

Douglas Amanda M.

The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe: or, There's No Place Like Home



Amanda Douglas

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Amanda Minnie Douglas

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CHAPTER I

JOE'S GRAND DISCOVERY

Hal sat trotting Dot on his knee, – poor little weazen-faced Dot, who was just getting over the dregs of the measles, and cross accordingly. By way of accompaniment he sang all the Mother Goose melodies that he could remember. At last he came to, —

"There was an old woman who lived in a shoe:
She had so many children she didn't know what to do;
To some she gave broth without any bread," —

and Harry stopped to catch his breath, for the trotting was of the vigorous order.

"And a thrashing all round, and sent them to bed!"

finished Joe, thrusting his shaggy head in at the window after the fashion of a great Newfoundland dog.

Dot answered with a piteous cry, – a sort of prolonged wail, heart-rending indeed.

"Serve you right," said Joe, going through an imaginary performance with remarkably forcible gestures.

"For shame, Joe! You were little once yourself, and I dare say cried when you were sick. I always thought it very cruel, that, after being deprived of their supper, they should be" —

"Thrashed! Give us good strong Saxon for once, Flossy!"

Flossy was of the ambitious, correct, and sentimental order. She had lovely light curls, and soft white hands when she did not have to work too hard, which she never did of her own free will. She thought it dreadful to be so poor, and aspired to a rather aristocratic ladyhood.

"I am sorry you were not among them," she replied indignantly. "You're a hard-hearted, cruel boy!"

"When the thrashings went round? You're a c-r-u-e-l girl!" with a prodigious length of accent. "Why, I get plenty of 'em at school."

"Trot, trot, trot. There was an old woman' – what are you laughing at, Joe?" and Hal turned red in the face.

"I've just made a brilliant discovery. O my poor buttons! remember Flossy's hard labor and many troubles, and do not *bust*! Why, we're the very children!"

At this, Joe gave a sudden lurch: you saw his head, and then you saw his heels, and the patch on the knee of his trousers, ripped partly off by an unlucky nail, flapped in the breeze; and he was seated on the window-sill right side up with care, drumming both bare heels into the broken wall. He gave a prolonged whistle of satisfaction, made big eyes at Dot, and then said again, —

"Yes, we are the *very* children!"

"What children? Joe, you are the noisiest boy in Christendom!"

"Flossy, the old woman who lived in a shoe is Granny, and no mistake! I can prove it logically. Look at this old tumble-down rookery: it is just the shape of a huge shoe, sloping gradually to the

toe, which is the shed-end here. It's brown and rusty and cracked and patched: it wants heeling and toeing, and to be half-soled, greased to keep the water out, and blacked to make it shine. It was a famous seven-leaguer in its day; but, when it had lost its virtue, the giant who used to wear it kicked it off by the roadside, little dreaming that it would be transformed into a cabin for the aforesaid old woman. And here we all are sure enough! Sometimes we get broth, and sometimes we don't."

Dot looked up in amazement at this harangue, and thrust her thumbs in her mouth. Hal laughed out-right, – a soft little sound like the rippling of falling water.

"Yes, a grand discovery! Ladies and gentlemen of the nineteenth century, I rise to get up, to speak what I am about to say; and I hope you will treasure the words of priceless wisdom that fall from my lips. I'm not backward about coming forward" —

Joe was balancing himself very nicely, and making tremendous flourishes, when two brown, dimpled hands scrubbed up the shock of curly hair, and the sudden onslaught destroyed his equilibrium, as Flossy would have said, and down he went on the floor in crab fashion, looking as if he were all arms and legs.

"Charlie, you midget! just wait till I catch you. I haven't the broth, but the other thing will do as well."

But Charlie was on the outside; and her little brown, bare feet were as fleet as a deer's. Joe saw her skimming over the meadow; but the afternoon was very warm, and a dozen yards satisfied him for a race, so he turned about.

"Joe, you might take Dot a little while, I think," said Hal beseechingly, as Joe braced himself against the door-post. "I've held her all the afternoon."

"She won't come – will you, Dot?"

But Dot signified her gratification by stretching out her hands. Joe was a good-natured fellow; and, though he might have refused Hal easily, he couldn't resist Dot's tender appeal, so he took her on his shoulder and began trotting off to Danbury Cross. Dot laughed out of her sleepy eyes, highly delighted at this change in the programme.

"Oh, dear!" and Hal rubbed his tired arms. "I shouldn't think grandmother would know what to do, sure enough! What a host of us there are, – six children!"

"I'm sure I do my best," said Flossy with a pathetic little sniff. "But it's very hard to be an orphan and poor."

"And when there are six of us, and we are all orphans, and all poor, it must be six times as hard," put in Joe with a sly twinkle.

Then he changed Dot from her triumphal position on his shoulder to a kind of cradle in his arms. Her eyelids drooped, and she began to croon a very sleepy tune.

Hal looked out of the window, over to the woods, where the westward sun was making a wonderful land of gold and crimson. Sometimes he had beautiful dreams of that softened splendor, but now they were mercenary. If one could only coin it all into money! There was poor grandmother slaving away, over at Mrs. Kinsey's, – she should come home, and be a princess, to say the very least.

"I guess I'll clear up a bit!" said Hal, coming down from the clouds, and glancing round at the disorderly room. "Granny will be most tired to death when her day's work is done. Flossy, if you wouldn't mind going in the other room."

Flossy gathered up her skirts and her crocheting, and did not take the invitation at all amiss.

Then Hal found the stubby broom, and swept the floor; dusted the mantle, after removing an armful of "trash;" went at the wooden chairs, that had once been painted a gorgeous yellow with green bars; and cleared a motley accumulation of every thing off of the table, hanging up two or three articles, and tucking the rest into a catch-all closet. A quaint old pitcher, that had lost both spout and handle, was emptied of some faded flowers, and a fresh lot cut, – nothing very choice;

but the honeysuckle scented the room, and the coxcombs gave their crimson glow to the top of the pyramid.

"Why, Mrs. Betty," said Joe, "you've made quite a palace out of your end of the shoe, and this miserable little Dot has gone to sleep at last. Shall I put her in the cradle, or drop her down the well?"

Hal smiled a little, and opened the door. It was the best room, quite large, uncarpeted, but clean; and though the bed was covered with a homemade spread, it was as white as it could be. The cradle was not quite as snowy; for the soiled hands that tumbled Dot in and out left some traces.

To get her safely down was a masterpiece of strategy. Joe bumped her head; and Hal took her in his arms, hushing her in a low, motherly fashion, and pressing his brown cheek to hers, which looked the color of milk that had been skimmed, and then split in two, and skimmed again. She made a dive in Hal's hair with her little bird's claw of a hand, but presently dropped asleep again.

"I guess she'll take a good long nap," whispered Hal, quite relieved.

"I'm sure she ought," sighed Florence.

Hal went back to his housekeeping. He was as handy as a girl, any day. He pulled some radishes, and put them in a bowl of cold water, and chopped some lettuce and onions together, the children were all so fond of it. Then he gleaned the raspberries, and filled the saucer with currants that were not salable.

Joe, in the meanwhile, had gone after Mrs. Green's cows. She gave them a quart of milk daily for driving the cows to and from the pasture, and doing odd chores.

"If you see the children, send them home," had been Hal's parting injunction. "Grandmother will soon be here."

She came before Joe returned. The oddest looking little old woman that you ever saw. Florence, at fourteen, was half a head taller. Thin and wrinkled and sunburned; her flaxen hair turning to silver, and yet obstinately full of little curls; her blue eyes pale and washed out, and hosts of "crows'-feet" at the corners; and her voice cracked and tremulous.

Poor Grandmother Kenneth! She had worked hard enough in her day, and was still forced to keep it up, now that it was growing twilight with her. But I don't believe there was another as merry a houseful of children in all Madison.

Joe's discovery was not far out of the way. The old woman, whose biography and family troubles were so graphically given by Mother Goose, died long before our childhood; but I think Granny Kenneth must have looked like her, though I fancy she was better natured. As for the children, many and many a time she had not known what to do with them, – when they were hungry, when they were bad, when their clothes were worn out and she had nothing to make new ones with, when they had no shoes; and yet she loved the whole six, and toiled for them without a word of complaint.

Her only son, Joe, had left them to her, – a troublesome legacy indeed; but at that time they had a mother and a very small sum of money. Mrs. Joe was a pretty, helpless, inefficient body, who continually fretted because Joe did not get rich. When the poor fellow lay on his death-bed, his disease aggravated by working when he was not able, he twined his arms around his mother's neck, and cried with a great gasp, —

"You'll be kind to them, mother, and look after them a little. God will help you, I know. I should like to live for their sakes."

A month or two after this, Dot was born. Now that her dear Joe was dead, there was no comfort in the world; so the frail, pretty little thing grieved herself away, and went to sleep beside him in the churchyard.

The neighbors made a great outcry when Grandmother Kenneth took the children to her own little cottage.

"What could she do with them? Why, they will all starve in a bunch," said one.

"Florence and Joe might be bound out," proposed another.

A third was for sending them to the almshouse, or putting them in some orphan asylum; but five years had come and gone, and they had not starved yet, though once or twice granny's heart had quaked for fear.

Every one thought it would be such a blessing if Dot would only die. She had been a sight of trouble during the five years of her life. First, she had the whooping cough, which lasted three times as long as with any ordinary child. Then she fell out of the window, and broke her collar-bone; and when she was just over that, it was the water-pox. The others had the mumps, and Dot's share was the worst of all. Kit had the measles in the lightest possible form, and actually had to be tied in bed to make him stay there; while it nearly killed poor Dot, who had been suffering from March to midsummer, and was still poor as a crow, and cross as a whole string of comparisons.

But Granny was patient with it all. The very sweetest old woman in the world, and the children loved her in their fashion; but they seldom realized all that she was doing for them. And though some of her neighbors appreciated the toil and sacrifice, the greater part of them thought it very foolish for her to be slaving herself to death for a host of beggarly grandchildren.

"Well, Hal!" she exclaimed in her rather shrill but cheery voice, "how's the day gone?"

"Pretty well: but you're tired to death. I suppose Mrs. Kinsey's company came, and there was a grand feast?"

"Grand! I guess it was. Such loads of pies and puddings and kettles of berries and tubs of cream" —

Granny paused, out of breath from not having put in any commas.

"Ice-cream, you mean? Freezers, they call 'em."

"You do know every thing, Hal!" And granny laughed. "I can't get all the new-fangled names and notions in my head. There was Grandmother Kinsey, neat as a new pin, and children and grandchildren, and aunts and cousins. But it was nice, Hal."

The boy smiled, thinking of them all.

"Half of the goodies'll spile, I know. Mrs. Kinsey packed me a great basket full; and, Hal, here's two dollars. I'm clean tuckered out."

"Then you just sit still, and let me 'tend to you. Dot's asleep; and if I haven't worried with her this afternoon! That child ought to grow up a wonder, she's been so much trouble to us all. Joe's gone after the cows, and Florence is busy as a bee. Oh, what a splendid basket full! Why, we shall feast like kings!"

With that Hal began to unpack, — a plate full of cut cake, biscuits by the dozen, cold chicken, delicious slices of ham, and various other delicacies.

"We'll only have a few to-night," said Hal economically. "'Tisn't every day that we have such a windfall. I'll put these out of the children's sight; for there they come."

The "children" were Charlie and Kit, with barely a year between; Kit being seven, and Charlie — her real name was Charlotte, but she was such a tomboy that they gave her the nickname — was about eight. Hal was ten, and Joe twelve.

"Children," said Hal, "don't come in till you've washed yourselves. Be quiet, for Dot is asleep."

Thus admonished, Charlie did nothing worse than pour a basin of water over Kit, who sputtered and scolded and kicked until Hal rushed out to settle them.

"If you're not quiet, you shall not have a mouthful of supper; and we've lots of goodies."

Kit began to wash the variegated streaks from his face. Charlie soused her head in a pail of water, and shook it like a dog, then ran her fingers through her hair. It was not as light or silken as that of Florence, and was cropped close to her head. Kit's was almost as black as a coal; and one refractory lock stood up. Joe called it his "scalp-lock waving in the breeze."

