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Author: Amy Bell Marlowe

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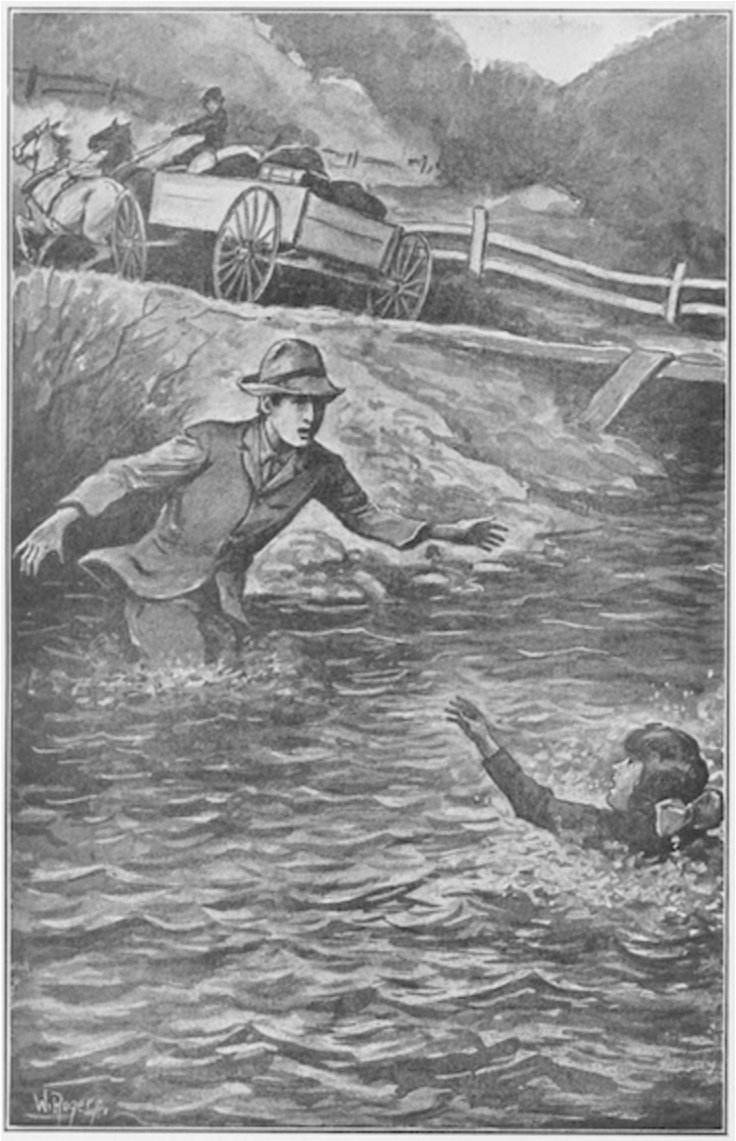

LUCAS TORE DOWN THE BANK AND WADED
RIGHT INTO THE STREAM. Frontispiece (Page 61.)

THE GIRLS OF HILLCREST FARM

OR

THE SECRET OF THE ROCKS

BY

AMY BELL MARLOWE

AUTHOR OF
THE OLDEST OF FOUR, A LITTLE MISS NOBODY,
THE GIRL FROM SUNSET RANCH, ETC.

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The Girls of Hillcrest Farm

CONTENTS

THE GIRLS OF HILLCREST FARM

CHAPTER I
EVERYTHING AT ONCE!

Whenever she heard the siren of the ladder-truck, as it swung out of its station on the neighboring street, Lydia Bray ran to the single window of the flat that looked out on Trimble Avenue.

They were four flights up. There were twenty-three other families in this "double-decker." A fire in the house was the oldest Bray girl's nightmare by night and haunting spectre by day.

Lydia just couldn't get used to these quarters, and they had been here now three months. The old, quiet home on the edge of town had been so different. To it she had returned from college so short a time ago to see her mother die and find their affairs in a state of chaos.

For her father was one of those men who leave everything to the capable management of their wives. Euphemia, or "'Phemie," was only a schoolgirl, then, in her junior year at high school; "Lyddy" was a sophomore at Littleburg when her mother died, and she had never gone back.

She couldn't. There were two very good reasons why her own and even 'Phemie's education had to cease abruptly. Their mother's income, derived from their grandmother's estate, ceased with her death. They could not live, let alone pursue education "on the heights," upon Mr. Bray's wages as overseer in one of the rooms of the hat factory.

"Mother's hundred dollars a month was just the difference between poverty and comfort," Lyddy had decided, when she took the strings of the household into her own hands.

"I haven't that hundred dollars a month; father makes but fifteen dollars weekly; *you* will have to go to work at something, 'Phemie, and so will I."

And no longer could they pay twenty-five dollars a month house rent. Lyddy had first placed her sister with a millinery firm at six dollars weekly, and had then found this modest tenement about half-way between her father's factory and 'Phemie's millinery shop, so that it would be equally handy for both workers.

As for herself, Lyddy wished to obtain some employment that would occupy only a part of her day, and in this she had been unsuccessful as yet. She religiously bought a paper every morning, and went through the "help wanted" columns, answering every one that looked promising. She had tried many kinds of "work at home for ladies," and canvassing, and the like. The latter did not pay for shoe-leather, and the "work at home" people were mostly swindlers. Lyddy was no needle-woman, so she could not make anything as a seamstress.

She had promised her mother to keep the family together and make a home for her father. Mr. Bray was not well. For almost two years now the doctor had been warning him to get out of the factory and into some other business. The felt-dust was hurting him.

He had come in but the minute before and had at once gone to lie down, exhausted by his climb up the four flights of stairs. 'Phemie had not yet returned from work, for it was

nearing Easter, despite the rawness of the days, and the millinery shop was busy until late. They always waited supper for 'Phemie.

Now, when Lyddy ran to the window at the raucous shriek of the ladder-truck siren, she hoped she would see her sister turning the corner into the avenue, where the electric arc-light threw a great circle of radiance upon the wet walk. 4

But although there was the usual crowd at the corner, and all seemed to be in a hurry to-night, Lyddy saw nothing of either her sister or the ladder-truck. She went back to the kitchen, satisfied that the fire apparatus had not swung into their street, so the tenement must be safe for the time being.

She finished laying the table for supper. Once she looked up. There was that man at the window again!

That is, he *would* be a man some day, Lyddy told herself. But she believed, big as he was, he was just a hobbledehoy-boy. He was a boy who, if one looked at him, just *had* to smile. And he was always working in a white apron and brown straw cuff-shields at that window which was a little above the level of Lyddy's kitchen window.

Lyddy Bray abominated flirting and such silly practises. And although the boy at the window was really good to look upon–cleanly shaven, rosy-cheeked, with good eyes set wide apart, and a firm, broad chin–Lyddy did not like to see him every time she raised her eyes from her own kitchen tasks.

Often, even on dark days, she drew the shade down so that she should have more privacy. For sometimes the young man looked idly out of the window and Lyddy believed that, had she given him any encouragement, he would have opened his own window and spoken to her. 5

The place in which he worked was a tall loft building; she believed he was employed in some sort of chemical laboratory. There were retorts, and strange glass and copper instruments in partial view upon his bench.

Now, having lighted the gas, Lyddy stepped to the window to pull down the shade closely and shut the young man out. He was staring with strange eagerness at her–or, at least, in her direction.

"Master Impudence!" murmured Lyddy.

He flung up his window just as she reached for the shade. But she saw then that he was looking above her story.

"It's those Smith girls, I declare," thought Lyddy. "Aren't they bold creatures? And–really–I thought he was too nice a boy—"

That was the girl of it! She was shocked at the thought of having any clandestine acquaintance with the young man opposite; yet it cheapened him dreadfully in Lyddy's eyes to see him fall prey to the designing girls in the flat above. The Smith girls had flaunted their cheap finery in the faces of Lyddy and 'Phemie Bray ever since the latter had come here to live. 6

She did not pull the shade down for a moment. That boy certainly was acting in a most outrageous manner!

His body was thrust half-way out of the window as he knelt on his bench among the retorts. She saw several of the delicate glass instruments overturned by his vigorous motions. She saw his lips open and he seemed to be shouting something to those in the window above.

"How rude of him," thought the disappointed Lyddy. He had looked to be *such* a nice young man.

Again she would have pulled down the shade, but the boy's actions stayed her hand.

He leaped back from the window and disappeared–for just a moment. Then he staggered into view, thrust a long and wide plank through his open window, and, bearing down upon it, shoved hard and fast, thrusting the novel bridge up to the sill of the window above Lyddy's own.

"What under the sun does that fellow mean to do?" gasped the girl, half tempted to raise her own window so as to look up the narrow shaft between the two buildings.

"He never would attempt to cross over to their flat," thought Lyddy. "That would be quite too–ri–dic–u–lous—" 7

The youth was adjusting the plank. At first he could not steady it upon the sill above Lyddy's kitchen window. And how dangerous it would be if he attempted to "walk the plank."

And then there was a roaring sound above, a glare of light, a crash of glass and a billow of black smoke suddenly–but only for a moment–filled the space between the two buildings!

The girl almost fell to the floor. She had always been afraid of fire, and it had been ever in her mind since they moved into this big tenement house. And now it had come without her knowing it!

While she thought the young man to be trying to enter into a flirtation with the girls in the flat above, the house was afire! No wonder so many people had seemed running at the corner when she looked out of the front window. The ladder-truck had swung around into the avenue without her seeing it. Doubtless the street in front of the tenement was choked with fire-fighting apparatus.

"Oh, dear me!" gasped Lyddy, reeling for the moment.

Then she dashed for the bedroom where her father lay. Smoke was sifting in from the hall through the cracks about the ill-hung door. 8

"Father! Father!" she gasped.

He lay on the bed, as still as though sleeping. But the noise above should have aroused him by this time, had her own shrill cry not done so.

Yet he did not move.

Lyddy leaped to the bedside, seizing her father's shoulder with desperate clutch. She shook his frail body, and the head wagged from side to side on the pillow in so horrible a way–so lifeless and helpless–that she was smitten with terror.

Was he dead? He had never been like this before, she was positive.

She tore open his waistcoat and shirt and placed her hand upon his heart. It was beating–but, oh, how feebly!

And then she heard the flat door opened with a key–'Phemie's key. Her sister cried:

"Dear me, Lyddy! the hall is full of smoke. It isn't your stove that's smoking so, I hope? And here's Aunt Jane Hammond come to see us. I met her on the street, and these four flights of stairs have almost killed her—Why! what's happened, Lyddy?" the younger girl broke off to ask, as her sister's pale face appeared at the bedroom door. 9

"Everything–everything's happened at once, I guess," replied Lyddy, faintly. "Father's sick–we've got company–and the house is afire!"

CHAPTER II

AUNT JANE PROPOSES

10

Aunt Jane Hammond stalked into the meagerly furnished parlor, and looked around. It was the first time she had been to see the Bray girls since their "come down" in the world.

She was a tall, gaunt woman–their mother's half-sister, and much older than Mrs. Bray would have been had she lived. Aunt Jane, indeed, had been married herself when her father, Dr. "Polly" Phelps, had married his second wife.

"I must–say I–expected to–see some–angels sit–ting a–round–when I got up here," panted Aunt Jane, grimly, and dropping into the most comfortable chair. "Couldn't you have got a mite nearer heaven, if you'd tried, Lyddy Bray?"

"Ye-es," gasped Lyddy. "There's another story on top of this; but it's afire just now."

"*What?*" shrieked Aunt Jane.

"Do you really mean it, Lyddy?" cried her sister. "And that's what the smoke means?"

11

"Well," declared their aunt, "them firemen will have to carry me out, then. I couldn't walk downstairs again right now, for no money!"

'Phemie ran to the hall door. But when she opened it a great blast of choking smoke drove in.

"Oh, oh!" she cried. "We can't escape by the stairway. What'll we do? What *shall* we do?"

"There's the fire-escape," said Lyddy, trembling so that she could scarcely stand.

"What?" cried Aunt Jane again. "*Me* go down one o' them dinky little ladders–and me with a hole as big as a half-dollar in the back of my stockin'? I never knowed it till I got started from home; the seam just gave."

"I'd look nice going down that ladder. I guess not, says Con!" and she shook her head so vigorously that all the little jet trimmings upon her bonnet danced and sparkled in the gaslight just as her beadlike, black eyes snapped and danced.

"We–we're in danger, Lyddy!" cried 'Phemie, tremulously.

"Oh, the boy!" exclaimed Lyddy, and flew to the kitchen, just in time to see the Smith family sliding down the plank into the laboratory–the two girls ahead, then Mother Smith, then Johnny Smith, and then the father. And all while the boy next door held the plank 12
firmly in place against the window-sill of the burning flat.

Lyddy threw up the window and screamed something to him as the last Smith passed him and disappeared. She couldn't have told what she said, for the very life of her; but the young man across the shaft knew what she meant.

He drew back the plank a little way, swung his weight upon the far end of it, and then let it drop until it was just above the level of her sill.

"Grab it and pull, Miss!" he called across the intervening space.

Lyddy obeyed. There was great confusion in the hall now, and overhead the fire roared loudly. The firemen were evidently pressing up the congested stairway with a line or two of hose, and driving the frightened people back into their tenements. If the fire was confined to the upper floor of the double-decker there would be really little danger to those below.

But Lyddy was too frightened to realize this last fact. She planted the end of the plank upon her own sill and saw that it was secure. But it sloped upward more than a trifle. How would they ever be able to creep up that inclined plane–and four flights from the bottom of the shaft?

But to her consternation, the young fellow across the way deliberately stepped out upon the plank, sat down, and slid swiftly across to her. Lyddy sprang back with a cry, and he came in at the window and stood before her. 13

"I don't believe you're in any danger, Miss," he said. "The firemen are on the roof, and probably up through the halls, too. The fire has burned a vent through the roof and—Yes! hear the water?"

She could plainly hear the swish of the streams from the hosepipes. Then the water thundered on the floor above their heads. Almost at once small streams began to pour through the ceiling.

"Oh, oh!" cried Lyddy. "Right on the supper table!"

A stream fell hissing on the stove. The big boy drew her swiftly out of the room into her father's bedroom.

"That ceiling will come down," he said, hastily. "I'm sorry–but if you're insured you'll be all right."

Lyddy at that moment remembered that she had never taken out insurance on the poor sticks of furniture left from the wreck of their larger home. Yet, if everything was spoiled—

"What's the matter with him?" asked the young fellow, looking at the bed where Mr. Bray lay. He had wonderfully sharp eyes, it seemed.

"I don't know–I don't know," moaned Lyddy. "Do you think it is the smoke? He has been ill a long time–almost too sick to work—" 14

"Your father?"

"Yes, sir," said the girl.

"I'll get an ambulance, if you say so–and a doctor. Are you afraid to stay here now? Are you all alone but for him?"

"My sister–and my aunt," gasped Lyddy. "They're in the front room."

"Keep 'em there," said the young man. "Maybe they won't pour so much water into those front rooms. Look out for the ceilings. You might be hurt if they came down."

He found the key and unlocked and opened the door from the bedroom to the hall. The smoke cloud was much thinner. But a torrent of water was pouring down the stairs, and the shouting and stamping of the firemen above were louder.

Two black, serpent-like lines of hose encumbered the stairs.

"Take care of yourself," called the young man. "I'll be back in a jiffy with the doctor," and, bareheaded, and in shirt-sleeves as he was, he dashed down the dark and smoky stairway.

Lyddy bent over her father again; he was breathing more peacefully, it seemed. But when she spoke to him he did not answer. 15

'Phemie ran in, crying. "What is the matter with father?" she demanded, as she noted his strange silence. Then, without waiting for an answer, she snapped:

"And Aunt Jane's got her head out of the window scolding at the firemen in the street because they do not come up and carry her downstairs again."

"Oh, the fire's nearly out, I guess," groaned Lyddy.

Then the girls clutched each other and were stricken speechless as a great crash sounded from the kitchen. As the young man from the laboratory had prophesied, the ceiling had fallen.

"And I had the nicest biscuits for supper I ever made," moaned Lyddy. "They were just as fluffy—"

"Oh, bother your biscuits!" snapped 'Phemie. "Have you had the doctor for father?"

"I–I've sent for one," replied Lyddy, faintly, suddenly conscience-stricken by the fact that she had accepted the assistance of the young stranger, to whom she had never been introduced! "Oh, dear! I hope he comes soon."

"How long has he been this way, Lyd? Why didn't you send for me?" demanded the younger sister, clasping her hands and leaning over the unconscious man. 16

"Why, he came home from work just as usual. I–I didn't notice that he was worse," replied the older girl, breathlessly. "He said he'd lie down—"

"You should have called the doctor then."

"Why, dear, I tell you he seemed just the same. He almost always lies down when he comes home now. You know that."

"Forgive me, Lyddy!" exclaimed 'Phemie, contritely. "Of course you are just as careful of father as you can be. But–but it's so *awful* to see him lie like this."

"He fainted without my knowing a thing about it," moaned Lyddy.

"Oh! if it's only just a faint—"

"He couldn't even have heard the noise upstairs over the fire."

Just then a stream of water descended through the cracked bedroom ceiling, first upon the back of 'Phemie's neck, and then upon the drugget which covered the floor.

"Suppose *this* ceiling falls, too?" wailed Lyddy, wringing her hands.

"I hope not! And we'll have to pay the doctor when he comes, Lyd. Have you got money enough in your purse?"

"I–I guess so." 17

"I'll not have any more after this week," broke out 'Phemie, suddenly. "They told me to-day the rush for Easter would be over Saturday night and they would have to let me go till next season. Isn't that mean?"

Lydia Bray had sat down upon the edge of their father's bed.

"I guess everything *has* happened at once," she sighed. "I don't see what we shall do, 'Phemie."

There came a scream from Aunt Jane. She charged into the bedroom wildly, the back of her dress all wet and her bonnet dangling over one ear.

"Why, your parlor ceiling is just spouting water, girls!" she cried.

Then she turned to look closely at the man on the bed. "John Bray looks awful bad, Lyddy. What does the doctor say?"

Before her niece could reply there came a thundering knock at the hall door.

"The doctor!" cried 'Phemie.

Lyddy feared it was the young stranger returning, and she could only gasp. What should she say to him if he came in? How introduce him to Aunt Jane?

But the latter lady took affairs into her own hands at this juncture and went to the door. She 18
unlocked and threw it open. Several helmets and glistening rubber coats appeared vaguely in the hall.

"Getting wet down here some; aren't you?" asked one of the firemen. "We'll spread some tarpaulins over your stuff. Fire's out–about."

"And the water's *in*," returned Aunt Jane, tartly. "Nice time to come and try to save a body's furniture—"

"Get it out of the adjusters. They'll be around," said the fireman, with a grin.

"How much insurance have you, Lyddy?" demanded the aunt, when the firemen, after covering the already wet and bedraggled furniture, had clumped out in their heavy boots.

"Not a penny, Aunt Jane!" cried her niece, wildly. "I never thought of it!"

"Ha! you're not so much like your mother, then, as I thought. *She* would never have overlooked such a detail."

"I know it! I know it!" moaned Lyddy.

"Now, you stop that, Aunt Jane!" exclaimed the bolder 'Phemie. "Don't you hound Lyd. She's done fine–of course she has! But anybody might forget a thing like insurance."

"Humph!" grunted the old lady. Then she began again:

"And what's the matter with John?"

19

"It's the shop, Aunt," replied Lyddy. "He cannot stand the work any longer. I wish he might never go back to that place again."

"And how are you going to live? What's 'Phemie getting a week?"

"Nothing–after this week," returned the younger girl, shortly. "I sha'n't have any work, and I've only been earning six dollars."

"Humph!" observed Aunt Jane for a second time.

There came a light tap on the door. They could hear it, for the confusion and shouting in the house had abated. The fire scare was over; but the floor above was gutted, and a good deal of damage by water had been done on this floor.

It was a physician, bag in hand. 'Phemie let him in. Lyddy explained how her father had come home and lain down and she had found him, when the fire scare began, unconscious on the bed–just as he lay now.

A few questions explained to the physician the condition of Mr. Bray, and his own observation revealed the condition of the tenement.

"He will be better off at the hospital. You are about wrecked here, I see. That young man who called me said he would ring up the City Hospital."

The girls were greatly troubled; but Aunt Jane was practical.

20

"Of course, that's the best place for him," she said. "Why! this flat isn't fit for a well person to stay in, let alone a sick man, until it is cleared up. I shall take you girls out with me to my boarding house for the night. Then–we'll see."

The physician brought Mr. Bray to his senses; but the poor man knew nothing about the fire, and was too weak to object when they told him he was to be removed to the hospital for a time.

The ambulance came and the young interne and the driver brought in the stretcher, covered Mr. Bray with a gray blanket, and took him away. The interne told the girls they could see their father in the morning and he, too, said it was mainly exhaustion that had brought about the sudden attack.

Aunt Jane had been stalking about the sloppy flat–from the ruined kitchen to the front window.

"Shut and lock that kitchen window, and lock the doors, and we'll go out and find a lodging," she said, briefly. "You girls can bring a bag for the night. Mine's at the station hard by; I'm glad I didn't bring it up here."

It was when Lyddy shut and locked the kitchen window that she remembered the young man again. The plank had been removed, the laboratory window was closed, and the place

21

unlighted.

"I guess he has some of the instincts of a gentleman, after all," she told herself. "He didn't come back to bother me after doing what he could to help."

Two hours later the Bray girls were seated in their aunt's comfortable room at a boarding house on a much better block than the one on which the tenement stood. Aunt Jane had ordered up tea and toast, and was sipping the one and nibbling the other contentedly before a grate fire.

"This is what I call comfort," declared the old lady, who still kept her bonnet on–nor would she remove it save to change it for a nightcap when she went to bed.

"This is what I call comfort. A pleasant room in a house where I have no responsibilities, and enough noise outside to assure me that I am in a live town. My goodness me! when Hammond came along and wanted to marry me, and I knew I could leave Hillcrest and never have to go back—Well, I just about jumped down that man's throat I was so eager to say 'Yes!' Marry him? I'd ha' married a Choctaw Injun, if he'd promised to take me to the city."

"Why, Aunt Jane!" exclaimed Lyddy. "Hillcrest Farm is a beautiful place. Mother took us there once to see it. Don't you remember, 'Phemie? *She* loved it, too." 22

"And I wish she'd had it as a gift from the old doctor," grumbled Aunt Jane. "But it wasn't to be. It's never been anything but a nuisance to me, if I *was* born there."

"Why, the view from the porch is the loveliest I ever saw," said Lyddy.

"And all that romantic pile of rocks at the back of the farm!" exclaimed 'Phemie.

"Ha! what's a view?" demanded the old lady, in her brusk way. "Just dirt and water. And that's what they say *we're* made of. I like to study human bein's, I do; so I'd ruther have my view in town."

"But it's so pretty—"

"Fudge!" snapped Aunt Jane. "I've seen the time, when I was a growin' gal, and the old doctor was off to see patients, that I've stood on that same porch at Hillcrest and just *cried* for the sight of somethin' movin' on the face of Natur' besides a cow.

"View, indeed!" she pursued, hotly. "If I've got to look at views, I want plenty of 'life' in 'em; and I want the human figgers to be right up close in the foreground, too!"

'Phemie laughed. "And I think it would be just *blessed* to get out of this noisy, dirty city, and live in a place like Hillcrest. Wouldn't you like it, Lyd?" 23

"I'd love it!" declared her sister.

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Aunt Jane, sitting bolt upright, and looking actually startled. "Ain't that a way out, mebbe?"

"What do you mean, Aunt Jane?" asked Lydia, quickly.

"You know how I'm fixed, girls. Hammond left me just money enough so't I can live as I like to live–and no more. The farm's never been aught but an expense to me. Cyrus Pritchett is supposed to farm a part of it on shares; but my share of the crops never pays more'n the taxes and the repairs to the roofs of the old buildings.

"It'd be a shelter to ye. The furniture stands jest as it did in the old doctor's day. Ye could move right in–and I expect it would mean a lease of life to your father.

"A second-hand man wouldn't give ye ten dollars for your stuff in that flat. It's ruined. Ye couldn't live comfortable there any more. But if ye wanter go to Hillcrest I'm sure ye air more than welcome to the use of the place, and perhaps ye might git a bigger share of the crops out of Cyrus if ye was there, than I've been able to git.

“What d’you say, girls–what d’you say?”

CHAPTER III

THE DOCTOR DISPOSES

The Bray girls scarcely slept a wink that night. Not alone were they excited by the incidents of the evening, and the sudden illness of their father; but the possibilities arising out of Aunt Jane Hammond’s suggestion fired the imagination of both Lyddy and ’Phemie.

These sisters were eminently practical girls, and they came of practical stock–as note the old-fashioned names which their unromantic parents had put upon them in their helpless infancy.

Yet there is a dignity to “Lydia” and a beauty to “Euphemia” which the thoughtless may not at once appreciate.

Practical as they were, the thought of going to the old farmhouse to live–if their father could be moved to it at once–added a zest to their present situation which almost made their misfortune seem a blessing.

Their furniture was spoiled, as Aunt Jane had said. And father was sick–a self-evident fact. This sudden ill turn which Mr. Bray had suffered worried both of his daughters more than any other trouble–indeed, more than all the others in combination.

Their home was ruined–but, somehow, they would manage to find a shelter. ’Phemie would have no more work in her present position after this week, and Lyddy had secured no work at all; but fortune must smile upon their efforts and bring them work in time.

These obstacles seemed small indeed beside the awful thought of their father’s illness. How very, very weak and ill he had looked when he was carried out of the flat on that stretcher! The girls clung together in their bed in the lodging house, and whispered about it, far into the night.

“Suppose he never comes out of that hospital?” suggested ’Phemie, in a trembling voice.

“Oh, ’Phemie! don’t!” begged her sister. “He *can’t* be so ill as all that. It’s just a breakdown, as that doctor said. He has overworked. He–he mustn’t ever go back to that hat shop again.”

“I know,” breathed ’Phemie; “but what *will* he do?”

“It isn’t up to him to do anything–it’s up to *us*,” declared Lyddy, with some measure of her confidence returning. “Why, look at us! Two big, healthy girls, with four capable hands and the average amount of brains.

“I know, as city workers, we are arrant failures,” she continued, in a whisper, for their room was right next to Aunt Jane’s, and the partition was thin.

“Do you suppose we could do better in the country?” asked ’Phemie, slowly.

“And if I am not mistaken the house is full of old, fine furniture,” observed Lyddy.

“Well!” sighed the younger sister, “we’d be sheltered, anyway. But how about eating? Lyddy! I have *such* an appetite.”

“She says we can have her share of the crops if we will pay the taxes and make the necessary repairs.”

“Crops! what do you suppose is growing in those fields at this time of the year?”

"Nothing much. But if we could get out there early we might have a garden and see to it that Mr. Pritchett planted a proper crop. And we could have chickens–I'd love that," said Lyddy.

"Oh, goodness, gracious me! Wouldn't we *all* love it–father, too? But how can we even get out there, much more live till vegetables and chickens are ripe, on nothing a week?"

"That–is–what–I–don't–see–yet," admitted Lyddy, slowly.

"It's very kind of Aunt Jane," complained 'Phemie. "But it's just like opening the door of Heaven to a person who has no wings! We can't even reach Hillcrest." 27

"You and I could," said her sister, vigorously.

"How, please?"

"We could walk."

"Why, Lyd! It's fifty miles if it's a step!"

"It's nearer seventy. Takes two hours on the train to the nearest station; and then you ride up the mountain a long, long way. But we could walk it."

"And be tramps–regular tramps," cried 'Phemie.

"Well, I'd rather be a tramp than a pauper," declared the older sister, vigorously.

"But poor father!"

"That's just it," agreed Lydia. "Of course, we can do nothing of the kind. We cannot leave him while he is sick, nor can we take him out there to Hillcrest if he gets on his feet again—"

"Oh, Lyddy! don't talk that way. He *is* going to be all right after a few days' rest."

"I do not think he will ever be well if he goes back to work in that hat factory. If we could only get him to Hillcrest."

"And there we'd all starve to death in a hurry," grumbled 'Phemie, punching the hard, little boarding-house pillow. "Oh, dear! what's the use of talking? There is no way out!" 28

"There's always a way out–if we think hard enough," returned her sister.

"Wish you'd promulgate one," sniffed 'Phemie.

"I am going to think–and you do the same."

"I'm going to—"

"Snore!" finished 'Phemie. That ended the discussion for the time being. But Lydia lay awake and racked her tired brain for hours.

The pale light of the raw March morning streaked the window-pane when Lydia was awakened by her sister hurrying into her clothes for the day's work at the millinery store. There would be but two days more for her there.

And then?

It was a serious problem. Lydia had perhaps ten dollars in her reserve fund. Father might not be paid for his full week if he did not go back to the shop. His firm was not generous, despite the fact that Mr. Bray had worked so long for them. A man past forty, who is frequently sick a day or two at a time, soon wears out the patience of employers, especially when there is young blood in the firm.

'Phemie would get her week's pay Saturday night. Altogether, Lyddy might find thirty dollars in her hand with which to face the future for all three of them! 29

What could she get for their soaked furniture? These thoughts were with her while she was dressing.

'Phemie had hurried away after making her sister promise to telephone as to her father's condition the minute they allowed Lyddy to see him at the hospital. Aunt Jane was a luxurious lie-abed, and had ordered tea and toast for nine o'clock. Her oldest niece put on her shabby hat and coat and went out to the nearest lunch-room, where coffee and rolls were her breakfast.

Then she walked down to Trimble Avenue and approached the huge, double-decker where they had lived. Salvage men were already carrying away the charred fragments of the furniture from the top floor. Lyddy hoped that, unlike herself, the Smiths and the others up there had been insured against fire.

She plodded wearily up the four flights and unlocked one of the flat doors and entered. Two of the salvage men followed her in and removed the tarpaulins–which had been worse than useless.

"No harm done but a little water, Miss," said one of them, consolingly. "But you talk up to the adjuster and he'll make it all right."

They all thought, of course, that the Brays' furniture was insured. Lyddy closed the door and looked over the wrecked flat. 30

The parlor furniture coverings were all stained, and the carpet's colors had "run" fearfully. Many of their little keepsakes and "gim-cracks" had been broken when the tarpaulins were spread.

The bedrooms were in better shape, although the bedding was somewhat wet. But the kitchen was ruined.

"Of course," thought Lyddy, "there wasn't much to ruin. Everything was cheap enough. But what a mess to clean up!"

