
The girls were all cooks to-day
Milli Thompson '29
MARY COOKE SC

HALF-A-DOZEN HOUSEKEEPERS

A STORY FOR GIRLS IN *HALF-A-DOZEN CHAPTERS*

By

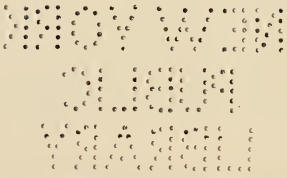
KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

Author of "The Birds' Christmas Carol," "Polly Oliver's Problem," and "A Summer in a Cañon."

Pictures by MILLS THOMPSON

PHILADELPHIA

HENRY ALTEMUS COMPANY



CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFATORY NOTE.

MY thanks are due to the Century Company for permission to reprint this story, which was published some years ago in the St. Nicholas Magazine.

The original material has been thoroughly revised and extended, and now makes its first appearance in book form.

K. D. W.

Half-a-Dozen Housekeepers

CHAPTER I

BELL WINSHIP'S EXPERIMENT

MARCH had come in like a lion, and showed no sign of going out like a lamb. The pussy willows knew that it was, or ought to be, spring, but although it takes a deal to discourage a New England pussy willow, they shivered in their brown skins and despaired of making their annual appearance even by April Fool's Day. The swallows still lingered in the South, having received private advices from the snow-birds that State o' Maine

weather, in the present season, was only fitted for Arctic explorers. The air was keen and nipping and the wind blew steadily from the north and howled about the chimneys until one hardly knew whether to hug the warmth of the open fire or to go out and battle with the elements.

Little did the rosy girls of the Wareham Female Seminary (girls were still "young females" when all this happened)—little did they care about snow and sleet and ice. Studies went on all the better with the afternoon skating and sliding to look forward to. What joy to perch in the window-seat with your volume of Virgil, and translate "*Hoc opus hic labor est*" with half an eye on the gleaming ice of the pond, or the glittering crust of the hillsides! What fun to slip on your rubber boots, muffle your-

self in your warm coat (made out of mother's old mink cape), and run across the way to the Academy for recitations in mathematics or philosophy!

These joys, however, with their attendant responsibilities, duties, and cares, were to be suspended for a while at the Wareham Seminary, and the "young females" who graced that institution of learning were not inconsolable.

Bell Winship, an uncommonly nice girl herself and a born leader of other nice girls, had sent out five mysteriously worded notes that morning, five little notes to as many little maids, requesting the honor of their presence at ten A. M. precisely, in Number 27, Second floor.

Where Bell Winship wished girls to be, there they always were, and on the minute, too, lest they should miss something; so there is nothing remarkable in

this statement of the fact, that at ten o'clock in the morning, Number 27, Second floor, of the Wareham Female Seminary seemed to be overflowing with girls, although in reality there were but six, all told.

The wildest curiosity prevailed, and it was very imperfectly controlled, but, at length, the hostess, mounting a shoe-box, spoke with great dignity in these words:

"Fellow-countrywomen: Whereas, our recitation-hall has been burned to the ground, thereby giving us a well-earned vacation of two weeks, I wish to impart to you a plan by which we can better resign ourselves to the afflicting and mysterious dispensation. You are aware," she continued, still impressively, "that my highly respected parents are both away for the winter,

thus leaving our humble cottage closed, and it occurred to me as a brilliant, if somewhat daring, idea, that we six girls should go over and keep house in it for a fortnight, alone and untrammeled."

Here the tidal wave of her eloquence was impeded by the overmastering enthusiasm of the audience. Cheers and applause greeted her. Everybody pounded with whatever she chanced to have in her hand, on any article of furniture that chanced to be near.

"Oh, Bell, Bell! what a lovely plan!" cried Lilla Porter; "a more than usually lovely plan; but will your mother ever allow it, do you suppose?"

"That's the point," answered Bell, gleefully. "Here is the letter I have just received from my father; he is a good parent, wholly worthy of his daughter:

Baltimore, March 6th, 18—.

My dear Child:—We do not like to refuse you anything while we are away enjoying ourselves, so, as the house is well insured, you may go over and try your scheme. Your mother says that you must not entirely demolish her jelly and preserves. My only wish is that you will be careful of the fires and lights.

I hope you won't feel injured if I suggest your asking advice and suggestion of Miss Miranda and Miss Jane, who are your nearest neighbors. They will take you in charge anyway, and you might as well put yourself nominally under their care. Your uncle will, of course, have an eye to you, perhaps two eyes, and I dare say he could use more than the allotted number, but Grandmamma will lend him hers, no doubt.

Write me a line every day, saying

that the household timbers are still standing.

Your weakly indulgent but affectionate Father.

"Isn't he a perfect darling?" cried the enraptured quintette.

"I think," said demure Patty Weld, "that before we permit ourselves to feel too happy, we had better consult *our* 'powers that be,' and see if we can accept Bell's invitation."

"I refuse to hear 'No' from one of you," Bell answered, firmly. "I have thought it all over; spent the night upon it, in fact. You, Alice, and Josie Fenton, are too far from home to go there anyway, so I shall lead you off as helpless captives. Your mother is in town, Lilla, so that you can ask her immediately, and hear the worst; you and

Edith, Patty, are only a half-day's journey away, and can find out easily. I know you can get permision, for it's going to be perfectly proper and safe. Grandmamma lives nearby, the Sawyer spinsters are the village duennas, and Uncle Harry can protect us from any rampaging burglars and midnight marauders that may happen in to pay their respects.''

So the ''Jolly Six,'' as they were called by their schoolmates, separated, to build many castles in the air. Bell, it was decided, was to go on to her country home in advance, and, with the help of a neighboring farmer's daughter, prepare and provision the house for an unusual siege.

The girls had determined to have no servant, and their many ingenious plans for managing and dividing the work

were the source of great amusement to the teachers, some of whom had been admitted to their confidence. Josie Fenton and Bell were to do the cooking, Jo claiming the sternly practical department best suited to her—meat, vegetables, and bread—while Bell was to concoct puddings, cakes, and the various little indigestible dainties toward which schoolgirl hearts are so tender. Alice Forsaith, the oldest of the party and the beauty of the school, with Edith Lambert, as an aid, was to manage the making of the beds, tidying of rooms, and setting of tables, while Lilla Porter and Patty Weld, with noble heroism and self-sacrifice, offered to shoulder that cross of an old-fashioned girl's life — the washing and wiping of dishes.

On a Wednesday morning the two maiden ladies living nearly opposite the

Winship cottage were transfixed with wonder by the appearance of Bell, who asked for the house-key left in safe keeping with them.

"Du tell, Isabel!—I didn't expect to see you this mornin',—air your folks comin' home or hev you been turned out o' school?" asked Miss Miranda.

"Oh, no," laughed Bell; "I'm going to housekeeping myself!"

"Good land! You haven't run off and got married, have you?" cried Miss Jane.

"Not quite so bad as that; but I'm going to bring five of my schoolmates over to-morrow, and we intend to stay here two weeks all alone, as housekeepers and householders."

"Land o' mercy," moaned the nervous Miss Miranda. "That Pa o' yourn would let you tread on him and not

notice it. How any sensible man could do sech a crazy thing as to let a pack of girls tear his house to pieces, I don't see. You'll burn us all up before a week's out; I declare I sha'n't sleep a wink for worrying the whole time."

"You needn't be afraid, Miss Sawyer," said Bell, with some spirit. "If six girls, none of them younger than fourteen, can't take care of a few stoves and fireplaces, I should think it was a pity. Everybody seems to think nowadays that young people have no common sense. The world's growing wiser all the time, and I don't see why we shouldn't be as bright as those detestable pattern-girls of fifty years ago."

"Well, well, don't get huffy, Isabel; you mean well, but all girls are unstiddy at your age. Anyhow, I'll try to keep an eye on ye. Here's your key, and we

can spare you a quart of milk a day and risin's for your bread, if you're going to try riz bread, though I don't s'pose one of ye knows anything about flour food."

"Thank you; that'll be very nice, and now I'm going over to begin work, for I have heaps to do. Emma Jane Perkins has come to help me, and Grandma's Betty will come down every afternoon. By the way, can I have Topsycat while I am here?"

"Yes, I s'pose so," said Miss Jane, "though it's been an awful sight of work gettin' her used to our ways, and I'd never have done it if Mis' Winship hadn't set such store by her. She pretty near pined away the first week, and I've baked ginger cake for her and buttered her fritters every mornin'."

"I won't borrow her if you think she

will be more troublesome afterward," Bell answered, "but you know it's almost impossible to keep house without a cat and a dog. Bobs came over from Uncle Harry's the moment I arrived, and is waiting at the gate now."

"I don't agree with you," said Miss Miranda. " 'Blessed be nothin', I say, when it comes to live stock. We disposed of our horse, the pig went next, and the cow's turn's comin'. Even a cat is dreadful confinin'. If you have a cat and two hens you're as much tied down as if you had a barn full of critters."

The day was very cold, and both Bell and Emma Jane shivered as they unlocked one frost-bitten door after another.

"We shall freeze as stiff as pokers," said Bell, with chattering teeth; "but we

can't help it; let's build a fire in every stove in the house and thaw things out."

This was done, and in an hour they were moderately comfortable. The weather being so cold, Bell decided upon using only three rooms, all on the first floor — the large, handsome family sitting-room, the kitchen, and Mrs. Winship's chamber. This being very capacious, she moved a couple of bedsteads from other rooms, and placing the three side by side, filled up the intervening spaces with bolsters, thus making one immensely wide bed.

"There, Emma Jane, isn't that a bright idea? We can all sleep in a row, and then there'll be no quarreling about bedfellows or rooms. I certainly am a good contriver," cried Bell, with a triumphant little laugh.

"It looks awful like a hospital, and

the bolsters will keep fallin' down in between and it'll be dreadful hard makin' 'em up of a mornin','' rejoined Emma Jane, who was no flatterer, being New England born and bred.

The sitting-room coal stove had accommodations, on top and back, for cooking, so Bell thought that their suppers, with perhaps an occasional breakfast, might be prepared there. The large bay-window, with its bright drugget, would serve as a sort of tiny dining-room, so the mahogany extension-table, with its carved legs, pretty red cover, and silver service, was carried there. This accomplished, and every room made graceful and attractive by Bell (who was a born homemaker, and placed photographs, lamps, sofa-pillows, fir-boughs, and bowls of red apples just where they were needed in the picture), she went over

to her Grandmother's, where four loaves of bread were baking and pies being filled, in order that the young housekeepers might begin with a full pantry.

"Oh, Grandma," she exclaimed breathlessly, tearing off her cloud and bringing down with it a sunshiny mass of bronze hair, "it does look lovely, if I do say it; and as for setting that house on fire, there's no danger, for it will take a week to thaw it into a state in which it would burn. I have made up my mind that I sha'n't be the one to build the fires every morning, even if I am hostess. I don't want to freeze myself daily for the cause of politeness. Has the provision man come yet?"

"Yes," said Uncle Harry, "and brought eatables enough for an army—more than you girls can devour in a month."

"You'll see," said Bell, laughingly.

"You don't know the capacity of the 'Jolly Six' yet. Now, Betty, please take the eggs and potatoes and fish and put them in our store room. I've just time to make my cake and custard before I drive to the station for the girls. Do you know, Uncle Harry, I am going to do the most astounding thing! I've borrowed Farmer Allen's one-seated old pung,—the one he takes to town filled with vegetables,—and I am going to keep it for our sleigh-rides. It will hold all six of us, and what do we care for public opinion?" said she, with a disdainful gesture.

CHAPTER II

IN THE FIRELIGHT

TWO hours later you might have seen the old pung drawn by Mr. Allen's Jerry, with Bell and Alice Forsaith on the seat, and four laughing, rosy-cheeked girls warmly tucked in buffalo robes on the bottom. Even the sober old sun, who had been under a cloud that day, poked his head out to see the fun, and became so interested that, in spite of himself, he forgot his determination not to shine, and did his duty all the afternoon.

