

Speed Nell

A House Party with the Tucker Twins



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A House Party with the Tucker Twins

CHAPTER I

MAXTON

There may be more fun than a house-party, but I doubt it. Certainly I, Page Allison, have never had it. What could be more delightful than to spend two weeks in a beautiful old country home with such a host as General Price, and to have as fellow guests all the girl friends you care for most in the world, – to say nothing of some of the male persuasion that at least you don't hate?

Harvie Price had been promised this house-party by his grandfather as reward of merit, and, like most things earned by hard labor, it proved to be worth the work expended. The Tucker Twins of course were there, Mary Flannagan, Shorty Hawkins, George Massie (alias Sleepy), Wink White, Jim Hart, and Ben Raglan, whose other name was Rags. There were two men from the University whom we did not know before, but it did not take long for us to forget that they were new acquaintances. They fitted in wonderfully well and a few hours found them behaving like old and tried friends. Their names were Jack Bennett and Billy Somers, and both of them hailed from Kentucky. There was a new girl in the party, Jessie Wilcox. She wasn't quite so easy to know as the new boys.

I always feel like crying when I think of dear little Annie Pore's connection with that house-party. She was of course the very first person Harvie asked, the one he wanted most. I think in his mind the party was given to Annie, and when Mr. Pore with characteristic selfishness and stubbornness refused to let her go, it was a blow indeed.

His plea was that he needed her to keep the store for him. He had hired a clerk after Annie went to boarding-school, and owing to his growing business, had kept the boy on through vacation, but on the eve of the house-party had seen fit to get rid of him, having sent him on an unasked for and undesired holiday.

"I found it out only this morning," said Harvie gloomily.

He had come to meet us at the landing, most of us having arrived by boat from Richmond. He was doing his best to look cheerful, feeling that a cloud must not be cast over the entire party because one member could not be there. He said he felt he knew me well enough to speak out on the subject of Mr. Pore, and speak out he did.

"But has your grandfather tried to persuade him to let her come?"

"No! You see Grandfather is a great believer in State's Rights, and he carries his theories down to the individual. He says that Mr. Pore is a wrong-headed father but it is his own affair and he refuses to interfere. He takes the stand that he has no more right to dictate to Mr. Pore how to run his household, than Massachusetts had to interfere in our own little matter of slavery here in Virginia, back in the sixties."

"Poor Annie! We shall have to work out some kind of a scheme for her. I'll tell Mary and the Tuckers. I am sure we can get the tiresome old Englishman to come around somehow."

"I wish I thought so, but I tell you that Mr. Arthur Ponsonby Pore has never been known to change his mind. Besides he is leaving to-day for Richmond to be gone several days."

That is often the way with persons who have not much mind to change; they seem to have none to spare; but Mr. Pore was a cultivated, learned gentleman, – surely he was amenable to reason.

Price's Landing was a quiet little wharf almost hidden by the overhanging willows. It took the boat only a moment to drop one mail bag and take on another, or to do the same by the occasional

passengers. It seemed hardly worth while to go through the motions of landing for such small traffic, but Harvie assured us that in watermelon time or when tobacco was being shipped they were a very important trading point, one of the busiest along the James.

The village was about an eighth of a mile back from the landing and it looked as though not even watermelon time could wake it up. There were two stores, Mr. Pore's and a rival concern; a blacksmith shop, sprawling far out in the road; a schoolhouse; three churches; a post-office; and four residences.

"I'd like to stop and have all of you see Annie now, but Grandfather is expecting us and perhaps we had better come back later on," said Harvie, who was driving one of the vehicles sent to meet us.

The road to Maxton, the Prices' place, skirted the village and then went directly up quite a steep elevation. The house was built on top of the hill commanding a fine view of the river. The lawn sloped down to the water's edge where one could see a very attractive boat-house and several boats riding at anchor.

"Lovely! Lovely!" we exclaimed.

"I'm mighty afraid I'm going to run down that hill and jump in the water," cried Dum.

"Well, hills are certainly made to run down and water to jump in," declared one of the new acquaintances, Billy Somers, who was standing on the springs of the vehicle in the rear holding on by the skin of his teeth and the back seat. "I bid to do what you do."

The mansion (one could not call it just plain house) was a perfect specimen of colonial architecture, red brick of a rich rare tone with a great gallery across the front, the roof of which was supported by huge white pillars. The front door was a marvel of beautiful proportions, line and detail. A great ball might have been given on the porch, or gallery, as it is called in the South. Indeed, a sizable party might have been held on each one of the broad stone steps that led to the lawn. Only a very long-legged person could go up or down those stairs without taking two steps to a tread.

A house like Maxton is very wonderful and beautiful but somehow never seems very homelike to me. Every time you go in and out of your front door to have to tackle those stairs would take from the homey feeling. Now at my home, Bracken, you are closer to Mother Earth and not nearly so grand and toploftical.

Standing on the gallery to greet the guests were General Price and his maiden sister Miss Maria, the general tall and stately and Miss Maria short and fat. It was easy for the brother to look aristocratic and dignified, in fact he could not have looked any other way, so deserved no credit; but for the sister to look equally so was a marvel. Her figure reminded me of Mammy Susan's tomato pincushion, a treasure I had been allowed to play with in my childhood. She was quite as round in the back as the front and her waist was like the equator: an imaginary line extending from east to west. Her face was in keeping with her figure, round and fat, but through those rolls of flesh the high born lady looked out. Her voice was very sweet and the hand that she extended to us was as white as snow. She must have been about seventy years old, but thanks to her rotundity there were no wrinkles on her pink and white face. Of course she was dressed in black silk and old lace! How else could she have been clothed?

The general would have served as a model for the make-up of a movie actor in a before-the-war film. The Tuckers and Mary and I decided later on that we felt just like a movie as we went up those grand broad steps with our host and hostess at the top.

The hall carried out our feeling of being on the screen.

"My, what a place to dance!" whispered Dee to me, but General Price heard her and smiled his approval. He was dignified himself but we were thankful he did not expect us to be.

"You shall dance here to your heart's content, my dear. Many a measure has been trod in this hall."

Dee looked a little depressed at being expected to tread a measure. That sounded rather minuetish to the modern ear. We wondered what he would think of the dances of the day.

Maxton was laid out in the form of a cross with two great wings, one on each side of the hall. The girls were lodged upstairs in one wing, the boys in the other. Downstairs in the boys' wing were the parlors and smoking room and General Price's chamber and office; in the girls', the dining room, breakfast room, sewing room, chamber, linen room, storeroom, Miss Price's chamber and her small sitting room where she directed her household. There was a basement with more storerooms, pantries, a billiard room and a winter kitchen, but in the summer an outside kitchen was used. All of these things we found out later on a tour of inspection with our hostess.

The great hall ran through the house and the back door was exactly like the front. Thanks to the lay of the land, however, there was not quite such a formidable array of steps. It seemed much more homelike in the back than the front. From the rear gallery one stepped into a formal garden, gravel paths, box hedges, labyrinth and all.

"Oh, ain't it great, ain't it great?" cried Mary, dancing up and down the waxed floor of the great bedroom she and I were to occupy. Dum and Dee Tucker were put in the room with the other girl, Jessie Wilcox. If Annie could have come she was to have been with Mary and me.