"Now, Charlie, pump another pail of water. There comes Joe, and we'll have supper."

Charlie eyed Joe distrustfully, and hurried into the house. Hal hung up Granny's sun-bonnet, and placed the chairs around.

"Come, Florence," he said, opening the door softly.

"My eyes!" ejaculated Joe in amaze. "Grandmother, you're a trump."

"Joe!" exclaimed Hal reproachfully.

Joe made amends by kissing Granny in the most rapturous fashion. Then he escorted her to the table in great state.

"Have you been good children to-day?" she asked, as they assembled round the table.

"I've run a splinter in my toe; and, oh! my trousers are torn!" announced Kit dolefully.

"If you ever had a whole pair of trousers at one time the world would come to an end," declared Joe sententiously.

"Would it?" And Kit puzzled his small brain over the connection.

"And Charlie preserves a discreet silence. Charlie, my dear, I advise you to keep out of the way of the ragmen, or you will find yourself on the road to the nearest paper-mill."

Florence couldn't help laughing at the suggestion.

"Children!" said their grandmother.

Full of fun and frolic as they were, the little heads bowed reverently as Granny asked her simple blessing. She would as soon have gone without eating as to omit that.

"I really don't want any thing," she declared. "I've been tasting all day, – a bit here and a bit there, and such loads of things!"

"Tell us all about it," begged Joe. "And who was there, – the grand Panjandrum with a button on the top. Children's children unto the third and fourth generation."

"O Joe! if you only wouldn't," began Granny imploringly.

"No, I won't, Granny;" and Joe made a face as long as your arm, or a piece of string.

"Of course I didn't see 'em all, nor half; but men and women and children and babies! And Grandmother Kinsey's ninety-five years old!"

"I hope I'll live to be that old, and have lots of people to give me a golden wedding," said Charlie, with her mouth so full that the words were pretty badly squeezed.

"This isn't a golden wedding," said Florence with an air of dignity: "it's a birthday party."

"Ho!" and Joe laughed. "You'll be, —

'Ugly, ill-natured, and wrinkled and thin,
Worn by your troubles to bone and to skin.'"

"She's never been much else," rejoined Flossy, looking admiringly at her own white arm.

"I'm not as old as you!" And Charlie flared up to scarlet heat.

"Oh! you needn't get so vexed. I was only thinking of the skin and bone," said Florence in a more conciliatory manner.

"Well, I don't want to be a 'Mother Bunch.'"

"No fear of you, Charlie. You look like the people who live on some shore, – I've forgotten the name of the place, – and, eat so many fish that the bones work through."

Charlie felt of her elbows. They were pretty sharp, to be sure. She was very tall of her age, and ran so much that it was quite impossible to keep any flesh on her bones.

"Hush, children!" said grandmother. "I was going to tell you about the party. Hal, give me a little of your salad, first."

The Kinseys had invited all their relations to a grand family gathering. Granny told over the pleasant and comical incidents that had come under her notice, – the mishaps in cooking, the babies that had fallen down stairs, and various entertaining matters.

By that time supper was ended. Florence set out to take some lace that she had been making to a neighbor; Hal washed the dishes, and Charlie wiped them; Joe fed the chickens, and then perched himself astride the gate-post, whistling all the tunes he could remember; Kit and Charlie went to bed presently; and Hal and his grandmother had a good talk until Dot woke up, strange to say quite good-natured.

"Granny," said Hal, preparing a bowl of bread and milk for his little sister, "some day we'll all be grown, and you won't have to work so hard."

"Six men and women! How odd it will be!" returned Granny with a smile shining over her tired face.

"Yes. We'll keep you like a lady. You shall have a pretty house to live in, and Dot shall wait upon you. Won't you, Dot?"

Dot shook her head sagely at Granny.

And in the gathering twilight Hal smiled, remembering Joe's conceit. Granny looked happy in spite of her weariness. She, foolish body, was thinking how nice it was to have them all, even to poor little Dot.

CHAPTER II

PLANNING IN THE TWILIGHT

It was a rainy August day, and the children were having a glorious time up in the old garret. Over the house-part there were two rooms; but this above the kitchen was kept for rubbish. A big wheel, on which Granny used to spin in her younger days, now answered for almost any purpose, from a coach and four, to a menagerie: they could make it into an elephant, a camel, or a hyena, by a skilful arrangement of drapery.

There were several other pieces of dilapidated furniture, old hats, old boots, a barrel or two of papers; in fact, a lot of useless traps and a few trophies that Joe had brought home; to say nothing of Charlie's endless heaps of trash, for she had a wonderful faculty of accumulation; herbs of every kind, bundles of calamus, stacks of "cat-tails," the fuzz of which flew in every direction with the least whiff of wind.

The "children" had been raising bedlam generally. Joe was dressed in an old scuttle-shaped Leghorn bonnet and a gay plaid cloak, a strait kind of skirt plaited on a yoke. Granny had offered it to Florence for a dress, but it had been loftily declined. Kit was attired as an Indian, his "scalp-lock" bound up with rooster feathers; and he strutted up and down, jabbering a most uncouth dialect, though of what tribe it would be difficult to say. Charlie appeared in a new costume about every half-hour, and improvised caves in every corner; though it must be confessed Joe rather extinguished her with his style. He could draw in his lips until he looked as if he hadn't a tooth in his head, and talk like nearly every old lady in town.

Such whoops and yells and shouts as had rung through the old garret would have astonished delicate nerves. In one of the bedrooms Granny was weaving rag-carpet on a rickety loom, for she did a little of every thing to lengthen out her scanty income; but the noise of that was as a whiff of wind in comparison.

At last they had tried nearly every kind of transformation, and were beginning to grow tired. It was still very cloudy, and quite twilight in their den, when Florence came up stairs, and found them huddled around the window listening to a wonderful story that Joe made up as he went along. Such fortunes and adventures could only belong to the Munchausen period.

"Dear!" exclaimed Florence, "I thought the chief of the Mohawks had declared war upon the Narragansetts, and everybody had been scalped, you subsided so suddenly. You've made racket enough to take off the roof of the house!"

"It's on yet," was Joe's solemn assurance.

"O Joe!" begged Charlie: "tell us another story, – something about a sailor who was wrecked, and lived in a cave, and found bags and bags of money!"

"That's the kind, Charlie. Flo, come on and take a seat."

"Where's Dot?"

"Here in my arms," replied Hal; "as good as a kitten; aren't you, Dot?"

Dot answered with a contented grunt.

"Oh, let's all tell what we'd like to do!" said Charlie, veering round on a new tack. "Flo'll want to be Cinderella at the king's ball."

Florence tumbled over the pile of legs, and found a seat beside Hal.

"Well, I'll lead off," began Joe with a flourish. "First, I'm going to be a sailor. I mean to ship with a captain bound for China; and hurra! we'll go out with a flowing sea or some other tip-top thing! Well, I guess we'll go to China, – this is all suppos'n, you know; and while I'm there I'll get such lots of things! – crape-shawls and silks for you, Flossy; and cedarwood chests to keep out

moths, and fans and beautiful boxes, and a chest of tea, for Granny. On the way home we shall be wrecked. You'll hear the news, and think that I'm dead, sure enough."

"But how will Flo get her shawls?" asked Charlie.

"Oh, you'll hear presently! That's way in the end. I shall be wrecked on an island where there's a fierce native chief; and first he and his men think they'll kill me." Joe always delighted in harrowing up the feelings of his audience. "So I offer him the elegant shawls and some money" —

"But I thought you lost them all in the wreck!" interposed quick-brained Charlie.

"Oh, no! There's always something floats ashore, you must remember. Well, he concluded not to kill me, though they have a great festival dance in honor of their idols; and I only escape by promising to be his obedient slave. I find some others who have been cast on that desolate shore, and been treated in the same manner. The chief beats us, and makes us work, and treats us dreadfully. Then we mutiny, and have a great battle, for a good many of the natives join us. In the scrimmage the old fellow is killed; and there's a tremendous rejoicing, I can tell you, for they all hate him. We divide his treasure, and it's immense, and go to live in his palace. Well, no boat ever comes along; so we build one for ourselves, and row to the nearest port and tell them the chief is dead. They are very glad, for he was a cruel old fellow. Then we buy a ship, and go back for the rest of our treasures. We take a great many of the beautiful things out of the palace, and then we start for home, double-quick. It's been a good many years; and, when I come back, Granny is old, and walking with a cane, Florence married to a rich gentleman, and Dot here grown into a handsome girl. But won't I build a stunning house! There'll be a scattering out of this old shoe, I tell you."

"Oh, won't it be splendid!" exclaimed Charlie, with a long-drawn breath. "It's just like a story."

"Now, Hal, it's your turn."

Hal sighed softly, and squeezed Dot a little.

"I shall not go off and be a sailor" —

"Or a jolly young oysterman," said Joe, by way of assistance.

"No. What I'd like most of all" — and Hal made a long pause.

"Even if it's murder, we'll forgive you and love you," went on tormenting Joe.

"O Joe, don't!" besought Florence. "I want to hear what Hal will choose, for I know just what I'd like to have happen to me."

"So do I," announced Charlie confidently.

"I don't know that I can have it," said Hal slowly; "for it costs a good deal, though I might make a small beginning. It's raising lovely fruit and flowers, and having a great hot-house, with roses and lilies and dear white blossoms in the middle of the winter. I should love them so much! They always seem like little children to me, with God for their father, and we who take care of them for a stepmother; though stepmothers are not always good, and the poor wicked ones would be those who did not love flowers. Why, it would be like fairy-land, — a great long hot-house, with glass overhead, and all the air sweet with roses and heliotrope and mignonette. And it would be so soft and still in there, and so very, very beautiful! It seems to me as if heaven must be full of flowers."

"Could you sell 'em if you were poor?" asked Charlie, in a low voice.

"Not the flowers in heaven! Charlie, you're a heathen."

"I didn't mean that! Don't you suppose I know about heaven!" retorted Charlie warmly.

"Yes," admitted Joe with a laugh: "he could sell them, and make lots of money. And there are ever so many things: why, Mr. Green paid six cents apiece for some choice tomato-plants."

"When I'm a man, I think I'll do that. I mean to try next summer in my garden."

"May I tell now?" asked Charlie, who was near exploding with her secret.

"Yes. Great things," said Joe.

"I'm going to run away!" And Charlie gave her head an exultant toss, that, owing to the darkness, was lost to her audience.

Joe laughed to his utmost capacity, which was not small. The old garret fairly rang again. Florence uttered a horrified exclamation; and Kit said, —

"I'll go with you!"

"Girls don't run away," remarked Hal gravely.

"But I mean to, and it'll be royal fun," was the confident reply.

"Where will you go? and will you beg from door to door?" asked Joe quizzically.

"No: I'm going out in the woods," was the undaunted rejoinder. "I mean to find a nice cave; and I'll bring in a lot of good dry leaves and some straw, and make a bed. Then I'll gather berries; and I know how to catch fish, and I can make a fire and fry them. I'll have a gay time going off to the river and rambling round, and there'll be no lessons to plague a body to death. It will be just splendid."

"Suppose a bear comes along and eats you up?" suggested Joe.

"As if there were any bears around here!" Charlie returned with immense disdain.

"Well, a snake, or a wild-cat!"

"I'm not afraid of snakes."

"But you'd want a little bread."

"Oh! I'd manage about that. I do mean to run away some time, just for fun."

"You'll be glad to run back again!"

"You see, now!" was the decisive reply.

"Florentina, it is your turn now. We have had age before beauty."

Florence tossed her soft curls, and went through with a few pretty airs.

"I shouldn't run away," she said slowly; "but I'd like to *go*, for all that. Sometimes, as I sit by the window sewing, and see an elegant carriage pass by, I think, what if there should be an old gentleman in it, who had lost his wife and all his children, and that one of his little girls looked like — like me? And if he should stop and ask me for a drink, I'd go to the well and draw a fresh, cool bucketful" —

"From the north side — that's the coldest," interrupted Joe.