When the girls opened the door and saw Bell's preparations,—the cozy sit-

ting-room, with dining-table in the bay-window, three sofas in a row, so that on snowy days they might extend their lazy lengths thereon, and finally a fir-covered barrel of Nodhead and Baldwin apples in one corner,—there arose bursts of happy laughter and ecstatic cheers loud enough to shock the neighbors, who seldom laughed and never cheered.

"I know it's an original idea to have an apple-barrel in your parlor corner," said Bell; "but the common-sense of it will be seen by every thoughtful mind. Our forces will consume a peck a day, and life is too short to spend it in galloping up and down cellar constantly for apples."

"Bell Winship, you are an inhospitable creature," exclaimed Lilla Porter. "Here I am, camly seated on a coal-hod with my hat on, while you are talking

so fast that you can't get time to show us our apartments. Shelter before food, say I!"

"Apartments!" sniffed Bell, in mock dudgeon. "You are very grand in your ideas! Behold your camp, your wigwam, your tent, your quarters!" and she threw open the door of the large chamber and waved the party dramatically in that direction.

"Bell, you will yet be Presidentess of these United States," cried Edith Lambert. "Any girl who can devise two such happy combinations as an apple-barrel in a parlor corner and three beds in a row, ought to be given a chair of state."

"Might a poor worm inquire, Bell," asked Patty, "why those croquet mallets and balls are laid out in file round the beds?"

"Why, those are for protection, you goose, supposing anybody should come in the piazza window at night, and we had nothing to kill him with!"

"Yes, and supposing he should take one of the mallets and pound us all to a jelly to begin with?" Patty retorted, being of a practical mind.

"That *would* be rather embarrassing," answered Bell, with a reflective shudder; "I hadn't thought of it."

"What could one poor man do against five girls banging him with croquet mallets, while the sixth was running to alarm the neighbors?" asked Alice, "and to put an end to the discussion I suggest that the cooks start supper;" whereupon she threw herself into an arm-chair, and put up a pair of small, stout boots on the fender.

The unfortunate couple referred to ex-

changed looks of unmitigated discouragement.

"I have my opinion of a girl who will mention supper before she has been in the house an hour," said the head cook.

"Josie, I foresee that they are going to make galley-slaves of us if they can. However," turning again to Alice, "it isn't to be supper, but dinner. The meals at this house are to be thus and so: Breakfast at 9 A. M., luncheon at 12 M., dinner at 5 P. M., refreshments at various times betwixt and between, and all affairs pertaining to eatables are to be completely under the control of the chefs, Mesdemoiselles Winship and Fenton. We cannot have you 'suggesting' dinner at all hours, Miss Forsaith. If time hangs heavy on your hands, occupy it in your own branches of housework."

"If we are to be ruled over in this way, life will not be worth living," cried Patty Weld, in comical despair. "I dare say we shall be half starved as the days go on, but do give us something good to begin on, Bluebell!"

Judging from the scene at the table an hour later, it would not have made much difference whether the repast was sumptuous or not, so formidable were the appetites, and such the merriment.

"Oh, dear," sighed Bell, dismally, to the asistant cook, "I will throw off all disguise and say that this family is a surprise and a disappointment to me. When a person cooks twenty-seven potatoes, with the reasonable expectation of having half left to fry, and sees a solitary one left in the dish, with all its lovely companions both faded and gone, she is naturally disheartened. Any way, we

have finished for to-night, so the Dish Brigade can marshal its forces. We will take our one potato into the kitchen, Jo, and see if we can make it enough for breakfast. Look in the corner bookcase; bring Mrs. Whitney's 'Just How,' Marion Harland's 'Cook Book,' 'The Young Housekeeper's Friend,' and 'The Bride's Manual.' "

At nine o'clock that evening Uncle Harry passed through the garden, and noticing a pair of open shutters, peeped in at the back window of the sitting-room, thinking he had never seen a more charming or attractive picture. Pretty Edith Lambert was curled up in an armchair near the astral lamp, her face resting on her two rosy palms, and her eyes bent over "Little Women." Bluebell, her bright hair bobbed in a funny sort of twist, from which two or

three venturesome and rebellious curls were straying out, and her high-necked blue apron still on over her dark dress, was humming soft little songs at the piano. Roguish Jo was sitting flat on the hearth, her bright cheeks flushed rosier under the warm occupation of corn popping, and her dark hair falling loosely round her face, while Patty Weld with her shy, demure face, was beside her on a hassock, knitting a "fascinator" out of white wool. These two, so thoroughly unlike, were never to be seen apart; indeed, they were so inseparable as to be dubbed the "Scissors" or "Tongs" by their friends. Alice and Lilla were quarreling briskly over a game of cribbage, Lilla's animated expression and ringing laugh contrasting forcibly with the calm face of her antagonist. Alice was never known to be

excited over anything. It was she who carried off all the dignity and took the part of presiding goddess of the party. The girls all adored her for her beauty and superior age; for she had attained the enviable pinnacle of "sweet sixteen."

"Come," said Jo, breaking the silence, "let us have refreshments, then a good quiet talk together, then muster the Hair-Brushing Brigade, and go to bed. I think I have corn enough; I've popped and popped and popped as no one ever popped before, and till popping has ceased to be fun."

"Pop on, pop ever; the more you give us, Jo, the more popular you'll be," laughed Bell.

"She's a veritable 'pop-in-J,' isn't she?" cried Lilla.

"Now Lilla," said Edith, "let us get the apples and nuts, and we'll sit in a

ring on the floor, and eat. I sha'n't crack the almonds; the girl that hath her teeth, I say, is no girl, if with her teeth she cannot crack an almond. Lilla, you're not a bit of assistance; you've tied up the end of the nut-bag in a hard knot, upset the apple-dish, put the table-cloth on crooked, and—oh, dear—now you've stepped in the pop-corn," as Lilla, trying desperately to cross the room without knocking something over, as usual, had hit the corn-pan in her airy flight. "You have such a genius for stepping into half-a-dozen things at once, I think you must be web-footed."

"Well, that's possible," retorted the unfortunate Lilla; "I've often been told I was a duck of a girl, and this proves it."

"Do you realize, girls," said Edith, after a while, "that we shall all be visited

by ghosts and visions to-night, if we don't terminate this repast? I'll put away the dishes, Bell, if you'll move the sofas up to the fire, so that we can have our good-night chat."

So, speedily, six warm dressing-sacques were slipped on, and then, the lamps being turned out, in the ruddy glow of the firelight, the brown, the yellow, and the dark hair was taken down, and the housekeepers, braiding it up for the night, talked and dreamed and built their castles in the air, as all young things are wont to do.

"Girls, dear old girls," said Alice, softly, breaking an unusual silence of two minutes; "isn't this cosy and sweet and friendly beyond anything? How thankful we ought to be for the happy lives God gives us! We have been put into this beautiful world and taken care

of so wisely and kindly every day; yet we don't often speak, or even think, about it."

"It is trouble, sometimes, more than happiness, that leads us into thinking about God's care and goodness," said Edith, "although it's very strange that it should. Before my mother's death I was just a little baby playing with letter-blocks, and all at once, after that, I began to make the letters into words and spell out things for myself."

"What a perfect heathen I am," burst out Jo. "I can't feel any of these things any more than if I were a Chinaman. Or, perhaps, it is as Edith says, I am still playing with blocks, although I cannot even see the letters on them. I wonder if I shall ever be wide awake enough for that!"

"Look out of the window, Jo," said

Bell, who was leaning on the sill. "Don't you think if God can make out of all that snow and ice, in three short months, a lovely, tender, green, springing world, He can make something out of us? Isn't it a wonderful thing that He can wake up the life that's asleep under the frozen earth?"

"Well," rejoined Jo, dismally, "there's something to begin on out there, but I don't think I have much of a soul; any way, I have never seen any signs of it. You always say things so prettily, Bell, that I like to hear you sermonize. You'd make a good minister's wife."

"I think you have plenty of 'soul material,' Jo," said Lilla, confusedly struggling to make a figure of speech express her meaning. "There's lots of it there, only it wants to be blown up, somehow."

"Thanks for your encouragement," said Jo, amid the laughter that followed Lilla's peculiar metaphor. "I think if you'll try to handle the spiritual bellows, you'll find it's harder work than you imagine. Now don't laugh, girls, because I really do feel solemn about it, only I talk in my usual frivolous way."

"You always make yourself appear wicked, Jo," said her loving champion, Patty, "but I happen to know a few facts on the opposite side. Who was it who gave every cent of her month's allowance to Mrs. Hart, the poor washerwoman who scorched her white skirt; and who stayed away from the church sociable to take care of that horrid room mate of hers who had a headache?"

"Patty, if you don't desist," cried Jo, with a flaming face, and brandishing a hair-brush fiercely, "I'll throw this at

your dear, charitable little head. Now, Bell, you know we all agreed to tell a story of adventure each night before going to bed, and I think you, as hostess, ought to begin. If the entertainment is delayed much longer it will find me asleep with fatigue and over-feeding in the front row of the orchestra."

"Dear me, I can't begin!" cried Bell, "Nothing ever happened to me except going to California and having a double wedding in the family. That's the sum total of my adventures."

"Make up something then, or tell us a true story about California. Oh, you do have such a good time, and funny things are always happening to you," sighed Lilla. "You never seem to have any trials."

"Trials!" rejoined Bell, sarcastically. "I should think I hadn't. Perhaps I

haven't a little scamp of a brother and an awfully fussy old aunty! Perhaps I'm not such an idiot that I can't multiply eight and nine, or seven and six, without a lead-pencil; perhaps I wasn't left at school while my parents toured in the South! Don't you call those afflictions?''

''Yes, I do,'' answered Lilla, joining in the general laugh; ''and I'll never allude to your good fortune again. Now tell us a California story,—that's a dear,—for I'm getting sleepy as well as Jo.''

''Oh, well,'' said Bell, walking about the room absent-mindedly, until her eyes rested on the cabinet, ''I'll tell you the story of these;'' and she took up a string of dusty pearls which were seamed and cracked as if by fire. ''Now open your eyes and lend me your ears, for I shall

make it as 'bookish' and romantic as possible.

"Last summer Mother and I were living in a beautiful valley a hundred miles from San Francisco. It was near the mining districts, where Father was attending to some business. Of course, a great many Mexicans and Indians, as well as Chinamen, worked in these mines, and we used to see them very often. Mother and I were sitting under the peach-trees in the garden one afternoon. It was so beautiful sewing or reading in that California garden, for the fruit was ripe and hanging in bushels on the trees, as lovely to look at as it was luscious to eat; some of the peaches were a rich yellow inside and others snow-white, except where the crimson stones had tinged their sockets with rosy little spots."

"Don't," cried Jo; "you'll make us

discontented with our New England apples!"

"We were chatting and eating peaches," continued Bell, "when the gate opened, and an Indian girl with an old squaw came in and approached us, The girl could speak English, and told me her name was Eskaluna. I had heard about her, and knew that she was the beauty and belle of the tribe, and was going to marry the chief's son when the next moon came; for our Indian cook was as gossipy as a Yankee, and was forever telling us tales. She was the most beautiful creature I ever saw: lovely black hair, not so coarse as is usual with them, brilliant dark eyes, good features, and the prettiest slim hands and graceful arms. She was dressed gaily and handsomely in the fashion of her tribe, and on her lovely, bare, brown

neck was this long string of Mexican pearls, which we noticed at once as being very valuable. She stayed there all the afternoon under the fruit-trees, and really grew quite confidential. Mother, meanwhile, had gone into ecstacies over her beautiful pearls, and had taken them from her neck to examine them. At sunset, when she went home to her wigwam, she slipped the necklace into mother's lap, saying, with her sweet trick of speech, 'I eatie your peachie, you takie my beads.' Of course, mother could not accept them, and Eskaluna departed in quite a disappointed mood. I remember being sorry that the pretty young thing was going to marry the disagreeable, ugly chief. He was just as jealous and ferocious as he could be—wouldn't let her talk to one of the warriors of the tribe, and had shot one man

already because he fancied Eskaluna admired him."