"I've got no business calling it great, though," she said as she stopped prancing, "when Annie can't be here. What are we to do about it, Page Allison?"

"Let's call Tweedles in consultation. They can think up things."

Tweedles were very glad to come. Miss Wilcox, who had motored over to Maxton several hours ahead of us, had already taken possession of the room and had begun to unpack her many fluffy clothes. Miss Maria had introduced all of us to our fellow visitor and had graciously expressed a desire that we should be good friends. We were willing, but it remained to be seen whether the stranger would meet us half way. She was a beautiful little creature with dark eyes and hair. Evidently she was very dressy or she would not have had to take up two double beds and all the chairs with her clothes. She seemed to have no idea of making room for the Tuckers nor did she make any excuse for spreading herself so promiscuously.

"She needn't think I am going to move them," said Dum. "If they aren't off my bed by bedtime, I'll just go to sleep on them. I wish we could come in with you girls."

"Of course that would never do," declared Dee. "We must stay where Miss Price put us."

"Maybe Miss Wilcox will turn out to be fine," I suggested, hoping to turn the tide of Dum's disapproval.

"Fine! She's too fine. I wish you could see her fluffy ruffles. But this isn't thinking up something to do about poor little Annie. My, I wish Zebedee could have come!"

We all wished the same thing, but since he couldn't come we felt we must think up something for ourselves.

"He could have talked old Ponsonby Pore into letting Annie come, I just know," said Dee.

"Maybe we could do the same thing," I suggested.

"Harvie says nothing will move him."

"Well, one thing sure, we can go to see Annie and he can't drive us out, not after he has visited us at the beach. He'll just have to be polite to us."

"Can't she come up in the evening? Surely she must stop keeping store sometimes," asked Mary.

"Country stores never close. At least the one near us never does. They might miss the sale of a box of matches or a stick of candy. I used to think, when I was a little girl, that I would rather keep a store than do anything in all the world. I talked about it so much that Mammy Susan got right uneasy about me."

"Well, Harvie and Sleepy are blue enough about it, so we must cheer up," said Dee. "We are to be here two weeks and if we behave real well maybe they will ask us for longer, and surely in that time we can make that old stickinthemud come around. Zebedee could think up a way in a minute."

CHAPTER II

THE COUNTRY STORE

The Prices had the right idea about entertaining a crowd of young people: that was to let them entertain each other. If a dozen boys and girls can't have a good time just because they are girls and boys then there is something very dull about them and the combination is hopeless. There was nothing dull about this crowd gathered in the hospitable Price mansion. Harvie was too well bred to let the disappointment about the non-appearance of one guest make him neglect the others. Poor George Massie was the one who could not conceal his feelings. Annie was the first and only girl he had ever cared for and now he sat, a mountain of woe, consuming large quantities of luncheon as though the business of eating were the only solace in life.

"Wake up, Sleepy, the worst is yet to come!" teased Rags.

Sleepy only groaned and dismally accepted another hot biscuit. The funny thing about Sleepy was that he was so in love with Annie that he did not at all mind being teased.

"I am going down to see Annie right after luncheon. Don't you want to go too?" I whispered to Sleepy who was next to me.

"Sure!"

"We are trying to think up a plan by which we can get her hateful old father to let her join us here."

"Brute!"

"Don't you think the girl is pretty, sitting next to Wink?"

Miss Wilcox had plunged into a flirtation with that budding young doctor, placed on her right, not forgetting to turn to her left quite often to include Jack Bennett in her chatter.

"No! Like blondes best!"

Miss Wilcox looked up quickly. I was almost sure she had heard Sleepy. She glanced quite seriously around the table, regarding each girl intently. Certainly there were no decided blondes there except Mary Flannagan, whose hair was red, and even the best friends of dear old Mary could not call her beautiful. The Tucker twins were more brunette than blonde, Dum's hair being red black and Dee's blue black. As for me, Page Allison, I was neither one thing nor the other. My hair was neither light nor dark and my eyes were grey. She need not look at me so hard. I wasn't the blonde that Sleepy liked best.

Farther acquaintance with Jessie Wilcox explained her concern over Sleepy's remark. She was a very nice girl just so long as she was "it," but she could not brook a rival of any sort. She must be the center of attraction, admired by all, praised by all. The minute she felt that there was someone who was considered more beautiful than she was, could dance better, sing better, do anything better, that minute she was a changed being.

Her previous visits to Maxton had been very delightful as she had always been praised and petted to her heart's content. Both General Price and his sister were devoted to her and she was ever a welcome visitor. Her grandfather's home was about ten miles from Price's Landing, and whenever she came from New York to see him she must spend part of her time with the old people at Maxton. Harvie admired her very much, as who would not? She was beautiful, intelligent, very quick-witted and charming. He had never seen her with any other girl except her best friend, who on one occasion had been at Maxton with her, and this friend, being hopelessly plain and rather slow of wit, but served as a foil to the little beauty.

After overhearing Sleepy's announcement about blondes, she looked at me so steadily that I began to blush. I was suddenly very conscious of my tip-tilted nose and of the added toll of

freckles that the summer always exacted from it. I wondered if anyone else was noticing the almost disagreeable expression of her usually sweet countenance.

I was glad when Miss Maria arose as a signal for us to leave the table.

"Make yourselves at home!" the general said in his hospitable way. "Maxton is yours to do with as you please. There are horses in the stables for any of you who want to ride or drive; there are boats on the river; there are swings on the lawn; the tennis court is in condition for matches if you care to play. All I ask of you is not to fall off the horses or let them run away with you and kill you; and not to tumble into the river and drown."

"That seems a reasonable request," I laughed. "How about falling out of the swings or beating each other up with tennis rackets?"

"Oh, well! I must not put too many restrictions on youth," he said, pinching my ear.

Jessie looked at me again rather severely and once more I felt mighty freckled.

"Let's get a rig and go see Annie," suggested Sleepy.

"All right! Tweedles and Mary want to go, too."

"Let's get in ahead of them," he pleaded.

"Come on, Page!" shouted Dum. "We want you in a set of tennis."

"Now I was just going to ask her to come for a row," cried Dee. "Wink and Jim told me to engage you. They have gone to see about the boat."

"Sorry, but I've got a date with Sleepy."

"Humph! Miss Allison seems to be rather in demand," said Jessie to Jack Bennett. She said it in a low voice but I heard quite distinctly.

"Yes! They say she is the most popular girl at her school."

"Oh, is that so? I can't see the attraction."

"Well, she must have it because girls like her as well as the fellows. They say Dr. White is terribly smitten on her."

"Absurd!"

I quite agreed with her. The sooner Wink White stopped hypnotizing himself into thinking he was in love with me, the better I would have liked it. Of course every girl likes to have attention, but I thought entirely too much of Wink to be pleased to have him looking at me like a dying calf. He was such a nice boy, so good looking, so clever, so agreeable, – except when he was alone with me. Then his whole nature seemed to undergo a change. I dreaded being left with him and usually managed to avoid it. He was my fly in the ointment of this house-party. I did not at all relish having this young Kentuckian state it as a fact that Wink was interested in me. Jessie Wilcox was welcome to him if she could persuade him to transfer his affections.