She looked out of the window across the air-shaft. There was the boy!

He nodded and beckoned to her. He had his own window open. Lydia considered that she had no business to talk with this young man; yet he had played the "friend in need" the evening before.

"How's your father?" he called, the moment she opened her window.

"I do not know yet. They told me not to come to the hospital until nine-thirty."

"I guess you're in a mess over there–eh?" he said, with his most boyish smile.

But Lyddy was not for idle converse. She nodded, thanked him for his kindness the evening before, and firmly shut the window. She thought she knew how to keep *that* young man in his place. 31

But she hadn't the heart to do anything toward tidying up the flat now. And how she wished she might not *have* to do it!

"If we could only take our clothing and the bedding and little things, and walk out," she murmured, standing in the middle of the little parlor.

To try to "pick up the pieces" here was going to be dreadfully hard.

"I wish some fairy would come along and transport us all to Hillcrest Farm in the twinkling of an eye," said Lyddy to herself. "I–I'd rather starve out there than live as we have for the past three months here."

She went to the door of the flat just as somebody tapped gently on the panel. A poorly dressed Jewish man stood hesitating on the threshold.

"I'm sorry," said Lyddy, hastily; "but we had trouble here last night–a fire. I can't cook anything, and really haven't a thing to give—"

Her mother had boasted that she had never turned away a beggar hungry from her door, and the oldest Bray girl always tried to feed the deserving. The man shook his head eagerly.

"You ain't de idee got, lady," he said. "I know dere vas a fire. I foller de fires, lady." 32

"You follow the fires?" returned Lyddy, in wonder.

"Yes, lady. Don'dt you vant to sell de house-holdt furnishings? I pay de highest mar-r-ket brice for 'em. Yes, lady–I pay cash."

"Why–why—"

"You vas nodt insured–yes?"

"No," admitted Lyddy.

"Den I bay you cash for de goots undt you go undt puy new–ain'dt idt?"

But Lyddy wasn't thinking of buying new furniture–not at all. She opened the door wider.

"Come in and look," she invited. "What will you pay?"

"Clodings, too?" he asked, shrewdly.

"No, no! We will keep the clothing, bedding and kitchenware, and the like. Just the furniture."

The man went through the flat quickly, but his bright, beady eyes missed nothing. Finally he said:

"I gif you fifteen tollar, lady."

"Oh, no! that is too little," gasped Lyddy.

She had begun to figure mentally what it would cost to replace even the poor little things they had. And yet, if she could get any fair price for the goods she was almost tempted to 33 sell out.

"Lady! believe me, I make a goot offer," declared the man. "But I must make it a profit–no?"

"I couldn't sell for so little."

"How much you vant, den?" he asked shrewdly.

"Oh! a great deal more than that. Ten dollars more, at least."

"Twenty-fife tollars!" he cried, wringing his hands. "Belief me, lady, I shouldt be shtuck!"

His use of English would have amused Lyddy at another time; but the girl's mind was set upon something more important. If she only *could* get enough money together to carry them all to Hillcrest Farm–and to keep them going for a while!

"Fifteen dollars would not do me much good, I am afraid," the girl said.

"Oh, lady! you could buy a whole new house-furnishings mit so much money down–undt pay for de rest on de installment."

"No," replied Lyddy, firmly. "I want to get away from here altogether. I want to get out into the country. My father is sick; we had to send him to the hospital last night."

The second-hand man shook his head. "You vas a kindt-hearted lady," he said, with less of 34 his professional whine. "I gif you twenty."

And above that sum Lyddy could not move him. But she would not decide then and there. She felt that she must see her father, and consult with 'Phemie, and possibly talk to Aunt Jane, too.

"You come here to-morrow morning and I'll tell you," she said, finally.

She locked the flat again and followed the man down the long flights to the street. It was not far to the hospital and Lyddy did not arrive there much before the visitors' hour.

The house physician called her into his office before she went up to the ward in which her father had been placed. Already she was assured that he was comfortable, so the keenness of her anxiety was allayed.

"What are your circumstances, Miss Bray?" demanded the medical head of the hospital, bluntly. "I mean your financial circumstances?"

"We–we are poor, sir. And we were burned out last night, and have no insurance. I do not know what we really shall do–yet."

"You are the house-mother–eh?" he demanded.

"I am the oldest. There are only Euphemia and me, beside poor papa—"

"Well, it's regarding your father I must speak. He's in a bad way. We can do him little good here, save that he will rest and have nourishing food. But if he goes back to work again—" 35

"I know it's bad for him!" cried Lyddy, with clasped hands. "But what can we do? He *will* crawl out to the shop as long as they will let him come—"

"He'll not crawl out for a couple of weeks–I'll see to that," said the doctor, grimly. "He'll stay here. But beyond that time I cannot promise. Our public wards are very crowded, and of course, you have no relatives, nor friends, able to furnish a private room—"

"Oh, no, sir!" gasped Lyddy.

"Nor is *that* the best for him. He ought to be out of the city altogether–country air and food–mountain air especially—"

"Hillcrest!" exclaimed Lyddy, aloud.

"What's that?" the doctor snapped at her, quickly.

She told him about the farm–where it was, and all.

"That's a good place for him," replied the physician, coolly. "It's three or four hundred feet higher above sea-level than the city. It will do him more good to live in that air than a ton of medicine. And he can go in two weeks, or so. Good-morning, Miss Bray," and the busy doctor hurried away to his multitude of duties, having disposed of Mr. Bray's case on the instant. 36

CHAPTER IV 37
THE PILGRIMAGE

Lydia Bray was shocked indeed when they allowed her in the ward to see her father. A nurse had drawn a screen about the bed, and nodded to her encouragingly.

The pallor of Mr. Bray's countenance, as he lay there with his eyes closed, unaware of her presence, frightened the girl. She had never seen him utterly helpless before. He had managed to get around every day, even if sometimes he could not go to work.

But now the forces of his system seemed to have suddenly given out. He had overtaxed Nature, and she was paying him for it.

"Lyddy!" he whispered, when finally his heavy-lidded eyes opened and he saw her standing beside the cot.

The girl made a brave effort to look and speak cheerfully; and Mr. Bray's comprehension was so dulled that she carried the matter off very successfully while she remained.

She spoke cheerfully; she chatted about their last night's experiences; she even laughed over some of Aunt Jane's sayings–Aunt Jane was always a source of much amusement to Mr. Bray. 38

But the nurse had warned her to be brief, and soon she was beckoned away. She knew he was in good hands at the hospital, and that they would do all that they could for him. But what the house physician had told her was uppermost in her mind as she left the institution.

How were they to get to Hillcrest–and live after arriving there?

"If that man paid me twenty dollars for our furniture, I might have fifty dollars in hand," she thought. "It will cost us something like two dollars each for our fares. And then there would be the freight and baggage, and transportation for ourselves up to Hillcrest from the station.

"And how would it do to bring father to an old, unheated house–and so early in the spring? I guess the doctor didn't think about that.

"And how will we live until it is time for us to go–until father is well enough to be moved? All our little capital will be eaten up!"

Lyddy's practical sense then came to her aid. Saturday night 'Phemie would get through at the millinery shop. They must not remain dependent upon Aunt Jane longer than over Sunday.

"The thing to do," she decided, "is for 'Phemie and me to start for Hillcrest immediately–on Monday morning at the latest. If one of us has to come back for father when he can be moved, all right. The cost will not be so great. Meanwhile we can be getting the old house into shape to receive him." 39

She found Aunt Jane sitting before her fire, with a tray of tea and toast beside her, and her bonnet already set jauntily a-top of her head, the strings flowing.

"You found that flat in a mess, I'll be bound!" observed Aunt Jane.

Lydia admitted it. She also told her what the second-hand man had offered.

"Twenty dollars?" cried Aunt Jane. "Take it, quick, before he has a change of heart!"

But when Lyddy told her of what the doctor at the hospital had said about Mr. Bray, and how they really seemed forced into taking up with the offer of Hillcrest, the old lady looked and spoke more seriously.

"You're just as welcome to the use of the old house, and all you can make out of the farm-crop, as you can be. I stick to what I told you last night. But I dunno whether you can really be comfortable there."

"We'll find out; we'll try it," returned Lyddy, bravely. "Nothing like trying, Aunt Jane."

"Humph! there's a good many things better than trying, sometimes. You've got to have sense in your trying. If it was me, I wouldn't go to Hillcrest for any money you could name! 40

"But then," she added, "I'm old and you are young. I wish I could sell the old place for a decent sum; but an abandoned farm on the top of a mountain, with the railroad station six miles away, ain't the kind of property that sells easy in the real estate market, lemme tell you!

"Besides, there ain't much of the two hundred acres that's tillable. Them romantic-looking rocks that 'Phemie was exclaimin' over last night, are jest a nuisance. Humph! the old doctor used to say there was money going to waste up there in them rocks, though. I remember hearing him talk about it once or twice; but jest what he meant I never knew."

"Mineral deposits?" asked Lyddy, hopefully.

"Not wuth anything. Time an' agin there's been college professors and such, tappin' the rocks all over the farm for 'specimens.' But there ain't nothing in the line of precious min'rals in that heap of rocks at the back of Hillcrest Farm–believe me!

"Dr. Polly useter say, however, that there was curative waters there. He used 'em some in his practise towards the last. But he died suddent, you know, and nobody ever knew where he got the water–'nless 'twas Jud Spink. And Jud had run away with a medicine show years before father died.

"Well!" sighed Aunt Jane. "If you can find any way of makin' a livin' out of Hillcrest Farm, you're welcome to it. And–just as that hospital doctor says–it may do your father good to live there for a spell. But *me*–it always give me the fantods, it was that lonesome."

It seemed, as Aunt Jane said, "a way opened." Yet Lyddy Bray could not see very far ahead. As she told 'Phemie that night, they could get to the farm, bag and baggage; but how they would exist after their arrival was a question not so easy to answer.

Lyddy had gone to one of the big grocers and bought and paid for an order of staple groceries and canned goods which would be delivered at the railroad station nearest to Hillcrest on Monday morning. Thus all their possessions could be carted up to the farm at once.

She had spent the afternoon at the flat collecting the clothing, bedding, and other articles they proposed taking with them. These goods she had taken out by an expressman and shipped by freight before six o'clock.

In the morning she met the second-hand man at the ruined flat and he paid her the twenty dollars as promised. And Lyddy was glad to shake the dust of the Trimble Avenue double-decker from her feet.

As she turned away from the door she heard a quick step behind her and an eager voice exclaimed:

"I say! I say! You're not moving; are you?"

Lydia was exceedingly disturbed. She knew that boy in the laboratory window had been watching closely what was going on in the flat. And now he had *dared* follow her. She turned upon him a face of pronounced disapproval.

"I–I beg your pardon," he stammered. "But I hope your father's better? Nothing's happened to–to him?"

"We are going to take him away from the city–thank you," replied Lyddy, impersonally.

She noted with satisfaction that he had run out without his cap, and in his work-apron. He could not follow her far in such a rig through the public streets, that was sure.

"I–I'm awful sorry to have you go," he said, stammeringly. "But I hope it will be beneficial to your father. I–I— You see, my own father is none too well and we have often talked of his living out of town somewhere–not so far but that I could run out for the week-end, you know."

Lyddy merely nodded. She would not encourage him by a single word.

"Well–I wish you all kinds of luck!" exclaimed the young fellow, finally, holding out his hand.

"Thank you," returned the very proper Lyddy, and failed to see his proffered hand, turning promptly and walking away, not even vouchsafing him a backward look when she turned the corner, although she knew very well that he was still standing, watching her.

"He may be a very nice young man," thought Lyddy; "but, then—"

Sunday the two girls spent a long hour with their father. They found him prepared for the move in prospect for the family–indeed, he was cheerful about it. The house physician had

evidently taken time to speak to the invalid about the change he advised.

"Perhaps by fall I shall be my own self again, and we can come back to town and all go to work. We'll worry along somehow in the country for one season, I am sure," said Mr. Bray.

But that was what troubled Lyddy more than anything else. They were all so vague as to what they should do at Hillcrest–how they would be able to live there!

Father said something about when he used to have a garden in their backyard, and how nice the fresh vegetables were; and how mother had once kept hens. But Lyddy could not see yet how they were to have either a garden or poultry. 44

They were all three enthusiastic–to each other. And the father was sure that in a fortnight he would be well enough to travel alone to Hillcrest; they must not worry about him. Aunt Jane was to remain in town all that time, and she promised to report frequently to the girls regarding their father's condition.

"I certainly wish I could help you gals out with money," said the old lady that evening. "You're the only nieces I've got, and I feel as kindly towards you as towards anybody in this wide world.

"Maybe we can get a chance to sell the farm. If we can, I'll help you then with a good, round sum. Now, then! you fix up the old place and make it look less like the Wrath o' Fate had struck it and maybe some foolish rich man will come along and want to buy it. If you find a customer, I'll pay you a right fat commission, girls."

But this was "all in the offing;" the Bray girls were concerned mostly with their immediate adventures.

To set forth on this pilgrimage to Hillcrest Farm–and alone–was an event fraught with many possibilities. Both Lyddy and 'Phemie possessed their share of imagination, despite their practical characters; and despite the older girl's having gone to college for two years, she, or 'Phemie, knew little about the world at large. 45

So they looked forward to Monday morning as the Great Adventure.

It was a moist, sweet morning, even in the city, when they betook themselves early to the railway station, leaving Aunt Jane luxuriously sipping tea and nibbling toast in bed–*this* time with her nightcap on.

March had come in like a lion; but its lamblike qualities were now manifest and it really did seem as though the breath of spring permeated the atmosphere–even down here in the smoky, dirty city. The thought of growing things inspired 'Phemie to stop at a seed store near the station and squander a few pennies in sweet-peas.

"I know mother used to put them in just as soon as she could dig at all in the ground," she told her sister.

"I don't believe they'll be a very profitable crop," observed Lyddy.

"My goodness me!" exclaimed 'Phemie, "let's retain a little sentiment, Lyd! We can't eat 'em–no; but they're sweet and restful to look at. I'm going to have moon-flowers and morning-glories, too," and she recklessly expended more pennies for those seeds. 46

Their train was waiting when they reached the station and the sisters boarded it in some excitement. 'Phemie's gaiety increased the nearer they approached to Bridleburg, which was their goal. She was a plump, rosy girl, with broad, thick plaits of light-brown hair ("molasses-color" she called it in contempt) which she had begun to "do up" only upon going to work. She had a quick blue eye, a laughing mouth, rather wide, but fine; a nose that an enemy–had laughing, good-natured Euphemia Bray owned one–might have called "slightly snubbed," and her figure was just coming into womanhood.

Lydia's appearance was entirely different. They did not look much like sisters, to state the truth.

The older girl was tall, straight as a dart, with a dignity of carriage beyond her years, dark hair that waved very prettily and required little dressing, and a clear, colorless complexion. Her eyes were very dark gray, her nose high and well chiseled, like Aunt Jane's. She was more of a Phelps. Aunt Jane declared Lyddy resembled Dr. Apollo, or "Polly," Phelps more than had either of his own children. 47

The train passed through a dun and sodden country. The late thaw and the rains had swept the snow from these lowlands; the unfilled fields were brown and bare.

Here and there, however, rye and wheat sprouted green and promising, and in the distance a hedge of water-maples along the river bank seemed standing in a purple mist, for their young leaves were already pushing into the light.

"There will be pussy-willows," exclaimed 'Phemie, "and hepaticas in the woods. Think of *that*, Lyddy Bray!"

"And the house will be as damp as the tomb–and not a stick of wood cut–and no stoves," returned the older girl.

"Oh, dear, me! you're such an old grump!" ejaculated 'Phemie. "Why try to cross bridges before you come to them?"

"Lucky for you, Miss, that I *do* think ahead," retorted Lyddy with some sharpness.

There was a grade before the train climbed into Bridleburg. Back of the straggling old town the mountain ridge sloped up, a green and brown wall, breaking the wind from the north and west, thus partially sheltering the town. There was what farmers call "early land" about Bridleburg, and some trucking was carried on. 48

But the town itself was much behind the times–being one of those old-fashioned New England settlements left uncontaminated by the mill interests and not yet awakened by the summer visitor, so rife now in most of the quiet villages of the six Pilgrim States.

The rambling wooden structure with its long, unroofed platform, which served Bridleburg as a station, showed plainly what the railroad company thought of the town. Many villages of less population along the line boasted modern station buildings, grass plots, and hedges. All that surrounded Bridleburg's barrack-like depôt was a plaza of bare, rolled cinders.

On this were drawn up the two 'buses from the rival hotels–the "New Brick Hotel," built just after the Civil War, and the Eagle House. Their respective drivers called languidly for customers as the passengers disembarked from the train.

Most of these were traveling men, or townspeople. It was only mid-forenoon and Lyddy did not wish to spend either time or money at the local hostelries, so she shook her head firmly at the 'bus drivers.

"We want to get settled by night at Hillcrest–if we can," she told 'Phemie. "Let's see if your baggage and freight are here, first of all." 49

She waited until the station agent was at leisure and learned that all their goods–a small, one-horse load–had arrived.

"You two girls goin' up to the old Polly Phelps house?" ejaculated the agent, who was a "native son" and knew all about the "old doctor," as Dr. Apollo Phelps had been known throughout two counties and on both sides of the mountain ridge.

"Why, it ain't fit for a stray cat to live in, I don't believe–that house ain't," he added. "More'n twenty year since the old doctor died, and it's been shut up ever since.

"What! you his grandchildren? Sho! Mis' Bray–I remember. She was the old doctor's daughter by his secon' wife. Ya-as.

"Well, if I was you, I'd go to Pritchett's house to stop first. Can't be that the old house is fit to live in, an' Pritchett is your nighest neighbor."

"Thank you," Lyddy said, quietly. "And can you tell me whom we could get to transport our goods–and ourselves–to the top of the ridge?"

"Huh? Why! I seen Pritchett's long-laiged boy in town jest now–Lucas Pritchett. He ain't got away yet," responded the station agent.

"I ventur' to say you'll find him up Market Street a piece–at Birch's store, or the post-office. This train brung in the mail. 50

"If he's goin' up light he oughter be willin' to help you out cheap. It's a six-mile tug, you know; you wouldn't wanter walk it."

He pointed up the mountainside. Far, far toward the summit of the ridge, nestling in a background of brown and green, was a splash of vivid white.

"That's Pritchett's," vouchsafed the station agent. "If Dr. Polly Phelps' house had a coat of whitewash you could see it, too–jest to the right and above Pritchett's. Highest house on the ridge, it is, and a mighty purty site, to my notion."

CHAPTER V
LUCAS PRITCHETT

51

The Bray girls walked up the village street, which opened directly out of the square. It might have been a quarter of a mile in length, the red brick courthouse facing them at the far end, flanked by the two hotels. When "court sat" Bridleburg was a livelier town than at present.

On either hand were alternately rows of one, or two-story "blocks" of stores and offices, or roomy old homesteads set in the midst of their own wide, terraced lawns.

There were a few pleasant-looking people on the walks and most of these turned again to look curiously after the Bray girls. Strangers–save in court week–were a novelty in Bridleburg, that was sure.

Market Street was wide and maple-shaded. Here and there before the stores were "hitching racks"–long wooden bars with iron rings set every few feet–to which a few horses, or teams, were hitched. Many of the vehicles were buckboards, much appreciated in the hill country; but there were farm wagons, as well. It was for one of these latter the Bray girls were in search. The station agent had described Lucas Pritchett's rig. 52

"There it is," gasped the quick-eyed 'Phemie, "Oh, Lyd! *do* look at those ponies. They're as ragged-looking as an old cowhide trunk."

"And that wagon," sighed Lyddy. "Shall we ride in it? We'll be a sight going through the village."

"We'd better wait and see if he'll take us," remarked 'Phemie. "But I should worry about what people here think of us!"

As she spoke a lanky fellow, with a lean and sallow face, lounged out of the post-office and across the walk to the heads of the disreputable-looking ponies. He wore a long snuff-colored overcoat that might have been in the family for two or three generations, and his overalls were stuck into the tops of leg-boots.

"That's Lucas–sure," whispered 'Phemie.

But she hung back, just the same, and let her sister do the talking. And the first effect of Lyddy's speech upon Lucas Pritchett was most disconcerting.

"Good morning!" Lyddy said, smiling upon the lanky young farmer. "You are Mr. Lucas Pritchett, I presume?"

He made no audible reply, although his lips moved and they saw his very prominent Adam's apple rise and fall convulsively. A wave of red suddenly washed up over his face like a big breaker rolling up a sea-beach; and each individual freckle at once took on a vividness of aspect that was fairly startling to the beholder. 53

"You *are* Mr. Pritchett?" repeated Lyddy, hearing a sudden half-strangled giggle from 'Phemie, who was behind her.

"Ya-as–I be," finally acknowledged the bashful Lucas, that Adam's apple going up and down again like the slide on a trombone.

"You are going home without much of a load; aren't you, Mr. Pritchett?" pursued Lyddy, with a glance into the empty wagon-body.

"Ya-as–I be," repeated Lucas, with another gulp, trying to look at both girls at once and succeeding only in looking cross-eyed.

"We are going to be your nearest neighbors, Mr. Pritchett," said Lyddy, briskly. "Our aunt, Mrs. Hammond, has loaned us Hillcrest to live in and we have our baggage and some other things at the railway station to be carted up to the house. Will you take it–and us? And how much will you charge?"

Lucas just gasped–'Phemie declared afterward, "like a dying fish." This was altogether too much for Lucas to grasp at once; but he had followed Lyddy up to a certain point. He held forth a broad, grimed, calloused palm, and faintly exclaimed: 54

"You're Mis' Hammon's nieces? Do tell! Maw'll be pleased to see ye–an' so'll Sairy."

He shook hands solemnly with Lyddy and then with 'Phemie, who flashed him but a single glance from her laughing eyes. The "Italian sunset effect," as 'Phemie dubbed Lucas's blushes, began to fade out of his countenance.

"Can you take us home with you?" asked Lyddy, impatient to settle the matter.

"I surely can," exclaimed Lucas. "You hop right in."

"No. We want to know what you will charge first–for us and the things at the depôt?"

"Not a big load; air they?" queried Lucas, doubtfully. "You know the hill's some steep."

Lyddy enumerated the packages, Lucas checking them off with nods.

"I see," he said. "We kin take 'em all. You hop in—"

But 'Phemie was pulling the skirt of her sister's jacket and Lyddy said:

"No. We have some errands to do. We'll meet you up the street. That is your way home?" and she indicated the far end of Market Street.

"Ya-as." 55

"And what will you charge us?"

"Not more'n a dollar, Miss," he said, grinning. "I wouldn't ax ye nothin'; but this is dad's team and when I git a job like this he allus expects his halvings."

"All right, Mr. Pritchett. We'll pay you a dollar," agreed Lyddy, in her sedate way. "And we'll meet you up the street."

Lucas unhitched the ponies and stepped into the wagon. When he turned them and gave them their heads the ragged little beasts showed that they were a good deal like the proverbial singed cat–far better than they looked.

"I thought you didn't care what people thought of you here?" observed Lyddy to her sister, as the wagon went rattling down the street. "Yet it seems you don't wish to ride through

Bridleburg in Mr. Pritchett's wagon."

"My goodness!" gasped 'Phemie, breathless from giggling. "I don't mind the wagon. But *he's* a freak, Lyd!"

"Sh!"

"Did you ever see such a face? And those freckles!" went on the girl, heedless of her sister's admonishing voice.

"Somebody may hear you," urged Lyddy.

"What if?"

"And repeat what you say to him." 56

"And *that* should worry me!" returned 'Phemie, gaily. "Oh, dear, Lyd! don't be a grump. This is all a great, big joke–the people and all. And Lucas is certainly the capsheaf. Did you ever in your life before even imagine such a freak?"

But Lyddy would not join in her hilarity.

"These country people may seem peculiar to us, who come fresh from the city," she said, with some gravity. "But I wonder if we don't appear quite as 'queer' and 'green' to them as they do to us?"

"We couldn't," gasped 'Phemie. "Hurry on, Lyd. Don't let him overtake us before we get to the edge of town."

They passed the courthouse and waited for Lucas and the farm wagon on the outskirts of the village–where the more detached houses gave place to open fields. No plow had been put into these lower fields as yet; still, the coming spring had breathed upon the landscape and already the banks by the wayside were turning green.

'Phemie became enthusiastic at once and before Lucas hove in view, evidently anxiously looking for them, the younger girl had gathered a great bunch of early flowers.

"They're mighty purty," commented the young farmer, as the girls climbed over the wheel with their muddy boots and all. 57

'Phemie, giggling, took her seat on the other side of him. She had given one look at the awkwardly arranged load on the wagon-body and at once became helpless with suppressed laughter. If the girls she had worked with in the millinery store for the last few months could see them and their "lares and penates" perched upon this farm wagon, with this son of Jehu for a driver!

"I reckon you expect to stay a spell?" said Lucas, with a significant glance from the conglomerate load to Lyddy.

"Yes–we hope to," replied the oldest Bray girl. "Do you think the house is in very bad shape inside?"

"I dunno. We never go in it, Miss," responded Lucas, shaking his head. "Mis' Hammon' never left us the key–not to upstairs. Dad's stored cider and vinegar in the cellar under the east ell for sev'ral years. It's a better cellar'n we've got.

"An' I dunno what dad'll say," he added, "to your goin' up there to live."

"What's he got to do with it?" asked 'Phemie, quickly.

"Why, we work the farm on shares an' we was calc'latin' to do so this year."

"Our living in the house doesn't interfere with that arrangement," said Lyddy, quietly. "Aunt Jane told us all about that. I have a letter from her for your father." 58

"Aw–well," commented Lucas, slowly.

The ponies had begun to mount the rise in earnest now. They tugged eagerly at the load, and trotted on the level stretches as though tireless. Lyddy commented upon this, and Lucas flushed with delight at her praise.

“They’re hill-bred, they be,” he said, proudly. “Tackle ’em to a buggy, or a light cart, an’ up hill or down hill means the same to ’em. They won’t break their trot.

“When it comes plowin’ time we clip ’em, an’ then they don’t look so bad in harness,” confided the young fellow. “If–if you like, I’ll take you drivin’ over the hills some day–when the roads git settled.”

“Thank you,” responded Lyddy, non-committally.

But ’Phemie giggled “How nice!” and watched the red flow into the young fellow’s face with wicked appreciation.

The roads certainly had not “settled” after the winter frosts, if this one they were now climbing was a proper sample. ’Phemie and Lyddy held on with both hands to the smooth board which served for a seat to the springless wagon–and they were being bumped about in a most exciting way. 59

’Phemie began to wonder if Lucas was not quite as much amused by their unfamiliarity with this method of transportation as she was by his bashfulness and awkward manners. Lyddy fairly wailed, at last:

“Wha–what a dread–dreadful ro-o-o-ad!” and she seized Lucas suddenly by the arm nearest to her and frankly held on, while the forward wheel on her side bounced into the air.

“Oh, this ain’t bad for a mountain road,” the young farmer declared, calmly.

“Oh, oh!” squealed ’Phemie, the wheel on her side suddenly sinking into a deep rut, so that she slid to the extreme end of the board.

“Better ketch holt on me, Miss,” advised Lucas, crooking the arm nearest ’Phemie. “You city folks ain’t useter this kind of travelin’, I can see.”

But ’Phemie refused, unwilling to be “beholden” to him, and the very next moment the ponies clattered over a culvert, through which the brown flood of a mountain stream spurted in such volume that the pool below the road was both deep and angry-looking.

There was a washout gullied in the road here. Down went the wheel on ’Phemie’s side, and with the lurch the young girl lost her insecure hold upon the plank. 60

With a screech she toppled over, plunging sideways from the wagon-seat, and as the hard-bitted ponies swept on ’Phemie dived into the foam-streaked pool!

CHAPTER VI 61
NEIGHBORS

Lucas Pritchett was not as slow as he seemed.

In one motion he drew in the plunging ponies to a dead stop, thrust the lines into Lyddy’s hands, and vaulted over the wheel of the farm wagon.

“Hold ’em!” he commanded, pulling off the long, snuff-colored overcoat. Flinging it behind him he tore down the bank and, in his high boots, waded right into the stream.

Poor ’Phemie was beyond her depth, although she rose “right side up” when she came to the surface. And when Lucas seized her she had sense enough not to struggle much.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she moaned. "The wa–water is s-so cold!"

"I bet ye it is!" agreed the young fellow, and gathering her right up into his arms, saturated as her clothing was, he bore her to the bank and clambered to where Lyddy was doing all she could to hold the restive ponies.

"Whoa, Spot and Daybright!" commanded the young farmer, soothing the ponies much quicker than he could his human burden. "Now, Miss, you're all right—" 62

"All r-r-right!" gasped 'Phemie, her teeth chattering like castanets. "I–I'm anything *but* right!"

"Oh, 'Phemie! you might have been drowned," cried her anxious sister.

"And now I'm likely to be frozen stiff right here in this road. Mrs. Lot wasn't a circumstance to me. She only turned to salt, while I am be-be-coming a pillar of ice!"

But Lucas had set her firmly on her feet, and now he snatched up the old overcoat which had so much amused 'Phemie, and wrapped it about her, covering her from neck to heel.

"In you go–sit 'twixt your sister and me this time," panted the young man. "We'll hustle home an' maw'll git you 'twixt blankets in a hurry."

"She'll get her death!" moaned Lyddy, holding the coat close about the wet girl.

"Look out! We'll travel some now," exclaimed Lucas, leaping in, and having seized the reins, he shook them over the backs of the ponies and shouted to them.

The remainder of that ride up the mountain was merely a nightmare for the girls. Lucas allowed the ponies to lose no time, despite the load they drew. But haste was imperative. 63

A ducking in an icy mountain brook at this time of the year might easily be fraught with serious consequences. Although it was drawing toward noon and the sun was now shining, there was no great amount of warmth in the air. Lucas must have felt the keen wind himself, for he was wet, too; but he neither shivered nor complained.

Luckily they were well up the mountainside when the accident occurred. The ponies flew around a bend where a grove of trees had shut off the view, and there lay the Pritchett house and outbuildings, fresh in their coat of whitewash.

"Maw and Sairy'll see to ye now," cried Lucas, as he neatly clipped the gatepost with one hub and brought the lathered ponies to an abrupt stop in the yard beside the porch.