A chorus of "Oh's" and "Ah's" interrupted Bell, and Alice's eyes grew round with interest, for she was sixteen and had been called a "cruel coquette" by a young student at Wareham.

"In a few days our Indian cook came home at night from the mines, saying that he wanted a holiday the next morning to go to a funeral. We had heard that in some tribes they burn the bodies of the dead, and wondered whether his were one of them, so we asked him the particulars, of course, and were terribly shocked when we heard that it was the funeral of poor Eskaluna, who had visited us so lately, in all her dusky beauty. Nakawa told us the whole story in his broken English, and a sad one it was. Her lover, the chief, as I have said, was

always jealous of her, and on the afternoon she came to our house, he had heard from some crafty villain or other (an enemy of Eskaluna's, of course), that she was false, and, instead of intending to marry him, loved a handsome young Indian of another tribe, and was planning to run away with him.

"This fired his hot blood, and he rushed off on the village road determined to kill her. He climbed a large sycamore tree on a lonely part of the way, and there waited until the shadows fell over the mountain sides, and the sun, dropping behind their peaks, left the San Jacinto valley in fast-growing darkness. At last he saw the gleam of her scarlet dress in the distance, and soon he heard her voice as she came singing along, little thinking of her dreadful fate. He took sure aim at the heart that


The story Eskaluna

was beating happily and carelessly under its cape of birds' feathers; shot, and so swift and unerring was his arrow that she fell in an instant, dead, upon the path. Then, leaving her with the helpless old squaw, he escaped into a cañon near by.

"The next day we went over to the Indian encampment, and reached the place just after poor Eskaluna had been burned on the funeral pile. We went close to the spot and could hardly help crying when we thought of her beauty and sweetness, and her sad and undeserved death. Up near the head of the pile where that lovely brown neck of hers had rested,—the prettiest neck in the world,—lay this charred string of pearls she had worn in our garden. Mother asked for it as a remembrance, and the old squaw gave it to her. Eska-

luna's brother is on the war-path after her murderer, I believe, to this day, if he hasn't killed him yet; for he was determined to avenge her. Now, isn't that romantic, and tragic at the same time, girls? Poor Eskaluna! I don't know that her fate would have been much easier if she had married the chief; but it is hard to think of her being so heartlessly murdered when she was so innocent and true; and that's the end of my story. Who comes next?"

"Not I, at this hour," yawned Jo, "but it was a good tale!"

"Nor I, after that thrilling experience of yours!" said Alice, admiringly.

"I can think of no story half so delightful as the dreams we shall have if we go to bed," murmured Edith from her cozy corner. "Come, it is after ten,

and the wide bed calls loudly for occupants.''

In a half-hour all six were asleep, and the bright-faced moon, looking in at the piazza window, smiled as she saw the half-dozen heads in a row, and the bed surrounded by croquet mallets and balls.

CHAPTER III

AN EMERGENCY CASE

THE next morning broke clear, bright, and sparkling, but bitterly cold.

I cannot attempt to tell you all the doings of that indefatigable and ingenious bevy of girls during the day. Miss Miranda, their opposite neighbor, had kept to her post of observation, the window, very closely, and had seen much to awaken scorn and surprise.

"Wa'al, Jane!" said she, excitedly, in the afternoon, "there they go ag'in! That's the fourth time the hoss has been harnessed into Allen's pung to-day; and

now they've got their uncle. Whatever they find to laugh so over, and where they go to, is more'n I can see. They haven't done up their dinner dishes, I know, for I've been watching of 'em and they hain't had time to do 'em so quick as this, though Bell Winship is as spry as a skeeter when she gets a-goin'."

Miss Miranda's organs of vision were better than magnifying glasses, for, aided by a lively imagination, they could dart around corners and through doors with great ease. Bell avowed confidentially to Patty that morning, when she met her neighbor's eyes fixed on the pantry window, that she believed Miss Miranda could see a fly-speck on top of a liberty-pole.

The girls had made the day a very long and lively one, and in the evening, their spirits still high and their inventive

powers still unimpaired, they gave an impromptu concert. The audience was small but appreciative. Grandmother was in a private box—the high-backed arm-chair in the cosiest corner; Uncle Harry sat on a hastily-erected throne made by perching a stool on the dining-table, and being given a large pair of goggles, was requested to serve as dramatic and musical critic for the morning newspapers. Two or three of the boarders from Mrs. Carter's famous Winter Farmhouse on the hill, the young schoolmaster (a Bowdoin student earning his college course by odd terms of teaching), and Hugh Pennell, his chum and classmate, home on a brief holiday, made quite a brave show when seated in three rows, while the unaffected laughter, the open mouths, and the staring eyes of "the help," Emma Jane Perkins, Betty

Bean, and 'Bijah Flagg, who were grouped at the hall door, helped in the general merriment.

Bell had a keen sense of the ridiculous and a voice like a meadow-lark. Jo was capital, too, as a mimic, so together, they gave some absurdly funny scenes from famous operas. Bell had thrown on an evening dress of her cousin's, which happened to be left in the house, and this, with its short sleeves, showing her round, girlish arms, and its long train, made her such a distracting little prima donna of fifteen, that Hugh Pennell quite laid his boyish heart at her feet. She sang "The Last Rose of Summer" with all the smiles, head-tossings, arch looks, casting down of eyelids, and kissing of finger-tips at the close, which generally accompany it when sung by the stage soprano, and she was naturally greeted

with rapturous applause. Then Jo, as the tenor, in dressing-gown and smoking-cap for male attire, sang a fervent duet with Alice Forsaith, rendering it with original Italian words and embraces at the end of every measure.

Tableaux showing scenes from well-known novels, and thrilling historical events depicted in pantomime, came next, and the company was invited to name them as they followed one another in quick succession,— Eliza crossing the river by leaping from ice block to ice block, the bloodhounds in hot pursuit; Pochahontas saving the life of her noble Captain John; Rochester, holding Jane Eyre spellbound by the steely glitter of his eye; and the Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers, landing on a stern and rock-bound coast, ably represented by the dining-room table. As Uncle Harry sat


Mills Thompson

on the table he was obliged to be the center of this thrilling scene, which was variously surmised by the audience to be the capture of a slave-ship by pirates, the rescue of a babe from a tenement-house fire, the killing of Julius Cæsar in the Roman Senate, or an impassioned attempt to drag Casabianca from the burning deck.

After bidding their visitors good-night, Bell and Jo went into the kitchen to put buckwheat cakes to raise for breakfast.

"I believe I'll chop the meat hash for a half-hour while the kitchen is warm," said Jo. "Emma Jane is right about the knife; it is dull beyond words!"

"If it is any duller than Emma Jane herself, I am sorry for it," rejoined Bell.

"It's a poor workman who complains of his tools, Jo," said Patty, looking in

at the door, with a superior air; "Columbus discovered America in an open boat."

"He would never have discovered America with this chopping-knife," quoth Jo, bringing it down with vicious emphasis on the unoffending meat.

"Did you notice Emma Jane's expression as she stood in the doorway to-night?"

"I did," replied Bell, as she bustled about her last tasks at closet, cupboard, and sink. "Not a penny of my money shall go to the heathen in other lands until I have done some missionary work with her. In ten days I propose to make her stand straight, hold her head up, keep her mouth closed when not occupied in conversation or eating, stop straining her hair out by the roots, tie the ends of her braids with ribbon instead of twine,

give up her magenta hood, and a few other little details."

"I don't see how you dare advise her at her advanced age," responded Jo. "I suppose she is thirteen, but she appears about thirty. Look, Bell, can this hash be safely trusted now to the pearly teeth of our parlor boarders, or are the pieces too large for their delicate sensibilities?"

"I think that it may escape criticism," laughed Bell. "Cover it with a clean towel and a platter, and one of us will give it a last castigation before it goes in the frying-pan."

"I never had such a good time in my life, never, never!" sighed Lilla, as she blew out the lamp, and tucked herself on the front side of the bed, a little later. "I have only two things to trouble me. First: my wisdom tooth feels as if it were going to ache again. Second: it is

my turn to build the kitchen fire in the morning."

"Console yourself with one thought, my dear," murmured Bell, drowsily, yet sagely. "Both these misfortunes can't happen to you, for if your tooth chances to ache, we shall not have the heart to make you build the fire."

"Don't tell her that," urged Jo, with a prodigious yawn, "or she will be feigning toothache constantly."

Lilla's fears had good foundation, however, for in the middle of the night, Jo, who slept next the front side, wakened suddenly to find her slipping quietly out of bed.

"What's the matter, Lilla?" she whispered.

"Nothing; don't wake the others, but that miserable tooth grumbles just enough to keep me awake, and my

temple aches and my cheek, too. Where is the lotion I use for bathing my face, do you know?"

"Yes, where you put it this morning, on the back of the wash-stand; sha'n't I light the lamp and help you?"

"No, no, hush!" said Lilla. "I can put my hand on it in the dark. Here it is! I'll bathe my face a few minutes, and then try to go to sleep."

So, she anointed herself freely, put the bottle and sponge under the head of the bed lest she should need them again, and, finally, the pain growing less, fell asleep.

In the morning, Bell, who wakened first, rubbed her eyes drowsily, glanced at Lilla, who was breathing quietly, and uttered a piercing shriek. This in turn aroused the other girls, who joined in the shriek on general principles, and

then, blinking in the half-light, looked where Bell pointed. One side of Lilla's face was swollen, and of a dark, purple color, presenting a truly frightful appearance. At length, hearing the confusion, Lilla awoke with a start, and her eyes being open, and rolling about in surprise, she looked still more alarming.

"What on earth is the matter, girls?" she asked, sitting up in bed, smoothing back her hair and rubbing her heavy lids.

Thereupon Edith and Alice began to tremble and nobody answered her.

"K-k-keep c-c-calm," said Bell. "Lilla, dear, your face is badly swollen and inflamed, and we're afraid you are going to be ill, but we'll send for the doctor straight away. Does it pain you very much?"

Lilla jumped up hastily, and, looking

in the mirror, uttered a cry of terror, and sank back into the rocking-chair.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! What can it be! Oh, take me home to my father! It must be a malignant pustule—or spotted fever—or something dreadful! What shall I do? Bell, you are a doctor's daughter; do find out what's the matter with me! I am disfigured for life, and I wasn't very good-looking before."

"Girls," said Bell, "let us dress this very instant, for we can't be too quick about a thing of this kind. You, Jo, build the kitchen fire, and, Alice, make a blaze on the hearth in here; then, after we've made her comfortable, Edith can run and tell Uncle Harry to come."

"Put on the kettle," added Patty, "and heat blankets; they always do that in emergencies."

"Don't frighten me to death," wailed Lilla, "calling me 'a thing of this kind' and an 'emergency.' I don't feel a bit worse than I did in the night."

"She had neuralgia in her face," explained Jo; "that must have had something to do with it. She put on some of her liniment, and then dropped off to sleep. Come, darling, let us tuck you in bed again; try to keep up your courage!"

Then there was a hasty consultation in the kitchen 'midst many groans and tears. Bell was an authority on sickness, and she said, with an awe-struck face, that it must be a dreadful attack of erysipelas in the very last stages.

"But," cried Alice, perplexed, "it is all very strange, for why does she have so little pain, and how could her face

have turned so black from mortification in one night?''

''Blood-poisoning is very quick and very deadly,'' said Patty, who had heard about such a case in her own family.

''Goodness knows what it is,'' exclaimed Bell, wringing her hands in nervous terror. ''What to do with her I don't know; whether to put bricks to her head and ice to her feet, or keep her head cold and heat her 'extremities,' as father calls them—whether to give her a sweat or keep her dry, or wrap her in blankets, or get the linen sheets. Jo is with her now. If you'll go and wake Uncle Harry, Edith, it is the best thing we can do. Run along with her, too, Patty, and you won't be afraid together.''