Sleepy and I skimmed away in a spruce red-wheeled buggy with a young horse that evidently liked to be moving.

"Fierce about Annie!" he said. "I'd like to wring that old duffer's neck."

"I hope he has gone before we get there, then," I laughed. "If Mr. Tucker could only get hold of him, I bet he could bring him around."

Mr. Pore had not gone, however, when we drew up at the cross roads where the country store stood. He was engaged in trying to sell a large rake to a farmer, while Annie was busily employed in measuring off two yards and three-quarters of unbleached cotton for the farmer's wife and then computing the amount due when the cotton was worth eight and two-third cents a yard. She completed the calculation just as we came in.

How glad she was to see us! Mr. Pore seemed pleased to renew my acquaintance, too. He gave only a formal greeting to Sleepy but shook my hand in what he meant to be a cordial way. The fact that I was part English and that part of me came up to his idea of social equality, made him look upon me as desirable. He had not forgotten that my mother and his wife had been friends in England. He honestly felt that there were no Americans who were his equals. General Price might

be almost so, but not quite. He saw no reason why his beautiful daughter should not spend her young life weighing out lard and measuring calico for negroes, but every reason why she should not demean herself by mixing socially with any but the highest.

Mr. Pore's store was like every other country store except that it was perhaps a little more orderly, not much though. Order in a country store seems to be impossible. The stock must be so large and so varied to suit all demands that there never is room for it. I have never seen a country store that was not crowded. How the keepers of such stores ever take stock of their wares is a mystery to me. Perhaps they never do, but just go on buying when the supply gets low, and selling off as they can, putting money in the till until it gets full and then sending it to the bank. Usually they run their affairs in a haphazard manner and their books would defy an expert to straighten out. No matter from what walk of life the country storekeepers are drawn, they are all more or less alike, whether they are younger sons of the nobility as was Mr. Pore or elder sons of the soil (with much soil sticking to them) as was old Blinker, who ran the rival emporium at Price's Landing. They always have more stock than they have store, and their books usually look as though entries had been made upside down.

The Pores' store had shelves stretching from one end to the other, down both sides and reaching as high as the ceiling. On these shelves were piled dry-goods of all grades and material, lamps, shoes, harness, hardware, canned goods of every description, crackers, soap, starch, axle grease, false hair, perfume, patent medicines, toys, paint brushes, brooms, tobacco, writing paper, china and glass ware, jars, pots and pans, pokers, baseball bats, millinery, overalls, etc., etc.

The things that were too tall for the shelves, like Grandfather's clock, consequently stood on the floor. The aisle between the counters was blocked with sewing machines, kitchen tables, chairs, lawn mowers, crates of eggs and cases of ginger ale and sarsaparilla. There were barrels of coarse salt and great tins of lard, firkins of mackerel and herring, barrels of flour and sacks of meal. One would think that everything in the world that could be bought or sold was in that little store, but no! A door to one side led into another room and this room was also full to overflowing. There were more barrels of provisions for man and beast; sacks of chicken feed and bran; stoves of all kinds; poultry netting; coils of wire fencing; gardening implements and away back in a corner I spied a coffin.

What a setting for such a jewel as Annie Pore! Her beauty shone resplendent from its background of apron gingham and butter crocks. I fancied I could detect a little redness to her eyelids as though the disappointment in not being at Maxton with her friends had caused some weeping, but her manner was calm and her expression one of resignation to fate and the decrees of a selfish father. I could not help thinking how I would have behaved under the circumstances, or the Tucker twins. I would not have cried, to be sure, but neither would my expression have been resigned. As for Dum and Dee: they would no doubt have broken up the shop.

"We are so sorry Annie can't come to the house-party," I ventured as the farmer who had been haggling for the rake decided not to take it.

Why Mr. Pore was ever able to sell anything I could not see. His manner was so superior and condescending. Harvie told me afterwards that Mr. Pore had succeeded in spite of himself. He was scrupulously honest in the first place and then he always carried the best line of goods. As for the science of salesmanship: he had yet to learn its rudiments. He looked sore and irritated at having failed to make the sale but put on more than ever the manner of insulted royalty. I saw the farmer making for the rival store where a little later he emerged. Blinker had made the sale.

When I ventured the above remark, Annie looked as though she wished I wouldn't, and her father, I am sure, regretted the fact that I was part English, and that English of good blood; otherwise he could easily have annihilated me.

"It is a matter I do not care to discuss," he said with a freezing hauteur.

"Oh, I am not discussing with you, my dear Mr. Pore! I am merely telling you. All of us are so devoted to Annie and we have looked forward to being with her on this house-party all summer. I am sure if Harvie had known earlier that you would not be able to spare Annie at this time, he would have been glad to postpone the party."

"Ahem – I – am compelled to take this occasion for a business trip. When one is engaged in mercantile pursuits, it is necessary to make periodical visits to the city to replenish one's wares."

"Oh, certainly, I understand, but we still are dreadfully sorry about Annie. Of course we know that you want her to have all the pleasure on earth. That is the way fathers are made. We are sure you will make your stay as brief as possible so that Annie can join us at Maxton."

He looked somewhat taken aback and murmured something more about mercantile pursuits. Sleepy sat on a keg of nails with eyes as big as saucers while Annie had the startled expression of one who sees her friend enter the cage of a man-eating lion.

"You see I am an only child, too, Mr. Pore, and my mother is dead, just like Annie's. I know better than anyone how much a father can be to a little motherless daughter, and how that father can plan and deny himself for his child. You can't tell me anything about the love of a father."

As Mr. Pore had never attempted to tell of any such thing, this was most audacious of me. Annie was actually gasping and Sleepy choked, but Mr. Pore looked at me quite solemnly through his gold-rimmed glasses.

"Sometimes my father is called away; you see a country doctor's time is not his own, either, and he has had to leave me just when I felt I most needed him – on birthdays – and – and – all kinds of holidays, but he comes back to me just as fast as he can. My father is thinking of getting an assistant and then he can have more time, I hope. You have had an assistant, too, have you not?"

He bowed gravely.

"Where is he, then?"

"He is away on leave."

"Ill? That is too bad!"

"No, not ill! He is having a much-needed holiday."

"Oh, then he has gone on a trip?"

"I fancy not."

"Why, then I am sure he would be glad to come back and relieve Annie so she can come to Maxton. Oh, Mr. Pore, do please write for him to come on back and take his holiday later!"

"Really, Miss Allison – " he began in his most dignified Oxford donnish manner.

"Oh, I just know you will! You and Father and Mr. Tucker are all just alike. You can't bear to deny your girls any pleasure."

His expression was comical at having these virtues thrust upon him.

"I – er – I – shall endeavor to return from this enforced journey, necessary to replenish the stock which one engaged in mercantile pursuits in the rural districts finds it expedient to carry, and on my return if all goes well with the business, I shall permit my daughter to enjoy the hospitality extended to her by my neighbor, General Price."

"I knew you would! I knew you would!" and I shook his limp hand which Dee Tucker had once said reminded her of nothing so much as an old pump handle that had lost the sucker. Everybody knows how that feels, at least everybody who has had dealings with pumps. You grasp the handle expecting some resistance and a flow of water in response; but when the sucker has disappeared, the handle will fly up in a strange limp manner and unless the pumper is wary there is danger of getting a lick in the nose.

