

HAPPY HOUSE

BY

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TO MARTHA
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HAPPY HOUSE

CHAPTER I

THE LETTER

Through the stillness of a drowsy June day broke the intoning of the library bell, chiming the hour.

Three heads lifted quickly to listen. Three pairs of eyes met, the same thought flashed through three minds.

"Won't we miss that bell, though? I've seen grads when they've come back stand perfectly still and listen to it with their eyes all weepy looking. That's the way we'll feel by and by," one of them said slowly.

"And the chimes used to make me dreadfully homesick! Don't those frosh days seem ages ago?"

The third girl slammed the lid of the trunk that occupied the centre of the disordered room. She crossed to the window.

Over the stretch of green between the dormitory and the campus many people were slowly walking. Their fluffy dresses, their gay parasols, the aimlessness of their wandering steps marked them as visitors. The girl in the window frowned as she watched them.

"I always hate it when the campus fills up with gawking, staring people! It ought to be kept—sacred—just for us!"

One of the three laughed merrily in answer.

"How selfish that sounds, Claire! Haven't all those people come to see one of us graduate? This is their day—ours is past." She stopped short. "Did you see Thelma King's sister at the class-day exercises? She's a *peach*! She's going to enter next fall. She's a leader in everything at the High where she goes. She'll make a good college girl; you could see the right spirit in her face. How I envy her! It's dreadful when you think of new ones—coming—taking our places! I wish I was just beginning my Freshman year—I'd even be willing to endure Freshman math."

The third of the group who had been sitting on, the floor staring out over the tree tops with the dreamy gravity of one who—as long ago as yesterday—graduated from the great University, suddenly interrupted.

"Dear girls, cease your whining! What do those pieces of sheepskin reposing somewhere in the mess on yonder bureau stand for? Remember what that man said yesterday—how we mustn't think this Commencement is the end of anything—it's just the beginning. Why, this new world that's been born out of the frightful war is full of work for our trained minds and hands! We mustn't look back for a minute—we must look ahead!" Thrilled by her own words she leveled a reproachful glance upon her two companions.

Claire sighed. "I never could get the inspiration from things that you always seem to, Anne. I guess I'm not built right! I couldn't make myself listen to *half* that man said. I can't think of anything right now but what a job it's going to be getting everything into that trunk. Mother was heartless not to stay over and do it for me!"

"Never mind, Claire, we'll help you. Of course you and I can't see things in the big, grand way that Anne can because she's found herself and we haven't. But when our work *does* come we'll do it! It may not be off in Siberia or China or Africa—like Anne's—but, wherever it is, I guess our Alma Mater won't be ashamed of us!" The girl's eyes softened with the passionate tenderness of the new graduate for her University.

Back in the freshman days a curious chance had drawn these three together. Then, for four years, years of hopeful effort, aspirations and youthful problems, the currents of their young lives had intermingled closely; now each must go its way. The moment brought the pang that comes to youth at such a parting. Their bonds were something closer than friendship. Behind them were months of the sweetest intimacy that youth can know—ahead were the lives they must live apart out in a world that cared nothing for college ideals and inspirations, where each must find her "work" and do it, so that "her Alma Mater might be proud!"

Statistics, even in a university, would be dull if, now and then, Fate did not play a trick with them. Upon the roster of the class of Nineteen-nineteen had been entered two names: "Anne Leavitt, Los Angeles, California; Anne Leavitt, New York City."

When one thinks that in the great world war there was an army of, approximately, seventy-five thousand Smiths alone, and a whole division of John Smiths, one need not marvel that two Anne Leavitts came that October day to the old University. Doubtless, in those first trying days, they passed one another often and did not know, but a week later, when Professor Nevin in First Year French, read slowly from his little leather book: "Miss Anne Leavitt," two girls jumped to their feet and in astonishment, faced one another.

"I am Anne Leavitt!" spoke the larger of the two.

"And I am Anne Leavitt, too!" laughed the smaller.

A snicker ran around the room. Professor Nevin frowned and stared—first at his little worn book and then at the two offending young women. Of course he was powerless to undo what had been done years before! And as he scowled, across the classroom one Anne Leavitt smiled at the other. When the hour ended the recitation they walked away arm in arm, laughing over the ridiculous situation.

At the Library steps they were joined by another girl from the French class. She had run in her eagerness to overtake them.

"Are you *really* both Anne Leavitts?" she asked breathlessly.

They assured her solemnly that they were and that they didn't know just what to do about it—old Professor Nevin had been so funny and upset. They all three laughed again over it all. And there in the golden warmth of that October day began the friendship of these three—for the third girl was Claire Wallace.

The students in the University found countless ways of distinguishing between the two Anne Leavitts. One was tall and grave with a meditative look in her deep-set eyes; the other, a head shorter, had a lightness about her like an April day, reddish curly hair and an upturned nose. One Anne Leavitt had never been called anything but Anne, the other, since her baby days, had been Nancy. The more intimate of the college girls called them Big Anne and Little Anne. The professors, dignified perforce, read from their rolls, "Miss Anne Leavitt, California—Miss Anne Leavitt, New York."

In name only were the two girls alike. Anne had been born with the legendary "silver spoon" and its mythical fortune. When her father and mother died a friend of her father's, as guardian, had continued the well-regulated indulgence that had marked her childhood. Because she possessed an iron will and early acquired a seriousness and dignity beyond her years, she was always a leader in each of the boarding schools to which she progressed. Whatever Anne wanted to do she always did, and yet, in spite of it, she had reached her college days unspoiled, setting her strong will only for the best and obsessed with a passionate longing for a service that would mean self-sacrifice.

She thought now she had found it! Two weeks from this very day she, would sail for a far-off village in Siberia to teach the peasant children there and bring to the pitiful captivity of Russian ignorance the enlightenment of American ideals. So big and wonderful seemed the adventure that, girl-like, she had paid little heed to the small details. Nancy and Claire Wallace worried more than she!

"You'll never get enough to eat and how will you ever keep your clothes clean," sighed Claire, who loved pretty frocks.

"And we can't send you things, either, for they'd never reach you—some of those awful Bolsheviks would be sure to steal them!"

Madame Breshkovsky, the little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution, had made several visits to the University, and Anne, with the others, had listened over and over to her vivid, heartrending stories of the suffering needs of the children of the real Russia. It had been after such an evening that Anne had given herself to the cause. So that, when Nancy and Claire fretted excitedly over the hardships and dangers of the undertaking, she had only looked at them with the question in her grave, dark eyes: "What matters it if perhaps Anne Leavitt does lack a few clothes and food and some silly luxuries if she is doing a little, little bit to help her fellowmen?"

Nancy Leavitt, like the beloved Topsy, had just "grewed up." To her chums, in her own spirited way, she had once described how: "Ever since I can remember there were always just Dad and I. When he wanted to go anywhere he used to pick me up like a piece of baggage and off we went. Half the time I didn't go to the same school two years in succession. And he

used to teach me, too. Oh, how homesick I was when I came here—without him. We're just like pals!"

Nancy's physical well-being had been watched over by nurses of almost every race and color. She knew a little Hindoo and from the old Hindoo "ayah" she had caught bits of Hindoo mysticism. She had romped and rolled with Japanese babies; she had lived on a ranch in Mexico until bandits had driven them away; she had trudged along behind her father over miles of trail in Alaska. And the only place she had ever called "home" was a tiny flat in New York, where her father kept the pretty furniture that Nancy's mother had bought when a bride. Back to this they would come after long intervals, for a little respite from their wanderings, and for Nancy the homecoming was always an excitingly happy one from the moment she ran down to Mrs. Finnegan's door for the key to the lugging out again of the two little trunks, which meant a sudden departure for some distant land.

College had brought a great change into this gypsy life and a grief at the separation from her "Dad." But as the weeks had passed her letters to him read less and less like a wail of homesickness, and were filled more and more with the college happenings and whole passages devoted to girlish descriptions of her new friends.

For the last two years her father had been overseas as senior newspaper correspondent with the American Expeditionary Force, and it would be weeks before he could return. That thought added now to the lonely ache in Nancy's heart as she stared at her chums and wondered what it would seem like to live day after day without seeing them!

These three had trod together up the Paths of Learning until they were passing now the Gateway of Life; and yet, right at that moment, all of them, even Anne, felt childishly lonely and homesick for the shelter of the University they were leaving.

That was why the chiming of the Library clock, that had marked the passage of happy time for more than one generation of youth, brought a shadow across each of the three young faces.

A little wistfulness crept into Nancy's voice. "Your life's all cut out for you, Anne. It's positively thrilling! Though I'd make an awful mess out of any such undertaking. And Claire has her family. I'll just go to New York and get the key from Mother Finnegan and work like mad on the 'Child.' I want to finish it before Dad comes home. I shall send it, then, to Theodore Hoffman himself—I might as well hitch my wagon to the tiptoppest star—or whatever it is you do! Of course it isn't as grand as going to Russia, but I'm going to work, and some day, maybe, I'll be famous all over the world!"

"Little Anne Leavitt, the great dramatist!" murmured Big Anne fondly.

Claire Wallace, confronting nothing more serious than the squeezing of her belongings into the huge trunk, was stirred with envy. Nancy had her "Child"—not a youngster but a growing pile of manuscript, Anne had her "crusade" among the unfortunate children of Siberia—she had nothing ahead but to join her family at their summer home, an estate that covered hundreds of acres on Long Island.

"I wish you'd come home with me, first, Nancy! You heard mother say how much she wanted you to come and we will have a beautiful time and then you can see Barry."

Nancy frowned sternly. She had several reasons for frowning—she thought. Of course she would really like to go to Merrycliffe with Claire; she loved to frolic, and the last term had been a pretty hard grind, but her whole future depended upon her finishing her play and Claire simply must *not* coax her! Then the other reason was Barry. Barry was Claire's brother recently returned from long service in France, decorated by each of the allied countries. Toward him Nancy and Anne, quite secretly, felt an unreasonable and growing dislike. Neither of them had ever laid eyes on him but, ignoring the injustice, based their antipathy solely on the fact that "Claire talks of nothing but Barry until you feel like shutting your ears!"

Nancy had, more than once, declared that "she could just see him strutting around with all his medals, letting everyone make a lion of him, and she loathed handsome men, anyway—they lacked character" and Anne said "*her* heart went out to those boys whose every minute in the trenches had been an unrecognized and unrecorded act of heroism." Of course they both carefully kept their real feelings from little Claire, who was too dear to them to ever hurt in any way, so that, when she talked "Barry," if they were only politely attentive, in her proud enthusiasm, she never noticed.

Now Nancy, instead of saying truthfully that "*she* wasn't going to spend her summer helping make a parlor pet out of the 'lion,'" simply shook her head and frowned.

"Claire, don't tease me! Of course I know how nice it would be to swim and dance and play tennis and all sorts of things, but I must work!" and she finished with the decided tone that was like Anne's.

Claire looked unhappy. "*I* don't want to go and dance and swim and play around, though it is nice, but I can't write and I can't go to Russia, so I'll just *have* to go and do what the others in my crowd all do, and I suppose you'll think I'm a butterfly when I'm *really* perfectly miserable!"

Nancy controlled a smile. "Bless you, we won't think you're anything but just the apple of our eyes. The world needs butterflies to keep it beautiful and gay. Your adventure, Claire, is waiting for you, maybe, around the corner. That's what Mother Finnegan is always saying! And after my 'Child' is finished I promise I'll come and play with you!"

Claire was only a little cheered.

"But Barry may not be there, then. Mother says he's dreadfully restless. He may be gone now!"

A knock at the door saved Nancy from an answer.

It was old Noah, the porter. He held a letter in his hand.

"It's fer Mis' Anne Leavitt and I'm blessed if I know which one of yez so, I sez, I'll jes' take it to the two of yez and let you toss up fer it!"

It was not unusual for the two girls to find their mail confused. They generally distinguished by the handwriting or the postmarks. But now they both stared at the letter they took from Noah's hand.

It was addressed in a fine, old-fashioned handwriting.

"I can't recognize it," exclaimed one Anne Leavitt.

"I'm sure *I* never saw it before!" cried the other.

"Isn't this exciting? Let me see the postmark. F-r-e-e-d-o-m!" spelled Nancy. "I never heard of it," she declared.

"I believe it's mine! I have some relatives—or did have—a great aunt or something, who lived near a place like that way up on North Hero Island. I'd forgotten all about them. Open it, Claire, and let's see what it is."

"You never told *us* about any aunt on any North Hero Island! It sounds like a romance, Anne," accused Nancy, who thought she knew everything about her friend.

Anne laughed. "I don't wonder you think so. I just barely remember father speaking of her. Read it, Claire!"

Claire had seized the letter and opened it. "It is signed 'Your loving aunt.' Isn't it the most ridiculous mystery? Why *couldn't* it have been something else besides an aunt!"

"Well, I'm awfully afraid it *is* for me. We never could *both* have aunts on North Hero Island. Go on, blessed child—I'm prepared for the worst!"

Claire rose dramatically.

"My dear Niece," she read, adding: "I want you to *know*, Anne, that she honors you by spelling that with a capital." "Of later years it has been a matter of deep regret to me that though the same blood runs in our veins we are like strangers, and that you have been allowed to grow to womanhood without knowing the home of your forefathers on this historic island. It is for that reason that now, after considerable debate with my conscience, I am writing to you at your college address which I have obtained through a chance article in an Albany newspaper ('that was the Senior Play write-up,' interrupted Nancy, excitedly) to urge you to avail yourself of the earliest opportunity to visit me in the old home.

"I feel the burden and responsibility of my increasing years, and I know that soon I will be called to that land where our forefathers have gone before us. You are, I believe, my nearest of kin—the family, as you must know, is dying out and I would have preferred that you had been a boy—I will tell you frankly that I am considering changing my will and that upon your visit depends whether or not you will be my beneficiary. I would wish to leave the home and my worldly wealth—the wealth of the past Leavitts, to a Leavitt, but before I can do so to the satisfaction of my own conscience, I must know that you are a Leavitt and that you have been brought up with a true knowledge and respect for what being a Leavitt demands of you,

"I await your reply with anxiety. Your visit will give me pleasure and I assure you that you will learn to love the spot on which, for so many generations, your ancestors have lived."

"Your Loving Aunt,
"SABRINA LEAVITT."

"Well, I'll be——" In all her college vocabulary Anne could not find the word to express her feelings.

"Isn't that rapturous? A great-aunt and a fortune! And will you *please* tell me why she had to debate with her conscience?" cried Claire.

Nancy was gleeful over Anne's wrath.

"I'm glad she's yours, Annie darling! Dad always said the whole world was *my* only kin, but I never ran against anyone who wanted to look me over before she left me a fortune! Who ever heard of North Hero Island and where in goodness is it?"

"I remember, now, that her name was awfully queer—Aunt Sa-something or other, and North Hero Island isn't *utterly* unknown, Nancy, to the can't even remember! I wish it had happened to Lake Champlain. I saw it once on a road-map when I was touring last fall with Professor and Mrs. Scott, and Professor Scott said it was a locality picturesquely historic—I remember."

Claire turned the letter over and over.

"I think it's all awfully thrilling! An aunt you can't even remember! I wish it had happened to me! It would be something so different. It's just like a story. But what a *lot* she does think of her forefathers!"

"Well, the Leavitts are a very old family and they are a New England family, too, although I was born in California," interrupted Anne with a dignity that would have gladdened the great-aunt's heart.

Nancy was again provoked to merriment.

"Dad always said that the only other Leavitt *he* knew was a cow-puncher! He could lick anyone on the plains."

Anne ignored this. She was frowning in deep thought.

"The tiresome part is that—if I *don't* go—if I tell her about going to Russia—she may write to my guardian!"

All three were struck dumb at the thought. Anne had not consulted her guardian before she had impulsively enlisted her services in Madame Breshkovsky's cause. Because she was three months past twenty-one, legally he could not interfere, but being so newly of age she had not had the courage to meet his protest. So she had simply written that she was planning a long trip with friends and would tell him of the details when they had been completed. A letter lay now in her desk which she intended to mail the day before she sailed. It would be too late,

then, for him to interfere. If her conscience troubled her a little about this plan, she told herself that the cause justified her action.

And now this Aunt Sa-something might upset everything!

"I wish I could remember more about those relatives up there—father and mother used to laugh whenever they mentioned the old place. I always imagined they were dreadfully poor! She must be a terrible old lady—you can sort of tell by the tone of her letter. Oh, dear!"

"What will you do?" echoed Claire, still thinking it a much more attractive adventure than Russia.

"I have it!" cried Anne. "*You* shall go in my place, Nancy!"

"*I!* I should say not! Are you stark crazy, Anne Leavitt?"

Anne seized her excitedly by the shoulder. "You could do it as easy as anything in the world, Nancy. She's never laid eyes on me and I know my father never wrote to her. You'll only have to go there for three or four weeks——"

"And pose as a real Leavitt when I'm a Leavitt that just belongs to Dad! Well, I won't do it!" replied Nancy, stubbornly.

"Nan-cy, please listen! You wouldn't have to do or say a thing—she'd just take it for granted. And you could always make some excuse to go away if——"

"If it looked as though I was going to be found out! Why, it'd be like living on a volcano. And I'd be sure to always say the wrong thing!"

"But you could *try* it," implored Anne. "It would make everything simple and you'd be doing *your* bit, then, for Madame Breshkovsky! Think of all she told us of the suffering in Russia. Surely you could do a little thing now to help! And if Aunt *did* like you and left me her money, it would *really* be you and we'd give it to the cause!"

"It'd be acting a lie," broke in Nancy.

"Oh, not exactly, Nancy, for you really are Anne Leavitt and, anyway, it's just as though you were my other half. Way back I know we are related. If you don't love me well enough to help me out now—well, I'm disappointed. I'll never forget it!"

Poor Nancy, mindful of the long separation that lay before her and her friend, cried out in protest.

"Oh, Anne, *don't* say that!"

Claire, her eyes brilliant with excitement, chimed in:

"Nancy, it's a hope-to-die adventure. Maybe you could make up no end of stories and plays out of the things that happen up there! And, anyway, you can finish the 'Child' and come to Merrycliffe that much sooner!"

Claire had advanced the most appealing argument. North Hero Island certainly sounded more inspiring than a stuffy flat in Harlem with six small Finnegans one floor below. And it was an adventure. Anne hastened to take advantage of the yielding she saw in Nancy's face.

"You can stay here with me until I have to go to New York, and we can look up trains and I can tell you all about my forefathers, though I really don't know a single thing. But she won't expect you to know—don't you remember she wrote that she regretted my being brought up without knowing the home of my forefathers. And if you just act as though you wanted more than anything else in the world to learn all about the Leavitts, she'll just love it and she'll tell you everything you *have* to know!"

"It's the most *thrilling* romance," sighed Claire, enviously.

"Sounds more to *me* like a conspiracy, and can't they put people in jail for doing things like that?" demanded Nancy.

"Oh, Nancy, you're *so* literal—as if she would, way up there on an island next to nowhere! And anyway, think of the boys who perjured themselves to get into the service. Wasn't that justified?"

Nancy, being in an unpleasant mood, started to ask what *that* had to do with *her* pretending to be an Anne Leavitt who she wasn't, when Big Anne went on in a hurt tone:

"Well, we won't talk about it any more! I'll have to give up going to Russia and my whole life will be spoiled. And I *am* disappointed—I thought our friendship meant something to you, Nancy."

"*Anne!* There isn't a *thing* I wouldn't do for you! You're next dearest to Dad. For you I'll go to—Freedom or any old place. I'll do my best to be you to the dot and I'll pay homage to your forefathers and will ask not a penny of the legacy—if you get it! It shall all be for the cause!"

Anne read no irony in her tone. Her dignity flown, she caught her friend in a strangling hug. "Oh, Nancy, you *darling*, will you? I'll never forget it! We'll write to her right away—or you will. From this *very* minute you are Anne Leavitt!"

"I wish I could go, too," put in Claire. "Perhaps I can coax Barry to motor up that way."

"Don't you *dare!*" cried Nancy in consternation. "It would spoil it all. I'll write to you every day every thing that happens. Goodness, if I'm as scared when I face your Aunt Sa-something as I am right now when I think about it, she'll know at a glance that I'm just an everyday Leavitt and not the child of her forefathers!"

"Hark!" Claire lifted a silencing finger. "The seniors are singing."

The lines they loved drifted to them.

"Lift the chorus, speed it onward,
Loud her praises tell!"

"Let's join them." Suddenly Claire caught a hand of each. "*Girls*, think of it—what it *means*—it's the last time—*it's all over!*" Her pretty face was tragic.

Big Anne, with a vision of Russia in her heart, set her lips resolutely.

"Don't look *back*—look *ahead!*" she cried, grandly.

But in Nancy's mind as, her arms linked with her chums', she hurried off to join the other Seniors in their last sing, the troubling question echoed: "To what?"

CHAPTER II

WEBB

A clatter of departing hoofs, a swirl of dust—and Nancy was left alone on the hot railroad platform of North Hero. Her heart had seemed to fix itself in one painful lump in her throat. She was so very, very close to facing her adventure!

"If you please, can you tell me in what way I can reach Freedom?" Her faltering voice halted the telegraph operator as he was about to turn the corner of the station.

"Freedom? Well, now, old Webb had ought 'a been here for the train. Isn't often Webb misses seein' the engine come in! Just you go in and sit down, Miss, he'll come along," and scarcely had the encouraging words passed the man's lips than a rickety, three-seated, canopied-topped wagon, marked "Freedom Stage" turned the corner.

"*Hey*, Webb, here's a lady passenger goin' along with you to Freedom! And did you think the express would wait fer you?"

Webb and his dusty, rusty and rickety wagon was a welcome sight to poor Nancy. It had already seemed to her that her journey was endless and that Freedom must be in the farthest corner of the world. For the first few hours she had been absorbed by her grief at parting with Anne. But a night in a funny little hotel in Burlington had given her time to reflect upon her undertaking and it had assumed terrible proportions in her eyes. The courage and confidence she had felt with her chums, back in the room in the dormitory, deserted her now.

"Goin' to Freedom you say, Miss?" the man Webb asked, a great curiosity in his eyes. "Wal, you jes' come along with me! Had an order for Tobiases and it set me late, but we'll git thar. Climb up here, Miss," and with a flourishing aside of his reins he made room for her on the dusty seat he occupied.

Nancy handed him her big bag and climbed easily over the wheel into the seat he had indicated. Then with a loud "get-ap" and a flourish of his whip they rumbled off on the last leg of Nancy's journey.

"Ain't ever been to Freedom before?" he asked as they turned the corner of the maple-shaded street of the little town, and the horses settled down into a steady trot. "Reckon not or old

Webb 'ud have known ye—ain't any folks come and go on this here island thet *I* don't know," he added with pride, dropping his reins for a better study of his passenger.

The air was fragrant with spring odors, the great trees met in a quivery archway overhead, the meadow lands they passed were richly green; Nancy's failing spirits began to soar! She threw a little smile toward the old man.

"I've never been in Freedom before—though I'm a Leavitt," she ventured.

Her words had the desired effect. The man straightened with interest.

"Wal, bless me, are ye one o' Miss Sabriny's folks? And a-goin' to Happy House when ye ain't ever seen it?"

Nancy nodded. "I'm Anne Leavitt," she answered carefully. "And I have never seen my Aunt Sabrina. So I have come up from college for a little visit. And I think *everything* is lovely," she finished, drawing a long breath, "though, goodness knows, I thought I'd never get here!"

She was uncomfortably conscious that the old man was regarding her with open concern.

"Funny, no one ain't heard a word about it! So ye're Miss Sabriny's great-niece and a-comin' to Happy House from your school fer a visit!"

"Why, yes, why not?"

"Wal, I was jes' thinkin' you'd never *seen* Happy House. And I guess most folks in Freedom's forgotten Miss Sabriny hed any folks much—count of the trouble!"

"Oh, *what* trouble, please, Mr. Webb?"

The old man shook his reins vigorously against the horses' backs.

"Webb, you're an old fool—an old, dodderin' fool! Of course this here trouble was a long spell ago, Miss, and don't belong to Leavitts young like you. I s'pose it want much, anyways, and I guess Miss Sabriny herself's forgotten it else you wouldn't be a comin' to Happy House! I'm an old man, missy, and thar ain't been much in Freedom as I don't know about, but an old un'd ought 'a know 'nough to keep his tongue in his head. Only—you come to Webb if anything bothers you and you needn't call me *Mr.* Webb, either, for though I'm one of Freedom's leadin' cit-zuns and they'd never be a Memorial Day or any kind of Fourth of July doin's in Freedom without *me*—nobody calls me Mister Webb and you jus' come to me——"

Nancy, forgetful now of the pleasant things about her, frowned.

"You're very nice to me, Webb, and I'm glad to have made a friend so soon! I think the trouble *has* been forgotten. Anyway, I'm only going to stay a little while."

"And a good thing it'll be fur Miss Milly, too."

"Miss Milly——" asked Nancy.

"It ain't no easy life fur her livin' with Miss Sabriny holdin' the sword of wrath over her poor head, and there's lots of folks think Miss Milly'd be a heap happier in the old graveyard than in Happy House, 'lowin' as how both feet are in the grave anyway. But this ain't no cheerful talk to hand out to you, Miss, only I cal'late you'll make Miss Milly a heap happier—shut up the way she is."

"How far are we from Freedom?" asked Nancy, abruptly, thinking as she did so that, if they were a very long way, she would have an opportunity to learn from her garrulous friend all she needed to know!

"Two mile from the turn yonder by the oak," the old man answered.

For a few moments both maintained a deep silence. Nancy, her thoughts in a tumult, was wondering what question she would ask first—there was so much she wanted to know—the "trouble," "Miss Milly and the sword of wrath" or what he meant by "Happy House." The last post stirred her curiosity; then, too, it did not seem just nice to pry from this old man.

"Why do they call the Leavitt place 'Happy House'?"

"Wal, I guess it ain't because it's exactly *happy*, and some sez mebbe as how it's been a curse! Folks comes here to Freedom and looks at the old place and there's somethin' printed about it in a little book they sell up at Tobiases in Nor' Hero, only I ain't much on the readin'. B'lindy Guest knows the story by heart, and she can tell you more'n I can."

"Oh, *please*, Webb, I can't make head or tail out of what you are saying," laughed Nancy pleadingly. "Who *called* it Happy House first?"

"B'lindy sez the book sez that it was the first Anne Leavitt as come to Nor' Hero called it Happy House and they hed one of these here mantels made out o' marble over in London and fetched across with the letters right in it spellin' Happy House! And she helped fix it up with her own hands she'd kind o' set such store by the idee, right thar in the settin' room and the very next day she slipped off sudden like and died like a poor little flower. And there ain't been much happiness in Happy House from them days since! B'lindy knows the hul story; jes' 'sits written."

"Oh, how *thrilling!*" cried Nancy, breathing very fast. She had an uncontrollable desire to halt Webb and the Freedom stage right on the spot in order to write to Claire Wallace. But at that moment, around the turn by the old oak galloped a horse and rider. Because it was the first living creature Nancy had seen since leaving North Hero, she was startled.

"*Hey* there, Webb," the rider cried, whirling out of the path of the old wagon.

And Webb called back in cheery greeting: "*Hey*, Pete!"

Through the cloud of dust Nancy had caught a glimpse of a pair of merry eyes set deep in a face as brown as the dark shirt the man wore. Turning impulsively in her seat she noticed, with an unexplainable sense of pleasure, that the bare head of the rider was exceptionally well shaped and covered with short curly hair. Then, to her sudden discomfiture, the rider wheeled directly in the road and pulled his horse up short.

It was, of course, because he was the first real person she had seen on this big lonely Island that prompted her to nod ever so slightly in response to his friendly wave! Then she turned discreetly back to Webb.

"Who is he?" she asked, in what she tried to make an indifferent tone.

"Peter Hyde an' as nice a young fellar as ever come to Freedom! Ain't been here much more'n a week and knows everybody. He's old man Judson's hired man and he's goin' to make somethin' of that ten-acre strip of Judson's some day or my name ain't Cyrenus Webb!"

"*Judson's hired man!*" cried Nancy, chagrined. What *would* Anne think of her—to have recognized, even in the slightest degree, the impertinence of this fellow! Her face burned at the thought.

"Seems to have a lot of learnin' but he's awful simple like and a hustler. Nobody knows whereabouts he come from—jes' dropped by out of some advertisement old Judson put in the papers up Burlington way."

"Tell me more about Freedom," broke in Nancy with dignity. "Is it a very old place?"

"Wal, it's jest as old as this Island, though I ain't much on readin' or dates. Folks on Nor' Hero's pretty proud of the hul Island and B'lindy sez as how it's printed that folks settled here long 'fore anyone, exceptin' the Indians, ever heard of Manhattan Island whar New York is. Used to be French first round here but they didn't stay long, and then the English come down 'fore the Revolution and the Leavitts with them, I guess. This here Island's named fur Ethan Allen, you know, and folks sez old Jonathan, thet works up at Happy House, is a connection of his. All the folks round here's related some way or other to them pi'neers and I guess if we hed to put up a fight now we'd do it jest as brave as them Green Mountain Boys! The old smithy's been standin' on the four corners for nigh onto one hundred years and the meetin' house facin' the commons, B'lindy sez, is older than the smithy. And up the Leavitt road thar's a tablet these here Daughters of somethin' or other from Montpelier put up for some pi'neers that died fightin' the Indians while their women folks set off in boats for the mainland. I heard B'lindy tell that at the last social down at the meetin' house. I cal'late some of them pi'neers were Leavitts, at that, fur it want long before that the pretty lady came who hed the name built in the mantel. B'lindy knows—she can tell jes' what day the pretty lady come and the very room she died in. B'lindy was born in the old house and she and Miss Sabriny growed up like sisters though B'lindy's a good sight younger and spryer like than Miss Sabriny!"

From the warmth of his tone Nancy guessed that there was a weak spot in Webb's heart for B'lindy.

"Tell me more about B'lindy," she asked, softly.

"Wal, if you jus' take a bit of advice from an old man you be *purty* nice to B'lindy! Folks sez that Miss Sabriny's high and mightier than the worst Leavitt, and they're a mighty proud lot, but I jus' got a notion that the only person who runs Miss Sabriny is B'lindy and I sort o' think she runs the hul of Happy House! And now here I am a gossipin' so with a pretty passenger that I clean furgot to leave off that chicken wire for Jenkins. *Whoa*, there, *whoa*, I say!"

Nancy guessed that the cluster of housetops she glimpsed ahead, almost hidden by the great elms and maples, was Freedom. She stared at them reflectively. Through Webb she seemed suddenly to feel that she had known the little tragedies and joys of Freedom all her life. She was not a bit afraid now to meet Aunt Sabrina or this Miss Milly or B'lindy. And she was eager to see the old, old house and the spot where Leavitts had been massacred as they protected their women! After all, it was going to be very pleasant—this playing at being one of the old Leavitts! She wished Webb would hurry.

When Farmer Jenkins followed Webb to the wheel of the wagon, Nancy knew that Webb had lingered to tell of her coming. She met the farmer's open stare with a pleasant little smile so that, an hour later, he "opined" to the thin, bent-shouldered woman who shared his name and labors, that "if that young gal wouldn't set things stirrin' pretty lively up at Happy House, he'd miss his guess!"

As they approached the outlying houses of the village Webb assumed an important air. "This here's Freedom, Missy, and I'm proud to do the honors for Miss Sabriny's niece! It's not big as places go but its record can't be beat sence Ethan Allen's day. Webb knows, fer I marched away with the boys in blue back in '61, though I was a bare-footed youngster, long 'bout fourteen, and couldn't do nothin' more useful than beat a drum. And thar's our service flag, Missy, and every last one of the six of 'em's come through hul—thanks be to God! And thar's the hotel by the post-office and cross here's the school house which I helped build the winter they wa'n't no call fur the stage. This is the Common and thet's the meetin' house, as anyone could see, fur it ain't a line different from the meetin' houses over at Bend and Cliffsdale and Nor' Hero and all over Vermont, I guess. Funny how they never wanted only one kind o' meetin' houses! And here's the old smithy lookin' like it was older than B'lindy 'lowed, and here's whar we turn to go up the Leavitt road. Seein' how you're sort of a special passenger I'll go right along up to Happy House, though it ain't my custum!"

Nancy was tremendously excited. She stared to right and left at the little old frame and stone houses set squarely in grass-grown yards flanked by flowerbeds, all abloom, and each wearing, because of tightly closed blinds, an appearance of utter desertion. On the wooden "stoop" of the place Webb had dignified by calling a "hotel" were lounging a few men who had scarcely stirred when Webb in salutation had flourished his whip at them. The Commons, hot in the June sun, was deserted save for a few chickens pecking around in the long grass. The green shutters of the meeting house were tightly closed, too. From the gaping door of the smithy came not a sound. Even the great branches of the trees scarcely stirred. Over everything brooded a peaceful quiet.

"Oh, how delicious," thought Nancy. "How very, very old everything is. *How* I shall love it!" She leaned forward to catch a first glimpse of Happy House.

"Back by the smithy thar's old Dan'l Hopworth's place. Shame to have it on Miss Sabriny's road only I 'low most as long as the Leavitts been here thar's been some of the no-good Hopworths! Poor old Dan'l's 'bout as shiftless as any o' them, B'lindy sez, and his grandchillern ain't any better. And that thar leads down to old man Judson's. His ten acre piece runs right up to Miss Sabriny's. And *thar's* Happy House."

Through the giant elms Nancy caught her first glimpse of the vine covered old stone walls. Her first feeling was of disappointment; in the square lines of the house there was little claim

to beauty. But its ugliness was softened by the wonderful trees that arched over its roof; the gray of its walls and the tightly blinded windows gave a stirring hint of mystery.

The door, built squarely in the middle of the house, opened almost directly upon a stone-flagged path that led in a straight line to the road. There was something sternly formidable about it; Nancy, staring at it with a rapidly beating heart, wondered, when it opened, what might lie in store for her beyond it!

Webb, with much ado, was swinging her big bag over the wheel.

"Wal, we're makin' history, I guess, with another little Anne Leavitt comin' to Happy House! Them horses'll stand and I'll jus' carry this bag up fer you. Come along, Missy, and remember what Webb tells ye—ye make up to B'lindy!"

Nancy followed him up the path to the door. To herself she was whispering, over the quaking of her heart:

"Well, good-by Nancy Leavitt—you're *Anne* now and don't you forget it for one single minute!"

CHAPTER III

HAPPY HOUSE

In the long, dim, high-ceilinged hall of Happy House Nancy felt very small and very much afraid. Though Miss Sabrina was standing very close to her it seemed as though her voice came from a long way off. It was a cold voice, and although Miss Sabrina was without doubt trying to be gracious, there was no warmth in her greeting. She was very tall, with a long Roman nose that gave her entire appearance a forbidding look.

Following her, Nancy stumbled up the long stairs and down an upper hall to a door where Miss Sabrina stopped.

"This is the guest room," she explained, as she opened the door.

Someone had opened one of the blinds so here there was more light. Nancy, looking about, thought that it was the most dreadfully tidy room she had ever seen. It had a starched look—the heavy lace curtains at the window were so stiff that they could have stood quite alone without pole or ring; the stiff-backed cushioned chairs were covered with stiff linen "tidies," edged with stiff lace; the bureau and washstand were likewise protected and a newly starched and ruffled strip, of a sister pattern, protected the wall behind the bowl.

"I think you'll find it comfortable—here. There is a pleasant land breeze at night and it is quiet," Miss Sabrina was saying.

"*Quiet!*" thought Nancy. Was there any noise anywhere on the whole Island? She gave herself a little mental shake. She must say *something* to this very tall, very stately woman—she was uncomfortably conscious that a pair of cold gray eyes was closely scrutinizing her.

"Oh, I shall love it," she cried with an enthusiasm she did not feel. "And it is so nice in you—to want me!"

The gray eyes kindled for a moment.

"I wanted you to know us—and to know Happy House. In spite of all that has happened you *are* a Leavitt and I felt that it was wrong that you should have grown up to womanhood out of touch with the traditions of your forefathers. We are one of the oldest families on this Island—Leavitts have always been foremost in making the history of the state from the days when they fought side by side with Ethan Allen. Any one of them would have laid down his life for the honor of his name and his country. You will want to wash, Anne—the roads are dusty. And no family in all Vermont is held in higher esteem than the Leavitts since the first Leavitt came down from Montreal and settled here in the wilderness. Put on a cooler dress, if you wish, and then come down to the dining-room. We always eat dinner at twelve-thirty, but B'lindy has kept something warm. Yes, if you are a true Leavitt you will soon grow to revere the family pride and honor for which we Leavitts live!" And with stately steps, as measured as her words, Miss Sabrina withdrew from the room.