Alice and Bell went back presently to Lilla, who looked even worse, now that

the room was bright with the glow of the open fire and the pale light of the student lamp.

"You patient old darling!" cried Bell, falling on her knees beside the bed. "We have sent for Uncle Harry and the Doctor, and now you are sure to be all right, for we've taken the thing in good time. Good gracious!! what bottle have I tipped over under this bed?"

"It's my neuralgia liniment," murmured Lilla, faintly. "I bathed my face in it last night, and put it under there afterward. Don't spill it, for I can't get any more here."

"Your neuralgia lotion!" shrieked Bell, first with a look of blank astonishment, and then one of excitement and glee mixed in equal parts. "Look at it, girls! Look, Alice and Jo! Oh, Lilla, you precious, blundering goose!" and

thereupon she dragged out from beneath the bed valance a pint bottle of violet ink, and then relapsed into a paroxysm of voiceless mirth. Just then the back door opened, and in hurried Uncle Harry, Edith, and Patty, much terrified, for they had heard the shouts and gasps and excited voices from outside, and supposed that Lilla must at least have fallen into convulsions.

"Let me see the poor child immediately," cried Mr. Winship. "What is the trouble with you, Bell? are you demented? and where is Lilla?" looking at the apparently empty bed, for Lilla had wound herself in the sheets and blankets, disappeared from view, and was endeavoring to force a pillow into her mouth in order to render her shame-faced laughter inaudible. "Are you trying to play a joke on me?" continued he, with

as much dignity as was consistent with an attire made up of an undershirt, a pair of trousers, overshoes, a tall hat, and a gold-headed cane which he had quite unconsciously caught up in his hasty flight from his chamber.

"The fact is," answered Bell, between her gasps, and trying desperately hard to regain her sobriety,—"the fact is—Uncle Harry—we made—a mistake; and so did—Lilla. There were two bottles just alike on the wash-stand, and in the night she bathed her face for five minutes in the purple ink! Oh, oh, oh!!"

Uncle Harry's face relaxed into a broad smile as he realized the joke.

"Oh, Mr. Winship, you should have seen her!" sighed Jo, lifting her head from the sofa-pillow, with streaming eyes. "All her face, except part of her

forehead and one cheek, was covered with enormous dark purple blotches. She looked like a clown, or a Fourth of July fantastic, or anything else frightful!"

"Well," said Edith, slyly, "Bell said mortification had taken place. I don't think Lilla has ever been more mortified than she is now; do you?

"Puns are out of place, Edith," said Bell, severely. "Don't hurry, Uncle Harry. Don't let any thought of your rather peculiar attire cause you embarrassment."

But before Bell's teasing voice had ceased, the last thud, thud of his rubbers, and click, click of his gold-headed cane were heard in the hall, and he thought, as he tried to finish his early morning nap, that it would be a long time before he allowed those madcap

girls to rout him out of bed again at five o'clock on a winter's day.

As for the girls themselves, they did not even make a trial of slumber, but first scrubbed Lilla energetically with hard soap and pumice, and then made molasses candy, determined that the roaring kitchen fire should be used to some purpose.

Having gained so much time by the unusual way in which they had started the day, they were enabled to look back at nightfall on an unprecedented number of activities, some of them rather unique and original. There was a call upon Emma Jane's mother, another upon Mrs. Carter at the Winter Farm, a sleigh-ride with Geoffrey Strong, the vehicle being a truck for hauling wood, an hour's coasting down Brigadier hill, and a trip to the doctor's for court-

plaster and arnica and peppermint and cough lozenges. Then directly after luncheon Bell and Jo made a private and confidential call upon Grandma Winship's pig, leaving with him as evidences of regard several samples of their own cookery. This call they hoped was unnoticed, but an hour afterwards the other four girls were espied coming from the Winships', all clad in black garments of one sort or another. When questioned as to the meaning of this mysterious piece of foolishness they merely remarked that they, too, had called upon the Winships pig, but that it was a visit of condolence and sympathy.

CHAPTER IV

A WINTER PICNIC

YOU may think that Lilla's "mortification" was quite an excitement in this enterprising young household; yet I assure you that never twenty-four hours passed but a ridiculous adventure of some kind overtook the girls. The daily bulletin which they carried over to Mrs. Carter at the Winter Farm kept the worthy inmates in constant wonderment as to what would happen next. Sometimes there was a regular programme for the next day, prepared the night before, but oftener, things happened of

themselves, and when they do that, you know, pleasure seems a deal more satisfying and delightful, because it is unexpected. Uncle Harry was in great demand, and very often made one of the gay party of young folks off for a frolic. They defied King Winter openly, and went on all sorts of excursions, even on a bona-fide picnic, notwithstanding the two feet of snow on the ground. The way of it was this: On Friday, the boys—Hugh Pennell, Bell's cousin, Jack Brayton, and the young schoolmaster—turned the great bare hall in the top of the old Winship family house into a woodland bower.

By the way, I have not told you much about Geoffrey Strong yet, because the girls of the story have had everything their own way, but Geoffrey Strong was well worth knowing. He was only

eighteen years old, but had finished his sophomore year at Bowdoin College, and was teaching the district school that he might partly earn the money necessary to take him through the remainder of the course. He was as sturdy and strong as his name, or as one of the stout pine-trees of his native State, as gentle and chivalrous as a boy knight of the olden time; as true and manly a lad, and withal as good and earnest a teacher, notwithstanding his youth, as any little country urchin could wish. Mr. Winship was his guardian, and thus he had become quite one of the Winship family.

The boys were making the picnic grounds when I interrupted my story with this long parenthesis. They took a large pair of old drop curtains used at some time or other in church tableaux, and made a dark green carpet by stretch-

ing them across the floor smoothly and tacking them down; they wreathed the pillars and trimmed the doors and windows with evergreens, and then planted young spruce and cedar and hemlock trees in the corners or scattered them about the room firmly rooted in painted nail-kegs.

"It looks rather jolly, boys, doesn't it?" cried Jack, rubbing his cold fingers, "but I'm afraid we've gone as far as we can; we can't make birds and flowers and brooks!"

"What's the special difficulty?" asked Geoffrey. "We'll borrow Grandmother Winship's two cages of canaries and Mrs. Adams' two; then we'll bring over Mrs. Carter's pet parrot, and altogether we'll be musical enough, considering the fact that the thermometer is below zero."

This suggestion of Geoff's they ac-

cordingly adopted, and their mimic forest became tuneful.

The next stroke of genius came from Hugh Pennell. He found bunches of white and yellow everlastings at home with which he mixed some cleverly constructed bright tissue-paper flowers, of mysterious botanical structure. He planted these in pots, and tied them to shrubs, and behold, their forest bloomed!

"But we have finished now, boys," said Hugh, dejectedly, as he put his last bed of whiteweed and buttercups under a shady tree. (They were made of paper, and were growing artistically in a moss-covered chopping-tray.) "We can't get up a brook, and a brook is a handy thing at a picnic, too. Good for the small children to fall into, good for drinking, good for dish-washing, good for its cool and musical tinkle."

"I have an idea," suggested Jack, who was mounted on a step-ladder busily engaged in tying a stuffed owl and a blue jay to a tree-top. "I have an idea. We can fill the ice-water tank, put it on a shelf, let the water run into a tub, then station a boy in the corner to keep filling the tank from the tub. There's your stagnant pool and your running streamlet. There's your drinking-water, your dish-washer, your musical tinkle, and possibly your small child's watery grave. What could be more romantic?"

"Out with him!" shouted Geoff. "He ought to be drowned for proposing such an apology for a brook."

"I fail to see the point," said Jack; "the sound would be sylvan and suggestive, and I've no doubt the girls would be charmed."

"We'll brook no further argument on

the subject," retorted Hugh; "the afternoon is running away with us. We might bring up the bath-tub, or the watering-trough, sink it in an evergreen bank and surround it with house plants, but I don't think it would satisfy us exactly. I'll tell you, let us give up the brook and build a sort of what-do-you-call'em for a retreat, in one corner."

After some explanations from Hugh about his plan, the boys finally succeeded in manufacturing something romantic and ingenious. Two blooming oleanders in boxes were brought from Uncle Harry's parlor, there was a hemlock tree with a rustic seat under it, there was an evergreen arch above, there was a little rockery built with a dozen stones from the old wall behind the barn, and there were Miss Jane Sawyer's potted scarlet geraniums set in among them, all

surmounted by two hanging baskets and a bird-cage. With nothing save an air-tight stove to warm it into life (the ugliness of the stove quite hidden by screens of green boughs), the cold, bare hall was magically changed into a green forest, vocal with singing birds and radiant with blooming flowers.

The boys swung their hats in irrepressible glee.

"Won't this be a surprise to the people, though! Won't they think of the desert blooming as the rose!" cried Hugh.

"I fancy it won't astonish Uncle Harry and Grandmother much," answered Jack, dryly, "inasmuch as we've nearly borrowed them out of house and home during the operation. Old Mrs. Winship said when I took her hammer, hatchet, chopping-tray, house plants, and

screw-driver, that perhaps she had better go over to Mrs. Carter's and board. The girls will be fairly stunned, though. Just imagine Bell's eyes! I told them we'd see to sweeping and heating the hall, but they don't expect any decorations. Well, I'm off. Lock the door, Geoff, and guard it like a dragon; we meet at eleven to-morrow morning, do we? Be on hand, sharp, and let us all go in and view the scene together. I wouldn't for worlds miss hearing and seeing the girls."

Jack and Hugh started for home, and Geoff went downstairs to run a gauntlet of questioning from Jo Fenton, who was present in Grandmother Winship's kitchen on one of the borrowing tours of the day, and extremely anxious to find out why so much mysterious hammering was going on.

While these preparations were in progress, the six juvenile housekeepers were undergoing abject suffering in their cookery for the picnic. It had been a day of disasters from beginning to end—the first really mournful one in their experience.

It commenced bright and early, too; in fact, was all ready for them before they awoke in the morning, and the coal fire began it, for it went out in the night. Everybody knows what it is to build a fire in a large coal stove; it was Jo's turn as stoker and firewoman, and I regret to say that this circumstance made her a little cross, in fact, audibly so.

After much searching for kindling-wood, however, much chattering of teeth, for the thermometer was below zero, much vicious banging of stove doors, and clattering of hods and shovels, that

trouble was overcome. But, dear me! it was only the first drop of a pouring rain of accidents, and at last the girls accepted it as a fatal shower which must fall before the weather would clear, and thus resigned themselves to the inevitable.

The breakfast was as bad as a breakfast knew how to be. The girls were all cooks to-day in the exciting preparation for the picnic, for they wanted to take especially tempting dainties in order that they might astonish more experienced providers. Patty scorched the milk toast; Edith, that most precise and careful of all little women under the sun, broke a platter and burned her fingers; Lilla browned a delicious omelet, and waved the spider triumphantly in the air, astonished at her own success, when, alas, the smooth little circlet slipped ill-

naturedly into the coal hod. Lilla stood still in horror and dismay, while Bell fished it hastily out, looking very crumpled, sooty, shrunken, and generally penitent, if an omelet can assume that expression. She slapped it on the table severely, and said, with a little choke and tear in her voice:

"The last of the eggs went into that omelet, and it is going to be rinsed, and fried over, and eaten. There isn't another thing in the house for breakfast. There is no bread; Alice put cream-of-tartar into the buckwheats, instead of saleratus, and measured it with a tablespoon besides; Miss Miranda's cat upset the milk can; the potatoes are frozen; and I am ashamed to borrow anything more of Grandmother."

"Never," cried Alice, with much determination. "Sooner eat omelet and

coal hod, too! Never mind the breakfast! there are always apples. What shall we take to the picnic? We can suggest luncheon at high noon, and no one will suspect we haven't breakfasted."

"Let's make mince pies," cried Jo, animatedly, from her seat on the woodbox.

"Goose," answered Bell, with a sarcastic smile. "There's plenty of time to make mince-meat, of course!"