I cared not for a response. If no flow of kindness was the result of my enthusiasm, I cared not a whit. Annie was to be one of the house-party and I had saved the day. I remembered how Mr. Tucker, dear old Zebedee, had declared that he had won over Mr. Pore by treating him like a human being, that time he had persuaded him to let Annie come to Willoughby to the vacation party. I had

treated him as I would any ordinary kind father and he had been so astonished and pleased at his portrait that he had unconsciously accepted it as a likeness and begun to pose to look like it.

CHAPTER III

ENGAGING IN MERCANTILE PURSUITS

A warning whistle from the up-going steamboat made the dignified Mr. Pore step lively. With admonitions to Annie to keep an eye to business and with a limp handshake to Sleepy and me, a peck of a kiss on Annie's white brow, he seized his ancient Gladstone bag and made for the landing. That bag must have been a leftover from the old days in England, and more precious it was in its owner's eyes than the finest new suitcase that money might buy.

All of us were relieved that he was gone. I giggled with joy and Annie smiled at Sleepy and me as she had not done since we arrived.

"All the gang is coming down soon to see you, honey. They would have come with us but we slipped off," said I, going behind the counter to hug my little friend. I always have had a way of calling Annie my little friend, which is most absurd as she is inches taller than I am, but there has been a feeling somehow that she must be protected, and persons who must be protected seem little even when they are big.

"Gee, I wish I could take you on a little drive before they come!" exclaimed Sleepy.

"That is very kind of you but of course I can't leave the shop," sighed Annie.

"Yes, you can! I am here!"

"But I wouldn't let you keep shop for me," laughed Annie.

"I'd like to know why not – I bet I can sell more things than you can. Just you try me."

"It isn't that! I just couldn't let you. It is something I have to do but it is not right for you to do it."

"Such nonsense! You just put on your hat and go with Sleepy. How do you know what is the price of things?"

"Almost all the goods have marks on them but here is a list of prices, besides, – but Page, dear, – I just couldn't let you do it."

"Well, you just can!" and I took off my own hat and put it on her head. I hadn't known before what a pretty hat it was. Any hat would be glorified by Annie's wonderful honey-colored hair. "Now give me your apron!" and I untied the little frilly affair that Annie wore to keep shop in and put it on myself.

Sleepy took her by the arm and carried her off, protesting, laughing, holding back, but happy in being coerced.

"Take her for a long drive, Sleepy! I can run this store and sell it out of supplies in no time, I am sure."

I heard the sound of the red wheels of the spruce little buggy die away as the driver let the young horse have free rein. I gave a sigh of joy. Here I was keeping store at last! What would Mammy Susan say? It is not often that the acme of one's ambition is reached so young. I smoothed down my apron and slipped in behind the counter just as a customer entered.

It was a farmer's wife who had driven over to the landing for provisions. She hitched her horse and ramshackle buggy in front of the store and came in prepared to spend a delightful hour. Going to the store in the country is the event of the week. Her eye had an eager gleam and there was a flush on her high cheek bones. She was a gaunt-looking woman with hair slicked up so tight under her stiff straw hat that it looked as though it must hurt. The hat had all the flowers that grow in an old-fashioned garden bedecking it, to say nothing of spiky bows of green ribbon and a rhinestone buckle. She had on a linen duster which had evidently been hastily donned over a calico house dress.

"Where's Mr. Pore?"

"He has gone to Richmond."

"Where's Annie?"

"She has stepped out for a moment. Please may I serve you?"

"No, I reckon I'll come again when some of them are in. I'll go over to Blinker's and trade this morning."

Heavens! Was I to stand still and see customers go over to the rival store? Had I missed my vocation after all my dreams? Was storekeeping not what I was cut out for?

"I'm sorry you won't stay and see these new gingham," I faltered. A gleam in her eye emboldened me to proceed. "They are making them up so pretty in Richmond now."

"Well, I wonder if they are! Are you from Richmond?"

"I have been visiting there but I am from Milton. I love to visit in Richmond. Don't you? It is such a good way to get the new styles."

That had fetched her. She gave up all idea of trading with Blinker. What did he know of styles and the way gingham were being made up in the city? I got down stacks of dry-goods and with my first customer began to plan a wonderful garment for the protracted meeting soon to take place. Gingham was decided not to be fine enough for the occasion and a pretty piece of voile was chosen instead. A silk drop skirt must go with it and bunches of velvet ribbon must set it off. The farmer's wife was having the time of her life and I was enjoying myself to the utmost. I measured off the material in a most professional manner, trembling for fear the customer would find out what a novice I was. I was thankful that she was to make it instead of me. With all of my learned talk about clothes, I could not have sewed up a pillowslip and had it fit the pillow.

Next on the program was chicken feed. The rats had devoured her supply of wheat saved for the poultry and the corn had not yet been harvested. We had to go in the adjoining room for that and I had a chance to peep at my price list on the way. I persuaded her also into laying in a supply of canned soups and got her interested in a lawn mower and a patent churn. She declared she was coming over the next day with her husband and try to persuade him to purchase both of them for her.

"Men-folks are mighty slow to get implements for the women. I ain't complaining of my old man, but he thinks he must have every new-fangled bit of farming machinery that comes along while I am churning with the same old big-at-the-bottom-and-little-at-the-top-little-thing-in-the-middle-goes-flippityflop churn that my mother had. As for the bit of lawn around the house that he 'lows me, – that has to be cut with a sickle just when I can catch a hand to do it. Now if I had that little lawn mower I could run it myself and keep things kind of tidy like 'round the house."

"Of course you could," I assented. "Now don't you want some of this cheese? It is right fresh." I had noted a great new cheese in a glass case that had evidently been cut only that morning. "Do you ever make polenta? This cheese would be fine for that."

"No, do tell! I never even heard of it."

"Why, it is a great dish among the Italians and is the best thing you ever tasted."

"I'm a great hand for cooking and sho' do relish a new recipe."

"Take three cups of boiling water and one cup of corn meal and one cup of grated cheese, and a teaspoon of salt. Stir the meal into the boiling water and let it cook until it begins to get thick and then put in the cheese and salt and bake it in a well-greased pan. It is dandy eating."

"Well now, doesn't that sound nice? Give me a pound of the cheese and one of those new pans to bake it in. My pans are all pretty nigh burnt out."

"Did you ever try any of this glassware for baking? It is so nice and clean and the crust looks so pretty showing through. To be sure it is more expensive than tin, but it is so satisfactory."

"I never heard of such a thing! Show it to me."

I had noticed with some surprise that Mr. Pore had a supply of the fire-proof glass just coming into general use. He was certainly a progressive buyer for one who was such a poor salesman. I

sold her two glass baking dishes and then more dry-goods. It took three trips for us to carry out all her packages to the buggy. More purchasers had arrived in the meantime. I foresaw a busy time.

A little colored girl with three eggs tied up in a rag wanted to trade them for flour.

"My maw is makin' a cake fur the barsket fun'ral an' she ain't got a Gawd's mouth er flour in the house. She say if'n she can trade these here fur some flour she'll be jes' a-kitin'."