"*Whe-w!* Can you just *beat* it!" Nancy flung at the closed door. She turned a complete circle, taking in with one sweeping glance the heavy walnut furniture, dark and uninviting against the ugly wallpaper and the equally ugly though spotlessly clean carpet; then threw out both hands despairingly.

"Well, Nancy, you *are* in for it—forefathers and everything—family pride and honor!" she finished with a groan. "So be a sport!" And taking herself thus sternly in hand she went to the wash bowl and fell to scrubbing off the dust as Miss Sabrina had bidden her.

The clean, cool water and a change of dress restored her confidence. At least Aunt Sabrina had accepted her without a question—*that* ordeal was over. Everything would go easier now. As she opened the door there came up from below a tempting smell of hot food—Nancy suddenly remembered that she had not eaten a crumb since her hasty, early breakfast in Burlington.

The dining-room was as dim and cool as the rest of the house and as quiet. Miss Sabrina herself placed a steaming omelette at Nancy's place. Then she sat down stiffly at the other end of the table. The omelette was very good; Nancy relished, too, eating it from a plate of rare old blue and white china; her quick eyes took in with one appraising glance the beautiful lines of the old mahogany highboy and the spindle-legged chairs which one of the "forefathers" must have brought over from England, years and years ago.

"The meat pie was cold so B'lindy beat up an omelette," Miss Sabrina was saying. "I guess you must be hungry, Anne."

And then, because there had been the slightest tremble in the older woman's voice Nancy realized, in a flash, that Miss Sabrina was as nervous as she! Of course she had dreaded the coming of this strange grand-niece whom she had invited to Happy House merely from her

sense of duty to Leavitt traditions. In her relief Nancy wanted more than anything to laugh loudly—instead she flashed a warm smile and said coaxingly:

"I wish you'd call me Nancy! Everyone does and it sounds—oh, jollier."

But Miss Sabrina's long face grew longer. She shook her head disapprovingly. "We've never called Anne Leavitts anything but Anne since the first one and I guess in every generation there's been *one* Anne Leavitt! My mother gave the name to an older sister who died when she was a baby. My own name is Sabrina Anne. Eat the strawberries! Jonathan says they're the last from the garden."

Rebuked Nancy bent her head over the fruit. "I am ashamed to know so little—of my family! You will forgive me, won't you, when I seem ignorant? I *do* want to learn." And she said this with all her heart, for unless she could either get Aunt Sabrina quickly away from the beloved subject of family or learn something about them, she was sure to make some dreadful blunder.

Making little patterns on the tablecloth with the end of one thin finger, Miss Sabrina cleared her throat twice, as though she wanted to say something and found it difficult to speak. Her eyes, as she levelled them upon Nancy, turned steely gray with cold little glints in their depths.

"As I wrote to you, I believe, I struggled—for a long time—with my conscience before I took the unwarranted step of inviting you to Happy House. Now I must make one command. Never, while you are here, are you to mention the name of your father or grandfather—and I likewise will refrain from so doing!" She stood up stiffly as she finished her singular words.

Nancy had lifted a round strawberry to her lips. She was so startled that the hand that guided it dropped suddenly and the berry rolled over the cloth, leaving a tiny red trail across the white surface.

Was there ever anything in the world as strange as this? Why shouldn't she mention Anne's father or her grandfather? To be sure, as all she knew about them was the little Anne had told her during the last two weeks, she was not likely to want to say much about them—nevertheless she was immensely curious. Why *should* Miss Sabrina make such a singular command and *why* should she be so agitated?

Nancy knew she must say something in reply. "I—I'll be glad to do just—what you want me to do!" she stammered. "I just want to—make you like me—if I can."

Nancy said this so humbly and so sincerely that it won a smile from Miss Sabrina. Nancy did not know, of course, that the old woman had been trying hungrily to find something in Nancy's face that was "like a Leavitt!" And as Nancy had spoken she had suddenly seen an expression cross the young face that, she said to herself, was "all Leavitt!" So her voice was more kindly and she laid an affectionate hand upon the girl's shoulder.

"I am sure I shall grow very fond of you, my dear. Now I must leave you to amuse yourself—this is my rest hour. Make yourself at home and go about as you please!"

Nancy did not move until the last sound of her aunt's footstep died away. A door shut, then the house was perfectly still. She drew a long, quivery breath.

"Thank goodness—she *does* have to rest! Nancy Leavitt, how are you ever going to stand all that pomposity—for days and days. Wouldn't it be *funny* if I took to talking to myself in this dreadful stillness? Happy House—*Happy*, indeed."

It was not at all difficult for Nancy to know what each room, opening from the long hall, was or what it looked like. The parlor opened from one side, the sitting-room from the other; the dining-room was behind the sitting-room and the kitchen in a wing beyond that. The parlor with its old mahogany and walnut furniture, its faded pictures and ugly carpeting was, of course, just like the sitting-room, except that, to give it more of a homey air, in the sitting-room there were some waxed flowers under a glass, a huge old Bible on the marble-topped table, a bunch of peacock feathers in a corner and crocheted tidies on the horsehair chairs—and the old mantel that had come from England, Webb had said, was in the "sittin'-room."

She tip-toed through the hall and opened the door on the right. Accustomed now to the prevailing dimness, her eyes swept immediately to the old fireplace. The marble mantel stood out in all its purity against the dark wall; age had given a mellow lustre to its glossy surface. Nancy, remembering Webb's story about that Anne Leavitt who, ages ago had placed it there, went to it and touched it reverently. "H-a-p-p-y H-o-u-s-e," she spelled softly, her finger tracing the letters graven into the marble. Doubtless it had come across the sea on one of those slow-sailing ships of long ago—that other Anne Leavitt had waited impatiently months and months for it!

Had that Anne Leavitt, like poor old Aunt Sabrina, worried and fussed over Leavitt traditions? Of course not—she had *made* them.

A curiosity seized Nancy to find B'lindy. Webb had said she knew everything. She must be somewhere beyond that last closed door in the long hallway—the omelette had come from that direction.

Under Nancy's pressure the door opened into a pantry and beyond, in a big, sunny kitchen, shiny in its spotlessness, stood B'lindy before a table, putting the last touches to a pie. She turned at the sound of Nancy's step. Nancy paused in the doorway.

"May I come in?" she asked. "Are you B'lindy?" She imitated Webb's abbreviation.

"Yes," the woman at the table answered shortly. "And you're the niece." She gave Nancy a long, steady look. "Ain't a bit like a Leavitt's I can see! Miss Sabriny would have you come, I hope you'll like it."

"The hateful creature," thought Nancy. Why couldn't *some one* in Happy House act natural and kind and jolly?

Like Miss Sabrina, B'lindy was tall and almost as old; her forbidding manner came not from a Roman nose but from heavy brows that frowned down over deep-set eyes—eyes that pierced in their keenness. Like Miss Sabrina she had a certain dignity, too, which seemed to set her apart from her fellow creatures—the result, no doubt, as Nancy thought, of having been born in the Leavitt household.

"Of course I'm going to love it. It's so—so quiet! And that omelette you made me was delicious. I was dreadfully hungry. And oh, there is so much I want to know about Happy House. Webb told me—coming here—that you knew everything. I've just gone in and looked at the old fireplace. Tell me all about that Anne Leavitt."

Nancy's coaxing tone covered the fire that was within her heart. To herself she was saying: "The old iceberg—I'll thaw her out now or never!"

B'lindy set her pie down; her voice warmed a little. She rested her hands on her hips and assumed what Webb would have called her "speakin' air."

"Well, now, if it's *pryin'* B'lindy Guest don't know nothin', but if it's hist'ry—Webb's just about right. Justin Leavitt brought Anne Leavitt down from Montreal 'slong ago as 1740, when there was first a settlement up to Isle la Motte. He bought most this whole Island, I guess, from the Indians and when they wanted a home Anne Leavitt laid her finger on this very spot we're sittin' on. Justin built the house out of the stone they dug from the Island itself. And she planned that there mantel—just set her heart on it and it seems how a Leavitt could have anything—anyways they hed it made in England and brought over here jest's she planned with Happy House spelled on it all carved like 'tis now. And she helped put it up with her own little hands. The house's been changed a lot sence but no one's ever touched that mantel!"

"And then she died," put in Nancy, breathlessly.

"Yes—she was just nothin' more'n a child and delicate at that and wa'n't built to stand them pi'neer hardships, hidin' from the Indians and eatin' corn and roots and the like when she was used to food as good as the king's, for noble blood she had—the book over at North Hero says so! She just seemed to live 'til that there mantel come and she saw it with her very own eyes. She was brave as any man and she hung on spite of everything 'til she'd got that done and then jest 'sif she was tuckered out she laid down and died!"

"In what room, B'lindy?"

"What's now the guest room—so the book says." B'lindy ignored Nancy's stifled, "Oh, goodness me!" "That next year the Indians attacked all the settlers and Justin Leavitt and his brother Remembrance was killed along with a half-dozen other pi'neers beatin' back the red men while Robert's wife and the other women folk escaped in an open boat across the lake and Robert's wife hid little Justin under her cape. Then Happy House was empty 'til little Justin growed up and came back."

"And had the Indians gone then?"

"No, but they were friendly like and a good thing it was for they'd never been worse en'mies than the Yorkers was then. I guess Ethan Allen, and his Green Mountain Boys slept right here many a time, for there wasn't much they did fightin' the Yorkers without consultin' a Leavitt! But here I am rattlin' on and the oven waitin' for them pies."

"Oh, B'lindy—it's like a wonderful story! Will you show me the book that tells all about it? I'm so glad my name is Anne, too. If you're busy I'll run out and look at the garden—and find Jonathan. Webb told me about him, too."

Nancy's spirits were soaring; instinctively she felt that she had won B'lindy! It was a good beginning. She opened the great oak door and stepped out upon the path. At one time the grounds of Happy House must have been pretentious—they were quaintly beautiful now in their age and half-neglect. Flowering perennials had crept out from their old beds and had spread unchecked around among the giant trunks of the trees so that from hedge to hedge there was a riot of color.

Among the gay blossoms Nancy picked her way, skirting the walls of the house to discover what might lie beyond. In the back she found Jonathan pottering among some raspberry bushes that bordered the flagged walk. He was very bent and very old and very wrinkled; his eyes twitched and blinked as he lifted his head to look at her.

"Good afternoon! I am Anne Leavitt," Nancy called blithely. He was such a perfect part of the old, old garden that she loved him on the spot.

"Wal, wal—little Anne Leavitt," and he nodded and blinked at her.

"I wish you'd call me Nancy," Nancy ventured. "Everyone does, and I don't seem nearly big enough to be Anne. I love your flowers and oh, what a lot of berries you are going to have!"

The old man straightened his shoulders—at least he tried to! His flowers were his children.

"In my younger days this here garden was the show of the Island," he answered proudly. "Folks come from all round to look at it! Thirty-two kinds of posies and that want countin' the hollyhocks that grew like trees—taller'n I am. And vines and berries and vegetables. But I can't work like I used to, and Miss Sabriny don't like anyone but me to touch things. So things have to go abit. Miss Nancy, huh! Ye *are* a little thing." But his smile was kindly. "And I hope ye bring some sunshine to Happy House."

Suddenly Nancy exclaimed: "Oh—the lake! I didn't realize how close we were to it."

Beyond the raspberry patch and the kitchen garden stretched an old orchard. Through the trees Nancy had glimpsed the sapphire blue of Lake Champlain.

"Is that orchard ours?" she asked Jonathan.

"That it is. I helped my father plant those thar trees myself and they're the best bearin' on the hul of Nor' Hero!"

Nancy stood irresolute. She wanted to explore further—to run out among the apple trees to the very cliff of the lake. But she was bursting to write to Claire—there was already so much to tell her.

So with one long, lingering look she retraced her steps back to the house. As she passed slowly under the trees she was startled by the movement of a single slat in one of the upstairs blinds. And instinctively she knew that an eye peeped at her from behind it.

Miss Milly—it must, of course, be the "poor Miss Milly" of whom Webb had spoken!

Nancy closed the front door softly behind her that it might not disturb Miss Sabrina's hour of rest. Then she tiptoed up the long stairway. It took but a moment's calculating to decide which door led to the room where the blind had opened. She stopped before it and tapped gently with one knuckle.

"Come in," a voice answered.

Opening the door, Nancy walked into a room the counterpart of her own, except that a couch was drawn before the blinded windows. And against it half-lay a frail little woman with snow-white hair and tired eyes, shadowing a face that still held a trace of youth.

As Nancy hesitated on the threshold a voice singularly sweet called to her:

"Come in, my dear! I am your Aunt Milly."

CHAPTER IV

AUNT MILLY

"So this is Anne Leavitt!"

But Aunt Milly did not say it at all like Aunt Sabrina, or even crisply, like B'lindy's "so *you're* the niece," but with a warm, little trill in her voice that made Nancy feel as though she was very, very glad to have her there!

Two frail little hands caught Nancy's and squeezed them in such a human way that Nancy leaned over impulsively and kissed Miss Milly on her cheek.

"I am so very glad to know you." Aunt Milly dashed a tear away from her cheek. "I've counted the hours—after Sabrina told me you were coming. To-day I lay here listening for Webb and then must have fallen asleep, so that when you really came I didn't know it. Wasn't that silly? Sit right down, dear—no, not in that old chair, it's so uncomfortable—pull up that rocker. Let me get a good look at you!"

Nancy did not even dread Miss Milly's "good look"—she was so delightfully human! She pulled the rocker close to the lounge and stretched out in it with a happy little sigh.

"I thought *I'd* never get here! It seems as though this is way off in the corner of the world. And I'm just tired enough to find the—the *quiet* downright restful."

Aunt Milly laughed. "I've been worrying over the 'quiet.' It's so dreadfully quiet here—for young folks. I was afraid it would make you homesick. Now tell me all about your trip and your Commencement. I've been going over in my mind just what your Commencement must have been like—ever since Sabrina told me we had a niece who was a Senior in college. It must be wonderful!" she finished, with just the tiniest bit of a sigh.

Suddenly Nancy realized that here was someone hungry to know all that was going on in the world outside of North Hero—not the world of men and women, but her girl's world—that world that had ended Commencement Day. She told a few little things about Senior Week, then, a little homesick for all that had just been left behind, she rattled off one recollection after another with an enthusiasm that kindled an answering fire in Miss Milly's eyes.

"I can't *bear* to think it's all over—except that life itself is one grand adventure and probably, after a little, I'll look back on the school days and think how empty they were of—real things!" Then Nancy, looking down at the frail white hand that clasped her own, thought with a sort of shock that life was scarcely an adventure for poor Miss Milly. But Miss Milly answered contentedly. "I love to hear all about it. I'm glad you had it, my dear. I hope you'll come in and talk with me often—it's like sunshine hearing your young voice!"

"Oh, I shall *like* to. You won't think I'm dreadful, will you, if I tell you that Aunt Sabrina frightens me awfully and so does B'lindy—just a little. But you don't seem a bit like them."

Miss Milly laughed outright—a laugh that had a silver tinkle in it. "No, I suppose I'm not—a bit like them."

"So when I'm so frightened I don't know what to do I shall come straight to you. And, please, Aunt Milly, will *you* call me Nancy? No one has ever called me anything but that and it makes me feel—like someone else—when they call me Anne. Aunt Sabrina was horrified when I asked her."

"Yes—she would be! Of course I shall call you Nancy—or anything that you wish! I can't be much company for you, dear, tied to this couch, but you can bring a great deal of happiness to me."

A wistful gleam in Aunt Milly's eyes made Nancy lean over and kiss her again. At that moment the door opened and Aunt Sabrina walked in. Then it seemed to Nancy as though a shadow crossed Miss Milly's face. The glow in her eyes died completely. She seemed to shrink back among the cushions.

"Oh, you have met our niece," Aunt Sabrina said in her cold voice and with no curiosity as to how it had happened.

Nancy looked at Aunt Milly and Aunt Milly's glance seemed to say: "Please don't tell her I peeked through the blinds." Aloud she answered meekly: "I told her we were glad she had come!"

Aunt Sabrina nodded as though to approve such action. Her eyes turned around the room.

"Is there anything you want done? B'lindy's washed the other covers for your cushions, but they aren't dry enough to iron. The color didn't run a bit—they'll be more sensible than those white ones, for they won't be needing washing all the time, and B'lindy has enough to do!"

"Oh, yes, they'll be more sensible," Miss Milly agreed wearily. "No, I don't want anything."

There were two or three moments of silence. Aunt Sabrina went about the room straightening a picture here, a "tidy" there. Nancy watched her with angry eyes—what *was* there about her that had killed that precious glow in poor little Miss Milly?

She rose abruptly. "May I go to my room? I want to write a letter." Miss Sabrina said, "Why, of course, Anne," and Miss Milly flashed a little ghost of a smile that entreated: "You see what life is like for me, so please, *please* come again."

Upon Nancy's face, as she closed her own door behind her, was a mixture of relief, indignation and apprehension. And a little of each of these emotions crept into the lines of the letter that—to give vent to all that was bursting within her—she dashed off to Claire.

"—— You'd just better believe that if I had that precious darling, Anne Leavitt, back in our beloved tower room I'd tell her that all the fortunes in the world and all the suffering Russians wouldn't hire me to spend one more day with her 'family.'

"And yet, Claire, darling, it's so *dreadful* that it's funny. I just wonder that I haven't been scared *pink!* Can you picture your little Nancy surrounded by mahogany, so old that it fairly screams at you, that it was brought over on the *Mayflower* and walls as high as the Library tower (please subtract poetical license) and just oodles of Leavitt traditions—though I'll admit, just being a plain human mortal, I don't know yet quite *what* the Leavitt traditions are, but believe me, I expect to, very soon, for Aunt Sabrina talks of nothing else!

"Of course, sweet child, you can't make head or tail to all my jibberish, so I'll write lucid English now. The Island is wonderfully beautiful, everything about it seems different from any other part of the world—the trees are bigger and the grass is greener and every now and then you catch a glimpse of Lake Champlain as blue as Anne's sapphire ring and hazy purple mountains beyond. And the whole place is brimming with all kinds of historical stories.

"They call this house Happy House. It was named that by the first Anne Leavitt, and she had a mantel made in England with the letters carved on it, and the day after it was put up she died in the very room I'm writing in! Isn't that tragic and exciting? I can't make a story out of that, though, for it's been all written up in a book they sell at North Hero.

"The house is big and built of stone that was quarried on the Island, and it's all covered with vines and is beautiful—outside. It has trees all around it that meet overhead like a canopy, and instead of a regular garden in beds the ground's all covered with tiger lilies and Sweet William and phlox and lots of flowers I don't know the name of, that look as though they'd spilled out over their gardens and grew everywhere. And there's a darling old gardener who is a descendant of Ethan Allen.

"In fact, everyone I've seen is old and, Webb said, is descended from 'somebody or other.'

"But the inside of the house—oh, horrors! I don't believe a ray of sunshine has gotten into it since the year one, and if it did, it would be shut out mighty fast. Dad would go wild with delight over the old furniture, and the dishes are beautiful, but the wallpaper looks like green lobsters crawling all around, and you walk on brown-red roses as big as cabbages. Does it torture my artistic soul? Oh, ye gods! And my own room! No wonder that other Anne Leavitt died! I never saw so many tidies in my life—I shall never draw a happy breath among them. Oh, I can shut my eyes, right now and see the dear old tower room—you sitting in the middle

of the bed (unmade, of course), playing your uke, Anne digging at her French Four on the window seat along with the fudge dishes which I forgot to wash, and a week's muss all around us. Oh, Claire, *weren't* we happy, though? And to think it's all over.

"Aunt Sabrina is very handsome and very Leavitty. I think Anne, in her manner, when we've done something she doesn't approve of, is like her Aunt Sabrina. She's very tall and parts her hair straight in the middle and has the longest, straightest nose and a way of talking to you that makes you feel like an atom. B'lindy, who is the woman-of-all-work around Happy House, but Somebody, just you believe, is very much like Aunt Sabrina and looks at you as if she could see the littlest thought way back in your mind. And, of course, with me acting a part and feeling as guilty as can be, you can imagine that I don't enjoy B'lindy's searching glance! However, I asked her some questions about the Leavitts and it warmed her up a little.

"But there is an Aunt Milly that Anne didn't seem to know about and, Claire, *she* is human—the dearest, sweetest, prettiest, timidest little thing. You can't tell, looking at her, whether she is old or not, but being my great-aunt—or Anne's—I suppose she is. But she is an invalid and evidently can't walk. There's something about her that makes you feel dreadfully sorry for her and like taking care of her, and I sort of imagine that for some reason or other Aunt Sabrina treats her horridly. When Aunt Sabrina comes into the room, poor Aunt Milly acts scared to death.

"Just how I'll come out of it all I can't guess. I've got to keep my head and see the thing through for Anne's sake. But—so far—I don't like it a bit. It was easy enough planning it all with Anne back in college, but somehow, now that I'm here, I feel so underhanded, deceiving these people. And Miss Sabrina talks so much about the Leavitt honor that it makes me feel like thirty cents. There is a lot of mystery about the place, but I feel as though I had no right to try and find it out, though I'll admit I'm dreadfully curious. I rode over from North Hero with the funniest old man—his name is Webb and he said he was one of Freedom's 'first citizens.' Modest—yes. Well, with a very little encouragement he would have poured out the entire Leavitt history, only it didn't seem nice to let him talk. But he spoke about a 'Leavitt trouble,' and he said something about Miss Milly being 'happier in the grave.' Isn't that interesting? And the very strangest thing of all is that Aunt Sabrina has forbidden me to ever *mention* my father—or Anne's father and grandfather! Of course Anne will want to know all about it, and maybe it is my duty to find out why! Anyway, if the chance comes to me, well, I won't shut my ears.

"Speaking of Webb and riding over from North Hero, Claire, I did the most dreadful thing, and if I tell you, you must swear that you won't ever tell Anne, though goodness knows when either of us will see dear old Anne again. We'd driven along for miles and hadn't seen a soul—even the cows in the pastures weren't moving—when suddenly, around a corner, dashed a man on horseback. He went by us like a flash, but I could tell even with all the dust, that he rode well and was very handsome and sort of different from—well, Webb, and the people you'd *expect* to see on North Hero Island. I was curious—you know, I always am—and I turned around. And what do you think he did—he wheeled that horse around and stopped dead still to stare at us, and caught me turning, of course, though I was just curious because he seemed different. And that isn't all—he had the nerve to wave his hand and here's the confession! *I nodded back to him!* I always am so impulsive and it seemed so good to see someone that was young. And he did have the grandest eyes even through the dust. But here's the worst—I asked Webb who he was, and Webb said he was '*Judson's hired man!*' Oh, Claire, what would Anne have said!

"Well, of course, the fellow had his nerve, and if I ever see him again I shall show him his place and make him understand that I am a dignified, unapproachable young person.

"Oh, Claire, dearest, I wish I was with you at Merrycliffe. You don't know how lucky you are to have a jolly home and a jolly mother who knows how to love! That's the trouble here—they act as though it was a crime to show a spark of affection. Aunt Milly comes the nearest to it, but I don't believe the others *know* what love is.

"Write to me often, for it will help keep up my courage, and I will keep you posted as to all that happens to poor me—especially about the hired man. I can't wait to see him.

"Once your happy and now your perfectly miserable used-to-be Nancy.

"To be known for the present as,

"ANNE LEAVITT."

CHAPTER V

BIRD'S-NEST

"Joshua Leavitt was Justin's son and he married Abigail Clark over at Isle Le Motte, and they had three sons, Joshua and John and Jacob, all upright, settled young men. Let me see, it was either John or Jacob was killed in the war of 1812, wasn't it, B'lindy?"

Nancy's mind was working faster than the knitting needles in her fingers. For three days now she had sat very close to Aunt Sabrina, learning "all about the Leavitts."

"It's lucky I have a good head for history," she said to herself, nodding to show Aunt Sabrina that she was deeply interested in these Joshuas and Johns and Jacobs. "If I'm here long enough she *may* get down to the present generation! Joshua—John—Jacob," she repeated softly.

"Dear me, where *is* B'lindy? My memory isn't as good as it used to be. I'm growing to be an old woman. But the Bible in there tells how either John or Jacob fell at Fort Niagara. The Leavitts have always been brave men—and men of honor!"

At this point Nancy, quite involuntarily, dropped a stitch. The sudden color that flushed her cheeks escaped Aunt Sabrina's notice, for B'lindy's voice came suddenly through the open door.

"Miss Sabriny, if Jon'than don't get that cornstarch from Eaton's there won't be no cornstarch puddin' for dinner. He's worse than no good round the house and a body takes more steps huntin' him than doin' all his chores for him!"

Nancy sprang to her feet. "Oh, *please* let me find him! I—I'd love to walk around a bit, too. I'll speak very sternly, B'lindy—you just see if he doesn't go at once!" Tossing her red wool

into the cushion of the old rocker she had been occupying, Nancy was off before the astonished B'lindy or Aunt Sabrina could utter a protest.

She found Jonathan at his everlasting digging. Nancy shook him playfully by the arm. Jonathan could not guess that her eyes were bright because, for a few moments at least, she had escaped from the oppressiveness of Aunt Sabrina and her ancestors; his old heart warmed to her infectious smile.

"B'lindy's as cross as can *be*! She must have the cornstarch at *once*! I hate cornstarch pudding worse than poison, but you must hurry as fast as you can, and *please* go by the lilac side of the house, because Miss Sabrina is sitting over on the hollyhock porch talking ancestors and I want her to think that it's taking me forever to find you!"

"Cornstarch! Bless my boots!" A hundred wrinkles crossed the weather beaten old face. "I'll go off to Eaton's fast's ever I can, Missy."

"Nice Jonathan," and picking a posy, Nancy stuck it into the buttonhole of the gardener's sweater. "And *I'm* going fast's ever I can, straight out to the lake."

With a wave of her hand she flew down the path through the row of old apple trees. She wanted to shout and to sing, but as that might startle the entire island, she indulged in a joyous handspring instead!

"Of course, Anne, darling, if *you* could see me you'd look shocked—you'd say, 'Nancy Leavitt, when *are* you going to grow up!' But, Annie, if growing up and up and up is going to be to grow like your Aunt Sabrina, sitting all the day long dwelling on the glories that are past and gone—never—never—*never*!" The girl flung her arms out toward the blue waters of the lake. "If I had a wish I'd wish that I could swim straight out across you—to those purple mountains—over there!"

It was very still in the orchard; cool, too, for the hot June sun only penetrated in spots the outspreading branches of the old trees. Gradually the tumult of longing in Nancy's mind quieted; a sense of delicious quiet inspired her.

"It's heavenly here—just as though I was all alone in the world." She turned slowly around. Not a glimpse of any habitation could be seen, the rows of trees hid even Happy House. And beyond was the stretch of sparkling water, with its rim of hazy, purple hills.

Nancy ran to the apple tree nearest the cliff. It was very old, its branches grew close to the ground. In a moment she had climbed them and had perched herself comfortably upon one with her back resting against another.

"It must be nice to be a bird," she mused, touching lightly the glossy leaves about her. "Playing in tree-tops and when you're bored to death, simply flying off without so much as an excuse! Or a wood-nymph," wistfully. Then her drooping shoulder suddenly straightened, under the stimulation of an idea. She sprang to the ground. "Oh, *rapture*!" she cried, and raced back toward Happy House.

Half an hour later Jonathan, having made peace with B'lindy, found her in the old carriage house. Two shiny nails protruding from her teeth and a hammer in her hands betrayed that she had found his tool-box. Her face, through smudges of dust, wore a look of determination.

"You've come just in time to help me, Jonathan. I must get the top of *this* box off and fasten it to *that* box—so it'll open and shut. Then you must find a piece of leather for hinges and some oil cloth. I think that you have everything on earth hidden in this place—except carriages!"

Because, with Jonathan, it had been love at first sight, he obeyed with only a "well, well, Missy." With the boards of one box he made a snug door for the other box and he found, hidden away, some precious leather that could be cut into strips for hinges, and a square of oil cloth and canvas, too. There were more nails in the tool-box, and though old Jonathan guarded that tool-box like a treasure-chest, he'd give Nancy anything it held!

They labored feverishly, and within an hour Nancy declared their work done.

"Now come with me, Jonathan, and I'll show you my secret." She lifted the box and started toward the orchard, Jonathan trudging after her.

When they reached the last tree near the cliff Nancy set her burden down. She turned to her companion with a solemn face.

"Jonathan, no one is going to know this secret but you and me! I am a dramatist. You don't look as though you knew what that was, but it is something that it's very, *very* hard to be, and I shall have to work—like everything! Right up on the branch of that tree is where I'm going to work. I want you to take those nails I put in your pocket and fasten this box securely to the trunk of the tree. Then I'm going to keep all my things right in it and fasten it with this padlock I—borrowed—from your tool-box. It'll be just like a nest—and I'll steal out here and work and work and then, some day, when I'm famous, all the newspapers will print a story telling how I wrote my first play in an apple tree and that it was a secret between you and me, and they'll want *your* picture! Now, right here, Jonathan. I'll hold it and you nail it tight."

Jonathan *didn't* know what a dramatist was, but he did know that his "little Missy," perched on the old branch, was as pretty as any bird and her eyes as bright as the sunshine that filtered through the leaves of the tree.

"Oh, that's just fine," cried Nancy, springing to the ground to survey their work. "It's as safe as can be and you've helped me a *lot*, you dear old thing, you. Now we must hurry home or B'lindy's dinner will be cold and remember, cross your heart, this is a solemn, solemn secret!"

She drew her fingers across his worn, gray sweater, and he nodded in acceptance of the mysterious sign. And as he followed her back through the orchard to the house something within his breast seemed to sing the way it did each spring when he found the first crocus peeping up through the frosty earth.

Nancy found it difficult to keep from bolting through her dinner. But a tiny sense of guilt at having left "Joshua and Jacob" so abruptly made her very attentive to Aunt Sabrina's long story of how the blue china was first brought to Happy House.

Scarcely had Miss Sabrina's door closed upon her for her hour of rest, however, than Nancy flew to her own room. She gathered up her precious paper and pencils, a knife and a worn manuscript case, a few favorite books and a tattered dictionary, and started out on tip-toe through the hall toward the stairs. But, though her step was light, its sound caught a certain patient ear nearby.

"Nancy! Oh, Nancy!"

Nancy remembered, then, remorsefully, that not once that day had she run in to see poor little Aunt Milly. With her treasures in her arms she went straight to her. In the smile that greeted her from the couch by the window, there was not one sign to indicate that Aunt Milly had been waiting the whole long morning for her to come.

"I've been so busy," explained Nancy, dropping her load. "I have a mind to tell you, Aunt Milly. I meant it to be a secret, only Jonathan knows, because he had to help me. And I'd like *you* to know, too. Anyway, a secret's more fun when more of us know it! You see, I'd gotten as far as Jacob in my lessons on Leavitts, and then Aunt Sabrina couldn't remember whether it was he or his brother that was killed in the war of 1812, and B'lindy rudely interrupted just because she had no corn starch! Oh, Aunt Milly, I'm dreadful, but I couldn't have stood it another *minute*—I could have hugged B'lindy and her pudding! Why, I've sat for three days straight in a horrible stiff chair listening to musty, dusty tales, and I wanted to scream! So I said *I'd* find Jonathan and I bolted—and I *stayed* away! And out in the orchard, right close to the bank, the grandest idea came to me. To fix a nest! And Jonathan helped me. We made a little box, all waterproof, and nailed it to the tree to keep my things in—these," indicating the pile at her feet. "And I'm going to hide there—and work! And that's another secret. I'm writing a play! I wrote two in college and the English professor said they were unusual and the Senior class gave one. And I have a *real* one, almost done. *Now* you know the secret."

"Oh, *Nancy!*" said Aunt Milly softly, two bright spots of color on her cheeks.

"You see I can steal out there and sit on that comfy branch and think I'm all alone in the world. Such beautiful thoughts will come to me! It'll be like a bird's nest."

"Oh, Nancy," Aunt Milly said again, with a tragic look in her eyes that the youthful Nancy could not read. "I wish I could see you there—just once! Are the trees big, dear? And is the grass real green?" There was a little tremble in the sweet voice. "Seems to me it used to be ploughed up 'round the apple trees."

Over Nancy rushed the heartbreaking thought that poor Miss Milly had not seen the orchard for years and years. She threw both arms about the frail form. With a torrent of words she pictured the raspberry patch, old Jonathan's lettuce and radishes and beets and beans and slender cornstalks working up through the soft earth, and the giant apple trees beyond, the lake "just like diamonds sprinkled over sapphire blue velvet" and the purple hills in the background. And all the while she talked, Nancy felt little quivers passing through the form she held.

"It—*isn't—fair!*" she ended, enigmatically. She sat still for a moment, staring at Miss Milly. With her bright color Aunt Milly didn't look at all like a helpless invalid. "Maybe——" began Nancy, then stopped short. She rose abruptly to her feet. "I've got an idea that beats my bird's-nest all to pieces! I can't tell you now because you'd be frightened to death, but it's going to

be wonderful! Let me hide this truck under your couch and now be very, very good until I come back. I must find B'lindy at once."

Nancy, fired by her sudden purpose, interrupted B'lindy in the last of her "drying up" and demanded to know where she could find Mr. Webb. When B'lindy "'lowed she wa'n't his keeper, but he's most al'las hangin' 'round the smithy or Eaton's or the post-office or the hotel, 'cept when you wanted him, and then he wa'n't hangin' 'round nowhere," Nancy started off down the path, bareheaded.

Fortune favored her, for Mr. Webb was "hangin' round the smithy and very delighted to see Miss Anne!" He had been wondering a lot about the coming of the girl to Happy House. "Somethin' sure to come of it," he had reflected again and again.

Of course, he assured Nancy, he'd do anything he could for her. And Nancy was sure they might find all that they needed right there in the smithy.

"It must be very comfortable and have some springs—and be safe, too. And if you can find some wheels with rubber tires—off an old baby carriage, they'll run more smoothly. And the seat must be big enough for a lady—but she's a *small* lady!"

Jonathan thought he "caught her idee. Old Mrs. King, over at North Hero, couldn't walk a step 'count of rheumatism, and she had a rig-up such as Nancy was describing." Yes, Timothy Hopkins at the smithy had most every kind of a thing about and he'd see what he could do, and Miss Anne could run down in the morning, early, before the stage started for North Hero.

"And, Webb," Nancy levelled her sweetest smile, "don't even *try* to think whom it's for—it's a secret."

CHAPTER VI

IN THE ORCHARD

Until Webb could finish the task that Nancy had assigned to him, Nancy curbing her impatience, had to return to the study of "Joshua, Jacob and John."

"It was John that was killed in the war of 1812, and now we have progressed to the next generation of Samuel and Ezekiel," she wrote to Claire. "But let me tell you that just as soon as Webb finishes the 'rig-up' (that is what he calls my perfectly beautiful idea) I'm not going to have a minute to spend on any of the old ancestors. Won't it be wonderful to see Aunt Milly's face when she knows about it? *Think* of it, Claire—how we love to frolic all around this good old earth, and how awful it would be to be tied to a couch all your days—and in *such* a room!"

"After to-day my letters will be just scraps and you can picture your Nancy working madly in her tree-top!"

"So far all is safe, and I'm really beginning to feel as though I was a real Leavitt and not walking around in Anne's shoes, especially when I am with Aunt Milly. But it's terribly hard not to talk about Dad and you and Anne, and I have to hold my lips together lots of times to keep from bursting out with something. I suppose it's good training for me—Miss Sykes used to tell me my impulsiveness would be my ruin some day.

"I have seen the hired man! Yesterday, when I went out to my nest, I deliberately walked around the edge of the orchard. I saw a lot of tumble-down sheds and things over on a rise of ground that I supposed was Judson's, and of course the lot in between was the ten-acre strip that Webb told me about. I couldn't *see* that it was any better than any other part of the country around here. And while I was staring, suddenly something moved, and there was that creature with a hoe standing at the other end of the lot. And he waved his hand! Says I, 'Nancy Leavitt, this is your chance,' and I tossed my head so hard that my neck truly cracked, and I stalked off back to the orchard. It was good enough for him.

"Oh, oh, oh, Webb has come! He's taken the rig-up around the lilac side (for strategic reasons, I have divided the grounds of Happy House) and out to the carriage barn. Now I shall tackle B'lindy and make ready for the blessed hour of rest.

"Adieu, dearest Claire, pray for your old pal."

The winning of B'lindy to her plan was not as easy as Webb had been. It had been a "bad" morning for B'lindy; the fire would not draw well, she had forgotten to "set" her bread, and Judson's cat had gotten into the cream. Nancy's arguments fell on deaf ears.

"I guess what's well enough's well enough," at last she threw over her shoulder. "Milly Leavitt's laid on that couch twenty years and it ain't likely she'll lay there many more, and there ain't no use meddlin' with what's what!"

