

Emerson Alice B.

**Ruth Fielding at Lighthouse
Point: or, Nita, the
Girl Castaway**



Alice Emerson

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CHAPTER I AN INITIATION

A brown dusk filled the long room, for although the windows were shrouded thickly and no lamp burned, some small ray of light percolated from without and made dimly visible the outlines of the company there gathered.

The low, quavering notes of an organ sighed through the place. There was the rustle and movement of a crowd. To the neophyte, who had been brought into the hall with eyes bandaged, it all seemed very mysterious and awe-inspiring.

Now she was set in a raised place and felt that before her was the company of masked and shrouded figures, in scarlet dominoes like those worn by the two guards who had brought her from the anteroom. The bandage was whisked from her eyes; but she could see nothing of her surroundings, nor of the company before which she stood.

“Candidate!” spoke a hollow, mysterious voice somewhere in the gloom, yet sounding so close to her ear that she started. “Candidate! you stand before the membership body of the S. B.’s. You are as yet unknown to them and they unknown to you. If you enter the secret association of the S. B.’s you must throw off and despise forever all ties of a like character. Do you agree?”

The candidate obeyed, in so far as she prodded her sharply in the ribs and a shrill voice whispered: “Say you do—gump!”

The candidate obeyed, in so far as she proclaimed that she did, at least.

“It is an oath,” went on the sepulchral voice. “Remember!”

In chorus the assembly immediately repeated, “Remember!” in solemn tones.

“Candidate!” repeated the leading voice, “you have been taught the leading object of our existence as a society. What is it?”

Without hesitation now, the candidate replied: “Helpfulness.”

“It is right. And now, what do our initials stand for?”

“Sweetbriar,” replied the shaking voice of the candidate.

“True. That is what our initials stand for to the world at large—to those who are not initiated into the mysteries of the S. B.’s. But those letters may stand for many things and it is my privilege to explain to you now that they likewise are to remind us all of two virtues that each Sweetbriar is expected to practice—to be sincere and to befriend. Remember! Sincerity—Befriend. Remember!”

Again the chorus of mysterious voices chanted: “Remember!”

“And now let the light shine upon the face of the candidate, that the Shrouded Sisterhood may know her where’er they meet her. Once! Twice! Thrice! Light!”

At the cry the ray of a spot-light flashed out of the gloom at the far end of the long room and played glaringly upon the face and figure of the candidate. She herself was more blinded by the glare than she had been by the bandage. There was a rustle and movement in the room, and the leading voice went on:

“Sisters! the novice is now revealed to us all. She has now entered into the outer circle of the Sweetbriars. Let her know us, where’er she meets us, by our rallying cry. Once! Twice! Thrice! *Now!*”

Instantly, and in unison, the members chanted the following “yell”:

“S. B.–Ah-h-h!
S. B.–Ah-h-h!
Sound our battle-cry
Near and far!
S. B.–All!
Briarwood Hall!
Sweetbriars, do or die–
This be our battle-cry–
Briarwood Hall!
That’s All!”

With the final word the spot-light winked out and the other lights of the hall flashed on. The assembly of hooded and shrouded figures were revealed. And Helen Cameron, half smiling and half crying, found herself standing upon the platform before her schoolmates who had already joined the secret fraternity known as “The Sweetbriars.”

Beside her, and presiding over the meeting, she found her oldest and dearest friend at Briarwood Hall–Ruth Fielding. A small megaphone stood upon the table at Ruth’s hand, and its use had precluded Helen’s recognition of her chum’s voice as the latter led in the ritual of the fraternity. Like their leader, the other Sweetbriars had thrown back their scarlet hoods, and Helen recognized almost all of the particular friends with whom she had become associated since she had come–with Ruth Fielding–the autumn before to Briarwood Hall.

The turning on of the lights was the signal for general conversation and great merriment. It was the evening of the last day but one of the school year, and discipline at Briarwood Hall was relaxed to a degree. However, the fraternity of the Sweetbriars had grown in favor with Mrs. Grace Tellingham, the preceptress of the school, and with the teachers, since its inception. Now the fifty or more girls belonging to the society (fully a quarter of the school membership) paired off to march down to the dining hall, where a special collation was spread.

Helen Cameron went down arm-in-arm with the president of the S. B.’s.

“Oh, Ruthie!” the new member exclaimed, “I think it’s ever so nice–much better than the initiation of the old Upedes. I can talk about them now,” and she laughed, “because they are–as Tommy says–‘busted all to flinders.’ Haven’t held a meeting for more than a month, and the last time–whisper! this is a secret, and I guess the last remaining secret of the Upedes–there were only The Fox and I there!”

“I’m glad you’re one of us at last, Helen,” said Ruth Fielding, squeezing her chum as they went down the stairs.

“And I ought to have been an original member along with you, Ruth,” said Helen, thoughtfully. “The Up and Doing Club hadn’t half the attractiveness that your society has–”

“Don’t call it *my* society. We don’t want any one-girl club. That was the trouble with the Up and Doings–just as ‘too much faculty’ is the objection to the Forward Club.”

“Oh, I detest the Fussy Curls just as much as ever,” declared Helen, quickly, “although Madge Steele *is* president.”

“Well, we ‘Infants,’ as they called us last fall when we entered Briarwood, are in control of the S. B.’s, and we can help each other,” said Ruth, with satisfaction.

“But you talk about the Upedes being a one-girl club. I know The Fox was all-in-all in that. But you’re pretty near the whole thing in the S. B.’s, Ruthie,” and Helen laughed, silyly. “Why, they say you wrote all the ritual and planned everything.”

“Never mind,” said Ruth, calmly; “we can’t have a dictator in the S. B.’s without changing the constitution. The same girl can’t be president for more than one year.”

“But you deserve to boss it all,” said her chum, warmly. “And I for one wouldn’t mind if you did.”

Helen was a very impulsive, enthusiastic girl. When she and Ruth Fielding had come to Briarwood Hall she had immediately taken up with a lively and thoughtless set of girls who had banded themselves into the Up and Doing Club, and whose leader was Mary Cox, called “The Fox,” because of her shrewdness. Ruth had not cared for this particular society and, in time, she and most of the other new pupils formed the Sweetbriar Club. Helen Cameron, loyal to her first friends at the school, had not fallen away from Mary Cox and joined the Sweetbriars until this very evening, which was, as we have seen, the evening before the final day of the school year.

