the flat golden circle

intently for an instant, then turned it to read the inscription.

A pained cry broke from his lips. Chicken Little glanced hastily up to find him holding the ring in shaking fingers, staring off into vacancy. “Juanita!” he whispered, “Juanita!”

Chicken Little touched his hands in distress.

“Captain—Captain Clarke, what is it?”

He looked down at her with a start. “I—it is—Excuse me a moment, Chicken Little.”

He walked into his bedroom with the ring still in his hand and closed the door.

Chicken Little waited and waited, not knowing whether she ought to go and tell Sherm what she suspected. It seemed too strange to be possible. And if it were true, surely Captain Clarke would want to tell him himself. Perhaps she oughtn’t to be there. She rose softly and slipped out to Wing in the kitchen. After a time she heard Sherm get up from his seat on the veranda step and go into the library. Immediately after, the bedroom door opened and she heard the murmur of voices. She left a message with Wing and running quietly out to Calico, untied him, and rode home in the twilight.

“You needn’t ever say again, Ernest Morton,” she wrote to her brother the next evening, “that E. P. Roe’s stories are too goody-goody and fishy to be interesting. He can’t hold a candle to what’s happened to the Captain and Sherm. I have to go round pinching myself to believe it is really so. I am almost afraid I will wake up and find it isn’t, still. Do you remember the picture of the Captain’s little boy that looked like Sherm? Well, it was Sherm. I can hear you say: ‘What in the dickens?’ So, I’ll put you out of suspense right away. The Captain’s boy was not dead, only lost, and he is Sherm or Sherm is he, whichever way is right—I’m sure I don’t know. You see the Captain went off on a long voyage and got shipwrecked and was gone ages and ages. And Juanita’s father and mother were way off in California—they used to be Spanish. That’s what made them so foreign-looking in the locket picture. Well, nobody knows exactly what happened. When the Captain got back to New York and hunted up the boarding house where she had lived, they said she had left six months before to go to her parents in California. Captain Clarke wrote to California and found that her father was dead and her mother hadn’t

heard from Juanita for months, and didn't know anything about her coming home. Wasn't it dreadful? He paid detectives to hunt her up, but they never found the slightest clue. The Captain thought she'd gone off and left him on purpose—that's what made him such a woman-hater—and³⁸⁴ so sad all the time. You wouldn't know him now. He looks like Merry Christmas all the year round. You should see him gaze at Sherm. Marian says it makes her want to cry, and Mother says it is the most wonderful manifestation of Providence she has ever known. It seems to me Providence would show more sense not to muddle things up so in the first place. Sherm is as pleased as can be to find he really is somebody, and he's awfully fond of the Captain, but you see he'd got so used to loving the Darts as his own folks that he can't get unused to it all of a sudden. He choked all up when he tried to call Captain Clarke 'Father,' and the Captain told him not to. There's heaps more to tell, but Mother has been calling me for the past three minutes."

"No wonder Sherm feels dazed," said Dr. Morton two evenings later, watching the boy, who was making a vain pretense of playing checkers with Chicken Little.

He was so heedless that she swept his men off the board at each move, to Chicken Little's disgust. Sherm usually beat her when he gave his mind to the game. Presently, she picked up the board and dumped the checkers off into her lap.

"A penny for your thoughts, Sherm."

"I was just wondering if Captain—Father—would find out anything more³⁸⁵ in New York."

"How long will he be gone?"

"I guess that depends on whether he gets track of anything new. After he comes back we're going to Chicago to see—Mother."

"Oh, I am so glad. It will make you feel a lot better to have a good visit with them all."

"Yes, and he told me I might buy back the old home for her if she wants it—if I'd only known last week, she needn't have sold the place. And the Captain—Father—says he will give me some money to put out at interest so she'll have enough to live on comfortably. He says he owes her and Father a debt he can never repay for bringing me up."

Chicken Little was thoughtful. “Sherm, he seems to have plenty of money, maybe you can go to college and to the Beaux Arts, too.”

“He said I could have all the education I wanted.”

“Will you go to college next year?”

“Yep.”

“O dear, it will be awful here unless Mother lets me go to Centerville.”

“Don’t fret, she is going to.”

“How do you know?”

“She told Marian so last night.”

Chicken Little got to her feet and shot two feet into the air with a whoop of joy. “Goody! Goody!! Goody!!!”

“Save a little breath, Jane. I know something better than that. Promise you won’t tell—your mother would skin me if she knew I were giving away her cherished plans.”

“Don’t be afraid, she just wants me to act surprised, and I can do it a lot better if I know about it before hand.”