"But, B'lindy, no one has ever tried this! It's so easy. Wait until you see how nice and safe Webb has made the chair. It's wonderful! It would be wicked to keep her shut up there when we could take her out! Think of it, B'lindy, all *we* have and poor little Aunt Milly! Why, it might make her well! I really know of such a case. It was a woman who had tried every medicine she knew of and it was just happiness she needed! If Aunt Milly could get out there in the sunshine and—and see things, *she* might get well, too. Anyway, she could laugh!"

B'lindy laid down her egg-beater. It was a sign of yielding.

"I guess nobody's *tried* happiness on Milly Leavitt!"

"We'll take her together, B'lindy. You may go with me to her room and see her face when she knows!"

"I told Miss Sabriny that there was no tellin' *what'd* happen in Happy House if she brought a young thing like you here," was B'lindy's way of assent. With an uplifted arm she warded off what threatened to be a hug.

"Go 'way, Anne Leavitt, or there won't be no dinner! And this is *your* doin's, remember."

True to her promise, Nancy waited until the last dinner dish was dried; then she and B'lindy, very like culprits, tip-toed to Miss Milly's room. Aunt Milly wore a look of expectancy, which changed to wonder when she saw B'lindy. And one glance at Nancy's eager face told her that something very, very different was about to happen!

In a whisper Nancy commanded her to peep out and "just see what you'll see." And Miss Milly, in a flutter, *did* peep out, and saw Jonathan below, with a curiously contrived chair on wheels.

"It's for you—Webb made it," declared Nancy. "And you're not to get excited, because that might spoil everything. We're going to take you to the orchard!"

"Oh, *Nancy!*" Something caught in poor Miss Milly's throat.

"You must do just what I tell you. Take this shawl, though it's warmer out there than it is in here. I'm very strong and I shall carry you right down in my arms, and you must cling tight to my neck."

Poor Miss Milly commenced to tremble violently. "Nancy—I'm afraid! I—I—It's so long—maybe I'd better—maybe it isn't—*right!*"

"Oh, Aunt Milly, darling, how could it be wrong to be happy! Just *try* it! Think of the sunshine and the birds and the nice smells and all Jonathan's growing things! And B'lindy is going along, too, to help. *Try* it, Aunt Milly!"

Aunt Milly's eyes filled with tears, then she commenced to laugh softly. "Maybe it'll be the only time! I'd love—once more——" She let Nancy lift her slowly. "I'm too heavy, dear," she protested.

"*Heavy——*" thought Nancy. The pitifully frail form was as nothing in her clasp. "I haven't played forward on our basket-ball team for four years for nothing, Aunt Milly! March on, B'lindy. Now—very still."

It was a strange procession that moved off through the garden toward the orchard. Jonathan led the way, B'lindy wheeled the chair and Nancy frisked along, first one side, then the other, picking posies here and there until Aunt Milly's lap was quite full. And Miss Milly sat very still with her hands clasped tight together and a look of ecstasy in her eyes, as though she was beholding a new and beautiful world! Every step forward brought an added wonder. She had forgotten the world was like this.

"*Oh-h!*" she whispered rapturously when a robin trilled from a nearby tree. "*Oh-h!*" she cried again when she caught a glimpse of the lake.

But when they reached the cliff it was Nancy's turn to exclaim. For there in her tree had been built the cosiest of rustic seats.

"*How lovely!*" she cried, springing into it. "It just fits." She shook her finger at old Jonathan. "*You* made this for me, you dear old thing!"

But Jonathan, wishing mightily that he had, had to admit that he "didn't know a blame thing 'bout it!"

"Then it was Webb. He wanted to surprise me, too, as well as Aunt Milly. Only—how did he know about my tree? Isn't it *nice*? It's as comfy as can be."

When Nancy joyously declared that everybody and everything was lovely, somehow B'lindy and Jonathan and Aunt Milly felt so, too! B'lindy, at Nancy's bidding, sat down upon the grass close to the chair, and Jonathan, too rheumatic to follow her example, leaned against the tree trunk and stared at Nancy with adoring eyes.

"At first I was going to keep my nest a secret, just between Jonathan and me. But it'll be much nicer to have all of us know about it. We can have such nice times here. We can do so many things. B'lindy, can you knit?"

B'lindy said she could not, though she could crochet.

"Then I'm going to teach you and Aunt Milly both. You can knit socks for the children in Europe, though you must begin on washcloths. Jonathan—I don't suppose there's any use trying to teach you—you must keep us supplied with flowers because Aunt Milly can't have enough—you see there are so many years she has to make up. And sometimes I'll read to you and sometimes I'll work. We'll come here every afternoon—shall we?"

B'lindy and Jonathan and Aunt Milly nodded their heads. B'lindy, watching Miss Milly's face, was beginning to think that there might be some sense in Nancy's prescription of happiness.

And if in her heart Nancy smothered any wistful longing as she glanced at the locked treasure-box, she forgot it when she, too, watched Aunt Milly.

It was Jonathan who suddenly noticed that the sun was creeping over toward the west and that he'd "better be at the lettuce."

"Goodness to gracious," cried B'lindy, scrambling to her feet with a considerable creaking of joints. "Anne Leavitt, my day's work ain't half done!"

On the way back through the orchard Miss Milly kept tight hold of Nancy's hand, giving it an occasional squeeze.

"I could die happy—now," she whispered.

At the turn of the path beyond the raspberry patch the culprits were confronted by Miss Sabrina. It was a very angry Aunt Sabrina, whose one glance shadowed every bit of sunshine. Even Nancy, the ringleader of the plot, felt her knees give way in fright.

"What are you all about?" Miss Sabrina demanded in a voice cold with anger. "Go about your work, Jonathan Allen. B'lindy, you wheel that ridiculous chair back to wherever you got it from! And you, Milly Leavitt, how *dare* you meddle with the ways of God?"

Everyone seemed to obey Miss Sabrina without a word of protest. Jonathan faded out of sight, B'lindy disappeared toward the kitchen with the chair and Nancy, followed by Miss Sabrina, carried the trembling Miss Milly back to her couch.

"Anne, you go out now!" Miss Sabrina jerked her head toward the door.

"I'll have a thing or two to say to Milly. She made her bed—it's the will of our Lord she should lie in it!"

Nancy hesitated one moment, but something in Aunt Milly's frightened glance seemed to say, "Go away!" So she went out and closed the door upon the two sisters.

Alone in her own room a storm of anger shook her. "I *hate* her!" she cried out to the ugly walls. "I *hate* her! She's—just—*stone*!"

"I'm *glad* I'm not a real Leavitt! We were *so* happy!"

Then, really frightened, Nancy listened intently to catch some word from the other room.

CHAPTER VII

AUNT MILLY'S STORY

When Nancy could stand the interval of quiet no longer, she went back to Miss Milly's door. She did not even knock. So sure was she of finding a crushed and heartbroken Aunt Milly within that she stood dumbfounded before the little creature who sat bolt upright upon the couch.

"Come in, my dear—and close the door!"

Everything about Miss Milly seemed to say that "the worm has turned." There was a glow on her face different from that it had worn out in the orchard; it seemed to come from some fire within.

"Open every blind in the room, Nancy," she commanded in a tone that was new for Aunt Milly. "I might as well get what light I can in here. Now come and sit beside me."

For a moment Aunt Milly patted Nancy's hand and said nothing. Then she gave a little sigh.

"I can't *tell* you, Nancy, I can't even *begin* to tell you, what you've done for me—taking me out there! If I never go again, I've had it once. And it's sort of stiffened something inside of me!"

She fell silent again. Nancy was wishing that she could have heard what had passed between Aunt Sabrina and Miss Milly that had left Miss Milly so defiant!

Aunt Milly seemed to read her thought.

"She was dreadfully angry and it was partly because she was frightened—really frightened. You see, Nancy, sister Sabrina thinks things must always go just so and that it's almost wicked to try—different things. She says—I've made my bed!"

"What *does* she mean, Aunt Milly?"

"It's a long story, dear."

"I'd like to hear it, Aunt Milly."

"I suppose you ought to know—someone else may tell you, old Webb or B'lindy, or even Sabrina, though she'd rather die first! I think I used to be something like you, Nancy, or I would have been, if it hadn't been for—the trouble!"

"Will it make you unhappy to tell it, Aunt Milly?"

"No, child. I used to lie here by the hour and think things over and over, but after awhile I got so things sort of blurred—I suppose I grew resigned and all the fight inside of me died. There never was much. You see Sabrina brought me up and she was as stern then as she is now. Our father was like that, too. My mother died when I was a baby."

"When father died Sabrina had the care of me. I suppose she tried to bring me up well; she was very strict and—never seemed to understand! And when I was quite young I began to dream of getting away from the Islands. I wanted to go away to school somewhere and learn to do something—I did not much care what—that would keep me out in the world. Finally I decided that I wanted to study music and then, sometime, teach it. It wasn't much to want, was it, dear? But goodness me, when I went to Sabrina with my plan she was terribly angry. You might have thought I had suggested something wicked! She simply *couldn't* understand! There was enough money for us both to live on and she said I was selfish and inconsiderate to want to go away. She talked a great deal about the Leavitt position and being a lady and learning contentment, and the more she talked the more restless and discontented I grew! And the more I dreamed of what waited out in the world beyond these little Islands.

"After a long while, Nancy, I made up my mind to go, anyway! It was not easy to do, because I'm not very brave, and the trouble we'd had sort of made me hate to take any step that might make a break between Sabrina and me. But I had to do it. I simply couldn't seem to face a life here. That's hard for you to believe, isn't it, dear? But I *was* a different creature, then. Well, one night I packed some clothes and slipped away. I walked to North Hero and caught the train for Burlington. I was going from there to—to New York."

Breathlessly, Nancy whispered, "What happened then?"

"The train was wrecked outside of Burlington!"

"*Oh*—Aunt Milly!"

"I was terribly hurt. I lay for weeks in a hospital in Burlington and they didn't know whether I'd live or die! I wish——" she stopped short. "No, I don't! I'm *glad* I didn't die. Then they brought me home—like this!"

"Poor, poor little Aunt Milly!"

"But, listen, child—that isn't half all. It seems that on the same train was a young man from North Hero whom I had always known—and liked. But Aunt Sabrina had never approved of him, and long before she had forbidden his coming here. I did see him sometimes, though—I loved company and he was entertaining. There had never been more than a pleasant friendship between us, and I had not dreamed that he was going to Burlington on that train. He was killed. And when I came back from the hospital the story was on every tongue that I had been running away with Charlie Prince!"

"Oh, I was hurt in every part of me—my body and my soul and my mind! My precious dreams had crumbled forever and ever. And I had to face that dreadful scandal! Not that I ever saw a soul—Sabrina took care of *that*! She kept me shut up as though I had the plague. But through her reproachful eyes I was made to see the accusations of every man, woman and child on the Hero Islands. And I couldn't *make* her believe it wasn't so! She simply wouldn't talk about it. She went around with that dreadful look, day after day, and when she'd say anything at all, it was about how I had brought shame to the Leavitt name. And after awhile I began to feel as though I *had* done something—more than just run away to study music. She made me understand that the only way I could atone for it all was by burying myself within these four walls."

"Then *that's* what she means by 'making your bed.'"

"Yes, dear, I was so crushed that I came to believe she was right. God knew that all I had wanted when I went away was a right to my own way of living, but His ways are inscrutable and His Will has to be done! Sabrina called it the sword of wrath and the justice of the Almighty, and it didn't make much difference to me *what* it was called—I was here. That's my story, dear, that's the way I've lived until—to-day. But you've changed it. Something inside of me that I thought was dead—isn't dead at all! Do you know what I told Sabrina? I told her I didn't *care* what she thought, that I guessed when a woman was forty years old and over she could decide things for herself and if just going out there in the orchard was wicked, then I'd go on being *wickeder*! That's what I told her. Dear, dear, you should have seen her face!"

"Hurrah, hurrah, Aunt Milly!"

"Poor Sabrina, I never spoke like that in my life to her! I've always been so—*afraid*, until to-day! I don't know what she'll do now. You must not blame her too much, Nancy dear, it's the Leavitt trouble that has made her what she is—it shadowed all our lives!"

"Aunt Milly, what was the Leavitt trouble?"

Aunt Milly looked distressed. "Then you *don't* know? I shouldn't have spoken of it! I promised Sabrina I wouldn't speak to you—about it."

"But, Aunt Milly, I have a—a right to know, haven't I? Even Webb hinted about it, and it makes me feel as though I was—well, on the outside of things, to be kept in ignorance."

Miss Milly regarded her for a moment. "I *told* Sabrina that you wouldn't know! But may be you ought to. Somehow, telling things, too, makes them seem not so dreadful! I believe we

Leavitts lock troubles away too much—don't air them enough, maybe. Sabrina thinks it's as dreadful now as it was the day it happened. It was about our brother. He was a year older than Sabrina. He wasn't at all like her, though, nor like my father. He was gay and handsome, and high-spirited and dreadfully extravagant. When I was very small I used to be frightened at the quarrels between him and my father—and they were always over money.

"One night—he had come home just before supper after being away for a week, no one knew where, and my father was very angry about that—they had a quarrel that seemed more bitter than any other. Besides, there was a thunder-storm that made it seem worse. I had been sent to bed, but the lightning had frightened me, and I had crept downstairs to the sitting-room. I opened the door. They were all three—for Sabrina always sided with my father—talking so loudly they did not hear me. My father's face frightened me more than the lightning and my brother's had turned dead white. I think my father had just offered him some money, for his wallet was in his hand and on the floor lay a bill, as though my brother had thrown it back. I began to cry and ran back to my room, more frightened by them than by the storm. And I lay there in my bed for hours, waiting for something to happen!"

"About midnight one dreadful bolt of lightning struck the house. It shattered the chimney all to pieces on the outside and inside, filled the sitting-room with dust and pieces of mortar, cracked the mantel and moved it an inch and a half from the wall. But no one thought much of all that, because something far more dreadful had happened! My brother was gone and my father's wallet, the one I had seen in his hand, was missing. He remembered laying it on the mantel and my brother and Sabrina had seen him do it. It had contained over a thousand dollars in bank notes. The next day my father found out that my brother had taken the early train out of North Hero. I was too young to understand much about it, but I used to pray, first, that my brother would come back and tell them he *didn't* take the wallet and then I'd pray that he'd never, never come back, so that they couldn't put him in prison."

"That must have been Anne's grandfather," Nancy was thinking.

"He did come back, three weeks later," Miss Milly went on, "and there was a scene much worse than the night of the storm. They forgot I was in the room. My father accused my brother of stealing the wallet and refused to let him say a word. 'I want no lies added to your other sins,' was what he said—I can hear him now. And my brother looked as though something had struck him. Then my father told him that if he'd take himself off and never darken the doors of Happy House again, nor communicate with his family in any way, the matter would be dropped forever—for the sake of the Leavitt name. My brother stood there for a moment; I remember, I wanted to run to him! Oh, I've wished I *had*—so often! But I was afraid of Sabrina—and my father. And then my brother turned and walked out of the room—and out of the door—and—down the path—and——"

Poor Miss Milly, worn out by the excitement of the day, began to cry softly.

Nancy had to jerk herself to break the spell of the story. Her face wrinkled in a frown. "It—is—dreadful, isn't it, Aunt Milly? I don't mean his spending money and running debts and things, I mean—your—your father's horrid—*mercilessness*! Why, the courts don't treat the worst criminals like that! And they call it Leavitt pride—and honor! *I* call it injustice. I wish you *had* just run up and kissed him, then. It might have made everything so different!"

"So *that's* why I can't speak of Anne's father or grandfather," Nancy was thinking back of her frown. "And that's why Anne knew so little about her aunts!" Then aloud: "I'm glad you told me, Aunt Milly. It'll help us—be pals. We'll have other afternoons—like to-day—out in the sunshine. But now you must rest. And I'll get ready to face Aunt Sabrina!"

"She'll be dreadfully cross," sighed Miss Milly, with the glow all gone from her face.

"I'm not a bit afraid," and Nancy meant it, for within her breast smouldered such righteous indignation at Miss Sabrina and her precious ancestors that she welcomed the challenge.

Dressing hurriedly for supper Nancy's eye caught the letter to Claire lying on her bureau. It seemed to her as though hours and hours had passed since she had so flippantly bade Claire "pray for me!"

She wanted to open the letter and dash off another page to tell Claire of all that had happened and how the "mystery" was a mystery no longer. Then, with the envelope in her hand, she remembered that it concerned Aunt's grandfather and that, perhaps, *she* had no right to tell! But she did open the sheet and scribble across the top: "All sorts of things have happened since I wrote this, and I may be back with you any moment. I can't tell you yet all about it, but I can say this, that I hate Happy House and I'm glad as can be that I'm only a pretend Real-Leavitt! Everybody isn't horrid, though, that nice old Webb built the cosiest seat up in my tree and surprised me."

In exactly twenty minutes, by the hands of her small watch, she must meet Miss Sabrina! Anyway, she could tell her just what she thought about the whole thing, for, without any doubt she'd be sent away! But there was Aunt Milly—she had promised Aunt Milly that there would be more afternoons in the orchard. Somehow she must fix that.

"I know," she waved her brush in mid-air, "I'll get Belinda!"

CHAPTER VIII

B'LINDY'S TRIUMPH

No great general of war ever mapped out a plan of attack more carefully than Nancy laid hers! First she begged B'lindy to let her pick over the raspberries for supper. While doing this in the chummiest sort of way, it was very easy to tell B'lindy that she had eaten lots of raised biscuits but never any raised biscuits like she'd had at Happy House!

The last raspberry in the glass dish, Nancy in departing, whispered with a little laugh; "Weren't you dreadfully frightened this afternoon when you saw Aunt Sabrina? O! of course you weren't—Webb told me you were the only one who could really make Aunt Sabrina do anything, but, goodness, *I* was!" Which was balm to B'lindy's injured pride; as the afternoon wore on B'lindy had been growing more and more indignant because she had not "stood on her two feet and spoke up to Sabriny Leavitt" instead of "turning tail like old Jonathan!"

Throughout the supper, by eating very fast, Nancy managed to conceal her nervousness and expectancy. Aunt Sabrina sat stiffly and looked very tired and very old and, somehow, by a twist of her lips managed to make Nancy understand that she, Nancy, was in deep disgrace and that in due time sentence of punishment would be passed. Between B'lindy and her mistress not a word was exchanged; B'lindy's head was tossed high and there was an air of "sniffing" about her that, if it had not all been so tragic, would have made the entire situation funny.

"Oh, what a *place*—what *funny* people!" cried Nancy to the stars as she leaned that night far out of her window. "How can I *stand* it! And why does not something happen quickly? It's just *like* Aunt Sabrina not to say a word and to keep me on pins and needles! That's the same way she treated Aunt Milly and that poor boy—years ago!" Thereupon Nancy let her fancy wander back to the "gay-spirited, extravagant" brother and his story—Anne's grandfather. Had *he* cared, she wondered, had he died longing to see again the old Island home, or had it been a blessing—casting him out in the wide world. He must have met fortune somewhere, for Anne's father had been wealthy. Dear Anne—Nancy picked out the star that was farthest in the East and addressed it reverently. "If you can see Anne and she can see you will you tell her that she mustn't feel cross at the mess I've made of things. I tried to be careful but I'm me and, anyway, all the ignorance of her blessed peasants isn't any worse than the pride and narrowness of her own relatives! Good-night, dearest Anne, for the last time I go to sleep in my prison walls—to-morrow I die!"

However, the June sunshine of the next morning restored much of Nancy's courage. She made quick note of a few good signs, and best of these was when she surprised B'lindy vigorously tacking a cushion upon Miss Milly's chair. B'lindy did not see Nancy and Nancy tip-toed away with a smile.

Then, too, the glow was back in Miss Milly's face, and when Nancy ran into her room, her hands full of roses, Miss Milly greeted her eagerly.

"I think the sun is shining to-day just for me," she laughed, waving her hand to the windows from which the blinds had been drawn.

"And *I* think," and Nancy cocked her head knowingly, "that B'lindy will force an attack with the enemy about mid-day!"

Nancy was right in her prediction. At dinner B'lindy, clad in her customary checked gingham apron, served them veal stew and delicious fluffy dumplings, but after the shortcake she appeared without it, and with a broad-brimmed hat pinned well down over her sharp features.

Nancy checked an exclamation; Miss Sabrina's lips twisted ever so slightly, though not a word came from them.

B'lindy assumed an added note of defiance by placing her hands on her hips. "I guess the dishes can wait 'til the cool of the afternoon," she said, trying to make her tone casual. "I'm goin' to take Miss Milly for her airin'."

One might have thought that there was nothing out of the ordinary in B'lindy's announcement, beyond perhaps, the leaving of the dinner dishes, but a tense moment followed, when one pair of steely eyes bored into another pair, just as hard. And Nancy, a little frightened, realized,

with a sort of breathlessness, that she, was witnessing the invisible conflict of two strong wills. One must weaken—and she dropped her eyes, for she was swept by a moment's pity.

It was Miss Sabrina's that weakened! The tenseness was broken when she rose hurriedly from her chair.

"Then it's on your own head, B'lindy Guest," she cried shrilly, "I've done my duty as I saw it! She's better left alone."

B'lindy, triumphant, threw after her, with a snort; "Duty's duty and *I* know that's well as you, but I guess no one's tried the perscription of happiness for Milly Leavitt and mebbe it ain't too late!"

Nancy was torn between a wild desire to hug B'lindy and to say a nice word to Aunt Sabrina, departing majestically from the room. But she did neither—for both women, at that moment, looked very forbidding. Instead, as the door closed behind Miss Sabrina, she drew a long breath. "Suspended sentence," she said, solemnly.

Then, at B'lindy's "What's that?" she laughed back: "The victor's wreath shall adorn your brow, my worthy ally. While you prepare the chariot I shall make haste to tell Aunt Milly that all's well with the world! *Don't* look at me like that, B'lindy Guest, I'm not crazy—yet!"

But B'lindy "lowed" she was, for Nancy seized her by the shoulders and kissed first one cheek and then the other, and uttered the perfectly incomprehensible—to B'lindy—remark: "Webb was right!"

CHAPTER IX

DAVY'S CLUB

"The next thing we do is to s'lute the flag of our country. Now, one, two, three—after me!"

The shrill command floated up to Nancy in her tree-top.

She had just snuggled back against her seat with a long sigh of contentment. The door of her treasure-box stood open and beside her were the sheets of her neglected manuscript. She had stolen out for an hour's uninterrupted work.

"How *heavenly* quiet," she had been saying to the rustling leaves. "*Now* I am going to work and make up for lost time." Everything at Happy House seemed to be back on what Nancy called a "peace-basis." "I must go down to the village and tell Webb what a dear he was to make this seat," she had thought, as she climbed into it.

Then, just as her inspired pencil had written "Act 4" across the top of a clean sheet, had come the strange words, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Well, I *never!*" Nancy peeped all around. The sound came apparently from under the cliff. "Who *is* it? And how could *anyone* get there."

The voice—a boy's—was rattling on in a succession of sharp commands. Nancy crept toward the edge and peeped over. There, to her amazement, on a strip of sand beach in an indentation of the shore, marched and counter-marched a small boy, quite alone. He was a funny, snub-nosed, tousled headed boy in ragged blouse and blue jeans—and, clearly, very much in earnest, for a deep scowl wrinkled his freckled face.

"At-ten-shun! Shoulder arms—right face—forward, march." Three feet length of bare-footed manliness stepped briskly across the sand. "Step up, you Dick Snead," and a domineering arm swept out toward an imaginary lagger in the rear.

"Was there *ever* anything so funny?" giggled Nancy, crouching in the tall grass at the top of the cliff. "And what is it? Fairies don't come in over-alls, and I don't think they ever liked military drill, either."

She loosened a stone and let it roll down the bank. Startled, the youngster lifted his glance to the top of the bank.

"Hello," called Nancy.

A heavy scowl answered her friendly greeting.

"What are you doing?"

"I ain't doin' nothin'." It was clear that Nancy's interruption was unwelcome. "Least I ain't doin' nothin' that's hurtin'."

"Of course not! It sounded nice. I didn't even know there was a beach down there! How did you ever get down?"

The boy grew crafty—the haste with which he answered said plainly that he did not *want* Nancy to know how.

"Girls can't get down—it's awful dang'rous!"

"Then won't you come up?"

The boy considered this. He had guessed that this must be the "girl up at the Happy House." She seemed friendly and not at all disposed to "chase a feller away." And if he climbed up to her, then there would be no danger of her discovering the way down to the beach.

"All right, I'll come up." He disappeared for a moment in the tangle of growth that fringed the foot of the cliff to bob up close at Nancy's side.

"My goodness—it's just as though you came up by magic," she cried. "It *must* be dang'rous. I'm Nancy Leavitt. Who are you?"

The boy gave Nancy a suspicious look.

"Mebbe you'll tell!" he muttered, doubtingly.

"Oh, no, I *wouldn't*! Besides, what can I tell? And I can't even guess who you are because you see I don't know anyone in Freedom."

"I'm Davy Hopworth."

"Of course, I remember,—" But Nancy stopped short for what she remembered was how Webb had called them the "no-good Hopworths."

"And that there's my club," finished Davy, gravely. "Only the other fellers couldn't sneak away today."

"I—understand," Nancy nodded, hugging her knees with her arms. "What a jolly place to meet. It's so—so secret."

Davy grinned. "You bet. That's a pirate's cove. I guess mebbe there's a treasure buried there. All us boys knows where to get down, too."

"I'm so glad you let me know your secret! I won't tell a soul! I think your club's very jolly, too."

Davy, won by Nancy's disarming friendliness, produced from a ragged pocket a dirty piece of paper and handed it to her.

"Them's the Rules," he said, briefly.

At the top was printed "Cove Culb." And below were the rules: 1. No swaring. 2. No back talk. 3. No smokin nothin. 4. No lis. 5. No steling birds eggs. 6. No hurtin dume animals. 7. Eviry boys goter no how to swim and lick eviry boy thats an enmy to the culb. 8. To kil pirats. 9. To fite for ar contry.

While Nancy was trying to control her lips so that she could say something, Davy added proudly, "I wrote 'em."

"They're—splendid! But *why* in the world should the other boys have to sneak away?"

"Liz says folks don't think a Hopworth's good 'nough. I guess no one thinks a feller oughta have any fun, either. Liz don't. I wait 'til she cleans the meetin' house—ev'ry Monday and after there's socials and things. We sneak. Jim and Dick get a lickin' if they get caught," Davy explained without the slightest embarrassment.

Nancy's indignation was sincere. "What a *shame*! I wish I was a boy, I'd join your club in a moment. Why, you can do so many things down there—drill and—swim, can't you? And have jolly fires and roast potatoes and weiners and corn?"

"Gee—I wish you were a boy."

"Why, can't I join anyway?" cried Nancy, inspired. "Some clubs have honorary members who do nice things for them. Can't I?"

Davy did not know what an "honorary member" was, and an instinct trained to suspicion warned him now.

"Girls ain't any fun."

"Oh, some girls aren't, I know! But I'm a lot like a boy. I can swim half a mile—I've done it! I can play ball, too and—and—why I won a medal for a high pole-vault! I'll bet I can beat you right now in a race!"

Davy regarded her with wide eyes.

"Bet you can't!"

Nancy sprang to her feet.

"Let's race from—here—to that big elm way down there." She indicated with her finger a giant elm in the "ten-acre strip."

"How you goin' to get over that stone fence?" And Davy pointed out the low stretch of stones that marked the dividing line between the orchard and the ten-acre strip.

"Oh, *that!* That's easy!"

Plainly Davy's respect was growing. He danced first on one foot and then on the other. "You are a sport. If you can beat I'll let you join the club. I'll count! One—two—three!"

They were off over the stubby grass. Nancy, longer-limbed, caught the lead. She vaulted the fence with agile ease. But Davy soon caught up to her and in the last few yards passed her. Laughing, breathless, Nancy reached the tree and clung to it.

"Hurray," came from behind them.

There, approaching them, was the "hired man." He had seemingly sprung from nowhere.

Flushed and disheveled by the race, an intruder on the enemy's own ground, Nancy was at a disarming disadvantage. Besides, Davy greeted the newcomer rapturously.

"Say, she's as good's a boy. She's goin' to join the club!" he announced, with triumph. "As honery member," he added.

Peter Hyde held out a brown hand.

"Congratulations! And to the club, too!"

Nancy was conscious that he was staring at her in a perplexed way. Her cheeks already red from running took on an added color under his glance. But there was a friendliness in his, eyes that won, her in spite of her resolve to avenge at every opportunity her injured dignity.

"I'd have won," she retorted laughingly, "if it hadn't been for—these," and she swished her white skirts. "But I don't care as long as Davy says I may join the club. Meetings whenever Liz cleans the meeting-house," she repeated.

"And she can swim and she can play ball and says we can make fires and things," cried Davy to Peter Hyde.

"Then you won't need me anymore?"

"You can be a honery member, too. She says they do nice things for clubs."

Peter Hyde put an arm across Davy's shoulder. "I think we could do a lot of nice things for Davy and his club," he said, directly to Nancy. "Seems to me there's energy and enthusiasm here that's being sort of wasted. What do you say—shall we be honery members?"

Nancy nodded. "I swear to keep all the rules."

Davy hopped with joy. "Wait 'til I tell the fellers. I guess you'll see 'em round, even if they do get a lickin'! But, say," he stopped short, inspired by a sudden thought, "mebbe now Mis' Leavitt's niece b'longs they won't *have* to sneak!"

Peter Hyde walked back with Nancy and Davy as far as the stone wall. From the corner of her eye Nancy was, quite against her will, admiring the straight figure whose strength was only made more evident by the rough working clothes.

"He seems *nice*—for a hired man," she was thinking, all the while she was answering Davy's boyish questions.

And more than once, as he watched Nancy, that first perplexing look came back into Peter Hyde's eyes.

"Why, she *isn't* a kid, after all!"

CHAPTER X

THE HIRED MAN

"Claire, darling—

"It's after ten o'clock at night and here on North Hero that's like four in the morning in New York, but I can't wait another minute to write to you. The *funniest* thing has happened—only I'll save it for the end of my letter.

"I haven't written to you since that letter with the crazy postscript, like a nightcap, on it. Well, instead of being deported from Happy House, bag and baggage, I seem to become more of a fixture, each day. And each day, Claire Wallace, I grow more and *more* to think I belong here. Just so often I have to shake myself and say 'don't forget—you're pretending.' And, I

scarcely dare write this—I believe they are all growing a *little*, wee bit fond of me—the real me. Of course Webb loved me at first sight and so did old Jonathan—*he's* a dear! And precious little Aunt Milly, who is getting the prettiest pink in her cheeks and can laugh now, truly laugh, and is as proud as can be over her first washcloth, she wants me with her all the time. I can tell by the way she looks at me. And I am really growing embarrassed, to say nothing of fat, with the good things B'lindy cooks and if you knew B'lindy, you'd understand that that is *her* way of showing sentiment. But as to Aunt Sabrina—I am not so sure!

"Things have changed since I wrote to you—there was an awful clashing of wills in Happy House and Aunt Sabrina came out on the bottom and since then she has an air of 'having washed her hands of me.' And she's stopped the lessons on Leavitts, too, just when we'd gotten to Ezekiel. But I've learned more than she wanted me to—I've found out about the mystery, as I wrote before, only I can't explain until our own Anne says I may—because it's about her grandfather!

"I believe in my last letter I said, too, that I hated Happy House. Well, I don't believe I do. It's a funny place—just when you think its dismal and prisony you see something you just love—like one of Jonathan's rose ramblers, all pinky, climbing up an old gray tree trunk. I can't explain it, there's a sort of an appeal about the whole place that's spooky, as though it was something human and—wanted me! Isn't that a silly notion, especially when I'm just here acting Anne's part so that she can go off to Russia?

"And this whole village is just like Happy House—it is proudly clinging to what it has been in the past and defying the advance of the new things of the present. When I walk along the main street (and only street) of the village I stare at the shutup houses, for, bless me, no one would dream of opening any blinds, and I wonder if there's a marble-topped table in every one of those best-parlors and a family Bible on every table filled with pages of ancestors. I suppose I'm wickedly disrespectful—when I see my dear Dad, and oh, how I want, want, want to see him—I shall tell him that now I know he didn't bring me up right.

"I am a 'honey' member of a club—and now I'm approaching the exciting part of my letter. It is called Cove's Club and has rules that forbid my swearing, talking back, smoking, lying, stealing bird's eggs, hurting dumb animals, and that make me fight (and lick) every enemy to the club (which, alas, seem to be mostly mothers) kill pirates and defend my country. Isn't that heavenly? It meets whenever Liz Hopworth has to clean the 'meetin' house' which is always on Mondays and after there's a social. And to attend the meetings you have to slide down thirty feet of bank to what is known around here as Falling Water Cove, though I don't believe water ever fell there. Anyway, it is a historic spot for reasons besides the club—one is that it was from there Robert Leavitt and the women of the household, with little Justine, escaped when Freedom was attacked by the Indians and it was there, one dark night, Ethan Allen himself landed in a boat for a secret conference with Jacob Leavitt before an attack upon the Yorkers. (90 plus in American History.)

"And the members of the Club are (please read slowly) Me, Davy Hopworth, Dick Snead, Jim Davis, Kirk Brown and Peter Hyde—the hired man.

"Peter Hyde and I are the 'honey' members."

"I can hear you, Claire. 'That is just like you, Nancy Leavitt—swear you're going to do one thing and doing another.' Yes, darling, it is like me, I'll admit! But this time it's different. I

really did intend to be very haughty and distant each time I saw the man but—I couldn't. Could you, if you had just been running a race which included vaulting a stone wall? I had to run the race to win Davy's respect and I had to jump the wall—well, to show I could! And of course I never dreamed the creature was anywhere around. But he sprang up from the earth, I believe, and was there at the finish. And could *you* look haughty with every hair pin dropping out of your head?

"And, anyway, afterwards, he explained something that has made everything different, but that comes later in my story.

"Today it rained for the first time since I've been in North Hero. A sort of steady pitter-patter, not the kind of a downpour that makes you hug shelter, but a splashy sort you long to run out in with your face turned up. All morning long I sat with the aunts (Aunt Milly was so disappointed when she saw the rain that I brought her down to the hollyhock porch and made her all comfy there) and I simply couldn't stand it all afternoon so, after lunch, I stole away. Now Happy House is divided (thank goodness) into two parts, so if the aunts are on one side it is easy to slip out of the other. I put on my slicker and cap and slipped away. I frisked around in the rain drops for awhile, then, I started toward the orchard to see if my water-proof box was water-proof. And as I walked down the path I heard the sound of hammering from the direction of my Nest. 'A-ha,' says I, 'I will surprise nice Mr. Webb at his work!' So I crept up on tiptoe. And, oh, Claire, it wasn't Mr. Webb *at all—it was Peter Hyde!* There he was with a hammer and a saw and some nails in a funny apron he had tied around him working away with the rain spattering through the leaves right into his face.

"I was so surprised I thought I'd run back, but just at that moment he saw me. And of course, the way I always do when I shouldn't, I began to laugh. And he laughed, too, though he *was* embarrassed.

"I am sure he didn't want me to find out that he had made the seat. But for a hired man he met the situation with ease. He simply asked me to stand there while he drove one more nail; then, he said, his work would be complete. When he'd finished he held out his hand and invited me to climb into the nest. All this with the rain spattering on us! Of course I had to tell him that it was perfectly lovely and had been such a jolly surprise and that I had thought Webb had made it. And now comes the funny part. He explained in a sort of sheepish way that he thought *I was a little girl!* Jonathan had told him that Miss Sabrina's little niece was coming to Happy House. When he caught a glimpse of me in the stage (he dared to say this) he thought I looked like a 'jolly sort of a kid.' Then that very afternoon he saw me turn a handspring in the orchard—and climb the tree! He said he got to thinking what a sort of dull place Happy House would be for any youngster, and that it would be fun for him to do some little thing to make it jollier for her. He admitted, to use his own words, that he was flabbergasted to find that I wasn't a kid after all! I'm glad, in a 'close-up' I *do* look my years!

"But can't you see that that explains *everything* and that he *wasn't* impertinent, after all?

"Of course, living in cities all my life, I've always had an impression that hired men were just big, clumsy, dirty looking creatures who ate with knives and always smelled horsey. This Peter Hyde isn't that way at all. He's tanned copper-color but his face and hands look clean and except for his clothes, he doesn't look much different from any one else. And now that he knows I am quite grown-up (at least in years) he treats me very nicely.

"We're going to do all sorts of nice things for Davy Hopworth, who is a very nice, bright youngster, but, just because he's a Hopworth, the other boys get punished for playing with him and that makes both Peter Hyde and me indignant.

"Isn't the world funny, Claire, how the sins of the fathers and the grandfathers are visited upon the children—at least in places like this? Of course my beloved Finnegans are too busy just keeping the present generation going, to think much about the past, and the world they live in rushes too fast to stop to think that Timmy Finnegan, maybe's, going to rob a bank because his great-great-grandfather, over in County Cork, ran off with a pig.