"Hush, Joe! No one laughed at you!"

"Laugh! Why, I am sober as an owl."

"Then I'd give him a drink. I wish we could have some goblets: tumblers look so dreadfully old-fashioned. I mean to buy *one*, at least, some time. He would ask me about myself; and I'd tell him that we were all orphans, and had been very unfortunate, and that our grandmother was old" —

"Four score and ten of us, poor old maids, —
Four score and ten of us,
Without a penny in our *puss*,
Poor old maids,"

sang Joe pathetically, cutting short the *purse* on account of the rhyme.

"O Joe, you are too bad! I won't tell any more."

"Yes, do!" entreated Hal. "And so he liked you on account of the resemblance, and wanted to adopt you."

"Exactly! Hal, how could you guess it?" returned Florence, much mollified. "And so he would take me to a beautiful house, where there were plenty of servants, and get me lovely clothes to wear; and there would be lots of china and silver and elegant furniture and a piano. I'd go to school, and study music and drawing, and never have to sew or do any kind of work. Then I'd send you nice presents home; and, when you were fixed up a little, you should come and see me. And maybe, Hal, as you grew older, he would help you about getting a hot-house. I think when I became a woman, I would take Dot to educate."

"I've heard of fairy godmothers before, but this seems to be a godfather. Here's luck to your old covey, Florrie, drunk in imaginary champagne."

"Joe, I wish you wouldn't use slang phrases, nor be so disrespectful."

"I'm afraid I'll have to keep clear of the palace."

"Oh, if it only could be!" sighed Hal. "I think Flo was meant for a lady."

Florence smiled inwardly at hearing this. It was her opinion also.

"Here, Kit, are you asleep?" And Joe pulled him out of the pile by one leg. "Wake up, and give us your heart's desire."

Kit indulged in a vigorous kick, which Joe dodged.

"It'll be splendid," began Kit, "especially the piano. I've had my hands over my eyes, making stars; and I was thinking" —

"That's just what we want, Chief of the Mohawk Valley. Don't keep us in suspense."

"I'm going to save up my money, like some one Hal was reading about the other day, and buy a fiddle."

A shout of laughter greeted this announcement, it sounded so comical.

Kit rubbed his eyes in amazement, and failed to see any thing amusing. Then he said indignantly, —

"You needn't make such a row!"

"But what will you do with a fiddle? You might tie a string to Charlie, and take her along for a monkey; or you might both go round singing in a squeaky voice, —

'Two orphan boys of Switzerland.'"

"You're real mean, Joe," said Kit, with his voice full of tears.

"Kit, I'll give you the violin myself when I get rich," Florence exclaimed in a comforting tone, her soft hand smoothing down the refractory scalp-lock; "but I would say violin, it sounds so much nicer. And then you'll play."

"Play!" enunciated Kit in a tone that I cannot describe, as if that were a weak word for the anticipated performance. "I'd make her talk! They'd sit there and listen, — a whole houseful of people it would be, you know; and when I first came out with my fiddle, — violin. I mean, — they would look at me as if they thought I couldn't do much. I'd begin with a slow sound, like the wind wailing on a winter night, — I guess I'd have it a storm, and a little lost child, for you can make almost any thing with a violin; and the cries should grow fainter and fainter, for she would be chilled and worn out; and presently it should drop down into the snow, and there'd be the softest, strangest music you ever heard. The crowd would listen and listen, and hold their breath; and when the storm cleared away, and the angels came down for the child, it would be so, so sad" — and there was an ominous falter in Kit's voice, "they couldn't help crying. There'd be an angel's song up in heaven; and in the sweetest part of it all, I'd go quietly away, for I wouldn't want any applause."

"But you'd have it," said Hal softly, reaching out for the small fingers that were to evoke such wonderful melody. "It almost makes me cry myself to think of it! and the poor little girl lost in the snow, not bigger than Dot here!"

"Children!" called Granny from the foot of the stairs, "ain't you going to come down and have any supper? I've made a great pot full of mush."

There was a general scrambling. Hal carried Dot in his arms, for she was fast asleep. Two or three times in the short journey he stopped to kiss the soft face, thinking of Kit's vision.

"Oh, we've been having such a splendid time!" announced Charlie. "All of us telling what we'd like to do; and, Granny, Joe's going to build you an *elegant* house!" with a great emphasis on the word, as Charlie was not much given to style, greatly to the sorrow and chagrin of Florence.

Granny gave a cheerful but cracked treble laugh, and asked, —

"What'll he build it of, my dear, – corn-cobs?"

"Oh, a *real* house! He's going to make lots of money, Joe is, and get shipwrecked."

Granny shook her head, which made the little white curls bob around oddly enough.

"How you do mix up things, Charlie," said Joe, giving her a poke with his elbow. "You're a perfect harum-scarum! I don't wonder you want to live in the woods. Go look at your head: it stands out nine ways for Sunday!"

Charlie ran her fingers through her hair, her usual manner of arranging it.

"Granny, here's this little lamb fast asleep. She's grown to be one of the best babies in the world;" and Hal kissed her again.

He had such a tender, girlish heart, that any thing weak or helpless always appealed to him. Their sleek, shining Tabby had been a poor, forlorn, broken-legged kitten when he found her; and there was no end to the birds and chickens that he nursed through accidents.

But for a fortnight Dot had been improving, it must be confessed, being exempt from disease and broken bones.

"Poor childie! Just lay her in the bed, Hal."

There was a huge steaming dish of mush in the middle of the table; and the hungry children went at it in a vigorous manner. Some had milk, and some had molasses; and they improvised a dessert by using a little butter, sugar, and nutmeg. They spiced their meal by recounting their imaginary adventures; but Granny was observed to wipe away a few tears over the shipwreck.

"It was all make believe," said Joe sturdily. "Lots of people go to sea, and don't get wrecked."

"But I don't want you to go," Granny returned in a broken tone of voice.

"Pooh!" exclaimed Joe, with immense disdain. "Don't people meet with accidents on the land? Wasn't Steve Holder killed in the mill. And if I was on the cars in a smash-up, I couldn't swim out of that!"

Joe took a long breath, fancying that he had established his point beyond a cavil.

"But sailors never make fortunes," went on Granny hesitatingly.

"Captains do, though; and it's a jolly life. Besides, we couldn't all stay in this little shanty, unless we made nests in the chimney like the swallows; and I don't know which would tumble down first, – we or the chimney."

Charlie laughed at the idea.

"I shall stay with you always, Granny," said Hal tenderly. "And Dot, you know, will be growing into a big girl and be company for us. We'll get along nicely, never fear."

Some tears dropped unwittingly into Granny's plate, and she didn't want any more supper. It was foolish, of course. She ought to be thankful to have them all out of the way and doing for themselves. Here she was, over fifty, and had worked hard from girlhood. Some day she would be worn out.

But, in spite of all their poverty and hardship, she had been very happy with them; and theirs were by no means a forlorn-looking set of faces. Each one had a little beauty of its own; and, though they were far from being pattern children, she loved them dearly in spite of their faults and roughnesses. And in their way they loved her, though sometimes they were great torments.

And so at bed-time they all crowded round to kiss the wrinkled face, unconsciously softened by the thought of the parting that was to come somewhere along their lives. But no one guessed how Granny held little Dot in her arms that night, and prayed in her quaint, fervent fashion that she might live to see them all grown up and happy, good and prosperous men and women, and none of them straying far from the old home-nest.

I think God listened with watchful love. No one else would have made crooked paths so straight.

CHAPTER III

A CHANCE FOR FLOSSY

The vacation had come to an end, and next week the children were to go to school again. Florence counted up her small hoard; for though she did not like to sweep, or wash dishes, she was industrious in other ways. She crocheted edgings and tidies, made lamp-mats, toilet-sets, and collars, and had earned sixteen dollars. Granny would not have touched a penny of it for the world.

So Florence bought herself two pretty delaine dresses for winter wear, and begged Granny to let Miss Brown cut and fit them. Florence had a pretty, slender figure; and she was rather vain of it. Her two dresses had cost seven dollars, a pair of tolerably nice boots three and a half, a plaid shawl four, and then she had indulged in the great luxury of a pair of kid gloves.

It had come about in this wise. Mrs. Day had purchased them in New York, but they proved too small for her daughter Julia. She was owing Florence a dollar; so she said, —

"Now, if you have a mind to take these gloves, Florence, I'd let you have them for seventy-five cents. I bought them very cheap: they ask a dollar and a quarter in some stores;" and she held them up in their most tempting light.

Florence looked at them longingly.

"They are lovely kid, and such a beautiful color! Green is all the fashion, and you have a new green dress."

There was a pair of nice woollen gloves at the store for fifty cents; and although they were rather clumsy, still Florence felt they would be warmer and more useful.

"I don't know as I can spare you the dollar now," continued Mrs. Day, giving the dainty little gloves a most aggravating stretch.

"I'd like to have them," said Florence hesitatingly.

"I suppose your grandmother won't mind? Your money is your own."

Now, Mrs. Day knew that it was wrong to tempt Florence; but the gloves were useless to her, and she felt anxious to dispose of them.

"Grandmother said I might spend all my money for clothes," was the rather proud reply.

"Kid gloves always look so genteel, and are so durable. You have such a pretty hand too."

"I guess I will take them," Florence said faintly.

So Mrs. Day gave her the gloves and twenty-five cents. Florence carried them home in secret triumph, and put them in *her* drawer in Granny's big bureau. She had not told about them yet; and sometimes they were a heavier burden than you would imagine so small a pair of gloves could possibly be.

Joe had earned a little odd change from the farmers round, and bought himself a pair of new trousers and a new pair of boots; while Hal had been maid-of-all-work in doors, and head gardener out of doors.

"Just look at these potatoes!" he said in triumph to Granny. "There's a splendid binful, and it'll last all winter. And there'll be cabbage and pumpkins and marrow-squash and Lima beans, and lots of corn for the chickens. The garden has been a success this summer."

"And you've worked early and late," returned Granny in tender triumph. "There isn't such another boy in the State, I'll be bound!" And she gave him the fondest of smiles.

"But the best of all is Dot. She's actually getting fat, Granny; and she has a dimple in her cheek. Why, she'll be almost as pretty as Flossy!"

Granny gave the little one a kiss.

"She's as good as a kitten when she is well," was the rejoinder, in a loving tone.

Kit and Charlie still romped like wild deers. They had made a cave in the wood, and spent whole days there; but Charlie burned her fingers roasting a bird, and went back to potatoes and corn, that could be put in the ashes without so much risk.

The old plaid cloak had been made over for a school-dress, and Charlie thought it quite grand. Kit and Hal had to do the best they could about clothes.

"Never mind me, Granny," Hal said cheerfully; though he couldn't help thinking of his patched Sunday jacket, which was growing short in the sleeves for him.

So on Saturday the children scrubbed and scoured and swept, and made the place quite shine again. Hal arranged the flowers, and then they all drew a restful breath before the supper preparations began.

"There's Mrs. Van Wyck coming!" and Charlie flew up the lane, dashing headlong into the house, to the imminent peril of her best dress, which she had been allowed to put on for an hour or two.

"Mrs. Van Wyck!"

Granny brushed back her bobbing flaxen curls, washed Dot's face over again with the nearest white cloth, which happened to be Flossy's best handkerchief that she had been doing up for Sunday.

"Oh!" the young lady cried in dismay, and then turned to make her prettiest courtesy. Mrs. Van Wyck was very well off indeed, and lived in quite a pretentious cottage, – villa she called it; but, as she had a habit of confusing her V's and W's, Joe re-christened it the Van Wyck Willow.

"Good-afternoon, Mrs. Kenneth. How d'y do, Florence?"

Florence brought out a chair, and, with the most polite air possible, invited her to be seated.

Mrs. Van Wyck eyed her sharply.

"'Pears to me you look quite fine," she said.

Florence wore a white dress that was pretty well outgrown, and had been made from one of her mother's in the beginning. It had a good many little darns here and there, and she was wearing it for the last time. She had tied a blue ribbon in her curls, and pinned a tiny bouquet on her bosom. She looked very much dressed, but that was pretty Flossy's misfortune.