"At any rate, we must have jelly-cake," said Lilla, with decision, while dishing up the injured omelet for the second time. "We had better carry the delicacies, for Mrs. Pennell and the boys will be sure to bring bread and meat and common things."

"Oh, tarts, tarts!" exclaimed Edith, in an ecstacy of reminiscence. "I haven't


Cut a hole out of the middle of each round thing, then fill it up with jelly and bake it
Mills Thompson

had tarts for a perfect age! Do you think we could manage them?"

"They must be easy enough," answered Patty, with calm authority. "Cut a hole out of the middle of each round thing, then fill it up with jelly and bake it; that's simple."

"Glad you think so," responded Edith, with an air of deep melancholy and cynicism, as she prepared to wash the cooking dishes and found an empty dish-water pot. "I should think the jelly would grow hard and crusty before the tarts baked, but I suppose it's all right. Everything we touch to-day is sure to fail."

"Oh, how much better if you said, 'I'll try, I'll try, I'll try,' " sang Bell, in a spasm of gayety.

"Oh, how much sadder you will feel when you've tried, by and by," retorted

Edith. "Is there anything difficult about pastry, I wonder? Look in the cook-book. Does it have to be soaked over night like ham, or hung for two weeks like game, or put away in a stone jar like fruit-cake, or 'braised' or 'trussed' or 'larded' or anything?"

"No," said Patty, looking up from the "Bride's Manual," "but it has to be pounded on a marble slab with a glass rolling-pin."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Bell. "Tarts are nothing but pie-crust. This village is situated in the very middle of what is called the New England Pie Belt, and the glass rolling-pin and the marble slab have never been seen by the oldest or youngest inhabitant. I know that bride. When she makes pastry you can see her diamond engagement ring flash as she dips her turquoise scoop into her

ruby flour-barrel. Look up soft gingerbread, Patty."

"Four cups best New Orleans molasses—"

"The molasses is out," said Jo; "find jelly-cake."

"Jelly all gone," said Bell; "where, I can't think, for there were seventeen tumblers."

"The boys are awfully fond of it with bread," said Alice, reminiscently. "How about doughnuts?"

"All right," Bell answered, "of course you'll go to the store for more eggs and a pail of lard. We're out of molasses, eggs, lard, ginger, jelly, patience, and luck."

Over an hour was spent in futile excursions throught the cookery books, vain rummagings of the pantry and larder, frequent trips to the country store, and

nothing was a triumphant success. Things that should have been thin were fat and puffy; those that should have risen high and light as air were flat and soggy; pots, pans, bowls, were heaped on one another in the sink until at one o'clock Alice Forsaith went to bed with a headache, leaving the kitchen in a state of general confusion and uproar. I cannot bear to tell you all the sorry incidents of that dreadful day, but Bell had shared in the blunders with the rest. She had gone to the store-room for citron, and had stumbled on a jar of frozen "something" very like mince-meat. This, indeed, was a precious discovery! She flew back to the kitchen, crying:

"Hurrah! We'll have the pies after all, girls! Mother has left a pot of mince-meat in the pantry. It's frozen, but it will be all right. You trust to

me. I've made pies before, and these shall not be a failure."

The spider was heated, and enough meat for three pies put in to thaw. It thawed, naturally, the fire being extremely hot, and it presently became very thin and curious in its appearance.

"It looks like thick soup with pieces of chopped apple in it," said Lilla to Bell, who was patting down a very tough, substantial bottom crust on a pie plate.

"We-l-l, it does!" owned the head cook, frankly; "but I suppose it will boil down or thicken up in baking. I don't like to taste it, somehow."

"Very natural," said Lilla, dryly. "It doesn't look 'tasty;' and, to tell the truth, it does not look at all as I've been brought up to imagine mince-meat ought to look."

"I can't be responsible for your 'bringing up,' Lill. Please pour it in, and I'll hold the plate."

The mixture trickled in; Bell put a very lumpy, spotted covering of dough over it, slashed a bold original design in the middle for a ventilator, and deposited the first pie in the oven with a sigh of relief.

Just at this happy moment, Betty Bean, Mrs. Winship's maid-of-all -work, walked in with a can of kerosene.

"Don't you think that's funny looking mince-meat, Betty?" asked Patty, pointing to the frying-pan.

Betty the wise looked at it one moment, and then said, with youthful certainty and disdain:

" 'Tain't no more mince-meat than a cat's foot."

This was decisive, and the utterance

fell like a thunder-bolt upon the kitchen-maids.

"Gracious," cried Bell, dropping her good English and her rolling-pin at the same time. "What do you mean? It looked exactly like it before it melted. What is it, then?"

"Suet," answered cruel Betty Bean. "Your ma chopped it and done it up in molasses for her suet plum puddins this winter. It's thick when it's cold; and when it was froze, maybe it did look like pie-meat with a good deal of apple in it; but it ain't no such thing."

This was too much. If I am to relate truly the adventures of this half-dozen suffering little maidens, I must tell you that Bell entirely lost her sunny temper for a moment; caught up the unoffending spider filled with molasses and floating bits of suet; carried it steadily and swift-

ly to the back-door, hurled it into a snow-bank; slammed the door, and sat down on a flour-firkin, burying her face in the very dingy roller-towel. The girls stopped laughing.

"Never mind, Bluebell," cooed Patty, sympathetically, smoothing her hostess's curly hair with a very doughnutty hand, and trying to wipe her flushed cheeks with an apron redolent of hot fat. "You can use the rest of the pie-crust for tarts, and my doughnuts are swelling up be-yoo-ti-ful-ly!"

Bell withdrew the towel from her merry, tearful eyes, and said with savage emphasis:

"If any of you dare tell this at the picnic to-morrow, or let Uncle Harry or the boys know about it, I'll—I don't know what I'll do," finished she, weakly.

"That's a fearful threat," laughed Jo, —" 'The King of France and fifty thousand men plucked forth their swords! and put them up again.' "

And so this cloud passed over, and another and yet another with comforting gleams of sunshine between, till at length it was seven o'clock in the evening before the dishes were washed and the kitchen tidied; then six as tired young housewives stretched themselves before the parlor fire as a bright blaze often shines upon. Bell, pale and pretty, was curled upon the sofa, with her eyes closed. The other girls were lounging in different attitudes of dejection, all with from one to three burned fingers enveloped in cloths. The results of the day's labor were painfully meager, —a colander full of doughnuts, some currant buns, molasses ginger-bread, and a

loaf of tolerably light fruit cake. Out in the kitchen closet lay a melancholy pile of failure,—Alice's pop-overs, which had refused to pop; Patty's tarts, rocky and tough; and a bride's cake that would have made any newly married couple feel as if they were at the funeral of their own stomachs. The girls had flown too high in their journey through the cook book. Bell and Jo could really make plain things very nicely, and were considered remarkable caterers by their admiring family of school-mates; but the dainties they had attempted were entirely beyond their powers; hence the pile of wasted goodies in the closet.

"Oh, dear," sighed Lilla. "Nobody has spoken a word for an age, and I don't wonder, if everybody is as tired as I. Shall we ever be rested enough to go to-morrow?"

"I was thinking," said Edith, dreamily, "that we have only seven more days to stay. If they were all to be as horrible as this, I shouldn't care very much; but we have had such fun, I dread to break up housekeeping. The chief trouble with to-day was that we did no planning yesterday. We never looked into the store-room nor bought anything in advance nor settled what we should cook."

"Well," said Bell, waking up a little, "we will crowd everything possible into the last week and make it a real carnival time. To-morrow is Saturday and the picnic; on Monday or Tuesday we'll have some sort of a 'pow-wow,' as Uncle Harry says, for the boys, in return for their invitation, and then we'll think of something perfectly grand and stupendous for Friday, our last day of fun. It

will take from that until Monday to get the house into something like order for my mother's return. (This with a remorseful recollection of the terrible back bed-room, where everything imaginable had been "dumped" for a week past.)

"I haven't finished trimming our shade hats," called Alice, faintly, from the distance. "I will do it in the morning while you are packing the luncheon. Whatever we do let us unpack our baskets privately and try to mix in our food with Mrs. Carter's or Mrs. Winship's, so that nobody will know which is which."

The girls had tried to devise something jaunty, picturesque, and summery for a picnic costume; but the weather being too cold for a change of dress, they had only bought broad straw hats at the country store,—hats that farmers wore in haying time, with high crowns and wide

brims. They had turned up one side of them coquettishly, and adorned it with funny silhouettes made of black paper, descriptive of their various adventures. Lilla's, for instance, had a huge ink bottle and sponge; Bell's a mammoth pie and frying-pan. Around the crowns they had tied colored scarfs of ribbon or gauze, interwoven with bunches of dried grasses, oats, and everlastings.

Half-past eight found them all sleeping as soundly as dormice; and the next morning with the recuperative power that youth brings, they awoke entirely refreshed and ready for the fray.

The picnic was a glorious success. It was a clear, bright day, and not very cold; so that with a good fire they were able to have a couple of windows open, and to feel more as if they were out in the fresh air. The surprise and delight

of the girls knew no bounds when they were ushered into their novel picnic ground, and even the older people avowed that they had never seen such a miracle of ingenuity. The scene was as pretty a one as can be imagined, though the young people little knew how lovely a picture they helped to make in the midst of their pastoral surroundings. Six charming faces they were, happy with girlish joy, sweet and bright from loving hearts, and pure, innocent, earnest living. Bell was radiant, issuing orders for the spread of the feast, flying here and there, laughing over a stuffed snake under a bush (Geoff's device), and talking merry nonsense with Hugh, her arch eyes shining with mischief under her great straw hat.

Marcus Aurelius, the parrot, talked, and the canaries sang as if this were the

last opportunity any of them ever expected to have; while the embroidered butterflies and stuffed birds fluttered and swayed and danced on the quivering tree-twigs beneath them almost as if they were alive.

The table-cloth was spread on the floor, in real picnic fashion, for the boys would allow neither tables nor chairs, and the lunch was simply delectable. Mrs. Winship, Mrs. Brayton, and Mrs. Pennell, with affectionate forethought, had brought everything that schoolgirls and boys particularly affect—jelly-cake, tarts, and hosts of other goodies. How the girls remembered their closetful of "attempts" at home; how they roguishly exchanged glances, yet never disclosed their failures; how they discoursed learnedly on baking-powder versus saleratus, raw potato versus boiled potato

yeast; and with what dignity and assurance they discussed questions of household economy, and interlarded their conversation with quotations from the "Young Housekeeper's Friend," and the "Bride's Manual."

In the afternoon they played all sorts of games,—some quiet, more not at all so,—until at five o'clock, nearly dark in these short days, they left their make-believe forest and trudged home through the snow, baskets under their arms, declaring it a mistaken idea that picnics should be confined to summer.

"What a gl-orious time we've had!" exclaimed Jo, as they busied themselves about the home dining-room. "Yesterday seems like a horrible nightmare, or, at least, it would if it hadn't happened in the daytime, and if we hadn't the pantry to remind us of the truth. The

things we carried were not so v-e-r-y bad, after all! I was really proud of the buns, and Patty's doughnuts were as 'swelled up' as Mrs. Drayton's."

"And a great deal yellower and spotted-er," quoth Edith, in a sly aside.

"Well," admitted Patty, ruefully, "there certainly was quite enough saleratus in them; but I think it very unbecoming in the maker of the bride's-cake to say anything about other people's mistakes! Bride's cake, indeed!" she finished with a scornful smile.

"True!" said Edith, much crushed by this heartless allusion to what had been the most thorough and expensive failure of the day; "I can't deny it. Proceed with your sarcasm."

"This house 'looks as if it was going to ride out'! as Miss Miranda says," exclaimed Alice. "Do let us try to

straighten it before Sunday! The closets are all in snarls, the kitchen's in a mess, and the less said about the back bedroom the better."