"It is too late in the evening to philosophize, and I mustn't let my wick burn too low or Aunt Sabrina will know I'm using the midnight oil. Don't be cross, dear Claire, if you don't hear from me every day; although you might suppose that up here I'd have a great deal of leisure time, somehow each day seems to bring something unexpected. And as I said on page 2 of this voluminous letter, I am growing fond of Happy House and there is a sort of fascination about everything here. Dear Anne, with her noble dreams, never longed to bring about the reforms that I do! One is to throw out the dreadful waxed flowers and peacock feathers and old grasses from Happy House and fill the vases with fresh flowers. Another is to sweep through the whole blessed village and open every blind and let in today!

"And then when I'm bursting with my longing to make the whole world better, I'm suddenly reminded that I'm just a little next-to-nothing that can't even remember to act grown-up, masquerading in our Anne's shoes and daring to find flaws in Miss Sabrina Leavitt with all the noble heritage of Leavitt tradition flowing in her veins.

"Good night, littlest pal, I wish I could be with you long enough for a good, long gossip. But, by and by—"

CHAPTER XI

MOONSHINE AND FAIRIES

"Good-evening, yellow Buttercups
Good-evening, daisies white,
Tell me, have you met the Moon-Queen
On this pretty night?"

The little singer made a sweeping courtesy.

"How d'you do, Miss Buttercup? Do come here now and meet Mrs. Moon!" With a gesture of exaggerated elegance she led an imaginary Buttercup out to a pool of silver where the bright moonlight slanted through the branches of an apple tree.

"Now, everybody, bow to Mrs. Moon," and the fairy-hostess bent to the ground. Then she snapped her fingers. "On with the music," she cried. Like a spirit she danced off over the

grass, now scarcely more than a shadow among the shadows, now full in the moonlight, bending, swaying, leaping, arms outstretched, face lifted.

But the frolic of the fairies in the moonlight came to a sad end, for a human hand reached out from behind a tree-trunk and caught the make-believe hostess of Mrs. Moon by one thin arm.

"Lemme go!" cried the child, shrilly.

Nancy, awakened by the moonlight streaming across the rose-cabbages of her carpeting, had been lured out into the night. Halting at the raspberry patch she had heard the little singer. Cautiously, lest indeed she disturb fairies at their revels she had crept into the orchard. From a hiding place she had watched the child's mad dance.

"Sh-h! I am the Moon-Queen! Let me dance with you!" Releasing the little wriggling body Nancy threw off her slippers. "Come!" Waving her hand she danced down through the apple trees, singing:

In their dress of yellow gold,
In their petals white,
I can see the fairy folk
Gathered here to-night!

From the shadow the child watched her, sullenly, suspiciously. But with her loosened hair falling down over her pink dressing gown, Nancy herself looked an eerie little sprite; in a moment the child's alarm vanished. Of course she *knew* that this must be Miss Sabriny Leavitt's niece, but it was fun, anyway, to pretend that she *was* the Moon-Queen! And she must be very, very nice not to have "chased" her at once! And she might stop dancing, too, any moment! So out she ran to join Nancy, with hands outstretched, and together they capered and danced around among the old trees until, quite out of breath, Nancy fell upon the soft grass.

"Oh, goodness me, what *fun*! Now come here, Miss Fairy, and tell me who you are? *Are* you a fairy come from the Village of Tall Grass in yonder field?"

The child, completely won, dropped at Nancy's feet.

"I'm Nonie Hopworth."

"Oh-h!" Nancy was genuinely surprised. "Are you Davy's sister?"

The child nodded. "Yep." She regarded Nancy closely. "You're *different*, aren't you?"

Nancy caught her meaning. "Yes, I'm different—at least, I'm not exactly like——"

"Miss Sabriny or—or B'lindy. *She'd* have chased me! That's why I come here to play at night. Anyway, it's easier to pretend at night. Do you ever pretend, Miss?"

"Call me Nancy, do! Of course, I pretend, often! I love to."

"Ain't it fun—I mean isn't! I forgot. I play it 'most all the time."

Nancy looked curiously at the strange little figure, almost wraithlike in the dim light. It was hard to believe that the winsome creature could belong in Freedom—and to the "no-good" Hopworths.

There was grace in every movement of the thin little body not in the least concealed by the worn, soiled, out-grown dress. Two dark, burning, eager, questioning eyes told of a spirit that lived above and beyond the sordid, colorless monotony of a life with old Dan'l Hopworth and Liz, who "didn't believe a feller oughta have any fun!"

"What do you pretend, Miss Nancy?"

Nancy laughed and rubbed the soles of her bare feet.

"Well, once I pretended I was the Moon-Queen and I scratched my poor feet dreadfully. What do you pretend?"

Nonie rocked back on her heels.

"Oh, lots and lots of different things. My every-day game is Rosemary. She's my make-believe chum. She lives down in the haunted house on the North Hero road, only when I pretend, of course, the house isn't haunted. And it's got lovely glass things from the ceiling for candles and they sparkle like rainbows and diamonds. Rosemary and I play games and we—we read and tell each other stories and sometimes she helps me with the work, when Liz ain't around. Only Rosemary don't believe in fairies. She says that's baby, so when she's away I pretend fairy."

"When the moon shines——"

"Oh, yes, it's nicer then. And you can't play-fairy round our house because there ain't—there are *not*—any flowers. So I come here—there are such lots of pretty shadows—and nice smells. I pretend all the flowers come out from the garden and have a party. It's fun having the flowers, 'cause you can just *tell* how they'll act. You know a tulip's going to be awful tall and proud and bow—like this! And a rose'll act shy, and a buttercup's pert. And a daisy's 'shamed 'cause her dress ain't better—I mean isn't. And a dandelion's awful bold. And a daffy-down-dilly—oh, *they're* jolly!"

"How perfectly delightful! Tell me more, Nonie. I believe you have a witch for a fairy grandmother!"

Nonie giggled. "That's 'nother of my games. I've had that for a long time. She's coming some day and touch me with a wand and make me into a beautiful lady. And I'll go out and step into my carriage and a footman all shiny and white will say: 'To her Majesty's!' And I'll sit in the best parlor and drink chocolate and real whipped cream from cups with pink roses on 'em, and a page will say: '*Do* have another piece of cake, your ladyship,' and—and I'll say, 'I couldn't hold another mouthful, thanks, I've had five!'"

Nancy and Nonie laughed together. Then Nonie sighed.

"Do any dreams ever come true? I mean the kind of things you sit and think about and want?"

"Maybe, if you dream hard enough, Nonie," Nancy answered, soberly.

"Course I know *some* of the things I pretend can't come true but maybe some will. Miss Denny told me they might. Only she said I'd have to make 'em. She's my teacher. I love her. I guess you're most as nice as she is. She gives me books and tells me when I say bad grammar. She says we must just think beautiful things and then put them into the right words—but it's hard! I forget awful easy. She don't—I mean, she does *not*—think I'm queer. Liz calls me 'loony!'"

"Oh, *no*—Nonie," protested Nancy, "Liz just can't understand."

"But *you* do, don't you? Miss Denny did, too." Nonie was silent for a moment. "After I've learned a lot more I want to go out in the world with Davy and make a fortune. I don't know just how—but I want to do grand things. There's some places, ain't there—aren't there—that's so big folks wouldn't know we were Hopworths? Davy says he wants to go to sea and Liz says he'll come to no good end like Pa, but mebbe I can take him with me." She sighed. "It's awful long off 'til I grow up, though, I'm only twelve."

Then Nonie added slowly, as though she was sharing a secret: "There's one more thing I pretend. After I go to bed I shut my eyes tight and pretend that a beautiful lady with hair all gold and eyes that twinkle like stars and smile at you, comes and sits by my bed and takes hold of my hand and pats it and then kisses me, sort of on my forehead, and says: 'Good night, sweetness,' like that, in a voice that's soft like music and not a bit of the holler-kind!" Nonie gave a little sigh of rapture. "It's nice, you see, to have a make-believe mother like that! I s'pose a real one wouldn't have time. Anyways, Liz says she'd like to *see* a real mother do more for young 'uns than she does!"

Nancy blinked a sudden rush of tears from her eyes. She felt that she had seen bared the very soul of a child—a soul hungry for kindness and for love. She reached out and took one of the small hands in her own.

"Nonie—let's you and I play lots together. I can give you books, too. We'll read them together. You can come to Happy House often in the daytime."

Nonie shook her head doubtfully.

"Liz won't let me. She says there ain't—there isn't—no use my going off and leaving my work. She says school's bad enough!"

"Does Liz—punish—you much?"

"She chases Davy and me with the broom sometimes. And she scolds, too, but we don't mind, 'cause she's scolding all the time. I wish she would whip us—or lock us up—or—send us to bed! It'd be like other kids, then."

The strangeness of a child longing for punishments that would make her life seem like other childrens' shocked Nancy! She looked at the thin body—was poverty starving the physical being while neglect starved the spirit?

"I'll talk to Liz myself. We'll see what I can coax her to do," Nancy declared resolutely. "We'll be chums, Nonie."

"Oh, then I won't have to play 'bout Rosemary! So, you *are* as nice as Miss Denny. You don't know her, do you? But she'll come back in the fall and sometime, I guess, she'll be Mr. Peter's dearest."

"What *do* you mean, Nonie," demanded Nancy.

"Well, Mr. Peter's the *niciest* man I know 'cause he's awful—nice to Davy and me, and Miss Denny's the nicest *lady* and so she'll be his dearest! He don't—he doesn't—know her yet but he will in the fall and so will you."

"I may not," Nancy answered, rather coldly, "so your Miss Denny may have your Mr. Peter all to herself. And now something tells me it's time for fairies to be in bed! If you'll hand me my slippers I'll dance with you to the gate—only we must be very, very still or we'll waken B'lindy!"

From the gate of Happy House Nancy watched the child's figure disappear in the shadows of the road. In a very little while she would be crawling into her deserted bed, pulling the clothes up over her head and pretending that a mother's hand was caressing her to sleep and a voice that never "hollered" was whispering "goodnight."

"Blessed child," thought Nancy, "her fairy godmother has given her one gift that even Liz can't take away from her—imagination!"

CHAPTER XII

LIZ

Old Jonathan, returning from his daily trip to the postoffice, brought home the news that "there'd be doin's on Fourth of July 'count of the soldier boys—that Webb'd said it'd got to be a Fourth that not a child in Freedom'd forget!" And B'lindy had retorted that "it wa'nt likely, I guess, if Webb got up the doin's anyone *would*—they'd be doin's no one *could* forget!"

But Nancy's interest in the coming event gave way with a quickly smothered exclamation of delight when Jonathan drew from an inside pocket a square, bluish envelope with a foreign postmark, redirected in Mrs. Finnegan's most careful handwriting.

"And here's another," he added, bringing forth a letter from Claire.

"You're a *dear*," cried Nancy, hugging her treasures. "If you'll take this pan of peas, Jonathan, I'll run off and read them!"

B'lindy watched Nancy disappear toward the orchard with mingled amazement and disapproval. "There never was a letter *I* got I'd set by my work for! *That's* a young one for you!"

Out in her Bird's-nest Nancy held up the two envelopes. "I'll save you 'til last, Daddy," she whispered, kissing the handwriting she loved.

Claire's letter was short and yet so like her that Nancy could have believed her friend was there with her—talking to her.

"I'm perfectly miserable, and I can't let mother guess—she tries to make everything so jolly for me. But I'm just plain homesick for college and you girls. The summer isn't a bit what I'd planned. Barry went away before I got home. Mother thought he'd come back but he didn't, and the maddening thing is she won't tell me where he is. She said Barry was 'getting settled.' Isn't that absurd? I suppose he's gone off to the Canadian Rockies or maybe to Japan. But I don't see why mother has to make a secret of it! The war's changed all the men I know—none of them seem as nice. They're so restless and act so old. But then, I'm restless, too, and feel as old as the hills. For heaven's sake, Nancy, hurry up and do your duty by Anne's relatives and come here to me—I need you!"

"Funny Claire," laughed Nancy, talking aloud in the way she had learned at Happy House. "She's always trying to make herself think she's miserable. But Barry *is* a pill! Now, Daddy mine!"

Because she must make her moment of joy last as long as possible, she spread out each page; she peeped into the envelope to be certain that she had them all; she touched ever so lightly the penned lines; she even sniffed joyously at the paper in a vain hope of detecting the familiar odor of Havana tobacco.

The letter had been three weeks on its way. And it was in answer to one Nancy had written to him from college, soon after Anne's plans to go to Russia had been completed.

"* * * * That is fine in Anne, but it seems to me, that in the enthusiasm of her youth she's overlooking opportunities for service closer at hand. These problems over here are so tremendous—they, need a tried mind and the wisdom of years. You know, my dear, if you want to do things to make this world better you can generally find them waiting for you in your very own corner! Wherever you look you will see the destruction of prejudice, ignorance, selfishness and pride—you don't have to go to Russia to find it!

"In a few weeks my baby will be graduated. I cannot picture you grown up. Perhaps you will never seem so to your Dad. I feel as though these months that I have spent over here away from you must have made many changes in my girl—they have cheated me of a great deal of joy in your development. But I hope that the dignities you have acquired have not changed the dear, kind, joyous heart of you!

"You tell me you have decided upon a 'career,' but you will not tell me what—little torment! Is it something in which I can help? If it is useful and honorable, my child, it will bring you happiness, whatever it is. I hope it is a hard one, too, the more you have to work the more satisfaction you will enjoy.

"Now for good news. My work over here is done. As soon as I can get passage I will sail for home, I can't think of anything else. I thought I'd spend my unexpected holiday nosing around in the places where I've always wanted to go—but I can't. I'm too impatient to enjoy anything. So I shall camp on the doorstep of the G. H. Q. Office until word of my sailing

comes. I suppose you are at the apartment under Mrs. Finnegan's loving eye. When I return we'll run off to the seashore or mountains for a few weeks."

"Dear, dear thoughtful Daddy—nice, old, *preachy* Daddy—with your sugar-coated sermons in little pellets, all easy to swallow!" cried Nancy, laughing, then suddenly a sob choked her, another and then another.

"It's almost *dreadful* to have Daddy have just me. What if he is disappointed when he sees me! What if he is—angry—at what I've done!"

For the first time this possibility crossed her mind { 134 } leaving a terrible fear. Impulsive Nancy had often displeased her father, but always the most trivial offence had troubled her deeply. Her father had such an aversion to the smallest departure from truth! And wasn't she really acting a lie?

For the next few moments poor Nancy sorely needed the support of Anne's convincing arguments! Remorse of the most torturing kind swept her.

And she had dared to judge Miss Sabrina's standards of honor and justice!

"I'll go away," she cried, aloud. "I'll go straight back to Mrs. Finnegan's where I belong."

But this determination, soothing at it was, brought added problems. Nancy's brow wrinkled with a deep frown of perplexity. It would not be fair to Anne to just run away—she'd have to give some explanation to Miss Sabrina and Miss Milly and B'lindy, and even Webb. And just now, in her present mood, anything but the absolute truth seemed abhorrent to her.

Then she thought of Aunt Milly—dear little Aunt Milly. She was a different creature now from the pale little woman Nancy had first seen on the couch in the darkened room. Each day, when she did not go to the orchard, she spent in the sitting room or on the hollyhock porch, knitting and helping in little household tasks. And Nancy knew by the wistful glance that met hers when she came and went, how Aunt Milly hungered for her company. Nancy had told herself that it was because she was young and that she seemed, perhaps, like what Aunt Milly had wanted to be—before the dreadful accident.

What *would* Aunt Milly's life be if she went suddenly out of it?

There was Davy, too, and all she had planned to start for the Club and Nonie—

What must Nonie think? She had let a whole day go by and had not seen Liz!

Nancy re-read her father's letter. "If you want to do things to make this world better you can generally find them waiting for you in your very own corner!" Funny—that Daddy should have written just that! Nancy folded her letter with a sigh of relief. "Of course, there's work right here and maybe—I'd be a coward to run away—just now. The wrong was done when I came!"

The logic was youthful, but then Nancy, despite the dignity of graduation was very youthful, too. Her mind made up she looked very resolute. She'd go and call upon Liz that very afternoon.

However, she must know more concerning the Hopworth's before she braved Liz on her own ground. So she sought out the all-wise B'lindy.

B'lindy was most generous with her information.

"I guess the Hopworths ain't any concern of yours, Miss Anne. The Leavitts all's visited mostly with good folks like the Allens and the Chamberlains and the Fiskes over in South Hero, and the Hills up to Isle Le Motte and the Eatons and Todds, here to Freedom. Time was when the best come to Happy House—Miss Sabriny's mother liked company—but not trash like the Hopworth's!"

"But *why* are they trash, B'lindy? What do they do? Webb says they're an old family, that they've been here as long as the Leavitts."

B'lindy snorted. "Webb's tongue's tied in the middle and wags both ends and I guess most of the time at the wrong end! Mebbe they are old—you can't kill off folks same's you can a strain of cattle. They don't do nothin', Miss Anne, that's it—they don't do nothin'. They're just shiftless, no-good folks. Old Dan'l don't work—never did, and his pa before him. And that Eric—he was worst of all!"

"Who was Eric?" begged Nancy.

"Old Dan'l's son and as bad a boy as ever tormented a neighborhood. But no one knew he'd be anything but no-good, and he wasn't. Ran off to sea. Folks never heard much 'bout him, but they knew they wouldn't hear anything good, anyway. Then, sudden-like, he turns up with two young 'uns. Brought 'em to old Dan'l to keep. One was a girl and the other, a baby in his arms, was a boy."

Freedom folks had never lost their enjoyment in this episode of Eric Hopworth's adventurous life. B'lindy, happy now in her tale, made the most of it.

"I guess there were a lot of stories 'bout them young uns, but old Dan'l never made a sign 'bout which was true. And Eric Hopworth went off's suddenly as he come, leavin' those two more Hopworth's for old Dan'l to feed and bring up, and for the folks 'round here to watch, unless they wanted all their apples stolen and their chickens killed! Mis' Tubbs told Mis' Sniggs that she *see* a marriage certificate and that the mother'd been one of them actor-women down in New York and she thought like's not the woman died when the boy was born. Mis' Jenkins sez *she'd* heard other stories over in North Hero! Anyways old Dan'l's as close-mouthed as a stature!"

"And who's Liz?" asked Nancy.

"Old Dan'l's half-sister. He brought her over from Bend after the young 'uns came, to do for 'em."

Nancy mused for a moment. There was not much use in telling B'lindy that she was going to call upon Liz—it would take days and days of argument to overcome the heritage of prejudice in B'lindy's mind. Perhaps, for the present, she had better keep Nonie in the orchard.

It had not needed B'lindy's description for Nancy to recognize the Hopworth dwelling, if by such a name could be called the four weather-beaten walls hanging crazily together as though by a last nail. A litter of debris cluttered the bare ground around the house and between the shed and the unused barn. Back of the shed an old man slouched in the sun.

The door sagged on its one hinge, partly open. When Nancy knocked a gaunt, slatternly woman, in the room within, turned with a scowl.

As Nancy's eyes, sweeping over the dirty, crowded room, came back to the hard face before her, she sickened at the thought of little Nonie, with her "dreams," growing in this environment. Then, as Liz' scowl gave place to a sullen indifference, Nancy realized that the most marked thing about the woman was a resigned hopelessness.

Nancy, choosing her words carefully, introduced herself. As Liz' unfriendliness discouraged any advances, Nancy plunged straight to the point. She had taken a fancy to the children, she explained—would Miss Hopworth permit Nonie and sometimes Davy, to come often to Happy House? She, Nancy, found it a little lonesome at Happy House and she would enjoy their company.

Liz dropped a pan with a bang. "I'll tell you just's I tell her—there ain't goin' to be any more traipsing 'way from her work all the time like with the schoolmar'm either to Happy House nor nowhere. All them notions is settin' the girl loony goin' on with her lies and things 'bout things bein' differunt. She'll stay *right* to home!"

And to prevent further argument Liz' head bent meaningly toward the door.

But at that moment a shadow crossed it. Mrs. Sniggs, very gingerly, thrust a head inside. Under her arm she carried a kettle. Once in a while old Dan'l mended the village kettles.

"How d'do," snapped Liz.

But Mrs. Sniggs, with an uplift of her nose that said plainly: "I don't even *see* you," put her kettle near the door without a word and turned to depart. At which Liz, in a loud tone, exclaimed: "Most *certainly*, Miss Leavitt, we're *delighted*! Our Nonie can visit you up to Happy House real often!"

Liz knew and Nancy knew, by the tell-tale shadow that lingered across the threshold that Mrs. Sniggs had heard; Nancy blessed the good fortune that had brought the woman there at that moment!

Walking homeward, her mind full of plans of all she wanted to do for Nonie and Davy, Nancy with a shudder recalled the Hopworth home—and Liz. Something in the tired eyes haunted her. "Maybe," she thought with a pang of pity, "maybe she's as—starved—as Nonie!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE FOURTH OF JULY

B'lindy had said, truly, that "she guessed if Webb got up the Fourth of July doin's they'd be doin's no one'd forget!"

Webb's "doin's" took the form of a parade—a parade in which the very young and the very old should take part. At its head Webb himself would march, with the two recently returned soldiers, one on each side. The young people would come in costumes depicting the characters of the men associated with the Island history.

"Mrs. Eaton wants you to help her dress the children, Anne," Miss Sabrina had announced, the day before the Fourth. "She asked me to ask you to be at the meeting-house at 9 o'clock.

"Oh, I'd love to," Nancy had responded eagerly.

"It is very nice of her, I am sure," Miss Sabrina had added. "She *wants* to be pleasant." And a hint of apology in Miss Sabrina's voice made Nancy suddenly think that perhaps Mrs. Eaton was not *always* pleasant.

She remembered that B'lindy had added the Eaton name to the list of acquaintances possible to a Leavitt.

The very air of that Fourth of July morning was a-tingle with excitement. When Nancy turned into the village street it seemed to her filled with people, all in Sunday-best and holiday spirits. The green in front of the meeting-house was alive with eager, tumbling youngsters.

Mrs. Eaton, a large woman with what Nancy called a prune mouth and watery blue eyes, greeted Nancy effusively. Nancy was a "*dear*"—she said it with a rising squeak—to help her! There wasn't a great deal to do—the little dears were going to wear white caps and capes and represent a band of peace; the girls would carry wreaths of white syringa. *She'd* thought of it all herself—two days before.

"I'm *so* glad to be rushed to *death*," she explained, patting down a small cap on a small head. "Of *course* you know my Archie is *still* in Germany!"

Nancy had not known it, nor, indeed, anything about Archie, but she nodded sympathetically.

"Cyrus Eaton says I'm a *wonder*—just a wonder! But I *suppose* I ought to be thankful my Archie's come through without losing any of his arms or legs! Now, my *dear*, if you'll fix the *rest* of these children I'll run down and look at the Indian Chiefs. *Bless* me, I don't know *what* Webb'd do without me. But *then*, I'm glad to do it—it keeps my *mind* off Archie." She panted off with a patronizing smile that took in Nancy and the group of staring youngsters.

To Nancy, whose life had been spent mostly in the big cities of the world, this glimpse of village life was a novel experience. She loved it—the spontaneous gaiety of it all, the round-eyed children that crowded to her, noisily clamoring to have their "things" put on. The notes of a bugle floated up the street. Fire crackers popped off with the regularity of machine-gun fire. From every side came loud, eager voices. She was glad she was a part of it all. As she

finished arranging its cap, she patted each head, just as Mrs. Eaton had done, but in Nancy's smile there was something that had not been in Mrs. Eaton's, so she invariably won a quick smile in response.

Suddenly Nancy spied Nonie and Davy, hand in hand, watching the other children from a little distance. Their childish longing betrayed itself in the unwonted way their hands clung together, in the wistfulness of their faces. Nancy hailed them.

"Come along—hurry!" she cried. They ran eagerly to her. Nancy seized a cape and a cap.

"Dast we?" asked Davy, very gravely.

"Why, of *course*. Quick—take this cap, Davy. Here, Nonie, is a wreath. Now—stand here—in this line!" She placed them between two other children. "All of you—faces forward! Be ready for the signal. Right foot—don't forget."

Mrs. Eaton bustled up. "Everything *ready*, my dear? It's perfectly *beautiful*—just beautiful!" in breathless staccato. "I wish my Archie could see it! I'm actually *inspired*!" Her red, moist face suggested that she had made a mistake in her choice of words. She ran around the group of children, standing in ragged file, impatiently awaiting the signal to start. "The little *dears*—just like a beautiful band of peace!" Suddenly she stared and her face flushed a darker red. "Nonie Hopworth, how *dared* you come here!"

Nonie's lips quivered and her eyes went imploringly to Nancy. Davy tossed his head defiantly. Neither answered.

"I called them, Mrs. Eaton."

Now there was no "my dear" on Mrs. Eaton's tongue. It clicked sharply against her teeth. She was too outraged, too, to pick her words.

"Get right away!" She seized Davy by the shoulder. "Little good-for-nothings! This is a patriotic celebration and we don't want any Hopworth's in it!"

Nancy's eyes blazed. "Oh, Mrs. Eaton! *Don't*—they're just children! They——"

"*You're* a stranger here in Freedom, Miss Leavitt—I'll be pleased if you'll let *me* manage this! I say it's an *insult* to our heroes to have Eric Hopworth's young 'uns here—an insult to Freedom's noble history!" The ruffles on her bosom heaved in her anger. "What'd Eric Hopworth do for his country! When I think of my Archie——" What she might have thought did not find expression, because of the pins she was tearing roughly from Nonie's cape and thrusting between her teeth. "Go off now," she panted between the shining row. "Go off where you came from!"

Then, almost simultaneously with the approach of a dishevelled Indian hollering between cupped hands that "p'rade's goin' start," came Webb's warning whistle from down the street. Mrs. Eaton straightened to an appropriate dignity of bearing. She made a waving motion of her arm toward her little dears that ignored Nancy, standing back, dumb with the cruelty of it all.

But Nonie's crestfallen face stung Nancy to sudden action. While the band of peace fluttered wildly back to its position, Nancy, with an arm about each, moved with the children toward the church. She moved quickly, too, for a sudden inspiration had seized her. She remembered three flags on standards in the Sunday-school room. She bade Davy get them.

"Do *just* what I tell you," she commanded. "The *cat*!" she threw over her shoulder.

All Freedom was too intent upon catching a first glimpse of Webb's host moving up the village street to notice the strange sight of Nancy and her companions racing through the back yards and fields that skirted the main thoroughfare. A long tear in Nancy's skirt testified to the speed with which she had climbed all obstacles. Such was the fire in her soul that she could have climbed a mountain!

In the shade of a wide maple tree, B'lindy, resplendent in fresh gingham and her good-as-new-last-year's-hat, watched Webb's "doin's" with a heart that fluttered with pride. No town in the whole Island could turn out more folks! But, then, no town on the Island had a prouder history!

With his badges glittering on the faded blue coat, Webb marched at the head of his "p'rade" in his uniform of the Grand Army of the Republic. On either side of him stepped the recently returned soldiers, their young-old faces turned straight ahead, their worn tunics attesting to other lines of march through other village streets. Behind them were the three soldier boys who had not "gone across." In pure enjoyment of the occasion they had forgotten the resentment against fate that they had cherished. A group of boys and girls in Indian costume portrayed that epoch of Freedom's history. One great warrior brandished a tomahawk that had been dug up in a nearby field and was now kept in a suitable setting at the post-office. Close at their heels followed four staid Puritan men, broad white collars pinned over Sunday coats. Ethan Allen and his brother Ira, beloved heroes of the little Islands, were there in character. Two lanky lads wore the uniform of 1861. Mrs. Eaton's "band of peace" in straggling lines, brought up the rear.

Greeted from each side by lusty cheers, through a cloud of dust, to the tap-a-tap-tap of three proud drummers, the pageant moved down the street. It had been Webb's plan that the "p'rade" should halt before the stoop of the hotel, where Mr. Todd, the postmaster, in a collar much too high and a coat much too tight, waited to give an address of welcome. But as Webb's eyes roved with pardonable pride over the fringe of spectators on each side of the line of march, they suddenly spied an unexpected sight. On the stepping block in front of the school house stood Nancy, her white skirts blowing, with Nonie and Davy on each side. And each held, proudly upright, an American flag.

It was a pretty sight—the colors of the flags fluttering over the three bare heads, the young faces tilted earnestly forward. Webb saw in it a friendly effort on Miss Anne's part to add to the success of his "doin's." So as the line of march approached the stepping-block, he solemnly saluted the three.

Advancing, the returned soldiers also saluted, stiffly. The drummers lost a beat in order to wave their drumsticks. The Indians gaily brandished their clubs, the Puritans nodded, the "boys in blue" mimicked their heroes of the hour with a stiff bending and jerking of their right arms.

But then and there Mrs. Eaton fell back from her position at the head of the "band of peace." Nancy, wickedly watching from the corner of a perfectly innocent appearing eye, saw her give a gasp as she stepped aside.

Nonie and Davy, exalted into an ecstasy of joy over the part they had finally played in the celebration, stared in amazement at Nancy's suppressed peals of laughter, to which she gave way only when the last wee dove of peace had trailed off toward the hotel. And not only Davy and Nonie stared; from out of the spectators came Peter Hyde.

"I have cooked my goose—now," giggled Nancy, wiping her eyes and holding out a hand. "She was *so* funny! But I have outraged Freedom's noble history!" Nancy twisted her lips to resemble Mrs. Eaton's.

"If you'll let me help you down we might hurry and hear some of the Honorable Jeremiah Todd's oration," suggested Peter Hyde.

Nancy jumped lightly to the ground. "I wouldn't *dare*," she answered. "Mrs. Eaton only waits to tear me limb from limb! I saw it in her pallid eye. You don't *know* what I've done! Davy, you and Nonie carry these flags carefully back to the Sunday-school. And what do you say—in celebration of this day—to a swim—this afternoon, at the Cove!"

They exclaimed their approval of the suggestion. Nonie lingered.

"Do you know what I pretended then?" she asked, affectionately gripping Nancy's arm. "I pretended I was Joan of Arc, all in white, riding on a big horse with bugles, calling to my army. Miss Denny read to me all about it. Oh, it was grand!" She sighed, because the moment had passed. Davy pranced impatiently.

"Oh, come 'long—stop yer actin' lies!" Then, to Nancy, with a questioning look that said such fortune seemed too good to be true: "'*Honest?*' 'Bout the swimmin'."

Nancy nodded mysteriously. "Honest to goodness—at three bells!"

She watched the children scamper away, then turned eyes dark with indignation to Peter Hyde.

"How can *anyone* be cruel to children?" she cried. "How can anyone hurt them?"

Peter did not know what she was talking about, but he agreed with all his heart.

"Kids—and dogs and cats and—little things," he added. "I shot a rabbit once when I was fifteen, and when I went up to get it, it was still breathing, and looked so pitiful and small—I couldn't help but feel that it hadn't had a chance 'gainst a fellow like me. I had to kill it then. That was enough for me! I haven't shot—any sort of living things—like *that*—since!"

His step shortened to Nancy's and together they turned their backs upon Jeremiah's cheering audience and walked slowly homeward. Her mind concerned with the children, Nancy told Peter all that had happened—of finding Nonie in the orchard, of the child's "pretend" games, of her call upon Liz. Then she concluded with an account of the incident of the morning mimicing, comically, Mrs. Eaton's outraged manner.

"As if it would hurt her or her Archie or—or anyone else in this old place to make two youngsters happy," Nancy exclaimed, disgustedly. "I'm going to do everything I can, while I'm at Happy House, to make up to them," she finished.

Peter assured her that he wanted to help. How much the desire was inspired by sympathy for Nonie and Davy or by the winning picture Nancy made, her rebel strands of red-brown hair blowing across her flushed cheeks, no one could say. And when at the gate of Happy House they separated, Peter promising to be on hand at the Cove at four o'clock, Nancy watched him swing down the road with a pleasant sense of comradeship.

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. EATON CALLS

"Oh, shades of Odysseus," muttered Nancy. From the swing on the hollyhock porch she had spied Mrs. Eaton coming up the flagged path to the front door.

As she sat idly swinging, Nancy had been trying over the deeply emotional lines that Berthé, the much-suffering heroine of her dear play, should say when the villain proved to be her lover in disguise. A chance glance through the syringas had acquainted her with the alarming fact that an avenging enemy approached.

It was the day after the Fourth of July. As yet not a word had come to Happy House concerning Nancy's part in the celebration.

There was not time for Nancy to escape; however, it was not likely that Miss Sabrina would take such a guest out to the porch. Nancy heard her greet the newcomer, then their steps approached the sitting-room. The swing was at the other end of the porch. Nancy, hugging her knees, could not be seen from the sitting-room windows and, anyway, the blinds had been shut to keep out the hot morning sun. Through their slats Nancy heard Mrs. Eaton's effusive greetings.

"I might as well hear what the cat tells," Nancy concluded. The fate of the proverbial eavesdropper did not alarm her in the least; she felt the resignation, of a child that knows he faces punishment.

Mrs. Eaton spent several moments explaining, how often she "had had a *mind* to drop in for a little chat."

"But I am a *different* woman with my Archie away! Cyrus says he don't *know* how I bear up so well. *You* don't know, of course, a mother's feelings!" Did Nancy imagine that she heard a rustling, as though Aunt Sabrina had suddenly straightened in her chair? "And *I* said to Cyrus that *he* don't even know a mother's feeling that's raised a boy right from the *cradle*!"

Miss Sabrina inquired politely as to the last word of Archie, and, with satisfied pride, the mother recounted Archie's description of the difficulties that had confronted the Allied

occupancy of the Rhinelands. Archie's mother truly believed that Archie alone bore that tremendous responsibility.

"And Archie and me are as *like* as two peas," she added.

It was, of course, only a matter of a few moments before Mrs. Eaton led up to the event of the day before. Nancy caught the crisp change in the woman's voice. The story gained much in her telling—of Nancy's impertinence in forcing the Hopworth young 'uns among her "little dears," then how she had, though fully aware of her, Mrs. Eaton's, explicit orders, flaunted Eric Hopworth's brood in the face of every respectable man, woman and child of Freedom—actually desecrating the very flags she had—*taken*—out of the Sunday-school room.

The story was interrupted by many sighs and sniffs.

"Of course *everybody* on this Island that knows me and my Archie, Cyrus says, will *feel* for me. I might as well as *not* of been slapped in the face. And I said to Cyrus, "*I* think Miss Leavitt ought to *know*—she's taken that girl there!" And Cyrus and I *both* said that of *course* no one would be surprised, seeing she's *that* branch of your family where I suppose—you'll *forgive* me for speaking right out *plain*, you can expect almost *any* kind of actions!"

Nancy swung her feet down out of the hammock. "The cat," she breathed, straightening. She could see that stinging shaft plunge straight into poor Aunt Sabrina's heart and turn! She held her breath for Aunt Sabrina's answer.

Miss Sabrina's voice was cold and her words measured. "I am very sorry this has happened, Mrs. Eaton. But I am sure my niece did not dream of impertinence. She has not been here long enough to know of our prejudices!"

"*Bully!*" Nancy, said, almost aloud. "*That's* a time when breeding shows!"

Mrs. Eaton was plainly annoyed at Miss Sabrina's defence. Her voice took on a crisper edge. "She's been here long *enough* to pick up with Judson's hired *man!* *Your* notions may be different from *mine*, Miss Leavitt, but *I* wouldn't 'low any girl of *mine* to go swimming at Cove's Hole with the Hopworth young 'uns! Dick Snead told his mother and his mother told my Cousin 'Manthy. Ain't there any *better* folks she can take up with on this Island than a hired man *and* the Hopworths?" Her shrill inflection seemed to say, "There—I have you *now!*"

Nancy's feet beat a war-dance. She wanted to rush in to her own defence—had Dick Snead told his mother and his mother told Cousin 'Manthy that she had swam forty strokes under water? Discretion, however, bade her use caution.

A rustling indicated that the caller, her errand accomplished, had risen to go. She shot her last tiny, poisoned arrow. "Of *course* I said to Cyrus *all* of us on the Island know all that poor Miss Leavitt's *had* to stand, what with her brother and *then* her sister! And *that's* why, I said to Cyrus, Miss Leavitt *ought* to know about these goings on, or else something *else* would come down on your poor head! I must run along, now, 'Manthy came in to watch my jam. That Carroll girl I got over at Greenfield isn't worth her keep—you have to watch her *every* moment!"

All the pride of generations of Leavitts must have come to Miss Sabrina's rescue at that moment! She met the final thrust with calm dignity.

"My niece is only making me a very short visit, Mrs. Eaton. It is hardly worth while for me to interfere with her conduct."