"Hi, Maw!" he added, as a very stout woman appeared in the doorway–quite filling the opening, in fact. "Hi, Maw! Here's Mis' Hammon's nieces–an' one of 'em's been in Pounder's Brook!"

"For the land's sake!" gasped the farmer's wife, pulling a pair of steel-bowed spectacles down from her brows that she might peer through them at the Bray girls. "Ain't it a mite airly for sech didoes as them?"

"Why, Maw!" sputtered Lucas, growing red again. "She didn't *go* for to do it–no, ma'am!" 64

"Wa-al! I didn't know. City folks is funny. But come in–do! Mis' Hammon's nieces, d'ye say? Then you must be John Horrocks Bray's gals–ain't ye?"

"We are," said Lyddy, who had quickly climbed out over the wheel and now eased down the clumsy bundle which was her sister. "Can you stand, 'Phemie?"

"Ye-es," chattered her sister.

"I hope you can take us in for a little while, Mrs. Pritchett," went on the older girl. "We are going up to Hillcrest to live."

"Take ye in? Sure! An' 'twon't be the first city folks we've harbored," declared the lady, chuckling comfortably. "They're beginnin' to come as thick as spatters in summer to

Bridleburg, an' some of 'em git clear up this way— For the land's sake! that gal's as wet as sop."

"It–it was wet water I tumbled into," stuttered 'Phemie.

Mrs. Pritchett ushered them into the big, warm kitchen, where the table was already set for dinner. A young woman–not so *very* young, either–as lank and lean as Lucas himself, was busy at the stove. She turned to stare at the visitors with near-sighted eyes. 65

"This is my darter, Sairy," said "Maw" Pritchett. "She taught school two terms to Pounder's school; but it was bad for her eyes. I tell her to git specs; but she 'lows she's too young for sech things."

"The oculists advise glasses nowadays for very young persons," observed Lyddy politely, as Sairy Pritchett bobbed her head at them in greeting.

"So I tell her," declared the farmer's wife. "But she won't listen to reason. Ye know how young gals air!"

This assumption of Sairy's extreme youth, and that Lyddy would understand her foibles because she was so much older, amused the latter immensely. Sairy was about thirty-five.

Meanwhile Mrs. Pritchett bustled about with remarkable spryness to make 'Phemie comfortable. There was a warm bedroom right off the kitchen–for this was an old-fashioned New England farmhouse–and in this the younger Bray girl took off her wet clothing. Lyddy brought in their bag and 'Phemie managed to make herself dry and tidy–all but her great plaits of hair–in a very short time.

She would not listen to Mrs. Pritchett's advice that she go to bed. But she swallowed a bowl of hot tea and then declared herself "as good as new." 66

The Bray girls had now to tell Mrs. Pritchett and her daughter their reason for coming to Hillcrest, and what they hoped to do there.

"For the land's sake!" gasped the farmer's wife. "I dunno what Cyrus'll say to this."

It struck Lyddy that they all seemed to be somewhat in fear of what Mr. Pritchett might say. He seemed to be a good deal of a "bogie" in the family.

"We shall not interfere with Mr. Pritchett's original arrangement with Aunt Jane," exclaimed Lyddy, patiently.

"Well, ye'll hafter talk to Cyrus when he comes in to dinner," said the farmer's wife. "I dunno how he'll take it."

"*We* should worry about how he 'takes it,'" commented 'Phemie in Lyddy's ear. "I guess we've got the keys to Hillcrest and Aunt Jane's permission to live in the house and make what we can off the place. What more is there to it?"

But the older Bray girl caught a glimpse of Cyrus Pritchett as he came up the path from the stables, and she saw that he was nothing at all like his rotund and jolly wife–not in outward appearance, at least.

The Pritchett children got their extreme height from Cyrus–and their leanness. He was a grizzled man, whose head stooped forward because he was so tall, and who looked fiercely on the world from under penthouse brows. 67

Every feature of his countenance was grim and forbidding. His cheeks were gray, with a stubble of grizzled beard upon them. When he came in and was introduced to the visitors he merely grunted an acknowledgment of their names and immediately dropped into his seat at the head of the table.

As the others came flocking about the board, Cyrus Pritchett opened his lips just once, and not until the grace had been uttered did the visitors understand that it was meant for a reverence before meat.

"For wha' we're 'bout to r'ceive make us tru' grat'ful–pass the butter, Sairy," and the old man helped himself generously and began at once to stow the provender away without regard to the need or comfort of the others about his board.

But Maw Pritchett and her son and daughter seemed to be used to the old man's way, and they helped each other and the Bray girls with no niggard hand. Nor did the shuttle of conversation lag.

"Why, I ain't been in the old doctor's house since he died," said Mrs. Pritchett, reflectively. "Mis' Hammon', she's been up here two or three times, an' she allus goes up an' looks things over; but I'm too fat for walkin' up to Hillcrest–I be," concluded the lady, with a chuckle. 68

She seemed as jolly and full of fun as her husband was morose. Cyrus Pritchett only glowered on the Bray girls when he looked at them at all.

But Lyddy and 'Phemie joined in the conversation with the rest of the family. 'Phemie, although she had made so much fun of Lucas at first, now made amends by declaring him to be a hero–and sticking to it!

"I'd never have got out of that pool if it hadn't been for Lucas," she repeated; "unless I could have drunk up the water and walked ashore that way! And o-o-oh! wasn't it cold!"

"Hope you're not going to feel the effects of it later," said her sister, still anxious.

"I'm all right," assured the confident 'Phemie.

"I dunno as it'll be fit for you gals to stay in the old house to-night," urged Mrs. Pritchett. "You'll hafter have some wood cut."

"I'll do that when I take their stuff up to Hillcrest," said Lucas, eagerly, but flushing again as though stricken with a sudden fever.

"There are no stoves in the house, I suppose?" Lyddy asked, wistfully.

"Bless ye! Dr. Polly wouldn't never have a stove in his house, saving a cook-stove in the kitchen, an' of course, that's ate up with rust afore this," exclaimed the farmer's wife. "He said open fireplaces assured every room its proper ventilation. He didn't believe in these new-fangled ways of shuttin' up chimbleys. My! but he was powerful sot on fresh air an' sunshine. 69

"Onct," pursued Mrs. Pritchett, "he was called to see Mis' Fibbetts–she that was a widder and lived on 'tother side of the ridge, on the road to Adams. She had a mis'ry of some kind, and was abed with all the winders of her room tight closed.

"'Open them winders,' says Dr. Polly to the neighbor what was a-nussin' of Mis' Fibbetts.

"Next time he come the winders was down again. Dr. Polly warn't no gentle man, an' he swore hard, he did. He flung up the winders himself, an' stamped out o' the room.

"It was right keen weather," chuckled Mrs. Pritchett, her double chins shaking with enjoyment, "and Mis' Fibbetts was scart to death of a leetle air. Minute Dr. Polly was out o' sight she made the neighbor woman shet the winders ag'in.

"But when Dr. Polly turned up the ridge road he craned out'n the buggy an' he seen the winders shet. He jerked his old boss aroun', drove back to the house, stalked into the sick woman's room, cane in hand, and smashed every pane of glass in them winders, one after another. 70

"'Now I reckon ye'll git air enough to cure ye 'fore ye git them mended,' says he, and marched him out again. An' sure 'nough old Mis' Fibbetts got well an' lived ten year after. But she never had a good word for Dr. Polly Phelps, jest the same," chuckled the narrator.

"Well, we'll make out somehow about fires," said Lyddy, cheerfully, "if Lucas can cut us enough wood to keep them going."

“I sure can,” declared the ever-ready youth, and just here Cyrus Pritchett, having eaten his fill, broke in upon the conversation in a tone that quite startled Lyddy and ’Phemie Bray.

“I wanter know what ye mean to do up there on the old Polly Phelps place?” he asked, pushing back his chair, having set down his coffee-cup noisily, and wiped his cuff across his lips. “I gotta oral contract with Jane Hammon’ to work that farm. It’s been in force year arter year for more’n ten good year. An’ that contract ain’t to be busted so easy.”

“Now, Father!” admonished Mrs. Pritchett; but the old man glared at her and she at once subsided.

Cyrus Pritchett certainly was a masterful man in his own household. Lucas dropped his gaze to his plate and his face flamed again. But Sairy turned actually pale. 71

Somehow the cross old man did not make Lyddy Bray tremble. She only felt angry that he should be such a bully in his own home.

“Suppose you read Aunt Jane’s letter, Mr. Pritchett,” she said, taking it from her handbag and laying it before the farmer.

The old man grunted and slit the flap of the envelope with his greasy tableknife. He drew his brows down into even a deeper scowl as he read.

“So she turns her part of the contract over to you two chits of gals; does she?” said Mr. Pritchett, at last. “Humph! I don’t think much of that, now I tell ye.”

“Mr. Pritchett,” said Lyddy, firmly, “if you don’t care to work the farm for us on half shares, as you have heretofore with Aunt Jane, pray say so. I assure you we will not be offended.”

“And what’ll you do then?” he growled.

“If you refuse to put in a crop for us?”

“Ya-as.”

“Get some other neighboring farmer to do so,” replied Lyddy, promptly.

“Oh, you will, eh?” growled Cyrus Pritchett, sitting forward and resting his big hands on his knees, while he glared like an angry dog at the slight girl before him. 72

The kitchen was quite still save for his booming voice. The family was evidently afraid of the old man’s outbursts of temper.

But Lyddy Bray’s courage rose with her indignation. This cross old farmer was a mere bully after all, and there was never a bully yet who was not a moral coward!

“Mr. Pritchett,” she told him, calmly, “you cannot frighten me by shouting at me. I may as well tell you right now that the crops you have raised for Aunt Jane of late years have not been satisfactory. We expect a better crop this year, and if you do not wish to put it in, some other neighbor will.

“This is a good time to decide the matter. What do you say?”

CHAPTER VII 73
HILLCREST

Mrs. Pritchett and Sairy really were frightened by Lyddy Bray’s temerity. As for Lucas, he still hung his head and would not look at his father.

Cyrus Pritchett had bullied his family so long that to be bearded in his own house certainly amazed him. He glared at the girl for fully a minute, without being able to formulate any

reply. Then he burst out with:

"You let me ketch any other man on this ridge puttin' a plow inter the old doctor's land! I've tilled it for years, I tell ye—"

"And you can till it again, Mr. Pritchett," said Lyddy, softly. "You needn't holler so about it–we all hear you."

The coolness of the girl silenced him.

"So, now it's understood," she went on, smiling at him brightly. "And we'll try this year to make a little better crop. We really must get something more out of it than the taxes."

"Jane Hammon' won't buy no fertilizer," growled Mr. Pritchett, put on the defensive–though he couldn't tell why. "An' ye can't grow corn on run-down land without potash an' kainit, and the like." 74

"Well, you shall tell us all about that later," declared Lyddy, "and we'll see. I understand that you can't get blood from a turnip. We want to put Hillcrest in better shape–both in and out of the house–and then there'll be a better chance to sell it."

Cyrus Pritchett's eyes suddenly twinkled with a shrewd light.

"Does Jane Hammon' really want to sell the farm?" he queried.

"If she gets a good offer," replied Lyddy. "That's what we hope to do while we're at Hillcrest–make the place more valuable and more attractive to the possible buyer."

"Ha!" grunted Cyrus, sneeringly. "She'll get a fancy price for Hillcrest–not!"

But that ended the discussion. "Maw" Pritchett looked on in wonder. She had seen her husband beaten in an argument by a "chit of a girl"–and really, Cyrus did not seem to be very ugly, or put out about it, either!

He told Lucas to put the ponies to the wagon again, and to take the Bray girls and their belongings up to Hillcrest; and to see that they were comfortable for the night before he came back.

This encouraged Mrs. Pritchett, when Lyddy took out her purse to pay for their entertainment, to declare: 75

"For the good land, no! We ain't goin' to charge ye for a meal of vittles–and you gals Dr. Polly Phelps's own grandchildren! B'sides, we want ye to be neighborly. It's nice for Sairy to have young companions, too. I tell her she'll git to be a reg'lar old maid if she don't 'sociate more with gals of her own age."

Sairy bridled and blushed at this. But she wasn't an unkind girl, and she helped 'Phemie gather their possessions–especially the latter's wet clothing.

"I'm sure I wish ye joy up there at the old house," said Sairy, with a shudder. "But ye wouldn't ketch me."

"Catch you doing what?" asked 'Phemie, wonderingly.

"Stayin' in Dr. Phelps's old house over night," explained Sairy.

"Why not?"

The farmer's daughter drew close to 'Phemie's ear and whispered:

"It's ha'nted!"

"*What?*" cried 'Phemie.

"Ghosts," exclaimed Sairy, in a thrilling voice. "All old houses is ha'nted. And that's been give up to ghosts for years an' years." 76

"Oh, goody!" exclaimed 'Phemie, clasping her hands and almost dancing in delight. "Do you mean it's a really, truly haunted house?"

Sairy Pritchett gazed at her with slack jaw and round eyes for a minute. Then she sniffed.

"Wa-al!" she muttered. "I re'lly thought you was *bright*. But I see ye ain't got any too much sense, after all," and forthwith refused to say anything more to 'Phemie.

But the younger Bray girl decided to say nothing about the supposed ghostly occupants of Hillcrest to her sister–for the present, at least.

There was still half a mile of road to climb to Hillcrest, for the way was more winding than it had been below; and as the girls viewed the summit of the ridge behind Aunt Jane's old farm they saw that the heaped-up rocks were far more rugged than romantic, after all.

"There's two hundred acres of it," Lucas observed, chirruping to the ponies. "But more'n a hundred is little more'n rocks. And even the timber growin' among 'em ain't wuth the cuttin'. Ye couldn't draw it out. There's firewood enough on the place, and a-plenty! But that's 'bout all–'nless ye wanted to cut fence rails, or posts."

"What are those trees at one side, near the house?" queried Lyddy, interestedly. 77

"The old orchard. *There's* your nearest firewood. Ain't been much fruit there since I can remember. All run down."

And, indeed, Hillcrest looked to be, as they approached it, a typical run-down farm. Tall, dry weed-stalks clashed a welcome to them from the fence corners as the ponies turned into the lane from the public road. The sun had drawn a veil of cloud across his face and the wind moaned in the gaunt branches of the beech trees that fringed the lane.

The house was set upon a knoll, with a crumbling, roofed porch around the front and sides. There were trees, but they were not planted near enough to the house to break the view on every side but one of the sloping, green and brown mountainside, falling away in terraced fields, patches of forest, tablelands of rich, tillable soil, and bush-cluttered pastures, down into the shadowy valley, through which the river and the railroad wound.

Behind Hillcrest, beyond the outbuildings, and across the narrow, poverty-stricken fields, were the battlements of rock, shutting out all view but that of the sky.

Lonely it was, as Aunt Jane had declared; but to the youthful eyes of the Bray girls the 78
outlook was beautiful beyond compare!

"Our land jines this farm down yonder a piece," explained Lucas, drawing in the ponies beside the old house. "Ye ain't got nobody behind ye till ye git over the top of the ridge. Your line follers the road on this side, and on the other side of the road is Eben Brewster's stock farm of a thousand acres–mostly bush-parsture an' rocks, up this a-way."

The girls were but momentarily interested in the outlook, however. It was the old house itself which their bright eyes scanned more particularly as they climbed down from the wagon.

There were two wings, or "ells." In the west wing was the kitchen and evidently both sitting and sleeping rooms, upstairs and down–enough to serve all their present needs. Aunt Jane had told them that there were, altogether, twenty-two rooms in the old house.

Lucas hitched his horses and then began to lift down their luggage. Lyddy led the way to the side door, of which she had the key.

The lower windows were defended by tight board shutters, all about the house. The old house had been well guarded from the depredations of casual wayfarers. Had tramps passed this way the possible plunder in the old house had promised to be too bulky to attract them; 79
and such wanderers could have slept as warmly in the outbuildings.

Lyddy inserted the key and, after some trouble, for the lock was rusty, turned it. There was an ancient brass latch, and she lifted it and pushed the door open.

“My! isn’t it dark–and musty,” the older sister said, hesitating on the threshold.

“Welcome to the ghosts of Hillcrest,” spoke ’Phemie, in a sepulchral voice.

“Oh, don’t!” gasped Lyddy.

She had not been afraid of Cyrus Pritchett, but ’Phemie’s irreverence for the spirits of the old house shocked her.

“All right,” laughed the younger girl. “We’ll cut out the ghosts, then.”

“We most certainly *will*. If I met a ghost here I’d certainly cut him dead!”

’Phemie went forward boldly and opened the door leading into the big kitchen. It was gloomy there, too, for the shutters kept out most of the light. The girls could see, however, that it was a well-furnished room. They were delighted, too, for this must be their living-room until they could set the house to rights.

“Dust, dust everywhere,” said ’Phemie, making a long mark in it with her finger on the dresser.

“But *only* dust. We can get cleaned up here all right by evening. Come! unhook the shutters and let in the light of day.” 80

The younger girl raised one of the small-paned window sashes, unbolted the shutter, and pushed both leaves open. The light streamed in and almost at once Lucas’s head appeared.

“How does it look to ye–eh?” he asked, grinning. “Gee! the hearth’s all cleared and somebody’s had a fire here.”

“It must have been a long time ago,” returned Lyddy, noting the crusted ashes between the andirons.

“Wa-al,” said Lucas, slowly. “I’ll git to work with the axe an’ soon start ye a fire there, B-r-r-r! it’s cold as a dog’s nose in there,” and he disappeared again.

But the sunlight and air which soon flooded the room through all the windows quickly gave the long-shut-up kitchen a new atmosphere.

’Phemie already had on a working dress, having changed at the Pritchett house after her unfortunate ducking; Lyddy soon laid aside her own better frock, too.

Then they found their bundle of brooms and brushes, and set to work. There was a pump on the back porch and a well in the yard. During all these empty years the leather valve of the pump had rotted away; but Lucas brought them water from the well. 81

“I kin git the shoemaker in town to cut ye out a new leather,” said the young farmer. “He’s got a pattern. An’ I can put it in for ye. The pump’ll be a sight handier than the well for you two gals.”

“Now, isn’t he a nice boy?” demanded Lyddy of her sister. “And you called him a freak.”

“Don’t rub it in, Lyd,” snapped ’Phemie. “But it is hard to have to accept a veritable gawk of a fellow like Lucas–for that’s what he *is*!–as a sure-enough hero.”

This was said aside, of course, and while Lucas was doing yeoman’s work at the woodpile. He had brought in a huge backlog, placed it carefully, laid a forestick and the kindling, and soon blue and yellow flames were weaving through the well-built structure of the fire. There was a swinging crane for the kettle and a long bar with hooks upon it, from which various cooking pots could dangle. Built into the chimney, too, was a brick oven with a sheet-iron door. The girls thought all these old-fashioned arrangements delightful, whether they proved convenient, or not.

They swept and dusted the old kitchen thoroughly, and cleaned the cupboards and pantry-closet. Then they turned their attention to the half bedchamber, half sitting-room that opened directly out of the kitchen. In these two rooms they proposed to live at first–until their father could join them, at least. 82

There was an old-time high, four-post bed in this second room. It had been built long before some smart man had invented springs, and its frame was laced from side to side, and up and down, like the warp and woof of a rug, with a "bedrope" long since rotted and moth-eaten.

"My goodness me!" exclaimed 'Phemie, laughing. "That will never hold you and me, Lyd. We'll just have to stuff that old tick with hay and sleep on the floor."

But Lucas heard their discussion and again came to their help. Lyddy had bought a new clothesline when she purchased her food supplies at the city department store, and the clever Lucas quickly roped the old bedstead.

"That boy certainly is rising by leaps and bounds in my estimation," admitted 'Phemie, in a whisper, to her sister.

Then came the problem of the bed. Lyddy had saved their pillows from the wreck of the flat; but the mattresses had gone with the furniture to the second-hand man. There might be good feather beds in the farmhouse attic; Aunt Jane had said something about them, Lyddy believed. But there was no time to hunt for these now. 83

"Here is a tick," 'Phemie said again. "What'll we fill it with?"

"Give it to me," volunteered Lucas. "One of the stable lofts is half full of rye straw. We thrashed some rye on this place last year. It's jest as good beddin' for humans as it is for cattle, I declare."

"All right," sighed 'Phemie. "We'll bed down like the cows for a while. I don't see anything better to do."

But really, by sunset, they were nearly to rights and the prospect for a comfortable first night at Hillcrest was good.

Lucas's huge fire warmed both the kitchen and the bedroom, despite the fact that the evening promised to be chilly, with the wind mourning about the old house and rattling the shutters. The girls closed the blinds, made all cozy, and bade young Pritchett good-night.

Lyddy had paid him the promised dollar for transporting their goods, and another half-dollar for the work he had done about the house that afternoon.

"And I'll come up in the mornin' an' bring ye the milk an' eggs maw promised ye," said Lucas, as he drove away, "and I'll cut ye some more wood then." 84

There was already a great heap of sticks beside the hearth, and in the porch another windrow, sheltered from any possible storm.

"We're in luck to have such good neighbors," sighed Lyddy, as the farm wagon rattled away.

"My! but we're going to have good times here," declared 'Phemie, coming into the house after her and closing and locking the door.

"It's a long way off from everybody else," observed the older sister, in a doubtful tone. "But I don't believe we shall be disturbed."

"Nonsense!" cried 'Phemie. "Let's have supper. I'm starved to death."

She swung the blackened old tea-kettle over the blaze, and moved briskly about the room laying the cloth, while Lyddy got out crackers and cheese and opened a tin of meat before she brewed the comforting cup of tea that both girls wanted.

However, they *were* alone–half a mile from the nearest habitation–and if nothing else, they could not help secretly comparing their loneliness with the tenement in the city from which they had so recently graduated.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WHISPER IN THE DARK

85

'Phemie was very bold–until something really scared her–and then she was quite likely to lose her head altogether. Lyddy was timid by nature, but an emergency forced her courage to high pressure.

They both, however, tried to ignore the fact that they were alone in the old house, far up on the mountainside, and a considerable distance from any neighbor.

That was why they chattered so all through supper–and afterward. Neither girl cared to let silence fall upon the room.

The singing of the kettle on the crane was a blessing. It made music that drove away "that lonesome feeling." And when it actually bubbled over and the drip of it fell hissing into the fire, 'Phemie laughed as though it were a great joke.

"Such a jolly thing as an open fire is, I declare," she said, sitting down at last in one of the low, splint-bottomed chairs, when the supper dishes were put away. "I don't blame Grandfather Phelps for refusing to allow stoves to be put up in his day."

86

"I fancy it would take a deal of wood to heat the old house in real cold weather," Lyddy said. "But it *is* cheerful."

"Woo-oo! woo-oo-oo!" moaned the wind around the corner of the house. A ghostly hand rattled a shutter. Then a shrill whistle in the chimney startled them.

At such times the sisters talked all the faster–and louder. It was really quite remarkable how much they found to say to each other.

They wondered how father was getting along at the hospital, and if Aunt Jane would surely see him every day or two, and write them. Then they exchanged comments upon what they had seen of Bridleburg, and finally fell back upon the Pritchetts as a topic of conversation–and that family seemed an unfailing source of suggestion until finally 'Phemie jumped up, declaring:

"What's the use of this, Lyd? Let's go to bed. We're both half scared to death, but we'll be no worse off in bed—And, b-r-r-r! the fire's going down."

They banked the fire as Lucas had advised them, put out the lamp, and retired with the candle to the bedroom. The straw mattress rustled as though it were full of mice, when the sisters had said their prayers and climbed into bed. 'Phemie blew out the candle; but she had laid matches near it on the high stand beside her pillow.

87

"I hope there *are* feather beds in the garret," she murmured, drowsily. "This old straw is *so* scratchy."

"We'll look to-morrow," Lyddy said. "Aunt Jane said we could make use of anything we found here. But, my! it's a big house for only three people."

"It is," admitted 'Phemie. "I'd feel a whole lot better if it was full of folks."

"I have it!" exclaimed Lyddy, suddenly. "We might take boarders."

"Summer boarders?" asked her sister, curiously.

"I–I s'pose so."

"That's a long way ahead. It's winter yet," and 'Phemie snuggled down into her pillow. "Folks from the city would never want to come to an old house like this–with so few conveniences in it."

"*We* like it; don't we?" demanded Lyddy.

"I don't know whether we do yet, or not," replied 'Phemie. "Let's wait and see."

'Phemie was drowsy, yet somehow she couldn't fall asleep. Usually she was the first of the two to do so; but to-night Lyddy's deeper breathing assured the younger sister that she alone was awake in all the great, empty house. 88

And Sairy Pritchett had intimated that Hillcrest was haunted!

Now, 'Phemie didn't believe in ghosts–not at all. She would have been very angry had anyone suggested that there was a superstitious strain in her character.

Yet, as she lay there beside her sleeping sister she began to hear the strangest sounds.

It wasn't the wind; nor was it the low crackling of the fire on the kitchen hearth. She could easily distinguish both of these. Soon, too, she made out the insistent gnawing of a rat behind the mopboard. That long-tailed gentleman seemed determined to get in; but 'Phemie was not afraid of rats. At least, not so long as they kept out of sight.

But there were other noises. Once 'Phemie had all but lost herself in sleep when–it seemed–a voice spoke directly in her ear. It said:

"*I thought I'd find you here.*"

'Phemie started into a sitting posture in the rustling straw bed. She listened hard.

The voice was silent. The fire was still. The wind had suddenly dropped. Even the rat had ceased his sapping and mining operations.

What had frightened Mr. Rat away? 89

He, too, must have heard that mysterious voice. 'Phemie could not believe she had imagined it.

Was that a rustling sound? Were those distant steps she heard–somewhere in the house? Did she hear a door creak?

She slipped out of bed, drew on her woollen wrapper and thrust her feet into slippers. She saw that it was bright moonlight outside, for a pencil of light came through a chink in one of the shutters.

Lyddy slept as calmly as a baby–and 'Phemie was glad. Of course, it was all foolishness about ghosts; but she believed there was somebody prowling about the house.

She lit the candle and after the flame had sputtered a bit and began to burn clear she carried it into the kitchen. Their little round alarm clock ticked modestly on the dresser. It was not yet ten o'clock.

"Not the 'witching hour of midnight, when graveyards yawn'–and other people do, too," thought 'Phemie, giggling nervously. "Surely ghosts cannot be walking yet."

Indeed, she was quite assured that what she had heard–both the voice and the footsteps–were very much of the earth, earthy. There was nothing supernatural in the mysterious sounds.

And it seemed to 'Phemie as though the steps had retreated toward the east ell–the other wing of the rambling old farmhouse. 90

What was it Lucas Pritchett had said about his father using the cellar under the east wing at Hillcrest? Yet, what would bring Cyrus Pritchett–or anybody else–up here to the vinegar

cellar at ten o'clock at night?

'Phemie grew braver by the minute. She determined to run this mystery down, and she was quite sure that it would prove to be a very human and commonplace mystery after all. She opened the door between the kitchen and the dark side hall by which they had first entered the old house that afternoon. Although she had never been this way, 'Phemie knew that out of this square hall opened a long passage leading through the main house to the east wing.

And she easily found the door giving entrance to this corridor. But she hesitated when she stood on the threshold, and almost gave up the venture altogether.

A cold, damp breath rushed out at her–just as though some huge, subterranean monster lay in wait for her in the darkness–a darkness so dense that the feeble ray of her candle could only penetrate it a very little way.

"How foolish of me!" murmured 'Phemie. "I've come so far–I guess I can see it through." 91

She certainly did not believe that the steps and voice were inside the house. The passage was empty before her. She refused to let the rising tide of trepidation wash away her self-control.

So she stepped in boldly, holding the candle high, and proceeded along the corridor. There were tightly closed doors on either side, and behind each door was a mystery. She could not help but feel this. Every door was a menace to her peace of mind.

"But I will *not* think of such things," she told herself. "I know if there *is* anybody about the house, it is a very human somebody indeed–and he has no business here at this time of night!"

In her bed-slippers 'Phemie's light feet fell softly on the frayed oilcloth that carpeted the long hall. Dimly she saw two or three heavy, ancient pieces of furniture standing about–a tall escritoire with three paneled mirrors, which reflected herself and her candle dimly; a long davenport with hungry arms and the dust lying thick upon its haircloth upholstery; chairs with highly ornate spindles in their perfectly "straight up and down," uncomfortable-looking backs.

She came to the end of the hall. A door faced her which she was sure must lead into the east wing. There, Aunt Jane had said, old Dr. Polly Phelps had had his office, consultation room, and workshop, or laboratory. 'Phemie's hand hesitated on the latch. 92

Should she venture into the old doctor's rooms? The greater part of his long and useful life had been spent behind this green-painted door. 'Phemie, of course, had never seen her grandfather; but she had seen his picture–that of a tall, pink-faced, full-bodied man, his cheeks and lips cleanly shaven, but with a fringe of silvery beard under his chin, and long hair.

It seemed to her for a moment as though, if she opened this door, the apparition of the old doctor, just as he was in his picture, would be there to face her.

"You little fool!" whispered the shaken 'Phemie to herself. "Go on!"

She lifted the latch. The door seemed to stick. She pressed her knee against the panel; it did not give at all.

And then she discovered that the door was locked. But the key was there, and in a moment she turned it creakingly and pushed the door open.

The air in the corridor had been still; but suddenly a strong breeze drew this green door wide open. The wind rushed past, blew out the candle, and behind her the other door, which she had left ajar, banged heavily, echoing and reechoing through the empty house. 93

'Phemie was startled, but she understood at once the snuffing of her candle and the closing of the other door. She only hoped Lyddy would not be frightened by the noise–or by her absence from her side.

"I'll see it through, just the same," declared the girl, her teeth set firmly on her lower lip. "Ha! driven away by a draught–not I!"

She groped her way into the room and closed the green door. There was a match upon her candlestick and she again lighted the taper. Quickly the first room in this east wing suite was revealed to her gaze.

This had been the anteroom, or waiting-room for the old doctor's patients. There was a door opening on the side porch. A long, old-fashioned settee stood against one wall, and some splint-bottomed chairs were set stiffly about the room, while a shaky mahogany table, with one pedestal leg, occupied the center of the apartment.

'Phemie was more careful of the candle now and shielded the flame with her hollowed palm as she pushed open the door of the adjoining room.

Here was a big desk with a high top and drop lid, while there were rows upon rows of drawers underneath. A wide-armed chair stood before the desk, just as it must have been 94
used by the old doctor. The room was lined to the ceiling with cases of books and cupboards. Nobody had disturbed the doctor's possessions after his death. No younger physician had "taken over" his practice.