Mrs. Van Wyck gathered up her silk gown, – a great staring brocade in blue and gold, that might have been her grandmother's, it looked so ancient in style.

"I've come over on some business," she began, with an important air and a mysterious shake of the head.

Granny sat down, and took Dot upon her lap. Kit and Charlie peered out of their hiding-places, and Joe perched himself upon the window-sill.

"How do you ever manage with all this tribe?" And Mrs. Van Wyck gave each of them a scowl.

"There's a houseful," returned Granny, "but we *do* get along."

"Tough scratching, I should say."

"And poor pickings the chickens might add, if they had *such* an old hen," commented Joe *soto voce*. "There'd be something worse than clucking."

Hal couldn't help laughing. Mrs. Van Wyck was so ruffled and frilled, so full of ends of ribbon about the head and neck, that she did look like a setting hen disturbed in the midst of her devotions.

"Them children haven't a bit of manners," declared Mrs. Van Wyck, in sublime disregard of syntax. "Trot off, all of you but Florence: I have something to say to your grandmother."

Joe made a somerset out of the window, and placed himself in a good listening position; Hal went out and sat on the doorstep; and Charlie crawled under the table.

"I don't see how you manage to get along with such a houseful. I always did wonder at your taking 'em."

"Oh! we do pretty well," returned Granny cheerily.

"They're growing big enough to help themselves a little. Why don't you bind Joe out to some of the farmers. Such a great fellow ought to be doing something besides racing round and getting into mischief."

Joe made a series of such polite evolutions, that Hal ran to the gate to have a good laugh without being heard.

"He's going to school," said Granny innocently. "They all begin on Monday."

"Going to school?" And Mrs. Van Wyck elevated her voice as if she thought them all deaf. "Why, *I* never went to school a day after I was twelve year old, and my father was a well-to-do farmer. There's no sense in children having so much book-larnin'. It makes 'em proud and stuck up, and good for nothing.

"Oh! where's that dog? Put him out! Put him out! I can't bear dogs. And the poorer people are, the more dogs they'll keep."

Joe, the incorrigible, was quite a ventriloquist for his years and size. He had just made a tremendous ki-yi, after the fashion of the most snarling terrier dog, and a kind of scrabbling as if the animal might be under Mrs. Van Wyck's feet.

"Oh, my! Take the nasty brute away. Maybe he's full of fleas or has the mange" —

"It is only Joe," explained Florence, as soon as she could put in a word.

"I'd Joe him, if I had him here! You're a ruining of these children as I've always said; and you may thank your stars if Joe escapes the gallows. I've positively come on an errand of mercy."

"Not for Joe," declared the owner of the name with a sagacious shake of the head, while Mrs. Van Wyck paused for breath.

"Yes. Not one of them'll be worth a penny if they go on this way. Now, here's Florence, growing up in idleness" —

"She keeps pretty busy," said Granny stoutly.

"Busy! Why, you've nothing for her to do. When I was a little girl, my mother made me sit beside her, and sew patchwork; and before I was twelve year old I had finished four quilts. And she taught me the hymn, —

'Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do.'"

"They always learn a verse for Sunday," said Granny deprecatingly.

"But you let 'em run wild. I've seen it all along. I was a talkin' to Miss Porter about it; and says I, 'Now, I'll do one good deed;' and the Lord knows it's needed."

Everybody listened. Joe from the outside made a pretence of picking his ears open with the handle of a broken saucepan.

"Florence is getting to be a big girl, and it's high time she learned something. As I was a sayin' to Miss Porter, 'I want just such a girl; and it will be the making of Florence Kenneth to fall into good hands.'"

"But you don't mean" — and Granny paused, aghast.

"I mean to make the child useful in her day and generation. It'll be a good place for her."

Mrs. Van Wyck nodded her head until the bows and streamers flew in every direction.

Granny opened her eyes wide in surprise.

"What do you want of her, Mrs. Van Wyck?"

Charlie peeped out from between the legs of the table to hear, her mouth wide open lest she should lose a word.

"Want of her?" screamed the visitor. "Why, to work, of course! I don't keep idle people about me, I can tell you. I want a girl to make beds, and sweep, and dust, and wash dishes, and scour

knives, and scrub, and run errands, and do little chores around. It'll be the making of her; and I'm willing to do the fair thing."

Granny was struck dumb with amazement. Florence could hardly credit her ears. Hal sprang up indignantly, and Joe doubled his fists as if he were about to demolish the old house along with Mrs. Van Wyck.

"Yes. I've considered the subject well. I always sleep on a thing before I tell a single soul. And, if Florence is a good smart girl, I'll give her seventy-five cents a week and her board. For six dollars a month I could get a grown girl, who could do all my work."

Granny looked at Florence in helpless consternation; and Florence looked at Granny with overwhelming disdain.

"Well! why don't you answer?" said the visitor. She had supposed they would jump at the offer.

"I don't expect to go out doing housework, Mrs. Van Wyck," said Florence loftily.

"Hoity-toity! how grand we are! I've never been above doing my own housework; and I could buy and sell the whole bunch of you, a dozen times over."

"Florence wouldn't like it, I'm afraid," said Granny mildly.

"A fine way to bring up children, truly! You may see the day when you'll be thankful to have a home as good as my kitchen."

There was a bright red spot in Florence's cheeks.

"Mrs. Van Wyck," Florence began in a quiet, ladylike manner, although she felt inclined to be angry, "grandmother is right: I should not like it. I have no taste for housework; and I can earn more than you offer to give by doing embroidering and crocheting. Through the six weeks of vacation I earned sixteen dollars."

"Fancy work! What is the world coming to? Children brought up to despise good, honest employment."

"No, I don't despise it," amended Florence; "but I do not like it, and I think it a hard way of earning a little money. If I can do better, of course I have the right."

Granny was amazed at the spirit Florence displayed.

"You'll all be paupers on the town yet, mark my words. Flaunting round in white dresses and ribbons, and" —

She glanced around for some further vanity to include in her inventory.

"I am sure we are obliged to you," said Granny mildly. "But Florence" —

"Yes, Florence is too good to work. There's no sense in such high-flown names. I'd have called her plain Peggy. She must curl her hair, and dress herself — oh my lady, if I had you, you'd see!"

And Mrs. Van Wyck arose in great wrath, her streamers flying wildly.

"You'll remember this when you come to beggary, — refusing a good home and plenty. Your grandmother is a foolish old woman; and you're a lazy, shiftless, impudent set! I wash my hands of the whole lot."

"I'm sorry," began Granny.

"There's no use talking. I wouldn't have the girl on any account. I can get her betters any day. You'll come to no good end, I can tell you!"

With that, Mrs. Van Wyck flounced out; but at the first turn tumbled over Kit, who had rolled himself in a ball on the doorstep.

Down she went, and Joe set up a shout. Hal couldn't help laughing, and Charlie ran to pull out Kit.

"You good-for-nothing, beggarly wretches!"

While she was sputtering and scrambling about, Joe began a hideous caterwauling.

"Drat that cat! Pity I hadn't broken his neck! And my second-best bonnet!"

Kit hid himself in his grandmother's gown, sorely frightened, and a little bruised.

"It's the last time I'll ever step inside of this place. Such an awful set of children I never did see!"

To use Joe's expressive phraseology, she "slathered" right and left, her shrill voice adding to the confusion.

Granny watched the retreating figure with the utmost bewilderment.

"The mean old thing!" began Florence, half crying. "Why, I couldn't stand her temper and her scolding, and to be a common kitchen-girl!"

"She meant well, dear. In my day girls thought it no disgrace to live out."

"Wasn't it gay and festive, Granny? I believe I've burst every button, laughing; and you'll have to put a mustard plaster on my side to draw out the soreness. And oh, Kit, what a horrible yell you gave! How could you be the ruin of that second best bonnet?"

"'Twasn't me," said Kit, rubbing his eyes. "But she most squeezed the breath out of me."

"Flossy, here is your fortune, and your coach-and-four. My dear child, I hope you will not be too much elated, for you must remember" —

"Satan finds some mischief still,' &c."

Joe whisked around, holding Dot's apron at full length in imitation of a streamer.

"I wonder if she really thought I would go. Scouring and scrubbing, and washing dishes. I'd do with one meal a day first."

"She is a coarse, ill-bred woman," said Hal; "not a bit like Mrs. Kinsey."

"We will not be separated just yet," exclaimed Granny, with a sigh for the time that must come.

"And I don't mean to live out," was the emphatic rejoinder of Florence.

"My dear, you mustn't be too proud," cautioned Granny.

"It isn't altogether pride. Why should I wash dishes when I can do something better?"

"That's the grit, Flossy. I'll bet on you!"

"O Joe! don't. I wish you would learn to be refined. Now, you see all Mrs. Van Wyck's money cannot make her a lady."

Joe put on a solemn face; but the next moment declared that he must keep a sharp look out, or some old sea-captain would snap him up, and set him to scrubbing decks, and holystoning the cable.

And yet they felt quite grave when the fun was over. Their merry vacation had ended, and there was no telling what a year might bring forth.

"I think I should like most of all to be a school-teacher," Florence declared.

"You'll have to wait till you're forty. Who do you s'pose is going to mind a little gal?"

"Not you; for you never mind anybody," was the severe reply.

Florence felt quite grand on the following day, attired in her new green delaine, and her "lovely" gloves. Granny was so busy with the others that she never noticed them; and Florence quieted her conscience by thinking that the money was her own, and she could do what she liked with it. She kept self generally in view, it must be admitted.

Mrs. Van Wyck's overture was destined to make quite a stir. She repeated it to her neighbors in such glowing terms that it really looked like an offer to adopt Florence; and she declaimed bitterly against the pride and the ingratitude of the whole Kenneth family.

Florence held her head loftily, and took great pains to contradict the story; and Joe became the stoutest of champions, though he teased her at home.

"But it's too bad to have her tell everybody such falsehoods; and, after all, three dollars a month would be very low wages. Why, Mary Connor gets a dollar a week for tending Mrs. Hall's baby; and she never scrubs or scours a thing!"

Truth to tell, Florence felt a good deal insulted.

But the whole five went to school pretty regularly. Hal was very studious, and Florence also, in spite of her small vanities; but Joe was incorrigible everywhere.

Florence gained courage one day to ask Mr. Fielder about the prospect of becoming a teacher. She was ambitious, and desired some kind of a position that would be ladylike.

"It's pretty hard work at first," he answered with a smile.

"But how long would I have to study?"

"Let me see – you are fourteen now: in three years you might be able to take a situation. Public schools in the city are always better for girls, for they can begin earlier in the primary department. A country school, you see, may have some troublesome urchins in it."

Florence sighed. Three years would be a long while to wait.

"I will give you all the assistance in my power," Mr. Fielder said kindly. "And I may be able to hear of something that will be to your advantage."

Florence thanked him, but somehow the prospect did not look brilliant.

Then she thought of dressmaking. Miss Brown had a pretty cottage, furnished very nicely indeed; and it was her boast that she did it all with her own hands. She kept a servant, and dressed quite elegantly; and all the ladies round went to her in their carriages. Then she had such beautiful pieces for cushions and wonderful bedquilts, – "Though I never take but the least snip of a dress," she would say with a virtuous sniff. "I have heard of people who kept a yard or two, but to my mind it's downright stealing."

There was a drawback to this picture of serene contentment. Miss Brown was an old maid, and Florence hoped devoutly that would never be her fate. And then Miss Skinner, who went out by the day, was single also. Was it the natural result of the employment?

CHAPTER IV THE IDENTICAL SHOE

They did pretty well through the fall. Joe came across odd jobs, gathered stores of hickory-nuts and chestnuts; and now and then of an evening they had what he called a rousing good boil; and certainly chestnuts never tasted better. They sat round the fire, and told riddles or stories, and laughed as only healthy, happy children can. What if they were poor, and had to live in a little tumble-down shanty!

Sometimes Joe would surprise them with a somerset in the middle of the floor, or a good stand on his head in one corner.

"Joe," Granny would say solemnly, "I once knowed a man who fell that way on his head off a load of hay, and broke his back."