Nancy was struck dumb with amazement. What did Aunt Sabrina mean—that *this* silly little affair ended her stay at Happy House? What *would* Anne think? Oh, *what* a mess she had made of everything! Of course she had expected that something might happen any moment; after one day had safely passed, she had always thought it might be the next; had she not told Anne that she was certain to make some dreadful blunder? But it was a shame to go away in disgrace when she had not really done anything, after all!

Indignation of the most righteous sort began slowly to master Nancy's consternation. Well, if she did have to go she would allow herself, just once, the sweet satisfaction of telling Miss Sabrina what she thought of the Leavitts and their sense of honor! She rushed headlong into the sitting-room.

"I heard what that—that creature said," she blurted out. "I don't *know* why God makes women like that! What would you *think*, Aunt Sabrina, if you'd seen her take a whip and lash those children across their bare bodies? And that wouldn't have been as bad as what she really *did* do, for those hurts would have healed, and the way she hurt their spirits wouldn't *ever* heal! She is cruelly unjust—and unkind!"

Poor Miss Sabrina looked very old and very tired—far too tired to meet this impetuous attack! Something in the unyieldingness of her expression drove Nancy to utter abandon.

"Oh, I suppose I'll have—to go away! But I'm glad—everything is all wrong at Happy House. There's no happiness here—at all. Fath—someone I love used to tell me that happiness comes to you as you *give* happiness, and that's what's the matter here—you don't give happiness! You live—apart—and you just wrap yourself round with the traditions of the Leavitts and all that—tommyrot! I'm glad I'm not—a—I'm glad I'm the—the other branch. I guess the golden rule is better than any family honor and that it doesn't matter at *all* what all the people who are dead and gone've done—it's what the people who are *living* are doing—that counts!"

Breathless from her outburst and frightened by its daring, Nancy burst into tears and rushed from the room.

In the aftermath of calm that followed the storm, Nancy woefully faced the consequences of what she had done. How silly it would all sound to Anne when she heard it! Anne would tell her, of course, what *she* would have done—but then, Anne had always been able to control every word and every action.

Nancy, staring about at the four walls of her room in very much the same way she had done that first day of her coming to Happy House, realized that they were not so ugly, after all. Their height gave a sense of coolness and space; the branches of an old cherry tree brushed her windows; from below came all sorts of sweet smells out of Jonathan's garden; the incessant twittering of birds and the humming of insects made the summer air teem with busy, happy life. It was pleasant, she sighed—much pleasanter than a flat in Harlem in July!

"Well, I won't pack until I get my dishonorable discharge, and I can't get away until Webb's stage goes, anyway! I'll take Miss Milly once more to the orchard."

Miss Milly went to the orchard so often now that it had become a part of almost every day's routine, and it was no longer necessary that B'lindy and Jonathan should make up the party, though they went more often than not. This day Aunt Milly declared everything particularly nice, but she thought it was because she and Nancy were alone—she could not know that Nancy had been doing her best to make it an afternoon Aunt Milly would never forget—"because it's probably the last!"

They lingered in the orchard until almost supper-time. Then Nancy sought the kitchen. She liked to drop in on B'lindy, help her in some small way in the preparation of the evening meal, and chat at the same time. She was astounded, now, to find Aunt Sabrina, with a very red face, bending over the kitchen stove.

B'lindy, sitting very straight in the chair by the window, gave the explanation—resentfully.

"Pears to be hash ain't good enough for supper. Had it all fixed for the cookin' and I guess it's fair 'nough for anyone to eat and I can't abide left-overs hangin' 'round. But Miss S'briny says the supper to-night's got to be extry nice and Miss Anne's got to have waffles and *she'll* cook 'em herself, seein' how old B'lindy that's cooked 'em nigh onto fifty years, can't cook 'em *good* 'nough for Miss Anne!"

Miss Sabrina's face was bent over the waffles—Nancy could not see it. The moment was too solemn to permit her to so much as smile. She said very gravely, almost reprovingly:

"You *know*, B'lindy, that you *can't* make waffles as good as Aunt Sabrina can and I've been hungry for days for waffles!"

Nancy knew that, after that night, waffles would always mean something more to her than merely a concoction of food stuffs particularly dear to her palate—they'd mean the momentary triumph of reason and justice, the defeat of the Mrs. Eaton-kind, and the pitiful attempt of a very old and a very proud woman to "give happiness."

CHAPTER XV

GUNS AND STRING BEANS

"Claire darling—

"Almost two weeks since I wrote to you. Will you love me any more?

"As I write I am all alone on the edge of a very little pool of light reflected from my little lamp that was only intended to see me into bed and not to burn half the night through while I write to my pal.

"Is this summer night as perfect where you are, Claire? (Tush—you've probably been playing tennis and dancing and flirting until you are too exhausted to care about anything except the breakfast bell disturbing you.) But up here it's *wonderful*! The sky is blue-black velvet, all studded with stars that seem suspended—they are so very close. And the air just caresses you! And there are the sweetest smells, grassy and earthy and all fragrant of roses. There are queer little noises, too—as though the night was full of fairy creatures. And I heard a whip-or-will! And a screech-owl, way, way off.

"Since I wrote to you last I have 'put my foot in it' again! Terribly! It's too long a story to write to you—there isn't nearly oil enough for that—but I skated over the thin ice and reached safety—in other words, I am still here! And, Nancy, I know, now, even Aunt Sabrina is beginning to like me! Do you know why? Because I lost my head and told her what I thought was the matter with her and Happy House and I don't suppose anyone *dared* to tell her that before. (I called her Leavitt traditions tommy-rot.) And I think she *enjoyed* the sensation! Anyway, she seems to treat me now like Somebody and she said something the other day about how lovely the autumns were on the Island, as though she took it for granted I'd be here then!

"Claire, what if I can *never* get away? Did I dream, when I took Anne's shoes (to speak in figures) and put them on, where they'd lead me? And sometimes I think that I will not see the end of the trail for a long time. I'm not crazy to see it, either, for it *must* end in Disaster!

"I am beginning to understand these people, too. I—in my usual way, judged them too quickly! One must know their history to know them—know what a splendid background they have. Aunt Sabrina has taken up Ezekiel where she left off and tells me stories about the Champlain Valley. Of course, I know she is doing it, because I called the Leavitt glories 'tommy-rot' and when I read, in B'lindy's book (gotten up, of course, to bait tourists) what these Islanders *have* done, I feel cheap and small and insignificant beside all these people who have such heroic grandfathers and great grandfathers.

"I suppose, all over the world, Island people must be different from people whose lands lie directly contingent with other lands and people. The very waters that shut away these precious Hero Islands wash their lives back upon themselves—they live in—they can't help it. The world that rushes on so fast for us, living in the big cities, scarcely stirs them here! These folks talk about Ethan Allen and Remembrance Baker as though it was only yesterday they walked down under the elms of the village street! They all eat off from very old china and sit in very old chairs—precious because some hero dear to the Island has sat in them!

"(All of this is not original with me—The Hired Man said it.)

"So just as I finished grandly saying to Aunt Sabrina that it didn't matter at *all* what the people, who are dead and gone, have done, I'm beginning to see—like a picture opened before my eyes—that it *does* matter—quite a little! They, these dead and gone people, leave us what they have done; if it's bad, we have to pay for it, some way or other—if it's noble, we have to be worthy of it! *That* philosophy is all mine and not the Hired Man's.

"There are a great many things about the aforesaid Hired Man (I never think of him as that) that perplex me. He is a great big riddle. He is more interesting than any one I ever met before. I wish you were here so we could talk him over the way we used to the Knights of the Pink Parlor. That he is good looking is not what seems so queer, because I suppose there *are*

good-looking hired men as well as good-looking street car conductors or undertakers. He is so understandable—he is like you and Anne and Dad. And he knows so much about everything! He must have gone to college—he talks just like a college man. But once when I hinted he smiled and told me that he was 'still a student in the college of Experience, where after all one could learn more than at even the great universities.'

"He is Mysterious. After I've been with him I plan it all out—what he must have been and why he fell to the level of this sort of work; then the next time I see him he says something that makes me change all my ideas. I am sure he is concealing something—he simply will not say one word about himself! I don't believe it's anything as bad as murder or forgery or—anything like that, because he has such honest eyes, and they look right straight through you. It's probably some sorrow or—or disappointment. Sometimes his eyes look very tired, as though they had seen some terrible tragedy, though mostly always they're just jolly.

"He's wonderful with Nonie and Davy—they adore him. He thinks of so many nice things for them to do. He says once he was a scoutmaster in the Boy Scouts. I think he almost gave something away then, for, after he said it, he looked so funny and wouldn't say another word.

"He treats me as though I was another boy just a little older than Davy. And after the silly men we knew in college it's a relief to find anyone like Peter Hyde, even though he is a hired man. I suppose it's because he's probably had a hard time—has had to make his way, he's had all the nonsense knocked out of him! I am sure, if one could teach him to dance and then set him down in the middle of your mother's living-room you'd all go crazy over him. Now isn't that some Hired Man? Dear me, I spend more time wondering about him! Then I laugh at myself. Do you remember the Russian who came to college last year—how we all thought he must be a Russian prince and then we found out he'd been born on the Lower East Side?"

There were other doubts concerning Peter Hyde that Nancy did *not* confide to Claire. For the past two years and more, in Nancy's honest soul, all men between twenty-one and forty were divided into two classes; those who had gone over to France and those who had not. If Peter Hyde *had* gone there was nothing in any act or word that signified it; if he had *not* gone, why not? Was *that* what he was hiding?

She had resorted, feeling very contemptible as she did so, to little traps to draw him out, but he had invariably escaped them—sometimes changing the subject abruptly, other times openly laughing and saying nothing. Very much against her will she felt growing within her a contempt for him; almost a dislike of his personal appearance, so obviously healthy and able to have fought for his country! And yet, loyalty had kept her from confiding this to Claire.

A sense of fairness, too, urged her to give Peter the benefit of the doubt until she knew. "I'll just ask him," she decided resolutely. "I'll ask him right out—the very first chance I get!"

The opportunity to learn the truth had come on the very afternoon following the night she had written to Claire. Nonie and Davy had not appeared for a swim, so Peter had suggested a walk. He wanted Nancy to go over, with him, the new work he had started on the Judson ten-acre piece, the improvements in the barns, the rotary gardens.

It was the first time that Peter Hyde had talked much about his work. Nancy, who would have said turnips grew on bushes, for all she knew, found herself, under his instruction, suddenly absorbed in the scientific growing of beans and corn and potatoes; in the making of one strip of garden produce three different food products in rotation; in irrigation and drainage; in sanitary stables and electrically lighted chicken houses.

"You know there's poetry in these growing things," Peter cried, waving his hand out over the tender stalks of corn. "You get all the Art you want! Can you find anywhere a more wonderful picture than that waving field of oats—pale green against that sky? And in a few weeks it'll be yellow. See that lettuce green, too. And music—you can stand in a field of corn when the wind is blowing a little and you will hear a symphony!"

Nancy, surprised, watched his glowing face with interest. Here was indeed a new side of the Hired Man! He went on:

"And business, say, there's a practical side to this farming that ought to satisfy any man. Wits, science, strategy, instinct, plain common-sense—it's all as necessary right here as in the biggest business concern in the world. And if a fellow wants a *fight*—well, he has it when he goes up against Mother Earth. We're used to thinking of her as kindly, generous, lavishing her favors! I've had another picture—she's worse than a Czar! She's exacting, she's moody, she's undependable, at times. I suppose she does it to try out her children—but anyway, the farmer has to fight every minute!"

He stopped suddenly. "I'm boring you to death, maybe!" He laughed apologetically. "It's always been a hobby of mine—this working with the earth. I never thought I'd do anything with it—until the war! Then I realized how much a nation's prosperity depends upon how its soil is used. And that's where our government's been short-sighted. They haven't paid enough attention to the small farmers. Of course, they try out some good things and publish bulletins, but the farmers ought to *know* how, by certain scientific changes, the productiveness of the land can be doubled! Take Judson, here. He's been farming this whole place just the way his grandfather did before him! He's read about new-fangled things, but he's afraid to try them—he doesn't know how to begin! Think how many Judsons there are all over the world! So I'm trying to show him by actually working out some experiments I've tested. If it's a success, if his account at the bank at North Hero shows it at the end of the season—why, there isn't anything Judson will be afraid to try. And think what it would mean to this country if it had a million farmers like Judson! And see how easily they can be shown!"

Nancy's face was alight with enthusiasm. With her vivid imagination she pictured a glorious army of Peter Hydes going out over the land, rescuing the poor farmers, putting new weapons into their hands!

"It's wonderful! And it's—brave!" she added, "because it isn't as if you went off with a whole lot of others with bands and flags flying!"

She was suddenly struck with remorse that she had, in her heart, so wronged Peter Hyde! She had thought him a slacker when he had shouldered the harder task! Something in the earnestness still reflected on his face made her own her guilt.

"I can't be glad *enough* you've told me all this! I didn't know! I never lived in the country. I just thought things to eat grew up any old way. And all this time I have been thinking horrid

things about you because I thought you hadn't gone to war! I thought, maybe, you were way off up here to escape the feeling everyone had for slackers! You can imagine, now, when I see what you really *are* doing, how ashamed I feel! Will you forgive me?"

Peter's frank amusement made Nancy feel very uncomfortable and small. But then she deserved it! He held out his hand as a sign of his forgiveness. There was still laughter in his eyes as he regarded her.

"I suppose that was very natural! Most of the young fellows you know must have gone over!" he said, seriously enough.

She wanted very much to tell him of her father—how he had followed the men over the top; how he had worked day after day getting the stories back to the people at home and spent night after night tracing the "missing," or writing letters for the boys who never got further back than the first dressing-stations and who wanted mothers and fathers and sweethearts to know that they'd had their chance and had made the most of it! But she couldn't, for she was supposed to be Anne and Anne's father had died when she was a little girl.

She told him of a few of the college men she had known, who had gone, eagerly, at the first call.

"They didn't even want to wait to get commissions! *They* just wanted to fight!"

The revelation of Peter Hyde made her think of Claire's brother. She told him about Claire and Anne—she called Anne, vaguely, "another girl." "Claire's a darling and we just love her, but we can't *abide* her brother! Of course it's not reasonable, because we've never laid eyes on him, but we've heard enough from Claire to know just what he's like. I suppose the war made a few like him—he was brave enough over there and lucky to have all his recommendations recognized, but it made him *so* conceited! He came back here and just strutted around, everywhere. Claire says her mother's friends used to have *teas* for him—he'd go to them and speak and show his medals! Claire was mad over him. She was so disappointed because I came here instead of going to Merrycliffe. But I couldn't see myself spending my time petting her beloved Lion! I knew I'd be rude and say just what I thought."

Nancy and Peter were sitting upon the stump of a tree near the cliff. Peter suddenly rose and walked to the edge—his back square to Nancy. After a moment he turned.

"Thought I heard something down there," he explained, at her questioning glance. "Don't blame you for disliking that sort—like Claire's brother! They're a rummy kind! I had a friend a lot like him. But—maybe, it wasn't all his fault—about the teas and things! Maybe his mother got 'em started and he didn't want to hurt her!"

It was like Peter Hyde, so gentle with children and animals, to stand up now for even Barry Wallace's kind.

"You're just like Dad," Nancy cried warmly, then stopped, a little frightened. But of course Peter had not been in Freedom long enough to know anything about the Leavitts.

He bowed with great ceremony, one hand over his heart.

"If Dad's like daughter, I thank you for the compliment. Now, if you will linger longer with me I'd like to show you Mrs. Sally and her babies. Sally is my experimental pig. I've built a piggery for her with a plunge and a sunken garden, and if you don't declare that Sally enjoys such improved surroundings, I'll know my whole summer's work's a failure."

Nancy walked over the rough ground toward the barns with a light heart. She had a delightful sense of being "pals" with this new Peter Hyde—who, while the Barry Wallaces were swaggering around with their medals, was up here in an out-of-the-way corner of the nation, fighting a new sort of a fight! He actually *wanted* her approval of his new piggery!

CHAPTER XVI

PETER LENDS A HAND

It was quite natural that Nancy should take her problems to Peter Hyde.

More correctly, she did not take them—Peter Hyde discovered them when, a few days later, he found Nancy alone in her Bird's-nest, completely surrounded by sheets of paper, a frown wrinkling her entire face, furiously chewing one end of her pencil.

There had, of course, to be some explanation of the manuscript. Nancy told him of the play she was writing, how she had really come to North Hero to finish it!

"I thought I'd have hours and hours to work. And I was so glad when I found this hiding place. I've been here, now, weeks and weeks, and have done scarcely a thing!"

"Is it because the Muse will not come?" asked Peter, eyeing the scattered sheets with awe.

"Oh, it would *come*—if it had a chance! My head's just bursting with things I want to write and I dream about them in my sleep. But—it sounds silly—I'm so busy. Maybe the things I do don't seem important but I just can't escape them."

She made room for Peter on the seat beside her. Then she told him of Aunt Milly; of that first trip to the orchard, how it had been the beginning of a new life for the little woman.

"I bring her downstairs every day now, right after breakfast, and she's one of the family. I'm going to coax Webb to make another sort of a chair; one she can wheel herself—I've seen them. She's learned to knit beautifully; she's so proud because she's working on a sock for the Belgian children—she says it's the first time she's *ever* felt useful! She helps B'lindy, too. It makes you want to cry to see how happy she is. But with all her independence she wants me all the time. When I start to leave her there's something in the way she looks at me that is just as though she reached out and caught me by the hand!"

Nancy described, too, how B'lindy was constantly finding little tasks for her that would keep her in the kitchen or on the back porch within sound of her voice.

"You see talking's the joy of B'lindy's life and my ears are new—they haven't heard all the things she has to say. Just when I think I can escape she begins telling me of the cake her mother baked for Miss Sabrina's mother the day the Governor of Vermont came to Happy House—or something like that!"

Anxious that Peter should understand everything Nancy made a vivid word-picture of Miss Sabrina and of the difficulties she had had in winning her. "I believe she's fond of me now, but she just doesn't know *how* to show it! She's never displayed one bit of affection in her whole life, I'm sure. She's stone. But sometime she's going to break—I'm doing my best to make her! I know she enjoys having dear little Aunt Milly around, but do you think she'd say so? Goodness no. But there's a lot of good in Aunt Sabrina and I'm bound to know it all, so I make it my duty to sit with her just so long each day while she tells me about the Leavitts and the other families of this Island. And there *is* something heroic about them all!

"So here I am, just tingling to finish the last act of my play and not a moment to myself! If it isn't precious Aunt Milly or Aunt Sabrina or B'lindy or even dear old Jonathan, it's Nonie or Davy or——"

"Or me," finished Peter Hyde, glancing significantly at the neglected work. "Your hands *are* full!"

Nancy went on earnestly. "And it all seems so worth while! Look at Nonie—she's a different creature already. I don't believe she pretends as much, either—her little body is catching up with her spirit. And Davy doesn't hang his head when he looks at you!"

Peter Hyde could understand her feeling toward the children. They had planned together to bring something more into those two starved young lives. Like Nancy, he was delighted at the results already apparent. It *was* work too worth while to be abandoned—for anything.

"Nonie fairly eats up the books I give her but she always wants to read them with me—it's so that she can ask questions. And the questions she asks! Every new thing she learns she immediately adapts to her own life. We've begun 'Little Women' and of course she plays Amy! Poor little flower, sometimes I think of old Dan'l and Liz and wonder from where on earth the child got her gift. And what a precious blessing it is to her!"

Recalling Davy's contempt for his sister's "actin' lies," they both laughed.

"How could *anyone* think bad things of Davy," cried Nancy, indignantly. "He's the soul of truth and honor! But up here he won't have a chance."

"Oh, yes, he will!" Peter contradicted. "If I'm any good reading character in a ten-year-old he'll *make* a chance. He's a leader, now. Look at the way the other boys follow his slightest suggestion!"

Davy's "club" was flourishing. The attractions that Peter and Nancy had added to its program had made it boom. Several new "fellars" had come in. The meetings were even more frequent than Liz cleaned the meeting-house, and now, because it had become known that Miss Sabrina's niece was a member of the club, no lickings awaited the members upon their return, rather impatient mothers eager to hear "what that girl at Happy House was up to now." There

was some talk about turning the club into a Boy Scout troop; Mr. Peter had promised to organize them and train them.

"Oh, dear," Nancy sighed, perplexed and torn, "it's like having a dream you've dreamed crumble all to pieces! I wanted to have my play done before my—I mean, I wanted to finish it up here and then send it straight to Theodore Hoffman himself. Of course you don't know him. He's one of the greatest dramatists and play producers in the world. I know it's daring in me and maybe he won't even give a minute to my little insignificant effort, but—whatever he may say, I'll know it is the best criticism I can get!"

To Nancy's surprise Peter displayed a considerable knowledge of plays and actors, critics and producers. He could see her problem, too—how she was torn between the claims of Happy House and her beloved work.

Nancy was grateful for his sympathy and because he did not laugh at her. But of course, why should anyone who could find music in waving corn not understand her own dreams!

Peter's face looked very much as though he was tackling some problem of drainage—or a new incubator.

"When you get right down to plain facts, it's a question of conserving time. You're wasting it—somewhere. I believe you can double up a bit. Let Aunt Milly listen to Belinda, and teach Aunt Milly to help Nonie. I'll take care of Davy. You say Aunt Milly likes to feel she's useful—if you start her she can help Nonie a lot and Nonie'll give her something to think about, too."

Nancy considered this with brightening eyes. "I believe you're right! I've just been selfish, trying to do everything myself just because I loved to, and stupid—to think no one else could do it! Of course Aunt Milly can read with Nonie—and play with her, too. I'll begin this very day. I'll have a school here in the orchard and Nonie and B'lindy and Aunt Milly shall come. It'll be the funniest school you ever heard of," Nancy laughed. "I'll teach B'lindy the joy of seeing Hopworth 'young 'uns' eat her best molasses cookies!"

Nancy's face showed that she was mentally leaping far ahead in her plans. Peter felt that he had been left out.

"Let me be the head taskmaster or whatever you call it. You'll doubtless need a strong hand now and then. Anyway, you don't know how much it helps *my* work mixing a little fun with it!"

Now that her problems were straightening Nancy felt very kindly and gracious and happy.

"Of course, you may come to the orchard—whenever you want! Oh, you *have* helped me so much," she cried, with a smile that brought a sudden gleam in Peter Hyde's eyes. "Now, if you'll give me a hand putting these pages together, I'll run in and prepare Aunt Milly and B'lindy."

Following along the lines of Peter's suggestion, Nancy's "school" developed rapidly. She covered sheet after sheet of paper with "schedules" and finally to her satisfaction, blocked off every waking moment of her pupils' day. Aunt Milly fell heartily in with her plans; she was

proud to know that she could help. The books for Nonie that Nancy had spirited to Happy House were as fascinating to her as to Nonie.

After the first day Aunt Milly thought of a great many new "lessons" they could begin for Nonie. With the promise that after awhile she could make for herself a "pinky" dress, like Nancy's, Aunt Milly taught her to hem and seam and tuck. At the same time Nonie learned that it was quite as bad to wear a torn, soiled dress as to say "him and me" or "I ain't."

"You're *wonderful*, Aunt Milly," Nancy had declared, after this innovation in the school. "I never would have thought of it, myself." She laughed, ruefully. "I'd better study with Nonie, I guess, and learn to mend, myself."

Nancy had told Aunt Milly, too, of Nonie's pretend-mother. Perhaps that was why Aunt Milly's voice was very sweet and tender as she and Nonie talked and played and read together. Nonie liked to wheel the chair; she began to look forward to bolder excursions beyond the gate to the village.

B'lindy, in her heart still a little distrustful that "no good could come from encouragin' them Hopworths," nevertheless found countless excuses to join the little group under the apple trees, sometimes bringing some hideous lace crocheting that had been years in the making but would some day—if B'lindy lived long enough to complete it—cover a bed. Sometimes she brought a basket of goodies and other times came empty-handed and just sat idle with a softened look in her old eyes as they rested on the purple rim of mountains across the water.

"I guess it makes a body work better for restin' a spell," she said, after one of these intervals.

But with the success of Nancy's new plans were two little clouds—small at first but growing with each day. One was the realization that very soon her work for these dear people could go on without her. And though in one breath she told herself that this was fortunate, because her stay at Happy House must end with her father's return, in the next she was swept with a sharp jealousy that, after she had gone, Aunt Milly and B'lindy and Nonie and Davy would still gather under the apple tree.

Since the afternoon Peter Hyde had found her with the manuscript she had not laid eyes upon him!

A sense of hurt at his neglect did not grow less when she learned from old Jonathan, after one or two questions, that he had gone over to Plattsburg; rather it gave way to a resentment that Peter, considering what good chums they had grown to be and the "school" and everything, should have gone off on any such trip without one word of parting!

"He'll see how well we can get along without him," she had declared to herself after the third day. After all he probably *was* hiding something; this sudden disappearance must have some connection with it.

His comradeship had grown very pleasant, she admitted, but, she told herself, it belonged to the real Anne Leavitt, like Aunt Milly and Nonie and the others, he must drop out of her life when she left Happy House.

So that he might not even be missed by Davy and his cronies, Nancy devoted one entire afternoon to teaching the boys of the club how to build a fire without matches. When, after repeated and discouraging failures, the last one had joyfully succeeded, Nancy had promised to teach them to wig-wag at the very next meeting.

When Nancy returned to the house, flushed and tired from the hours on the beach, old Jonathan, at the door, presented her with a half-blown rose, its stem thrust through a folded sheet of paper.

"Mr. Peter, over to Judson's, asked me to give it t'you."

With a certain set of the college men and girls Nancy had been very popular; more than once pretty tributes of flowers had come to her. She had accepted them rather indifferently, had kept them with dutiful care in water and had pasted the cards that had come with them in her remembrance book. But this gift was different; it was quaint—and *so* pretty!

"If you will meet me at seven in the orchard I will tell you a surprise that will tickle you to pieces," Peter Hyde had scrawled across the paper.

"How—*funny!*" laughed Nancy, reading and re-reading the lines. "What can it be?"

If Nancy had asked herself why she sang as she dressed for supper she would have thought, truthfully, that it *was* because she was ravenously hungry and B'lindy's supper smelled very good; and she chose to wear, from her slender wardrobe, a pink organdy, because it would be cool—*not* that she even dreamed, for a moment, of doing such a silly thing as going to the orchard at seven o'clock, to meet Peter Hyde!

A dozen times, during the evening meal, she resolved that Peter Hyde's surprise could wait. He presumed, indeed, to think that, after he had absented himself for so long without one little word of explanation, she would go running at the crook of his little finger!

However, she put the pink rose in her belt and occasionally slipped it out to smell of it. It was the most beautiful rose she had ever seen—she must ask Jonathan its variety.

At five minutes of seven she picked up her knitting and sat resolutely down between her aunts on the hollyhock porch. Just as Aunt Sabrina was telling her how, back in 1776, Robert Leavitt had dined with Benedict Arnold on the flagship of his little Champlain fleet, two days before its engagement with the British, the old clock within the house struck seven. With her breath caught in her throat Nancy counted sixty, twice—then suddenly sprang to her feet and rushed off the veranda.

"Why, Nancy—dear," cried Aunt Milly, startled.

"Humph," grunted Aunt Sabrina, clicking her needles faster than ever.

Peter was in the orchard. He had been there since quarter of seven. He was disappointed at the coolness of Nancy's greeting; it seemed to him that he had been gone for ages, and he had, during his absence, quite foolishly, been looking forward to this meeting.

He had hoped, too, that she might wear the rose.

"One guess where I've been," he commanded lightly, as he held out his hand to assist her into the tree.

"Dear me, how can I tell? Buying plows or pigs or——"

Nancy tried to make her tone seem airily indifferent, when all the time she was really consumed with curiosity and a desire, too, to tell him how splendidly her work was going.

"I have seen Theodore Hoffman!"

"*What?*"

"Don't look as though you thought I'd gone mad. He's human. I happened to hear that he was staying at Bluff Point, so I went over to see the gentleman."

Nancy's eyes *did* say that she thought he had gone quite out of his mind!

"How did you *dare*?"

"I know a fellow that knows him. He was very nice—as I said, he's human, terribly human. You should see him playing tennis!"

"What—*what* did you say to him?"

"I told him I had a little friend who was soon to become one of the greatest playwrights in the world and——"

"*Peter!*" Nancy lifted an imploring finger. "Honest, what *did* you say? And why——" she was suddenly abashed. He had done this for her.

Peter kept his tone light.

"You see I did have some pig business over that way, so it was easy enough to do a favor for a little pal at the same time. Hoffman was very nice—he's going to be around up here for some weeks and promised me he would drive over here. Now it's up to you to have the manuscript ready."

"Oh, Peter, I'm *frightened!* You're a darling! I shall *always* bless pigs! Of *course* I'll have it done—I'll work night and day. I'll go straight back to the house now." She jumped to the ground. In her haste she forgot the poor rose she had hidden behind her.

Peter, crestfallen at her sudden flight, found it, however. He smiled, whimsically, as he held it in the palm of his hand.

"Nice little kid," he said, as he had said once before, then he put the rose carefully into his pocket.

CHAPTER XVII

NANCY PLANS A PARTY

"What are you doing, Nonie?"

Pencil poised in mid-air; Nancy leaned down from her Nest where she had been working. Aunt Milly was nodding in her chair, her finger and thumb between the pages of "Sarah Crewe," from which she had been reading until she had succumbed to the drowsy sounds of the summer air. Nonie had been tiptoeing back and forth across the grass making funny, little, inarticulate sounds in her throat.

"I'm playing party," Nonie stopped under the apple tree and lifted a thoughtful face to Nancy. "When I grow up I shall have ten children and have parties all the time. There'll be harps and violins and drums and lots and lots to eat. And I shall wear velvet, with a long train, and carry a big fan." She sighed. "Do you always have to be beautiful to do beautiful things?"

"Just doing beautiful things makes you seem beautiful," explained Nancy.

Nonie was not satisfied. "B'lindy makes beautiful cakes and pies but *she* isn't beautiful. And Jonathan puts seeds in the ground that grow into pretty flowers but—he's ugly! Could I do beautiful things and—look like this?" She spread out her shabby skirts.

Behind the troubled gaze Nancy caught the gleam of a vision.

"You can—you can! Nonie, no one can ever take your dreams away from you!"

"Not even Liz," echoed Nonie, bitterly.

A few days before a tragedy had touched Nonie's life. From out of nowhere there had wandered into her affections a hungry-eyed, maltese cat with two small babies. Nonie had mothered them passionately, tenderly. She had hidden scraps of food from her own meagre portions to feed them; she had fitted a box with old rags and had concealed it beneath the loose plankings of the shed. Then, mother cat, satisfied that her babies were in good hands, had disappeared.

"Even kittens can't have mothers," Nonie had thought, perplexed over the ways of the world. "Never mind, darlings, Nonie will love you," and she had kissed each small puss as a pledge of her devotion.

But a week later she found both kittens lying stiff and cold behind the shed. At her passionate outburst, Liz had told her that "*she* wa'nt a goin' to have any *cats* under foot!"

Nonie had taken her sorrow to the Bird's-Nest and Nancy and Aunt Milly had managed to soothe her. But she would not forgive Liz.

"If that mother should ever come back how could I face her," she had asked very seriously. "She'd know it was my fault—because I left them! I wish—I wish babies never had to be left—without mothers!" Thereupon had taken shape the determination in Nonie's heart to some day have ten children whom she would never, never leave—not for a moment!

"Don't forget the fairy godmother, Nonie, and her wand. Some day she'll turn your old dress into gold cloth and put a crown upon your head." Nancy made her tone light; she could not bear to see the shadow on the child's face. She jumped down from the tree.

"I've just thought of the loveliest plan! Nonie, let's have a party at Happy House!"

"A *real* party?"

"Yes, a real party—with lots and *lots* to eat! It's too warm for velvet, but how would you like to wear a white dress of mine that's dreadfully small for me? I'm sure Aunt Milly's clever fingers can fix it over. B'lindy shall make a cake—like the Governor had, and Aunt Sabrina shall get out all the old silver and linen."

Nonie's face said plainly that she could not believe her ears!

"Honest?" she whispered, glancing toward Aunt Milly.

"Well——" Nancy laughed. "Of course, we'll have to consult Aunt Sabrina and Aunt Milly and B'lindy. Suppose we cough very loudly—then Aunt Milly will waken!"

An hour earlier, as Nancy sat in the Nest making notes here and there upon her manuscript, the thought of the party had not entered her head. But once there, it grew rapidly. Besides, her heart was very light; she wanted everyone else to celebrate with her—her play was done! She had worked day and night; the tiny shadows under her eyes told that. But in her exultation any physical weariness was forgotten.

In the still hours of the night before she had dashed off a sleepy line to Claire..... "The Gypsy Sweetheart is done. Darling, pray for me! My fate lies in those pages. I may soon be with you at Merrycliffe—that is, if you still want me."

The last line was an afterthought. That day a curious letter had come from Claire, perplexing to Nancy because Claire's usual complaining tone had given place to mysterious rejoicing. "I can't tell you *anything*, Nancy, because I promised I wouldn't, but some day you're going to know. I'm the most wildly happy girl in the world," and beyond that the maddening creature had written nothing. "I believe she's engaged," thought Nancy, indignant and hurt, too, that Claire should let any such thing come into her life without some hint to her dearest friends.

After repeated coughing Aunt Milly wakened with a start and tried to look as though she had not been asleep. Nancy told her of the party they wanted to have at Happy House. She had a way of telling it that made it seem very simple and easy. After one frightened gasp, Aunt Milly promised to help win Aunt Sabrina's and B'lindy's approval.

Nothing, perhaps, so marked the amazing changes in Happy House worked by Nancy's stay than the eagerness with which B'lindy, and even Miss Sabrina, accepted the suggestion of the "party."

They sat with Nancy and Aunt Milly on the hollyhock porch after supper excitedly making plans; at least B'lindy and Aunt Milly were excited; Aunt Sabrina had moments of alarm—it had been so very long since they had entertained anyone!

"Do let me plan the whole thing," begged Nancy. "I'm good at such things. I always had charge of all the class stunts. Ever since I've been here I've pictured how wonderfully this old house would open up for entertaining. We'll have flowers in all the rooms—heaps and heaps of them. But let's serve out under the trees!"

B'lindy and Miss Sabrina were horrified at such an idea. When guests had come before to Happy House they had eaten in dignified manner from the dining-room table.

"But your garden is so lovely," Nancy cried. She made a vivid picture of how it would look on the day of the party. Her enthusiasm won her point; even Aunt Sabrina's doubt had to yield before her youthful determination.

So it was agreed that ice-cream and cake—like the Governor had had—should be passed from tables set under the old trees, and in the dining-room there would be punch in the old punch bowl that had, in years gone by, honored many a distinguished gathering under the old roof. And Nancy should have her "heaps" of flowers everywhere.

"Maybe we'd better keep the sitting-room closed," suggested Miss Sabrina, faintly. She was too proud to tell them that she could not bear the thought of curious eyes staring at the mantel with its ragged crack, everlasting reminder of the storm that marked the falling of the shadow over Happy House.

But Nancy would not listen even to this—flowers everywhere and doors and windows open, everywhere.

When Nancy had declared that everyone in Freedom must be invited—even the Hopworths and Peter Hyde, Miss Sabrina had made her last protest.

"The Leavitts, Anne——" she had begun.

"Oh, *bless* the Leavitts," Nancy had laughingly broken in, "dear Aunt Sabrina, don't you see that it's your chance to show that—that catty Mrs. Eaton, who's just a common storekeeper's wife and's only been here on North Hero one and one-half generations, that *you*, Sabrina Leavitt, are not going to be told by *her* what you should do and what you shouldn't do!"

Miss Sabrina had not forgotten what she had suffered from Mrs. Eaton's cruel tongue; Nancy's impetuous argument carried convincing weight. So Nancy triumphantly added to her list, Mr. Daniel Hopworth, Miss (Elizabeth or Eliza, she wondered) Hopworth, Miss Nonie Hopworth and Master David Hopworth.

For the next few days such a bustle followed that Nancy wondered why she had not thought of it before! While B'lindy opened shutters and swept and dusted and aired, the sunshine poured into corners of the old house that had never seen it before. Miss Sabrina unlocked old chests and sorted out and polished old silver and washed and pressed old linen of exquisite fineness. Aunt Milly made over the white dress for Nonie. Nancy wrote the invitations, in Miss Sabrina's name, and despatched them by Webb to what B'lindy called "Tom, Dick and Harry" in Freedom.

Nancy, herself, invited Webb.

"I'll tell you a secret about this party, Webb! I want everyone in Freedom to know that Happy House *is* a happy house; I want them to see how wonderful Aunt Milly is and that she *wouldn't* be happier in her grave! I want them to see the old mantel and the lovely rooms. And I want them to know that the Hopworth's are invited!"