'Phemie went near enough to see that the desk, and the cupboards as well, were locked. There was a long case standing like an overgrown clock-case in one corner. The candle-light was reflected in the front of this case as though the door was a mirror.

But when 'Phemie approached it she saw that it was merely a glass door with a curtain of black cambric hung behind it. She was curious to know what was in the case. It had no lock and key and she stretched forth a tentative hand and turned the old-fashioned button which held it closed.

The door seemed fairly to spring open, as though pushed from within, and, as it swung outward and the flickering candle-light penetrated its interior, 'Phemie heard a sudden surprising sound.

Somewhere–behind her, above, below, in the air, all about her–was a sigh! Nay, it was more than a sigh; it was a mighty and unmistakable yawn!

And on the heels of this yawn a voice exclaimed: 95

"I'm getting mighty tired of this!"

'Phemie flashed her gaze back to the open case. Fear held her by the throat and choked back the shriek she would have been glad to utter. For, dangling there in the case, its eyeless skull on a level with her own face, hung an articulated skeleton; and to 'Phemie Bray's excited comprehension it seemed as though both the yawn and the apt speech which followed it, had proceeded from the grinning jaws of the skull!

CHAPTER IX 96

MORNING AT HILLCREST

The bang of the door, closed by the draught when 'Phemie had opened the way into the east wing, *had* aroused Lyddy. She came to herself–to a consciousness of her strange surroundings–with a sharpness of apprehension that set every nerve in her body to tingling.

"'Phemie! what is it?" she whispered.

Then, rolling over on the rustling straw mattress, she reached for her sister's hand. But 'Phemie was not there.

"'Phemie!" Lyddy cried loudly, sitting straight up in bed. She knew she was alone in the room, and hopped out of bed, shivering. She groped for her robe and her slippers. Then she sped swiftly into the kitchen.

She knew where the lamp and the match-box were. Quickly she had the lamp a-light and then swept the big room with a startled glance.

'Phemie had disappeared. The outside door was still locked. It seemed to Lyddy as though the echoing slam of the door that had awakened her was still ringing in her ears.

She ran to the hall door and opened it. Dark–and not a sound! 97

Where could 'Phemie have gone?

The older sister had never known 'Phemie to walk in her sleep. She had no tricks of somnambulism that Lyddy knew anything about.

And yet the older Bray girl was quite sure her sister had come this way. The lamplight, when the door was opened wide, illuminated the square hall quite well. Lyddy ran across it and pushed open the door of the long corridor.

There was no light in it, yet she could see outlined the huge pieces of furniture, and the ugly chairs. And at the very moment she opened this door, the door at the far end was flung wide and a white figure plunged toward her.

"'Phemie!" screamed the older sister.

"Lyddy!" wailed 'Phemie.

And in a moment they were in each other's arms and Lyddy was dragging 'Phemie across the entrance hall into the lighted kitchen.

"What is it? What *is* it?" gasped Lyddy.

"Oh, oh, oh!" was all 'Phemie was able to say for the moment; then, as she realized how really terrified her sister was, she continued her series of "ohs" while she thought very quickly.

She knew very well what had scared her; but why add to Lyddy's fright? She could not explain away the voice she had heard. Of course, she knew very well it had *not* proceeded from the skeleton. But why terrify Lyddy by saying anything about that awful thing? 98

"What scared you so?" repeated Lyddy, shaking her a bit.

"I–I don't know," stammered 'Phemie–and she didn't!

"But why did you get up?"

"I thought I heard something–voices–people talking–steps," gasped 'Phemie, and now her teeth began to chatter so that she could scarcely speak.

"Foolish girl!" exclaimed Lyddy, rapidly recovering her own self-control. "You dreamed it. And now you've got a chill, wandering through this old house. Here! sit down there!"

She drove her into a low chair beside the hearth. She ran for an extra comforter to wrap around her. She raked the ashes off the coals of the fire, and set the tea-kettle right down upon the glowing bed.

In a minute it began to steam and gurgle, and Lyddy made her sister an old-fashioned brew of ginger tea. When the younger girl had swallowed half a bowlful of the scalding mixture she ceased shaking. And by that time, too, she had quite recovered her self-control.

"You're a very foolish little girl," declared Lyddy, warningly, "to get up alone and go wandering about this house. Why, *I* wouldn't do it for–for the whole farm!" 99

"I–I dropped my candle. It went out," said 'Phemie, quietly. "I guess being in the dark scared me more than anything."

"Now, that's enough. Forget it! We'll go to bed again and see if we can't get some sleep. Why! it's past eleven."

So the sisters crept into bed again, and lay in each other's arms, whispering a bit and finally, before either of them knew it, they were asleep. And neither ghosts, nor whispering voices, nor any other midnight sounds disturbed their slumbers for the remainder of that first night at Hillcrest.

They were awake betimes–and without the help of the alarm clock. It was pretty cold in the two rooms; but they threw kindling on the coals and soon the flames were playing tag through the interlacing sticks that 'Phemie heaped upon the fire.

The kettle was soon bubbling again, while Lyddy mixed batter cakes. A little bed of live coals was raked together in front of the main fire and on this a well greased griddle was set, where the cakes baked to a tender brown and were skillfully lifted off by 'Phemie and buttered and sugared. 100

What if a black coal or two *did* snap over the cakes? And what if 'Phemie's hair *did* get smoked and "smelly?" Both girls declared cooking before an open fire to be great fun. They had yet, however, to learn a lot about "how our foremothers cooked."

"I don't for the life of me see how they ever used that brick oven," said Lyddy, pointing to the door in the side of the chimney. "Surely, that hole in the bricks would never heat from *this* fire."

"Ask Lucas," advised 'Phemie, and as though in answer to that word, Lucas himself appeared, bearing offerings of milk, eggs, and new bread.

"Huh!" he said, in a gratified tone, sniffing in the doorway. "I told maw you two gals wouldn't go hungry. Ye air a sight too clever."

"Thank you, Lucas," said Lyddy, demurely. "Will you have a cup of tea!"

"No'm. I've had my breakfast. It's seven now and I'll go right t' work cutting wood for ye. That's what ye'll want most, I reckon. And I want to git ye a pile ready, for it won't be many days before we start plowin', an' then dad won't hear to me workin' away from home."

Lyddy went out of doors for a moment and spoke to him from the porch. 101

"Don't do too much trimming in the orchard, Lucas, till I have a look at the trees. I have a book about the care of an old orchard, and perhaps I can make something out of this one."

"Plenty of other wood handy, Miss Lyddy," declared the lanky young fellow. "And it'll be easier to split than apple and peach wood, too."

'Phemie, meanwhile, had said she would run in and find the candle she had dropped in her fright the night before; but in truth it was more for the purpose of seeing the east wing of the old house by daylight–and that skeleton.

"No need for Lyddy to come in here and have a conniption fit, too," thought the younger sister, "through coming unexpectedly upon that Thing in the case.

"And, my gracious! he might just as well have been the author of that mysterious speech I heard. I should think he *would* be tired of staying shut up in that box," pursued the girl, giggling nervously, as she stood before the open case in which the horrid thing dangled.

Light enough came through the cracks in the closed shutters to reveal to her the rooms that the old doctor had so long occupied.

'Phemie closed the skeleton case and picked up her candle. Then she continued her investigation of the suite to the third room. Here were shelves and work-benches littered with a heterogeneous collection of bottles, tubes, retorts, filters, and other things of which 'Phemie did not even know the names or uses. 102

There was a door, too, that opened directly into the back yard. But this door was locked and double-bolted. She was sure that the person, or persons, whom she had heard talking the night before had not been in this room. When she withdrew from the east wing she locked the green-painted door as she had found it; but in addition, she removed the key and hid it where she was sure nobody but herself would be likely to find it.

Later she tackled Lucas.

“I don’t suppose you–or any of your folks–were up here last night, Lucas?” she asked the young farmer, out of her sister’s hearing.

“Me, Miss? I should say not!” replied the surprised Lucas.

“But I heard voices around the house.”

“Do tell!” exclaimed he.

“Who would be likely to come here at night?”

“Why, I never heard the beat o’ that,” declared Lucas. “No, ma’am!”

“Sh! don’t let my sister hear,” whispered ’Phemie. “She heard nothing.” 103

“Air you sure—” began Lucas, but at that the young girl snapped him up quick enough:

“I am confident I even heard some things they said. They were men. It sounded as though they spoke over there by the east wing–*or in the cellar*.”

“Ye don’t mean it!” exclaimed the wondering Lucas, leading the way slowly to the cellar-hatch just under the windows of the old doctor’s workshop.

This hatch was fastened by a big brass padlock.

“Dad’s got the key to that,” said Lucas. “Jest like I told you, we have stored vinegar in it, some. Ain’t many barrels left at this time o’ year. Dad sells off as he can during the winter.”

“And, of course, your father didn’t come up here last night?”

“Shucks! O’ course not,” replied the young farmer. “Ain’t no vinegar buyer around in this neighborhood now–an’ ’specially not at night. Dad ain’t much for goin’ out in the evenin’, nohow. He does sit up an’ read arter we’re all gone to bed sometimes. But it couldn’t be dad you heard up here–no, Miss.”

So the puzzle remained a puzzle. However, the Bray girls had so much to do, and so much to think of that, after all, the mystery of the night occupied a very small part of ’Phemie’s thought. 104

Lyddy had something–and a very important something, she thought–on her mind. It had risen naturally out of the talk the girls had had when they first went to bed the evening before. ’Phemie had wished for a houseful of company to make Hillcrest less lonely; the older sister had seized upon the idea as a practical suggestion.

Why not fill the big house–if they could? Why not enter the lists in the land-wide struggle for summer boarders?

Of course, if Aunt Jane would approve.

First of all, however, Lyddy wanted to see the house–the chambers upstairs especially; and she proposed to her sister, when their morning’s work was done, that they make a tour of discovery.

“Lead on,” ’Phemie replied, eagerly. “I hope we find a softer bed than that straw mattress–and one that won’t tickle so! Aunt Jane said we could do just as we pleased with things here; didn’t she?”

“Within reason,” agreed Lyddy. “And that’s all very well up to a certain point, I fancy. But I guess Aunt Jane doesn’t expect us to make use of the whole house. We will probably find

this west wing roomy enough for our needs, even when father comes."

They ventured first up the stairs leading to the rooms in this wing. There were two nice ones here and a wide hall with windows overlooking the slope of the mountainside toward Bridleburg. They could see for miles the winding road up which they had climbed the day before. 105

"Yes, this wing will do very nicely for *us*," Lyddy said, thinking aloud. "We can make that room downstairs where we're sleeping, our sitting-room when it comes warm weather; and that will give us all the rest of the house—"

"All but the old doctor's offices," suggested 'Phemie, doubtfully. "There are three of them."

"Well," returned Lyddy, "three and four are seven; and seven from twenty-two leaves fifteen. Some of the first-floor rooms we'll have to use as dining and sitting-rooms for the boarders—"

"My goodness me!" exclaimed her sister, again breaking in upon her ruminations. "You've got the house full of boarders already; have you? What will Aunt Jane say?"

"That we'll find out. But there ought to be at least twelve rooms to let. If there's as much furniture and stuff in all as there is in these—"

"But how'll we ever get the boarders? And how'd we cook for 'em over that open fire? It's ridiculous!" declared 'Phemie.

"*That* is yet to be proved," returned her sister, unruffled. 106

They pursued their investigation through the second-floor rooms. There were eight of them in the main part of the house and two in the east wing over the old doctor's offices. The last two were only partially furnished and had been used in their grandfather's day more for "lumber rooms" than aught else. It was evident that Dr. Phelps had demanded quiet and freedom in his own particular wing of Hillcrest.

But the eight rooms in the main part of the house on this second floor were all of good size, well lighted, and completely furnished. Some of them had probably not been slept in for fifty years, for when the girls' mother, and even Aunt Jane, were young, Dr. Apollo Phelps's immediate family was not a large one.

"The furniture is all old-fashioned, it is true," Lyddy said, reflectively. "There isn't a metal bed in the whole house—"

"And I had just as lief sleep in a coffin as in some of these high-headed carved walnut bedsteads," declared 'Phemie.

"You don't have to sleep in them," responded her sister, quietly. "But some people would think it a privilege to do so."

"They can have *my* share, and no charge," sniffed the younger girl. "That bed downstairs is bad enough. And what would we do for mattresses? That's *one* antique they wouldn't stand for–believe me! Straw beds, indeed!" 107

"We'll see about that. We might get some cheap elastic-felt mattresses, one at a time, as we needed them."

"And springs?"

"Some of the bedsteads are roped like the one we sleep on. Others have old-fashioned spiral springs–and there are no better made to-day. The rust can be cleaned off and they can be painted."

"I see plainly you're laying out a lot of work for us," sighed 'Phemie.

"Well, we've got to work to live," responded her sister, briskly.

"Ya-as," drawled 'Phemie, in imitation of Lucas Pritchett. "But I don't want to feel as though I was just living to work!"

"Lazybones!" laughed Lyddy. "You know, if we really got started in this game—"

"A game; is it? Keeping boarders!"

"Well?"

"I fancy it's downright hard work," quoth 'Phemie.

"But if it makes us independent? If it will keep poor father out of the shop? If it can be made to support us?" cried Lyddy. 108

'Phemie flushed suddenly and her eyes sparkled. She seized her more sedate sister and danced her about the room.

"Oh, I don't care how hard I work if it'll do all that!" she agreed. "Come on, Lyd! Let's write to Aunt Jane right away."

CHAPTER X
THE VENTURE

109

But Lyddy Bray never made up her mind in a hurry. Perhaps she was inclined to err on the side of caution.

Whereas 'Phemie eagerly accepted a new thing, was enthusiastic about it for a time, and then tired of it unless she got "her second wind," as she herself laughingly admitted, Lyddy would talk over a project a long time before she really decided to act upon it.

It was so in this case. Once having seen the vista of possibilities that Lyddy's plan revealed, the younger girl was eager to plunge into the summer-boarder project at once. But Lyddy was determined to know just what they had to work with, and just what they would need, before broaching the plan to Aunt Jane.

So she insisted upon giving a more than cursory examination to each of the eight chambers on this second floor. Some of the pieces of old furniture needed mending; but most of the mending could be done with a pot of glue and a little ingenuity. Furthermore, a can of prepared varnish and some linseed oil and alcohol would give most of the well-made and age-darkened furniture the gloss it needed. 110

There were old-style stone-china toilet sets in profusion, and plenty of mirrors, while there was closet room galore. The main lack, as 'Phemie had pointed out, was in the mattress line.

But when the girls climbed to the garret floor they found one finished room there–a very good sleeping-room indeed–and on the bedstead in this room were stacked, one on top of another, at least a dozen feather beds.

Each bed was wrapped in sheets of tarred paper–hermetically sealed from moths or other insect life.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Lyd!" cried 'Phemie, "let's take one of these to sleep on. There are pillows, too; but we've got *them*. Say! we can put one of these beds on top of the straw tick and be in comfort at last."

"All right. But the feather bed would be pretty warm for summer use," sighed Lyddy, as she helped her sister lift down one of the beds–priceless treasures of the old-time housewife.

"Country folk–some of them–sleep on feathers the year 'round," proclaimed 'Phemie. "Perhaps your summer boarders can be educated up to it–or *down* to it." 111

"Well, we'll try the 'down' and see how it works," agreed Lyddy. "My! these feathers are pressed as flat as a pancake. The bed must go out into the sun and air and be tossed once in a while, so that the air will get through it, before there'll be any 'life' in these feathers. Now, don't try to do it all, 'Phemie. I'll help you downstairs with it in a minute. I just want to look into the big garret while we're up here. Dear me! isn't it dusty?"

Such an attractive-looking assortment of chests, trunks, old presses, boxes, chests of drawers, decrepit furniture, and the like as was set about that garret! There was no end of old clothing hanging from the rafters, too–a forest of garments that would have delighted an old clo' man; but—

"Oo! Oo! Ooo!" hooted 'Phemie. "Look at the spider webs. Why, I wouldn't touch those things for the whole farm. I bet there are fat old spiders up there as big as silver dollars."

"Well, we can keep away from that corner," said Lyddy, with a shudder. "I don't want old coats and hats. But I wonder what *is* in those drawers. We shall want bed linen if we go into the business of keeping boarders."

She tried to open some of the nearest presses and bureaus, but all were locked. So, rather dusty and disheveled, they retired to the floor below, between them managing to carry the feather bed out upon the porch where the sun could shine upon it. 112

At noon Lyddy "buzzed" Lucas, as 'Phemie called it, about the way folk in the neighborhood cooked with an open fire, and especially about the use of the brick oven that was built into the side of the chimney.

"That air contraption," confessed the young farmer, "ain't much more real use than a fifth leg on a caow–for a fac'. But old folks used 'em. My grandmaw did.

"She useter shovel live coals inter the oven an' build a reg'lar fire on the oven bottom. Arter it was het right up she'd sweep aout the brands and ashes with long-handled brushes, an' then set the bread, an' pies, an' Injun puddin' an' the like–sometimes the beanpot, too–on the oven floor. Ye see, them bricks will hold heat a long time.

"But lemme tell ye," continued Lucas, shaking his head, "it took the *know how*, I reckon, ter bake stuff right by sech means. My maw never could do it. She says either her bread would be all crust, or 'twas raw in the middle.

"But now," pursued Lucas, "these 'ere what they call 'Dutch ovens' ain't so bad. I kin remember before dad bought maw the stove, she used a Dutch oven–an' she's got it yet. I know she'd lend it to you gals." 113

"That's real nice of you, Lucas," said 'Phemie, briskly. "But what is it?"

"Why, it's a big sheet-iron pan with a tight cover. You set it right in the coals and shovel coals on top of it and all around it. Things bake purty good in a Dutch oven–ya-as'm! Beans never taste so good to my notion as they useter when maw baked 'em in the old Dutch oven. An' dad says they was 'nough sight better when *he* was a boy an' grandmaw baked 'em in an oven like that one there," and Lucas nodded at the closet in the chimney that 'Phemie had opened to peer into.

"Ye see, it's the slow, steady heat that don't die down till mornin'–that's what bakes beans nice," declared this Yankee epicure.

Lucas had a "knack" with the axe, and he cut and piled enough wood to last the girls at least a fortnight. Lyddy felt as though she could not afford to hire him more than that one day at present; but he was going to town next day and he promised to bring back a pump leather and some few other necessities that the girls needed.

Before he went home Lucas got 'Phemie off to one side and managed to stammer: 114

"If you gals air scart–or the like o' that–you jest say so an' I'll keep watch around here for a night or two, an' see if I kin ketch the fellers you heard talkin' last night."

"Oh, Lucas! I wouldn't trouble you for the world," returned 'Phemie.

Lucas's countenance was a wonderful lobster-like red, and he was so bashful that his eyes fairly watered.

"'Twouldn't be no trouble, Miss 'Phemie," he told her. "'Twould be a pleasure–it re'lly would."

"But what would folks say?" gasped 'Phemie, her eyes dancing. "What would your sister and mother say?"

"They needn't know a thing about it," declared Lucas, eagerly. "I–I could slip out o' my winder an' down the shed ruff, an' sneak up here with my shot-gun."

"Why, Mr. Pritchett! I believe you are in the habit of doing such things. I am afraid you get out that way often, and the family knows nothing about it."

"Naw, I don't–only circus days, an' w'en the Wild West show comes, an'–an' Fourth of July mornin's. But don't you tell; will yer?"

"Cross my heart!" promised 'Phemie, giggling. "But suppose you should shoot somebody around here with that gun?" 115

"Sarve 'em aout jest right!" declared the young farmer, boldly. "B'sides, I'd only load it with rock-salt. 'Twould pepper 'em some."

"Salt and pepper 'em, Lucas," giggled the girl. "And season 'em right, I expect, for breaking our rest."

"I'll do it!" declared Lucas.

"Don't you dare!" threatened 'Phemie.

"Why–why—"

Lucas was swamped in his own confusion again.

"Not unless I tell you you may," said 'Phemie, smiling on him dazzlingly once more.

"Wa-al."

"Wait and see if we are disturbed again," spoke the girl, more kindly. "I really am obliged to you, Lucas; but I couldn't hear of your watching under our windows these cold nights–and, of course, it wouldn't be proper for us to let you stay in the house."

"Wa-al," agreed the disappointed youth. "But if ye need me, ye'll let me know?"

"Sure pop!" she told him, and was only sorry when he was gone that she could not tell Lyddy all about it, and give her older sister "an imitation" of Lucas as a cavalier.

The girls wrote the letter to Aunt Jane that evening and the next morning they watched for the rural mail-carrier, who came along the highroad, past the end of their lane, before noon. 116

He brought a letter from Aunt Jane for Lyddy, and he was ready to stop and gossip with the girls who had so recently come to Hillcrest Farm.

"I'm glad to see some life about the old doctor's house again," declared the man. "I can remember Dr. Polly–everybody called him that–right well. He was a queer customer some ways–brusk, and sort of rough. But he was a good deal like a chestnut burr. His outside was his worst side. He didn't have no soothing bedside mannerisms; but if a feller was real *sick*, it was a new lease of life to jest have the old doctor come inter the room!"

It made the girls happy and proud to have people speak this way of their grandfather.

"He warn't a man who didn't make enemies," ruminated the mail-carrier. "He was too strong a man not to be well hated in certain quarters. He warn't pussy-footed. What he meant he said out square and straight, an' when he put his foot down he put it down emphatic. Yes, sir!

"But he had a sight more friends than enemies when he died. And lots o' folks that thought they hated Dr. Polly could look back–when he was dead and gone–an' see how he'd done 'em many a kind turn unbeknownst to 'em at the time. 117

"Why," rambled on the mail-carrier, "I was talkin' to Jud Spink in Birch's store only las' night. Jud ain't been 'round here for some time before, an' suthin' started talk about the old doctor. Jud, of course, sailed inter him."

"Why?" asked 'Phemie, trying to appear interested, while Lyddy swiftly read her letter.

"Oh, I reckon you two gals–bein' only granddaughters of the old doctor–never heard much about Jud Spink–Lemuel Judson Spink he calls hisself now, an' puts a 'professor' in front of his name, too."

"Is he a professor?" asked 'Phemie.

"I dunno. He's been a good many things. Injun doctor–actor–medicine show fakir–patent medicine pedlar; and now he owns 'Diamond Grits'–the greatest food on airth, *he* claims, an' I tell him it's great all right, for man *an'* beast!" and the mail-carrier went off into a spasm of laughter over his own joke.

"Diamond Grits is a breakfast food," chuckled 'Phemie. "Do you s'pose horses would eat it, too?"

"Mine will," said the mail-carrier. "Jud sent me a case of Grits and I fed most of it to this critter. Sassige an' buckwheats satisfy me better of a mornin', an' I dunno as this hoss has re'lly been in as good shape since I give it the Grits. 118

"Wa-al, Jud's as rich as cream naow; but the old doctor took him as a boy out o' the poorhouse."

"And yet you say he talks against grandfather?" asked 'Phemie, rather curious.

"Ain't it just like folks?" pursued the man, shaking his head. "Yes, sir! Dr. Polly took Jud Spink inter his fam'bly and might have made suthin' of him; but Jud ran away with a medicine show—"

"He's made a rich man of himself, you say?" questioned 'Phemie.

"Ya-as," admitted the mail-carrier. "But everybody respected the old doctor, an' nobody respects Jud Spink–they respect his money.

"Las' night Jud says the old doctor was as close as a clam with the lockjaw, an' never let go of a dollar till the eagle screamed for marcy. But he done a sight more good than folks knowed about–till after he died. An' d'ye know the most important clause in his will, Miss?"

"In grandfather's will?"

"Ya-as. It was the instructions to his execketer to give a receipted bill to ev'ry patient of his that applied for the same, free gratis for nothin'! An' lemme tell ye," added the mail-carrier, preparing to drive on again, "there was some folks on both sides o' this ridge that was down on the old doctor's books for sums they could never hope to pay." 119

As he started off 'Phemie called after him, brightly:

"I'm obliged to you for telling me what you have about grandfather."

"Beginning to get interested in neighborhood gossip already; are you?" said her sister, when 'Phemie joined her, and they walked back up the lane.

"I believe I am getting interested in everything folks can tell us about grandfather. In his way, Lyddy, Dr. Apollo Phelps must have been a great man."

"I–I always had an idea he was a little *queer*," confessed Lyddy. "His name you know, and all—"

"But people really *loved* him. He helped them. He gave unostentatiously, and he must have been a very, very good doctor. I–I wonder what Aunt Jane meant by saying that grandfather used to say there were curative waters on the farm?"

"I haven't the least idea," replied Lyddy. "Sulphur spring, perhaps–nasty stuff to drink. But listen here to what Aunt Jane says about father." 120

"He's better?" cried 'Phemie.

The older girl's tone was troubled. "I can't make out that he is," she said, slowly, and then she began to read Aunt Jane's disjointed account of her visit the day before to the hospital:

"I never *do* like to go to such places, girls; they smell so of ether, and arniky, and collodion, and a whole lot of other unpleasant things. I wonder what makes drugs so nasty to smell of?

"But, anyhow, I seen your father. John Bray is a sick man. Maybe he don't know it himself, but the doctors know it, and you girls ought to know it. I'm plain-spoken, and there isn't any use in making you believe he is on the road to recovery when he's going just the other way.

"This head-doctor here, says he has no chance at all in the city. Of course, for me, if I was sick with anything, from housemaid's knee to spinal mengetus, going into the country would be my complete finish! But the doctors say it's different with your father.

"And just as soon as John Bray can ride in a railroad car, I am going to see that he joins you at Hillcrest."

"Bully!" cried 'Phemie, the optimistic. "Oh, Lyddy! he's bound to get well up here." For this chanced to be a very beautiful spring day and the girls were more than ever enamored of the situation. 121

"I am not so sure," said Lyddy, slowly.

"Don't be a grump!" commanded her sister. "He's just *got* to get well up here." But Lyddy wondered afterward if 'Phemie believed what she said herself!

They finished cleaning thoroughly the two rooms they were at present occupying and began on the chambers above. Dust and the hateful spiderwebs certainly had collected in the years the house had been unoccupied; but the Bray girls were not afraid of hard work. Indeed, they enjoyed it.

Toward evening Lucas and his sister appeared, and the former set to work to repair the old pump on the porch, while Sairy sat down to "visit" with the girls of Hillcrest Farm.

"It's goin' to be nice havin' you here, I declare," said Miss Pritchett, who had arranged two curls on either side of her forehead, which shook in a very kittenish manner when she laughed and bridled.

"I guess, as maw says, I'm too much with old folks. Fust I know they'll be puttin' me away in the Home for Indignant Old Maids over there to Adams–though why 'indignant' I can't for the life of me guess, 'nless it's because they're indignant over the men's passin' of 'em by!" and Miss Pritchett giggled and shook her curls, to 'Phemie's vast amusement. 122

Indeed, the younger Bray girl confessed to her sister, after the visitors had gone, that Sairy was more fun than Lucas.

"But I'm afraid she's far on the way to the Home for Indigent Spinsters, and doesn't know it," chuckled 'Phemie. "What a freak she is!"

"That's what you called Lucas–at first," admonished Lyddy. "And they're both real kind. Lucas wouldn't take a cent for mending the pump, and Sairy came especially to invite us to the Temperance Club meeting, at the schoolhouse Saturday night, and to go to church in their carriage with her and her mother on Sunday."

"Yes; I suppose they *are* kind," admitted 'Phemie. "And they can't help being funny."

"Besides," said the wise Lyddy, "if we *do* try to take boarders we'll need Lucas's help. We'll have to hire him to go back and forth to town for us, and depend on him for the outside chores. Why! we'd be like two marooned sailors on a desert island, up here on Hillcrest, if it wasn't for Lucas Pritchett!"

The girls spent a few anxious days waiting for Aunt Jane's answer. And meantime they discussed the project of taking boarders from all its various angles. 123

"Of course, we can't get boarders yet awhile," sighed 'Phemie. "It's much too early in the season."

"Why is it? Aren't *we* glad to be here at Hillcrest?" demanded Lyddy.

"But see what sort of a place we lived in," said her sister.

"And lots of other people live hived up in the cities just as close, only in better houses. There isn't much difference between apartment-houses and tenement-houses except the front entrance!"

"That may be epigrammatical," chuckled 'Phemie, "but you couldn't make many folks admit it."

"Just the same, there are people who need just this climate we've got here at this time of year. It will do them as much good as it will father."

"You'd make a regular sanitarium of Hillcrest," cried 'Phemie.

"Well, why not?" retorted Lyddy. "I guess the neighbors wouldn't object."

'Phemie giggled. "Advertise to take folks back to old-fashioned times and old-fashioned cooking."

"Why not?" 124

"Sleeping on feather beds; cooking in a brick oven like our great-great-grandmothers used to do! Open fireplaces. Great!"

"Plain, wholesome food. They won't have to eat out of cans. No extras or luxuries. We could afford to take them cheap," concluded Lyddy, earnestly. "And we'll get a big garden planted and feed 'em on vegetables through the summer."

"Oh, Lyddy, it *sounds* good," sighed 'Phemie. "But do you suppose Aunt Jane will consent to it?"

They received Aunt Jane's letter in reply to their own, on Saturday.

"You two girls go ahead and do what you please inside or outside Hillcrest," she wrote, "only don't disturb the old doctor's stuff in the lower rooms of the east ell. As long as you don't burn the house down I don't see that you can do any harm. And if you really think you can find folks foolish enough to want to live up there on the ridge, six miles from a lemon, why go ahead and do it. But I tell you frankly, girls, I'd want to be paid for doing it, and paid high!"

Then the kind, if brusk, old lady went on to tell them where to find many things packed away that they would need if they *did* succeed in getting boarders, including stores of linen, and blankets, and the like, as well as some good china and old silver, buried in one of the great chests in the attic. 125

However, nothing Aunt Jane could write could quench the girls' enthusiasm. Already Lyddy and 'Phemie had written an advertisement for the city papers, and five dollars of Lyddy's fast shrinking capital was to be set aside for putting their desires before the newspaper-reading public.

They could feel then that their new venture was really launched.

CHAPTER XI
AT THE SCHOOLHOUSE

126

It was scarcely dusk on Saturday when Lucas drove into the side yard at Hillcrest with the ponies hitched to a double-seated buckboard. Entertainments begin early in the rural districts.