Ruth Fielding took the head of the table when the girls sat down to supper and the other officers of the club sat beside her. Helen was therefore separated from her, and when the party broke up late in the evening (the curfew bell at nine o’clock was abolished for this one night) the chums started for their room in the West Dormitory at different times. Ruth went with Mercy Curtis, who was lame; outside the dining hall Helen chanced to meet Mary Cox, who had been calling on some party in the East Dormitory building.

“Hello, Cameron!” exclaimed The Fox. “So you’ve finally been roped in by the ‘Soft Babies’ have you? I thought that chum of yours—Fielding—would manage to get you hobbled and tied before vacation.”

“You can’t say I wasn’t loyal to the Upedes as long as there was any society to be loyal to,” said Helen, quickly, and with a flush.

“Oh, well; you’ll be going down to Heavy’s seashore cottage with them now, I suppose?” said The Fox, still watching Helen curiously.

“Why, of course! I intended to before,” returned the younger girl. “We all agreed about that last winter when we were at Snow Camp.”

“Oh, you did, eh?” laughed the other. “Well, if you hadn’t joined the Soft Babies you wouldn’t have been ‘axed,’ when it came time to go. This is going to be an S. B. frolic. Your nice little Ruth Fielding says she won’t go if Heavy invites any but her precious Sweetbriars to be of the party.”

“I don’t believe it, Mary Cox!” cried Helen. “I mean, that *you* must be misinformed. Somebody has maligned Ruth.”

“Humph! Maybe, but it doesn’t look like it. Who is going to Lighthouse Point?” demanded The Fox, carelessly. “Madge Steele, for although she is president of the Fussy Curles, she is likewise honorary member of the S. B.’s.”

“That is so,” admitted Helen.

“Heavy, herself,” pursued Mary Cox, “Belle and Lluella, who have all backslid from the Upedes, and yourself.”

“But you’ve been invited,” said Helen, quickly.

“Not much. I tell you, if you and Belle and Lluella had not joined her S. B.’s you wouldn’t have been numbered among Heavy’s house party. Don’t fool yourself on that score,” and with another unpleasant laugh, the older girl walked on and left Helen in a much perturbed state of mind.

CHAPTER II

THE FOX AT WORK

Ruth Fielding, after the death of her parents, when she was quite a young girl, had come from Darrowtown to live with her mother's uncle at the Red Mill, on the Lumano River near Cheslow, as was related in the first volume of this series, entitled, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill; Or, Jasper Parloe's Secret." Ruth had found Uncle Jabez very hard to get along with at first, for he was a miser, and his kinder nature seemed to have been crusted over by years of hoarding and selfishness.

But through a happy turn of circumstances Ruth was enabled to get at the heart of her crotchety uncle, and when Ruth's very dear friend, Helen Cameron, planned to go to boarding school, Uncle Jabez was won over to sending Ruth with her. The fun and work of that first half at school are related in the second volume of the series, entitled "Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall; Or, Solving the Campus Mystery."

In the third volume of the series, "Ruth Fielding at Snow Camp; Or, Lost in the Backwoods," Ruth and some of her school friends spend a part of the mid-winter vacation at Mr. Cameron's hunting lodge in the Big Woods, where they enjoy many winter sports and have adventures galore.

Ruth and Helen occupied a "duo" room on the second floor of the West Dormitory; but when Mercy Curtis, the lame girl, had come to Briarwood in the middle of the first term, the chums had taken her in with them, the occupants of that particular study being known thereafter among the girls of Briarwood as the Triumvirate.

Helen, when deserted by The Fox, who, from that first day at Briarwood Hall, had shown herself to be jealous of Ruth Fielding, for some reason, went slowly up to her room and found Ruth and Mercy there before her. There was likewise a stout, doll-faced, jolly girl with them, known to the other girls as "Heavy," but rightly owning the name of Jennie Stone.

"Here she is now!" cried this latter, on Helen's appearance. "'The candidate will now advance and say her a-b-abs!' You looked scared to death when they shot you with the lime-light. I was chewing a caramel when they initiated me, and I swallowed it whole, and pretty near choked, when the spot-light was turned on."

Mercy, who was a very sharp girl indeed, was looking at Helen slyly. She saw that something had occasioned their friend annoyance.

"What's happened to you since we came from the supper, Helen?" she asked.

"Indigestion!" gasped Heavy. "I've some pepsin tablets in my room. Want one, Nell?"

"No. I am all right," declared Helen.

"Well, we were just waiting for you to come in," the stout girl said. "Maybe we'll all be so busy to-morrow that we won't have time to talk about it. So we must plan for the Lighthouse Point campaign now."

"Oh!" said Helen, slowly. "So you can make up your party now?"

"Of course! Why, we really made it up last winter; didn't we?" laughed Heavy.

"But we didn't know whether we could go or not then," Ruth Fielding said.

"You didn't know whether *I* could go, I suppose you mean?" suggested Helen.

"Why—not particularly," responded Ruth, in some wonder at her chum's tone. "I supposed you and Tom would go. Your father so seldom refuses you anything."

"Oh!"

"I didn't know how Uncle Jabez would look at it," pursued Ruth. "But I wrote him a while ago and told him you and Mercy were going to accept Jennie's invite, and he said I could go to Lighthouse Point, too."

“Oh!” said Helen again. “You didn’t wait until I joined the S. B.’s, then, to decide whether you would accept Heavy’s invitation, or not?”

“Of course not!”

“How ridiculous!” cried Heavy.

“Well, it’s to be a Sweetbriar frolic; isn’t it, Heavy?” asked Helen, calmly.

“No. Madge and Bob Steele are going. And your brother Tom,” chuckled the stout girl. “And perhaps that Isadore Phelps. You wouldn’t call Busy Izzy a Sweetbriar; would you?”

“I don’t mean the boys,” returned Helen, with some coolness.

Suddenly Mercy Curtis, her head on one side and her thin little face twisted into a most knowing grimace, interrupted. “I know what this means!” she exclaimed.

“What do *you* mean, Goody Two-Sticks?” demanded Ruth, kindly.

“Our Helen has a grouch.”

“Nonsense!” muttered Helen, flushing again.