Accordingly, inspired by Alice's enthusiasm, they began to work and to improve the hours like a whole hiveful of busy bees. They put on big aprons and washed pans and pots that had been evaded for two days, made fish-balls for breakfast, dusted, scrubbed, washed, mended, darned, and otherwise reduced the house to that especial and delicious kind of order which is likened unto apple-pie. And thus one week of the joys and trials of this merry half-a-dozen housekeepers was over and gone.

CHAPTER V

OLD MAIDS AND YOUNG

MONDAY morning broke. Such a cold, dismal, drizzly morning! The wind whistled and blew about the cottage, until Lilla suggested tying the clothes-line round the chimneys and fastening it to the strong pine-trees in front, for greater safety. It snowed at six o'clock, it hailed at seven, rained at eight, stopped at nine, and presently began to go through the same varied programme. After breakfast, Bell went to the window and stood dreamily flattening her nose against the pane, while the others

busied themselves about their several tasks.

"Well, girls," said she at length, "we've had four different kinds of weather this morning, so it may clear off after all, though I confess it doesn't look like it. It's too stormy to go anywhere, or for anybody to come to us, so we shall have to try violently in every possible way to amuse ourselves. I must run over to Miss Miranda's for the milk before it rains harder. Perhaps I shall stumble into some excitement on the way; who knows!"

So saying, she ran out, and in a few minutes appeared in the yard wrapped in a bright red water-proof, the hood pulled over her head, and framing her roguish, rosy face. In ten minutes she returned breathless from a race across the garden, and a vain attempt to keep her umbrella

right side out. She entered the room in her usual breezy way, leaving the doors all open, and sank into a chair, with an expression of mysterious mirth in her eyes.

"Guess what's happened!" she asked, with sparkling eyes. "I have the most enormous, improbable, unguessable surprise for you; you never will think, and anyway I can't wait to tell, so here it is: We are all invited to tea this afternoon with Miss Miranda and Miss Jane! Isn't that 'ridikilis'?"

"Do tell, Isabel," squeaked Jo, with a comically irreverent imitation of Miss Sawyer, "air you a-going to accept?"

"Oh, yes, Bell, we'd better go," said Edith Lambert. "I should like to see the inside of that old house. I dare say we shall enjoy it, and it saves cooking."

"We are remarkably favored,"

laughed Bell. "I don't believe that anybody has been invited there since the Sewing Circle met with them three years ago. They live such a quiet, strange, lonely life! Their mother and father died when they were very young, more than thirty years ago. They were quite rich for the times, and left their daughters this big house all furnished and quantities of lovely old-fashioned dishes and pictures. All the rooms are locked, but I'll try and melt Miss Miranda's heart, and get her to show us some of her relics. Scarcely anything has been changed in all these years, except that they have bought a cooking-stove. Miss Jane hates new-fangled things, and is really ashamed of the stove, I think; as to having a sewing-machine, or an egg-beater, or a carpet-sweeper,—why, she would as soon think of changing the

fashion of her bonnet! I believe there isn't such a curious house, nor another pair of such dried-up, half-nice, half-disagreeable people in the country. There's Emma Jane with the butter! I'll meet her at the back door, get her to peel some potatoes and apples, make her sew a white ruffle in her neck, and make some original remark."

Bell's criticism of the Misses Sawyer and their home was quite just. The old brick house stood in a garden which, in the spring-time, was filled with odorous lilacs, blossoming apple-trees, and long rows of currant and gooseberry bushes. In the summer, too, there were actual groves of asparagus, gaudy sunflowers, bright hollyhocks, gay marigolds, royal flower-de-luce,—all respectable, old-fashioned posies, into whose hearts the humming-birds loved to thrust their dainty

beaks and steal their sweetness. Then there were beds paved round with white clam-shells, where were growing trembling little bride's-tears, bachelor's-buttons, larkspur, and china pinks. No modern blossoms would Miss Miranda allow within these sacred ancient places, no begonias, gladioli, and "sech," with their new-fangled, heathenish, unpronounceable names. The old flowers were good enough for her; and, certainly, they made a blooming spot about the dark house.

Now, indeed, there was neither a leaf nor a bud to be seen; snow-birds perched and twittered on the naked apple-boughs, and rifts of snow lay over the sleeping seed-souls of the hollyhocks and marigolds, keeping them just alive and no more, in a freezing, cold-blooded sort of way common to snow.

But if the garden outside looked like a relic of the olden time, the rooms inside seemed even more so. The "keeping-room" had been refurnished fifteen or twenty years before, but so well had it been kept, that there still hovered about it a painful air of newness. Over the stiff black hair-cloth sofa hung a funeral wreath in a shell frame, surrounded by the Sawyer family photographs—husbands and wives always taken in affectionate attitudes, that their relations might never be misunderstood. In a corner stood the mahogany "what-not" with its bead watch-cases, shells, and glass globes covering worsted-work flowers, together with more family pictures, daguerreotypes in black cases on the top shelf, and a marvelous blue china vase holding peacock feathers. Then there was a gorgeous "drawn in" rug

before the fireplace, with impossible purple roses and pink leaves on its surface, and a marble-topped table holding a magnificent lamp with a glass fringe around it, and a large piece of red flannel floating in the kerosene.

All these glories the girls were allowed to view as a great favor granted at Bell's earnest request. They examined the parlor and the curiosities in the dining-room cupboard with awe-struck faces, though their sobriety was almost overcome at the sight of some of the works of art which Miss Miranda held up for their reverential admiration.

Upstairs there were rooms scarcely ever opened. The bedsteads were four-posted, and so high with many feather beds that their sleepy occupants must have ascended a step-ladder to get into them, or climbed up the posts hand over

hand and dropped down into the downy depths. The counterpanes and comforters were quilted in wonderful patterns. There was the "wild-goose chase," the "log cabin," the "rocky mountain," the "Irish plaid," and a "charm quilt," in twelve hundred pieces, no two of which were alike. The windows in the best chamber had white cotton curtains with elaborate fringes; the looking-glass was long and narrow with a yellow-painted frame, and a picture, in the upper half, of Napoleon crossing the Alps, the Alps in question being very pointed and of a sky-blue color, while Napoleon, in full-dress uniform, with never an outrider nor a guide, was galloping up and over the dizzy peaks on a skittish-looking pony.

These things nearly upset Jo's gravity, and she quite lost Miss Sawyer's favor

by coughing down an irrepressible giggle when she was shown a painting of Burns and His Mary, done in oil by Miss Hannah, the oldest sister of the family, and long since dead. Miss Sawyer had no doubt that Hannah's genius was of the highest order, although the specimens of her skill handed down would astonish a modern artist. Burns and His Mary were seated on a bank belonging to a landscape certainly not Scottish; His Mary, with a pink tarlatan dress on, tucked to the waist; while a brook was seemingly purling over Burns' coat-tails spread out behind him on the bank. It was this peculiar detail which aroused Jo's mirth, as well it might, so that she could not trust herself to examine with the others Miss Hannah's last and finest effort — "Maidens welcoming General Washington in the streets of Alexan-

dria." The maidens, thirteen in number, were precisely alike in form and feature, all very smooth as to hair, long as to waist, short as to skirt, pointed as to toe, and carrying bouquets of exactly the same size and structure, tied up with green ribbon.

The tour of inspection finished, the girls sat down to chat over their tatting and crochet work, while the two ladies went out to prepare supper.

"My reputation is gone," whispered Jo, solemnly. "To think that I should have laughed when I had been behaving so beautifully all the afternoon; but Robbie Burns was the last straw that broke the camel's back of my politeness; I couldn't have helped it if Miss Miranda had eaten me instead of frowning at me."

"What do you think?" cried Lilla,

jumping up impulsively and knocking down her chair in so doing, "I'm going to beard the lion in his den, and see if they won't let me help them get supper. Don't you want to come, Jo?"

The two girls ran across the long, cold hall, opened the kitchen door stealthily, and Jo asked in her sweetest tones, "Can't we set the table or help in any way, Miss Miranda?"

"No, I thank you, Josephine; there is nothing to do, or leastways you wouldn't know where things are, and wouldn't be any good. The Porter girl may come in if she wants to, but two of you would only clutter up the kitchen."

So Lilla went in meekly, and poor Jo flew back to the parlor, smarting under a bitter sense of disgrace. The sisters fortunately knew nothing of Lilla's aptitude for blunders, else she never would

have been suffered to touch their precious household gods. As it was, by dint of extreme care, she managed to get the plum sauce on the table, and to set the chairs around it, without any serious disaster. To be sure, in cutting the dried beef, she notched a memorandum of the pieces shaved on each of her fingers, so that when she finished they were perfect little calendars of suffering; however, this only concerned herself, and she did not murmur, as most of her mistakes implicated other people.

At half-past five they sat down to supper; and such a supper! Miss Miranda was evidently anxious to impress the young people. The best pink "chany" set had been unearthed, and there were besides other old dishes of great magnificence. Quaint British lustre pitchers held the milk and cream, a green dragon

plate the cookies, and the "Sheltered Peasant" saucers came in for general admiration.

The china was not more notable than the food. There were light soda biscuits, large in size and thick, and there was cold buttermilk bread; a blue and white bowl held tomato preserves, while a glass one was full of delicious apple-sauce cooked in maple-syrup; then there was a round, creamy cottage-cheese, white as a snow-ball; a golden, dried-pumpkin pie, baked in a deep yellow plate; the brownest and plummiest and indigestible-est of all plummy cakes, with doughnuts and sugar gingerbread besides. This array of good things being taken in with rapid and rabid glances, the girls exchanged involuntary looks of delight, and even emitted audible signs of happiness. To say that

Miss Mirandy was evidently anxious to impress the young people

they did justice to the repast would be a feeble expression, for in truth the meals of their own preparation were irregular as to time, indifferent as to quality, and sometimes, when they calculated carelessly and unwisely, even small as to quantity.

After tea was over, each of the girls was required to give, in answer to a string of questions asked, her entire family history; for no tidbit of information concerning other people's affairs was uninteresting to Miss Jane or Miss Miranda. This cross-examination being finished, they rose to go, unable to bear any longer the quiet, proper, suppressed atmosphere that pervaded the house. While they had been admiring the quaint, old-fashioned relics and busy devouring the appetizing New England goodies, they were quite at ease, but an hour or

two of conversation had exhausted their adaptability. When they had taken their leave, and the sound of their merry voices and ringing laughter floated in from the country road, Miss Miranda sank into a chair, and waved a fan excitedly to and fro, her mouse-colored complexion quite flushed and pink from the unwonted dissipation.

"Wall, Jane," said she, "it's over now, and we've done our dooty by Mis' Winship; she's a good neighbor, and I wanted to act right by Isabel when her Ma was away, but of all the crazy, 'stivering' girls I ever see, them do beat all; though they did behave tolerable well this afternoon."

"They seemed to enjoy their supper," said Miss Jane; "I never saw girls make a heartier meal."

"They did for certain," continued Mi-

randa, "too hearty most. I thought. That light-haired girl with the blue ear-rings left her meat hash, that'll sour before we can warm it over again, and et and et fruit cake till I was afraid she'd have fits at the table. We ought to be very thankful we hevn't any young ones or men-folks to cook for, Jane."

And with that expression of gratitude on her lips, she lighted a candle, and after locking up the house securely, the two spinsters went to their bedrooms to sleep the sleep of the calm and the virtuous.

Their merry visitors, undisturbed by the pelting rain from above, and the deep "slush" beneath, waded over into their own grounds with many a hearty laugh and jest.

"Oh, how delightful our own sitting-room looks!" exclaimed Patty, as they

opened the door and gathered about the cheerful fire on the hearth. And, indeed, it did, after the stiff, prim arrangement of the rooms they had left. The flickering blaze cast soft shadows on the walls, and touched the marbles on the brackets with rosy tints; the canary-birds were fast asleep with their heads hidden under their wings, and the dog and cat were snoozing peacefully together on the hearth-rug. The young people, as well as the room, belonged to another generation than Miss Miranda's and Miss Jane's, a brighter, freer, fresher one, with a wider outlook, and quite different problems and responsibilities.