The ponies had been clipped and looked less like animated cowhide trunks than they had when the Bray girls had first seen them and their young master in Bridleburg.

“School teacher came along an’ maw made Sairy go with him in his buggy,” exclaimed Lucas, with a broad grin. “If Sairy don’t ketch a feller ’fore long, an’ clamp to him, ’twon’t be maw’s fault.”

Lucas was evidently much impressed by the appearance of Lyddy and ’Phemie when they locked the side door and climbed into the buckboard. Because of their mother’s recent death the girls had dressed very quietly; but their black frocks were now very shabby, it was coming warmer weather, and the only dresses they owned which were fit to wear to an evening function of any kind were those that they had worn “for best” the year previous.

127

But the two girls from the city had no idea they would create such a sensation as they did when Lucas pulled in the ponies with a flourish and stopped directly before the door of the schoolhouse.

The building was already lighted up and there was quite an assemblage of young men and boys about the two front entrances. On the girls’ porch, too, a number of the feminine members of the Temperance Club were grouped, and with them Sairy Pritchett.

Her own arrival with the schoolmaster had been an effective one and she had waited with the other girls to welcome the newcomers from Hillcrest Farm, and introduce them to her more particular friends.

But the Bray girls looked as though they were from another sphere. Not that their frocks were so fanciful in either design or material; but there was a style about them that made the finery of the other girls look both cheap and tawdry.

“So *them* stuck-up things air goin’ to live ’round here; be they?” whispered one rosy-cheeked, buxom farmer’s daughter to Sairy Pritchett–and her whisper carried far. “Well, I tell you right now I don’t like their looks. See that Joe Badger; will you? He’s got to help ’em down out o’ Lucas’s waggin’; has he? Well, I declare!”

128

“An’ Hen Jackson, too!” cried another girl, shrilly. “They’d let airy one of us girls fall out on our heads.”

“Huh!” said Sairy, airily, “if you can’t keep Joe an’ Hen from shinin’ around every new gal that comes to the club, I guess you ain’t caught ’em very fast.”

“He, he!” giggled another. “Sairy thinks she’s hooked the school teacher all right, and that he won’t get away from her.”

“Cat!” snapped Miss Pritchett, descending the steps in her most stately manner to meet her new friends.

“Cat yourself!” returned the other. “I guess you’ll show your claws, Miss, if you have a chance.”

Perhaps Sairy did not hear all of this; and surely the Bray girls did not. Sairy Pritchett was rather proud of counting these city girls as her particular friends. She welcomed Lydia and Euphemia warmly.

"I hope Lucas didn't try to tip you into the brook again, Miss Bray," Sairy giggled to 'Phemie. "Oh, yes! Miss Lydia Bray, Mr. Badger; Mr. Jackson, Miss Bray. And this is Miss Euphemia, Mr. Badger–*and* Mr. Jackson. 129

"Now, that'll do very well, Joe–and Hen. You go 'tend to your own girls; we can git on without you."

Sairy deliberately led the newcomers into the schoolhouse by the boys' entrance, thus ignoring the girls who had roused her ire. She introduced Lyddy and 'Phemie right and left to such of the young fellows as were not too bashful.

Sairy suddenly arrived at the conclusion that to pilot the sisters from Hillcrest about would be "good business." The newcomers attracted the better class of young bachelors at the club meeting and Sairy–heretofore something of a "wall flower" on such occasions–found herself the very centre of the group.

Lyddy and 'Phemie were naturally a little disturbed by the prominent position in which they were placed by Sairy's manœuvring; but, of course, the sisters had been used to going into society, and Lyddy's experience at college and her natural sedateness of character enabled her to appear to advantage. As for the younger girl, she was so much amused by Sairy, and the others, that she quite forgot to feel confused.

Indeed, she found that just by looking at most of these young men, and smiling, she could throw them into spasms of self-consciousness. They were almost as bad as Lucas Pritchett, and Lucas was getting to be such a good friend now that 'Phemie couldn't really enjoy making him feel unhappy. 130

She was, indeed, particularly nice to him when young Pritchett struggled to her side after the girls were settled in adjoining seats, half-way up the aisle on the "girls' side" of the schoolroom.

These young girls and fellows had–most of them–attended the district school, or were now attending it; therefore, they were used to being divided according to the sexes, and those boys who actually had not accompanied their girlfriends to the club meeting, sat by themselves on the boys' side, while the girls grouped together on the other side of the house.

There were a few young married couples present, and these matrons made their husbands sit beside them during the exercises; but for a young man and young girl to sit together was almost a formal announcement in that community that they "had intentions!"

All this was quite unsuspected by Lyddy and 'Phemie Bray, and the latter had no idea of the joy that possessed Lucas Pritchett's soul when she allowed him to take the seat beside her.

Her sister sat at her other hand, and Sairy was beyond Lyddy. No other young fellow could get within touch of the city girls, therefore, although there was doubtless many a swain who would have been glad to do so. 131

This club, the fundamental idea of which was "temperance," had gradually developed into something much broader. While it still demanded a pledge from its members regarding abstinence from alcoholic beverages, including the bane of the countryside–hard cider–its semimonthly meetings were mainly of a literary and musical nature.

The reigning school teacher for the current term was supposed to take the lead in governing the club and pushing forward the local talent. Mr. Somers was the name of the young man with the bald brow and the eyeglasses, who was presiding over the welfare of Pounder's District School. The Bray girls thought he seemed to be an intelligent and well-mannered young man, if a trifle self-conscious.

And he evidently had an element that was difficult to handle.

Soon after the meeting was called to order it became plain that a group of boys down in the corner by the desk were much more noisy than was necessary.

The huge stove, by which the room was overheated, was down there, its smoke-pipe crossing, in a L-shaped figure, the entire room to the chimney at one side, and it did seem as though none of those boys could move without kicking their boots against this stove. 132

These uncouth noises interfered with the opening address of the teacher and punctuated the "roll call" by the secretary, who was a small, almost dwarf-like young man, out of whose mouth rolled the names of the members in a voice that fairly shook the casements. Such a thunderous tone from so puny a source was in itself amazing, and convulsed 'Phemie.

"Ain't he got a great voice?" asked Lucas, in a whisper. "He sings bass in the church choir and sometimes, begum! ye can't hear nawthin' but Elbert Hooker holler."

"Is *that* his name?" gasped 'Phemie.

"Yep. Elbert Hooker. 'Yell-bert' the boys call him. He kin sure holler like a bull!"

And at that very moment, as the bombastic Elbert was subsiding and the window panes ceased from rattling with the reverberations of his voice, one of the boys in the corner fell more heavily than before against the stove–or, it might have been Elbert Hooker's tones had shaken loose the joints of stovepipe that crossed the schoolroom; however, there was a yell from those down front, the girls scrambled out of the way, the smoke began to spurt from between the joints, and it was seen that only the wires fastened to the ceiling kept the soot-laden lengths of pipe from falling to the floor. 133

CHAPTER XII 134

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

The soot began sifting down in little clouds; but the sections of pipe had come apart so gently that no great damage was done immediately. The girls sitting under the pipe, however, were thrown into a panic, and fairly climbed over the desks and seats to get out of the way.

Besides, considerable smoke began to issue from the stove. One of the young scamps to whose mischievousness was due this incident, had thrown into the fire, just as the pipe broke loose, some woolen garment, or the like, and it now began to smoulder with a stench and an amount of smoke that frightened some of the audience.

"Don't you be skeert none," exclaimed Lucas, to 'Phemie and her sister, and jumping up from his seat himself. "'Taint nothin' but them Buckley boys and Ike Hewlett. Little scamps—"

"But we don't want to get soot all over us, Lucas!" cried his sister.

"Or be choked by smoke," coughed 'Phemie.

There was indeed a great hullabaloo for a time; but the windows were opened, the teacher rescued the burning woolen rag from the fire with the tongs and threw it out of the window, and several of the bigger fellows swooped down upon the malicious youngsters and bundled them out of the schoolhouse in a hurry–and in no gentle manner–while others, including Lucas, stripped off their coats and set to work to repair the stovepipe. 135

An hour was lost in repairs and airing the schoolhouse, and then everybody trooped back. Meanwhile, the Bray girls had made many acquaintances among the young folk.

Mr. Somers, the teacher, was plainly delighted to meet Lyddy–a girl who had actually spent two years at Littleburg. He was seminary-bred himself, with an idea of going back to take the divinity course after he had taught a couple of years.

But it suddenly became apparent to ’Phemie–who was observant–that Sairy looked upon this interest of the school teacher in Lyddy with “a green eye.”

Mr. Somers, who allowed the boys and young men to repair the damage created by his pupils while he rested from his labors, sat by Lyddy all the time until the meeting was called to order once more.

Sairy, who had begun by bridling and looking askance at the two who talked so easily about things with which she was not conversant, soon tossed her head and began to talk with others who gathered around. And when Mr. Somers went to the desk to preside again Sairy was not sitting in the same row with the Bray girls and left them to their own devices for the rest of the evening. 136

Lucas, the faithful, came back to ’Phemie’s side, however. Some of the other girls were laughing at Sairy Pritchett and their taunts fed her ire with fresh fuel.

She talked very loud and laughed very much between the numbers of the program, and indeed was not always quiet while the entertainment itself was in progress. This she did as though to show the company in general that she neither cared for the schoolmaster’s attentions nor that she considered her friendship with the Bray girls of any importance.

Of course, the girls with whom she had wrangled on the schoolhouse steps were delighted with what they considered Sairy’s “let-down.” If a girl really came to an evening party with a young man, he was supposed to “stick” and to show interest in no other girl during the evening.

When the intermission came Mr. Somers deliberately took a seat again beside Lyddy.

“Well, I never!” shrilled Sairy. “Some folks are as bold as brass. Humph!” 137

Now, as it happened, both Lyddy and the school teacher were quite ignorant of the stir they were creating. The green-eyed monster roared right in their ears without either of them being the wiser. Lyddy was only sorry that Sairy Pritchett proved to be such a loud-talking and rather unladylike person.

But ’Phemie, who was younger, and observant, soon saw what was the matter. She wished to warn Lyddy, but did not know how to do so. And, of course, she knew her sister and the school teacher were talking of quite impersonal things.

These girls expected everybody to be of their own calibre. ’Phemie had seen the same class of girls in her experience in the millinery shop. But it was quite impossible for Lyddy to understand such people, her experience with young girls at school and college not having prepared her for the outlook on life which these country girls had.

’Phemie turned to Lucas–who stuck to her like a limpet to a rock–for help.

“Lucas,” she said, “you have been very kind to bring us here; but I want to ask you to take us home early; will you?”

“What’s the matter–ye ain’t sick; be you?” demanded the anxious young farmer. 138

“No. But your sister is,” said ’Phemie, unable to treat the matter with entire seriousness.

“Sairy?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the matter with *her*?” grunted Lucas.

“Don’t you *see*?” exclaimed ’Phemie, in an undertone.

“By cracky!” laughed Lucas. “Ye mean because teacher’s forgot she’s on airth?”

“Yes,” snapped ’Phemie. “You know Lyddy doesn’t care anything about that Mr. Somers. But she has to be polite.”

“Why–why—”

"Will you take us home ahead of them all?" demanded the girl. "Then your sister can have the schoolmaster."

"By cracky! is that it?" queried Lucas. "Why–if you say so. I'll do just like you want me to, Miss 'Phemie."

"You are a good boy, Lucas–and I hope you won't be silly," said 'Phemie. "We like you, but we have been brought up to have boy friends who don't play at being grown up," added 'Phemie, as earnestly as she had ever spoken in her life. "We like to have *friends*, not *beaux*. Won't you be our friend, Lucas?"

She said this so low that nobody else could hear it but young Pritchett; but so emphatically that the tears came to her eyes. Lucas gaped at her for a moment; then he seemed to understand. 139

"I get yer, 'Phemie," he declared, with emphasis, "an' you kin bank on me. Sairy's foolish–maw's made her so, I s'pose. But I ain't as big a fool as I look."

"You don't look like a fool, Lucas," said 'Phemie, faintly.

"You've been brought up different from us folks," pursued the young farmer. "And I can see that we look mighty silly to you gals from the city. But I'll play fair. You let me be your friend, 'Phemie."

The young girl had to wink hard to keep back the tears. There was "good stuff" in this young farmer, and she was sorry she had ever–even in secret–made fun of him.

"Lucas, you are a good boy," she repeated, "and we both like you. You'll get us away from here and let Sairy have her chance at the schoolmaster?"

"You bet!" he said. "Though I don't care about Sairy. She's old enough to know better," he added, with the usual brother's callousness regarding his sister.

"She feels neglected and will naturally be mad at Lyddy," 'Phemie said. "But if we slip out during some recitation or song, it won't be noticed much." 140

"All right," agreed Lucas. "I'll go out ahead and unhitch the ponies and get their blankets off. You gals can come along in about five minutes. Now! Mayme Lowry is going to read the 'Club Chronicles'–that's a sort of history of neighborhood doin's since the last meetin'. She hits on most ev'rybody, and they will all wanter hear. We'll git aout quiet like."

So, when Miss Lowry arose to read her manuscript, Lucas left his seat and 'Phemie whispered to Lyddy:

"Get your coat, dear. I want to go home. Lucas has gone out to get the team."

"Why–what's the matter, child?" demanded the older sister, anxiously.

"Nothing. Only I want to go."

"We-ell–if you must—"

"Don't say anything more, but come on," commanded 'Phemie.

They arose together and tiptoed out. If Sairy saw them she made no sign, nor did anybody bar their escape.

Lucas had got his team into the road. "Here ye be!" he said, cheerfully.

"But–but how about Sairy?" cried the puzzled Lyddy. 141

"Oh, she'll ride home with the school teacher," declared Lucas, chuckling.

"But I really am surprised at you, 'Phemie," said the older sister. "It seems rather discourteous to leave before the entertainment was over–unless you are ill?"

"I'm sorry," said the younger girl, demurely. "But I got *so* nervous."

"I know," whispered Lyddy. "Some of those awful recitations *were* trying."

And 'Phemie had to giggle at that; but she made no further explanation.

The ponies drew them swiftly over the mountain road and under the white light of a misty moon they quickly turned into the lane leading to Hillcrest. As the team dropped to a walk, 'Phemie suddenly leaned forward and clutched the driver's arm.

"Look yonder, Lucas!" she whispered. "There, by the corner of the house."

"Whoa!" muttered Lucas, and brought the horses to a halt.

The girls and Lucas all saw the two figures. They wavered for a moment and then one hurried behind the high stone wall between the yard and the old orchard. The other crossed the front yard boldly toward the highroad. 142

"They came from the direction of the east wing," whispered 'Phemie.

"Who do you suppose they are?" asked Lyddy, more placidly. "Somebody who tried to call on us?"

"That there feller," said Lucas, slowly, his voice shaking oddly, as he pointed with his whip after the man who just then gained the highroad, "that there feller is Lem Judson Spink–I know his long hair and broad-brimmed hat."

"What?" cried 'Phemie. "The man who lived here at Hillcrest when he was a boy?"

"So they say," admitted Lucas. "Dad knew him. They went to school together. He's a rich man now."

"But what could he possibly want up here?" queried Lyddy, as the ponies went on. "And who was the other man?"

"I–I dunno who he was," blurted out Lucas, still much disturbed in voice and appearance.

But after the girls had disembarked, and bidden Lucas good night, and the young farmer had driven away, 'Phemie said to her sister, as the latter was unlocking the door of the farmhouse:

"*I* know who that other man was."

"What other man?"

"The one who ran behind the stone wall." 143

"Why, who was it, 'Phemie?" queried her sister, with revived interest.

"Cyrus Pritchett," stated 'Phemie, with conviction, and nothing her sister could say would shake her belief in that fact.

CHAPTER XIII 144

LYDDY DOESN'T WANT IT

"Who is this Mr. Spink?" asked Lydia Bray the following morning, as they prepared for church.

It was a beautiful spring morning. There had been a pattering shower at sunrise and the eaves were still dripping, while every blade of the freshly springing grass in the side yard–which was directly beneath the girls' window–sparkled as though diamond-decked over night.

The old trees in the orchard were pushing both leaf and blossom–especially the plum and peach trees. In the distance other orchards were blowing, too, and that spattered the mountainside with patches of what looked to be pale pink mist.

The faint tinkling of the sheep-bells came across the hills to the ears of Lyddy and 'Phemie. The girls were continually going to the window or door to watch the vast panorama of the mountainside and valley, spread below them.

"Who *is* this Mr. Spink?" repeated Lyddy.

Her sister explained what she knew of the man who–once a poorhouse boy–was now counted a rich man and the proprietor of Diamond Grits, the popular breakfast food. 145

"He lived here at Hillcrest as a boy, with grandfather," 'Phemie said.

"But what's *that* got to do with his coming up here now–and at night?"

"And with Mr. Pritchett?" finished 'Phemie.

"Yes. I am going to ask Mr. Pritchett about it. They surely weren't after vinegar so late at night," Lyddy observed.

But 'Phemie did not prolong the discussion. In her secret thoughts the younger Bray girl believed that it was Cyrus Pritchett and Mr. Spink whom she had heard about the old house the night she and Lyddy had first slept at Hillcrest.

There was no use worrying Lyddy about it, she told herself.

A little later the roan ponies appeared with the Pritchett buckboard. Instead of Mrs. Pritchett and her daughter, however, the good lady's companion on the front seat was Lucas, who drove.

"Oh, dear me!" cried Lyddy. "I hope we haven't turned Miss Pritchett out of her seat. Surely we three girls could have squeezed in here on the back seat."

"Nope," said Mrs. Pritchett. "That ain't it, at all. Sairy ain't goin' to church this mornin'."

"She's not ill?" asked Lyddy. 146

"I dunno. She ain't got no misery as I can find out; but she sartainly has a grouch! A bear with a sore head in fly time would be a smilin' work of Grace 'side of Sairy Pritchett ever since she come home from the Temperance Club las' night."

"Oh!" came from 'Phemie.

"Why—She surely isn't angry because we went home early?" cried Lyddy. "My sister, you see, got nervous—"

"I reckon 'taint that," Lucas hastened to say. "More likely she's sore on me."

"'Tain't nawthin' of the kind, an' you know it, Lucas," declared his mother. "Though ye might have driven 'round by the schoolhouse ag'in and brought her home."

"Wal, I thought she'd ride back with school teacher. She went with him," returned Lucas, on the defensive.

"She walked home," said Mrs. Pritchett, shortly. "I dunno why. She won't tell *me*."

"I hope she isn't ill," remarked the unconscious Lyddy.

But Lucas cast a knowing look over his shoulder at 'Phemie and the latter had hard work to keep her own countenance straight.

"Well," said Mrs. Pritchett, more briskly, "ye can't always sometimes tell what the matter is with these young gals. They gits crotchets in their heads." 147

She kept up the fiction that Sairy was a young and flighty miss; but even 'Phemie could no longer laugh at her for it. It was the mother's pitiful attempt to aid her daughter's chances

for that greatly-to-be-desired condition–matrimony.

The roads were still muddy; nevertheless the drive over the ridge to Cornell Chapel was lovely. For some time the girls had been noting the procession of carriages and wagons winding over the mountain roads, all verging upon this main trail over the ridge which passed so close to Hillcrest.

Lucas, driving the ponies at a good clip, joined the procession. Lyddy and 'Phemie recognized several of the young people they had met the night before at the Temperance Club–notably the young men.

Joe Badger flashed by in a red-wheeled buggy and beside him sat the buxom, red-faced girl who had voiced her distaste for the city-bred newcomers right at the start. Badger bowed with a flourish; but his companion's nose was in the air.

"I never did think that Nettie Meyers had very good manners," announced Mrs. Pritchett.

They overtook the schoolmaster jogging along behind his old gray mare. He, likewise, bowed profoundly to the Bray girls. 148

"I am afraid you did not enjoy yourself last night at the club, Miss Bray," he said to Lyddy, who was on his side of the buckboard, as Lucas pulled out to pass him. "You went home so early. I was looking for you after it was all over."

"Oh, but you are mistaken," declared Lyddy, pleasantly. "I had a very nice time."

As they drove on Mrs. Pritchett's fat face became a study.

"And he never even asked arter Sairy!" she gasped. "And he let her come home alone last night. Humph! he must ha' been busy huntin' for *you*, Miss Bray."

Lucas cast oil on the troubled waters by saying:

"An' I carried Miss Lyddy and Miss 'Phemie away from all of 'em. I guess *all* the Pritchetts ain't so slow, Maw."

"Humph! Wa-al," admitted the good lady, somewhat mollified, "you *hev* seemed to 'woke up lately, Lucas."

The chapel was built of graystone and its north wall was entirely covered with ivy. It nestled in a grove of evergreens, with the tidy fenced graveyard behind it. The visitors thought it a very beautiful place.

Everybody was rustling into church when they arrived, so there were no introductions then. The pastor was a stooped, gray old man, who had been the incumbent for many years, and to the Bray girls his discourse seemed as helpful as any they had ever heard. 149

After service the girls of Hillcrest Farm were introduced to many of the congregation by Mrs. Pritchett. Naturally these were the middle-aged, or older, members of the flock–mostly ladies who knew, or remembered, the girls' mother and Aunt Jane. Indeed, it was rather noticeable that the young women and girls did not come forward to meet Lyddy and 'Phemie.

Not that either of the sisters cared. They liked the matrons who attended Cornell Chapel much better than they had most of the youthful members of the Temperance Club.

Some of the young men waited their chance in the vestibule to get a bow and a smile of recognition from the newcomers; but only the schoolmaster dared attach himself for any length of time to the Pritchett party.

And Mrs. Pritchett could not fail to take note of this at length. The teacher was deep in some unimportant discussion with Lyddy, who was sweetly unconscious that she was fanning the fire of suspicion in Mrs. Pritchett's breast.

That lady finally broke in with a loud "Ahem!" following it with: "I re'lly don't know what's happened to my Sairy. She's right poorly to-day, Mr. Somers." 150

"Why–I–I'm sorry to hear it," said the startled, yet quite unsuspicious teacher. "She seemed to be in good health and spirits when we were on our way to the club meeting last evening."

"Ya-as," agreed Mrs. Pritchett, simpering and looking at him sideways. "She seems to have changed since then. She ain't been herself since she walked home from the meeting."

"Perhaps she has a cold?" suggested the teacher, blandly.

"Oh, Sairy is not subject to colds," declared Mrs. Pritchett. "But she is easily chilled in other ways–yes, indeed! I don't suppose there is a more sensitive young girl on the ridge than my Sairy."

Mr. Somers began to wake up to the fact that the farmer's wife was not shooting idly at him; there was "something behind it!"

"I am sorry if Miss Sairy is offended, or has been hurt in any way," he said, gravely. "It was a pity she had to walk home from the club. If I had known—"

"Wa-al," drawled Mrs. Pritchett, "*you* took her there yourself in your buggy." 151

"Indeed!" he exclaimed, flushing a little. "I had no idea that bound me to the necessity of taking her home again. Her brother was there with your carriage. I am sure I do not understand your meaning, Mrs. Pritchett."

"Oh, I don't mean anything!" exclaimed the lady, but very red in the face now, and her bonnet shaking. "Come, gals! we must be going."

Both Lyddy and 'Phemie had begun to feel rather unhappy by this time. Mrs. Pritchett swept them up the aisle ahead of her as though she were shooing a flock of chickens with her ample skirts.

They went through the vestibule with a rush. Lucas was ready with the ponies. Mrs. Pritchett was evidently very angry over her encounter with the teacher; and she could not fail to hold the Bray girls somewhat accountable for her daughter's failure to keep the interest of Mr. Somers.

She said but little on the drive homeward. There had been something said earlier about the girls going down to the Pritchett farm for dinner; but the angry lady said nothing more about it, and Lyddy and 'Phemie were rather glad when Hillcrest came into view.

"Ye better stop in an' go along down to the house with us," said the good-natured Lucas, hesitating about turning the ponies' heads in at the lane. 152

"Oh, we could not possibly," Lyddy replied, gracefully. "We are a thousand times obliged for your making it possible for us to attend church. You are all so kind, Mrs. Pritchett. But this afternoon I must plead the wicked intention of writing letters. I haven't written a line to one of my college friends since I came to Hillcrest."

Mrs. Pritchett merely grunted. Lucas covered his mother's grumpiness by inconsequential chatter with 'Phemie while he drove in and turned the ponies so that the girls could get out.

"A thousand thanks!" cried 'Phemie.

"Good-day!" exclaimed Lyddy, brightly.

Mrs. Pritchett's bonnet only shook the harder, and she did not turn to look at the girls. Lucas cast a very rueful glance in their direction as he drove hastily away.

"Now we've done it!" gasped 'Phemie, half laughing, half in disgust.

"Why! whatever is the matter, do you suppose?" demanded her sister.

"Well, if you can't see *that*—"

"I see she's angry over Sairy and the school teacher–poor man! But what have we to do with that?"

"It's your fatal attractiveness," sighed 'Phemie. Then she began to laugh. "You're a very innocent baby, Lyd. Don't you see that Maw Pritchett thought–or hoped–that she had Mr. Somers nicely entangled with Sairy? And he neglected her for you. Bing! it's all off, and we're at outs with the Pritchett family." 153

"What awful language!" sighed Lyddy, unlocking the door. "I am sorry you ever went to work in that millinery shop, 'Phemie. It has made your mind–er–almost common!"

But 'Phemie only laughed.

If the Pritchett females were "at outs" with them, the men of the family did not appear to be. At least, Cyrus and his son were at Hillcrest bright and early on Monday morning, with two teams ready for plowing. Lyddy had a serious talk with Mr. Pritchett first.

"Ya-as. That's good 'tater and truckin' land behind the barn. It's laid out a good many years now, for it's only an acre, or so, and we never tilled it for corn. It's out o' the way, kinder," said the elder Pritchett.

"Then I want that for a garden," Lyddy declared.

"It don't pay me to work none of this 'off' land for garden trucks," said Cyrus, shortly. "Not 'nless ye want a few rows o' stuff in the cornfield jest where I can cultivate with the hosses." 154

"But if you plant corn here, you must plant my garden, too," insisted Lyddy, who was quite as obstinate as the old farmer. "And I'd like to have a big garden, and plenty of potatoes, too. I am going to keep boarders this summer, and I want to raise enough to feed them–or partly feed them, at least."

"Huh! Boarders, eh? A gal like you!"

"We're not rich enough to sit with idle hands, and I mean to try and earn something," Lyddy declared. "And we'll want vegetables to carry us over winter, too."

Lucas had been listening with flushed and anxious face. Now he broke in eagerly:

"You said I could till a piece for myself this year, Dad. Lemme do it up here. There's a better chance to sell trucks in Bridleburg than there has been. I'll plow and take care of two acres up here, if Miss Lyddy says so, for half the crops, she to supply seed and fertilizer."

"Will–will it cost much, Lucas?" asked Lyddy, doubtfully.

"That land's rich, but it may be sour. Ain't that so, Dad? It won't take so very much phosphate; will it?"

Cyrus was slower mentally than these eager young folk. He had to think it over and discuss it from different angles. But finally he gave his consent to the plan and advised his son and Lyddy how to manage the matter. 155

"You kin git your fertilizer on time–six or nine months–right here in Bridleburg. That gives you a chance to raise your crop and market it before paying for the fertilizer," he said. "You'll have to get corn fertilizer, too, in the same way. But 'most ev'rybody else on the ridge does the same. We ain't a very fore-handed community, and that's a fac'."

At noon Lyddy and 'Phemie talked over the garden project more fully with Lucas. They planned what early seeds should be planted, and Lucas began plowing that particular piece behind the barn right after dinner.

Lyddy had very little money to work with, but she believed in "nothing ventured, nothing gained." She told Lucas to purchase a bag of potatoes for planting the next day when he went to town, and he was to buy a few papers of early garden seeds, too.

And when Lucas came back with the potatoes he brought a surprise for the Bray girls. He drove into the yard with a flourish. 'Phemie looked out of the window, uttered a scream of joy and surprise, and rushed out to receive her father in her strong young arms as he got down from the seat. 156

How feeble and tired he looked! 'Phemie began to cry; but Lyddy "braced up" and declared he looked a whole lot better already and that Hillcrest would cure him in just no time.

"And that foolish 'Phemie is only crying for joy at seeing you so unexpectedly, Father," said Lyddy, scowling frightfully at her sister over their father's bowed head as they helped him into the house.

Lucas hovered in the background; but he could not help them. 'Phemie saw, however, that the young farmer fully appreciated the situation and was truly sympathetic.

The change in Mr. Bray's appearance was a great shock to both girls. Of course, the doctor at the hospital had promised Lyddy no great improvement in the patient until he could be got up here on the hills, where the air was pure and healing.

Aunt Jane had come as far as the junction with him; but he had come on alone to Bridleburg from there, and the agent at the station had telephoned uptown to tell Lucas that the invalid wished to get to Hillcrest.

"I'm all right; I'm all right!" he kept repeating. But the girls almost carried him between them into the house. 157

"The doctors said you could do more for me up here than they could do for me there," panted Mr. Bray, smiling faintly at his daughters, who hovered about him as he sat before the crackling wood fire in the kitchen.

"And Aunt Jane never told us you were coming!" gasped Lyddy.

"What's the odds, as long as he's here?" demanded 'Phemie.

"Why, I shall soon be my old self again up here," Mr. Bray declared, hopefully. "Now, don't fuss over me, girls. You've got other things to do. That young fellow who brought me up here seems to be your chief cook and bottle-washer, and he wants to speak to you, I reckon," for Lucas was waiting to learn where he should put the potatoes and other things.

Mr. Bray knew all about the boarding house project and approved of it. "Why, I can soon help around myself. And I must do something," he told them, that evening, "or I shall go crazy. I couldn't endure the rest cure." But it was complete rest that he had to endure for several days after his unexpected arrival.

The girls gave up their room to their father, and went upstairs to sleep. 'Phemie had to admit that even *she* was glad there was at last somebody else in the house. Especially a man! 158

"But I never have thought to ask Mr. Pritchett about his being up here with that Spink man last Saturday night," Lyddy said, sleepily.

"You'd better let it drop," advised 'Phemie. "We don't want to get the whole Pritchett family down on us."

"What nonsense! Of course I shall ask him," declared her sister.

But as it happened something occurred the following day to quite put this small matter out of Lyddy's mind. The postman brought the first letter in answer to their advertisement. Lyddy was about to tear open the envelope when she halted in amazement. The card printed in the corner included the number of Trimble Avenue right next to the big tenement house in which the Brays had lived before coming here to Hillcrest.