"Granny dear, 'knowed' is bad grammar. When you go to see Florence in her palace, you must say knew, to rhyme with blew. But your old man's back must have grown cranky with rheumatism, while mine is limber as an eel."

"He wasn't old, Joe. And in my day they never learned grammar."

"Oh, tell us about the good old times!" and Hal's head was laid in Granny's lap.

The children were never tired of hearing these tales. Days when Granny was young were like enchantment. She remembered some real witch stories, that she was sure were true; and weddings, quiltings, husking-bees, and apple-parings were full of interest. How they went out sleigh-riding, and had a dance; and how once Granny and her lover, sitting on the back seat, were jolted out, seat and all, while the horses went skimming along at a pace equal to Tam O'Shanter's. And how they had to go to a neighboring cottage, and stay ever so long before they were missed.

"There'll never be such times again," Joe would declare solemnly.

Florence would breath a little sigh, and wonder if she could ever attain to beaux and merriment, and if any one would ever quarrel about dancing with her. How happy Granny must have been!

Dot had a dreadful cold, and Granny an attack of rheumatism; but they both recovered before Christmas. Every one counted so much on this holiday. All were making mysterious preparations. Joe and Hal and Florence had their heads together; and then it was Granny and Florence, or Granny and Hal.

"I don't dare to stir out," said Joe lugubriously, "lest you may say something that I shall not hear."

Hal killed three fine young geese. Two were disposed of for a dollar apiece, and the third he brought to the kitchen in triumph.

"There's our Christmas dinner, and a beauty too!" he announced.

Hal had sold turkeys and chickens enough to buy himself a good warm winter coat.

Granny had a little extra luck. In fact, it was rather a prosperous winter with them; and there was nothing like starvation, in spite of Mrs. Van Wyck's prediction.

They all coaxed Granny to make doughnuts. Joe dropped them in the kettle, and Hal took them out with the skimmer. How good they did smell!

Kit and Charlie tumbled about on the floor, and were under everybody's feet; while Dot sat in her high chair, looking wondrous wise.

"How'll we get the stockings filled?" propounded Joe, when the supper-table had been cleared away.

They all glanced at each other in consternation.

"But where'll you hang 'em?" asked Kit after a moment or two of profound study.

"Some on the andirons, some on the door-knob, some on the kettle-spout, and the rest up chimney."

"I say, can't we have two?" was Charlie's anxious question.

"Lucky if you get one full. What a host of youngsters! O Granny! did you know that last summer I discovered that you were the old woman who lived in a shoe?"

"O Joe! don't;" and Hal raised his soft eyes reproachfully.

Granny laughed, not understanding Hal's anxiety.

"Because I had so many children?"

"Exactly; but I think you are better tempered than your namesake."

Granny's eyes twinkled at this compliment.

"It was an awful hot day, and Dot was cross enough to kill a cat with nine lives."

"But she's a little darling now," said Hal, kissing her. "I think the sand-man has been around;" and he smiled into the little face with its soft drooping eyes.

"Yes, she ought to be in bed, and Kit and Charlie. Come, children."

"I want to see what's going to be put in my stocking," whined Charlie in a very sleepy tone.

"No, you can't. March off, you small snipes, or you will find a whip there to-morrow morning."

That was Joe's peremptory order.

They had a doughnut apiece, and then went reluctantly. Charlie was very sure that she was wider awake than ever before in her life, and could not get asleep if she tried all night. Kit didn't believe that morning would ever come. Hal put on Dot's nightgown, and heard her say, "Now I lay me down to sleep;" while Joe picked up the cat, and irreverently whispered, —

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
All curled up in a little heap.

If I should wake before 'tis day,
What do you s'pose the doctor'd say?"

"O Joe!" remonstrated Granny.

"That's Tabby's prayers. Tabby is a high principled, moral, and intellectual cat. Now go to sleep, and dream of a mouse."

Tabby winked her eyes solemnly, as if she understood every word; and it's my firm belief that she did.

Then Granny, Florence, Joe, and Hal sat in profound thought until the old high clock in the corner struck nine.

"Well," said Joe, "what are we waiting for?"

Hal laughed and answered, —

"For some one to go to bed."

"What is to be done about it?"

Florence looked wise, and said presently, —

"We'll all have to go in the other room except the one who is to put something in the stockings."

"That's it. Who will begin?"

"Not I," rejoined Joe. "I don't want to be poked down into the toe."

"And I can't have my gifts crushed," declared Florence.

"Hal, you begin."

Hal was very cheerful and obliging. Granny lighted another candle, and the three retired. He disposed of his gifts, and then called Joe.

Joe made a great scrambling around. One would think he had Santa Claus himself, and was squeezing him into the small stocking, sleigh, ponies, and all.

"Now, Granny, it's your turn."

Granny fumbled about a long while, until the children grew impatient. Afterward Florence found herself sorely straitened for room; but she had a bright brain, and what she could not put inside she did up in papers and pinned to the outside, giving the stockings a rather grotesque appearance, it must be confessed. There they hung in a row, swelled to dropsical proportions, and looking not unlike stumpy little Dutchmen who had been beheaded at the knees.

"Now, Granny, you must go to bed," said Joe with an air of importance. "And you must promise to lie there until you are called to-morrow morning, – honor bright!"

Granny smiled, and bobbed her flaxen curls.

"Now," exclaimed Florence, bolting the middle door so they would be sure of no interruption.

Joe went out to the wood-shed, and dragged in a huge shoe. The toe was painted red, and around the top a strip of bright yellow, ending with an immense buckle cut out of wood.

"Oh, isn't it splendid!" exclaimed Florence, holding her breath.

"That was Hal's idea, and it's too funny for any thing. Granny could crawl into it head first. If we haven't worked and conjured to keep Kit and Charlie out of the secret, then no one ever had a bit of trouble in this world."

Joe laughed until he held his sides. It was a sort of safety escape-valve with him.

"H-u-s-h!" whispered Hal. "Now, Flossy."

Florence brought a large bundle out of the closet. There were some suppressed titters, and "O's," and "Isn't it jolly?"

"Now you must tie your garters round the bedpost, put the toe of your shoes toward the door, and go to bed backward. That'll make every thing come out just right," declared Joe.

"Oh, dear! I wish it was morning!" said Hal. "I want to see the fun."

"So don't this child. I must put in some tall snoring between this and daylight."

They said good-night softly to each other, and went off to bed. Joe was so full of mischief, that he kept digging his elbows into Hal's ribs, and rolling himself in the bedclothes, until it was a relief to have him commence the promised snoring.

With the first gray streak of dawn there was a stir.

"Merry Christmas!" sang out Joe with a shout that might have been heard a mile. "Hal and Kit" —

"Can't you let a body sleep in peace?" asked Kit in an injured tone, the sound coming from vasty deeps of bedclothes.

Joe declared they always had to fish him out of bed, and that buckwheat cakes was the best bait that could be used.

"Why, it's Christmas. Hurrah! We're going to have a jolly time. What do you suppose is in your stocking?"

That roused Kit. He came out of bed on his head, and commenced putting his foot through his jacket sleeve.

"I can't find my stockings! Who's got 'em?"

"The fellow who gets up first always takes the best clothes," said Joe solemnly.

With that he made a dive into his. It was the funniest thing in the world to see Joe dress. His clothes always seemed joined together in some curious fashion; for he flung his arms and legs into them at one bound.

"Oh, dear! Don't look in my stocking, Joe. You might wait. I know you've hidden away my shoe on purpose."

With this Kit sat in the middle of the floor like a heap of rains, and began to cry.

Hal came to the rescue, and helped his little brother dress. But Joe was down long before them. He gave a whoop at the door.

"Merry Christmas!" exclaimed Florence with a laugh, glad to think she had distanced him.

"Merry Christmas! The top o' the mornin' to you, Granny! Long life and plenty of 'praties and pint.' Santa Claus has been here. My eyes!"

Hal and Kit came tumbling along; but the younger stood at the door in amaze, his mouth wide open.

"Hush for your life!"

But Kit had to make a tour regardless of his own stocking, while Joe brandished the tongs above his head as if to enforce silence.

Hal began to kindle the fire. Charlie crept out in her nightgown, with an old shawl about her, and stood transfixed with astonishment.

"Oh, my! Isn't that jolly? Doesn't Granny know a bit?"

"Not a word."

"Mrs. McFinnegan," said Joe through the chink of the door, "I have to announce that the highly esteemed and venerable Mr. Santa Claus, a great traveller and a remarkably generous man, has made a call upon you during the night. As he feared to disturb your slumbers, he left a ball of cord, a paper of pins, and a good warm night-cap."

Florence was laughing so that she could hardly use buttons or hooks. Dot gave a neglected whine from the cradle.

"Is Granny ready?" Hal asked as she came out.

"She's just putting on her cap."

Hal went in for a Christmas kiss. Granny held him to her heart in a fond embrace, and wished the best of every thing over him.

"Merry Christmas to you all!" she said as Hal escorted her out to the middle of the room.

Joe went over on his head, and then perched himself on the back of a chair. The rest all looked at Granny.

"Is this really for me?" she asked in surprise, though the great placard stared her in the face.

The children set up a shout. Kit and Charlie paused, open-mouthed, in the act of demolishing something.

"Why, I never" —

"Tumble it out," said Joe.

"This great shoe full" —

Florence handed the first package to Granny. She opened it in amaze, as if she really could not decide whether it belonged to her or not.

There was a paper pinned on it, "A Merry Christmas from Mrs. Kinsey."

A nice dark calico dress-pattern, at which Granny was so overcome that she dropped into the nearest chair.

Next a pair of gloves from Joe; a pretty, warm hood from Mrs. Howard, the clergyman's wife; a bowl of elegant cranberry sauce from another neighbor; a crocheted collar from Florence, and then with a big tug —

"Oh!" exclaimed Granny, "is it a comfortable, or what?"

A good thick plaid shawl. Just bright enough to be handsome and not too gay, and as soft as the back of a lamb.

"Where did it come from?"

Granny's voice trembled in her excitement.

"From all of us," said Florence. "I mean, Joe and Hal and me. We've been saving our money this ever so long, and Mrs. Kinsey bought it for us. O Granny!" —

But Granny had her arms around them, and was crying over heads golden and brown and black; and Hal, little chicken-heart, was sobbing and smiling together. Joe picked a big tear or two out of his eye, and began with some nonsense.

"And to keep it a secret all this time! and to make this great shoe! There never was such a Christmas before. Oh, children, I'm happier than a queen!"

"What makes you cry then, Granny?" asked Charlie. "But oh! wasn't it funny? And if it only had runners it would make a sleigh. Look at the red toe."

They kissed dozens of times, and inspected each other's gifts. Florence had made each of the boys two dainty little neckties, having begged the silk from Miss Brown. Charlie and Kit had a pair of new mittens, Joe and Hal a new shirt with a real plaited bosom, and a host of small articles devised by love, with a scarce purse. But I doubt if there was a happier household in richer homes.

It was a long while before they had tried every thing, tasted of all their "goodies," and expressed sufficient delight and surprise. Dot was taken up and dressed, and Kit found that she fitted into the shoe exact. Her tiny stocking was not empty. They all laughed and talked; and it was nine o'clock before their simple breakfast was ready.

Joe had to take a turn out to see some of the boys; Florence made the beds, and put the room in order; and Hal kept a roaring fire to warm it up, so that they might have a parlor. Kit and Charlie were deeply interested in the shoe; and Granny had to break out every now and then in surprise and thankfulness.

"A shawl and hood and gloves and a dress! Why, I never had so many things at once, I believe; and how hard you must all have worked! I don't see how you could save so much money!"

"It's better than living with Mrs. Van Wyck," returned Florence with pardonable pride. "Embroidering is real pretty work, and it pays well. Mrs. Howard has asked me to do some for a friend of hers."

"You're a wonder, Florence, to be sure. I can't see how you do 'em all so nice. But my fingers are old and clumsy."

"They know how to make pies and doughnuts," said Kit, as if that was the main thing, after all.