"We never can be jollier than this!" cried Lilla, in an irrepressible burst of appreciation. "Oh, that it might last forever, and that seminaries for young ladies might be turned into zoölogical

gardens! Then we could keep house here this week, the next week, and eternally, taking tea with Miss Miranda whenever she asked us to come. What a good supper that was, girls! Oh, Bell and Jo, you ought to be overcome with remorse when you think what you might give us to eat, if you were only skillful, energetic, and ingenious!"

"You're the very essence of thanklessness!" answered Bell, in high dudgeon. "It's nothing less than fiery martyrdom to cook for you girls, when you are so ungrateful. Your special seminary will not be so far removed from a zoölogical garden when *you* return to it, that is certain!"

"My dear child, I am sorry already for my remark," said Lilla, in feigned repentance. "It was very thoughtless in me to arouse your anger until after

the next meal. Any impertinence of ours is sure to be visited upon us in the form of oatmeal porridge, or salt fish and crackers."

"Lilla Porter, if you want to be an angel by and by, it would be better to draw your thoughts away from eatables for a time; you talk quite too much about food," said Edith Lambert, who had a very hearty appetite, but never called attention to it. "When you have done with your nonsense, I have something to propose for our final 'good time.' We have only four days, 't is true, and 'pity 't is 't is true'; but we must go away with flying colors, and so astonish the natives with our genius that the village will talk of us for months to come."

"Si-lence in court!" cried Jo, impressively. "Let me offer you the coal hod for a platform; it won't tip over; go

on, you look as dignified as a police-man."

"Stop your nonsense, Jo. You remember, Bell, the evening when we made a comic pantomime of 'Young Lochinvar,' and acted it before the teachers and seniors?"

"Indeed I do," laughed Bell, in recollection. "We girls took all the characters. What fun it was!"

"Why can't we do that again, changing and improving it, of course? The boys are so clever and bright about anything of the kind that they would be irresistibly funny. What do you think?"

"I like the idea," exclaimed Patty Weld. "Uncle Harry's large hall would be just the place for it, and the stage is already there."

"So it is; how fortunate," agreed Alice; "we couldn't think of anything

that would be greater fun. How shall we cast the characters? You must be the bride, Bell, the 'fair Ellen!' you will do it better than anybody. Jo will make up into the funniest old lady for a mother, and the rest of us can be the bride-maidens. Hugh Pennell will be a glorious Young Lochinvar, if he can be persuaded to run away with Bell—" this with a sly glance at her hostess.

"Yes," said Edith, "and poor Jack will have to be the 'craven bridegroom,' who loses his bride, and Geoff, the stern parient."

"Uncle Harry will read the poem for us, I know," continued Bell; "he does that sort of thing often at the church, and does it beautifully. Phil Howard, Royal Lawrence, and Harry will be bridemen. We'll perform the piece in such a tragic way that each

separate hair in the audience will stand erect.''

''But, oh, the labor of it, girls!'' sighed Patty — ''wooden horses to be made for the elopement scene, Scottish dresses, and all sorts of toggery to be hunted up; can we ever do it in time, with our house-cleaning before us?''

''Nonsense, of course we can,'' rejoined Bell, energetically. We will consult every book on private theatricals, Scottish history, manners, and costumes in this house, and Uncle Harry's, too. Let us get up at five to-morrow morning, have a simple breakfast of—''

''Cornmeal mush or dry bread and milk,'' finished Lilla, with grim sarcasm. ''If time must be saved, of course, it must come out of the cooking! How are we to do this amount of work on a low diet, I should like to know?''

"How are the cooks to get time for anything outside the kitchen if they humor your unnatural appetites? Out of kindness, we propose to lower you gradually, meal by meal, into the pit of boarding-school fare."

" 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' I don't care to be starved beforehand by way of getting used to it," retorted Lilla, as she lighted the bedroom candles. "Come, dears, do cover the fire; it was sleepy-time an hour ago, and if you want to see something beautiful, look through the piazza window."

Beneath them lay the steep river bank, smooth with its white, glittering crust, above which a few naked alders pushed their snow-weighted finger-tips; one rugged old pine-tree stood in the garden, grand, dark, and fearless; the quiet part of the river had been turned by

King Winter into an icy mirror; but over the dam a hundred yards below, the waters tumbled too furiously to be frozen. The old bridge looked like a silver string tying together the two little villages, and over all was the dazzling winter moonlight.

Six dreamy faces now at the cottage window. Six girlish figures, all drawn closely together, with arms lovingly clasped. The white beauty, and the solemn stillness of the picture hushed them into quietness. One minute passed and then another, while the spell was working, till at length Bell impulsively bent her brown head, and said softly: "If the minister were here he would say, 'Let us pray.' It makes me want to whisper, 'Dear Lord, make us pure and white within, as thy world is without.'"

"Amen," murmured Edith and Patty, in the same breath.

"Pull down the curtain," sighed Jo; "it makes me feel wicked!"

"Ah, don't, don't, not quite yet!" pleaded Edith, "it is too heavenly and it can't do us any harm to feel wicked. It reminds me of Tennyson's 'St. Agnes' Eve,' of the white, white picture she looked out upon from her convent window the night she was lifted to the golden doors of heaven—the poem you recited for the medal, Alice,—say a verse of it."

And Alice, half under her breath, repeated the lovely lines:

"As these white robes are soil'd and dark
To yonder shining ground;
As this pale taper's earthly spark,
To yonder argent round;

So shines my soul before the Lamb,
My spirit before Thee;
So, in mine earthly house I am
To that I hope to be!"

CHAPTER VI

"THE END OF THE PLAY"

ON the next morning, and, indeed, on all of those left of their stay, the six housekeepers were up at an alarmingly early hour, so that the sun, accustomed to being the earliest of all risers, felt himself quite behindhand and outshone.

In vain he clambered up over the hillside in a desperate hurry; the girls were always before him with lighted candles. As for the clock, it held up its hands with astonishment, and struck five shrill exclamation points of surprise to see six wide-awake young persons tumbling

out of their warm nests before the world was lighted or heated.

The day's hours were hardly enough for the day's plans, for there were farewell coasting, skating, and sleighing parties, besides active daily preparations for the pantomime. The costumes of the boys were gorgeous to behold, and were fashioned entirely by the girls' clever fingers. They consisted of scarlet or blue flannel shirts, short plaid kilts, colored stockings striped with braid, sashes worn over shoulders, and jaunty little caps with bobbing quills.

On the last happy evening of their stay, the eventful evening of "Young Lochinvar," the guests gathered from all the surrounding country to see the frolic. There were people from North Edgewood, South Edgewood, East Edgewood, and West Edgewood; from Edge-

wood Upper Corner, Edgewood Lower Corner, and Edgewood Four Corners, and everybody had brought his uncles and cousins.

In the big dressing-room the young actors were assembled,—and fortunately in a high state of exuberance and excitement, else they would have been decidedly frightened at the ordeal before them. Jo, mirror in hand, was trying to make herself look seventy; and, though she had not succeeded, she had transformed herself into a very presentable Scottish dame, with her short satin gown and apron, lace kerchief and spectacles. Edith was giving a pair of pointed burnt-cork eyebrows to Hugh, that he might wear a sufficiently dashing and defiant countenance for Lochinvar, while Jack stood before the glass practicing his meek expression for the jilted bridegroom.

Jo was trying to make herself look

Bell had sunk into a chair, and folded her hands to "get up" her courage. As to her dress, nobody knew whether it was the proper one for a Scottish bride or not; but it was the only available thing, and certainly she looked in it a very bewitching and sufficient excuse for Lochinvar's rash folly. It was of some shining white material, and came below the ankle, just showing a pair of jaunty high-heeled slippers; the skirt was 'broidered and flounced to the belt, the waist simple and full, with short puffed sleeves; while a bridal veil and dainty crown of flowers made her as winsome and bonny as a white Scottish rose. Emma Jane Perkins stood in one corner paralyzed by her own good looks. Her red hair was waved and hanging in her neck, and her dress was white. She hoped she could be trusted to bring in

this overpowering weight of beauty at the right moment, but felt a little doubtful.

Uncle Harry stumbled in at the low door.

"Are you ready, young fry?" asked he. "It is half-past seven, and we ought to begin."

"Put out the footlights, give the people back their money, and tell them the prima donna is dangerously ill!" gasped Bell, faintly, fanning herself with a box-cover. "I don't believe I can ever do it. Hugh, are you perfectly sure our horse won't break down on the stage when we elope?"

"Calm yourself, 'fair Ellen,' and trust to my horsemanship. Doesn't the poem say:

'Through all the wide Border his steed was the best'?

"And doesn't this exactly embody Scott's idea?"—pointing to a wild and cross-eyed wooden effigy mounted on a pair of trucks.

* * * * * *

You have all read Sir Walter Scott's poem of "Young Lochinvar," and many a time, I hope, for they are brave old verses:

Oh, young Lochinvar is come out of the West,
Through all the wide Border his steed was the best,
And, save his good broadsword, he weapons had none;
He rode all unarmed, and he rode all alone.
So faithful in love, and so dauntless in war,
There never was knight like the young Lochinvar.

And then, you remember, the young knight rode fast and far, stayed not for brakes, stopped not for stones, but all in vain; for ere he alighted at Netherby Gate, the fair Ellen, overcome by parental authority, had consented to be married to another:

For a laggard in love and a dastard in war
Was to wed the fair Ellen of brave Lochinvar.

But he, nothing daunted, boldly entered the bridal hall among bridemen and bridemaids and kinsmen, thereby raising so general a commotion that the bride's father cried at once, the poor craven bridegroom being struck quite dumb:

"Oh, come ye in peace here, or come ye in war,
Or to dance at our bridal, young Lord Lochinvar?"

The lover answers with apparent indifference that though he has in past times been exceedingly fond of the young person called Ellen, he has now merely come to tread a measure and drink one cup of wine with her, for although love swells like the tide, it ebbs like it also. So he drinks her health, while she sighs and blushes, weeps and smiles, alternately; then he takes her soft hand, her parents fretting and fuming the while, and leads the dance with her,—he so stately, she so lovely, that they are the subject of much envy, admiration, and sympathy. But while thus treading the measure, he whispers in her ear some-

thing to which she apparently consents without much unwillingness, and at the right moment they dance out from the crowd of kinsmen to the door of the great hall, where in the darkness the charger stands ready saddled. Quick as thought the dauntless lover swings his fair Ellen lightly up, springs before her on the saddle, and they dash furiously away:

"She is won! We are gone, over bank,
bush, and scaur;
They'll have fleet steeds that follow,"
quoth young Lochinvar.

As soon as their flight is discovered, there is wild excitement and hasty mounting of all the Netherby Clan; there is racing and chasing over the fields, but "the laggard in love and the

dastard in war" never recovers his lost Ellen.

So daring in love, and so dauntless in war,
Have ye e'er heard of gallant like young Lochinvar?

Uncle Harry read the poem through in such a stirring way that the audience was fairly warmed into interest; then, standing by the side of the stage with the curtain rolled up, he read it again, line by line, or verse by verse, to explain the action.

During the first stanza, Lochinvar made his triumphal entrance, riding a prancing hobby-horse with a sweeping tail of raveled rope, and a mane to match, gorgeous trappings adorned with sleigh-bells and ornamental paper de-

signs, and bunches of cotton tacked on for flecks of foam.

Lochinvar himself wore gray pasteboard armor, a pair of carpet slippers with ferocious spurs, red mittens, and carried a huge carving-knife. His costume alone was food for amusement, but the manner in which he careered wildly about the stage, displaying his valorous horsemanship as he rode to the wedding, was perfectly irresistible.