“I thought something didn’t fit her when she came in,” said Heavy, calmly. “But I thought it was indigestion.”

“What *is* the matter, Helen?” asked Ruth Fielding in wonder.

“Fee, fi, fo fum! I see the negro run!’—into the woodpile!” ejaculated the lame girl, in her biting way. “I know what is the matter with Queen Helen of Troy. She’s been with The Fox.”

Ruth and Heavy stared at Mercy in surprise; but Helen turned her head aside.

“That’s the answer!” chuckled the shrewd little creature. “I saw them walk off together after supper. And The Fox has been trying to make trouble—same as usual.”

“Mary Cox! Why, that’s impossible,” said Heavy, good-naturedly. “She wouldn’t say anything to make Helen feel bad.”

Mercy darted an accusing fore-finger at Helen, and still kept her eyes screwed up. “I dare you to tell! I dare you to tell!” she cried in a singsong voice.

Helen had to laugh at last.

“Well, Mary Cox said you had decided to have none but Sweetbriars at the cottage on the beach, Heavy.”

“Lot she knows about it,” grunted the stout girl.

“Why, Heavy asked her to go; didn’t she?” cried Ruth.

“Well, that was last Winter. I didn’t press her,” admitted the stout girl.

“But she’s your roommate, like Belle and Lluella,” said Ruth, in some heat. “Of course you’ve got to ask her.”

“Don’t you do it. She’s a spoil-sport,” declared Mercy Curtis, in her sharp way. “The Fox will keep us all in hot water.”

“Do be still, Mercy!” cried Ruth. “This is Heavy’s own affair. And Mary Cox has been her roommate ever since she’s been at Briarwood.”

“I don’t know that Belle and Lluella can go with us,” said the stout girl, slowly. “The fright they got up in the woods last Winter scared their mothers. I guess they think I’m too reckless. Sort of wild, you know,” and the stout girl’s smile broadened.

“But you intended inviting Mary Cox?” demanded Ruth, steadily.

“Yes. I said something about it to her. But she wouldn’t give me a decided answer then.”

“Ask her again.”

“Don’t you do it!” exclaimed Mercy, sharply.

“I mean it, Jennie,” Ruth said.

“I can’t please both of you,” said the good-natured stout girl.

“Please me. Mercy doesn’t mean what she says. If Mary Cox thinks that I am opposed to your having her at Lighthouse Point, I shall be offended if you do not immediately insist upon her being one of the party.”

“And that’ll suit The Fox right down to the ground,” exclaimed Mercy. “That is what she was fishing for when she got at Helen to-night.”

“Did *I* say she said anything about Lighthouse Point?” quickly responded Helen.

“You didn’t have to,” rejoined Mercy, sharply. “We knew.”

“At least,” Ruth said to Heavy, quietly, yet with decision, “you will ask your old friend to go?”

“Why—if you don’t mind.”

“There seems to have been some truth in Mary’s supposition, then,” Ruth said, sadly. “She thinks I intended to keep her out of a good time. I never thought of such a thing. If Mary Cox does not accept your invitation, Heavy, I shall be greatly disappointed. Indeed, I shall be tempted to decline to go to the shore with you. Now, remember that, Jennie Stone.”

“Oh, shucks! you’re making too much fuss about it,” said the stout girl, rising lazily, and speaking in her usual drawling manner. “Of course I’ll have her—if she’ll go. Father’s bungalow is big enough, goodness knows. And we’ll have lots of fun there.”

She went her leisurely way to the door. Had she been brisker of movement, when she turned the knob she would have found Mary Cox with her ear at the keyhole, drinking in all that had been said in the room of the triumvirate. But The Fox was as swift of foot as she was shrewd and sly of mind. She was out of sight and hearing when Jennie Stone came out into the corridor.

CHAPTER III ON LAKE OSAGO

The final day of the school year was always a gala occasion at Briarwood Hall. Although Ruth Fielding and her chum, Helen Cameron, had finished only their first year, they both had important places in the exercises of graduation. Ruth sang in the special chorus, while Helen played the violin in the school orchestra. Twenty-four girls were in the graduating class. Briarwood Hall prepared for Wellesley, or any of the other female colleges, and when Mrs. Grace Tellingham, the preceptress, graduated a girl with a certificate it meant that the young lady was well grounded in all the branches that Briarwood taught.

The campus was crowded with friends of the graduating class, and of the Seniors in particular. It was a very gay scene, for the June day was perfect and the company were brightly dressed. The girls, however, including the graduating class, were dressed in white only. Mrs. Tellingham had established that custom some years before, and the different classes were distinguished only by the color of their ribbons.

Helen Cameron's twin brother, Tom, and Madge Steele's brother, Bob, attended the Seven Oaks Military Academy, not many miles from Briarwood. Their graduation exercises and "Breaking Up," as the boys called it, were one day later than the same exercises at Briarwood. So the girls did not start for home until the morning of the latter day.

Old Dolliver, the stage driver, brought his lumbering stage to the end of the Cedar Walk at nine o'clock, to which point Tony Foyle, the man-of-all-work, had wheeled the girls' baggage. Ruth, and Helen, and Mercy Curtis had bidden their room good-bye and then made the round of the teachers before this hour. They gathered here to await the stage with Jennie Stone, Madge and Mary Cox. The latter had agreed to be one of the party at Lighthouse Point and was going home with Heavy to remain during the ensuing week, before the seashore party should be made up.

The seven girls comfortably filled the stage, with their hand luggage, while the trunks and suitcases in the boot and roped upon the roof made the Ark seem top-heavy. There was a crowd of belated pupils, and those who lived in the neighborhood, to see them off, and the coach finally rolled away to the famous tune of "Uncle Noah, He Built an Ark," wherein Madge Steele put her head out of the window and "lined out" a new verse to the assembled "well-wishers":

"And they didn't know where they were at,
One wide river to cross!
Till the Sweetbriars showed 'em that!
One wide river to cross!
One wide river!
One wide river of Jordan—
One wide river!
One wide river to cross!"

For although Madge Steele was now president of the Forward Club, a much older school fraternity than the Sweetbriars, she was, like Mrs. Tellingham, and Miss Picolet, the French teacher, and others of the faculty, an honorary member of the society started by Ruth Fielding. The Sweetbriars, less than one school year old, was fast becoming the most popular organization at Briarwood Hall.