“Well, she’s coming on at Christmas time for a visit in Centerville, and she’s going to take you on to visit Ernest.”

“Sherm, truly?”

“That’s what she said.”

Chicken Little gave an ecstatic hop. “Sherm,” she exclaimed presently, a new idea striking her, “I can go to that hop with Carol!”

“Carol?” Sherm sat up a little straighter. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you remember that letter I got from Carol? You don’t remember a single thing about it, do you? He wrote to ask me if I wouldn’t come on some time and go to a Navy hop with him. He said he was asking me in time so I couldn’t promise anybody else.”

“It strikes me Carol is getting mighty fresh.”

Chicken Little stole a surprised glance at Sherm.

“I don’t see anything fresh about that—I think it nice of him to remember me so long. My, I used to think Carol was the most wonderful thing. I hung a May basket to him the last spring we were in Centerville.”

“You did? Why, I thought I got yours. Who hung mine?”

“Gertie. I guess she won’t mind if I tell—it’s been so long.”

Sherm whistled. After a little he inquired rather sheepishly:

“Say, Chicken Little, you don’t like Carol best now, do you?”

Chicken Little looked up hastily. She was disgusted to feel her face growing hot. “Why, Sherm—I haven’t seen Carol for four years. I don’t know what I should think of him now.” Then, seeing the hurt look in Sherm’s eyes, she added: “I guess I’d have to like him pretty awfully well, if I did.”

Captain Clarke was gone two weeks and he had added only two facts to those they had been able to piece together. He had accidentally run across an old friend. This friend had supposed him dead all these years, and could scarcely believe his own eyes when he saw him. From him, he learned that his wife had also believed him dead before she would consent to leave New York. This friend told him he had suspected that her money was running low and had offered to help her, but she refused. He thought, after hearing the Captain’s story, that she must have had barely enough left to take her home, and that this explained why she was walking to the wharf instead of taking a hack, the day she was run down.

Sherm stayed on with the Morton’s until the following week when he set out with his new-found father to visit his adopted family. Youth recovers readily from its sorrows. It was almost the old Sherm who raised his cap to Chicken Little as the train got under steam and slid away from the long wooden platform.

“O dear!” she exclaimed, “seems to me I haven’t done anything this whole year but see somebody off. I think it ought to be my turn pretty soon.”

“Have a little patience, Humbug,” said her father, “your turn is almost here. It is hard for me to realize how fast my baby is growing up.”

Chicken Little liked the sound of those words—“growing up.” There was something magical about them. They lingered in her mind for days.

One hot Sunday afternoon late in June, she arrayed herself in an old blue lawn dress of Marian’s that trailed a full inch on the floor at every step. She coiled her hair high on her head and tucked in a rose coquettishly above her ear. Highly gratified with the result of her efforts, she swept downstairs in a most dignified manner to astonish the family. Unfortunately the family—Father and Mother, and both pups, were taking a siesta. She went over to the cottage; a profound silence reigned there also. She rambled around restlessly for a few moments, then, taking “Ivanhoe” and a pocketful of cookies, went out into the orchard. It was

hot even there. The air seemed heavy and the birds contented themselves with lazy chirpings. She swung herself up into her favorite tree and began to munch and read.

But she did not read long. The charm of the green world around her was greater than the pictured world of the book. Chicken Little fell to making pictures of her own—dream pictures that changed quickly into other dream pictures, as real dreams sometimes do. As she stared down the leafy arcades between the rows of apple trees, she saw an immense ball room hung in red, white, and blue bunting and filled with astonishingly handsome young men in blue uniforms. Ernest was there. And a tall, curly-headed Adonis, who looked both like, and unlike, the good-natured, plump Carol of Old Centerville days, was close beside her. But when the supposed Carol spoke, it was certainly Sherm's voice she heard, and it was Sherm's odd, crooked smile that curved the dream midshipman's lips. Chicken Little recognized the absurdity of this herself and laughed happily. A bird on a bough nearby took this for a challenge, and burst into an ecstasy of trills.

"Pshaw," she whispered to herself, "I wonder what it would really be like." She kept on wondering. She felt as if she and the orchard were wrapped about with a great cloud, like a veil, and that beyond this, all the wonderful things that must surely happen when she grew up, were hidden. The twilight was falling before she stretched her cramped limbs and slid down the rough tree trunk. She picked up her neglected book, which had fallen to the ground unnoticed, and said aloud, with a little mocking curtsy:

"Your pardon, Sir Walter, but I made a romance of my own that was—nicer."

Then she tucked the slighted author under her arm and flew to the house before the pursuing shadows. Chicken Little was growing up.



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