The next scene opened in Netherby Hall, showing the bridal party all assembled in gala dress. Into this family gathering presently strode the determined lover, with his carving-knife sheathed for politeness' sake. Then followed a comical pantomime between the angry parents, who demanded his intentions, and the adroit Lochinvar, who declared them to be peaceful. The father

(Geoffrey Strong) at last gave him unwilling permission to drink one cup of wine and tread one measure with the bride. She kissed the goblet (a tin quart measure), he quaffed off the spirit, and threw down the cup. Fair Ellen bridled with pleasure, and promenaded about the room on his arm, while the bridegroom looked on wretchedly, the parents quarreled, and the bride-maidens whispered:

"'Twere better by far
To have matched our fair cousin with
young Lochinvar."

At the first opportunity, the guests walked leisurely out, and young Lochinvar seized an imaginary chance to draw Ellen hastily back into the supper room. He whispered the magic word into her ear, she started in horror and drew back;

he urged; she demurred; he pleaded; she showed signs of surrender; he begged on his bended knees; she yielded at length to the plan of the elopement, with all its delightful risks. Then Lochinvar darted to the outside door and brought in his charger,—rather an unique proceeding, perhaps, but necessary under the circumstances, inasmuch as the audience could not be transported to the proper scene of the mounting. As the flight was to be made on horseback, much ingenuity and labor were needed to arrange it artistically. The horse's head was the work of Geoff's hand, and for meekness of expression, jadedness, utterly-cast-down-and-worn-out-ness, it stood absolutely unrivalled. A pair of trucks were secreted beneath the horse-blankets, and the front legs of the animal pranced gaily out in front, taking that

startling and decided curve only seen in pictures of mowing-machines and horse-races. Lochinvar quieted his fiery beast, and swung Ellen into the saddle, leaped up after her, waved his tall hat in triumph, and started off at a snail's pace, the horse being dragged by a rope from behind the scenes. When half way across the stage, Ellen clasped her lover's arm and seemed to have forgotten something. Everybody in the room at once guessed it must be some part of her trousseau. She explained earnestly in pantomime; Lochinvar refused to return; she insisted; he remained firm; she pouted and seemingly said that she wouldn't elope at all unless she could have her own way. He relented, they went back to Netherby Hall, and Ellen ran up a secret stairway and came down laden with maidenly traps. Greatly to

the merriment of the observers, she loaded them on the docile horse in the very face of Lochinvar's displeasure—two small looking-glasses, a bird-cage, and a French bonnet. She then leisurely drew on a pair of huge India rubbers, unfurled a yellow linen umbrella, and just as her lover's patience was ebbing, suffered herself to be remounted. The second trip across the stage was accomplished in safety, though with anything but the fleetness common to elopements either in life or in poetry.

Then came the pursuit—a most graphic and stirring scene, giving large opportunities to the supernumerary characters. Four bridemen on dashing hobby-horses, jumping fences, leaping bars and ditches in hot excitement; four bridemaids, with handkerchiefs tied over their heads, running hither and thither in

confusion; the old mother and father, limping in and straining their eyes for a sight of their refractory daughter; and last of all, poor Jack, the deserted bridegroom, on foot, with never a horse left to him, puffing and panting in his angry chase.

It was done! How people laughed till they cried, how they continued to laugh for five minutes afterward, I cannot begin to tell you. The performance had been the perfection of fun from first to last, and seemed all the more inspiring because it was original with the bright bevy of young folks who had enacted the poem. Uncle Harry had renewed his youth, and received the plaudits of the crowd with unconcealed pleasure. The hero and heroine, Lochinvar and fair Ellen, had so generously provided dramatic opportunities for the minor

actors that all had enjoyed an equal chance in the favor of the audience. There was neither envy, jealousy, nor heartburning; each of the girls gloried in the achievements of the others, and confessed that the mechanical ingenuity of the boys had made the triumph possible.

At length the lights were all out, the finery bundled up, the many farewells said, and as the girls, escorted by their faithful young squires, trudged along the path through the orchard for the last time, sad thoughts would come, although the party was much too youthful and cheery to be gloomy.

"Depart, fun and frolic!" sighed Lilla, in mournful tones. "Depart, breakfasts at any hour and other delights of laziness! Enter, boarding-school, books, bells, and other banes of existence!"

"It is really too awful to think or to speak about," sighed Jo. "Now I know how Eve must have felt when she had to pack up and leave the garden; only she went because she insisted upon eating of the tree of knowledge, while I must go and eat, whether I will or not."

"Your appetite for that special fruit isn't so great that you'll ever be troubled with indigestion," dryly rejoined Patty, the student of the "Jolly Six."

"Fancy starting off at half-past ten to-morrow morning; fancy reaching school at one, and sitting down stupidly to a dinner of broth, fried liver, and cracker-pudding! Ugh! it makes me shiver," said Alice.

"Think of us," cried Geoff, "going back to college, and settling into regular 'digs.'"

"If 'digs' is a contraction of digni-

taries,'' said Edith, saucily, ''you'll never be those; if you mean you are to delve into the mines of learning, that's doubtful, too; but if it's a corruption of Digger Indian, I should say there might be some force in your remark. Oh, what matchless war-whoops you gave in the pursuit to-night. Every separate hair in Betty Bean's head stood on end, and the Misses Sawyer sat close together and trembled visibly!''

''It was a wonderful evening,'' remarked Hugh. ''There were persons there who said that Bell was beautiful and I was clever.''

''I don't want to annoy you,'' laughed Jo, ''but I heard exactly the opposite.''

''Which only goes to show that both of us are both,'' retorted Bell.

''And that sentence goes to show that a week's absence from the class in pars-

ing and analysis has had its effect," said Patty. "Look at our angel cottage, girls! Doesn't it look like a marble night-lamp with the hall light shining through all its sweet little windows?"

"The fire isn't out, that's fortunate," observed Alice, as she saw a small cloud of smoke issuing from the chimney.

"Good night and sweet dreams," called the boys, when Geoffrey had unlocked the door of the cottage.

"Sweet dreams, indeed!" the girls answered in chorus. "The kitchen closet to put in order, also the shed, two trunks to pack, twenty-four hours' dishes to wash, and a million 'odd jobs' more or less."

"Don't forget the borrowed articles to be returned," reminded Hugh. "We'll take the pung and do that for you, also attend to the cleaning of the shed, which

is more in our line than yours. Boys, let us give one rousing cheer for Dr. and Mrs. Winship, the model parents of the century!''

The welkin rang with hurrahs, in which the girls joined with hearty vigor.

''Now another rousing one for the model daughter of the century,'' cried Bell, modestly; ''the model daughter who had the bright idea and begged the model parents to assent to it. Of what use would have been the model parents, pray, unless they had had the model daughter with the bright idea?''

More cheers, lustier than ever, floated out into the orchard.

''The model daughter would have had a dull house-party with nothing but her bright idea to keep her company,'' said Jo Fenton, suggestively.

''Three cheers for the house party!

Three cheers for the 'Jolly Six!' Hip, hip, hurrah!" and at this moment Uncle Harry's window opened and across the breadth of the orchard came the warning note of a conch shell, an instrument of much power, with which Uncle Harry called his men to dinner in haying time. Had it not been for this message of correction it is possible the enthusiastic young people might have cheered one another till midnight.

* * * * * *

It was afternoon of the next day. The six little housekeepers were gone, and the dejected boys went into the garden to take a last look at the empty cottage. On the door was a long piece of fluttering white paper, tied with black ribbon. It proved to be the parting words of the "Jolly Six."

How dear to our hearts are the scenes of vacation,
When fond recollection presents them to view!
The coasting, the sleigh-rides, and—chief recreation—
That gayest of picnics with squires so true!

And now, torn away from the loved situation,
The bump of conceit will explosively swell,
As proudly we think, never since the creation,
Did any young housekeepers keep house so well!

Think not our great genius too highly we've rated,

For all that belongs to the kitchen we know;
And feel that from infancy we have been fated
For scrubbing and cooking, far more than for show.

The cook-stove and dish-pan to us are so charming,
So toothsome the compounds we often have mixed,
That though you would think the news somewhat alarming,
On housekeeping ever our minds are quite fixed.

Good-by to all hope of a fame universal!
Farewell, vain ambition,—that way madness lies!

The rest of our youth shall be one long rehearsal
For life in six cottages, all of this size!

B. W.
J. F.
P. W.
A. F.
E. L.
L. P.
×
Their joint mark.

Witnessed by me this morning,
Jack Frost, Notary Public.
Sealed with a snow flake.

The boys read this nonsense with hearty laughter, and latching the gate behind them, they went off, leaving the place deserted.

"They are awfully jolly girls," said Jack.

"Better than jolly," added Geoffrey, thoughtfully.

"You're right, Geoff; miles better and miles more than jolly," agreed Hugh. "None like 'em in Brunswick."

"Or in Portland."

"Or in Bath."

"Or in Augusta."

And with this outburst of respectful admiration the lads passed out of view.

The setting sun shone rosily in at the piazza window that afternoon, but fell blankly against a gray curtain, instead of smiling into six laughing faces as before.

A noisy crowd of sparrows settled on the bare branches over the door-step, twittering as if they expected the supper of bread-crumbs which girlish hands had been wont to throw them, and at last flew

away disappointed. In the old house opposite, Miss Miranda sat in her high-backed chair, knitting as fiercely as ever, while Miss Jane was at her post by the window, drearily watching the sun go down.

She turned away with the glow of a new thought in her wrinkled face. "Mirandy!" called she, sharply.

No answer but the sharp click of knitting-kneedles.

"Mirandy Sawyer! What do you say to invitin' our niece, Hannah, down here from the farm, and givin' her a couple of terms' schoolin'? Aurelia has her hands full raisin' that great family of children. She'd be glad one of 'em should have some advantages. We ain't seen Hannah since she was ten, but she was a nice appearin', pretty behavin' girl."

Miranda glanced out of the window without speaking.

"It seems like a streak of sunshine had gone out o' the place with them young creeters, and I think we've lived here alone about long enough!" continued Miss Jane. "I should like to give one girl a chance of being a brighter, livelier woman than I am. Yes, you may drop your knittin', Mirandy, but you know it as well as I do!"

No wonder that Miss Miranda looked very much as if she had been struck by lightning; the more wonder that the quiet old house didn't shake to its foundation, when this proposal was made. Indeed, old Tabby, on the hearth-rug, did wake up, startled, no doubt by the consciousness that a child's hand might pull her tail in days to come.

"It does seem dreadful lonesome,"

Miss Miranda agreed, after a long pause. "Hear Topsy howling in the kitchen; she's missin' the young life that's gone, and she'll have to git used to us all over again, jest as I said. Hannah would be considerable expense to us, and make a sight o' work, too. Of course, you've thought o' that?"

"We take about so many steps, anyway," argued Miss Jane, "and if the child's spry and handy, she may save us a few now and then. Tabitha ain't so much care, nor near so confinin', sence Topsy came to keep her comp'ny—even two cats is better'n one."

"There goes Emma Jane Perkins," exclaimed Miss Miranda, from her post of observation. "She looks different somehow. I've always said I should think her face would ache, it's so hombly, but I guess she's passed her hombliest,

and is going to improve. Mebbe Mis' Perkins has been givin' her spring medicine."

"I guess the 'spring medicine' has been two weeks' good time with that trainin' and careerin' houseful of girls," rejoined Miss Jane, wisely. "Everybody in the village sits up kind o' smart and looks as if they'd taken a tonic. Maybe I'd better write to Aurelia on Sunday, Mirandy."

"Mebbe you had, Jane, and if she can't spare Hannah, say we'll take Rebecca, though I always thought she was a self-willed child, too full of her own fancies to be easy managed."

This is not the time for Rebecca's story; but, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Aurelia Randall could not spare Hannah, who was docile, industrious, and of much assistance with the house-work,

and as a matter of fact it was the somewhat dreaded Rebecca who did come from the far-away farm to live in the dull old house with Miss Jane and Miss Miranda. And all that befell this new family circle, formed almost by accident, and all that Rebecca did, or became, as well as everything that happened during the gradual beautifying of Emma Jane Perkins, was, as you see, the indirect result of Bell Winship's madcap experiment in housekeeping.

[THE END.]