Mary Cox did not join in the singing, nor did she have a word to say to Ruth during the ride to the Seven Oaks station. Tom and Bob, with lively, inquisitive, harum-scarum Isadore Phelps—"Busy

Izzy,” as his mates called him—were at the station to meet the party from Briarwood Hall. Tom was a dark-skinned, handsome lad, while Bob was big, and flaxen-haired, and bashful. Madge, his sister, called him “Sonny” and made believe he was at the pinafore stage of growth instead of being almost six feet tall and big in proportion.

“Here’s the dear little fellow!” she cried, jumping lightly out to be hugged by the big fellow. “Let Sister see how he’s grown since New Year’s. Why, we’d hardly have known our Bobbins; would we, Ruthie? Let me fix your tie—it’s under your ear, of course. Now, that’s a neat little boy. You can shake hands with Ruthie, and Helen, and Mary, and Jennie, and Mercy Curtis—and help Uncle Noah get off the trunks.”

The three boys, being all of the freshman class at Seven Oaks, had less interest in the final exercises of the term at the Academy than the girls had had at Briarwood; therefore the whole party took a train that brought them to the landing at Portageton, on Osago Lake, before noon. From that point the steamer *Lanawaxa* would transport them the length of the lake to another railroad over which the young folks must travel to reach Cheslow.

At this time of year the great lake was a beautiful sight. Several lines of steamers plied upon it; the summer resorts on the many islands which dotted it, and upon the shores of the mainland, were gay with flags and banners; the sail up the lake promised to be a most delightful one.

And it would have been so—delightful for the whole party—had it not been for a single member. The Fox could not get over her unfriendly feeling, although Ruth Fielding gave her no cause at all. Ruth tried to talk to Mary, at first; but finding the older girl determined to be unpleasant, she let her alone.

On the boat the three boys gathered camp-chairs for the party up forward, and their pocket money went for candy and other goodies with which to treat their sisters and the latter’s friends. There were not many people aboard the *Lanawaxa* on this trip and the young folks going home from school had the forward upper deck to themselves. There was a stiff breeze blowing that drove the other passengers into the inclosed cabins.

But the girls and their escorts were in high spirits. As Madge Steele declared, “they had slipped the scholastic collar for ten long weeks.”

“And if we can’t find a plenty of fun in that time it’s our own fault,” observed Heavy—having some trouble with her articulation because of the candy in her mouth. “Thanks be to goodness! no rising bell—no curfew—no getting anywhere at any particular time. Oh, I’m just going to lie in the sand all day, when we get to the Point—”

“And have your meals brought to you, Heavy?” queried Ruth, slily.

“Never you mind about the meals, Miss. Mammy Laura’s going down with us to cook, and if there’s one thing Mammy Laura loves to do, it’s to cook messes for me—and bring them to me. She’s always been afraid that my health was delicate and that I needed more nourishing food than the rest of the family. Such custards! Um! um!”

“Do go down and see if there is anything left on the lunch counter, boys,” begged Helen, anxiously. “Otherwise we won’t get Heavy home alive.”

“I *am* a little bit hungry, having had no dinner,” admitted the stout girl, reflectively.

The boys went off, laughing. “She’s so feeble!” cried Mary Cox, pinching the stout girl. “We never should travel with her alone. There ought to be a trained nurse and a physician along. I’m worried to death about her—”

“Ouch! stop your pinching!” commanded Jennie, and rose up rather suddenly, for her, to give chase to her tormentor.

The Fox was as quick as a cat, and Heavy was lubberly in her movements. The lighter girl, laughing shrilly, ran forward and vaulted over the low rail that separated the awning-covered upper deck from the unrailed roof of the lower deck forward.

“You’d better come back from there!” Ruth cried, instantly. “It’s wet and slippery.”

The Fox turned on her instantly, her face flushed and her eyes snapping.

“Mind your business, Miss!” she cried, stamping her foot. “I can look out—”

Her foot slipped. Heavy thoughtlessly laughed. None of them really thought of danger save Ruth. But Mary Cox lost her foothold, slid toward the edge of the sloping deck, and the next instant, as the *Lanawaxa* plunged a little sideways (for the sharp breeze had raised quite a little sea) The Fox shot over the brink of the deck and, with a scream, disappeared feet-first into the lake.

It all happened so quickly that nobody but the group of girls on the forward deck had seen the accident. And Madge, Heavy and Helen were all helpless—so frightened that they could only cry out.

“She can’t swim!” gasped Helen. “She’ll be drowned.”

“The paddle-wheel will hit her!” added Madge.

“Oh! where are those useless boys?” demanded the stout girl. “They’re never around when they could be of use.”

But Ruth said never a word. The emergency appealed to her quite as seriously as it did to her friends. But she knew that if Mary Cox was to be saved they must act at once.

She flung off her cap and light outside coat. She wore only canvas shoes, and easily kicked them off and ran, in her stocking-feet, toward the paddle-box. Onto this she climbed by the short ladder and sprang out upon its top just as The Fox came up after her plunge.

By great good fortune the imperiled girl had been carried beyond the paddles. But the *Lanawaxa* was steaming swiftly past the girl in the water. Ruth knew very well that Mary Cox could not swim. She was one of the few girls at Briarwood who had been unable to learn that accomplishment, under the school instructor, in the gymnasium pool. Whereas Ruth herself had taken to the art “like a duck to water.”

Mary’s face appeared but for a moment above the surface. Ruth saw it, pale and despairing; then a wave washed over it and the girl disappeared for a second time.

CHAPTER IV TROUBLE AT THE RED MILL

The screams of the other girls had brought several of the male passengers as well as some of the boat's crew to the forward deck. Mercy Curtis, who had lain down in a stateroom to rest, drew back the blind and saw Ruth poised on the wheel-box.

"Don't you do that, Ruth Fielding!" cried the lame girl, who knew instinctively what her friend's intention was.

But Ruth paid no more attention to her than she had to the other girls. She was wearing a heavy serge skirt, and she knew it would hamper her in the water. With nimble fingers she unfastened this and dropped it upon the deck. Then, without an instant's hesitation, she sprang far out from the steamer, her body shooting straight down, feet-first, to the water.