"Isn't that strange?" she murmured, and read the card again:

Commonwealth Chemical Company
407 Trimble Avenue

Easthampton

"Right from the very next door!" sparkled 'Phemie. "Don't that beat all!–as Lucas says."

But Lyddy had now opened the letter and read as follows: 159

"L. Bray, Hillcrest Farm, Bridleburg P. O.
"Dear Madam:

"I have read your advertisement and believe that you offer exactly what my father and I have been looking for–a quiet, home-like boarding house in the hills, and not too far away for me to get easily back and forth. If agreeable, we shall come to Bridleburg Saturday and would be glad to have you meet the 10:14 train on its arrival. If both parties are suited we can then discuss terms.

"Respectfully,
"HARRIS COLESWORTH."

"Why, what's the matter, Lyd?" demanded her sister, in amazement.

But Lyddy Bray did not explain. In her own mind she was much disturbed. She was confident that the writer of this note was the "fresh" young fellow who had always been at work in the chemical laboratory right across the air-shaft from her kitchen window!

Of course, it was quite by chance–in all probability–that he had answered her advertisement. Yet Lyddy Bray had an intuition that if she answered the letter, and the Colesworths came here to Hillcrest, trouble would ensue. 160

She had hoped very much to obtain boarders, and to get even one thus early in the season seemed too good to be true. Yet, now that she had got what she wanted, Lyddy was doubtful if she wanted it after all.

CHAPTER XIV 161
THE COLESWORTHS

Mr. Bray fell in with the boarder project, as we have seen, with enthusiasm. Although he could do nothing as yet, his mind was active enough and he gaily planned with 'Phemie what they should do and how they should arrange the rooms for the horde of visitors who were, they were sure, already on their way to Hillcrest.

"Though Lyd won't show the very first letter she's received in answer to our ad.," complained the younger sister. "What's the matter with those folks, Lyddy? Do they actually live right there near where we did on Trimble Avenue?"

"That was a loft building next to us," said their father, curiously. "Who are the people, daughter?"

"Somebody by the name of Colesworth. The Commonwealth Chemical Company office. It's about an old man to stay here."

"One man only!" exclaimed 'Phemie.

"With a young man–the one who writes–to come up over Sundays, I suppose," acknowledged Lyddy, doubtfully.

"Goody!" cried her sister. "*That* sounds better." 162

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, 'Phemie!" chided Lyddy, with some asperity.

But Mr. Bray only laughed. “I guess I can play ‘he-chaperon’ for all the young men who come here,” he said. “Your sister is only making fun, Lydia.”

But Lyddy was more worried in secret about the Colesworth proposition than she was ready to acknowledge. She “just felt” that Harris Colesworth was the young man who had helped them the evening of the fire in the Trimble Avenue tenement.

“He found out our name, of course, and when he saw my advertisement he knew who it was. He may even have found out where we were going when we left for the country. In some way he could have done so,” thought Lyddy, putting the young man’s character before her mind in the very worst possible light.

“He is altogether too persistent. I hope he is as energetic in a better way–I hope he attends to his business as faithfully as he seems to attend to *our* affairs,” continued Lyddy, bitterly.

“I don’t suppose this idea of his father coming up here into the hills is entirely an excuse for him to become familiar with–with *us*. But it looks very much like it. I–I wonder what kind of a man old Mr. Colesworth can be?” 163

Lyddy ruminated upon the letter she had received all that day and refused to answer it right away. Indeed, as far as she could see, the letter did not really need an answer. This Harris Colesworth spoke just as though he expected they would be only too glad to meet him on Saturday with a rig.

“And, if it were anybody else, I suppose I would be glad to do so,” Lyddy finally had to admit. “I suppose that ‘beggars mustn’t be choosers’; and if this Harris Colesworth isn’t a perfectly proper young man to have about, father will very quickly attend to *his* case.”

Really, Lyddy Bray thought much more about the Colesworths than her sister and father thought she did. After being urged by ’Phemie several times she finally allowed her sister to reply to the letter, promising to have a carriage at the station for the train mentioned in Harris Colesworth’s letter.

Of course, this meant hiring Lucas Pritchett and the buckboard. Lucas was at Hillcrest a good deal of the time that week. He got the garden plowed and the early potatoes planted, as well as some few other seeds which would not be hurt by the late frosts.

Mr. Bray got around very slowly; at first he could only walk up and down in the sun, or sit on the porch, well wrapped up. 164

Like most men born in the country and forced to be city dwellers for many years, John Bray had longed more deeply than he could easily express for country living. He appreciated the sights and sounds about him–the mellow, refreshing air that blew over the hills–the sunshine and the pattering rain which, on these early spring days, drifted alternately across the fields and woods.

With the girls he planned for the future. Some day they would have a cow. There was pasture on the farm for a dozen. And already Lyddy was studying poultry catalogs and trying to figure out a little spare money to purchase some eggs for hatching.

Of course they had no hens and at this time of the year the neighbors were likely to want their own setting hens for incubating purposes. Lyddy sounded Silas Trent, the mail-carrier, about this and Mr. Trent had an offer to make.

“I tell ye what it is,” said the garrulous Silas, “the chicken business is a good business–if ye kin ’tend to it right. I tried it–went in deep for incubator, brooders, and the like; and it would have been all right if I didn’t hafter be away from home so much durin’ the day. 165

“My wife’s got rheumatiz, and she can’t git out to ’tend to little chicks, and for a few weeks they need a sight of attention–that’s right. They’d oughter be fed every two hours, or so, and watched pretty close.

“So I had ter give it up last year, an’ this year I ain’t put an egg in my incubator.

"But if I could git 'em growed to scratchin' state–say, when they're broiler-size–I sartainly would like it. Tell ye what I'll do, Miss. I'll let ye have my incubator. It's 200-egg size. In course, ye don't hafter fill it first time if ye don't wanter. Put in a hundred eggs and see how ye come out."

"But how could I pay you?" asked Lyddy.

"I'll sell ye the incubator outright, if ye want to buy. And I'll take my pay in chickens when they're broiler-size–say three months old."

"What do you want for your incubator?" queried Lyddy, thoughtfully.

"Ten dollars. It's a good one. And I'll take a flock of twenty three-months-old chicks in pay for it–fifteen pullets and five cockerels. What kind of hens do you favor, Miss Bray?"

Lyddy told him the breed she had thought of purchasing–and the strain.

"Them's fine birds," declared Mr. Trent. "For heavy fowl they are good layers–and when ye butcher one of 'em for the table, ye got suthin' to eat. Now, you think my offer over. I'll stick to it. And I'll set the incubator up and show ye how to run it." 166

Lyddy was very anxious to venture into the chicken business–and here was a chance to do it cheaply. It was the five dollars for a hundred hatching eggs that made her hesitate.

But Aunt Jane had shown herself to be more than a little interested in the girls' venture at Hillcrest Farm, and when she expressed the keys of the garret chests and bureaus to Lyddy–so that the girl could get at the stores of linen left from the old doctor's day–she sent, too, twenty-five dollars.

"Keep it against emergencies. Pay it back when you can. And don't let's have no talk about it," was the old lady's characteristic note.

Lyddy was only doubtful as to whether this desire of hers to raise chickens was really "an emergency." But finally she decided to venture, and she wrote off for the eggs, sending the money by a post-office order, and Lucas brought up Silas Trent's incubator.

Friday night Trent drove up to Hillcrest and spent the evening with the Brays. He set the incubator up in the little washhouse, which opened directly off the back porch. It was a small, tight room, with only one window, and was easily heated by an oil-lamp. The lamp of the incubator itself would do the trick, Trent said. 167

He leveled the machine with great care, showed Lyddy all about the trays, the water, the regulation of heat, and gave her a lot of advice on various matters connected with the raising of chicks with the "wooden hen."

They were all vastly interested in the new vocation and the evening passed pleasantly enough. Just before Trent went, he asked:

"By the way, what's Jud Spink doing up this way so much? I seen him again to-day when I came over the ridge. He was crossin' the back of your farm. He didn't have no gun; and, at any rate, there ain't nothin' in season jest now–'nless it's crows," and the mail-carrier laughed.

"Spink?" asked Mr. Bray, who had not yet gone to bed. "Who is he?"

"Lemuel Judson Spink," explained 'Phemie. "He's a man who used to live here with grandfather when he was a boy–when *Spink* was a boy; not grandfather."

"He's a rich man now," said Lyddy. "He owns a breakfast food."

"Diamond Grits," added 'Phemie.

"He's rich enough," grunted Trent. "Rich enough so't he can loaf around Bridleburg for months at a time. Been here now for some time." 168

“Why, could that be the Spink your Aunt Jane told me once made her an offer for the farm?” asked Mr. Bray, thoughtfully.

“For Hillcrest?” cried ’Phemie. “Oh, I hope not.”

“Well, child, if she could sell the place it would be a good thing for Jane. She has none too much money.”

“But why didn’t she sell to him?” asked Lyddy, quite as anxious as her sister.

“He didn’t offer her much, if anything, for it.”

“Ain’t that like Jud?” cackled Trent. “He is allus grouching about the old doctor for being as tight as the bark to a tree; but when it comes to a bargain, Jud Spink will wring yer nose ev’ry time–if he can. Glad Mis’ Hammon’ didn’t sell to him.”

“Perhaps he didn’t want Hillcrest very much,” said Mr. Bray, quietly.

“He don’t want nothin’ ’nless it’s cheap,” declared Trent. “He’s picked up some mortgage notes, and the like, on property he thinks he can foreclose on. Got a jedgment against the Widder Harrison’s little place over the ridge, I understand. But Jud Spink wouldn’t pay more’n ha’f price for a gold eagle. He’d claim ’twas second-hand, if it warn’t fresh from the mint,” and the mail-carrier went off, chuckling over his own joke.

169

Both Lyddy and ’Phemie forgot, however, about the curious actions of Mr. Spink, or his desire to buy Hillcrest, in their interest in the coming of the only people who had, thus far, answered their advertisement for boarders.

Lucas met the 10:14 train on Saturday morning, and before noon he drove into the side yard with an old gentleman and a young man on the rear seat of the buckboard.

Before this the two girls, working hard, had swept and garnished the whole lower floor of the big farmhouse, save the east wing, which was locked. Indeed, Lyddy had never ventured into the old doctor’s suite of offices, for she couldn’t find the key.

A fire had been laid and was burning cheerfully in the dining-room–that apartment being just across the square side entrance hall from the kitchen. Lyddy was busy over the cooking arrangements when the visitors arrived, and ’Phemie was giving the finishing touches to the table in the dining-room.

But Mr. Bray, leaning on his cane, met the Colesworths as they alighted from the buckboard. Lucas drove away at once, promising to return again with the team in time to catch the four-fifty train back to town.

170

Lyddy found time to peep out of the kitchen window. Yes! there was that very bold young man who had troubled her so much–at times–while they lived in Trimble Avenue.

He met Mr. Bray with a warm handshake, and he helped his father up the wide stone steps with a delicacy that would have pleased Lyddy in anybody else.

But she had made up her mind that Harris Colesworth was going to be a very objectionable person to have about, and so she would not accept his friendly attitude or thoughtfulness as real virtues. He might attract the rest of the family–already ’Phemie was standing in the door, smiling and with her hand held out; but Lyddy Bray proposed to watch this young man very closely!

CHAPTER XV

171

ANOTHER BOARDER

Lyddy heard her sister and Harris Colesworth in the hall, and then in the dining-room. The girls had not made a fire in any other room in the house. It took too much wood, and the dining-room was large enough to be used as a sitting-room "for company," too.

And with the fresh maple branches and arbutus decorating the space over the mantel, and the great dish of violets on the table, and the odorous plum branches everywhere, that dining-room was certainly an attractive apartment.

The old-fashioned blue-and-white china and the few pieces of heavy silverware "dressed" the table very nicely. The linen was yellow with age, but every glass and spoon shone.

The sun streamed warmly in at the windows, the view from which was lovely. Lyddy heard the appreciative remarks of the young man as 'Phemie ushered him in.

But she ran out to greet the old gentleman. The elder Colesworth was sixty or more–a frail, scholarly-looking man, with a winning smile. He, like Mr. Bray, leaned on a cane; but Mr. Bray was at least fifteen years Mr. Colesworth's junior. 172

"So *you* are 'L. Bray'; are you?" asked the old gentleman, shaking hands with her. "You are the elder daughter and head of the household, your father tells me."

"I am older than 'Phemie–yes," admitted Lyddy, blushing. "But we have no 'head' here. I do my part of the work, and she does hers."

"And, please God," said Mr. Bray, earnestly, "I shall soon be able to do mine."

"Work is the word, then!" cried the old gentleman. "I tell Harris that's all that is the matter with me. I knocked off work too early. 'Retired,' they call it. But it doesn't pay–it doesn't pay."

"There will be plenty for you to do up here, Mr. Colesworth," suggested Lyddy, laughing. "We'll let you chop your own wood, if you like. But perhaps picking flowers for the table will be more to your taste–at first."

"I don't know–I don't know," returned the old gentleman. "I was brought up on a farm. I used to know how to swing an axe. And I can remember yet how I hated a buck-saw."

They went into the house; but Lyddy slipped back to the kitchen and allowed her father to follow Harris Colesworth and 'Phemie, with the old gentleman, into the dining-room. 173

'Phemie soon came out to help, leaving their father to entertain the visitors while dinner was being served. Lyddy had prepared a simple meal, of which the staple was the New England standby–baked beans.

She had been up before light, had built a huge fire in the brick oven, had heated it to a high temperature, and had then baked her pies, a huge pan of gingerbread, her white bread, and potatoes for dinner. She had steamed her "brown loaf" in a kettle hanging from the crane, and the sealed beanpot had been all night in the ashes on the hearth, the right "finish" being given in the brick oven as it gradually cooled off.

The girl had had wonderfully good luck with her baking. The bread was neither "all crust" nor was it dough in the middle. The pies were flaky as to crust and the apples which filled them were tender.

When Lyddy brought in the beanpot, wrapped in a blue and white towel to retain the heat, she met Harris Colesworth for the first time. To her surprise he did not attempt to appear amazed to see her.

"Miss Bray!" he cried, coming forward to shake hands with her. "I have been telling your father that we are already acquainted. But I never *did* expect to see you again when you sold out and went away from Trimble Avenue that morning." 174

"Shows how small the world is," said Mr. Bray, smiling. "We lived right beside the building in which Mr. Colesworth works, and he saw our advertisement in the paper—"

"Oh, I was sure it was Miss Bray," interrupted young Colesworth, openly acknowledging his uncalled-for interest (so Lyddy expressed it to herself) in their affairs.

"You see," said this very frank young man, "I knew your name was Bray. And I knew you were going into the country for Mr. Bray's health. I–I even asked at the hospital about you several times," he added, flushing a little.

"How very kind!" murmured Lyddy, but without looking at him, as 'Phemie brought in some of the other dishes.

"Not at all; I was interested," said the young man, laughing. "You always were afraid of getting acquainted with me when I used to watch you working about your kitchen. But now, Miss Bray, if father decides to come out here to board with you, you'll just *have* to be acquainted with me."

Mr. Bray laughed at this, and 'Phemie giggled. Lyddy's face was a study. It did seem 175
impossible to keep this very presuming young man at a proper distance.

But they gathered around the table then, and Lyddy had another reason for blushing. The visitors praised her cooking highly, and when they learned of the old-fashioned means by which the cooking was done, their wonder grew.

And Lyddy deserved some praise, that was sure. The potatoes came out of their crisp skins as light as feathers. The thickened pork gravy that went with them was something Mr. Colesworth the elder declared he had not tasted since he was a boy.

And when the beans were ladled from the pot–brown, moist, every bean firm in its individual jacket, but seasoned through and through–the Colesworths fairly reveled in them. The fresh bread and good butter, and the flaky wedges of apple pie, each flanked by its pilot of cheese, were likewise enjoyed.

"If you can put us up only half comfortably," declared the elder Colesworth, bowing to Lyddy, "I can tell you right now, young lady, that we will stay. Let us see your rooms, we will come to terms, and then I'll take a nap, if you will allow me. I need it after this heavy dinner. Why, Harris! I haven't eaten so heartily for months."

"Never saw you sail into the menu with any more enjoyment, Dad," declared his son, in 176
delight.

But Lyddy made her sister show them over the house. They were some time in making up their minds regarding the choice of apartments; but finally they decided upon one of the large rooms the girls proposed making over into bed-chambers on the ground floor. This room was nearest the east wing, had long windows opening upon the side porch, and with the two small beds removed from the half-furnished rooms on the second floor of the east wing, and brought downstairs, together with one or two other pieces of furniture, the Colesworths declared themselves satisfied with the accommodations.

Young Colesworth would come out on Saturdays and return Monday mornings. He would arrange with Lucas to drive him back and forth. And the old gentleman would come out, bag and baggage, on the coming Monday to take possession of the room.

To bind the bargain Harris handed Lyddy fifteen dollars, and asked for a receipt. Fifteen dollars a week! Lyddy had scarcely dared ask for it–had done so with fear and trembling, in fact. But the Colesworths seemed to consider it quite within reason.

"Oh, 'Phemie!" gasped Lyddy, hugging her sister tight out in the kitchen. "Just think of 177
fifteen dollars coming in every week. Why! we can all *live* on that!"

"M–m; yes," said 'Phemie, ruminatively. "But hasn't he a handsome nose?"

"Who–what— 'Phemie Bray! haven't you anything else in your head but young men's noses?" cried her sister, in sudden wrath.

But it was a beginning. They had really "got into business," as their father said that night at the supper table.

"I only fear that the work will be too much for us," he observed.

"For 'Phemie and me, you mean, Father," said Lyddy, firmly. "You are not to work. You're to get well. *That* is your business–and your only business."

"You girls will baby me to death!" cried Mr. Bray, wiping his eyes. "I refuse to be laid on the shelf. I hope I am not useless—"

"My goodness me! Far from it," cried 'Phemie. "But you'll be lots more help to us when you are perfectly well and strong again."

"There'll be plenty you can do without taxing your strength–and without keeping you indoors," Lyddy added. "Just think if we get the chicken business started. You can do all of that–after the biddies are hatched."

"I feel so much better already, girls," declared their father, gravely, "that I am sure I shall have a giant's strength before fall." 178

Aunt Jane had written them, however, certain advice which the doctor at the hospital had given to her regarding Mr. Bray. He was to be discouraged from performing any heavy tasks of whatsoever nature, and his diet was to consist mainly of milk and eggs–tissue-building fuel for the system.

He had worked so long in the hat shop that his lungs were in a weakened state, if not actually affected. For months they would have to watch him carefully. And to return to his work in the city would be suicidal.

Therefore were Lyddy and 'Phemie more than ever anxious to make the boarders' project pay. And with the Colesworths' fifteen dollars a week it seemed as though a famous start had been made in that direction.

By serving simple food, plainly cooked, Lyddy was confident that she could keep the table for all five from the board paid by Mr. Colesworth and his son. If they got other boarders, a goodly share of *their* weekly stipends could be added on the profit side of the ledger.

Lucas helped them for a couple of hours Monday morning, and the girls managed to put the room the newcomers had chosen into readiness for the old gentleman. Lucas drove to town to meet Mr. Colesworth. Lucas was beginning to make something out of the Bray girls' project, too, and he grinned broadly as he said to 'Phemie: 179

"I'm goin' to be able to put up for a brand new buggy nex' fall, Miss 'Phemie–a better one than Joe Badger's got. What 'twixt this cartin' boarders over the roads, and makin' Miss Lyddy's garden, I'm going to be well fixed."

"On the road to be a millionaire; are you, Lucas?" suggested 'Phemie, laughing.

"Nope. Jest got one object in view," grinned Lucas.

"What's that?"

"I wanter drive you to church in my new buggy, and make Joe Badger an' that Nettie Meyers look like thirty cents. That's what *I* want."

"Oh, Lucas! *That* isn't a very high ambition," she cried.

"But it's goin' to give me an almighty lot of satisfaction," declared the young farmer. "You won't go back on me; will yer, Miss 'Phemie?"

"I'll ride with you–of course," replied 'Phemie. "But I'd just as lief go in the buckboard."

"Now *that*," said the somewhat puzzled Lucas, "is another thing that makes you gals diff'rent from the gals around here." 180

Old Mr. Colesworth came and made himself at home very quickly. He played cribbage with Mr. Bray in the evening while the girls did up the work and sewed; and during the early days of his stay with them he proved to be a very pleasant old gentleman, with few crotchets, and no special demands upon the girls for attention.

He walked a good deal, proved to be something of a geologist, and pottered about the rocky section of the farm with a little hammer and bag for hours together.

As Mr. Bray could walk only a little way, Mr. Colesworth did most of his rambling about Hillcrest alone. And he grew fonder and fonder of the place as the first week advanced.

As far as his entertainment went, he could have no complaint as to that, for he was getting all that Lyddy had promised him–a comfortable bed, a fire on his hearth when he wanted it, and the same plain food that the family ate.

The girls of Hillcrest Farm had received no further answer to their advertisement, but the news that they were keeping boarders had gone broadcast over the ridge, of course. Silas Trent would have spread this bit of news, if nobody else.

But on Saturday morning, soon after breakfast, Mr. Somers's old gray mare turned up their lane, and Lyddy put on a clean apron and rolled down her sleeves to go out and speak to the school teacher. 181

"That's a very good thing about that lane," 'Phemie remarked, aside. "It is just long enough so that, if we see anybody turn in, we can primp a little before they get to the house."

"Miss Bray," said the teacher, hopping out of his buggy and shaking hands, "you see me here, a veritable beggar."

"A beggar?" queried Lyddy, in surprise.

"Yes, I have come to beg a favor. And a very great one, too."

"Why–I—"

He laughed and went on to explain–yet his explanation at first puzzled her.

"Where do you suppose I slept last night, Miss Bray?" he asked.

"In your bed," she returned.

"Wrong!"

"Is it a joke–or a puzzle?"

"Why, I had to sleep in the barn. You see, thus far this term I have boarded with Sam Larribee. But yesterday his boy came down with the measles. He had been out of school for several days–had been visiting the other side of the ridge. They think he caught it there–at his cousin's. 182

"However," continued Mr. Somers, "that does not help me. When I came home from school and heard the doctor's report, I refused to enter the house. We don't want an epidemic of measles at Pounder's School.

"So I slept in the barn with Old Molly, here. And now I must find another boarding place. They–er–tell me, Miss Bray, that you intend to take boarders?"

"Why–er–yes," admitted Lyddy, faintly.

"You have some already?"

"Mr. Colesworth and his son. They have just come."

"Couldn't you put me–and Molly–up for the rest of the term?" asked the school teacher, laughing.

"Why, I don't know but I could," said Lyddy, her business sense coming to her aid. "I–why, yes! I am quite sure about *you*; but about the horse, I do not know."

"You surely have a stall to spare?"

"Plenty; but no feed."

"Oh, I will bring my own grain; and I'll let her pasture in your orchard. She doesn't work hard and doesn't need much forage except what she can glean at this time of year for herself."

"Well, then, perhaps it can be arranged," said Lyddy. "Will you come in and see what our accommodations are?" 183

And so that is how another boarder came to Hillcrest Farm. Mr. Somers chose one of the smaller rooms upstairs, and agreed to pay for his own entertainment and pasturage for his horse–six dollars and a half a week. It was a little more than he had been paying at Larribee's, he said–but then, Mr. Somers wanted to come to Hillcrest.

He drove away to get his trunk out of the window of his bedroom at the measles-stricken farmhouse down the hill; he would not risk entering by the door for the sake of his other pupils.

A little later Lucas drove up from town with Harris Colesworth and his bag.

"Say!" whispered the lanky farmer, leaning from his seat to whisper to 'Phemie. "I hear tell you've got school teacher for a boarder, too? Is that so?"

"What of it?" demanded 'Phemie, somewhat vexed.

"Oh, nawthin'. Only ye oughter seen Sairy's face when maw told her!"

CHAPTER XVI 184

THE BALL KEEPS ROLLING

The school teacher pressingly invited the Bray girls to accompany him to the temperance meeting that evening; his buggy would hold the three, he declared. But both Lyddy and 'Phemie had good reason for being excused. There was now work for them–and plenty of it.

They had to disappoint Lucas in this matter, too; but Harris Colesworth laughingly accepted the teacher's later proposal that *he* attend, and the two young men drove off together, leaving the girls in the kitchen and old Mr. Colesworth and Mr. Bray playing cribbage in the dining-room.

It was while 'Phemie was clearing the supper table that her attention was caught by something that Mr. Colesworth said.

"Who is your neighbor that I see so much up yonder among the rocks, at the back of this farm, Mr. Bray?" he asked.

"Mr. Pritchett?" suggested Mr. Bray. "Cyrus Pritchett. The long-legged boy's father. He farms a part of these acres—"

"No. It is not Cyrus Pritchett I mean. And he is no farmer." 185

"I couldn't tell you," said Mr. Bray.

"A rather peculiar-looking man–long hair, black coat, broad-brimmed hat. I have frequently come upon him during the last few days. He always walks off as though in haste. I never have got near enough to speak to him."

"Why," responded Mr. Bray, thoughtfully scanning his hand, and evidently giving little attention to Mr. Colesworth's mystery, "why, I'm sure I don't know what would attract

anybody up in that part of the farm."

"Saving a man interested in breaking open rocks to see what's in them," chuckled Mr. Colesworth. "But this fellow is no geologist."

'Phemie, however, decided that she knew who it was. Silas Trent had mentioned seeing the man, Spink, up that way; and, on more than one occasion, 'Phemie was sure the owner of the Diamond Grits breakfast food had been lurking about Hillcrest.

"Lyddy has never asked Cyrus Pritchett about that evening he and Spink were up here–two weeks ago this very night. I almost wish she'd do so. This mystery is getting on my nerves!"

And yet 'Phemie was not at all sure that there was any mystery about it.

Lyddy, on the strength of getting her first boarders, renewed her advertisement in the Easthampton papers. At once she received half a dozen inquiries. It was yet too early in the season to expect many people to wish to come to the country to board; yet Lyddy painstakingly answered each letter, and in full. 186

But she really did not see how she would be able to get on over the summer with the open fire and the brick oven. It would be dreadfully hot in that kitchen. And she would have been glad to use Mrs. Pritchett's Dutch oven that Lucas had told her about.

But since the first Sunday neither Mrs. Pritchett or Sairy had been near Hillcrest. Now that Mr. Somers had established himself here, the Bray girls did not expect to ever be forgiven by "Maw" Pritchett and her daughter.

"It's too bad people are so foolish," said Lyddy, wearily. "I haven't done anything to Sairy."

"But she and her mother think you have. By your wiles you have inveigled Mr. Somers away from Sairy," giggled 'Phemie.

"'Phemie!" gasped her sister. "If you say such a thing again, I'll send Mr. Somers packing!"

"Oh, shucks! Can't you see the fun of it!?"

"There is no fun in it," declared the very proper Lyddy. "It is only disgraceful." 187

"I'd like to tell that young Mr. Colesworth about it," laughed 'Phemie. "He'd just be tickled to death."

Lyddy looked at her haughtily. "You *dare* include me in any gossip of such a character, and I–"

"Well? You'll what?" demanded the younger girl, saucily.

"I shall feel very much like spanking you!" declared Lyddy. "And that is just what you would deserve."

"Oh, now–don't get mad, Lyd," urged 'Phemie. "You take things altogether too seriously."

"Well," responded the older girl, going back to the main subject, "the problem of how we are to cook when it comes warm weather is a very, very serious matter."

"We've just got to have a range–ought to have one with a tank, on the end in which to heat water. I've seen 'em advertised."

"But how can we? I've gone into debt now for more than thirty dollars' worth of commercial fertilizer. I don't dare get deeper into the mire."

"But," cried the sanguine 'Phemie, "the crops will more than pay for *that* outlay."

"Perhaps." 188

"You're a born grump, Lyddy Bray!"

"Somebody has to look ahead," sighed Lyddy. "The crops may fail. Such things happen. Or we may get no more boarders. Or father may get worse."

"*Don't* say such things, Lyddy!" cried her sister, stamping her foot. "Especially about father."

The older girl put her arms about 'Phemie and the latter began to weep on her shoulder.

"Don't let us hide our true beliefs from each other," whispered Lyddy, brokenly. "Father is *not* mending–not as we hoped he would, at least. And yet the hospital doctor told Aunt Jane that there was absolutely nothing medicine could do for him."

"I know! I know!" sobbed 'Phemie. "But don't let's talk about it. He is so brave himself. He talks just as though he was gaining every day; but his step is so feeble—"

"And he has no color," groaned Lyddy.

"But, anyhow," 'Phemie pursued, wiping her eyes, her flurry of tears quickly over, as was her nature, "there is one good thing."

"What is that?"

"He doesn't lose hope himself. And *we* mustn't lose it, either. Of course things will come 189
out right–even the boarders will come."

"We don't know that," said Lyddy, shaking her head again.

"How about the woman who wrote you a second time?" queried 'Phemie. "Mrs. Castle. I bet *she* comes next week."

And 'Phemie was right in *that* prophecy. They had Lucas meet the train for Mrs. Castle on Saturday, and 'Phemie went with him. There were supplies to buy for the house and the young girl made her purchases before train time.

A little old lady in a Paisley shawl and black, close bonnet, got out of the train. The porter lifted down an ancient carpet-bag–something 'Phemie had never in her life seen before. Even Lucas was amazed by the little old woman's outfit.

"By cracky!" he whispered to 'Phemie. "You reckon *that's* the party? Why, she's dressed more behind the times than my grandmother useter be. Guess there must be places on this airth more countrified than Bridleburg."

But 'Phemie knew that Mrs. Castle's letter had come from an address in Easthampton which the Brays knew to be in a very good neighborhood. Nobody but wealthy people lived on that street. Yet Mrs. Castle–aside from the valuable but old-fashioned shawl–did not look to 190
be worth any great fortune.

"Are you the girl who wrote to me?" asked the old lady, briskly, when 'Phemie came forward to take the carpet-bag.

Mrs. Castle's voice was very resonant; she had sharp blue eyes behind her gold-bowed spectacles; and she clipped her words and sentences in a manner that belied her age and appearance.

"No, ma'am," said 'Phemie, doubtfully. "It was my sister who wrote. *I* am Euphemia Bray."

"Ha! And what is your sister's name? What does the 'L' stand for?"