"Whar you git them aigs?" asked an old uncle suspiciously. I had just sold him a plug of "eatin' terbaccer."

"I git 'em out'n the nesses, whar they b'long," she asserted, tossing her wrapped plaits scornfully.

"Yer ain't got but one hen an' I done see yo' maw a-wringing her naick this ve'y mawnin'."

"What'n if'n yer did? That ole blue hen been layin' two three times er day lately, an' my maw she says she mus' about laid out by this time, so she up'n kilt her fer the barsket fun'ral goin' on at de same time of de big meetin'. But laws a mussy! Do you know she was that full er aigs that it war distressful?" The child's eyes were wistful at the remembrance.

"Well, well! Nobody can't tell 'bout women an' hens. It seems lak nobody don't speak up an' testify how much good they is in some sisters 'til they is dead an' gone. Same way with hens! Same way with hens! Is yo' maw gwinter bile it or bake it?"

"Sh'ain't 'cided. If'n yer bile it yer gits soup extry an' if'n yer bake it yer gits stuffin' an' graby."

I was thankful for the little training I had in mathematics when it was up to me to convert eggs into flour. Some problem! I put in a little extra flour to make sure and the child skipped off.

At this juncture the Tucker twins, Mary Flannagan, and a troop of young men from Maxton blew in. I was secretly relieved that Miss Wilcox was not of the party. Not that I minded her seeing me keep store, but I had a feeling she might be a little scornful of Annie Pore.

"Where is Annie?" cried Dum.

"We are nearly dead to see her," declared Dee.

"Gone driving with Sleepy. I am keeping store in her absence. His Lord High Muck-a-Muck has embarked for Richmond."

"What fun! What fun! We bid to help!"

"Maybe only one had better help, as purchasers coming in might be overcome by too many clerks," I laughed.

"You are right! Dee must be the one because she is so tactful," said Dum magnanimously.

So Dee took off her hat and got behind the candy and ginger ale side of the counter, and then such a buying and selling ensued as that country store had never witnessed.

Of course everybody treated everybody else and then had to be treated in turn. I stayed on the dry-goods side, and while I was not doing such a thriving business as Dee, still I had my hands full. The farmer's wife had met some acquaintances and sent them to Pore's to see the new clerk who could tell them so much about Richmond styles. I had to draw a gallon of kerosene for one customer, but Wink insisted upon doing this for me. I did not want him to one little bit. If I was to be storekeeper, I preferred being one, not just playing at it.

"I think you are wonderful, Page, to do this for Annie," he whispered to me as we made our way to the coal oil barrel.

"Nonsense! What is wonderful about it?"

"You are always kind to everybody but me."

"Do you want me to keep store for you?"

"No, I want you to keep house for me," he muttered.

"But I did not know you had a house," I teased.

He pumped vigorously at the coal oil.

"I intend to have one some day."

"A grand one, surely, if you expect to have a housekeeper!"

"Page, you know what I mean!" He looked longingly into my eyes that I knew were full of mischievous twinkles.

"All I know is, you have wasted about a quart of kerosene."

The floor was flooded. It is a difficult thing to pump coal oil and make love at the same time. Poor Wink had done both of his jobs badly. He looked aghast at the havoc he had caused.

"I am a bungling fool!" he cried.

"No, Wink, you are not that. You are just not an adept at – pumping coal oil."

"Why are you always different with me? You don't treat other fellows the way you do me."

"You don't treat other girls the way you do me," I retorted.

"Of course not! I don't feel towards them as I do towards you."

"Well, it is a good thing your feelings don't make you grouchy with everybody. You just exude gloom as soon as you get with me. But this isn't keeping shop for Annie," and I grabbed the oil can from him and ran back into the store.

I was very glad to see Wink make his way to Dee. He usually went to her after a bout with me. They were great friends and seemed to have a million things of interest to discuss and nothing to disagree about. I could have been just as good a friend to him if he had only dropped the eternal subject and treated me as he did Dee: like an ordinary girl who was ready for a good time but had no idea of a serious attachment. We were nothing but chits of girls, after all, and only out of school because Gresham happened to burn down before we had time to graduate.

"Umm! How you do smell of coal oil!" cried Dee. "Don't dare to touch anything in my line of groceries until you have washed your hands. There's a basin back there."

Wink laughed and washed his hands as commanded. Now if I had said to him what Dee had he would have been furious, and gloom impenetrable would have ensued.

That afternoon I cut off and planned four different dresses for four farmers' wives, selling trimming and ribbons and fancy buttons. I made many trades with persons bringing in eggs and chickens and carrying off various commodities in exchange. I was never so busy in my life. Dee was equally so, even after we had persuaded the noisy crowd from Maxton to depart.

"Goodness! I feel as though I had been serving at a church fair," cried Dee, sinking down exhausted on a soap box.

She had just wheedled a shy young farmer into thinking that existence could not continue without a box of scented soap and a new cravat, although he had made a trip to the store for nothing more ornate than salt for the cattle.

"How do you reckon Annie ever gets through the day if this one is a sample? I haven't stopped a minute and here come some more traders."

The fact was that Dee and I had done about three times as much selling as the Pores usually accomplished. Word had gone forth that we were keeping shop, and everybody hastened to the country store. Dee found this out by accident over the telephone. There was such a violent ringing of the bell that she hastened to answer it, not being on to the country 'phone where everybody's bell rings at every call. This is what she overheard:

"Say, Milly! Pore's have got some gals from Richmond clerking there. They can put you on to the styles."

"So I hear! I'm gettin' the mule hitched up fast as I can to go over."

And then a masculine voice took it up evidently from another section:

"They say they are peaches, too!"

"That you, Dick Lee? Where'd you hear about them?"

"Saw Lem Baker on the way, goin' for salt. He got it from Jim Cullen."

"I bet you'll be there soon yourself," broke in the voice of Milly.

"Sure! My car is already cranked up gettin' up speed for the run. S'long!"

"Wait! What you goin' to buy, Dick? Your sister told me you went to the store yesterday and laid in enough for a week."

"Well, I may get a coffin," laughed the gay voice of Dick as he hung up the receiver.

CHAPTER IV

DEE TUCKER MAKES A SALE

"Page! I've been eavesdropping! I declare I never meant to do it. I got into the swim of the conversation and somehow couldn't get out of it," cried Dee, blushing furiously. "I don't know what Zebedee would say if he knew it."

"Why, honey, that isn't eavesdropping!" I laughed. "Country people always listen to everything they can over the 'phone. That is the only way we have of spreading the news. I can assure you that perfectly good church members in our county make a practice of running to the telephone every time a neighbor's bell rings. How many were on the line when you cut in?"

"Three or four, I should say, I couldn't quite tell."

Then Dee told me the conversation she had overheard, making me a party to the crime of eavesdropping.

"Here comes Dick now, I do believe. He was the one who was all cranked up ready to come."

There was a great buzzing and hissing on the road as a disreputable looking Ford came speeding down the hill. I have never seen such a dilapidated car, and still it ran and made good time, too. There was not a square inch of paint left on its faithful sides, and the top was hanging down on one side, giving it the appearance of a broken-winged crow. The doors flapped in the breezes, and the mud-guards were bent and twisted as though they had had many a collision.