Ruth was aware as she shot downward that Tom Cameron was at the rail over her head. The *Lanawaxa* swept by and he, having run astern, leaned over and shouted to her. She had a glimpse of something swinging out from the rail, too, and dropping after her into the lake, and as the water closed over her head she realized that he had thrown one of the lifebuoys.

But deep as the water was, Ruth had no fear for herself. She loved to swim and the instructor at Briarwood had praised her skill. The only anxiety she had as she sank beneath the surface was for Mary Cox, who had already gone down twice.

She had leaped into the lake near where The Fox had disappeared. Once beneath the surface, Ruth opened her eyes and saw the shadow of somebody in the water ahead. Three strokes brought her within reach of it. She seized Mary Cox by the hair, and although her school fellow was still sinking, Ruth, with sturdy strokes, drew her up to the surface.

What a blessing it was to obtain a draught of pure air! But The Fox was unconscious, and Ruth had to bear her weight up, while treading water, until she could dash the drops from her eyes. There was the lifebuoy not ten yards away. She struck out for it with one hand, while towing Mary with the other. Long before the steamer had been stopped and a boat lowered and manned, Ruth and her burden reached the great ring, and the girls were comparatively safe.

Tom Cameron came in the boat, having forced himself in with the crew, and it was he who hauled Mary Cox over the gunwale, and then aided Ruth into the boat.

"That's the second time you've saved that girl from drowning, Ruth," he gasped. "The first time was last Fall when you and I hauled her out of the hole in the ice on Triton Lake. And now she would have gone down and stayed down if you hadn't dived for her. Now! don't you ever do it again!" concluded the excited lad.

Had Ruth not been so breathless she must have laughed at him; but there really was a serious side to the adventure. Mary Cox did not recover her senses until after they were aboard the steamer. Ruth was taken in hand by a stewardess, undressed and put between blankets, and her clothing dried and made presentable before the steamer docked at the head of the lake.

As Tom Cameron had said, Mary Cox had fallen through the ice early in the previous Winter, and Ruth had aided in rescuing her; The Fox had never even thanked the girl from the Red Mill for such aid. And now Ruth shrank from meeting her and being thanked on this occasion. Ruth had to admit to herself that she looked forward with less pleasure to the visit to the seashore with Heavy because Mary Cox was to be of the party. She could not like The Fox, and she really had ample reason.

The other girls ran into the room where Ruth was and reported when Mary became conscious, and how the doctor said that she would never have come up to the surface again, she had taken

so much water into her lungs, had not Ruth grasped her. They had some difficulty in bringing The Fox to her senses.

“And aren’t you the brave one, Ruthie Fielding!” cried Heavy. “Why, Mary Cox owes her life to you—she actually does *this* time. Before, when you and Tom Cameron helped her out of the water, she acted nasty about it—”

“Hush, Jennie!” commanded Ruth. “Don’t say another word about it. If I had not jumped into the lake after Mary, somebody else would.”

“Pshaw!” cried Heavy, “you can’t get out of it that way. And I’m glad it happened. Now we *shall* have a nice time at Lighthouse Point, for Mary can’t be anything but fond of you, child!”

Ruth, however, had her doubts. She remained in the stateroom as long as she could after the *Lanawaxa* docked. When she was dressed and came out on the deck the train that took Heavy and The Fox and the Steeles and Busy Izzy home, had gone. The train to Cheslow started a few minutes later.

“Come on, Miss Heroine!” said Tom, grinning at her as she came out on the deck. “You needn’t be afraid now. Nobody will thank you. I didn’t hear her say a grateful word myself—and I bet *you* won’t, either!”

Helen said nothing at all about The Fox; but she looked grave. The former president of the Upedes had influenced Helen a great deal during this first year at boarding school. Had Ruth Fielding been a less patient and less faithful chum, Helen and she would have drifted apart. And perhaps an occasional sharp speech from Mercy was what had served more particularly to show Helen how she was drifting. Now the lame girl observed:

“The next time you see Mary Cox fall overboard, Ruth, I hope you’ll let her swallow the whole pond, and walk ashore without your help.”

“If your name *is* ‘Mercy’ you show none to either your friends or enemies; do you?” returned Ruth, smiling.

The girl from the Red Mill refused to discuss the matter further, and soon had them all talking upon a pleasanter theme. It was evening when they reached Cheslow and Mercy’s father, of course, who was the station agent, and Mr. Cameron, were waiting for them.

The big touring car belonging to the dry-goods merchant was waiting for the young folk, and after they had dropped Mercy Curtis at the little cottage on the by-street, the machine traveled swiftly across the railroad and out into the suburbs of the town. The Red Mill was five miles from the railroad station, while the Camerons’ fine home, “Outlook,” stood some distance beyond.

Before they had gotten out of town, however, the car was held up in front of a big house set some distance back from the road, and before which, on either side of the arched gateway, was a green lamp. The lamps were already lighted and as the Cameron car came purring along the street, with Helen herself under the steering wheel (for she had begged the privilege of running it home) a tall figure came hurrying out of the gateway, signaling them to stop.

“It’s Doctor Davison himself!” cried Ruth, in some excitement.

“And how are all the Sweetbriars?” demanded the good old physician, their staunch friend and confidant. “Ah, Tom, my fine fellow! have they drilled that stoop out of your shoulders?”

“We’re all right, Dr. Davison—and awfully glad to see you,” cried Ruth, leaning out of the tonneau to shake hands with him.

“Ah! here’s the sunshine of the Red Mill—and they’re needing sunshine there, just now, I believe,” said the doctor. “Did you bring my Goody Two-Sticks home all right?”

“She’s all right, Doctor,” Helen assured him. “And so are we—only Ruth’s been in the lake.”

“In Lake Osago?”

“Yes, sir—and it was wet,” Tom told him, grinning.

“I suppose she was trying to find that out,” returned Dr. Davison. “Did you get anything else out of it, Ruthie Fielding?”

“A girl,” replied Ruth, rather tartly.

“Oh-ho! Well, *that* was something,” began the doctor, when Ruth stopped him with an abrupt question:

“Why do you say that they need me at home, sir?”

“Why—honey—they’re always glad to have you there, I reckon,” said the doctor, slowly. “Uncle Jabez and Aunt Alviry will both be glad to see you—”

“There’s trouble, sir; what is it?” asked Ruth, gravely, leaning out of the car so as to speak into his ear. “There *is* trouble; isn’t there? What is it?”