"Lydia."

"Good!" ejaculated this strange old lady. "Then I'll ride out to the farm with you. Such good, old-fashioned names promise just what your sister said: An old-fashioned house and old-time ways. If 'L!' had meant 'Lillie,' or 'Luella,' or 'Lilas'–and if *you*, young lady, had been called 'Marie'–I'd have taken the very next train back to town."

'Phemie could only stare and nod. In her secret thoughts she told herself that this queer old woman was doubtless a harmless lunatic. She did not know whether it was quite best to have Lucas drive them to Hillcrest or not.

"You got a trunk, ma'am?" asked the long-legged youth, as the old lady hopped youthfully into the buckboard, and 'Phemie lifted in the heavy carpet-bag. 191

"No, I haven't. This is no fashionable boarding house I'm going to, I s'pose?" she added, eyeing 'Phemie sternly.

"Oh, no, ma'am!" returned the girl.

"Then I've got enough with me in this bag, and on my back, to last me a fortnight. If I like, I'll send for something more, then."

She certainly knew her own mind, this old lady. 'Phemie had first thought her to be near the three-score-and-ten mark; but every moment she seemed to get younger. Her face was wrinkled, but they were fine wrinkles, and her coloring made her look like a withered russet apple. Out of this golden-brown countenance the blue eyes sparkled in a really wonderful way.

"But I don't care," thought 'Phemie, as they clattered out of town. "Crazy or not, if she can pay her board she's so much help. Let the ball keep on rolling. It's getting bigger and bigger. Perhaps we *shall* have a houseful at Hillcrest, after all."

CHAPTER XVII 192

THE RUNAWAY GRANDMOTHER

But 'Phemie was immensely curious about this strange little old lady who was dressed so oddly, yet who apparently came from the wealthiest section of the city of Easthampton. The young girl could not bring herself to ask questions of their visitor–let Lyddy do that, if she thought it necessary. But, as it chanced, up to a certain point Mrs. Castle was quite open of speech and free to communicate information about herself.

As soon as they had got out of town she turned to 'Phemie and said:

"I expect you think I'm as queer as Dick's hat-band, Euphemia? I am quite sure you never saw a person like me before?"

"Why–Mrs. Castle–not *just* like you," admitted the embarrassed 'Phemie.

"I expect not! Well, I presume there are other old women, who are grandmothers, and have got all tangled up in these new-fangled notions that women have–Laws' sake! I might as well tell you right off that I've run away!"

"Run away?" gasped 'Phemie, with a vision of keepers from an asylum coming to Hillcrest to take away their new boarder. 193

"That's exactly what I have done! None of my folks know where I have gone. I just wrote a note, telling them not to look for me, and that I was going back to old-fashioned times, if I could find 'em. Then I got this bag out of the cupboard–I'd kept it all these years–packed it with my very oldest duds, and–well, here I am!" and the old lady's laugh rang out as shrill and clear as a blackbird's call.

"I have astonished you; have I?" she pursued. "And I suppose I have astonished my folks. But they know I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I ought to be. Why, I'm a grandmother three times!"

"'Three times?'" repeated the amazed 'Phemie.

"Yes, Miss Euphemia Bray. Three grandchildren–two girls and a boy. And they are always telling folks how up-to-date grandma is! I'm sick of being up-to-date. I'm sick of dressing

so that folks behind me on the street can't tell whether I'm a grandmother or my own youngest grandchild!

"We just live in a perfect whirl of excitement. 'Pleasure,' they call it. But it's gotten to be a nuisance. My daughter-in-law has her head full of society matters and club work. The girls and Tom spend all but the little time they are obliged to give to books in the private schools they attend, in dancing and theatre parties, and the like. 194

"And here a week ago I found my son–their father–a man forty-five years old, and bald, and getting fat, being taught the tango by a French dancing professor in the back drawing-room!" exclaimed Mrs. Castle, in a tone of disgust that almost convulsed 'Phemie.

"That was enough. That was the last straw on the camel's back. I made up my mind when I read your sister's advertisement that I would like to live simply and with simple people again. I'd like really to *feel* like a grandmother, and *dress* like one, and *be* one.

"And if I like it up here at your place I shall stay through the summer. No hunting-lodge in the Adirondacks for me this spring, or Newport, or the Pier later, or anything of that kind. I'm going to sit on your porch and knit socks. My mother did when *she* was a grandmother. This is her shawl, and mother and father took this old carpet-bag with them when they went on their honeymoon.

"Mother enjoyed her old age. She spent it quietly, and it was *lovely*," declared Mrs. Castle, with a note in her voice that made 'Phemie sober at once. "I am going to have quiet, and repose, and a simple life, too, before I have to die. 195

"It's just killing me keeping up with the times. I don't want to keep up with 'em. I want them to drift by me, and leave me stranded in some pleasant, sunny place, where I only have to look on. And that's what I am going to get at Hillcrest–just that kind of a place–if you've got it to sell," completed this strange old lady, with emphasis.

'Phemie Bray scarcely knew what to say. She was not sure that Mrs. Castle was quite right in her mind; yet what she said, though so surprising, sounded like sense.

"I'll leave it to Lyddy; she'll know what to say and do," thought the younger sister, with faith in the ability of Lyddy to handle any emergency.

And Lyddy handled the old lady as simply as she did everything. She refused to see anything particularly odd in Mrs. Castle's dress, manner, or outlook on life.

The old lady chose one of the larger rooms on the second floor, considered the terms moderate, and approved of everything she saw about the house.

"Make no excuses for giving me a feather bed to sleep on. I believe it will add half a dozen years to my life," she declared. "Feather beds! My! I never expected to see such a joy again–let alone experience it." 196

"Our circle is broadening," said old Mr. Colesworth, at supper that evening. "Come! I have a three-handed counter for cribbage. Shall we take Mrs. Castle into our game, Mr. Bray?"

"If she will so honor us," agreed the girls' father, bowing to the little old lady.

"Well! that's hearty of you," said the brisk Mrs. Castle. "I'll postpone beginning knitting my son a pair of socks that he'd never wear, until to-morrow."

For she had actually brought along with her knitting needles and a hank of grey yarn. It grew into a nightly occurrence, this three-handed cribbage game. When Mr. Somers had no lessons to "get up," or no examination papers to mark, he spent the evening with Lyddy and 'Phemie. He even helped with the dish-wiping and helped to bring in the wood for the morning fires.

Fire was laid in the three chambers, as well as the dining-room, to light on cold mornings, or on damp days; Lucas had spent a couple more days in chopping wood. But as the season advanced there was less and less need of these in the sleeping rooms.

There were, of course, wet and gloomy days, when the old folks were glad to sit over the dining-room fire, the elements forbidding outdoors to them. But they kept cheerful. And not a little of this cheerfulness was spread by Lyddy and 'Phemie. The older girl's thoughtfulness for others made her much beloved, while 'Phemie's high spirits were contagious. 197

On Saturday, when Harris Colesworth arrived from town to remain over Sunday, Hillcrest was indeed a lively place. This very self-possessed young man took a pleasant interest in everything that went on about the house and farm. Lyddy was still inclined to snub him–only, he wouldn't be snubbed. He did not force his attentions upon her; but while he was at Hillcrest it seemed to Lyddy as though he was right at her elbow all the time.

"He pervades the whole place," she complained to 'Phemie. "Why–he's under foot, like a kitten!"

"Huh!" exclaimed the younger sister. "He's hanging about you no more than the school teacher–and Mr. Somers has the best chance, too."

"'Phemie!"

"Oh, don't be a grump! Mr. Colesworth is ever so nice. He's worth any *two* of your Somerses, too!" 198

And at that Lyddy became so indignant that she would not speak to her sister for the rest of the day. But *that* did not solve the problem. There was Harris Colesworth, always doing something for her, ready to do her bidding at any time, his words cheerful, his looks smiling, and, as Lyddy declared in her own mind, "utterly unable to keep his place."

There never *was* so bold a young man, she verily believed!

CHAPTER XVIII 199
THE QUEER BOARDER

Spring marched on apace those days. The garden at Hillcrest began to take form, and the green things sprouted beautifully. Lucas Pritchett was working very hard, for his father did not allow him to neglect any of his regular work to keep the contract the young man had made with Lyddy Bray.

In another line the prospect for a crop was anxiously canvassed, too. The eggs Lyddy had sent for had arrived and, after running the incubator for a couple of days to make sure that they understood it, the girls put the hundred eggs into the trays.

The eggs were guaranteed sixty per cent. fertile and after eight days they tested them as Trent had advised. They left eighty-seven eggs in the incubator after the test.

But the incubator took an enormous amount of attention–at least, the girls thought it did.

This was not so bad by day; but they went to bed tired enough at night, and Lyddy was sure the lamp should be looked to at midnight.

It was three o'clock the first night before 'Phemie awoke with a start, and lay with throbbing pulse and with some sound ringing in her ears which she could not explain immediately. But almost at once she recalled another night–their first one at Hillcrest–when she had gone rambling about the lower floor of the old house. 200

But she thought of the incubator and leaped out of bed. The lamp might have flared up and cooked all those eggs. Or it might have expired and left them to freeze out there in the washhouse.

She did not arouse Lyddy, but slipped into her wrapper and slippers and crept downstairs with her candle. There *had* been a sound that aroused her. She heard somebody moving about the kitchen.

"Surely father hasn't got up–he promised he wouldn't," thought 'Phemie.

She was not afraid of outside marauders now. Both Mr. Somers and young Mr. Colesworth were in the house. 'Phemie went boldly into the kitchen from the hall.

The porch door opened and a wavering light appeared–another candle. There was Harris Colesworth, in *his* robe and slippers, coming from the direction of the washhouse.

'Phemie shrank back and hid by the foot of the stairs. But she was not quick enough in putting her light out–or else he heard her giggle. 201

"Halt! who goes there?" demanded Colesworth, in a sepulchral voice.

"A–a fr-r-riend," chattered 'Phemie.

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign," commanded the young man.

"Chickens!" gasped 'Phemie, convulsed with laughter.

"You'd have had fried eggs, maybe, for all your interest in the incubator," said Harris, with a chuckle. "So 'Chickens' is no longer the password."

"Oh, they didn't get too hot?" pleaded the girl, in despair.

"Nope. This is the second time I've been out. To tell you the truth," said Harris, laughing, "I think the incubator is all right and will work like a charm; but I understand they're a good deal like ships–likely to develop some crotchet at almost any time."

"But it's good of you to take the trouble to look at it for us."

"Sure it is!" he laughed. "But that's what I'm on earth for–to do good–didn't you know that, Miss 'Phemie?"

She told her sister about Harris Colesworth's kindness in the morning. But Lyddy took it the other way about. 202

"I declare! he can't keep his fingers out of our pie at any stage of the game; can he?" she snapped.

"Why, Lyd!"

"Oh–don't talk to me!" returned her older sister, who seemed to be rather snappish this morning. "That young man is getting on my nerves."

It was Sunday and the Colesworths had engaged a two-seated carriage in town to take Mrs. Castle and Mr. Bray with them to church. There was a seat beside Mr. Somers, behind Old Molly, for one of the girls. The teacher plainly wanted to take Lyddy, but that young lady had not recovered from her ill-temper of the early morning.

"Lyd got out of bed on the wrong side this morning," said 'Phemie. However, she went with Mr. Somers in her sister's stead.

And Lyddy Bray was glad to be left alone. No one could honestly call Hillcrest Farm a lonesome place these days!

"I'm not sure that I wouldn't be glad to be alone here again, with just 'Phemie and father," the young girl told herself. "There is one drawback to keeping a boarding house–one has no privacy. In trying to make it homelike for the boarders, we lose all our own home life. Ah, dear, well! at least we are earning our support." 203

For Lyddy Bray kept her books carefully, and she had been engaged in this new business long enough to enable her to strike a balance. From her present boarders she was receiving thirty-one and a half dollars weekly. At least ten of it represented her profit.

But the two young girls were working very hard. The cooking was becoming a greater burden because of the makeshifts necessary at the open fire. And the washing of bed and table linen was a task that was becoming too heavy for them.

“If we had a couple of other good paying boarders,” mused Lyddy, as she sat resting on the side porch, “we might afford to take somebody into the kitchen to help us. It would have to be somebody who would work cheap, of course; we could pay no fancy wages. But we need help.”

As she thus ruminated she was startled by seeing a figure cross the field from behind the barn. It was not Cyrus Pritchett, although the farmer spent most of his Sabbaths wandering about the fields examining the crops. Corn had not yet been planted, anyway–not here on the Hillcrest Farm.

But this was a man fully as large as Cyrus Pritchett. As he drew nearer, Lyddy thought that he was a man she had never seen before. 204

He wore a broad-brimmed felt hat–of the kind affected by Western statesmen. His black hair–rather oily-looking it was, like an Indian’s–flowed to the collar of his coat.

That coat was a frock, but it was unbuttoned, displaying a pearl gray vest and trousers of the same shade. He even wore gray spats over his shoes and was altogether more elaborately dressed than any native Lyddy had heretofore seen.

He came across the yard at a swinging stride, and took off his hat with a flourish. She saw then that his countenance was deeply tanned, that he had a large nose, thick, smoothly-shaven lips, and heavy-lidded eyes.

“Miss Bray, I have no doubt?” he began, recovering from his bow.

Lyddy had risen rather quickly, and only nodded. She scarcely knew what to make of this stranger–and she was alone.

“Pray sit down again,” he urged, with a wave of his hand. “And allow me to sit here at your feet. It is a lovely day–but warm.”

“It is, indeed,” admitted Lyddy, faintly.

“You have a beautiful view of the valley here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am told below,” said the man, with a free gesture taking in Bridleburg and several square miles of surrounding country, “that you take boarders here at Hillcrest?” 205

“Yes, sir,” said Lyddy again.

“Good! Your rooms are not yet all engaged, my dear young lady?” said the man, who seemed unable to discuss the simplest subject without using what later she learned to call “his platform manner.”

“Oh, no; we haven’t many guests as yet.”

“Good!” he exclaimed again. Then, after a moment’s pursing of his lips, he added: “This is not strictly speaking a legal day for making bargains. But we may *talk* of an arrangement; mayn’t we?”

“I do not understand you, sir,” said Lyddy.

“Ah! No! I am referring to the possibility of my taking board with you, Miss Bray.”

“I see,” responded the girl, with sudden interest. “Do you think you would be suited with the accommodations we have to offer?”

“Ah, my dear miss!” he exclaimed, with a broad smile. “I am an old campaigner. I have slept gypsy-fashion under the stars many and many a night. A straw pallet has often been my lot. Indeed, I am naturally simple of taste and habit.”

He said all this with an air as though entirely different demands might reasonably be expected of such as he. He evidently had a very good opinion of himself. 206

Lyddy did not much care for his appearance; but he was respectably–if strikingly–dressed, and he was perfectly respectful.

"I will show you what we have," said Lyddy, and rose and accompanied him through the house.

"You do not let any of the rooms in the east wing?" he asked, finally.

"No, sir. Neither upstairs nor down. We probably shall not disturb those rooms at all."

Finally they talked terms. The stranger seemed to forget all his scruples about doing business on Sunday, for he was a hard bargainer. As a result he obtained from Lyddy quite as good accommodations as Mrs. Castle had–and for two dollars less per week.

Not until they had come downstairs did Lyddy think to ask him his name.

"And one not unknown to fame, my dear young lady," he said, drawing out his cardcase. "Famous in more than one field of effort, too–as you may see.

"Your terms are quite satisfactory, I will have my trunk brought up in the morning, and I will do myself the honor to sup with you to-morrow evening. Good-day, Miss Bray," and he lifted his hat and went away whistling, leaving Lyddy staring in surprise at the card in her hand: 207

PROF. LEMUEL JUDSON SPINK, M.D.
Proprietor: Stonehedge Bitters
Likewise of the World Famous
DIAMOND GRITS
"*The Breakfast of the Million*"

"Why! it's the Spink man we've heard so much about–the boy who was taken out of the poorhouse by grandfather. I–I wonder if I have done right to take him as a boarder?" murmured Lyddy at last.

CHAPTER XIX 208

THE WIDOW HARRISON'S TROUBLES

Later Lyddy Bray had more than "two minds" about taking Professor Lemuel Judson Spink to board. And 'Phemie's "You never took him!" when she first heard the news on her return from church, was not the least of the reasons for Lyddy's doubts.

But 'Phemie denied flatly–the next minute–that she had any real and sensible reason for opposing Mr. Spink's coming to Hillcrest to board. Indeed, she said emphatically that she had never yet expressed any dislike for the proprietor of Diamond Grits–the breakfast of the million.

"My goodness me! why *not* take him?" she said. "As long as we don't have to eat his breakfast food, I see no reason for objecting."

But in her secret heart 'Phemie was puzzled by what "Jud Spink," as he was called by his old associates, was up to!

She believed Cyrus Pritchett knew; but 'Phemie stood rather in fear of the stern farmer, as did his whole household.

Only Lyddy had faced the bullying old man and seemed perfectly fearless of him; but ’Phemie shrank from adding to the burden on Lyddy’s mind by explaining to her all the suspicions *she* held of this Spink. 209

The man had tried to purchase Hillcrest of Aunt Jane for a nominal sum. He had been lurking about the old house–especially about the old doctor’s offices in the east wing–more than once, to ’Phemie’s actual knowledge.

And Spink was interested in something at the back of Hillcrest Farm. He had been hunting among the rocks there until old Mr. Colesworth’s presence had driven him away.

What was he after on the old farm where he had lived for some years as a boy? What was the secret of the rocks? And had the mystery finally brought Professor Lemuel Judson Spink to the house itself as a boarder?

These questions puzzled ’Phemie greatly. But she wouldn’t put them before her sister. If Lyddy was not suspicious, let her remain so.

It was their duty to take all the boarders they could get. Mr. Spink added his quota to their profits. ’Phemie was just as eager as Lyddy to keep father on the farm and out of the shop that had so nearly proved fatal to him.

“So there’s no use in refusing to swallow the breakfast food magnate,” decided ’Phemie. “We’ll down him, and if we have to make a face at the bitter dose, all right!” 210

Professor Spink came the very next evening. He was a distinct addition to the party at supper. Indeed, his booming voice, his well rounded periods, his unctuous manner, his frock coat, and his entire physical and mental make-up seemed to dominate the dining-room.

Mr. Colesworth listened to his supposedly scientific jargon with a quiet smile; the geologist plainly sized up Professor Spink for the quack he was. Mr. Bray tried to be a polite listener to all the big man said.

The girls were utterly silenced by the ever-flowing voice of the ex-medicine show lecturer; but Mr. Somers was inclined to argue on a point or two with Professor Spink. This, however, only made the man “boom” the louder.

Mrs. Castle seemed willing to listen to the Professor’s verbosity and agreed with all he said. She was willing after supper to withdraw from the usual cribbage game and play “enthralled audience” for the ex-lecturer’s harangues.

He boomed away at her upon a number of subjects, while she placidly nodded acquiescence and made her knitting needles flash–and he talked, and talked, and talked.

When the little old lady retired to bed Lyddy went to her room, as she usually did, to see if she was comfortable for the night. 211

“I am afraid our new guest rather bored you, Mrs. Castle?” Lyddy ventured.

“On the contrary, Lydia,” replied the old lady, promptly, “his talk is very soothing; and I can knit with perfect assurance that I shall not miss count while he is talking–for I don’t really listen to a word he says!”

Professor Spink did not, however, make himself offensive. He only seemed likely to become a dreadful bore.

During the day he wandered about the farm–a good deal like Mr. Colesworth. Only he did not carry with him a little hammer and bag.

’Phemie wondered if the professor had not come here to board for the express purpose of continuing his mysterious search at the back of the farm without arousing either objection or comment.

He watched Mr. Colesworth, too. There could be no doubt of that. When the old geologist started out with his hammer and bag, the professor trailed him. But the two never went

together.

Mr. Colesworth often brought in curious specimens of rock; but he said frankly that he had come across no mineral of value on the farm in sufficient quantities to promise the owner returns for mining the ore. 212

Aunt Jane, too, had said that the rocks back of Hillcrest had been examined by geologists time and again. There was no mineral treasure on the farm. *That* was surely not the secret of the rocks–and it wasn't mineral Professor Spink was after.

But the week passed without 'Phemie's having studied out a single sensible idea about the matter. Friday was a very hard and busy day for the girls. It was the big baking day of the week. They made a fire twice in the big brick oven, and left two pots of beans in it over night.

"But there's enough in the larder to last over Sunday, thanks be!" sighed 'Phemie, when she and Lyddy crept to bed.

"I hope so. What a lot they do eat!" said Lyddy, sleepily.

"A double baking of bread. A dozen apple pies; four squash pies; and an extra lemon-meringue for Sunday dinner. Oh, dear, Lyd! I wish you'd let me go and ask Maw Pritchett for her Dutch oven."

"No," replied the older sister, drowsily. "We will not risk a refusal. Besides, Mr. Somers said something about an old lady over the ridge–beyond the chapel–who is selling out–or being sold out–Mrs. Harrison. Maybe she has something of the kind that she will sell cheap." 213

"Well–that–old–brick–oven–is–kill–ing–me!" yawned 'Phemie, and then was sound asleep in half a minute.

The next morning, however, the girls hustled about as rapidly as possible and when Lucas drove up with young Mr. Colesworth they were ready to take a drive with the young farmer over the ridge.

"We want to see what this Mrs. Harrison has to sell," explained Lyddy to Lucas. "You see, we need some things."

"All right," he agreed. "I'll take ye. But whether the poor old critter is let to sell anything private, or not, I dunno. They sold her real estate last week, and this sale of household goods is to satisfy the judgment. The farm wasn't much, and it went for a song. Poor old critter! She is certainly getting the worst end of it, and after putting up with Bob Harrison's crotchets so many years."

'Phemie was interested in Mrs. Harrison and wanted to ask Lucas about her; but just as they started Harris Colesworth darted out of the house again, having seen his father.

"Hold on! don't be stingy!" he cried. "There's a seat empty beside you, Miss Lyddy. Can't I go, too?" 214

Now, how could you refuse a person as bold as that? Besides, Harris was a "paying guest" and she did not want to offend him! So Lyddy bowed demurely and young Colesworth hopped in.

"Let 'em go, Lucas!" he cried. "Now, this is what *I* call a mighty nice little family party–I don't see Somers in it."

At that Lucas laughed so he could scarcely hold the reins. But Lyddy only looked offended.

"Stop your silly giggling, Lucas," commanded 'Phemie, fearful that her sister would become angry and "speak out in meeting." "I want to know all about this Mrs. Harrison."

"Is that where you're bound–to the Widow Harrison's?" asked Harris. "I have been told that our new friend, Professor Spink, has sold her out–stock, lock, and barrel."

"Is *that* who is making her trouble?" demanded 'Phemie, hotly. "I *knew* he was a mean man."

"Well, he was a bad man to go to for money, I reckon," agreed Harris.

"Bob Harrison didn't mortgage his place to Jud Spink," explained Lucas. "No sir! He got the money of Reuben Smiles, years ago. And he and his widder allus paid the intrust prompt." 215

"Well–how did it come into Spink's hands?"

"Why–I dunno. Guess Spink offered Smiles a bonus. At any rate, the original mortgage had long since run out, and was bein' renewed from year to year. When it come time for renewal, Jud Spink showed his hand and foreclosed. They had a sale, and it didn't begin to pay the face of the mortgage. You see, the place had all run down. Bob hadn't turned a stroke of work on it for years before he died, and the widder'd only made shift to make a garden.

"Wal, there was a clause covering all personal property–and the widder had subscribed to it. So now the sheriff is going to have a vendue an' see if he kin satisfy Jud Spink's claim in full. Dunno what *will* become of Mis' Harrison," added Lucas, shaking his head. "She's quite spry, if she is old; but she ain't got a soul beholden to her, an' I reckon she'll be took to the poor farm."

CHAPTER XX 216

THE TEMPERANCE CLUB AGAIN

The boys sat in the buckboard and talked earnestly while Lyddy and 'Phemie Bray "visited" with the Widow Harrison. She was a tall, gaunt, sad woman–quite "spry," as Lucas had said; but she was evidently troubled about her future.

Her poor sticks of furniture could not bring any great sum at the auction, which was slated for the next Monday. She admitted to the Bray girls that she expected the money raised would all have to go to the mortgagee.

"I *did* 'spect I'd be 'lowed to live here in Bob's place till I died," she sighed. "Bob was hard to git along with. I paid dear for my home, I did. And now it's goin' to be took away from me."

"And you have no relatives, Mrs. Harrison? Nobody whose home you would be welcome in?" asked Lyddy, thoughtfully.

"Not a soul belongin' to me," declared Mrs. Harrison. "An' I wouldn't ask charity of nobody–give me my way."

"You think you could work yet?" ventured Lyddy. 217

"Why, bless ye! I've gone out washin' an' scrubbin' when I could. But folks on this ridge ain't able to have much help. Still, them I've worked for will give me a good word. No *young* woman can ekal me, I'm proud to say. I was brought up to work, I was, an' I ain't never got rusty."

Lyddy looked at 'Phemie with shining eyes. At first the younger sister didn't comprehend what Lyddy was driving at. But suddenly a light flooded her mind.

"Goody! that's just the thing!" cried 'Phemie, clasping her hands.

"What might ye be meanin'?" demanded the puzzled Mrs. Harrison, looking at the girls alternately.

"You are just the person we want, Mrs. Harrison," Lyddy declared, "and we are just the persons *you* want. It is a mutual need, and for once the two needs have come together."

"I don't make out what ye mean, child," returned the old woman.

"Why, you want work and a home. We need somebody to help us, and we have plenty of space so that you can have a nice big room to yourself at Hillcrest, and I *know* we shall get along famously. Do, *do*, Mrs. Harrison! Let's try it!" 218

A blush rose slowly into the old woman's face. Her eyes shone with sudden unshed tears as she continued to look at Lyddy.

"You don't know what you're saying, child!" she finally declared, hoarsely.

"Yes, dear Mrs. Harrison! We need you–and perhaps you need us."

"Need ye!" The stern New England nature of the woman could not break up easily. Her face worked as she simply repeated the words, in a tone that brought a choking feeling into 'Phemie's throat: "*Need ye!*"

But Lyddy went on to explain details, and bye-and-bye Mrs. Harrison gained control of her emotions. Lyddy told her what she felt she could afford to pay.

"It isn't great pay, I know; but we're not making much money out of the boarders yet; if we fill the house, you shall have more. And we will be sure to treat you nicely, Mrs. Harrison."

"Stop, child! don't say another word!" gasped the old woman. "Of course, I'll come. Why–you don't know what you're doing for me—"

"No; we're doing for ourselves," laughed Lyddy.

"You're givin' me a chance to be independent," cried Mrs. Harrison. "That's the greatest thing in the world." 219

"Isn't it?" returned Lyddy, sweetly. "I think so. That's what we are trying to do ourselves. So you'll come?"

"Sure as I'm alive, Miss," declared the old woman. "Ye need have no fear I won't. I'll be over in time to help ye with supper Monday night. And wait till Tuesday with your washin'. I'm a good washer, if I *do* say it as shouldn't."

The young folks drove back to Hillcrest much more gaily than they had come. At least, 'Phemie and Lucas were very gay on the front seat. Harris Colesworth said to Lyddy:

"Lucas has been giving me the full history of the Widow Harrison's troubles. And her being sold out of house and home isn't the worst she's been through."

"No?"

"The man she married–late in life–was a Tartar, I tell you! Just as cranky and mean as he could be. Everybody thought he was an old soldier. He was away from here all during the Civil War–from '61 to '65–and folks supposed he'd get a pension, and that his widow would have *something* for her trouble of marrying and living with the old grouch.

"But it seems he never enlisted at all. He was just a sutler, or camp follower, or something. He couldn't get a pension. And he let folks think that he had brought home a lot of money, and had hidden it; but when he died two years ago Mrs. Harrison didn't find a penny. He'd just mortgaged the old place, and they'd been living on the money he got that way." 220

"It seems too bad she should lose everything," agreed Lyddy.

"I am going to stay over Monday and go to the vendue," said Harris. "Lucas says she has a few pieces of furniture that maybe I'd like to have–a chest of drawers, and a desk—"

"Oh, yes! I saw them," responded Lyddy, "And she's got some kitchen things I'd like to have, too. I *need* her Dutch oven."

"Oh, I say, Miss Lyddy!" he exclaimed, eagerly, yet bashfully, "you're not going to try to cook over that open fire all this summer? It will kill you."

"I *do* need a stove–a big range," admitted the young girl. "But I don't see how—"

"Let me lend you the money!" exclaimed Harris. "See! I'll pay you ahead for father and me as many weeks as you like—"

"I most certainly shall not accept your offer, Mr. Colesworth!" declared Lyddy, immediately on guard again with this too friendly young man. "Of course, I am obliged to you; but I could not think of it." 221

She chilled his ardor on this point so successfully that Harris scarcely dared suggest that they four go to the Temperance Club meeting at the schoolhouse that night. Evidently Lucas and he had talked it over, and were anxious to have the girls go. 'Phemie welcomed the suggestion gladly, too. And feeling that she had too sharply refused Mr. Colesworth's kindly suggestion regarding the kitchen range, Lyddy graciously agreed to go.

Mr. Somers, the school teacher, was possibly somewhat offended because Lyddy had refused to accompany *him* to the club meeting; but for once Lyddy took her own way without so much regard for the possible "feelings" of other people. The teacher could not comfortably take both her and 'Phemie in his buggy; and why offend Lucas Pritchett, who was certainly their loyal friend and helper?

So when the ponies and buckboard appeared after supper the two girls were in some little flutter of preparation. Old Mr. Colesworth and Grandma Castle (as she loved to have the girls call her) were on the porch to see the party off.

The girls had worked so very hard these past few weeks that they were both eager for a little fun. Even Lyddy admitted that desire now. Since their first venture to the schoolhouse and to the chapel, Lyddy had met very few of the young people. And 'Phemie had not been about much. 222

Since Sairy Pritchett and her mother had put their social veto on the Bray girls the young people of the community–the girls, at least–acted very coldly toward Lyddy and 'Phemie. The latter saw this more clearly than her sister, for she had occasion to meet some of them both at chapel and in Bridleburg, where she had gone with Lucas several times for provisions.

Indeed she had heard from Lucas that quite a number of the neighbors considered 'Phemie and her sister "rather odd," to put it mildly. The Larribees were angry because Mr. Somers, the school teacher, had left them to board at Hillcrest. "Measles," they said, "was only an excuse."