They went to work at the dinner. It was to be a grand feast. Joe kept the fire brisk; while Hal waited upon Granny, and remembered the ingredients that went to make "tip-top" dressing.

"It is a pity you were not a Frenchman," said Florence. "You would make such a handy cook."

Hal laughed, his cheeks as red as roses.

"I couldn't keep house without him," appended Granny.

There was a savory smell of roasting goose, the flavor of thyme and onions, which the children loved dearly. Charlie and Kit went out to have a good run, and came back hungry as bears, they declared. Joe went off to see some of the boys, and compare gifts. Though more than one new sled or nice warm overcoat gave his heart a little twinge, he was too gay and happy to feel sad very long; and, when he had a royal ride down hill on the bright sleds that flashed along like reindeers, he returned very well content.

Florence sighed a little as she arranged the table. Three kinds of dishes, and some of them showing their age considerably. If they were all white it wouldn't be so bad. She did so love beauty!

But when the goose, browned in the most delicious manner, graced the middle dish, the golden squash and snowy mound of potatoes, and the deep wine color of the cranberries lent their contrast, it was quite a picture, after all. And when the host of eager faces had clustered round it, one would hardly have noticed any lack. They were all in the gayest possible mood.

Hal did the carving. The goose was young and tender, and he disappeared with marvellous celerity.

Wings, drumsticks, great juicy slices with crisp skin, dressing in abundance; and how they did eat! For a second helping they had to demolish the rack; and Charlie wasn't sure but picking bones was the most fun of all.

"Hal, you had better go into the poultry business," said Joe, stopping in the midst of a spoonful of cranberry.

"I've been thinking of it," was the reply.

"I should think he was in it," said Charlie slyly.

Joe laughed.

"Good for you, Charlie. They must feed you on knives at your house, you're so sharp. But I have heard of people being too smart to live long, so take warning."

Charlie gave her head a toss.

"Why wouldn't it be good?" pursued Joe. "People do make money by it; and I suppose, before very long, we must begin to think about money."

"Don't to-day" said Granny.

"No, we will not worry ourselves," rejoined Hal.

One after another drew long breaths, as if their appetites were diminishing. Dot sat back in her high chair, her hands and face showing signs of the vigorous contest, but wonderfully content.

"Now the pie!" exclaimed Joe.

Florence gathered up the bones and the plates, giving Tabby, who sat in the corner washing her face, a nice feast. Then came on the Christmas pie, which was pronounced as great a success as the goose.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Joe. "One unfortunate thing about eating is, that it takes away your appetite."

"It is high time!" added Florence.

They wouldn't allow Granny to wash a dish, but made her sit in state while they brought about order and cleanliness once more. A laughable time they had; for Joe wiped some dishes, and Charlie scoured one knife.

Afterward they had a game at blind-man's-buff. Such scampering and such screams would have half frightened any passer-by. They coaxed Granny to get up and join; and at last, to please Hal, she consented.

If Joe fancied he could catch her easily, he was much mistaken. She had played blind-man's-buff too many times in her young days. Such turning and doubling and slipping away was fine to see; and Charlie laughed so, that Joe, much chagrined, took her prisoner instead.

"Granny, you beat every thing!" he said. "Now, Charlie."

Charlie made a dive at the cupboard, and then started for the window, spinning round in such a fashion that they all had to run; but even she was not fleet enough.

After that, Kit and Florence essayed; and Joe, manœuvring in their behalf, fell into the trap himself, at which they all set up a shout.

"I'm bound to have Granny this time," he declared.

Sure enough, though he confessed afterwards that he peeped a little; but Granny was tired with so much running: and, as the short afternoon drew to a close, they gathered round the fire, and cracked nuts, washing them down with apples, as they had no cider.

"It's been a splendid Christmas!" said Charlie, with such a yawn that she nearly made the top of her head an island.

"I wonder if we'll all be here next year?" said Joe, rather more solemnly than his wont.

"I hope so," responded Granny, glancing over the clustering faces. Dot sat on Hal's knee, looking bright as a new penny. She, too, had enjoyed herself amazingly.

But presently the spirit of fun seemed to die out, and they began to sing some hymns and carols. The tears came into Granny's eyes, as the sweet, untrained voices blended so musically. Ah, if they could always stay children! Foolish wish; and yet Granny would have toiled for them to her latest breath.

"Here's long life and happiness!" exclaimed Joe, with a flourish of the old cocoanut dipper.
"A merry Christmas next year, and may we all be there to see!"
Ah, Joe, it will be many a Christmas before you are all there again.

CHAPTER V

GOOD LUCK FOR JOE

"Hooray!" said Joe, swinging the molasses jug over his head as if it had been a feather, or the stars and stripes on Fourth of July morning.

"O Joe!"

"Flossy, my darling, you are a poet sure; only poetry, like an alligator, must have feet, or it will lose its reputation. Here's your 'lasses, Granny; and what do you think? Something has actually happened to me! Oh, my! do guess quick!"

"You've been taken with the 'lirium" – and there Charlie paused, having been wrecked on a big word.

"Delirium *tremenjous*. Remember to say it right hereafter, Charlie."

Charlie looked very uncertain.

"Maybe it's the small-pox," said Kit, glancing up in amazement.

"Good for you!" and Joe applauded with two rather blue thumb-nails. "But it's a fact. Guess, Granny. I'm on the high road to fortune. Hooray!"

With that, Joe executed his usual double-shuffle, and a revolution on his axis hardly laid down in the planetary system. He would have said that it was because he was not a heavenly body.

"O Joe, if you were like any other boy!"

"Jim Fisher, for instance, – red-headed, squint-eyed, and freckled."

"He can't help it," said Hal mildly. "He is real nice too."

"You're not going" – began Granny with a gasp.

"Yes, I'm going" – was the solemn rejoinder.

"Not to sea!" and there came a quick blur in Hal's eyes.

"Oh, bother, no! You're all splendid at guessing, and ought to have a prize leather medal. It's in Mr. Terry's store; and I shall have a dollar and a half a week! Good by, Mr. Fielder. Adieu, beloved grammar; and farewell, most fragrant extract of cube-root, as well as birch-oil. O Granny! I'm happy as a big sunflower. On the high road to fame and fortune, – think of it!"

"Is it really true?" asked Florence.

"Then, I won't need to go for any thing," appended Charlie.

"No; but you'll have to draw water, and split kindlings, and hunt up Mrs. Green's cows."

"In Mr. Terry's store! What wonderful luck, Joe!"

Granny's delight was overwhelming. All along she had experienced a sad misgiving, lest Joe should take a fancy to the sea in real earnest.

"Yes. It's just splendid. Steve Anthony's going to the city to learn a trade. He had a letter from his uncle to-day, saying that he might start right away. I thought a minute: then said I, 'Steve, who's coming here?' 'I don't know,' said he. 'Mr. Terry'll have to look round.' 'I'm your boy,' said I, 'and no mistake.' And with that I rushed in to Mr. Terry, and asked him. He gave me some columns of figures to add up, and questioned me a little, and finally told me that I might come on Monday, and we'd try for a week."

"There's Joe's fortune," said Hal, "and a good one too. You will not need to go to sea."

There was an odd and knowing twinkle in Joe's merry hazel eye, which showed to an observing person that he was not quite sound on the question.

"Tate Dotty;" and two little hands were outstretched.

"O Dot! you're a fraud, and more trouble to me than all my money."

With that, Joe sat her up on his shoulder, and she laughed gleefully.

Granny lighted a candle, and began to prepare for supper. While Charlie set the table, Granny brought out the griddle, and commenced frying some Indian cakes in a most tempting manner. Joe dropped on an old stool, and delighted Dot with a vigorous ride to Banbury Cross.

Kit stood beside him, inhaling the fragrance of the cakes, and wondering at the dexterity with which Granny turned them on a slender knife.

"I don't see how you do it. Suppose you should let 'em fall?"

"Ho!" said Charlie, with a sniff of disdain. "Women always know how."

"But they can't come up to the miners," suggested Joe. "They keep house for themselves; and their flapjacks are turned, – as big as Granny's griddle here."

"One cake?"

"Yes. That's where the art comes in."

"They must take a shovel," said Charlie.

"No, nor a knife, nor any thing."

With that Joe shook his head mysteriously.

"With their fingers," announced Kit triumphantly.

"My mother used to bake them in a frying-pan," said Granny. "Then she'd twirl it round and round, and suddenly throw the cake over."

"There!"

Kit gave a nod as much as to say, "Beat that if you can."

"That isn't a circumstance," was Joe's solemn comment.

"But how then?" asked Charlie, who was wound up to a pitch of curiosity.

"Why, *they* bake them in a pan too, and twirl it round and round, and then throw it up and run out of doors. The cake goes up chimney, and comes down on the raw side, all right, you see, and drops into the pan before you can count six black beans."

"Oh, I don't believe it!" declared Charlie. "Do you, Granny?"

"They'd have to be pretty quick," was the response.

"You see, a woman never could do it, Charlie," Joe continued in a tormenting manner.

"But, Charlie, a miner's cabin is not very high; and the chimney is just a great hole in the roof," explained Hal.

"Tory, 'tory," said Dot, who was not interested in the culinary art.

"O Dotty! you'll have a piece worn off the end of my tongue, some day. It's high time you were storing your mind with useful facts; so, if you please, we will have a little English history."

"What nonsense, Joe! As if she could understand," and Florence looked up from her pretty worsted crocheting.

"To be sure she can. Dot comes of a smart family. Now, Midget," and with that he perched her up on his knee.

Charlie and Kit began to listen.

"When good King Arthur ruled the land,
He was a goodly king:
He stole three pecks of barley-meal
To make a bag pudding."

"I don't believe it," burst out Charlie. "I was reading about King Arthur" —
"And he was a splendid cook. Hear his experience, —

'A bag pudding the king did make,
And stuffed it well with plums;
And in it put great lumps of fat,

As big as my two thumbs."

Dot thought the laugh came in here, and threw back her head, showing her little white teeth.

"It really wasn't King Arthur," persisted Charlie.

"It is a fact handed down to posterity. No wonder England became great under so wise and economical a rule; for listen —

"The king and queen did eat thereof,
And noblemen beside;
And what they could not eat that night,
The queen next morning fried,' —

as we do sometimes. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Hunnerful," ejaculated Dot, wide-eyed.

"I hope you'll take a lesson, and" —

"Come to supper," said Granny.

Irrepressible Charlie giggled at the ending.

They did not need a second invitation, but clustered around eagerly.

"I'm afraid there won't be any left to fry up in the morning," said Joe solemnly.

After the youngsters were off to bed that evening, Joe began to talk about his good fortune again.

"And a dollar and a half a week, regularly, is a good deal," he said. "Why, I can get a spick and span new suit of clothes for twelve dollars, — two months, that would be; and made at a tailor's too."

"The two months?" asked Florence.

"Oh! you know what I mean."

"You will get into worse habits than ever," she said with a wise elder-sister air.

"I don't ever expect to be a grand gentleman."

"But you *might* be a little careful."

"Flo acts as if she thought we were to have a great fortune left us by and by, and wouldn't be polished enough to live in state."

"The only fortune we shall ever have will come from five-finger land," laughed Hal good-naturedly.

"And I'm going to make a beginning. I do think it was a streak of luck. I am old enough to do something for myself."

"I wish I could find such a chance," said Hal, with a soft sigh.

"Your turn will come presently," Granny answered, smiling tenderly.

Joe went on with his air-castles. The sum of money looked so large in his eyes. He bought out half of Mr. Terry's store, and they were to live like princes, — all on a dollar and a half a week.

Granny smiled, and felt proud enough of him. If he would only keep to business, and not go off to sea.

So on Friday Joe piled up his books, and turned a somerset over them, and took a farewell race with the boys. They were all sorry enough to lose him. Mr. Fielder wished him good luck.

"You will find that work is not play," he said by way of caution.

Early Monday morning Joe presented himself bright as a new button. He had insisted upon wearing his best suit, — didn't he mean to have another soon? for the school clothes were all patches. He had given his hair a Sunday combing, which meant that he used a comb instead of his fingers. Mr. Terry was much pleased with his promptness.