Dick, however, was spruce enough to make up for the appearance of his car. He had on a bright blue suit, the very brightest blue one can imagine coming in any material but glass or china; a necktie made of a silk U. S. flag, with a scarf pin which looked very like an owl with two great imitation ruby eyes; but I found on inspection it was the American Eagle. His shoes were very gay yellow and his socks striped red and white, carrying out the color scheme of his cravat.

I ducked behind my side of the counter leaving the field clear for Dee. She stood to her guns and gave the newcomer a radiant smile. She was there to sell goods for Annie Pore and sell them she would.

"Evenin'!"

"How do you do? What can I do for you?"

"Pretty day!"

"Yes, fine! Is there something I can show you?"

"Not so warm as yesterday and a little bit cooler than the day before!"

"Yes, that is so. We've got in a fresh cheese, – maybe you would like a few pounds of it."

"Looks like rain but the moon hangs dry."

"Oh, I hope it won't rain, – but maybe it will – let me sell you an umbrella, – they are great when it rains."

"We don't to say need rain for most of the crops, but it wouldn't hurt the late potatoes."

"Oh, I'm glad of that!"

"But the watermelons don't need a drop more. They are ripening fine, – rain would make them too mushy like. I'm going to ship a load of them next week. I 'low I'll get about three hundred off of that sandy creek bottom."

"Fine! Watermelons are my favorite berry."

Right there I exploded and the young man let out a great haw! haw! too that helped to break the ice, and also enabled Dee to stop her painful rejoinders to his polite small talk, and then he began to buy. I heard Annie and Sleepy as they hitched the horse at the post and I hoped devoutly the festive Dick would buy out the store before they got in.

Already he had purchased six cravats, a new coal skuttle, a much-decorated set of bedroom china, a bag of horse cakes, some canned salmon and a box of axle grease when Annie made her appearance.

She was looking so lovely that I did not blame Sleepy for having the expression of a hungry man. She was certainly good enough to eat.

"Oh, Page, we had such a wonderful drive! I am so afraid we were gone too long, but George simply would not turn around." Annie was the only person who always called Sleepy by his Christian name.

"He was quite right. I have had the time of my life. Dee is helping me. She is in the other room now, selling a young man named Dick everything in the store. Don't butt in on her; let her finish her sales. Here come the others! They said they would be back to see you."

In came all the house-party and such a hugging and kissing and handshaking ensued as I am sure that little country store had never before witnessed.

"Oh, Annie, we miss you so!" cried Mary.

"Indeed we do!" from the others.

"Maybe I can be with you in a day or so," said Annie. "Father is going to try to return in a very little while."

"Well, until he does come back one of us is going to be with you every day," declared Dum. "Page and Dee need not think they are the only ones who are going to help."

Annie's eyes were full of happy tears. "What have I done to deserve so many dear friends?" she whispered to me.

"Nothing but just be your sweet self!" I answered. "I must peep in and see what Dee is doing to that poor defenseless Dick. I bet she has sold him a kitchen stove by this time."

Annie and I made our way into the outer room, where at the far end we could see Dick and Dee in earnest converse.

"It is a very excellent one," she was declaiming. "In fact, I am sure there is not a better one to be bought. It is air tight and water tight; of the best material; the latest style; the workmanship on it is very superior; the price is ridiculously low. Really I think all country people ought to have one in the house for emergencies. One never can tell when one will be needed and sometimes they are so difficult to get in a hurry."

"That's so!" agreed the enamored Dick. "But I reckon I could get this any time from old man Pore if I should need it."

"Oh, no! You see this is the only one in stock and somebody might come for this this very night, and then where would you be if you needed it? Then even if you could get another one, it might not be nearly so attractive as this one. They are going up, too, all the time, – effect of the war. Of course this was bought when they were not so high, and I am letting you have advantage of the price we paid for it. After this they will be up at least forty per cent. – that's the truth. The war prices are something fierce."

"Ain't it the truth?"

"Yes, and then you might not be able to get another lavender one. I just know lavender would be becoming to you. I'd like to see you in a lavender one."

"Would you really now? That settles it then! I'll have to get old Pore to trust me, though, until I sell my melons."

"Oh, that's all right. Just whenever you feel like paying."

I was completely mystified. What on earth was that ridiculous girl selling to the young farmer? Annie was reduced to the limpness of a wet dishrag by what we had overheard. The giggles had her in their clutches and she could not speak.

"Do you think you can help me out with it?" asked the young man.

"Sure! It is not heavy yet."

Around the labyrinth made by the farming implements, stoves, etc., came the buyer and seller, he backing and she carefully guiding him. Between them they carried a long something; I, at first, could not make out what.

"A coffin!" I gasped.

Through the door they made their way into the store proper. Some colored customers had just come in and these fell back with expressions of curiosity and awe equally mingled on their black faces.

"Who daid? Who daid?" they whispered, but no one vouchsafed any information. Dee looked supernaturally solemn and Dick only wanted to get his latest purchase safely landed in his car.

The house-party had adjourned to the porch in front, and when the lugubrious procession emerged from the store the gaiety suddenly ceased. As Dick backed out, the young men doffed their caps and the girls bowed their heads. What was their amazement when Dee turned out to have hold of the other end. Every man sprang forward to take her place, but she sadly shook her head and held on to her job.

"It isn't heavy," she whispered.

Dum's eyes filled with tears. She thought with sadness that in a short while it would be heavy when it fulfilled its destiny. She was very proud of her twin that she should be so kind and helpful at such a time. How like Dee it was to be assisting this poor young man, who had perhaps lost some one near and dear to him!

No one spoke, but all remained reverently uncovered while the coffin was hoisted on the back seat of the ragged old car. The young men assisted in this, although Dee would not resign her place as chief mourner.

"Who daid? Who daid?" clamored the darkies who seemed to spring up from the ground, such a crowd of them appeared in the twinkling of an eye.

"I don't know," said Dum in a teary voice, "but isn't it sad?"

"'Tain't Miss Rena Lee 'cause I jes' done seed her headin' fer the sto'," declared a little pickaninny.

"She ain't a-trus'in' her bones ter Mr. Dick's artermobe. She done sayed she gonter drike her ole yaller mule whar she gwinter go."

"Ain't de Lees got a boardner? Maybe it's de boardner," suggested a helpful old woman.

"Well, I wonder if it is! Here he come! I'm a-gwinter arsk him."

Dick came out laden with his other purchases.

"Lawsamussy! It mus' be de boardner an' all er her folks is a-comin' down, 'cause how come Mr. Dick hafter buy all them things otherwise? Look thar chiny an' coal skuttles an' what not!"

"Who daid, Mr. Dick? Who daid?"

"Nobody I know of!" grinned the young man.

"Ain't it de boardner?"

"What boarder?"

"Miss Rena's boardner!"

"Sister Rena hasn't any boarder that I know of. Here, get out of the road or I'll let you know who is dead!"

He took a fond farewell of Dee and cranking up his noisy car, he jumped to his seat and speeded home with the coffin and the coal skuttle bouncing up and down right merrily.

"Ain't nobody daid?" grieved a sad old woman.

"No! Nobody ain't daid!" snapped an old man. "Nobody ain't eben a-dyin'. Now that thar Dick Lee done bought up th' only carsket in the sto' an' my Luly is mighty low – mighty low."