"Wal, I guess Freedom folks never saw the like before at Happy House, leastways not sence the old missus was alive," the old man had excitedly answered. "You *bet* old Webb'll be thar!" Nancy knew that as each invitation was delivered at each door there would go with it an excited account of the strange "sociable" that could include the Hopworths, and his added opinion that "thet gal'd sartin'ly started things happenin' at Happy House."

The smithy's son was engaged to help Jonathan cut the grass, weed the gardens and clip the borders, under Nancy's direction. So that, while amazing changes were going on within the house, changes equally startling were transforming the garden. Old Jonathan straightened more than once to view with pride the results of their work.

"This garden used to be the pride of the Island," he muttered, seeing in its restored trimness something of its old-time beauty. "But it's young hands that's needed."

"It's beautiful, *now*," Nancy had declared. "It's the loveliest garden I ever saw, Jonathan," and she thought of Nonie's quaint words: "Jonathan puts in seeds that grow into pretty flowers and he's ugly!" Yes, the wrinkled, leathery face under the old hat was not beautiful, and yet something of the beauty of the flowers he grew was reflected in the expression of the old eyes that bent so tenderly over them.

"That's life," reflected Nancy, indulging in a moment's philosophizing. "It's really what we think and do that makes us beautiful or not beautiful!"

They had worked late; the long shadows of the afternoon danced in lacy patterns over the gray walls of the house. Nancy, watching them, thought of that first disappointment she had felt upon viewing Happy House. Then it had seemed an ugly pile of stones, severely lined. Now it was more like a breathing Thing. It had sheltered and seen shaped so many lives; it held a future, too; it must stand protectingly for others after Aunt Milly and Aunt Sabrina had gone!

It had, now, with its blinds fastened back, an awakened, expectant look, as of eyes suddenly opened after a long, long sleep.

Then into Nancy's happy meditations flashed the disturbing thought that nothing about the garden or the house belonged in any way to her!

"It's just *like* me to forget," she declared aloud, shouldering her hoe and turning toward the carriage barn. "And like me to get fond of it all!"

"Anyway, Nonie'll have her party, and even if there isn't a harp and a velvet train there'll be lots to eat or B'lindy's name isn't B'lindy. I wonder," and Nancy addressed the distant outline of the Judson's barns, "how Peter Hyde'll *ever* act at a tea-party!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PARTY

Very early, on the morning of the day of the party, Nancy and Aunt Milly and B'lindy and Jonathan and Nonie and Davy and Peter Hyde, each, scanned a sunny, cloudless sky with relief and joy.

"Well, it isn't going to rain, anyway," each thought.

Even Miss Sabrina, lifting her shade slowly, felt her pulse beat more quickly as a sunbeam danced into her face. This day was a new day for Happy House; she could not count the years since a "party" had been given in her home; her old hands trembled now as she dressed hurriedly. "*What* if something goes wrong!" she thought. Had they forgotten anything?

A little later Nancy, standing with her arms full of girlish finery of thirty years ago, voiced the same fear to Aunt Milly.

"*What* if something should go wrong!" But there had been a giggle in her voice as she had said it. This was the most delightfully funny party she had ever known, and it was going to be the very jolliest, too.

Directly after breakfast Nonie had run home with the made-over white dress. She thought it much lovelier than velvet and in her joy over a pair of Nancy's slippers the child forgot her cherished dream of a train.

What Miss Milly should wear to the party was a matter that demanded much thought. "You see, I want you to look *happy*," Nancy explained to Aunt Milly. She had dragged down from the attic a little trunk in which, after the accident, many of Aunt Milly's girlish possessions had been packed. It was great fun taking them out and selecting from them what Aunt Milly should wear. There were not many things—compared to Nancy's own wardrobe it was pitifully small and spoke eloquently of the limited pleasures of Aunt Milly's girlhood.

"This will be lovely," Nancy held out a flowered silk. "And you can wear these darling beads. And this," picking out a shell comb, "in your hair. And I will send Jonathan over to Judson's for a bunch of their lovely roses. I *know* they have some!"

"But isn't this—queer—and out of date? I'm old now, Nancy!"

"You dear, funny Aunt Milly! Don't you know that you're not a bit old? All this time you've been shut away the years have been rolling right past you and have left you untouched. You're going to be the sweetest picture and you're going to be a—surprise, too!"

She was a picture when Nancy's eager fingers had finished with her. The pink of the quaintly fashioned dress was not more pink than the color that flushed her delicate cheeks; into her soft hair Nancy had thrust the shell comb and around her neck hung a chain of tiny corals. Jonathan had returned from Judson's with four bunches of roses and one of them now adorned Miss Milly.

"You're just *lovely*," Nancy had cried, imprinting a warm kiss upon the blushing cheek.

She awarded the same stamp of approval upon Aunt Sabrina, too, who was very stately in a black silk with one of the Judson roses pinned in the net fichu about her throat.

"And I shall kiss you, too," Nancy called out to B'lindy, catching, through the open door a glimpse of marvellously starched calico.

"You go 'long and keep out from under my feet," had been B'lindy's retort as she retreated from Nancy's threatened attack. "I guess there's work has to be done before *this* party's over!" But the grumbling in her voice could not conceal her pride and satisfaction.

"Oh, *everything* is just lovely," Nancy exclaimed, tiptoeing about to add a finishing touch here and there. And indeed, some magic wand seemed to have scattered gladness everywhere about the old place; the great rooms, open now to the sunshine, radiated it in the fragrance of the flowers that Nancy had heaped everywhere.

"I wish it would stay like this," was her unspoken thought.

But in her plans for the party which was to show all Freedom that Happy House *was* a happy house, Nancy had reckoned without Mrs. Cyrus Eaton.

Since trouble had shadowed Happy House and shut its hospitable doors, time had brought changes to Freedom just as it had to every place on the globe; commerce, trade, politics, a certain democratizing of the standards of living had made their inroads even upon the little village; new families came and old ones died out. And new influences challenged and threatened the old Island aristocracy.

Not the least of these was the influence of trade. When Cyrus Eaton bought and rebuilt the general store next to the post-office he made for himself—or for his wife—a social prestige that was beyond dispute. As the years had gone by he had strengthened this materially by certain credits which he extended to different families in the village.

Webb had gone to Mrs. Eaton's first with his invitation and his story. That lady had flipped the little card upon the table with a snort. Did Miss Leavitt or anyone *else* think she'd go anywhere where those Hopworths were? Was it not her duty, too, to warn her friends as to what this party would be like—to tell them of this hoydenish, impertinent girl, "of the bad branch of the family," who seemed to have hypnotized Miss Sabrina?

By the time Mrs. Eaton had finished her baking, put on her best purple poplin and started out in Webb's trail, her rage had carried her to such heights of eloquence that it was not difficult for her to convince her neighbors that some "hoax" was about to be played upon the good folks of Freedom and that each one must show her pride by remaining away from the party. She talked so fast, and repeated her stories so often, that she digressed, quite unconsciously, from the truth and, at the last few calls, made Nancy out a most shocking young person!

"I *can't* tell you—I *wouldn't* tell you—all the goings *on* at that Cove," was her favorite introduction. "And in the orchard, too! *Anyone* could have told Sabrina Leavitt she was a *fool* bringing the creature here—that branch of the family, *everyone* knows, wouldn't be above doing *anything!*"

So while happy Nancy arranged flowers for the party the expected guests entrenched themselves behind their closed blinds, their righteous satisfaction tinged the very least bit by regret born of immense curiosity.

However, there were two exceptions. Samuel Todd, the postmaster, was an aspirant for a seat in the State Legislature. His ancestors had never lived anywhere else but on the Island and he had inherited a wholesome respect for the Leavitt name. He was enough of a politician, too, to know that, even though she was an old woman, he might sometime need Miss Sabrina's good-will.

"You go 'long and keep your eyes open and your mouth shut," he had advised his wife when, after Mrs. Eaton's hurried call, she had sought his counsel. "You women talk too much, anyway."

Mrs. Todd, for once, was delighted to do his bidding; Carrie Baker, over at North Hero, had made over her yellow muslin so that it was "better'n new—and just lyin' up there in the closet catchin' dust," she explained to Mrs. Sniggs. Mrs. Sniggs promptly offered to accompany her.

"I'm that *curious* to see that mantel—and the girl, too!"

So that, when the hour of the party struck and found Nancy, like a flower, with Miss Sabrina and Miss Milly, on the lawn, ready to receive their guests, the only guests (excepting Peter Hyde and the Hopworths and Miss Sabrina and B'lindy, peeking from the door, did not count them) were Mrs. Sniggs and Mrs. Todd.

Liz Hopworth with Nonie and Davy had come early. Davy shone as to face and feet; the grandeur of the new shoes Peter Hyde had given him quite made up for the small things lacking in the rest of his appearance. Liz was trying not to pant in a plum-colored cashmere that was many sizes too small for her gaunt frame. Nancy had managed to place her near Aunt Milly—Aunt Milly was sure to be cordial and gentle with her and put her at her ease.

Webb and Peter Hyde had come early, too. Nancy had caught herself watching for Peter Hyde. She had given a little involuntary gasp when she saw him—he was resplendent in immaculate white flannels!

"Of course he *bought* them—just for this!" she thought regretfully. However, she had a moment of delicious satisfaction when she took him to Miss Sabrina; they should all see that a hired man could be very much of a gentleman.

"Peter," she managed to whisper to him, "I have a feeling that something *awful* is going to happen!" Then Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Sniggs had come through the gate and she had gone forward to meet them.

It was Webb who gave Nancy a hint of the real truth. He was, as he expressed it, "so gol darn flubberin' mad at the hul parcel of womenfolks he'd liked to burst!" Gossip had crept to the post-office stoop and Webb had sensed what was going on. "Skunks—beggin' your pardon, Miss Anne, but that's *what!*"

Nancy had a moment of panic; her eyes sought wildly for Peter Hyde. Then her fighting blood stirred. "Thank you, Webb," she said with well-assumed calmness. "Don't worry a bit! We'll show them—we'll act just as though we hadn't invited anyone else!"

But her nonchalant manner cloaked real distress. There was Miss Sabrina, proud Miss Sabrina who had opened the doors of her trouble for all Freedom to come and gape at—Nancy knew it had not been easy! There was pretty, fluttering, expectant Aunt Milly in the dress she had had made when she was eighteen; Nonie who had dreamed of throngs of guests paying homage before her; and B'lindy, who had made a cake that was "like as a twin to the one my mother made for the Gov'nor!" What would *they* say?

Was she not, indirectly, the cause of the humiliation that threatened them?

Nancy hurried to Peter Hyde where, in a corner of the garden, he stood paying court to Nonie. In answer to his pleasant nonsense Nonie's delighted laughter was rising shrilly. Nancy sent Nonie back to Aunt Milly. Then she caught Peter's arm.

"Peter! *Pe-ter!* Quick—come behind this bush! I'm—I'm—I've got to cry——"

And to Peter Hyde's consternation Nancy *did* burst into tears.

"For Heaven's sake, Nancy, what——"

"I'm just—*mad*," Nancy blurted from behind a handkerchief. "The—the *cats!*" She lifted her head, relieved by her sudden outburst. "It's that Mrs. Eaton again! She's—just—getting even!" She told what Webb had said. "And here's the—party—and no one will come! Aunt Sabrina will never, never get over it. And B'lindy—I *wish* I could run away."

Peter Hyde wanted very much to laugh, but the real distress in Nancy's face touched him. He patted her consolingly.

"Can't I do something? Can't Webb and I round 'em up at the point of a gun?"

"N-no, it's too late! We've just got to act as though the—the garden was *full* and make the best of it! I wanted it to be *such* a success. I wanted it to be a party that Nonie 'd never forget. And I wanted everyone to see Aunt Milly! Oh, why, oh, *why* doesn't something happen!" For Nancy had suddenly remembered the huge pails of ice-cream and the cake that was "like as a twin to the one my mother made for the Gov'nor."

At that moment the loud whirring of an automobile caught their attention. Nancy, red-eyed, peeped from behind their bush.

"It's at our gate!" she cried. "*Peter*——" she clutched his arm. From the tonneau a tall man was alighting. To Nancy there was something vaguely familiar in the sharp-featured, clean-shaven face and in the mass of wavy white hair that fringed his coat collar.

"*Peter, it's—it's—Theodore Hoffman!*"

CHAPTER XIX

THE MASTER

A bolt from the cloudless blue could not have startled the little gathering on the lawn more than did the arrival of the distinguished stranger at the gate of Happy House. Moreover, French Mercedes cars did not often pass through North Hero; this was purple and cream color and the chauffeur wore purple livery. And the man who walked up the path had a bearing that distinctly set him apart from ordinary mortals.

Nancy, in a panic, wanted the earth to swallow her, but as the earth was very solid, she had no choice but to drag herself forward. She had, only a moment before, prayed that something would happen—and something had!

Peter Hyde had rushed forward to greet the newcomer and this had given Nancy a moment to rally her scattered wits. She was too busy whispering an explanation to Miss Sabrina to notice how friendly had been the master's greeting to Peter.

"Miss Leavitt, may I present Mr. Theodore Hoffman—and Miss Anne Leavitt."

Peter's voice was as steady as though he was introducing any John Smith; there was even a twinkle in his eye, as it caught Nancy's glance, that seemed to say: "I have brought the master to you—now!"

There was a gentleness in the keen, deep-set eyes, a friendliness in the musical voice of the master that suddenly quieted Nancy's fluttering nerves. Time and again, at the very thought of this meeting, she had been so frightened and now—she was not a bit afraid. She was even glad he had come when the garden looked so pretty, when Aunt Sabrina was so proudly garbed in her best silk, when Aunt Milly, all pink and white, with Nonie perched on the arm of her chair, was leaning over explaining some intricate stitch in a bit of embroidery to Liz, to whom embroidery was not less remote than Sanskrit literature.

Mrs. Sniggs and Mrs. Todd were staring, open-mouthed, first at the stranger, then at the cream-and-purple car at the gate.

Nancy's spirits that had dropped to such depths behind the syringa bushes soared again. At last her moment had come! The master was declaring his delight in having chosen such a happy afternoon to come to Happy House; he admired the garden, and the old house; he admitted to a great curiosity concerning the Islands—he had never visited them before.

Nancy left him with Aunt Sabrina. Aunt Sabrina would manage to tell him a great deal—Nancy, watching, knew just when she left the Indians and the burning of Freedom and began on Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys and the coming of Benedict Arnold and his flagship to the Island.

"He'll love her," she whispered to Peter Hyde, nodding toward where the master leaned with deep attention over Miss Sabrina's chair. "Look me square in the eye, Peter! *Did* you know he was coming to-day?"

"On my honor, I didn't. Is the play ready?"

"All ready, in a nice fat envelope. For goodness sake, look at Webb!"

Webb, returning from the house where he had hurried to tell B'lindy of the coming of the distinguished guest ("Don' know who he is nor whar he come from, but he's got one of them thur autymobiles that's bigger'n a steam engine and a fellar drivin' it thet's dressed up like a circus lady") was standing in the path wildly gesticulating with one hand to attract Nancy's attention and with the other clapped over his mouth to suppress the laughter that was plainly shaking his entire body.

Nancy and Peter turned to see what had so convulsed him. Up the road toward the gate were approaching three separate groups of women, all coming hurriedly, breathlessly, with a great deal of chatter and fussing with hats and gloves.

Mrs. Maria Slade, behind her blind had seen the purple and cream-colored car. So had Miss Merry, across the street; so had a dozen others from behind their entrenchments. Simultaneously, in as many hearts, the urge of curiosity conquered resentment.

"It'll only take me *half* a minit to slip on my green dress," Mrs. Slade had called to Miss Merry. "Wait fer me!"

Mrs. Brown, next door, had heard her.

"I'll come along, too," she called out.

All through the street there was a stirring behind closed blinds, a hurried taking down of the Sunday-best and a feverish changing of shoes and searching for gloves.

"It's all very well for Sarah Eaton to tell us to show our pride," Mrs. Dexter had confided to Mrs. Hill, "but *I* just said to myself nobody done nothing to hurt me, *I* was goin' to see for myself what Sabriny Leavitt was havin' up there! Did you see that automobile? Purple, as I live. My, ain't this sun hot! I've got to go slower or I'll have a stroke."

"Every blessed woman in Freedom," cried Peter Hyde.

"Oh, how *funny*! Look at them coming. They saw the purple car. Peter, the party is a success! Aunt Sabrina will never know. Watch me now!" With a saucy tilt of her chin Nancy stepped down the path to greet the first of the late comers.

"*So* glad you have come," she murmured prettily, clasping Mrs. Slade's warm hand. "Do come under the trees where it is cool. I am so sorry you hurried."

In her most gracious manner Nancy presented each one in turn to Mr. Theodore Hoffman, of New York, then carried them off to Miss Milly.

"—and Miss Hopworth! But of course you know Miss Hopworth. Doesn't Nonie look darling to-day?" she would say to each one, with wicked intent.

Then a sudden inspiration seized her. "Nonie should play one of her pretend games for the master and their guests," she whispered excitedly to Aunt Milly and Nonie and Peter Hyde.

"Wheel Aunt Milly's chair back toward those bushes—that'll be the stage. Now, Nonie, play your best! Perhaps—perhaps the fairy godmother is here."

After a few moments of excited consultation Peter Hyde announced in a loud tone that, for the entertainment of the guests, a fairy fantasy, "The Visit of the Moon-Queen," would be presented by Miss Nonie Hopworth.

"Well, I swun, with folks here from N'York, encouragin' that girl to act her nonsense," murmured Mrs. Sniggs to a neighbor.

But the man-from-New York's face brightened expectantly when Nancy waved her hand out over their heads as though to touch them all with a fairy wand. "Let my magic give you fairy eyes so that you may see that this is *not* the garden of Happy House but a woodland, peopled by fairy creatures! If you will listen very hard, you will hear them stirring. It is the Flowers. They come to the Woodland to make it ready for the Moon-Queen who will visit them this night!"

Down through the trees danced Nonie, bare-footed, arms outflung, as though she was, indeed, joyously preparing for the triumphal coming of a Queen. In turn she characterized the Daisy, the Hollyhock, the Buttercup and the Rose—then became the good old Dandelion.

"Lily, you are *so* lazy," the Dandelion sternly admonished her fair sister. "Don't you know the Queen likes tidy gardens when she comes here? And see the muss Buttercup has left around. Oh, dearie me, children will be children and I'll be so glad when Buttercup and Daffy-down-dilly grow up! Daisy, it isn't lady-like to complain that your dress is so plain! I am sure the Queen will think you look very well, if your petals are clean. It's what you *do*, anyway, and *not* what you wear!"

Nancy saw Peter Hyde's laughing face drop suddenly between his arms.

With quaint, childish phrasing and with dancing steps Nonie interpreted her story to her audience. When each flower had done its part toward preparing the Garden for the coming of the Queen, Nonie, as the old Dandelion, admonished them to sit very still, "so as not to muss their dresses," and then disappeared only to appear again as the stately Queen. Like a peacock, holding an imaginary train in one hand, Nonie strutted across the grass, now nodding graciously to right and left, now haughtily chiding imaginary moonbeams who accompanied her. Then—the Queen supposedly in state upon her throne—Nonie was again the Dandelion, leading forward her sister flowers to pay court to their Queen.

Suddenly (from the direction of Aunt Milly's chair) came a slow, sorrowful voice that the Flowers (or at least Dandelion) lamented loudly as Trouble. The Flowers were sadly dismayed that Trouble should have intruded upon this festive gathering in honor of the Moon-Queen! But the Moon-Queen implored them "not to worry a bit."

"I know all about Trouble and the harm she does! I see everything as I ride through the sky. But, never fear, we will find a way to get rid of her!" The Queen threw out her hand with an imperial gesture. "Summon Youth!"

Nancy, as Youth, trying very hard not to giggle, answered the summons. In her pink dress, a flush dying her tanned cheeks, her eyes alight with life, she was so much the embodiment of joyous, appealing youth that Peter Hyde, absorbedly watching, felt a catch at his heart.

Gravely the Moon-Queen touched Youth with her magic wand.

"Go out into the world and drive Trouble away! I will give you fairy presents to help you in your fight. This," holding out a flower, "is a magic flower. If you wear it all the time you'll remember that there's always flowers and birds and nice things to make people happy. And here's a fairy leaf. If you wave that in people's faces they'll all be kind and never be cross to little children or animals or old people. And here is a fairy ring," placing a twisted dandelion stem in Youth's hand, "that'll make you love everybody and everybody love you. And here is a magic coat," putting Aunt Milly's shawl over Youth's arm, "when you wear it you'll always do beautiful things and you'll always seem beautiful and never grow old or ugly!"

Then the Flowers, at the Queen's bidding, danced wildly about Youth to show their joy at her coming—at least Nonie danced wildly, with utter abandon. Forgetting her audience, she had thrown herself heart and soul into the "game."

Again the Queen, she bade the pretty Rose step forward and take Youth by the hand and "walk along with her so that she'll see everything through your spectacles. I bid all *adieu!*"

After one sweeping bow Nonie had to unceremoniously leave the poor Moon-Queen in order to become the joyous Rose to whom had been allotted the pleasant task of accompanying Youth through her life's journey. She caught Youth by the hand and together, amid loud applause, led mainly by Webb and Peter Hyde, they danced away through the trees and shrubbery to the kitchen garden beyond.

"Author! Author!" came from Peter Hyde's corner and brought Nancy and Nonie, flushed by their play, back to the gathering under the trees.

"I'm blessed if *I* could make head'nor tail out of any of it, but did you see, Mary Sniggs, the way that N'York man watched the two of them galivantin'?"

Mrs. Sniggs discreetly snorted into her handkerchief. "That kind o' play-actin' may be very well for Sabriny Leavitt's niece, but I don' believe it'll do any girl any good that's gotta earn her livin'!"

Nancy, still breathless, found Peter Hyde at her side. There was an earnestness in the gaze he kept fixed upon her that brought an added color to her cheeks.

"Was it *dreadfully* silly, Peter? I couldn't resist it. Could you *see* their faces when they watched Nonie?"

"I could only see you! I feel as though fairies *had* been here!"

"Peter—you're silly," rebuked Nancy. "Shall I give you one of my fairy gifts? The flower—or the leaf——"

"I want the ring," he answered with provoking gravity.

"There—you shall have it! Now you will love everybody and everybody will love you," Nancy laughed, placing the dandelion stem in his outstretched hand.

She was tremendously glad that at that moment Theodore Hoffman joined them—Peter Hyde had so seriously patted the pocket into which he had placed the ring—as though he really believed it could work its magic! She turned eagerly to the master but he spoke first.

"Tell me—I am haunted by a thousand memories—who in the world is this strange little creature?"

Nancy told the master of Nonie, of that first night in the orchard, of her strange gift of imagination, of her "pretend" games by which she had persistently gilded over the very rough spots of a sordid, lonely life.

"She is always reaching out for the spirit of the things about her and trying to make each her own!"

"She is like a flower that has grown up among weeds," muttered the great man, his thoughts far away, a frown wrinkling his brow. "Sometimes, it is in such places that we find the greatest gifts. I wonder," he gave a little start, as though bringing himself, with an effort, back to the garden. "It's always been a hobby of mine, hunting around in queer places for something I can give to my Art. Perhaps you don't understand me, but, wherever I am, I am watching, watching all the time, for a promise of talent that, if properly cultivated and trained, will give something to the greatest of the Arts—dramatic expression."

Thrilled, Nancy sat tongue-tied, afraid to speak. He went on: "I said I was haunted—years ago I ran across another child, not unlike this one. She gave rare promise of genius. I put her in my school. I had her there several years. I looked for a great deal from her. But—she failed me."

"Did she—die?"

The master laughed. "No, she loved a man more than she did her art. I was jealous—unreasonable. I let her go away—heard nothing more of her. I suppose she married. She's probably fat now, with a half-dozen squalling babies. Yes, I was jealous—I wanted to give her to my art, soul and body—as a fanatic would make his offering to his gods. And this child has made me think of her again. It has been a most interesting hour, Miss Leavitt. You say the child's head is full of this sort of thing? H-mm."

Now the garden was filled with a babble of voices intermingled with the clinking of spoons and dishes. Someone had overheard the great man's praise of Nonie's "play-actin'," and the word spread quickly. Mrs. Brown allowed it was "just spooky the way that child could make you think she was what she wasn't" and Mrs. Slade's sister's sister-in-law had seen Maude Adams in a play where she'd "pretended something all the time—something 'bout Cinderella, and like as not it might have been 'bout fairies, too." Under the stimulation of iced tea and cakes and caramel ice cream, served from delicate china, praise for Nonie grew and the fairy leaf that Youth carried, so that "people would be kind," began to work its magic in the garden.

It was well toward sunset when the last guest departed. Nancy, standing in the doorway with the empty house behind her, and before her the deserted garden, with its chairs and tables in crazy disarray, sent a wild little prayer down the road after the purple automobile that had whirled away carrying the great master and her poor little play.

"Please think it's good! I worked so hard."

As her eye caught the gleam of gabled housetops through the trees Nancy suddenly pictured how, at that very moment, every home in Freedom was echoing with the story of the party.

It had been a success! All Freedom—through the women's eyes—had been there to see precious Aunt Milly; now they knew that Happy House was a happy house. And, wonder of wonders, she had heard Mrs. Sniggs, in a most friendly way, ask Liz Hopworth to drop in and show her how she made her "plum jell."

Suddenly Nancy seemed to hear Peter Hyde saying: "I didn't see anything but you!" How silly he'd been—putting that absurd dandelion stem into his pocket, as though it really *had* some magic! Then, with quite unaccountable haste, as though to run away from her own meditations, Nancy rushed to the kitchen and begged B'lindy to let her help "clear up."

CHAPTER XX

A PICNIC

A reaction set in after the party, Miss Milly, over-fatigued, had had to stay in her room. Happy House, itself, fell back into its old ways; again the blinds were shut, the flower vases disappeared and the peacock feathers were returned to their places of honor. B'lindy developed rheumatism.

Too, a week followed of long hot days and stifling nights, "brewin' up for somethin'," B'lindy declared.

Nancy, her play finished, suffered from a restlessness she had never known before. She told herself that, now her work was done, she must not linger at Happy House; then found that she could not bear to face the thought of going! These ties that she had made bound her closely. It was not as though she might come back as they would think she could—the separation must be forever. And the day must come when these good people she had grown to love would know that she had deceived and cheated them!

"That is my punishment," she thought, in real distress.

On the morning of a day that differed only from the other cloudless days in that the sky was bluer and the sun hotter, Jonathan brought Nancy a letter from Mrs. Finnegan. Enclosed in it was a cable from her father telling her that he had booked passage on the *Tourraine*, leaving Le Havre within two days.

"Oh," Nancy cried aloud, "he is *coming home!*"

So intent was she upon her letter that she did not see the rapid approach of a shiny Ford; but at a terrific whirring and grating of wheels and levers she turned, startled.

"Love letter?" queried Peter Hyde, jumping from the driver's seat.

"*How* you frightened me! And why this magnificence? No, it is *not* a love-letter!" Nancy laughed joyously as she tucked it away in her pocket. Oh, why *couldn't* she tell Peter Hyde that it was word that her dearest father was at that moment sailing home to her! (Nancy could not know that the letter had lain in Tim Finnegan's pocket for five whole days.)

"This——" and Peter Hyde caressed his new possession, "is the latest tool at Judson's. You have no idea how many things it can do—'most everything except milk the cows. To-day I thought, if Miss Nancy Leavitt was willing, it might take us on a picnic—say, up to Isle La Motte. I'm beastly tired of work!"

"Oh, lovely," declared Nancy. "I've felt these last few days as though I wanted to rush off somewhere! Besides, I have something to tell you!"

Peter pretended alarm at her serious tone; then making her promise to be ready within a half-hour, he drove off.

It would be very pleasant to have a last picnic with Peter Hyde. She would give herself one day of frolic before she faced the problem of getting away from Happy House. It was too hot for Aunt Milly to go out to the orchard, she would leave word with B'lindy that if Nonie came the child should be sent to Miss Milly's room to amuse her. And perhaps it would be wiser if she slipped away without telling Aunt Sabrina. Aunt Sabrina was sure to look as though, when *she* was a girl, young ladies did not dash off on long automobile rides unchaperoned!

Avoiding the living room and the hollyhock porch, Nancy sought out B'lindy and begged a little lunch.

"We're going for a little ride in Mr. Judson's new car, B'lindy, but we might not get back in time for lunch—you know you never *can* tell what'll happen when you start out in an automobile! A few nice jelly sandwiches and a little cold chicken and some fruit cake and—tarts——"

B'lindy shook her head. "'Tain't the *lunch* that's botherin' me, child, but I can't get the pesky idee out o' my head that somethin' is goin' to happen! I've been feelin' that way in my bones all day and all day yesterday, too."

"B'lindy, you foolish, superstitious thing—it's your rheumatism!"

"I guess it ain't my rheumatiz, Miss Anne, and my bones generally feels right. I ain't forgotten when Miss Milly had that accident nor when Judson's barn burned. I thought mebbe it was poor Mis' Hopkins dyin'. Didn't you know the poor soul dropped right off in her sleep last night and left Timothy Hopkins with those ten children to care for? I sez this mornin' when Jonathan told me that there was no use tryin' to understand the ways of the Lord—ten children and that poor Timothy Hopkins as helpless a body as ever was, anyway, and not much more'n 'nough to feed his own stomach and no one to manage now!"

"How dreadful! Poor man." Nancy tried to make her tone sympathetic. "Of course that was what your bones were feeling, B'lindy!"

B'lindy turned a truly distressed face to Nancy. "But it *wa'nt*! No, sir, right this minit my bones is feelin' worse than ever that somethin' is goin' to happen!" She sighed as she patted a sandwich together. "Lord knows mebbe it's the heat. There's somethin' brewin', Miss Anne, and you'd better keep an eye open for a storm—they come up fast in this valley!"

But Nancy refused to let B'lindy's fears or warnings dampen her gay spirits. Indeed, she promptly forgot them in the joy of dashing off over the dusty road. B'lindy's lunch was tucked away in the back; ahead stretched miles of smooth inviting highway, winding through pleasant green meadows.

And this man who grasped the wheel of the car with such complete confidence, who seemed bent upon nothing more important than making the little hand of the speedometer climb higher and higher—this was a new Peter Hyde, unfamiliar and yet strangely familiar in that now he resembled the dozens of other young men Nancy had known.

Nancy felt suddenly shy. Always before, when with Peter, she had enjoyed the least bit of a feeling of superiority, that she was graciously bringing, with her friendship, much into a life that must, because it was limited to Judson's farm, often seem dull and empty. But it was not easy to feel that way toward this very good-looking young man in immaculate blue serge who tended to her comfort with the assurance of a person quite accustomed to taking young ladies on automobile picnics!

Because they were both young, because the breeze blowing deliciously against their faces was fragrant with summer smells, their hearts were light; they chattered merrily, as young people will, about everything under the sun, then lapsed into pleasant silences, broken only by the regular humming of the engine.

However, after a little, these silences irritated Nancy. Peeping from a corner of her eye at Peter Hyde's blonde head, she was annoyed by an overwhelming curiosity as to what was going on, within it! What *was* the mystery concealed behind that pleasant mask? And why, when they seemed such good friends, could he not tell her?

Then she suddenly realized, with a quick sense of shame, that she, too, was concealing much from Peter Hyde!

As they rode along he pointed out old landmarks with the familiarity of a life-long Islander. He admitted that history fascinated him. "Not in books as much as when you can hook it up with the very ground you're walking on! Look at that lake over there—can't you picture it covered with the canoes of the Indians? They used to come around here in flotillas—the Iroquois, the Algonquins and the Hurons, always fighting. Great lot they were—scrapping all the time!"

He seemed to have at his tongue's end some interesting bit of information about every spot they passed. As they wandered around Isle La Motte, he told how on this little Island Champlain had first landed on his voyage down into the valley. He explained that a Jesuit mission had been established there as far back as 1660, long before any other white men had ventured into the wilderness.

They visited the ruins of Fort Ste. Anne on Sandy Point and the little chapel with its cross, to which, on the Feast of Ste. Anne, came pilgrims from great distances, to pray at the shrine.

"We think this America of ours is so young," he laughed. "And here we are living on soil that has been consecrated by brave sacrifices of centuries ago! Not so bad."

Driving homeward their backs were turned to the little ominous pile of clouds darkening a corner of the blue sky. At a spot where the road ran close to the edge of the lake, under a wide-spreading maple tree, they laid out B'lindy's lunch.

"Now I'll tell him I'm going," Nancy vowed to herself, with a little unaccountable fluttering.

He was on his knees before the picnic box. She could not see his face.

"Peter!" She had not realized how hard it was going to be to say it. "I'm—going—away! Really."

She had expected that he would be startled—show real consternation. Her going *must* make a difference in his life at Freedom—there were no other young people to take her place.

He was surprised; he held a jelly sandwich suspended for a moment, as though waiting for her to say something more. Then he laid it down on a paper plate.

"White meat or dark meat," he asked.

Nancy could not know that he was not really concerned as to whether she preferred white meat or dark meat, that his indifference was, indeed, covering a moment's inability to express his real feelings. She was suddenly angry—angry at herself more than at Peter Hyde!

"Of course I shall hate to go, I have grown very fond of Aunt Sabrina and Aunt Milly and B'lindy—and dear little Nonie. It's hardest to leave her!"

"They'll miss you. You've changed Happy House. And Nonie's a different child."

"He's very careful not to say he'll miss me," thought Nancy with childish pique. Then, aloud: "But I can't stay at Happy House forever. I only planned to spend three weeks there at the most and it's been six. And it seems as though I'd been there ages! I suppose one day on the Islands is like a week in the cities, where you live right next to people and never really touch their lives. However, it's in the rush of the cities I belong; I should *die* if I had to stay here!" She wanted him to understand that the attractions of Happy House could not hold her; she wanted to punish him for that abstraction that she had thought indifference.

"Judson's will be a dull hole without you at Happy House, Nancy," Peter put in, gravely.

She laughed lightly. "By Christmas you will have forgotten all about me! Anyway, you will have Miss Denny."

With wicked delight over his embarrassment Nancy told him of Nonie's plan that Miss Denny should be Mr. Peter's "dearest."

"Your fate is as plain as the nose on my face," she laughed, tantalizingly. "You won't have to cross my palm with silver to know your future, Mr. Hyde! A cottage on the ten-acre piece where you will live happily—ever afterward. As a wedding gift, with my best wishes, I'll give you the Bird's-Nest."

She dodged the drum-stick that Peter threw at her. "You are not at all grateful for the nice fortune I'm giving you," she declared.

"I am, indeed! Though it doesn't seem quite fair for me to make too many plans without consulting Miss Denny, and I've never seen the lady. She may be old and ugly, black—or yellow."

"I'll tell you—if you'll promise not to tell that I've told! She *is* old and ugly; she's blind in one eye and stutters and limps and has straggly gray hair and——"

"For Heaven's sake, stop! When all my life I've been looking for a girl with brown hair that looks sort of red and freckles—about three thousand of them!"

"Peter!" Nancy sprang precipitously to her feet. "Look—there is a storm coming!"

B'lindy's threatened storm was approaching swiftly. The black cloud that had been piling up behind them now overspread the whole western sky. "What a shame—to have it spoil our day! This has been such fun. I'll never forget it, after I've gone." Then, hastily, "Gather up the napkins and the baskets; I promised B'lindy I'd bring them home! Isn't there a short cut home? I'm really dreadfully afraid of lightning." But she had caught something in the expression of Peter Hyde's face that frightened her more than the threatened storm.

"Let's hurry," she cried, running unceremoniously to the automobile.

CHAPTER XXI

DAVY'S GIFT

Real need recognizing no distinction of class, it had been Liz Hopworth who had been summoned to the Hopkins home when Mrs. Hopkins "dropped off" in the middle of the night, leaving ten children motherless.

Over Dan'l's late breakfast Liz, wan-eyed from loss of sleep, but dignified by a new importance, related all the sad circumstances of poor Sarah Hopkins' passing. "Who'd a' *thought*," she exclaimed as she vigorously beat her pan-cake batter, "yesterday when I see the poor woman out a hangin' her clothes that this blessed night I'd a' been called in to straighten her limbs and do for those poor young 'uns!"

To Nonie and Davy death was a strangely mysterious thing which they took for granted; dogs and cats and calves died; frequently there was a burial in the village cemetery. These had always had an element of excitement which even stirred the Hopworth home, detached though it was from the village life. They looked at Liz, now, with wide eager eyes. To have

"straightened poor Sarah Hopkins' limbs" seemed to have transformed her—her tone was kinder, something almost tender gleamed in her tired eyes, and she was making pan-cakes for their breakfast!