A regular country store, with groceries on one side and dry goods on the other, a little sashed cubby for a post-office, and a corner for garden and farm implements. There was no liquor kept

on the premises; for the mild ginger and root beer sold in summer could hardly be placed in that category.

Joe was pretty quick, and by noon had mastered many of the intricacies. Old Mr. Terry was in the store part of the time, – "father" as everybody called him. He was growing rather childish and careless, so his son instructed Joe to keep a little watch over him. Then he showed him how to harness the horse, and drove off with some bulky groceries that he was to take home.

"All things work together for good, sonny," said Father Terry with a sleepy nod, as he sat down by the stove.

"What things?"

"All things," with a sagacious shake of the head.

This was Father Terry's favorite quotation, and he used it in season and out of season.

The door opened, and Mrs. Van Wyck entered. She gave Joe a sharp look.

"So *you're* here?" with a kind of indignant sniff.

"Yes. What will you have?"

There was a twinkle in Joe's eye, and an odd little pucker to his lips, as if he were remembering something.

"You needn't be so impudent."

"I?" and Joe flushed in surprise.

"Yes. You're a saucy lot, the whole of you."

With that Mrs. Van Wyck began to saunter round.

"What's the price of these cranberries?"

"Eighteen cents," in his most respectful tone.

"They're dear, dreadful dear. Over to Windsor you can get as many as you can carry for a shillin' a quart."

Joe was silent.

"Say sixteen."

"I couldn't," replied Joe. "If Mr. Terry were here" —

"There's Father Terry." She raised her voice a little. "Father Terry, come and look at these cranberries. They're a poor lot, and you'll do well to get a shillin' a quart."

Joe ran his fingers through them. Plump and crimson, very nice he thought for so late in the season.

"I don't s'pose I'd get more'n two good quarts out of three. They'll spile on your hands. Come now, be reasonable."

Father Terry looked undecided. Joe watched him, thinking in his heart that he ought not fall a penny.

"Say a shillin'."

The old man shook his head.

"Well, fifteen cents. I want three quarts, and I won't give a penny more."

The old gentleman studied Joe's face, which was full of perplexity.

"Well," he said with some reluctance.

Joe measured them. Mrs. Van Wyck gave each quart a "settle" by shaking it pretty hard, and Joe had to put in another large handful.

"Now I want some cheese."

The pound weighed two ounces over.

"You can throw that in. Mr. Terry always does."

"How much?"

"Twenty-three cents."

"No: you can't fool me, youngster. I never pay more than twenty cents."

"I'm sure Mr. Terry told me that it was twenty-three."

Father was appealed to again, and of course went over to the domineering enemy.

Then two pounds of butter passed through the same process of cheapening. Joe began to lose his temper. Afterward a broom, some tape and cotton, and finally a calico dress.

"Now, here's three dozen eggs for part pay. They're twenty-four cents a dozen."

"Why, that's what we sell them for," said astonished Joe, mentally calculating profit and loss.

"Oh! they've gone up. Hetty Collins was paid twenty-five over to Windsor. I'd gone there myself if I'd had a little more time."

"I wish you had," ejaculated Joe inwardly.

She haggled until she got her price, and the settlement was made.

"She's a regular old screwy," said Joe rather crossly. "I don't believe it was right to let her have those things in that fashion."

"All things work together for good."

"For *her* good, it seems."

Father Terry went back to his post by the stove. Joe breathed a little thanksgiving that Flossy was not Mrs. Van Wyck's maid-of-all-work.

Joe's next customer was Dave Downs, as the boys called him. He shuffled up to the counter.

"Got any *reel* good cheese?"

"Yes," said Joe briskly.

"Let's see."

Joe raised the cover. Dave took up the knife, and helped himself to a bountiful slice.

"Got any crackers?"

"Yes," wondering what Dave meant.

"Nice and fresh?"

"I guess so."

"I'll take three or four."

"That will be a penny's worth."

When Dave had the crackers in his hand he said, raising his shaggy brows in a careless manner, —

"Oh! you needn't be so perticular."

Then he took a seat beside Father Terry, and munched crackers and cheese. "Cool enough," thought Joe.

Old Mrs. Skittles came next. She was very deaf, and talked in a high, shrill key, as if she thought all the world in the same affliction.

She looked at every thing, priced it, beat down a cent or two, and then concluded she'd rather wait until Mr. Terry came in. At last she purchased a penny's worth of snuff, and begged Joe to give her good measure.

After that two customers and the mail. Father Terry bestirred himself, and waited upon a little girl with a jug.

Joe was rather glad to see Mr. Terry enter, for he had an uncomfortable sense of responsibility.

"Trade been pretty good, Joe?" with a smile.

"I've put it all down on the slate, as you told me."

"Hillo! What's this!"

A slow stream of something dark was running over the floor back of the lower counter.

"Oh, molasses!" and with a spring Joe shut off the current, but there was an ominous pool.

"I did not get that: it was" — and Joe turned crimson.

"Father. We never let him go for molasses, vinegar, oil, or burning fluid. He is sure to deluge us. Run round in the kitchen, and get a pail and a mop."

"It's my opinion that this doesn't work together for good," said Joe to himself as he was cleaning up the mess.

"So you had Mrs. Skittles?" exclaimed Mr. Terry with a laugh. "And Mrs. Van Wyck. Why, Joe!"

"She beat down awfully!" said Joe; "and she wanted every thing thrown in. Mr. Terry" —

"She called on father, I'll be bound. But she has taken off all the profits; and then to make you pay twenty-four cents for the eggs."

"I'd just like to have had my own way. If you'll give me leave" —

"You will have to look out a little for father. He's getting old, you know; and these sharp customers are rather too much for him."

"I'll never fall a penny again;" and Joe shook his head defiantly.

"You will learn by degrees. But it is never necessary to indulge such people. There's the dinner-bell."

Dave Downs had finished his crackers and cheese, and now settled himself to a comfortable nap. Joe busied himself by clearing up a little, giving out mail, and once weighing some flour. Then he discovered that he had scattered it over his trousers, and that with the molasses dabs it made a not very delightful mixture. So he took a seat on a barrel-head and began to scrub it off; but he found it something like Aunt Jemima's plaster.

"Run in and get some dinner, Joe," said Mr. Terry after his return to the store.

"But I was going home," replied Joe bashfully.

"Oh! never mind. We will throw in the dinner."

So Joe ran around, but hesitated at the door of Mrs. Terry's clean kitchen. She was motherly and cordial, however, and gave him a bright smile.

"I told Mr. Terry that you might as well come in here for your dinner. It is quite a long run home."

"You are very kind," stammered Joe, feeling that he must say something, in spite of his usual readiness of speech deserting him.

"You ought to have an apron, Joe, or a pair of overalls," she said kindly. "You will find grocery business rather dirty work sometimes."

"And my best clothes!" thought Joe with a sigh.

But the coffee was so delightful, and the cold roast beef tender as a chicken. And Joe began to think it was possible for a few things to work together for good, if they were only the right kind of things.

Altogether he went home at night in very good spirits.

"But my trousers will have to go in the wash-tub, Granny," he exclaimed. "I believe I wasn't cut out for a gentleman, after all."

"O Joe, what a sight! How could you?"

"It was all easy enough. If you'd had molasses to scrub up, and flour to get before it was dry, you would have found the sticking process not at all difficult. And oh! Mrs. Van Wyck came in."

Florence flushed a little at this.

"Yes, wait till I show you." With that, Joe sprang up, and wrapped Granny's old shawl about him, and began in his most comical fashion. In a moment or two the children were in roars of laughter.

"I don't know as it is quite right, Joe dear," interposed Granny mildly, "to make fun of any one."

"My conscience don't trouble me a bit;" for now he was in a high glee. "I owe her a grudge for making me pay twenty-four cents for eggs. And, Granny, when you come to the store, don't beat me down a penny on any thing; nor ask me to throw in a spool of cotton nor a piece of tape, nor squeeze down the measure. I wonder how people can be so mean!"

"Rich people too," added Florence in an injured tone of voice, still thinking of Mrs. Van Wyck's overture.

"There's lots of funny folks in the world," said Joe with a grave air. "But I like Mr. Terry, and I mean to do my very best."

"That's right;" and Granny smiled tenderly over the boy's resolve.

"And I'll put on my old clothes to-morrow. Who knows but I may fall into the mackerel-barrel before to-morrow night?"

Kit laughed at this. "They'll have to fish you out with a harpoon, then."

"Oh! I might swim ashore."

The next day Joe improved rapidly. To be sure, he met with a mishap or two; but Mr. Terry excused him, and only charged him to be more careful in future. And Father Terry administered his unfailing consolation on every occasion.

But on Saturday night Joe came home in triumph.

"There's the beginning of my fortune," he said, displaying his dollar and a half all in hard cash. For that was a long while ago, when the eagle, emblem of freedom, used to perch on silver half-dollars.

CHAPTER VI

FORTUNES AND MISFORTUNES

"I think I'll go into business," said Hal one evening, as he and Granny and Florence sat together.

They missed Joe so much! He seldom came home until eight o'clock; and there was no one to stir up the children, and keep the house in a racket.

"What?" asked Granny.

"I am trying to decide. I wonder how chickens would do?"

"It takes a good deal to feed 'em," said Granny.

"But they could run about, you know. And buckwheat is such a splendid thing for them. Then we can raise ever so much corn."

"But where would you get your buckwheat?" asked Florence.

"I was thinking. Mr. Peters never does any thing with his lot down here, and the old apple-trees in it are not worth much. If he'd let me have it ploughed up! And then we'd plant all of our ground in corn, except the little garden that we want."

"What a master hand you are to plan, Hal!"

Granny's face was one immense beam of admiration.

"I want to do something. It's too hard, Granny, that you should have to go out washing, and all that."

Hal's soft brown eyes were full of tender pity.

"Oh! I don't mind. I'm good for a many day's work yet, Hal."

"I hope some of us will get rich at last."

Florence sighed softly.

"I thought you were going to have a green-house," she said.

"I'm afraid I can't manage the green-house now, though I mean to try some day. And I noticed old Speckly clucking this morning."

"But we haven't any eggs," said Granny.

"I could get some."

"How many chickens would you raise?" asked Florence.

"Well, if we should set the five hens, – out of say sixty-four eggs we ought to raise fifty chickens; oughtn't we, Granny?"

"With good luck; but so many things happen to 'em."

"And if I could clear thirty dollars. Then there's quite a good deal of work to do in the summer."

"I shall soon be a fine lady, and ride in my carriage," Granny commented with a cheerful chirrup of a laugh.

"Mrs. Kinsey's chickens are splendid," said Florence.

"Yes. Shall I get some eggs, and set Speckly?"

"It's rather airy to begin."

"But I'll make a nice coop. And eggs are not twenty-four cents a dozen."

Hal finished off with a quiet smile at the thought of Mrs. Van Wyck.

So he went to Mrs. Kinsey's the next morning, and asked her for a dozen of eggs, promising to come over the first Saturday there was any thing to do, and work it out.

"I'll give you the eggs," she said; "but we will be glad to have you some Saturday, all the same."

So old Speckly was allowed to indulge her motherly inclinations to her great satisfaction. Hal watched her with the utmost solicitude. In the course of time a tiny bill pecked against white prison walls; and one morning Hal found the cunningest ball of soft, yellow down, trying to balance itself on two slender legs, but finding that the point of gravity as often centred in its head. But the little fellow winked oddly, as much as to say, "I know what I'm about. I'll soon find whether it is the fashion to stand on your head or your feet in this queer world."

One by one the rest came out. Hal had a nice coop prepared, and set Mrs. Speckly up at housekeeping. Dot caught one little "birdie," as she called it, and, in running to show Granny, fell down. And although Dot wasn't very heavy, it was an avalanche on poor "birdie." He gave two or three slow kicks with his yellow legs, and then was stiff for all time.

"Hal's boofer birdie," said Dot. "See, Danny!"

"O Dot! what have you done?"

"Him 'oont 'alk;" and Dot stood him down on the doorstep, only to see him tumble over.