"Sho-o' nuf I ain't heard tell of it. Is she in de baid?"

"Well, not ter say in de baid – but on de baid, on de baid. Anyhow 'tain't safe to count on her fer long. White folks is sho' graspin' these days. They is sho' graspin'."

The old man departed on his way grumbling.

"Caroline Tucker, what did you sell that coffin to that young man for?" demanded Dum sternly.

"Just to see if I could, Virginia Tucker. I told him I'd like to see him in a coffin lined with lavender, and he was so complimented, he immediately bought it to keep for a rainy day."

Dee and I had made so many sales that Annie had to send a telegram informing her father of the diminished stock. It was necessary to order another coffin immediately in case the ailing Luly might need it.

CHAPTER V

THE HUMAN FLY

General Price was vastly amused over the account of Dee's sale of the coffin to the amiable Dick. Miss Maria was frankly shocked, and Miss Wilcox amazed and a little scornful.

"I never cared for slumming," she announced that night when we had retired to the girls' wing.

"But helping Annie Pore keep store is not slumming," said Dee, the dimple in her chin deepening.

Dee Tucker had a dimple in her chin just like her father. When father and daughter got ready for a fight, those dimples always deepened.

"Most kind of you, I am sure, although that sort of adventure never appealed to me. I have taught in the mission school in New York's East Side, but when the class is over I always leave. I can't bear to mix with the lower classes. It is all right to help them but not by mixing."

"But you don't understand, – Annie Pore is one of our very best friends. She is not the lower classes. She is better born than any of us and prettier and better bred and more accomplished – "

"Ah, indeed! I should like to behold this paragon."

"Well, you shall behold her all right! She is going to join us here in a day or so."

Jessie Wilcox looked very much astonished and quite haughty. She could not understand the Prices asking such a person to meet her. The daughter of a country storekeeper was hardly one whom she cared to know socially. Dee had gone about it the wrong way to make the spoiled beauty look with favor on the little English girl: – prettier, better born, better bred, indeed! As for accomplishments: what accomplishments could a dowdy little country girl have that she had not?

The Tuckers and Jessie Wilcox were not hitting it off very well in the great bedroom which they shared. Dum had declared she would not move the fluffy finery which was spread out on her bed and she stuck to her word.

"What are you going to do with these duds?" she asked rather brusquely.

"Oh, you just put them back in my trunk," drawled the spoiled roommate.

"Humph! You had better ring for your maid. I'm not much on doing valet work."

With that she caught hold of the four corners of the bedspread and with a yank deposited the whole thing adroitly on the floor, butter side up.

Dee told me afterwards that Jessie's expression was one of complete astonishment. She was not used to being treated like the common herd. Much Dum cared! She got into the great four-posted bed with perfect unconcern, while Dee tactfully helped the pouting Jessie to hang up her many frocks.

"She had better be glad I didn't go to bed on them," stormed the unrepentant Dum when she told me about it. "As for Dee: I was disgusted with her for being so mealy-mouthed. Catch me hanging up anybody's clothes! I bet you one thing, – I bet you she keeps her fripperies off my bed after this."

I was in a way sorry for Jessie. I know it must be hard to be a spoiled darling turned loose with the Tucker twins. They were always perfectly square and fair in all their dealings, but they demanded squareness and fairness in others. Jessie was evidently accustomed to being waited on and admired, and the Tuckers refused to do either of these things necessary for the happiness of their roommate. She had always chosen her friends with a view to setting off her own charms, girls who were homely, less vivacious, duller. It did not suit her at all to be outshone in any way. She was certainly the prettiest girl in the house-party, that is, before Annie arrived, but she was not the most attractive. There never were more delightful girls in all the world than the Tucker twins,

witty, charming, vivacious, and very handsome. I could see their development in the two years I had known them and realized that they were growing to be very lovely women.

Mary Flannagan was nobody's pretty girl but she had something better than beauty, at least something that proves a better asset in life: extreme good nature and a sense of humor that embraced the whole universe. She had humor enough to see a joke on herself and take it. That, to me, is the quintessence of humor. Wherever Mary was there also were laughter and gaiety. She had a heart as big as all Ireland, from which country she had inherited her wit as well as her name.

Mary was not quite so bunchy as she had been. Two years had stretched her out a bit, but she would always be something of a rollypoly. She was as active as a cat, and so determined was she to end up as a character movie actress she never stopped her limbering-up exercises. After I would get in bed at night she would begin. She would turn somersaults, stand on her head, walk on her hands, do cart-wheels, bend the crab, fall on the floor at full length and do a hundred other wonderful stunts.

"I am so plain I'll have to go in for slap-stick comedy and maybe work up to the legit., but go in I will. Why, Page, there is oodlums of money in movies and think of the life!"

"I can see you, Mary, as a side partner to Douglas Fairbanks. Can you climb up a wall like a fly?" I laughed.

"No-o, not yet but soon! I can't get much practice in wall scaling. I am dying to try this wall outside our window. It is covered with ivy and would be easy as dirt, I know," and she poked her head out the window, gazing longingly at the tempting perpendicularity of the wall beneath.

Mr. Thomas Hawkins, alias Shorty, thought Mary was just about the best chum a fellow could have, and great was his joy when Fate landed him at the same country house with the inimitable Mary. Shorty, too, had made out to grow a bit since first we saw him make the great play in the football game at Hill Top. He was a very engaging lad with his tousled mane, rosy cheeks and clear boy's eyes.

"Is Shorty going to get into the movies, too?" I teased.

"No, – navy!"

"Oh, how splendid! I didn't know he had decided."

"Yes! He has talked to me a lot about it," said Mary quite soberly.

"What do you think about it?"

"Me? Why, I think our navy is going to have to be enlarged and I can't think of anybody better suited to it than Shorty. He is a descendant of Sir John Hawkins, you know, and that means seafaring blood in his veins."

How little did Mary and I think, as we lay in that great four-post bed and wisely discussed preparedness, that our country would really be at war in not so very many months, and that Shorty's entering the navy would be a very serious matter to all of his friends, if not to him.

No thoughts of war were disturbing us. The great war was going on, but then we were used to that and we were too young and thoughtless for it to bother us. It was across the water and no one we knew personally was implicated. Maxton was too peaceful a spot for one to realize that such a thing as bloodshed could go on anywhere in all the world. Our great room with its two huge beds and massive wardrobe, bureau and washstand, had once sheltered Washington and later on Lafayette; and then as the ages had rolled by, General Lee had visited the Prices and had slept in the very bed where Mary and I were lying so sagely and smugly arguing for preparedness. Perhaps the mocking-bird that every now and then gave forth a silvery trill in the holly tree near our window was descended from the same mocking-bird that no doubt had sung to the great warrior as he lay in the four-poster.

How quiet it was! A whippoorwill gave an occasional cry away off in the woods, and once I heard the chugging of a small steamboat puffing its way up the river, and then a little later the swish swash on the shore of the waves made by the stern wheel. But for that, the night was absolutely still.

"Page," whispered Mary, "are you asleep?"

"Fortunately not, or I'd be awake," I laughed.

"I'm thinking about getting up and trying to scale that wall. I am 'most sure I could do it with all that ivy to dig my toes in."