“I don’t know that I can exactly tell you, Ruthie,” he replied, with gravity. “But it’s there. You’ll see it.”

“Aunt Alviry—”

“Is all right.”

“Then it’s Uncle Jabez?”

“Yes, my child. It is Uncle Jabez. What it is you will have to find out, I am afraid, for *I* have not been able to,” said the doctor, in a whisper. “Maybe it is given to you, my dear, to straighten out the tangles at the Red Mill.”

He invited them all down to sample Old Mammy’s cakes and lemonade the first pleasant afternoon, and then the car sped on. But Ruth was silent. What she might find at the Red Mill troubled her.

CHAPTER V THE TINTACKER MINE

It was too late to more than see the outlines of the mill and connecting buildings as the car rushed down the hill toward the river road, between which and the river itself, and standing on a knoll, the Red Mill was. Ruth could imagine just how it looked—all in dull red paint and clean white trimmings. Miserly as Jabez Potter was about many things, he always kept his property in excellent shape, and the mill and farmhouse, with the adjoining outbuildings, were painted every Spring.

A lamp burned in the kitchen; but all else was dark about the place.

“Don’t look very lively, Ruth,” said Tom. “I don’t believe they expect you.”

But even as he spoke the door opened, and a broad beam of yellow lamplight shot out across the porch and down the path. A little, bent figure was silhouetted in the glow.

“There’s Aunt Alviry!” cried Ruth, in delight. “I know *she’s* all right.”

“All excepting her back and her bones,” whispered Helen. “Now, Ruthie! don’t you let anything happen to veto our trip to Heavy’s seaside cottage.”

“Oh! don’t suggest such a thing!” cried her brother.

But Ruth ran up the path after bidding them good-night, with her heart fast beating. Dr. Davison’s warning had prepared her for almost any untoward happening.

But Aunt Alvira only looked delighted to see the girl as Ruth ran into her arms. Aunt Alvira was a friendless old woman whose latter years would have been spent at the Cheslow Almshouse had not Jabez Potter taken her to keep house for him more than ten years before. Ill-natured people said that the miller had done this to save paying a housekeeper; but in Aunt Alvira’s opinion it was an instance of Mr. Potter’s kindness of heart.

“You pretty creetur!” cried Aunt Alvira, hugging Ruth close to her. “And how you’ve growed! What a smart girl you are getting to be! Deary, deary me! how I have longed for you to git back, Ruthie. Come in! Come in! Oh, my back and oh, my bones!” she complained, under her breath, as she hobbled into the house.

“How’s the rheumatics, Aunty?” asked Ruth.

“Just the same, deary. Up one day, and down the next. Allus will be so, I reckon. I’d be too proud to live if I didn’t have my aches and pains—Oh, my back and oh, my bones!” as she lowered herself into her rocker.

“Where’s Uncle Jabez?” cried Ruth.

“Sh!” admonished Aunt Alvira. “Don’t holler, child. You’ll disturb him.”

“Not *sick*?” whispered Ruth, in amazement.

“No—o. Not sick o’ body, I reckon, child,” returned Aunt Alvira.

“What *is* it, Aunt Alviry? What’s the matter with him?” pursued the girl, anxiously.

“He’s sick o’ soul, I reckon,” whispered the old woman. “Sumpin’s gone wrong with him. You know how Jabez is. It’s money matters.”

“Oh, has he been robbed again?” cried Ruth.

“Sh! not jest like that. Not like what Jasper Parloe did to him. But it’s jest as bad for Jabez, I reckon. Anyway, he takes it jest as hard as he did when his cash-box was lost that time. But you know how close-mouthed he is, Ruthie. He won’t talk about it.”

“About *what*?” demanded Ruth, earnestly.

Aunt Alvira rose with difficulty from her chair and, with her usual murmured complaint of “Oh, my back and oh, my bones!” went to the door which led to the passage. Off this passage Uncle Jabez’s room opened. She closed the door and hobbled back to her chair, but halted before sitting down.

“I never thought to ask ye, deary,” she said. “Ye must be very hungry. Ye ain’t had no supper.”

“You sit right down there and keep still,” said Ruth, smiling as she removed her coat. “I guess I can find something to eat.”

“Well, there’s cocoa. You make you a warm drink. There’s plenty of pie and cake—and there’s eggs and ham if you want them.”

“Don’t you fret about me,” repeated Ruth.

“What makes you so mussed up?” demanded Aunt Alvira, the next moment. “Why, Ruth Fielding! have you been in the water?”

“Yes, ma’am. But you know water doesn’t hurt me.”

“Dear child! how reckless you are! Did you fall in the lake?”

“No, Aunty. I jumped in,” returned the girl, and then told her briefly about her adventure on the *Lanawaxa*.

“Goodness me! Goodness me!” exclaimed Aunt Alvira. “Whatever would your uncle say if he knew about it?”

“And what is the matter with Uncle Jabez?” demanded Ruth, sitting down at the end of the table to eat her “bite.” “You haven’t told me that.”

“I ’lowed to do so,” sighed the old woman. “But I don’t want him to hear us a-gossipin’ about it. You know how Jabez is. I dunno as he knows I know what I know—”

“That sounds just like a riddle, Aunt Alvira!” laughed Ruth.

“And I reckon it *is* a riddle,” she said. “I only know from piecin’ this, that, and t’other together; but I reckon I fin’ly got it pretty straight about the Tintacker Mine—and your uncle’s lost a power o’ money by it, Ruthie.”

“What’s the Tintacker Mine?” demanded Ruth, in wonder.

“It’s a silver mine. I dunno where it is, ’ceptin’ it’s fur out West and that your uncle put a lot of money into it and he can’t git it out.”

“Why not?”

“’Cause it’s busted, I reckon.”

“The mine’s ‘busted’” repeated the puzzled Ruth.

“Yes. Or so I s’pect. I’ll tell ye how it come about. The feller come along here not long after you went to school last Fall, Ruthie.”

“What fellow?” asked Ruth, trying to get at the meat in the nut, for Aunt Alvira was very discursive.

“Now, you lemme tell it my own way, Ruthie,” admonished the old woman. “You would better,” and the girl laughed, and nodded. “It was one day when I was sweepin’ the sittin’ room—you know, what Mercy Curtis had for her bedroom while she was out here last Summer.”