"Oh, you've killed Hal's birdie! What will he say?"

"I 'ell down. Why 'oont him run, Danny?"

What could Granny do? Scolding Dot was out of the question. And just then Hal came flying up the road.

Granny had seen the fall, and explained the matter.

"But she mustn't catch them! You're a naughty little Dot!"

Dot began to cry.

"Poor little girl!" said Hal, taking her in his arms. "It is wrong to catch them. See, now, the little fellow is dead, and can never run about any more. Isn't Dot sorry? She won't ever touch Hal's birdies again, will she?"

So Dot promised, and Hal kissed her. But she carried the dead birdie about, petting it with softest touches, and insisting upon taking it to bed with her.

One more of the brood met with a mishap, but the other ten thrived and grew rapidly. By the time the next hen wanted to set, Hal had a dozen eggs saved.

He asked Farmer Peters about the lot. It was just below their house, between that and the creek, a strip of an acre and a half perhaps. The old trees were not worth much, to be sure; and Mr. Peters never troubled himself to cultivate the plot, as it was accounted very poor.

"Yes, you may have it in welcome; but you won't git enough off of it to pay for the ploughin'?"

"I'm going to raise chickens; and I thought it would be nice to sow buckwheat, and let them run in it."

"Turnin' farmer, hey? 'Pears to me you're makin' an airly beginnin'."

Hal smiled pleasantly.

"You'll find chickens an awful sight o' bother."

"I thought I'd try them."

"Goin' to garden any?"

"A little."

"Hens and gardens are about like fox an' geese. One's death on the other. But you kin have the lot."

So Hal asked Abel Kinsey to come over and plough. In return he helped plant potatoes and drop corn for two Saturdays. By this time there was a third hen setting.

House-cleaning had come on, and Granny was pretty busy. But she and Hal were up early in the morning garden-making. The plot belonging to the cottage was about two acres. Hal removed his chicken-coops to the lot, and covered his young vegetables with brush to protect them from incursions, – pease, beans, lettuce, beets, and sweet-corn; and the rest was given over to the chickens.

"I am going to keep an account of all that is spent for them," he said; "and we will see if we can make it pay."

When Joe had saved three dollars, he teased Granny to let him order his clothes.

"I don't like running in debt, Joe," she said with a grave shake of the head.

"But this is very sure. Mr. Terry likes me, and I shall go on staying. There will be four dollars and a half to pay down by the time they are done, and in five weeks I can earn the rest."

"How nice it seems!" said Hal. "You and Flo earn a deal of money."

Flo gave a small sniff. She wanted some new clothes also. And Kit and Charlie were going to shreds and patches. Charlie, indeed, was shooting up like Jack's bean-stalk, Joe declared, being nearly as tall as Hal. She was wild as a colt, climbed trees, jumped fences, and wouldn't be dared by any of the boys.

"I'm sure I don't know what you'll come to," Granny would say with a sigh.

Joe carried his point, and ordered his clothes; for he insisted that he could not think of going to Sunday school until he had them. It was quite an era in his life to have real store clothes. He felt very grand one day when he went to Mr. Briggs the tailor, and selected the cloth. There were several different patterns and colors; but he had made up his mind that it should be gray, just like Archie Palmer's.

He was so dreadfully afraid of being disappointed, that he dropped in on Friday to see if they were progressing. There was the jacket in the highest state of perfection.

"But the pants?" he questioned.

"Never you mind. Them pants'll be done as sure as my name's Peter Briggs."

"All right," said Joe; and he ran on his way whistling.

"Kit," he announced that evening, "I've just found out a good business for you."

"What?" and Kit roused himself.

"You shall be a tailor. I was thinking to-day how you would look on the board, with your scalp-lock nodding to every stitch."

"I won't," said Kit stoutly; and he gave a kick towards Joe's leg.

"It's a good business. You will always have plenty of cabbage."

"You better stop!" declared Kit.

"It will be handy to have him in the house, Granny. He can do the ironing by odd spells. And on the subject of mending old clothes he will be lovely."

With that Kit made another dive.

Granny gave a sudden spring, and rescued the earthen jar that held the cakes she had just mixed and set upon the stove-hearth.

"O Kit! Those precious pancakes! We are not anxious to have them flavored with extract of old shoes."

"Nor to go wandering over the floor."

Kit looked sober and but half-awake.

"Never mind," said Granny cheerily. "You mustn't tease him so much, Joe."

"Why, I was only setting before him the peculiar advantages of this romantic and delightful employment;" and with that, Joe executed a superior double-shuffle quickstep, accompanied by slapping a tune on his knee.

"You'd do for a minstrel," said Kit.

Joe cleared his voice with a flourish, and sang out, —

"I'd be a tailor,
Jolly and free,
With plenty of cabbage,
And a goose on my knee.

Monday would be blue,
Tuesday would be shady,
Wednesday I'd set out
To find a pretty lady."

"Much work you would do in that case," commented Florence.

"It's time to go to bed, children," said Granny.

"Yes," Joe went on gravely. "For a rising young man, who must take time by the fore-lock, or scalp-lock, and who longs to distinguish himself by some great and wonderful discovery, there's nothing like, —

'Early to bed, and early to rise,
To make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.'"

With that Joe was up stairs with a bound.

"Joe!" Charlie called in great earnest.

"Well?"

"You better take a mouthful of Granny's rising before you go."

"Good for you, Charlie; but smart children always die young. Granny, won't you put a stone on Charlie's head for fear?"

Hal said his good-night in a tenderer manner.

They were all wonderfully interested in Joe's clothes; and, though it was always later on Saturday night when he reached home, they begged to sit up, but Kit took a nap by the chimney-corner with Tabby. Granny sat nodding when they heard the gay whistle without.

"Hurrah! The country's safe!" exclaimed Joe. "Get out your spectacles, all hands."

"You act as if you never had any thing before, Joe," said Florence, with an air of extreme dignity.

"But these are real 'boughten' clothes," said Joe, "and gilt buttons down the jacket. I shall feel like a soldier-boy. Just look now."

The bundle came open with a flourish of the jack-knife. All the heads crowded round, though the one candle gave a rather dim light.

Such exclamations as sounded through the little room, from every voice, and in almost every key.

"But where are the trousers?" asked Hal.

"The trousers? — why" —

Granny held up the beautiful jacket. There was nothing else in the paper.

"Why — he's made a mistake. He never put them in, I am sure."

"You couldn't have lost 'em?" asked Granny mildly.

"Lost them — and the bundle tied with this strong twine! Now, that's mean! I'll have to run right back."

Off went Joe like a flash. He hardly drew a breath until his hand was on Mr. Briggs's door-knob.

"Well, what now, Joe?" asked the astonished Mr. Briggs.

"You didn't put in the trousers!"

"Didn't? Dan done 'em up. Dan!"

Dan emerged from a pile of rags under the counter, where he was taking a snooze.

"You didn't put in Joe's trousers."

"Yes I did."

"No you didn't," said Joe, with more promptness than politeness.

Dan began to search. A sleepy-looking, red-headed boy, to whom Saturday night was an abomination, because his father was always in the drag, and cross.

"I'm sure I put 'em in. Every thing's gone, and they ain't here."

"Look sharp, you young rascal!"

"He has lost 'em out."

"Lost your grandmother!" said Joe contemptuously; "or the liberty pole out on the square! Why, the bundle was not untied until after I was in the house."

"Dan, if you don't find them trousers, I'll larrup you!"

Poor Dan. Fairly wide awake now, he went tumbling over every thing piled on the counter, searched the shelves, and every available nook.

"Somebody's stole 'em."

Dan made this announcement with a very blank face.

"I know better!" said his father.

"You are sure you made them, Mr. Briggs," asked Joe.

"Sure!" in a tone that almost annihilated both boys.

"If you don't find 'em!" shaking his fist at Dan.

Dan began to blubber.

Joe couldn't help laughing. "Let me help you look," he said.

Down went a box of odd buttons, scattering far and wide.

"You Dan!" shouted his father, with some buttons in his mouth, that rendered his voice rather thick. "Just wait till I get at you. I have only six buttons to sew on."

"They're not here, Mr. Briggs," exclaimed Joe.

"Well, I declare! If that ain't the strangest thing! Dan, you've taken them trousers to the wrong place!"

A new and overwhelming light burst in upon Dan's benighted brain.

"That's it," said Joe. "Now, where have you taken them?"

"I swow!" ejaculated the youth, rubbing his eyes.

"None o' your swearin' in this place!" interrupted his father sternly. "I'm a strictly moral man, and don't allow such talk in my family."

"Tain't swearin'," mumbled Dan.

Mr. Briggs jumped briskly down from the board, with a pair of pantaloons in one hand, and a needle and thread in the other. Dan dodged round behind Joe.

"You took 'em over to Squire Powell's, I'll be bound!"

Another light was thrown in upon Dan's mental vision.

"There! I'll bet I did."

"Of course you did, you numskull! Start this minute and see how quick you can be gone."

"I will go with him," said Joe.

So the two boys started; and a run of ten minutes – a rather reluctant performance on Dan's part, it must be confessed – brought them to Squire Powell's. There was no light in the kitchen; but Joe beat a double tattoo on the door in the most scientific manner.

"Who's there?" asked a voice from the second story window.

"Dan Briggs!" shouted Joe.

"Guess not," said the squire. The sound was so unlike Dan's sleepy, mumbling tone.

"There was a mistake made in some clothes," began Joe, nothing daunted.

"Oh, that's it! I will be down in a minute."

Pretty soon the kitchen-door was unlocked, and the boys stepped inside.

"I didn't know but you sent these over for one of my girls," said the squire laughingly. "They were a *leetle* too small for me. So they belong to you, Joe?"

"Yes, sir," said Joe emphatically, laying hold of his precious trousers.

"Look sharper next time, Dan," was the squire's good advice.

"I wish you'd go home with me, Joe," said Dan, after they had taken a few steps. "Father'll larrup me, sure!"

"Maybe that will brighten your wits," was Joe's consoling answer.

"But, Joe – I'm sure I didn't mean to – and" —

"I'm off like a shot," appended Joe, suiting the action to the word; and poor Dan was left alone in the middle of the road.

"Why, what *has* happened, Joe?" said Granny as he bounced in the kitchen-door.

"Such a time as I've had to find 'them trousers,' as Mr. Briggs calls them! Dan had packed them off to Squire Powell's!"

"That Dan Briggs is too stupid for any thing," commented Florence.

"There's time to try them on yet," Joe exclaimed. "Just you wait a bit."

Joe made a rush into the other room.

"Don't wake up Dot," said Hal.

"Oh! I'll go as softly as a blind mouse."

"There, Granny, what do you think of that?"

"You want a collar and a necktie, and your hair brushed a little," said Florence with critical eyes.

"But aren't they stunners!"

Granny looked at him, turned him round and looked again, and her wrinkled face was all one bright smile. For he was so tall and manly in this long jacket, with its narrow standing collar, and the trousers that fitted to a charm.

"Oh," said Hal with a long breath, "it's splendid!"

"You bet! When I get 'em paid for, Hal, I'll help you out."

Florence sighed.

"O Flo! I can't help being slangy. It comes natural to boys. And then hearing them all talk in the store."

"Wa-a!" said a small voice. "Wa-a-a Danny!"

"There!" exclaimed Hal; and he ran in to comfort Dot.

But Dot insisted upon being taken up, and brought out to candle-light. The buttons on Joe's jacket pleased her fancy at once, and soothed her sorrow.

"I must say, Dot, you are a young woman of some taste," laughed Joe.

"Granny," said Kit, after sitting in deep thought, and taking a good chew out of his thumb, "when Joe wears 'em out, can you cut 'em over for me?"

"O Kit! Prudent and economical youth! To you shall be willed the last remaining shreds of my darling gray trousers, jacket, buttons and all."

They had a grand time admiring Joe. Charlie felt so sorry that she wasn't a boy; and Flo declared that "he looked as nice as anybody, if only he wouldn't" —

"No, I won't," said Joe solemnly.

Granny felt proud enough of him the next day when he went to church. Florence was quite satisfied to walk beside him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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