"Just fetch that grease, Nonie. Step spry, too—there's a lot to be done before this day's over. Lordy, I thought to myself last night, that the Lord strikes hard—leavin' those ten children that haven't done no wrong without any mother to manage and Timothy Hopkins sittin' there as helpless like he'd been hit over the head, he's that stunned. And scarcely a bite in the house."

Old Dan'l had long since gotten past the day of worrying over the ways of the Lord. Nor to him was there anything particularly startling in a lack of food. His had always been a philosophy that believed that from somewhere or other Providence would provide, and if it didn't—

"Scarcely a bite, and all steppin' on one another, there's so many of 'em, and then when I think o' Happy House and the plenty there's there, well, 's I say, the Lord's ways are beyond *me*! Eat up your breakfast, Nonie. You gotta do up the work here, for I told that poor man I'd come back quick as ever I could. There's no end of work to be done 'fore that place will look fit for folks to come and see her."

"Can I go, too, Liz?" asked Davy. "Mebbe I can help."

Normally Liz would have made a sharp retort. Now she considered a moment.

"Mebbe you can. You can play with the baby so's Jennie can help me sweep and dust. Sarah Hopkins would turn over if she thought folks was goin' to see the muss and litter. Hurry along."

All that Liz had said of the house of mourning had been true. Davy found the muss and litter; the poor smithy wandering helplessly around and the "young 'uns" stepping on one another. He shut his eyes tight so that he would not have to catch the tiniest glimpse of poor Sarah Hopkins lying very still in the bedroom off the kitchen. He was glad when Liz, in a strangely brisk tone, bade Jennie, the oldest Hopkins girl, give the baby over to Davy.

"He's come 'long to mind the baby, so's you can help. Take him outside, Davy, and keep him out from under foot. Take up these dishes! Sure's I'm livin' I see Mrs. Sniggs comin' up the road this blessed minit."

Davy, gathering up his charge, retreated hastily. In fact, his pace did not slacken until he was well away from the Hopkins home. Then he put his burden down under a tree and stared at it.

The baby, blissfully unconscious of its loss, cooed ecstatically to express his joy at the unusual attention. He reached out tiny hands to Davy. "Go——go!" he gurgled, coaxingly.

"You sit right there! I gotta think," was Davy's scowling answer.

And Davy was thinking—hard. Liz' story, over the breakfast, had sunk deep into his soul. *He* knew what it was to live in a household where there was no mother and not much food!

It did not take Davy very long to make up his mind. Then, with determination written in every wrinkle of his frowning face, he lifted the baby and hurried to his home. An hour later, still carrying the baby, he trudged doggedly up the road to Happy House, through the gate, along the path to the door. Only for a moment did he pause on the threshold; then, softly opening the door, he entered, and came out again, empty-armed.

The oppressiveness of the day had decidedly ruffled the atmosphere of Happy House. Miss Sabrina had taken the news of Nancy's flight with a disapproving grunt; B'lindy had sharply come to Nancy's defense. She "guessed girls had to be girls anyways, though she'd a feelin' in her bones that somethin' might happen and one never could tell 'bout them pesky machines."

Then Miss Sabrina, taller and straighter than ever, had walked haughtily away as far as the sitting room, when a shriek brought B'lindy running.

Miss Sabrina had dropped breathless into a chair and at her feet sat the Hopkins baby sucking its thumb.

"B'lindy—what—what is it? I liked to fall over it!"

"Land a' goshen—a *baby!* A *real* live baby!" B'lindy leaned over cautiously. "Crawled in here like a caterpillar! As I live, here's a note, Miss Sabrina!" She unpinned a piece of paper from the baby's dress.

"Ples kep this child there ante enuf food fer so meny Hopkins Liz sez and she sez the Lord never ment any body to go hungry she sez your hous is big enuf fer a dusen and lots of food I gues you don't no thet ther ar so meny Hopkins and you will like to kepe this one I no how it hurts to be hungry so ples don't send this baby bak. Yours truly, Davy."

B'lindy, after reading the note aloud, stared at the baby.

"Sarah Hopkins' young 'un—I swan!" With her apron she wiped a tear from her eye. "No one to do for it now."

Miss Sabrina snorted.

"Of all the nerve—bringing it here—for me to break my neck on!"

From above came Miss Milly's voice plaintively calling.

"Take it away. Milly's calling—she's got to know what the excitement's about. I'll *never* get over my fright," and Miss Sabrina, still trembling, rose to go to her sister. The baby puckered his face preparatory to a long wail. "Take it *out*," commanded Miss Sabrina, "it's going to cry—*give* it something quick."

B'lindy snatched the baby and flew to the kitchen. She could not bear to think that any living thing in Happy House was hungry. However, the threatened squall passed when B'lindy, after carefully shutting her doors, produced a bowl and a shiny spoon.

It had not been alone Miss Sabrina's shriek that had frightened Miss Milly. She had heard a rumble of thunder. She was lying back among her pillows deadly pale. She clutched Miss Sabrina's hand and begged her to stay with her.

"I know I'm foolish," she whispered plaintively, "but it's so oppressive. It's hard—for me—to breathe."

Sabrina sat down grimly beside her—no thunder storm came to North Hero that it did not bring unpleasant memories to them both.

"Is it—going to be—very bad?" Miss Milly asked plaintively. "I wish Nancy—was home."

"Maybe it'll go around," assured her sister with as much tenderness as she was capable of showing.

At that moment the door opened slowly and B'lindy, a strangely softened look on her old face tip-toed in, carrying in her arms the baby, sound asleep.

"I just brought it up for Miss Milly to see, it's that cute!" she explained, in a whisper.

"The poor little thing," Aunt Milly timidly touched the moist chubby hand. B'lindy, with the air of having accomplished some great feat, laid the baby carefully upon the couch.

"Fed its *poor* little stomick and it dropped right off to sleep—it'll forget things now," she said proudly.

With a different feeling in each of their hearts the three women stared for a moment at the sleeping baby. Miss Sabrina spoke first. Her voice was cold and crisp.

"Take that baby right out of here, B'lindy, and get Jonathan to carry it back where it came from."

A rumble of thunder, closer and louder, startled them. Miss Milly sat bolt upright, white-faced, and reached out a hand.

"Oh—*sister!* *Not* in the storm!"

B'lindy rose majestically and towered over her mistress. When, down behind her shut doors, that baby had gone to sleep in B'lindy's arms, something had wakened in her sixty-year old heart; it throbbed in her voice now. She spoke slowly. "I guess the *Almighty* sent Davy Hopworth here with this poor little young 'un! Like as not it would go hungry more'n once, and if three women here can't take care of a little baby—well, the Lord that suffered little children to come unto Him like's not will hold us to 'count for it! I guess Happy House would be a heap happier if there was less high and mightiness and more of the human milk of kindness in it, and doin' for others like little Miss Anne's always tryin' to do, anyway!" And quite breathless from her outburst B'lindy knelt beside the baby and defiantly folded sheltering arms over it.

For the briefest of moments no one stirred. Then Miss Sabrina rose hurriedly, and, mumbling something incoherent, left the room.

Across the baby B'lindy's eyes, feverishly bright, met Miss Milly's anxious glance.

"Don't know what she said, but, Milly Leavitt, sure's I'm alive I saw a *tear* in Sabriny Leavitt's eye! I guess we keep this baby."

CHAPTER XXII

REAL LEAVITTS AND OTHERS

The storm overtook Peter and Nancy on a lonely road that Peter had taken as a short-cut home.

At a sharp flash of lightning Nancy clutched Peter's arm.

"Pe-ter! Oh-h! It's silly for me to be afraid! It's only when it crackles!"

"I thought we could make Freedom before it broke. But I guess not. Here comes the rain!"

It came, in a blinding deluge.

"Sit close to me, Nancy. We must get to a house *somewhere* along this road!"

"B'lindy's bones certainly did feel right," Nancy giggled, excitedly. "Oh-h!" at another flash. "*Pe-ter!* I'm—I'm such a coward. Don't you think that's the worst?"

Peter hoped that it wasn't. He did not mind at all the flashes that sent little quivers of alarm through Nancy and made her huddle closer to him; he enjoyed the sense of protecting her, though his face, bent grimly upon the puddled road ahead, gave no hint of his real feeling.

"If this bus only had its curtains! Are you soaked?"

"You are, too, Peter! Do you suppose this is a cloudburst? Can the car make it?" For the little Ford was floundering uncertainly along the flooded road.

"What an end to our picnic," declared Peter, disgustedly. "Ha—a house, as I live! See ahead there."

Through the sheet of rain Nancy made out a low-gabled cottage almost hidden by the trees.

"It looks deserted," she declared, disappointedly.

"It'll be shelter, anyway. Deserted nothing—hear the dog! When I stop make a dash for the door."

The dog's bark was by way of a welcome rather than a warning, for, as he bounded toward the road, his shaggy tail wagged in a most friendly way. As Nancy, following Peter's

command, made a dash for shelter, the door of the cottage opened hospitably and a little old woman, unmindful of the fury of the rain, reached out to draw Nancy in.

"Come right in! Bless me, you're soaked." She had a cheery, piping voice and a way of repeating, "well, well, well," as though everything on earth was an exciting surprise.

"Won't your young man come in, too. Sit right over here by the fire! I told sister Janie that I'd light a few sticks of wood to keep it cheery. It got so dark-like. I'll set the kettle over and have a cup of tea in the shake of a dog's tail. When it storms in these parts it *does* storm, dearie! How wet you are!" She fussed over the fire and over her kettle and over Nancy's wet blouse. "Now, Janie, isn't it nice to have folks come here out of the storm?"

Then Nancy, through the gloom of the storm, made out that Janie was another little old woman sitting in an old arm chair in the window. Quite unmindful of the storm, she was tranquilly knitting.

"Folks don't come by this road so often," she smiled back.

"Aren't you afraid—sitting there?" Nancy cried. As she spoke there came a flash of lightning followed almost simultaneously by a roar of thunder that threatened the weather-beaten walls.

The sister called Janie waited smilingly, her head cocked on one side as though she enjoyed the storm. "Afraid, honey? Goodness, no. Saphrony and I've lived through too many of these storms to be afraid! Isn't the Lord watching over us just like all folks?"

"And didn't He just bring you poor souls here out of the storm?" added the older woman. "This tea will steep in a minit and I'm goin' to call that boy in!"

Peter had been trying to fasten a makeshift arrangement that would keep Nancy's seat dry. He was glad enough to give it up at their hostess' call. He looked so much like a drowned cat with the water dripping from his hat and shoulders that Nancy was as concerned as Saphrony and Janie.

"You poor children," Saphrony cried, running around Peter in a flutter of worry. "Take your coat right off this minit! Ain't I *glad* I started that fire! Fetch another stick, Janie. Well, well, well, now ain't it a nice storm that brings folks here for shelter?"

The fire did feel good against their soaked backs and Nancy and Peter enjoyed the chatter of the two funny, fussy little old women. The kettle sang merrily, too, and steamed invitingly. Janie, at her sister's bidding, opened a treasure-chest in the other room and brought from it a piece of fruit cake, wrapped in a red and white napkin.

"A bite'll taste good with our tea," Saphrony explained, apologetically.

"Aren't they the cutest pair?" Nancy whispered to Peter. "And isn't it the funniest little house?"

There seemed to be only the living room and kitchen combined and the bedroom adjoining. The furniture in it was very old and very worn, but everything was spotlessly clean. The red and white cover on the table, the braided rugs on the uneven floor; and the piece-work

cushions in the armed chairs added a homey, cosy touch that made up for the little luxuries lacking. Even in the storm the room was cheery.

Nancy forgot the storm in her enjoyment of the situation. Janie removed the red and white cover and spread a very worn white cloth. Saphrony took from a cupboard built in the wall a shiny pewter sugar-bowl and cream pitcher. Peter, amid a storm of protest from both little women, drew up some chairs.

"Now you stay right there by the fire," cried Saphrony. "We like to fuss! Janie and I don't have folks here often. The hot tea'll warm you."

The tea tasted very good, both Peter and Nancy declared over and over. "It's just like a party," Nancy added, nibbling on the thinnest shaving of fruit cake. Her evident pleasure set both little old ladies off in a soft cackling of satisfaction.

"Do you two live here all alone?" Nancy asked, passing her cup for more tea. "It seems so lonely."

"Lonely—not a bit! Janie and I've lived here all our lives. Not many folks come 'long this road, but we don't get lonesome—not a bit! There's always something to do. Folks just gets lonesome and miserable when they're idle, I always tell Janie. A little more cake, Mister——"

"Peter," laughed Nancy. "Well, I shall remember this storm because it's given us such a jolly half-hour, as well as a drenching! Oh, *look*—the sun!"

Through the mist of rain and the purple gloom the sun burst warm and golden, pouring through the bare windows into the little room, touching every corner and cranny with a cheerful glow.

"How wonderful," Nancy exclaimed. "It's the bright lining, all right—the cloud has turned inside out! I believe," she turned to Peter, "that when the sun does shine it shines brighter—here! You two have magic."

"Janie and I never shut it out," laughed the sister Saphrony. "We say it's God's way of smiling and frowning. There's no storm but what passes and we're just mighty glad you two children came 'long this way. Goin' to Freedom?"

Afterwards Nancy said to Peter that that had been the most curious thing about the two friendly little old women—that they had not right at first asked who they were nor where they were going!

Peter answered from the window. "Yes—we thought this road would be shorter." Then, to Nancy: "Do you think we can venture now? I guess the storm's passed."

Nancy nodded. "We'd better start. My aunts are worrying dreadfully, I'm afraid. But we've loved it—here. May we come again sometime? And may we not know who it is that has given us shelter?"

"Why, yes—I never thought to tell! Most folks know us, but maybe you're new in these parts. We're Saphrony and Janie Leavitt."

"*What!*" cried Nancy with such astonishment that Peter turned from the door. "Why, I—I am Anne Leavitt!" she said in very much the same way she had spoken in the French class, four years before.

The two little old women laughed. "I guess you're one of the Happy House Leavitts—they're *real* Leavitts. Sister Janie and I are only plain Leavitts," Saphrony explained with a twinkling in her eyes that seemed to say that to confuse real Leavitts with plain Leavitts was very, very funny. "Are you Miss Sabriny's niece?"

Nancy avoided the question. "Aren't you any relation to us—up at Happy House?"

"Not as anybody ever knew of. There's Leavitts and Leavitts all over New England, I guess. We've always been poor as Job."

"Well, I shall always pretend we're related," declared Nancy, warmly, "because it's been so nice here!"

While Peter was carefully tucking her into the seat with much lamenting that it had gotten so wet, Nancy was staring reflectively at the funny little weather-beaten cottage. From the door smiled the two sisters.

"I wish," she said, "that I could take a piece of their philosophy back to Happy House!" She leaned out to wave her hand once more. "Hasn't it been fun? I'm glad now that it stormed."

As they splashed along toward Freedom, Nancy fell into a sudden quiet. Her mind was held by an overwhelming desire to tell Peter, in this last hour she might have alone with him, the whole truth—that she, like the two sisters they had left, was not a real Leavitt, of that day back in college, of Anne's pleading and her yielding. Twice she opened her lips to speak, then shut them quickly. There was something in Peter's strong profile that made her afraid. Once he turned quickly and saw her eyes upon him with a frightened, troubled expression in their depths.

"What is it, Nancy?" he asked tenderly.

She couldn't tell him—she could not bear to see his face when he knew the truth! She tried to speak lightly.

"I was thinking how much I'd grown to like—things—around here and how I hate to—go away. Peter, will you keep Nonie and Davy doing happy things—like other children. And, Peter—do you hate people that—act lies?"

Peter laughed—Nancy was so deliciously child-like. Then he suddenly colored to the very roots of his hair.

"Generally—I haven't much use for people that can't stick pretty well to the truth. But when there may be some reason—someone may start doing it for someone else——" he stopped

abruptly. Nancy stared ahead with startled eyes. Did he know? But, no, how could he! It had only been an accident that he had so nearly hit upon the truth.

She could not tell him—she need not tell him; in a few days she would say good-by and go away and never see him again! Theirs had been a pleasant friendship, for awhile she would miss it, but she'd be just plain Nancy Leavitt again, playing with Claire at Merrycliffe or with Daddy somewhere in the mountains or at the seashore, working, too—beginning life. After a while these weeks at Happy House would seem a curious memory—a dream!

Suddenly she shivered.

"Freedom—at last!" exclaimed Peter, increasing his speed. Ahead they saw the gleam of roofs through the trees. "And it looks as though they'd caught the storm worse than we did!"

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT THE CHIMNEY HELD

The storm, sweeping down the valley, had reached the height of its fury over Freedom.

As the flashes of lightning grew sharper and more frequent, B'lindy bade Miss Milly watch the baby while she made things fast around the house. Both women had been hanging over the sleeping child with something like awe. "Poor little mite—like as not right this minute Sarah Hopkins is watchin' us," B'lindy had whispered, "little bit of a thing, goin' to grow into a big, big man some day! Ain't it just *wonderful*, Milly Leavitt?"

Milly's awe of the baby had been mixed with alarm at the increasing intensity of the storm. So that, as B'lindy moved to go, she held out an imploring hand.

"Now you just hold yourself together, Milly Leavitt—that storm ain't goin' to hurt you! Anyways, it's lots more likely to if I don't see that everything's shut up tight, so's the lightning can't get in! *Ouch!*" Even B'lindy covered her eyes from a blinding flash. "You hold on to that baby, Milly Leavitt," she commanded, bolting from the room.

But with each flash, each roar of thunder, poor Miss Milly's courage ebbed. Her cry—rising above, the noise of the storm brought Miss Sabrina and B'lindy to her.

"I can't—help—it!" she sobbed, covering her face. "It's so—so dreadful! And where's—Nancy! Oh—oh!"

Even Miss Sabrina's face was pale with alarm.

"You two women are like so many children," cried B'lindy, taking command. "Milly Leavitt, you'll work yourself into fits. Nancy's all right somewheres! I guess Peter Hyde's man enough to take care of her—mebbe they ain't where this storm is, anyways! Sabrina—you take that baby where Milly's yellin' won't wake it. Goodness knows the crashin's bad enough! Now Milly, you just hide your poor head in my lap," with grand tenderness, "I ain't afraid a bit."

Sabrina had no choice—B'lindy had put the baby into her arms and almost shoved her to the door.

She carried it to her own room and sat down very carefully. Never in her whole life had she held a little baby. What would she do if it wakened suddenly? And if it kicked and squirmed, might she not drop it?

But the baby did not kick or squirm—he felt very comfortable in Miss Sabrina's arms—he snuggled ever so gently a little closer, turned his face toward the warmth of her embrace, and throwing up one little arm, laid it against her throat. The warm, soft baby fingers burned against Sabrina's throbbing pulse—the little spark crept down, down to her old, cold heart and kindled something there—something that swept her whole being. Cautiously she held the baby closer, pressed it to her breast so that she might feel the whole perfect little body; the little lips twisted and Sabrina, thinking it was a smile, smiled back with infinite tenderness. She forgot the storm raging without, her ears were deaf to its roar; after a little she leaned her head down until she could lay her cheek against the baby's soft head.

Within the darkened room a miracle was working!

Suddenly the air was split by a sharp crackle as of a hundred rifles spitting fire close at hand; and simultaneously came a deafening roar as though the very Heavens were dropping with a crash. Through it all pierced Aunt Milly's scream. The walls of Happy House trembled and swayed; for a moment everything went black before Sabrina's eyes! Then B'lindy, running through the hall brought her sharply back to her senses.

"We're struck—we're struck! Sabrin'y! Jonathan!"

Once more Happy House had been struck by lightning! The crashing had been the tumbling of the bricks of the chimney. And just as in that other storm, long before, the lightning had worked its vengeance on the old mantel. It lay in pieces on the floor of the sitting-room, covered with a litter of broken bric-a-brac and mortar and bricks from the chimney.

But in the fear of fire no one thought of the mantel. B'lindy ran wildly around ordering Jonathan to throw buckets of water on any cranny that might possibly conceal a smouldering flame, at the same time heaping all kinds of curses down upon the heads of the neighbors who'd "let Happy House burn right to the ground without liftin' a finger." And Sabrina, after one look at the lightning's havoc, still with the baby in her arms, had gone to quiet Miss Milly.

When Jonathan's activity had threatened to destroy everything in the house with water, B'lindy finally became convinced that there was to be no fire. "Funniest lightnin' I ever see," she declared, breathlessly dropping into a chair; "set down that pail, Jonathan—you've most drowned us all. Thank Heaven, here comes Nancy."

Nancy and Peter, after one glance at the bricks scattered over the garden, had guessed what had happened.

"Struck,—sure as preachin'! Lucky we ain't burned to a *crisp*. Just *look* at the muss!" and B'lindy swept her arm toward the sitting-room door.

Nancy's face was tragic as she saw the broken mantel and the gaping fireplace. She clutched Peter's arm. "What a pity—what a *shame!* It was so very old and—and——" She leaned down and picked up one of the pieces. "Look, Peter, here are parts of the letters! See H-A-P. It had been cracked by another lightning storm, you know, years and years ago! Oh, I'm afraid it has been destroyed so that——" as she spoke she searched in the debris on the floor for more of the carving. Suddenly she cried out sharply and, straightening, held out an old, worn, stained leather wallet. "Peter! B'lindy! *Aunt Sabrina!*"

Her cry brought Miss Sabrina, alarmed, running.

"It *must—be—the—wallet!*"

Now it was Sabrina who cried out—a protesting, frightened cry. For a moment she staggered as though she was going to fall; Nancy's strong arm went closely around her.

"Look quickly, dear Aunt Sabrina," Nancy implored.

With trembling fingers Aunt Sabrina opened it—within lay mouldy, age-worn bank-notes—many of them!

"It must have fallen behind the mantel in that other storm," cried Nancy. Then a great joy shone in her face. "He *didn't* take it—Anne's grandfather!" she stopped abruptly. But Miss Sabrina had not even heard her, and Peter was too mystified by the whole thing to think Nancy's words strange. Miss Sabrina turned, with a stricken face.

"Anne—I—I can't think! What—what—wrong—have I done? Oh, God forgive me!" She threw her arms up over her head. Her grief was terrible because it was strange. Even Nancy, frightened, drew away.

"Oh, God, give back the years——" she moaned.

"It—is—too—late." She lifted a white, frightened face. "I must—be alone! Don't let anyone disturb me. Tell them, Anne—tell them—everything!" And with the wallet in her hand she went quickly but of the room.

Nancy turned to Peter, a triumph in her manner that was in strange contrast to Miss Sabrina's sorrow. She held her hand out toward the broken marble.

"*What* a story!" she cried, "over two generations that ugly old mantel concealed the vindication of a man's honor!" Then, laughing at Peter's puzzled face, she told him briefly the story of the trouble that had hung over Happy House shadowing and embittering the lives of those beneath its roof.

"And, Peter, it has gone with the storm! Oh, you don't know what that means!" she cried, because Peter *could* not know that she did not rejoice for herself, but because, now, there need be no barriers between Happy House and her own dear Anne—the real Anne Leavitt.

"After awhile—it *will* be Happy House," she ended, enigmatically.

She walked with him to the door.

"What a day it has been," she laughed, catching her breath. "I feel as though it had been weeks ago that we started off! I've forgotten how wet we were," she pulled at her blouse. "Run away now, Peter, for I must break the wonderful news to Aunt Milly and B'lindy, and, as B'lindy would say—"there's a pile of work's got to be done!"

"Nancy, the day isn't over yet!" Peter hesitated. "There's going to be a gorgeous sunset to-night—won't you come into the orchard—just for a little while?"

"Silly—haven't you seen enough of me for one day?"

His look spoke more eloquently than could any words.

"I have something to tell *you*!" he said, gravely.

CHAPTER XXIV

PETER

Nancy knew, with the instinct of a heart unfamiliar with coquetry, what Peter had to tell her!

She had wanted dreadfully to have to stay away from the orchard—she had hoped that Aunt Milly might need her, but Aunt Milly had gone to bed directly after supper, exhausted by the day's happenings. Aunt Sabrina's door had been shut ever since, with the wallet, she had gone into her room, and from within no sound betrayed her tragedy. B'lindy was fiercely struggling, with mop and broom, to remove all traces of the "curse" from Happy House. "Now just keep out of my way! I'm that upset," she answered Nancy, shortly.

The sunset was gorgeous. It flooded the garden with a soft, flaming golden light.

Like all girls, Nancy had had her dream of that time when her Knight should come riding to her; like all girls her dream-Knight was a pleasantly hazy individual, changing with her changing moods. And she had not wanted him to come quickly. Her young freedom was very precious to her.

One or two others had proposed to Nancy in hot-headed, boyish fashion. That had been part of girlhood's fun. One, a Junior, after begging her to elope with him, had gone away crushed, and vengeful, only to send her, two weeks later, a bunch of violets and a little note thanking her for her "common-sense," explaining that "Pop had threatened to cut his allowance in half unless he settled down and made his mid-years."

These had been boys; dear, sentimental, clean-hearted boys, but Peter Hyde was different—

She had not dreamed of this—not for a moment, until she had seen it in his eyes that afternoon as they sat under the maple tree with B'lindy's lunch spread between them. He had been such a jolly comrade through these weeks at Freedom, he had been so understandable, like Claire and Anne and Daddy! He had never thought she was silly or not-grown-up-enough, he liked children and animals and knew just what to do to make Nonie and Davy

happy; he had shared with her his ambitions in his work as though she was a man but, with it all, he was a farmer—his lot had been cast in the narrow confines of Judson's farm and barns and piggery—except for these pleasant days at Happy House she, Nancy Leavitt, with her heart set on a goal as distant as the stars themselves, could have little in common with him.

All this flashed through her mind as she walked slowly, reluctantly toward the orchard—and with it an annoyance that their pleasant comradeship should end this way. So that when, a little later, a very earnest Peter began to tell her in stumbling, awkward words how much her going must mean to him, she wanted to cry out and beg him to stop.

"Nancy—I'm clumsy as the devil. Don't you *know* what I want to tell you? I can't let you go without knowing it—and—and—Nancy, *could* you ever—ever love a fellow—like me—enough—to—want—to marry him?"

Then the woman's heart within her made Nancy ages old.

"Oh, Peter!" she said with tender compassion. She *didn't* want to hurt this very dear friend!

"I'm not nearly good enough for you, Nancy, but then, *any* fellow isn't good enough! And, Nancy, there isn't anything in this whole world I wouldn't do—if you cared."

"Oh, Peter!" Why *in* the world couldn't she say something more, she thought. Why couldn't she stem that flood she knew was coming? Why could she not make him see instantly, how impossible it all was—and say good-bye and go!

"I'll make you happy, Nancy—if loving will do it," he finished humbly.

"Peter—I wish—you hadn't—said this!"

"Do you mean you don't care—a bit?" he cried, protestingly. "Have I frightened you? You said yourself that living one day up here was like weeks somewhere else! Somehow I've not thought of your going away—ever. You seemed such a part of it here. You're so—different—from all the girls I've known! You're such a—*pal*. That's the kind a man needs!"

Nancy was biting her lip to hide its trembling. Over her swept a reverence for this that Peter Hyde was offering her—she knew that a man's pure soul was being bared before her. His awkward words came slowly because they were born of a deep feeling. She was not worthy!

"Oh, Peter! Peter! Please—I'm—I can't let you say all this! I'm *not*—what you think me! I'm a *cheat*! You'd hate me if——"

He caught her hand. "I know what you are, Nancy—you're the best, truest, straightest-hearted little girl that ever lived!"

With an effort that hurt Nancy pulled herself together. She looked away so that she might not see that it hurt Peter Hyde when she pulled her hand from his close clasp.

"Peter—we must be—sensible." She hated her own words, but something within her, told her that she must say them. "We've been jolly comrades—here, but—I'm not cut out for—this sort of life. I'd hate it—after a little; I'd go mad on a farm with just cows and pigs and things

around," she caught her breath; "I'm really an awfully selfish girl, Peter, and I've set my heart on my career! I'll always put that before anything—*anyone* else! That wouldn't be fair—to you. You must forget me and find someone who will help you in your work."

His face was turned from her—his silence frightened her. She tried to make her tone light. "You've been a fine pal, Peter, you've helped me a lot. You've taught me a great many things, too. I've always thought that farmers and—and——"

He wheeled suddenly.

"Nancy, you haven't said you *didn't* care for me, any!" he cried.

Nancy flushed in vexation.

"Well, I'm *trying* to—the best way I know how! I *do* like you—I'm going to be as honest as I can be! I just couldn't *ever*—no matter how much I might like the *farmer*—stand for—for a farm like Judson's!"

To Nancy's unutterable amazement Peter Hyde commenced to laugh, very softly, with a look in his eyes that caressed her. What an unexplainable creature he was—anyway!

"When my play is produced," Nancy went on, airily, "I shall invite you to come down and sit in a box and see it—and maybe, you'll bring Miss Denny with you!" She wanted to punish him.

But Peter Hyde, the incorrigible, was looking neither crestfallen nor disheartened. He seized both of Nancy's hands and held them very close.

"I'll come! When that play is produced you can just bet I'll be in the stage box and it won't be Miss Denny that's with me either! You haven't told me, Nancy—that you did not love *me*! You've just said you didn't like—pigs and cows and hired men and Judson's in general. Dear, I'm not going to let you answer me—now! I'm not even going to say good-bye! You're a tired little girl. If I go, will you promise me to go straight to bed?"

In her astonishment Nancy submitted to the impetuous kiss he pressed against her fingers. When but a few moments before her heart had been torn with pity that she must hurt this man, now he was, in a masterful way, sending her off to bed as though she was a very little girl! And nothing in his tone or manner suggested *anything* but utter peace of mind and heart.

But Nancy *was* tired—so very tired that it was pleasant to be led up the path toward the house, to think that someone—even Peter Hyde—cared enough about her to beg her "not to open an eye for twenty-four hours."

And of course it was because the day had held so much for her that upon reaching her room, she threw herself across her bed and burst into a passion of tears.

CHAPTER XXV

NANCY'S CONFESSION

A thousand torments seemed to rack poor Nancy's tired soul and body. For a long time she had lain, very still, across her bed. Then she had, mechanically, made ready for the night. But sleep would not come. Wider and wider-eyed she stared at the dim outline that was her open window. After awhile she crossed to it and knelt down before it, her bare arms folded on the sill.

A sense of remorse, which Nancy had been trying for some time past to keep tucked back somewhere in a corner of her mind, now overwhelmed her. She saw herself a cheat, an imposter. What would these good people of Happy House say of her when they knew all of them, even Peter Hyde—and little Nonie!

Her hands clenched tightly, Nancy faced what she called the reckoning.

Only a few days before she and Aunt Milly had had a long talk. Aunt Milly had told her how, one afternoon, she had tried to walk—and had failed.

"I'd been praying, my dear, that it might be possible. I thought, perhaps, I felt so much better——. But the wonderful thing was Nancy,—*I didn't care!* My life seems so full, now, of real things, thanks to all you've done for me, that whether I can walk or not is insignificant. And I shall always have you, anyway, Nancy!" Aunt Milly had said with the yearning look in her eyes that Nancy knew so well.

What would Aunt Milly say when she knew?

How had she, Nancy, betrayed Sabrina's trust?

Rapidly, as one can at such moments, Nancy's mind went over the weeks of her stay at Happy House. She had let herself go so far; she had taught these people she was deceiving to grow fond of her—to *need* her!

And she had grown fond of them—that was her punishment. She had grown fond of Happy House; she wanted to be the real Anne Leavitt and belong to Happy House and its precious traditions, that she had mocked; she wanted to have the right to rejoice, now, in the vindication of that brother who had gone away, years before.

Poor little Nancy, shivering there in the chill and silence of the night, her world, her girl's world, fell away from her. Like one looking in from without, she saw her own life as though it was another's—and what it might hold for her! She saw it stripped of the little superficialities of youth; she saw clearly, with uncanny preciseness, causes and effects, the havoc, too, of her own thoughtlessness and weaknesses.

Something in the vision frightened her, but challenged the best in her, too. One had only one life to live and each wasted day counted so much—each wasted hour cost so dearly! In the striving for the far goal one must not leave undone the little things that lay close at hand, the little, worth-while, sometimes-hard things. She had gone a long way down the wrong road,

but she'd turn squarely! Her head went high—she would make a clean breast of it all—to them all; Aunt Sabrina, Aunt Milly—Peter Hyde.

Her face went down against her arms; she wanted to hide, even in the darkness, the flush that mantled her cheeks. She could see his eyes as they had seemed to caress her—out there in the orchard. Oh, why had she not told him the truth, then and there; if she had he would have despised her, but it would have killed forever the hope she had read in his face.

Nancy, girlishly eager to struggle in life's tide, now, facing the greatest thing in life, shrank back, afraid. She wanted, oh so much, to be little again; there had always been someone, then, to whom to turn when problems pressed—Daddy, even Mrs. Finnegan—the Seniors in college, the Dean herself. Now—she felt alone.

Lighting her lamp, she pulled a chair to the table and spread out sheets of paper. She wanted to tell it all, while her courage lasted. She wrote furiously, her lips pressed in a straight line. She would not spare herself one bit—Peter Hyde must know just what she had done.

But, at the end, she yielded to a longing too strong to resist.

"Please, *please* don't think too badly of me. You see you don't know Anne and how her heart was set on going to Russia, and she was sure that if she told her relatives about going they'd stop her. And that seemed, then, the only important thing—neither of us thought of the wrong we'd be doing the people—here. It seemed, too, a very little thing for me to do for her. But I just can't bear to have *you* hate me!" For a moment she held her pencil over the last words, then hastily sealed the letter and addressed it.

The last paragraph stayed in her mind. "How *silly* we were, Anne," she said aloud, mentally arraiging those two very young creatures of college days.

Her confession made, a load rolled from Nancy's heart. "Anyway, he'll know the truth," was her soothing thought as she crawled into bed. In the morning she would tell Aunt Sabrina.

But Nancy's first waking thought—at a very late hour, for her over-tired body had taken its due in sound sleep—was that she was very, very unhappy. As she dressed, with trembling haste, she wondered if she had not better plan to catch the afternoon train at North Hero.

She sought out Jonathan first and despatched him with her letter, then walked slowly back into the house to face Aunt Sabrina.

On the newel post of the stairs were letters that Jonathan had just brought up from the post-office. One was addressed to her in Anne's familiar handwriting and was postmarked New York!

As though she had been struck, Nancy dropped down on the stairs.

Anne's valiant spirit of sacrifice and service had given way to complaint.

"All these weeks cooped up in a little room in London waiting for further orders, only to have them *dare* to tell me—after all the encouragement I'd had—that I was too young and inexperienced to go on into Russia, and that I could be of greater service in organization work

back home. Think of it, Nancy! And then shipping me back as though I was a little child. I have worn myself out with disappointment, rage and disgust. I came here to your rooms and slept last night in your bed (as much as any one could sleep with the Finnegan baby cutting a tooth downstairs) and I shall stay here until I can calm down enough to make some definite plans.

"... You've been a dear, Nancy, and I've been quite curious to know how you've gotten on. I never dreamed you'd stay so long! And now I must ask you to stay just a little longer, until I know what I want to do. Under no circumstances let my aunt know the truth...."

Nancy read the letter three times—she could scarcely believe her eyes. Poor Anne, her splendid dreams had come to nothing.

In her own desire to clean her soul by confession, she had forgotten Anne! Of course she could not tell Aunt Sabrina—at least not now. She must wait, as Anne had asked.

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive," Nancy repeated, bitterly, feeling as though the web she had made was tying her hand and foot.

B'lindy, looking in from the kitchen, saw her. B'lindy's face was strangely brightened; she gave a mysterious crook to her finger as she beckoned to Nancy to come into the kitchen.

"I set some coffee by for you—I guessed you'd be tuckered out after yesterday, ridin' round in that storm and then findin' the wallet was 'nough to tucker anybody." Before she poured the coffee she closed the door leading into the front of the house. "Miss Nancy, there's been more changes in Happy House even than findin' that wallet!"

"What do you mean, B'lindy?"

B'lindy leaned a radiant face over Nancy.

"It's Miss Sabriny—she's been just like she was born again! I guess folks won't know her. And you'll never guess what we're goin' to have up here. *A baby!*"

Nancy was frankly astonished. Then B'lindy told her what, in the excitement of the afternoon before, she had not heard—of finding the baby and Davy's note.