Ruth nodded again encouragingly, and the little old woman went on in her usual rambling way:

“I was a-sweepin’, as I say, and Jabez come by and put his head in at the winder. ‘That’s too hard for ye, Alvira,’ says he. ‘Let the dust be—it ain’t eatin’ nothin’.’ Jest like a man, ye know!

“Well,’ says I, ‘if I didn’t sweep onc’t in a while, Jabez, we’d be wadin’ to our boot-tops in dirt.’ Like that, ye know, Ruthie. And he says, ‘They hev things nowadays for suckin’ up the dirt, instead of kickin’ it up that-a-way,’ and with that a voice says right in the yard, ‘You’re right there, Mister. An’ I got one of ’em here to sell ye.’

“There was a young feller in the yard with a funny lookin’ rig-a-ma-jig in his hand, and his hat on the back of his head, and lookin’ jest as busy as a toad that’s swallered a hornet. My! you wouldn’t think that feller had a minnit ter stay, the way he acted. Scurely had time to sell Jabez one of them ‘Vac-o-jacs,’ as he called ’em.”

“A vacuum cleaner!” exclaimed Ruth.

“That’s something like it. Only it was like a carpet-sweeper, too. I seen pitchers of ’em in the back of a magazine onc’t. I never b’lieved they was for more’n ornament; but that spry young feller come in and worked it for me, and he sucked up the dust out o’ that ingrain carpet till ye couldn’t beat a particle out o’ it with an ox-goad!

“But I didn’t seem ter favor that Vac-o-jac none,” continued Aunt Alvirah. “Ye know how close-grained yer Uncle is. I don’t expect him ter buy no fancy fixin’s for an ol’ creetur like me. But at noon time he come in and set one o’ the machines in the corner.”

“He bought it!” cried Ruth.

“That’s what he done. He says, ‘Alviry, ef it’s any good to ye, there it is! I calkerlate that’s a smart young man. He got five dollars out o’ me easier than *I* ever got five dollars out of a man in all my days.’

“I tell ye truthful, Ruthie! I can’t use it by myself. It works too hard for anybody that’s got my back and bones. But Ben, he comes in once in a while and works it for me. I reckon your uncle sends him.”

“But, Aunt Alviry!” cried Ruth. “What about the Tintacker Mine? You haven’t told me a thing about *that*.”

“But I’m a-comin’ to it,” declared the old woman. “It’s all of a piece—that and the Vac-o-jac. I seen the same young feller that sold Jabez the sweeper hangin’ about the mill a good bit. And nights Jabez figgered up his accounts and counted his money till ’way long past midnight sometimes. Bimeby he says to me, one day:

“‘Alviry, that Vac-o-jac works all right; don’t it?’

“I didn’t want to tell him it was hard to work, and it does take up the dirt, so I says ‘Yes.’

“‘Then I reckon I’ll give the boy the benefit of the doubt, and say he’s honest,’ says Jabez.

“I didn’t know what he meant, and I didn’t ask. ’Twouldn’t be *my* place ter ask Jabez Potter his business—you know that, Ruthie. So I jest watched and in a day or two back come the young sweeper feller again, and we had him to dinner. This was long before Thanksgiving’. They sat at the table after dinner and I heard ’em talking about the mine.”

“Ah-ha!” exclaimed Ruth, with a smile. “Now we come to the mine, do we?”

“I told you it was all of a piece,” said Aunt Alvirah, complacently. “Well, it seemed that the boy’s father—this agent warn’t more than a boy, but maybe he was a sharper, jest the same—the boy’s father and another man found the mine. Prospected for it, did they say?”

“That is probably the word,” agreed Ruth, much interested.

“Well, anyhow, they found it and got out some silver. Then the boy’s father bought out the other man. Then he stopped finding silver in it. And then he died, and left the mine to his folks. But the boy went out there and rummaged around the mine and found that there was still plenty of silver, only it had to be treated—or put through something—a pro—a prospect—”

“Process?” suggested Ruth.

“That’s it, deary. Some process to refine the silver, or git it out of the ore, or something. It was all about chemicals and machinery, and all that. Your Uncle Jabez seemed to understand it, but it was all Dutch to me,” declared Aunt Alvirah.

“Well, what happened?”

“Why,” continued the old woman, “the Tintacker Mine, as the feller called it, couldn’t be made to pay without machinery being bought, and all that. He had to take in a partner, he said. And I jedge your Uncle Jabez bought into the mine. Now, for all I kin hear, there ain’t no mine, or no silver, or no nothin’. Leastwise, the young feller can’t be heard from, and Jabez has lost his money—and a big sum it is, Ruthie. It’s hurt him so that he’s got smaller and smaller than ever. Begrudges the very vittles we have on the table, I believe. I’m afraid, deary, that unless there’s a change he won’t want you to keep on at that school you’re going to, it’s so expensive,” and Aunt Alvirah gathered the startled girl into her arms and rocked her to and fro on her bosom.

“That’s what I was comin’ to, deary,” she sobbed. “I had ter tell ye; he told me I must. Ye can’t go back to Briarwood, Ruthie, when it comes Fall.”

CHAPTER VI

UNCLE JABEZ AT HIS WORST

It was true that Mr. Potter had promised Ruth only one year at school. The miller considered he owed his grand-niece something for finding and restoring to him his cash-box which he had lost, and which contained considerable money and the stocks and bonds in which he had invested. Jabez Potter prided himself on being strictly honest. He was just according to his own notion. He owed Ruth something for what she had done—something more than her “board and keep”—and he had paid the debt. Or, so he considered.

There had been a time when Uncle Jabez seemed to be less miserly. His hard old heart had warmed toward his niece—or, so Ruth believed. And he had taken a deep interest—for him—in Mercy Curtis, the lame girl. Ruth knew that Uncle Jabez and Dr. Davison together had made it possible for Mercy to attend Briarwood Hall. Of course, Uncle Jabez would cut off that charity as well, and the few tears Ruth cried that night after she went to bed were as much for Mercy’s disappointment as for her own.

“But maybe Dr. Davison will assume the entire cost of keeping Mercy at school,” thought the girl of the Red Mill. “Or, perhaps, Mr. Curtis may have paid the debts he contracted while Mercy was so ill, and will be able to help pay her expenses at Briarwood.”