"Why don't you wait until morning?"

"Because I don't want an audience. It is best to practice these stunts without anyone looking."

"Suppose you fall!"

"That's something movie actresses have to expect. I won't fall far if I do fall."

"Will you mind if I look on?"

"No, indeed! I can pretend you are the director."

Everything was as quiet as the grave when Mary bounced out of bed to practice her stunt. I followed, nothing loath to see more of the wonderful night. Some nights are too beautiful to waste in sleeping. It has always seemed such a pity to me that we could not fill up on sleep in disagreeable weather, and then when a glorious moonlight night arrives, be able to draw on that reserve fund of sleep and just sit up all night.

"Isn't it splendid out on the lawn? And only look at the river in the moonlight. I'd certainly like to be out there in a boat this minute with some very nice interesting person to recite poetry to me," I mused.

"I heard Wink White begging you to take a row with him."

"Yes, but I see myself doing it."

"Don't you like him?" asked Mary, sitting in the window ready for the trial descent.

"Of course I like him, but he's such a goose."

"Shorty thinks he is grand."

"So he is – grand, gloomy, and peculiar. If he'd only not be so sad and lonesome when he is with me."

"Of course all of us have noticed how different he is with you, never laughing and joking as he does with us but sighing like a furnace. But here goes! This is no time for analyzing the character of young Doctor Stephen White, – this is a play of action."

"But, Mary, ought you try to climb down in your nighty? It might get tangled around your feet."

"Oh, but the movie ladies always have to get out of windows in their nighties. I must practice in costume to get used to it."

"Barefooted, too?"

"Of course! I need all these toes to hang on by. Next time I am going to have my ch-e-i-ild, but this first time perhaps I had better not try to carry anything."

"I should think not, – but, Mary, do be careful."

I was looking down the perpendicular wall and it began to seem to me to be a crazy undertaking. The vines were very thick and would no doubt offer a foot-rest to the daring girl, but suppose she lost her head or the vine pulled loose from the wall!

It is a much easier matter to climb up and get in a window than it is to get out of one and climb down. There is something very scary about projecting one's bare foot into the unknown. Mary, however, was too serious in her desire to perfect herself for her chosen profession to stop and wiggle her toes with indecision. She was out of the window in a moment. I held my breath.

"Oh, God save her! Oh, God save her!" I whispered.

"Fireman, save my ch-e-i-ild!" came back in sibilant tones from Mary.

I couldn't help laughing although I was trembling with fright. I almost beat Mary to the ground I leaned so far out of the window. Sometimes the thick ivy hid her from my sight and again she would loom out very white in the moonlight.

Down at last! I felt like shouting for joy. Now began the ascent which was a small matter compared to the descent.

When the climber was about half-way up, I suddenly became aware of figures on the edge of the lawn. "The servants returning from church," I thought. Harvie had told me that "big meetin'" was going on and his aunt was quite concerned about her servants, as they had a way of taking French leave at "big meetin'" time. With the house-party in session, a paucity of servants would be quite serious. Extra inducements had been offered and the whole corps had promised to remain, taking turn about in getting off early for night church.

Anyone who has lived in the country, where colored servants are the only ones, knows what a serious time "big meetin'" can be. The whole negro population seems to go mad in a frenzy of religious fervor. Crops that are inconsiderate enough to ripen at that period remain ungathered; the washwoman lets soiled clothes pile up indefinitely; cooks refuse to cook; housemaids have a soul above sweeping; cows go dry for lack of milking; horses go uncurried and vehicles unwashed and ungreased.

I smiled when I saw that straggling group returning from church, knowing they would not be fit for any very arduous tasks the next day. I remembered how Mammy Susan used to berate our darkies for their delinquencies on days following meetings. As the churchgoers approached the house, which they had to pass to reach the quarters on the other side of the great house, they suddenly became aware of Mary's white figure hanging midway between heaven and earth.

Shouts and groans arose! One woman fell to the ground and, regardless of her finery, rolled on the grass imploring her Maker to save her. I trembled for fear Mary would fall, but she clung to the vine and scrambled up and in the window. The darkies ran like frightened rabbits.

"They thought you were a ghost, I believe."

"Well, I came mighty near giving up the ghost. When I heard those groans I thought something had me sure," panted the great actress, looking ruefully at a long rent in her very best nighty. "I did it all right, but being a great movie actress who is to play opposite Douglas Fairbanks is certainly hard on one's rags. Look, here's another tear! Another and another! I did that when the first darky squealed."

Of course we went to bed giggling.

"I wish Tweedles had seen you, but they would not have been willing to be mere audience. As for me, – I have no desire to be classified as a human fly. I wonder if we will hear some wild tale from those silly darkies."

But Mary was fast asleep before she could express her opinion. I could not sleep until I got the following limerick out of my system:

The Human Fly

Our Mary, an actress so flighty,
Scaled a wall in her very best nighty.
A nail proved a snag
And tore her fine rag,
She came back a la Aphrodite.

CHAPTER VI

"BIG MEETIN'"

I awakened early the next morning in spite of having been manager of a movie studio at all hours of the night. Mary was sleeping heavily. After all, I fancy climbing up and down a brick wall is harder than merely watching someone else do it. She had a big scratch across her cheek and her thumb had bled on the pillow. She must have snagged it on the same nail she had her best nighty. I peeped out of my eastern window and found Dum Tucker was doing the same thing from hers.

"Hello, honey! I'm so glad you're awake," she whispered. "Let's dress and go out."

"Is Dee asleep?"

"Sound! And the Lady Jessie is likewise snoozing, not looking nearly so pretty with her hair up in curl papers and her face greased with cold cream. I bet I can beat you dressing!"

We sprang from our doors into the hall at the same time and feeling sure we were the only ones awake in all the great mansion, we had the never-to-be-scorned joy of sliding down the bannisters. I'd hate to think I could ever get so old I wouldn't like to slide down bannisters. Of course I know I shall some day get too old to do it, but not too old to want to.

We ran out the great back door which opened on the formal garden.

"My, I'm glad we waked! I was nearly dead to sit up all night," said Dum.

"Me, too! Mary and I were awake very late. Did you hear anything?"

"Did I!"

"What did you hear?"

"A strange scratching along the wall, – I thought it was a whole lot of snakes climbing up to our window. There is only one thing in the world I am afraid of, and that is snakes."

"Mammy Susan says that 'endurin' of the war, they is sho' to be mo' snakes than in peaceable times.' Of course she has no idea that this war is away off across the water, and if it were inclined to breed snakes, it wouldn't breed them over here. But that snake you heard last night was Mary Flannagan scaling the wall. She is practicing all the time for the movies."

"Pig, not to call us!"

"I was dying to, but was afraid of raising too much rumpus."

The garden was beautiful at all times, but at that early hour it was so lovely it made us gasp. A row of stately hollyhocks separated the flower garden from the vegetables. Banked against the hollyhocks were all kinds of old-fashioned garden flowers: bachelor's buttons, wall-flowers, pretty-by-nights, love-in-a-mist, heliotrope, verbena, etc. There was a thick border of periwinkle whose glossy dark green leaves enhanced the brilliancy of the plants beyond. One great strip was given up entirely to roses, – and such roses!

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