"I guess that little mite opened up somethin' that was all dried up in Sabriny Leavitt's heart! Seems while we was all fussin' over the mess in the settin' room Davy Hopworth come up after that baby lookin' like he'd been scared to death. And then this mornin' Sabriny Leavitt comes to me 'n asks me to go down to Timothy Hopkins with her while she asks him for that baby back. Well, we went—she couldn't even wait for me to pick up. And Timothy Hopkins refused her *flat!* You wouldn't have believed your ears, Nancy, Sabriny Leavitt took most to cryin' and she told him how lonesome it was up to Happy House and how her whole life 'd been wasted 'cause she'd never done for others and he'd be doin' a kindness to an old woman to let her take the baby and do for it. But it wa'n't until she'd promised that she'd just sort o' bring him up and he could always go home and play with the nine others, and the nine o' them could come to Happy House's often as they wanted that he'd as much as listen. So we're goin' to have a baby!" B'lindy said it with unconcealed triumph. "Cunnin' little thing—smart's can be. You should a' seen it grab for the spoon when I was feedin' it!"

Nancy's eyes were shining. "Oh, that will be wonderful," she cried. "Where is Aunt Sabrina?"

As though in answer to her question, Miss Sabrina's voice called her from the front hall and at the same moment Miss Sabrina opened the door. Yes, it was a transformed Sabrina Leavitt—her face was deeply lined by all she had gone through, but there was a humility in her eyes that softened them and brought a deeper glow as though, indeed, from some new-born spirit within.

Impulsively, Nancy threw two strong arms about her neck and kissed her.

"Come into the sitting-room with me, Anne, I have a great deal I want to say to you." She led Nancy through the hall into the sitting-room and they sat down together upon the old horse-hair sofa. In Miss Sabrina's tone there was a dignified tranquility that made Nancy look at her with a little wonder. As though in answer to Nancy's thought Miss Sabrina said, quietly:

"God alone knows what I've lived through—since yesterday afternoon. Nancy, it is a terrible thing for an old woman to look back upon a life she has wasted—through pride and prejudice. The storm and finding the wallet—that was God's own way of opening my eyes! I have been a wicked, proud, selfish woman. But I've hurt myself worst of all. For here I am an old woman, and not a soul in the world really loves me——"

Nancy put out a protesting hand. Miss Sabrina patted it.

"I am right, my dear, I know it now. But if God will be good to me He will give me a few more years to live, so that I may make up, in a small way, for the wrong I have done—to others and to myself. Do you know, Nancy, it was you who first brought home to me the truth—that happiness comes as it is given. It was a fortunate thing for Happy House when I brought you here, dear."

Nancy had to bite her lips to strangle the words of confession that sprang to them. Aunt Sabrina went on:

"I cannot bring back the years or atone to my brother for the wrong I did to him. I do not know how I can make up to your own father. Perhaps, if you ask him to, he will forgive me, some day. But I shall, as soon as I can see my lawyers in North Hero, make a new will, leaving Happy House and my share of my father's fortune to you——"

"Good gracious——" thought Nancy; "she thinks Anne's father is still living!" In dismay Nancy sprang to her feet. But Miss Sabrina paid no heed to her agitation. She rose and went to the table and opened a leather-bound book that lay there.

"I have brought down some papers and letters that belonged to your grandfather—when he was a young man. Here is a picture of him. Come and see it, my dear."

Unwillingly Nancy crossed to the table. Miss Sabrina reverently placed the faded picture in her hand.

"My only brother," she whispered, brokenly. "Your grandfather."

"No, *Anne's* grandfather," Nancy almost screamed.

She looked at the picture with intent interest. It portrayed a strikingly handsome young man. She turned the card in her hand. Across the back had been written the name. "Eugene Standbridge Leavitt."

Astounded, Nancy cried out: "Why, that—*that is my father's name!*"

CHAPTER XXVI

EUGENE STANDBRIDGE LEAVITT

For a moment Nancy thought she had gone quite crazy! She put her hand to her head to steady its whirling. This was her grandfather—her own father's father! She was the real Anne Leavitt!

Aunt Sabrina was fussing over a note-book in which clippings had been pasted. She thought Nancy's agitation quite excusable; she was trembling herself.

"That is a family name. The Standbridge comes from our great-grandmother's side. I knew your father had been called Eugene—yes, here's what B'lindy cut out of the newspaper." She placed the open page of the book in Nancy's hands.

She told Nancy how, after the quarrel, her father had ordered her to destroy everything about the house that might remind anyone of the disowned son.

"I carried out his wishes. After our mother's death my father and I had been constant companions. I was terribly angry at my brother for having brought this grief and shame to my father in his old age. Now——" she caught her breath sharply.

"But B'lindy was fond of the boy. She packed these letters and the picture away, and after that, for years, whenever she'd read anything about him in the papers, or hear a word, she'd enter it in this little book. I never knew that until years later. See—here's an account of his wedding. It says he went abroad—he'd always wanted to, even when he was a young lad. Here it tells that he bought a newspaper. Here's where it speaks about his son Eugene."

It seemed to Nancy as though the little pages of the book, with their age-yellow clippings and curious entries, were opening to her a new side of her father's life. She remembered some stuffed birds in her father's cabinet that she had known in a vague sort of way had come from Africa; it was intensely interesting to read from the little book that "the well-known newspaper man, Eugene Leavitt, and his young son, Eugene, had gone on a six-months' trip to Africa."

"Milly wrote once to our brother, though I never knew it until I found this book. After a long while he answered with this note. B'lindy's put it here," turning a page.

The few lines were strangely characteristic of Nancy's own father. They told the younger sister that he'd found the world a very kind and a very good place to live in.

Another letter had been written by Nancy's father. It told, in a boyish, awkward way, of his father's death and that his father, before his death, had asked him to write to the relatives in Freedom and tell them that "there was no hard feeling."

Nancy pondered over this letter for a moment. A great many questions came into her mind. Her father must have inherited from his father a sense of hurt and injustice, or why, through all the years, and years of poverty, too, had he refrained from any mention of the aunts in Freedom?

Like links in a chain the little entries in B'lindy's book connected the three generations, for the last clipping told how the young wife of Eugene Leavitt, Jr., had been killed in a runaway in Central Park, leaving motherless the little three-year-old daughter, Anne Leavitt.

"Once Milly told me of finding this. Sometimes she used to wonder what you were like. But I was always angry when she mentioned you—I wanted to feel that I had rooted out all affection for my brother and his kin! As the years went by, though, I grew afraid—what was I going to do with this earthly wealth I possessed? Then I wrote that letter to you in college."

As though it had been but the day before Nancy saw again the beloved dormitory room, old Noah and his letter.

Then the whole truth flashed across her mind! Anne's Aunt Sa-something was the dear little Saphonia Leavitt, who lived with her sister Janie on the lonely road out of Freedom!

With a glee she made no effort to suppress, Nancy caught Aunt Sabrina by the elbows, danced her madly around, and then enveloped her in an impetuous hug.

"Oh, you don't know—you can't ever, ever know how nice it all—is," she cried, laughing and wiping away a tear at the same time. "To know that I *really, truly* belong to you and to Happy House!" Nancy's words rang true. They brought a flood of color to the old woman's cheeks.

"You see I never knew how long I could stay—I was sort of on probation and I love you all so much—now! But, tell me, are those two funny little Leavitt sisters any relation of—*ours*?" Nancy emphasized the last word with a squeeze of Miss Sabrina's hand.

"No—or if they are, it is so far back it's been lost. When I was little I used to see them occasionally, but they've never gone around much. They have always been very poor. They had a brother, but he went away from the Island when he was young—I think he must have died."

"I am going to *pretend* we're related," declared Nancy, "because I just love them. They took us in during the storm. And—and I have a dear chum, my very best chum, whose name is Anne Leavitt, too, and I am sure they are her aunts." She told Aunt Sabrina, then, in a sketchy way, of her four years' friendship with the other Anne Leavitt.

The windows of the sitting-room had been opened after the storm to let out the dust from the fallen mortar and brick. The blinds had not been closed again. Through the windows streamed a flood of sunshine.

With an impulsive movement Nancy closed the book and laid it down on the table. Her manner said plainly that thus they would dispose of all the past-and-gone Leavitts. She nodded toward the gaping fireplace.

"Let's have a *new* mantel made with Happy House carved in it, Aunt Sabrina. And, I think, it *will* be a Happy House, now."

There was a great deal Nancy wanted to tell Aunt Sabrina—of her father, and of their happy life together. But she had suddenly, with consternation, remembered the eloquent confession she had sent off to Peter Hyde.

"And I didn't need to—for I *am* Anne Leavitt!"

As quickly as she could break away from her aunt, she ran off in search of Jonathan. She found him tying up some of his vines that had been beaten down in the storm.

"Jonathan—that letter I gave you—did—did you give it to—to Mr. Hyde?" she asked with a faint hope that he had' not.

"Yes'm! Caught him jes' agoin' to take the stage."

"Going *away*?" Nancy cried.

"Yes'm. He hed a big bag and he give me a handshake like he was goin' to be away for a spell, tho' it's most harvestin' and he's not the kind to leave Judson short-handed—not him."

After a moment Nancy grew conscious that old Jonathan was staring curiously at her. So she turned and walked slowly back to the house.

Peter Hyde had gone away—without a word! He would read her letter—he would always think of her as she had pictured herself in it! And he might never know how the curious tangle had come out!

CHAPTER XXVII

ARCHIE EATON RETURNS

Liz, returning from her "afternoon's work at the meeting house, blew breathlessly into the Hopworth kitchen.

"As I live, Archie Eaton's comin' home—this blessed day! His ma got a telegram last night; Sammy Todd brought it over from Nor' Hero on his bicycle. And Webb's put a notice in the post-office—he wants every man, woman and child to meet on the Common to-night at seven to sort o' welcome Archie to home."

"Everybody? Me and Davy," broke in Nonie, excitedly.

"Of course, when Webb says every man, woman and child it means all of us," answered Liz with importance, smoothing out her gingham apron.

Three days had entirely made over Liz Hopworth. Sarah Hopkins' death had given Liz, hitherto an outcast, a position of importance in the community. However unfitting Freedom's ladies might have thought it, nevertheless it was an undisputable fact, and everyone knew it, that Liz's hands had "done for" the stricken family; she had cleaned and comforted, dusted and baked and stitched together suitable mourning for poor Jennie, the oldest Hopkins girl. At the simple funeral it had been Liz who had greeted the neighbors and had urged them to "just look at Sarah Hopkins—you'd think she was enjoyin' it all, she's that happy lookin'!" What no one else knew was that it had been Liz who had put her arms around Jennie Hopkins when a complete realization of her loss had swept over the girl and had bade her "just lay your poor little head right here and cry all you want to!" Never in all her life had Liz's arms known such a labor of love. Jennie *had* cried all she wanted to—great, heart-breaking sobs that had, though they exhausted, finally soothed her.

From his corner where old Dan'l, with hanging head waited his supper, came a grunt of unbelief. Liz turned reprovingly.

"Anyway, Archie Eaton's a soldier even if he be an Eaton!" Then, to Nonie: "I met Mis' Sniggs comin' up the village and she wants all the little girls to wear white and throw bouquets at Archie as he's gettin' off the stage and sing America. She's goin' to get the flowers at Mis' Todd's and Mis' Brown's. Miss Nancy's white's too nice, but I guess your gingham's faded most white 'nough. Anyways, it's plenty good."

"Have I time to run up and tell Miss Nancy?"

"Lan' sakes, no! We gotta get supper spry so's to have the work cleared away. Nancy Leavitt knows it, I callate—ain't much happens Webb doesn't carry straight off up to Happy House. I guess maybe they're pretty busy, too. Things is certainly changin', I said, when Sabriny Leavitt goes to poor Sarah Hopkins' funeral, sittin' right on the plush chair over in the right-hand corner near the waxed flowers. And sure's I'm alive, she's taken the Hopkins baby up to Happy House to do for. She wanted it to keep regular like her own, but Timothy Hopkins wouldn't listen for a minit—his children wa'nt a goin' to be separated if they all starved! Seems to me he was foolish, but he was awful set and mebbe he was right. Dan'l Hopworth, take off your slippers! Of course you're goin' to see Archie Eaton come home! I guess you're as patriotic as any other folks."

Liz's determination won its point so that a little before seven the entire Hopworth family joined every other "man, woman and child" on the village common. The common presented a pretty sight, big and small flags fluttering, the weather-worn service flag again hoisted to its place of honor and women and children in their best attire. Mrs. Eaton, upon whom every glance turned with frank curiosity, did not need her gorgeous purple poplin with its lace ruffles swelling over her proud bosom, to make her the most conspicuous figure in the gathering—that she was the mother of the returning soldier was enough! And her eyes, as they strained down the road like the others, for a first glimpse of Webb's horses, were wet with tears.

Someone saw a little cloud of dust and set up a shout: "He's comin'!" Others took up the cry. Mrs. Sniggs frantically gathered her flock of little singers around the carriage-block in front

of the meeting-house, where Webb had promised to pull up his team. Some one pushed Mrs. Eaton toward the spot.

"*There* he is," piped a small boy, pointing to the khaki figure that leaned out of the stage, violently waving a hat.

"Who's the other fellar?" asked Mr. Todd, but no one around him seemed to know.

All ceremony was thrown to the four winds; the hysterical piping of the little girls was lost in the wild rub-a-dub dub of the Freedom's drummers and the clamor of excited voices from the pushing, jostling crowd. However, Archie Eaton was utterly unconscious of it all, for in less than a second he was tightly enveloped in folds of purple poplin!

After a moment he sprang back to the step of Webb's wagon and raised his hand.

"Mebbe you think it ain't good to get home! *I'll* say it is! I've laid awake nights dreamin' of this. I ain't goin' to make a speech, folks, but I've got to tell you something. I wanted to send word to you back a time but my buddy here wouldn't let me! Mebbe you don't remember my buddy—he's changed a lot, I guess, but he's from Freedom, all right!" He pulled at the arm of his companion. "Stand up, so folks can see you! Give a cheer, now, for Eric Hopworth, the best and bravest soldier in Uncle Sam's army!"

Not a throat in Freedom could have made a sound for utter surprise. They gaped at the big, bronzed fellow in khaki while Archie Eaton went on, speaking rapidly.

"Mebbe you folks up here don't know yet that he led a bunch of us after a machine gun nest that was holdin' back the fellows there in the Argonny and that when every man of us dropped he went on single-handed, with a nasty hole in his side, and got every Jerry of 'em! But I guess before he done that he pulled Archie Eaton back where the Jerries couldn't finish me with their shot pepperin' the lot of us as we lay there and—well, he's done a lot more'n that and mebbe you don't know that the other day some fellers down at Washington gave him a Distinguished Service Medal which I guess puts him pretty near next to Ethan Allen himself! So set up a shout that'll split your throats for Eric Hopworth, 'cause if it wasn't for him Archie Eaton wouldn't be here holdin' his mother's hand and cryin' real tears, he's that tickled to be home, and this old North Hero wouldn't be on the map like 'tis! So let her rip, fellows! *My* buddy, Eric Hopworth!"

Something, pent up while Archie Eaton was speaking, burst with a roar. Each person, big or small, tried to shout louder than anyone else; each tried to press close enough to lay a hand on the hero. And, strange sight, Mrs. Eaton was now clasping Eric Hopworth in her arms!

Nancy, standing a little apart with Miss Sabrina, shouting like the others, suddenly felt her throat choke with a sob, for she saw Dan'l, stung to life, leap forward through the crowd to reach his son, his face lifted and lighted by a great pride. Then, as they clasped hands, the crowd parted suddenly, and through it flashed two small figures. In less than a moment Nonie and Davy were both in their father's arms.

No one stopped to recall the stories of Eric Hopworth's youth nor of his bringing the two babies back to his father. It was enough that he was there among them, one of the country's heroes.

Mrs. Eaton was excitedly begging everyone to come to her home and have ice cream and cake, and there was a general movement of young and old to accept her hospitality. But when she urged Eric Hopworth he shook his head, slipping one arm over his father's shoulder.

"I guess we want to go home," he explained, a little embarrassed. "You see, it's been a long time—Pa and I have got a lot to say to each other! And *we've* got to get acquainted," nodding at the youngsters who were clinging to his arm.

There was a great deal that Eric Hopworth could not tell his father, for the simple reason that he had *not* at his command the words that could tell of the lessons the war had taught him. But in one simple, awkward sentence he tried to express his remorse and penitence.

"Well, Pa," they had stopped before the door of the dilapidated house, "I guess it took the war to make a man of me! I went into it 'cause it looked pretty excitin', but it didn't take me long to find out it was a big job and the kind of a job that meant a fellow had to give the very best in him—and only the best! I've had time to think a lot and things sort a come to me different, over there. I guess I know now that I've got a job right here most as big as the war and I'm goin' to do it! I'm goin' to make a home for you and Liz and the kids—a *real* home!"

Nonie, standing off, a little shyly and uncertainly, was steeling herself for a test. Out of a clear sky had dropped a real father. He looked very big, but his face was kind, and he had a nice voice. Perhaps—*perhaps* one of her dreams was coming true! She slipped away to her room and made ready for bed with trembling fingers. For a long time she lay listening to the voices below. After a little Davy came in and crawled sleepily into the cot in the corner. Still she waited, her hands clasped tightly under the covers. At last she heard a step—not like her grandfather's, nor Liz', she knew theirs—a cautious, tip-toey step. As it came nearer she shivered with exquisite anticipation.

Eric Hopworth leaned over the bed. He had thought Nonie would be asleep. She held her eyes shut tight for a moment. He laid his hand on her head with a shy, caressing movement. Suddenly the child threw her two arms around his neck. He held her close, then he kissed her and laid her gently back upon the pillow.

"Good night, kiddie," he whispered softly, and tip-toed out of the room.

Nonie gave one long, happy sigh, then, cuddling down under the covers, dropped off into dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A LETTER FROM THE MASTER

Four days had passed since Nancy had written her confession and sent it off to Peter Hyde. They had seemed endless, too, in spite of all the strange changes at Happy House. Aunt Sabrina and Aunt Milly were pathetically and helplessly busy over the new member of the family, and his coming had necessitated momentous reforms in the habits of the household and long arguments as to the proper care of infants. B'lindy had finally found somewhere in

the back of a "Household Helper" a chapter on the "Care of the Child," and went about all day with a finger between its pages and a superior look on her face.

Nancy had spent one entire afternoon at the Hopworth's. Nonie and Davy had come for her and had dragged her back with them to see their "Dad."

"Ask him to tell you 'bout——" and Davy had breathlessly, rattled off a dozen or more of the war tales that he had liked best.

Nancy had thought, that afternoon, that, somehow or other, the Hopworth kitchen had changed since that first day she had visited it. It was cleaner, homier; there was less litter, the air was not so heavy with the stale odors of cooking. Old Dan'l sat near the open door smoking the pipe Eric had brought him, his eyes following Eric's every movement. Liz, fussing about over household tasks, was less dominant, less forbidding, and the tired look had gone from her face.

With the children's chatter Eric Hopworth's shyness soon wore off. Nonie had told him of the pleasant days at Happy House with Nancy; he felt a deep gratitude to these people who had been doing for his two "kiddies" what he should have done. At Davy's coaxing he had repeated for Nancy some of the incidents of the war in which he had shared. Davy had proudly exhibited the precious trophies that had come home in his father's luggage.

"And Dad's going to stay home always and always now," Nonie had announced. Then Eric Hopworth explained that he had taken a position in a big manufacturing plant at Burlington.

"The boss there was my captain. It'll do for a start. After a bit, maybe, I can take the family there, though Pa'll likely want to always stay here in Freedom," he had added with a squaring of the shoulders that said plainly that the burdens of the household now rested upon him.

Nancy had gone away from the cottage that afternoon with a feeling in her heart that Nonie and Davy would no longer need her. Davy, with his first-hand war stories and trophies and a real hero for a father, from now on had an assured standing among the youths of the village, and Nonie had some one to love and to love her.

So the little loneliness that this thought created added to Nancy's restlessness and made the hours seem endless. And it made her, too, haunt the doorway watching for Jonathan and possible letters.

She told herself, sternly, that, of course, it was silly to expect Peter Hyde to write—that was a closed chapter. But she had written a long letter to Anne, telling her of the strange things that had transpired at Happy House and of the two dear little sisters who were undoubtedly Anne's relatives. Surely Anne must answer that letter.

Old Jonathan was too simple-hearted to wonder why Nancy ran out each day to greet him or why she asked, each day, in a manner she tried to make casual, if "Mr. Judson had anyone to help him yet?" But on this fourth day, his smile was broad with satisfaction as he proudly placed in her hand a big, flat envelope.

A week before Nancy would have exclaimed—for it was from Theodore Hoffman. Now she turned away in disappointment.

In the excitement of the last few days she had forgotten her play. She opened the envelope now with steady fingers. By some intuition she knew just what she would find inside. There they were—all the sheets over which she had toiled so long, familiar, yet unfamiliar, their freshness gone from handling—tired-looking. Before she opened the master's letter she gave them a tender little pat, as though she felt very sorry for them.

The master's letter told her that her play had much merit and a great deal of promise, but that it was "young." "You must know more of life, my dear young lady, live close to love and close to sorrow and learn life's lessons, before you can portray them... And never lose faith in your work. After failure, try again—and again—and again... Work, work, work, greatness is in effort."

Nancy read the words with a thrill—it was as though he was speaking to her.

Her labor of the last few months should not be in vain; her little play, though it had been a failure, had brought her this golden message from the one who had, through the effort he preached, risen to the very top.

Then the last two paragraphs of the master's letter made her forget everything else.

"I have had constantly in my mind that strange child who played and danced in your garden. She has haunted me. You told me her name was Nonie Hopworth. I have looked up records and have learned that the young student who, fifteen years ago, gave such promise of dramatic ability, was Ilona Carr and that she married an Eric Hopworth. This Nonie is without doubt her child.

"Will you ask the child's guardians if they will allow her to come to my school at Tarrytown for a few years? There she will have the best schooling and dramatic training that my teachers can give and her talent will have an opportunity for development and growth. When she is older she shall choose for herself whether or not she will follow the calling——"

"The fairy godmother has come," declared Nancy, later, bursting in upon the Hopworth family with her strange news. She had to read and re-read the letter so that they could understand and Eric Hopworth had to hear all about the afternoon at Happy House when the great Theodore Hoffman had called.

At first he had decidedly opposed the plan. Liz had snorted in disapproval. Nonie had stared at first one, then another, with round, bewildered eyes.

"You ought not to throw away such a chance. It's a wonderful school—I've visited there. Nonie will have splendid training——"

"I know all about it," Eric Hopworth had broken in, and Nancy suddenly remembered what the master had told her.

"Tell me about Nonie's mother," she begged.

There was not much to tell—she had come into Eric Hopworth's life and gone out again, in a few years.

"I always had a feelin' I'd cheated her of a lot," Eric Hopworth said humbly, turning in his hand the photograph he had brought out from old Dan'l's bureau to show Nancy.

It was a cheap little photograph, taken a few months after they had been married. But the pretty face that smiled out of it was a happy face. Nancy, as she studied it closely, wondered if it had ever been shadowed by a regret for the dreams she had sacrificed by her marriage.

"Then—don't cheat Nonie now," Nancy answered.

So before she went away it was decided that Nonie should go to Tarrytown and while little Nonie was pinching herself to be sure she was awake and not dreaming, Nancy's and Liz's minds, in true feminine fashion, leaped ahead to the question of "clothes." Upon their perturbed planning came Mrs. Cyrus Eaton, walking into the Hopworth kitchen with the air of one familiar with its threshold.

Too many strange things had happened for Nancy to be amazed at this. And when she saw Mrs. Eaton pat Eric Hopworth's arm as she sat down beside him, Nancy knew that in the woman's heart, all silly prejudices had been swept away by a deep affection for the man who had saved her boy's life.

Mrs. Eaton had to hear all about the master's letter and Nonie's wonderful chance to go to the school at Tarrytown.

"Clothes—land sakes, Liz Hopworth, you've got enough to do without fussing over clothes. Let me get the child ready. I always did want to sew for a girl. Besides, it isn't much for me to do, considering——" she could not finish, but she laid her hand, again, on Eric Hopworth's arm.

Nancy realized, more than Liz, how much Mrs. Eaton wanted to have this opportunity to do something for Nonie, so she answered quickly, before anyone could make a protest:

"That will be splendid if you will help out that way, Mrs. Eaton," and she made her tone very final, as though they must all consider the matter settled.

Nancy left Mrs. Eaton and Liz fussing over the wearing qualities of various fabrics hitherto absolutely unknown to Nonie and walked slowly homeward. It was a sunny, still afternoon, conducive to meditation. And Nancy, in a pensive mood, had much to meditate over.

A moment's whim had brought her to Happy House and how much had happened because of her coming. How curiously intermixed everything had been; her acquaintance with Judson's hired man had brought her in touch with the great Theodore Hoffman and then he, through her, had found Nonie.

Life was so funny—Nancy suddenly remembered a game she had played when she was very, very small. She had had a box of queer shaped and many colored Japanese blocks, that, if placed together in just the right way, made a beautiful castle upon the highest peak of which she could place a shining red ball. But it had been very difficult to build; Nancy had, often, in impatience, thrown the blocks down, but her father had always come, then, to her help and had laughingly coaxed her to try again.

Life was like that—if one could successfully fit all the queer edges together and build up, piece by piece, one could have the reward of the shining ball at the top. But Nancy, thinking of it now, felt the tugging impatience that she had used to feel toward the pile of colored blocks.

A few weeks had so changed her own life—she must take up the little pieces and begin to build again.

At the gate of Happy House she paused, and turning, looked down the road. In the last few days she had caught herself often looking down that road and yet she would not admit to herself—she was too proud to admit it that she was always wishing that she would see Peter Hyde coming. It was very lonesome at Happy House without him.

Suddenly, in a swirl of dust, a motor turned the corner at the smithy and approached toward her at a tremendous speed, its outline barely distinguishable because of the cloud that enveloped it. No one came up that road unless they were coming to Happy House.

Then someone, swathed in linen and green, floating veiling, spied Nancy and waved wildly from the tonneau.

Scarcely believing her eyes, Nancy took a step forward. With a swerve and a roar the car came to a stop and from the front seat, throwing off goggles and cap, sprang Eugene Leavitt.

"Daddy!" cried Nancy, throwing herself into his arms.

"I thought it was Anne, but I couldn't——"

she began, finally withdrawing from his tight clasp to greet the others. "I just—couldn't believe it."

Anne was standing now beside her, and behind Anne, unwinding yards and yards of dust-covered veiling, laughed Claire.

"Oh, it's too good, good, good to be true," Nancy cried, trying to embrace them both at the same time. "To have you all come—at once. I'm so happy, I just want to cry."

"And, Nancy, at last you're going to meet my brother Barry," interrupted Claire, her eyes sparkling. "You wouldn't come to Merrycliffe, so you see I had to bring him here."

Nancy was so happy that she could even turn to greet the despised "lion" with a radiant smile. Claire's brother, who, forgotten by the others in their joyous reunion, had been busying himself with the engine of his car, now turned and removed from a dust-stained face the goggles that had almost completely hidden it.

"Pe-ter. You——" and Nancy, her face crimson, put her two hands behind her back.

CHAPTER XXIX

BARRY

Nancy presented such a picture of bewilderment and unbelief that the others all laughed—except Peter; his face was very grave.

"You see I thought the only way I could get you—to forgive me—was by bringing them all back with me."

But Nancy had no intention of forgiving—at least, at once—the trick that had been played upon her. She lifted her chin with meaning disdain and turned to the others.

"Let's go up to the house. My aunts will be so glad to see you all," and slipping one hand through her father's arm and another into Anne's she turned up the path, leaving Claire and her brother to follow.

Miss Sabrina had seen the car stop at the gate and had come to the door. She knew at once that this was Nancy's father. A color swept her cheeks and faded. She tried to say some word of welcome but her trembling lips could not frame a single syllable. But almost instantly her fears were set at rest, for Eugene Leavitt took her two hands in his clasp and lightly kissed her cheek in a cheery way that put aside forever the trouble that had separated them.

In the hub-bub and chatter that followed, Nancy did not realize that Peter Hyde had slipped away; not until Aunt Sabrina had carried her father off to Aunt Milly's room and B'lindy, radiant, had gone back to the kitchen to prepare a supper "fit for folks," leaving the three chums together. Claire gave her friend an affectionate shake.

"Now, Nancy Leavitt, don't be silly and stay cross at Barry. It's my fault. I knew he was here and that you were here, and that he knew you and you knew him, and neither of you——"

"Please, please Claire," begged Nancy, trying to stop her friend. Her face turned scarlet. Of course she could not be offended at his deception, had she not, herself, been masquerading? But burning in her mind was the recollection of that afternoon when she had opened her heart to Peter and had told him how she despised Barry Wallace and his kind. And he had let her talk—she could not forgive that, ever.

"After you'd been here a few weeks," Claire went on, "Barry wrote to me. I suppose he'd gotten to the point where he simply had to confide in someone. You can imagine, I nearly dropped when I saw the postmark and knew what he was doing, but picture how I felt when he wrote that he'd met the 'best girl ever—no frills and fropperies like mother's crowd, but a regular girl.' Of course I knew he meant you. I let him write a few more letters—I don't think Barry ever wrote so often to me before—and then, I told him everything."

"You did?" exclaimed Nancy. "Then——" she stopped short. Now she understood why he had refused to accept her answer as final—that last evening they had been together.

"And I made him promise on his honor not to tell you that I had told. So don't be cross at him," Claire pleaded, a little worried at Nancy's expression. "He has gone back to Judson's

and he said—he asked me to ask you if you would go out to Bird's-Nest—after supper—and——"

Claire, failing in words, threw her arms around Nancy's neck and kissed her. Anne, who had been impatiently waiting for an opportunity, took up her part of the story.

"Goodness, Nancy, you can be thankful you've been up here and not at the apartment—it's unbearably stuffy and hot. Although it ought to have seemed like paradise after my quarters in London," snapping her lips together. Poor Anne, her dream of service was now only a bitter recollection. "I was sitting there as forlorn as could be when in blew—no other word could describe it—Claire's brother. You wouldn't have dreamed from the way he acted that he'd never laid eyes on me before. He told me about the confession you'd written him and he said he knew you were unhappy up here because of your false position and that I ought to come back up here with him and get you out of it. He didn't want me to lose a moment. Then, while we were talking, your letter came with its astonishing news. Isn't it all like some nightmare—all the aunts and things mixed up the way they were? We had to read your letter over and over to understand it. Then when we finally got it through our heads, we decided we'd get Claire and start the next day for North Hero."

"But Dad?" asked Nancy.

"We were all ready to go when a taxi drove up to the door and out jumped your father. Of course he had to hear the whole story way back to the letter Noah brought to our room. Barry didn't give him a chance to even wash his face, he bundled him straight into the automobile as though it were a matter of life and death. And here we are. And this place looks like Heaven," Anne finished.

It was a merry party that gathered around Miss Sabrina's table. B'lindy wanting to express all that was in her heart, had spread a supper fit for the gods. Nancy's father had carried Miss Milly downstairs and sat between her and Nancy. Every now and then Nancy slipped her hand into his, under the tablecloth. Miss Sabrina, at the head of the table, beamed down upon them all in a pathetic ecstasy of happiness. From the kitchen came the insistent "goo's" of the smallest Hopworth, to the accompaniment of a silver spoon beating against a silver mug.

Through all the light chatter in the room there was an undertone of deep happiness and contentment. Only occasionally Claire's eyes flashed a worried, pleading message to Nancy that Nancy wilfully ignored. But when, after supper, the others all went to the Hollyhock porch and Nancy slipped away, the watchful Claire drew a sigh of relief and proceeded to feel riotously happy.

As Nancy walked slowly down the path to the orchard she felt her heart grow inexplicably, foolishly light. She was so glad that Peter Hyde had come back.

The gladness shone in her eyes as she let him clasp her two hands. He did not even ask her if she would forgive him; they both laughed joyously, like two children.

"Wasn't it funny? Both of us up here pretending to be someone else."

"But it wasn't fair. You knew—and I didn't."

Peter hastened to defend himself. "I didn't—at first. And then Claire made me promise not to let on that I knew. Anyway, I'd grown so downright sick of that Barry Wallace that I wanted to just see if I could make someone like plain Peter Hyde. Did I?" he asked.

Nancy ignored the direct question and avoided the pleading in Peter's eyes.

"Why did you come here, Pet—Barry?"

"I wonder if you will understand, Nancy?" Peter's voice was serious. "Mother thought I was crazy and Claire would have, too—at the time. But when I heard you tell—that afternoon—what you thought of Claire's brother, I decided I'd done just about the right thing. You see, when I came back from the other side, just because father and mother are quite prominent, I found that a lot of stuff had been printed about all the things I'd done——"

"But you did do them," cried Nancy, warmly.

"Oh, yes, I did them, and I have got three or four medals—but then so were a lot of other fellows doing the same things and a lot of 'em were killed, doing them. You see, I just looked at it that everyone of us went over to do our duty and most all of us did—and that's all there was to it. So when I came back it was a sort of a shock to fall into the mess I found waiting for me. I couldn't turn around that I wasn't asked to appear at a tea or a reception or a banquet or a church circle or something or other to speak. Every other minute I was dodging a photographer. And you see the worst of it all was that they were all my mother's friends, and my mother was always around looking as though she was at last reaping the reward for her sacrifice. I suppose any mother would have been the same. But you can see the hole it put me in. I hated it, but I couldn't bear to offend her. I wanted to go to work at something; I tried a week in my father's office, but I couldn't stand the confinement indoors. So I ran away—it was my only escape. I headed for the mountains—somewhere where no one would know me. At Burlington I saw Judson's ad. and this idea came to me. I'd hire out to him for awhile and get a chance to work out some theories that were pets of mine—before the war. I shipped my car back to Merrycliffe and wrote to mother of my plan, begging her to tell no one. I picked the name Peter Hyde at random—out of the hotel telephone book."

"I shall never, never think of you as anything but Peter Hyde," broke in Nancy.

"I don't ever want you to," assured Barry.

Nancy's eyes rested for a moment on the outline of the Judson barns. "Are you going to help Judson with his harvesting?" she asked, suddenly.

"Sure thing I am—I wouldn't think of leaving him, just now. Nancy, will you listen to a plan I've been making? I've got some money—it was my grandmother's—and I want to buy up some farms in different parts of the state, the kind of farms that are sort of run down at the heels, and experiment with them and see what can be done with them, as a sort of outright demonstration for other farmers. Do you think that worth while?" he asked so anxiously and with such humility that Nancy colored.

"Oh, Peter—why ask me? It sounds pleasant and—and like you." She suddenly seemed to see him going on with this new work—without her. The thought brought a wistful look into her face. Barry Wallace read it there.

"Nancy, I'm afraid I sort of made a mess of things—the other night. When you told me you were going away—I lost my head. Tell me—you said you'd always care more for your work than for anything or anyone else—couldn't you share your work? Like I'd like to share mine?"

Nancy lifted a protesting hand that Barry promptly imprisoned in both of his own.

"Oh, Peter, don't repeat all that—silly stuff—I said."

"Didn't you mean it, Nancy?" Barry cried.

"I meant it—then. But that was—young." Barry could not know that she was using the master's words. "I know—I think—that—that——"

"What, Nancy?"

Nancy looked wildly around. She wanted to run away, but Barry Wallace was holding her hand very tight.

"That—I'll work better if—that—oh, I'm just glad you came back," and Nancy could not have said anything more, for her face was smothered against Barry's shoulder.

After a little, Barry had to hear all about the rejected manuscript, the master's letter and the redemption of the Hopworth's. There in the sun-lit orchard a golden world seemed to stretch around them.

"How foolish we used to be," laughed Nancy, with a rapturous sigh. "I never doubted but that my first play was going to make my fortune."

"And I, after facing death in every one of its worst forms, ran away from a pack of fussy women," added Barry.

"Never mind, let's bury those two children out here under the apple trees and begin real work——"

"Together."

"Finding the little things to do in our very own corner," added Nancy, dreamily.

Across the twilight stillness came the familiar whistle that had been the special signal among the three chums at college.

"It's the girls," cried Nancy. "Let's go back. I can't bear to have them come here—just now. It's—it's——" she blushed, but met his eyes squarely. "I want this to be—just ours—for awhile."

As they walked slowly back to the house, Nancy stopped suddenly in the path.

"Doesn't Happy House look beautiful?" she whispered. And in fact the fading glow of the sun was touching the old walls with a shadowy beauty.

"It seems to speak to one," added Nancy. She was thinking of that other Anne Leavitt who had come there bravely intent upon building a happy home in the heart of the wilderness. Though she said not a word, in her heart she was making a solemn pledge—that she and Barry, would add, through useful lives, their bit to the traditions of Happy House and the little Island, traditions rich with bravery, sacrifice and loyalty.

Again came the girls' whistle—insistent. Nancy slipped her hand into Barry's.

"Let's hurry."

Hand in hand they went along the path to the house—and to their future together. As they reached, the edge of Jonathan's raspberry patch Nancy turned with shining eyes and whispered: "Pals."

And Barry, teasingly recalling Nonie's pet plan, answered tenderly: "Dearest."