But about herself she could have no such hope. She knew that the cost of her schooling had been considerable. Nor had Uncle Jabez, been niggardly with her about expenditures. He had given her a ten-dollar bill for spending money at the beginning of each half; and twice during the school year had sent her an extra five-dollar bill. Her board and tuition for the year had cost over three hundred dollars; it would cost more the coming year. If Uncle Jabez had actually lost money in this Tintacker Mine Ruth could be sure that he meant what he had left to Aunt Alvira to tell her. He would not pay for another school year.

But Ruth was a persevering little body and she came of determined folk. She had continued at the district school when the circumstances were much against her. Now, having had a taste of Briarwood for one year, she was the more anxious to keep on for three years more. Besides, there was the vision of college beyond! She knew that if she remained at home, all she could look forward to was to take Aunt Alvira’s place as her uncle’s housekeeper. She would have no chance to get ahead in life. Life at the Red Mill seemed a very narrow outlook indeed.

Ruth meant to get an education. Somehow (there were ten long weeks of Summer vacation before her) she must think up a scheme for earning the money necessary to pay for her second year’s tuition. Three hundred and fifty dollars! that was a great, great sum for a girl of Ruth Fielding’s years to attempt to earn. How should she “begin to go about it”? It looked an impossible task.

But Ruth possessed a fund of good sense. She was practical, if imaginative, and she was just sanguine enough to keep her temper sweet. Lying awake and worrying over it wasn’t going to do her a bit of good; she knew that. Therefore she did not indulge herself long, but wiped away her tears, snuggled down into the pillow, and dropped asleep.

In the morning she saw Uncle Jabez when she came down stairs. The stove smoked and he was growling about it.

“Good morning, Uncle!” she cried and ran to him and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him—whether he would be kissed, or not!

“There! there! so you’re home; are you?” he growled.

Ruth was glad to notice that he called it her *home*. She knew that he did not want a word to be said about what Aunt Alvira had told her over night, and she set about smoothing matters over in her usual way.

“You go on and ’tend to your outside chores, Uncle,” she commanded. “I’ll build this fire in a jiffy.”

“Huh! I reckon you’ve forgotten how to build a kitchen fire—livin’ so long in a steam-heated room,” he grunted.

“Now, don’t you believe that!” she assured him, and running out to the shed for a handful of fat-pine, or “lightwood,” soon had the stove roaring comfortably.

“What a comfort you be, my pretty creetur,” sighed Aunt Alvira, as she hobbled down stairs. “Oh, my back and oh, my bones! This is going to be a *creaky day*. I feel the dampness.”

“Don’t you believe it, Aunty!” cried the girl. “The sun’s going to come out and drive away every atom of this mist. Cheer up!”

And she was that way all day; but deep down in her heart there was a very tender spot indeed, and in her mind the thought of giving up Briarwood rankled like a barbed arrow. She would *not* give it up if she could help. But how ever could she earn three hundred and fifty dollars? The idea seemed preposterous.

Aside from being with Aunt Alvira, and helping her, Ruth’s homecoming was not at all as she had hoped it would be. Uncle Jabez was more taciturn than ever, it seemed to the girl. She could not break through the crust of his manner. If she followed him to the mill, he was too busy to talk, or the grinding-stones made so much noise that talking was impossible. At night he did not even remain in the kitchen to count up the day’s gains and to study his accounts. Instead, he retired with the cash-box and ledger to his own room.

She found no opportunity of opening any discussion about Briarwood, or about the mysterious Tintacker Mine, upon which subject Aunt Alvira had been so voluble. If the old man had lost money in the scheme, he was determined to give her no information at first hand about it.

At first she was doubtful whether she should go to Lighthouse Point. Indeed, she was not sure that she *could* go. She had no money. But before the week was out at dinner one day Uncle Jabez pushed a twenty-dollar bill across the table to her, and said:

“I said ye should go down there to the seaside for a spell, Ruth. Make that money do ye,” and before she could either thank him or refuse the money, Uncle Jabez stumped out of the house.

In the afternoon Helen drove over in the pony carriage to take Ruth to town, so the latter could assure her chum that she would go to Lighthouse Point and be one of Jennie Stone’s bungalow party. They called on Dr. Davison and the girl from the Red Mill managed to get a word in private with the first friend she had made on her arrival at Cheslow (barring Tom Cameron’s mastiff, Reno) and told him of conditions as she had found them at home.

“So, it looks as though I had got to make my own way through school, Doctor, and it troubles me a whole lot,” Ruth said to the grave physician. “But what bothers me, too, is Mercy—”

“Don’t worry about Goody Two-Sticks,” returned the doctor, quickly. “Your uncle served notice on me a week before you came home that he could not help to put her through Briarwood beyond this term that is closed. I told him he needn’t bother. Sam Curtis is in better shape than he was, and we’ll manage to find the money to put that sharp little girl of his where she can get all the education she can possibly soak in. But you, Ruth—”

“I’m going to find a way, too,” declared Ruth, independently, yet secretly feeling much less confidence than she appeared to have.

Mercy was all ready for the seaside party when the girls called at the Curtis cottage. The lame girl was in her summer house, sewing and singing softly to herself. She no longer glared at the children as they ran by, or shook her fist at them as she used to, because they could dance and she could not.

On Monday they would start for the shore, meeting Heavy and the others on the train, and spending a good part of the day riding to Lighthouse Point. Mr. Cameron had exercised his influence with certain railroad officials and obtained a private car for the young folk. The Cameron twins

and Ruth and Mercy would get aboard the car at Cheslow, and Jennie Stone and her other guests would join them at Jennie's home town.

Between that day and the time of her departure Ruth tried to get closer to Uncle Jabez; but the miller went about with lowering brow and scarcely spoke to either Ruth or Aunt Alvirah.

“It's jest as well ye air goin' away again so quick, my pretty,” said the old woman, sadly. “When Jabez gits one o' these moods on him there ain't nobody understands him so well as me. I don't mind if he don't speak. I talk right out loud what I have to say an' he can hear an' reply, or hear an' keep dumb, jest whichever he likes. They say ‘hard words don't break no bones’ an' sure enough bein' as dumb as an oyster ain't hurtin' none, either. You go 'long an' have your fun with your mates, Ruthie. Mebbe Jabez will be over his grouch when you come back.”

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