And there were other taxpayers in the district who thought Mr. Somers ought to have boarded with *them*, if he had to leave Sam Larribee's!

And of course, the way that oldest Bray girl had taken the school teacher right away from Sairy Pritchett—

'Phemie thought all this was funny. Yet she was glad Lyddy had not heard much of it, for Lyddy's idea of fun did not coincide with such gossip and ill-natured criticisms. 223

'Phemie was not, however, surprised by the cold looks and lack of friendly greeting that met them when they came to the schoolhouse this evening. Mr. Somers had got there ahead of them. There was much whispering when the Bray girls came in with Harris Colesworth, and 'Phemie overheard one girl whisper:

"Guess Mr. Somers got throwed down, too. I see she's got a new string to her bow!"

"Now, if Lyddy hears such talk as that she'll be really hurt," thought 'Phemie. "I really wish we hadn't come."

But they were in their seats then, with Harris beside Lyddy and Lucas beside herself. There didn't seem to be any easy way of getting out of the place.

CHAPTER XXI

CAUGHT

224

Nettie Meyers was there–Joe Badger's buxom friend. She stared hard at 'Phemie and her sister, and then tossed her head. But Mr. Badger came over particularly to speak to the girls.

Sairy Pritchett was very much in evidence. She sat with half a dozen other young women and by their looks and laughter they were evidently commenting unfavorably upon the Bray girls' appearance and character.

Lyddy bowed pleasantly to Mr. Badger and the other young men who spoke to her; but she gave her main attention to Harris. But 'Phemie noted all the sidelong glances, the secret whispering, the bold and harsh words. She was very sorry they had come.

Alone, 'Phemie could have given these girls "as good as they sent." Young as she was, her experience among common-minded girls like these had prepared her to hold her own with them. There had been many unpleasant happenings in the millinery shop where she had worked, of which she had told Lyddy nothing.

225

Mr. Somers came down from the desk to speak to the party from Hillcrest before the meeting opened. But everybody turned around to stare when he did so, and the teacher grew red to his very ears and remained but a moment under fire.

"Hul-*lo*!" exclaimed Harris Colesworth, under his breath, and 'Phemie knew that he immediately realized the situation. The whole membership–at least, the female portion of it–was hostile to the party from Hillcrest.

While the entertainment was proceeding, however, the Bray girls and their escorts were left in peace. Sairy Pritchett sat where she could stare at Lyddy and 'Phemie, and they were conscious of her antagonistic gaze all the time.

But Lucas was quite undisturbed by his sister's ogling and when there came a break in the program he leaned over and demanded of her in a perfectly audible voice:

"I say, Sairy! You keep on starin' like that and you'll git suthin' wuss'n a squint–you'll git cross-eyed, and it'll stay fixed! Anything about *me* you don't like the look of? Is my necktie crooked?"

Some of the others laughed–and at Sairy. It made the spinster furious.

226

"You're a perfect fool, Lucas Pritchett!" she snapped. "If you ever *did* have any brains, you've addled 'em now over certain folks that I might mention."

"Go it, old gal!" said the slangy Lucas. "Ev'ry knock's a boost–don't forgit that!"

"Hush!" commanded 'Phemie, in a whisper.

"Huh! that cat's goin' to do somethin' mean. I can see it," growled Lucas.

"She is your sister," admonished 'Phemie.

"That's how I come to know her so well," returned Lucas, calmly. "If she'd only been a boy I'd licked her aout o' this afore naow!"

"About *what*?" asked the troubled 'Phemie.

"Oh, just over her 'tarnal meanness. And maw's so foolish, too; *she* could stop her."

"I'm sorry we came here to-night, Lucas," 'Phemie whispered.

And at the same moment Lyddy was saying exactly the same thing to Harris Colesworth.

"Pshaw!" said the young chemist, in return, "don't give 'em the satisfaction of seeing we're disturbed. They know no better. I can't understand why they should be so nasty to us."

"It's Lucas's sister," sighed Lyddy. "She thinks she has reason for being offended with me. But I *did* hope that feeling had died out by this time."

"You say the word and we'll get out of here, Miss Lydia," urged Harris. 227

"Sh! No," she whispered, for somebody was painfully playing a march on the tin-panny old piano, and Mr. Somers was scowling directly down upon the Hillcrest party to obtain silence.

"Say! what's the matter with that Somers chap, too?" muttered Harris.

But Lyddy feared that the teacher felt he had cause for offence, and she certainly *was* uncomfortable.

The recess–or intermission–between the two halves of the literary and musical program, was announced. This was a time always given to social intercourse. The company broke up into groups and chattered and laughed in a friendly–if somewhat boisterous–way.

Newcomers and visitors were made welcome at this time. Nobody now came near the Bray girls–not even Mr. Somers. Whether this was intentional neglect on his part or not they did not know, for the teacher seemed busy at the desk with first one and then another.

Sairy Pritchett and the club historian had their heads together, and the latter, Mayme Lowry, was evidently adding several items to her "Club Chronicles," which amused the two immensely. And there was a deal of nudging and tittering over this among the other girls 228 who gathered about the arch-plotters.

"I'm glad they've got something besides us to giggle about," Lyddy confided to her sister.

But 'Phemie was not sure that the ill-natured girls were not hatching up some scheme to offend the Hillcrest party.

"I believe I'd like to go home," ventured 'Phemie.

"Aw! don't let 'em chase you away," exclaimed the young farmer.

"Oh, I know: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me!' But being called names–or, even having names *looked* at one–isn't pleasant."

Lyddy heard her and said quickly, her expression very decided indeed:

"We're not going–yet. Let us stay until the finish."

"Yes, by jove!" muttered Harris. "I'd just like to see what these Rubes would dare do!"

But girls are not like boys–at least, some girls are not. They won't fight fair.

The Hillcrest party need not have expected an attack in any way that could be openly answered–no, indeed. But they did not escape.

Mr. Somers rang his desk bell at last and called the company to order. After a song from the 229 school song-book, in which everybody joined, the "Club Chronicles" were announced.

This "history"–being mainly hits on what had happened in the community since the last meeting of the Temperance Club–was very popular. Mayme Lowry was a more than ordinarily bright girl, and had a gift for composition. It was whispered that she wrote the "Pounder's Brook Items" for the Bridleburg *Weekly Clarion*.

Miss Lowry rose and unfolded her manuscript. It was written in a somewhat irreverent imitation of the scriptural "Chronicles;" but that seemed to please the young folks here gathered all the more. She began:

"And it came to pass in the reign of King Westerville Somers, who was likewise a seer and a prophet, and in the fourth month of the second year of his reign over the Pounder's School District, that a certain youth whose name rhymes with 'hitch it,' hitched himself to the apron-strings of a maid, who was at that time sojourning at the top of the hill–and was hitched so tight that you couldn't have pried the two apart with a crowbar!"

"Oh, by cracky!" gasped the suddenly ruddy-faced Lucas. "What a wallop!"

The paragraph was punctuated with a general titter from the girls all over the room, while some of the boys hooted at Lucas in vast joy. 230

Lyddy turned pale; 'Phemie's countenance for once rivalled Lucas's own in hue. But Miss Lowry went on to the next paragraph, which was quite as severe a slap at somebody else.

"Don't get mad with *me*, Miss 'Phemie," begged Lucas, in a whisper.

"Oh, you can't help it, Lucas," she said. "But I'll never come to this place with you again. Don't expect it!"

The amusing but sometimes merely foolish paragraphs were reeled off, one after the other. Sometimes the crowd shouted with laughter; sometimes there was almost dead silence as Miss Lowry delivered a particularly hard hit, or one that was not entirely understood at first.

"And it came to pass in those days that certain damsels of the Pounder's Brook Temperance Club gathered themselves together in one place, and saith, the one to the other:

"Is it not so that the young men of Pounder's Brook are no longer attracted by our girls? They no longer care to listen to our songs, or when we play upon the harp or psaltery. They pass us by with unseeing vision. Verily an Easter bonnet no longer catcheth the eye of the wayward youth, and holdeth his attention. Selah.

"Therefore spake one damsel to the others gathered together, and sayeth: 'Surely we are not wise. The young men of our tribe goeth after strange gods. Therefore, let us awake, and go forth, and show the wisdom of serpents and–each and every one of us–start a boarding house!'" 231

The young men, who had begun to look exceedingly foolish during this harangue, suddenly broke into a chorus of laughter. Even Lucas and Harris Colesworth could not hide a grin, and the school teacher hid his face from the company.

The whole room was a-roar. Lyddy and 'Phemie suffered under the indignity–and yet 'Phemie could scarcely forbear a grin. It was a coarse joke, but laughter is contagious–even when the joke is against oneself.

Miss Lowry gave them no time to recover from this *bon mot*. She went on with:

"And it was said of a certain young man, as he rode on the way to Bridleburg, that he was met by another youth, who halted and asked a question of the traveler. But the traveler was strangely smitten at that moment, and all he could do was to *bray*."

There were no more shots at the Hillcrest folk after that–at least, if there were, the Bray girls did not hear them. The "Chronicles" came to an end at last. Somehow the sisters got away from the hateful place with their escorts. 232

"But don't ever ask me to go to that schoolhouse again," said Lyddy, who was infrequently angry and so, when she displayed wrath, was the more impressive. "I think, Lucas, the people around here are the most ill-mannered and brutal folk who ever lived. They are in the stone age. They should be living in caves in the hillside and be wearing skins of wild animals instead of civilized clothing."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Lucas, gently. "I reckon it looks so to you. But they have all got used to Mayme Lowry's shots–it's give an' take with most of 'em."

"There is no excuse–there *can* be no excuse for such cruelty," reiterated Lyddy. "And we never have done a single thing knowingly to hurt them."

Harris Colesworth was silent, but 'Phemie saw that his eyes danced. He only said, soothingly:

"They are a different class from your own, Miss Lydia. They look on life differently. You cannot understand them any more than they can understand you. Forget it!"

But that was more easily said than done. Forget it, indeed! Lydia declared when she went to bed with 'Phemie that she still "burned all over" at the recollection of the impudence of that Lowry girl! 233

Of course, common sense should have come to the aid of the Bray sisters and aided them to scorn the matter. "Overlook it" was the wise thing to do. But a tiny thorn in the thumb may irritate more than a much more serious injury.

Lyddy considered Mr. Somers quite as much at fault for what had happened at the meeting as anybody else. He was nominally in charge of the temperance meeting. On the other hand 'Phemie decided that she would not be seen so much in Lucas's company–although Lucas was a loyal friend.

The morrow was the first Sunday of the month of May, and its dawn promised as perfect a day as the month ever produced. Now the girls' flower gardens were made, the vines 'Phemie had planted were growing, the old lawns about the big farmhouse were a vernal green and the garden displayed many promising rows of spring vegetables.

The girls were up early and swept the great porch all the way around the house, and set several comfortable old chairs out where they would catch the morning sun for the early risers.

The earliest of the boarders to appear was Harris Colesworth, wrapped in a long raincoat and carrying a couple of bath towels over his arm.

"I found a fine swimming hole up yonder in the brook where it comes through the back of the farm," he declared to the sisters. "It's going to be pretty cold, I know; but nothing like a beginning. I hope to get a plunge in that brook every morning that I am up here." 234

And he went away cheerfully whistling. A moment later 'Phemie saw Professor Spink dart out of the side door and peer after the departing Harris, around a corner of the house. The professor did not know that he was observed. He shook his head, scowled, stamped his foot, and finally ran in for his hat and followed upon Harris's track.

"He's suspicious of everybody who goes up there to the rocks," thought 'Phemie. "What under the sun is it Spink's got up there?"

Later in the day–it was an hour or more before their usual Sunday dinner time–something else happened which quite chased the professor's odd actions out of 'Phemie's mind–and it gave the rest of the household plenty to talk about, too.

The procession of carriages going to Cornell Chapel had passed some time since when another vehicle was spied far down the road toward Bridleburg. A faint throbbing in the air soon assured the watchers on Hillcrest that this was an automobile.

Not many autos climbed this stiff hill to Adams; there was a longer and better road which did not touch Bridleburg and the Pounder's Brook District at all. But this big touring car came pluckily up the hill, and it did not slow down until it reached the bottom of the Hillcrest lane. 235

There were several people in the car, and one, a lithe and active youth, leaped out and ran up the lane. Plainly he came to ask a question, for he dashed across the front yard toward where

the family party were sitting on the porch.

"Oh, I say," he began, doffing his cap to the girls, "can you tell a fellow—"

His gaze had wandered, and now his speech trailed off into silence and his eyes grew as large as saucers. He was staring at the placidly-knitting Mrs. Castle, who sat listening to the Professor's booming voice.

"Grandma! Great–jumping–horse–chestnuts!" the youth yelled.

Mrs. Castle dropped her ball of yarn, and it went rolling down the steps into the grass. She laid down her knitting, took off the spectacles and wiped them, and them put them on again the better to see the amazed youth below her.

"Well," she said, at length, "I guess I'm caught."

CHAPTER XXII

THE HIDDEN TREASURE

236

"I'm going to call up the governor–and mom–and Lucy–and Jinny," gasped the young fellow, who had so suddenly laid claim to being Mrs. Castle's grandson. "I just want them to *see* you, Grandma. Why–why, *where* did you ever get those duds? And for all the world!–*you're knitting!*"

"You can call 'em up, Tommy," said the old lady, placidly. "I've got the bit in my teeth now, and I'm going to stay."

"Can we drive in here?" asked Master Tom, quickly, of the girls, whom he instinctively knew were in charge.

"Yes," said Lyddy. "Of course any friends of Mrs. Castle's will be welcome."

Tom sang out for the chauffeur to turn into the lane, and in a minute or two the motor party stopped in the grass-grown driveway within plain view of the people on the porch.

"Will you look at who's here?" demanded Master Tom, standing with his legs wide apart and waving his arms excitedly.

237

The rather stout, ruddy-faced man reading the Sunday paper dropped the sheet and gazed across at the bridling old lady.

"Why, Mother!" he cried.

"Grandma–if it isn't!" exclaimed one young lady, who was about nineteen.

"Mother Castle!" gasped the lady who sat beside Mr. Castle on the rear seat.

"Hullo, Grandma!" shouted the other girl, who was younger than Tom.

"I hope you all know me," said Grandmother Castle, rising and leaving her knitting in her chair, as she approached the automobile. "I thought some of sending for some more clothing to-morrow; but you can take my order in to-day."

"Mother Castle! what *is* the meaning of this masquerade?" demanded her daughter-in-law, raising a gold-handled lorgnette through which to stare at the old lady.

"Thank you, Daughter Sarah," returned Mrs. Castle, tartly. "I consider that from *you* a compliment. I expect that a gown, fitted to my age and position in life, *does* look like a fancy dress to you."

"Ho, ho!" roared her son, suddenly doubled up with laughter. "She's got you there, Sadie, I swear! Mother, you look just as your own mother used to look. I remember grandma well enough." 238

"Thank you, Rufus," said the old lady, and there were tears in her eyes. "Your grandmother was a fine woman."

"'Deed she was," admitted Mr. Castle, who was getting out of the car heavily. He now came forward and kissed his mother warmly. "Well, if you like this, I don't see why you shouldn't have it," he added, standing off and looking at her plain dress, and her cap, and the little shawl over her shoulders.

The girls and Master Tom had already kissed her; now Mrs. Castle the younger got down and pecked at her mother-in-law's cheek.

"I'm sure," she said, "I've always done everything to make you feel at home with us, Mother Castle. I've tried to make you one of the family right along. And you belong to the same clubs I do. Surely—"

"That's just exactly it!" cried the little old lady, shaking her head. "I don't belong in the same clubs with you. I don't want to belong to any club–unless it's a grandmothers' club. And I want simple living–and country air—"

"And all these Rubes?" chuckled Mr. Castle, waving his hand to take in the surrounding country.

"Quite so, Rufus. But you would better postpone your criticisms until— Ah, let me introduce my son, Mr. Colesworth," she added, as the old gentleman and Harris appeared from the side yard. "And young Mr. Harris Colesworth, of the Commonwealth Chemical Company. Perhaps you've heard of the Colesworths, Rufus?" 239

"Bless us and save us!" murmured Mr. Castle. "You're from Easthampton, too?"

The old lady continued to introduce her family to the Brays, to Mr. Somers, and even to Professor Spink. The latter came forward with a flourish.

"Spink–Lemuel Judson Spink, M.D., proprietor of Stonehedge Bitters, and Diamond Grits, the breakfast of the million," the professor explained, bowing low before Mrs. Rufus Castle.

"And these two smart girls I have adopted as grandchildren, too," declared the older Mrs. Castle, drawing Lyddy and 'Phemie forward. "These are the hard-working, cheerful, kind-hearted girls who make this delightful home at Hillcrest for us all."

"Oh, Mrs. Castle makes too much of what we do," said Lyddy, softly. "You see, 'Phemie and I are only too glad to have a grandmother; we do not remember ours."

"And, God forgive me! I'd almost forgotten what mine was like," said Mr. Castle, softly, eyeing his old mother with misty vision. 240

"Well, now!" spoke the old lady, briskly, "do you suppose you could find enough in that pantry of yours to feed this hungry mob of people in addition to your regular guests, Lyddy?"

"Why–if they'll take 'pot luck,'" laughed Lyddy. "Literally 'pot luck,' I mean, for the piece de resistance will be two huge pots of baked beans."

"And such beans!" exclaimed Grandmother Castle.

"And such 'brown loaf' to go with them," suggested Harris Colesworth.

"And old-fashioned 'Injun pudding' baked in a brick oven," added Mr. Bray, smiling. "There is a huge one, I know."

"I am not sure that there wasn't method in your madness, Mother," declared Mr. Castle. "All this sounds mighty tempting."

"And it will taste even more tempting," declared the elder Mrs. Castle.

"Let the hamper stay where it is," commanded her son, to the chauffeur. "We'll partake of the Misses Bray's hospitality."

The younger Castles, and the gentleman's wife, might have been in some doubt at first; but when they were set down to the long dining table, with Lyddy's hot viands steaming on the cloth–with the flowers, and beautiful old damask, and blue-and-white china of a by-gone day, and the heavy silver, and the brightness and cheerfulness of it all, they, too, became enthusiastic. 241

"It's the most delightful place to visit we've ever found," declared Miss Virginia Castle.

"It's too sweet for anything," agreed Miss Lucy. "I hope you'll come this way in the car again, Dad."

"I reckon we will if Grandma is going to make this her headquarters–and she declares she's going to stay," said Master Tom.

"Do you blame her?" returned his father, with a sigh of plenitude, as he pushed back from the table.

"Well! I can't convince myself that she ought to stay here; but you're all against me, I see," said their mother. "And, it really *is* a delightful place."

The Bray girls were proud of their success in satisfying such a party; and Lyddy was particularly pleased when Mr. Castle drew her aside and put a ten-dollar note in her hand.

"Don't say a word! It was worth it. I only hope you won't be over-run by auto parties and your place be spoiled. If you have any others, however, charge them enough. It is better entertainment than we could possibly get at any road house for the same money." 242

And so Lyddy got ten dollars toward her kitchen range.

While the ladies were getting into the tonneau, however, Miss Bray overheard a few words 'twixt Harris Colesworth and young Tom Castle that made her suspicious. She came out upon the side porch to wave them good-bye with the dish-cloth, and there were Harris and Tom directly beneath her.

And they did not observe Lyddy.

"All right, old man," Master Tom was saying, as he wrung the young chemist's hand. "The governor and I *were* a bit worried about grandma, and your tip came in the nick of time.

"But," he added, with a chuckle, "I had no end of trouble getting Mom and the girls to let James come up this way. You see, they'd never been this way over the hill before."

"Now," said Lyddy to herself, when the boys had passed out of hearing, "here is another case where this Harris Colesworth deliberately put his–his *nose* into other people's business!

"He knew these Castles. At least, he knew that they belonged to grandma. And he took it upon himself to be a talebearer. I don't like him! I declare I never *shall* really like him.

"Of course, perhaps grandma's son and the rest of the family might be getting anxious about her. But suppose they'd been nasty about it and tried to make her go home with them? 243

"No. 'Phemie is always saying Harris Colesworth has 'such a nice nose.' It is nothing of the kind! It is too much in other people's business to suit me," quoth Lyddy, with decision.

Her opinion of him, however, did not feaze Harris in the least. Mr. Somers was inclined to be stiff and "offish" since the previous evening, but Harris was jolly, and kept everybody cheered up–even grandma, who was undoubtedly a little woe-begone after her family had departed–for a while, at least.

It was a little too cool yet to sit out of doors after sunset, and that evening after supper they gathered about a clear, brisk fire on the dining-room hearth, and Harris Colesworth led the

conversation.

And perhaps he had an ulterior design in leading the talk to the Widow Harrison's troubles. He said nothing at which Jud Spink could take offense, but it seemed that Harris had informed himself regarding the old woman's life with her peculiar husband, and he knew much about Bob Harrison himself.

"Say–he was a caution–he was!" cried Harris. "And he kept folks guessing all about here for 244
years. The Pritchetts say Bob was a ne'er-do-well when he was a boy—"

"And that is quite so," put in Professor Spink. "I can remember the way the old folks talked about him when I was a boy about here."

"Just so," agreed Harris. "He made out he was entitled to a pension from the government, for years. And he always told folks he had brought a fortune home from the war with him. Let on that he had hidden it about the house, too."

Professor Spink's eyes snapped, and he leaned forward.

"You don't reckon there is anything in that story; do you, Mr. Colesworth?" he asked.

"Why–I don't–know," said Harris, slowly, but with a perfectly grave face. "As I make it out, when the old fellow died the widow made search for this hidden treasure he had hinted at so often; but when the lawyers found out that he was entitled to no pension–that he'd lied about *that*–and that about all he had left her was a mortgage on the place, Mrs. Harrison gave up the search for money in disgust. She said as he'd lied about the pension, and about other things, why, of course he'd lied about the hidden treasure."

"And don't you think he did?" asked Spink, with so much interest that the others were amused.

"Humph!" responded Harris, gravely. "I don't know. He *might* have hidden bonds–or 245
deeds–or even bank notes."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Mr. Bray, laughing. "That's imagination."

"You need not mind, Professor," said old Mr. Colesworth, sharply. "If there is money, or treasure, hidden there in the house, or on the place, and you have bid the place in, as I understand you have, it will be 'treasure trove'–it will belong to you–if you find it."

"Ha!" ejaculated Professor Spink, darting the old gentleman rather an angry glance.

"I don't know whether it is altogether talk and imagination, or not," said Harris, ruminatively. "Cyrus Pritchett was with Bob Harrison when he died. And he says the old man talked of this hidden money–or treasure–or what-not–up to the very time be became unconscious. He had a shock, you know, and it stopped his speech like *that*," and Harris snapped his finger and thumb.

"It sounds like a story-book," said Grandma Castle, complacently.

"It doesn't sound sensible," observed Lyddy, drily.

"I'm giving it to you for what it's worth," remarked Harris, good-naturedly. "Mr. Pritchett 246
was sitting up with Harrison when the old man had his final shock. Harrison had been mumbling along to Cyrus about what he wanted done with certain of his possessions. And he says:

"'There's that hid away that will be wuth money–five thousand in hard cash–some day, Cy.'

"Those are the words he used," said Harris, earnestly, and watching Professor Spink from one corner of his eye. "He was sitting up, Cy said, and as he spoke he pointed at— Well," broke off Harris, abruptly, "never mind what he pointed at. He died before he could finish what he was saying."

"Is that the truth, Harris Colesworth?" demanded 'Phemie, regarding him seriously.

"I got it from Lucas. Then I asked his father. That is just the way the story was told to me," declared the young fellow, warmly.

"And–and they never found anything?" asked Mr. Bray.

"No. They searched. They searched the old pieces of–of furniture, too. But Mrs. Harrison gave it up when it was found that Bob had been such a–a prevaricator."

"He probably lied about the fortune," said Mr. Bray, quietly.

"Well–maybe," grunted Harris.

But Lyddy remembered that Harris had already told her that he proposed to go to the vendue and buy in several pieces of the widow's furniture. Did that mean that Harris really thought he had a clue to the hidden treasure? 247

CHAPTER XXIII 248
THE VENDUE

Lucas Pritchett drove into the yard with the two-seated buckboard about nine o'clock the next forenoon. And, wonders of wonders! his mother sat on the front seat beside him.

'Phemie ran out in a hurry. Lyddy was getting ready to go to the vendue. She wanted to bid in that Dutch oven–and some other things.

"Why, Mrs. Pritchett!" exclaimed the younger Bray girl, "you are welcome! You haven't been here for an age."

Mrs. Pritchett looked pretty grim; but 'Phemie found it was tears that made her eyes wink so fast.

"I ain't never been here but onct since you gals came. And I'm ashamed of myself," said "Maw" Pritchett. "I hope you'll overlook it."

"For goodness' sake! how you talk!" gasped 'Phemie.

"Is it true you gals have saved that poor old critter from the farm?" demanded Mrs. Pritchett, earnestly, and letting the tears run unchecked down her fat cheeks. 249

"Why–why—"

"Widder Harrison, she means," grunted Lucas. "It all come out yesterday at church. The widder told about it herself. The parson got hold of it, and he put it into his sermon. And by cracky! some of those folks that treated ye so mean at the schoolhouse, Saturday night, feel pretty cheap after what the parson said."

"And if my Sairy ever says a mean word to one o' you gals–or as much as *looks* one," cried Mother Pritchett, "big as she is an',–an', yes–*old* as she is, I'll spank her!"

"Mrs. Pritchett! Lucas!" gasped 'Phemie. "It isn't so. You're making it up out of whole cloth. We haven't really done a thing for Mrs. Harrison—"

"You've thought to take her in and give her a home—"

"No, no! I am sure she will earn her living here."

"But none of us–folks that had knowed her for years–thought to give the poor old critter a chanst," burst out the lady. "Oh, I know Cyrus wouldn't 'a' heard to our taking her; and I dunno as we could have exactly afforded it, for me an' Sairy is amply able to do the work; but our Ladies' Aid never thought to do a thing for her–nor nobody else," declared Mrs. Pritchett. 250

"You two gals was ministerin' angels. I don't suppose we none of us really knowed how Mis' Harrison felt about going to the poorhouse. But we didn't inquire none, either.

"And here's Lyddy! My dear, I'm too fat to get down easy. I hope you'll come and shake hands with me."

"Why–certainly," responded Lyddy. "And I am really glad to see you, dear Mrs. Pritchett."

She had evidently overheard some, if not all, of the good lady's earnest speech. Harris Colesworth appeared, too, and Professor Spink was right behind him.

"You stopped for me, as I asked you to, Lucas?" asked the young chemist.

"Sure, Mr. Colesworth."

"Miss Lydia is going, too," said the young man.

"That'll fill the bill, then, sir," said Lucas, grinning.

"But I say!" exclaimed the professor, suddenly. "Can't you squeeze *me* in? I'm going over the hill, too."

"Don't see how it kin be done, Professor," said Lucas.

"But you said you thought that there'd be an extra seat—" 251

"Didn't know maw was going, then," replied the unabashed Lucas.

"And Somers has driven off to school with his old mare," exclaimed Spink.

"I believe he has," observed Harris.

"This is a pretty pass!" and Mr. Spink was evidently angry. "I've just *got* to get to that vendue."

"I'm afraid you'll have to walk–and it's advertised to begin in ha'f an hour," quoth Lucas.

"Say! where's your other rig?" demanded the professor. "I'll hire it."

"Dad's plowin' with the big team," said Lucas, flicking the backs of the ponies with his whip, as they started, "and our old mare is lame. Gid-up!

"That Jud Spink is gittin' jest as pop'lar 'round here as a pedlar sellin' mustard plasters in the lower regions!" observed young Pritchett, as they whirled out of the yard.

"Why, Lucas Pritchett! how you talk!" gasped his mother.

The widow's auction sale–or "vendue"–brought together, as such affairs usually do in the country, more people, and aroused a deal more interest, than does a funeral.

There was a goodly crowd before the little house, or moving idly through the half-dismantled lower rooms when Lucas halted the ponies to let Harris and the ladies out. 252

To Lyddy's surprise, the women present–or most of them–welcomed her with more warmth than she had experienced in a greeting since she and her sister had first come to Hillcrest.

But the auctioneer began to put up the household articles for sale very soon and that relieved Lyddy of some embarrassment in meeting these folk who so suddenly had veered toward her.

There were only a few things the girl could afford to buy. The Dutch oven was the most important; and fortunately most of the farmers' wives had stoves in their kitchens, so there was not much bidding. Lyddy had it nocked down to her for sixty cents.

Mrs. Harrison seemed very sad to see some of her things go, and Lyddy believed that every article that the widow seemed particularly anxious about, young Harris Colesworth bid in.

At least, he bought a bureau, a worktable, an old rocking chair with stuffed back and cushion, and last of all an old, age-darkened, birdseye maple desk, which seemed shaky and half-ready to fall to pieces.

253 “That article ought to bring ye in a forchune, Mr. Colesworth,” declared the auctioneer, cheerfully. “That’s where they say Bob hid his forchune–yessir!”

“And it looks–from the back of it–that worms had got inter the forchune,” chuckled one of the farmers, as the wood-worm dust rattled out of the old contraption when Harris and Lucas carried it out and set it down with the other articles Harris had bought.

“So you got it; did you, young man?” snarled a voice behind the two youths, and there stood Professor Spink.

He was much heated, his boots and trousers were muddy, and his frock coat had a bad, three-cornered tear in it. Evidently he had come across lots–and he had hurried.

“Why–were you interested in that old desk I bought in?” asked Harris with a grin.

“I’ll give ye a dollar for your bargain,” blurted out the professor.

“I tell you honest, I didn’t pay but two dollars for it,” replied Harris.

“I’ll double it–give you four.”

“No. I guess I’ll keep it.”

“Five,” snapped the breakfast food magnate.

“No, sir,” responded Harris, turning away.

254 “Good work! keep it up!” Lyddy heard Lucas whisper to the other youth. “I bet I kin tell jest what dad told him. Dad’s jest close-mouthed enough to make the professor fidgetty. He begins to believe it all now.”

“Shut up!” warned Harris.

The next moment the anxious professor was at him again.

“I want that desk, Colesworth. I’ll give you ten dollars for it–fifteen!”

“Say,” said Harris, in apparent disgust, “I’ll tell you the truth; I bought that desk–and these other things–to give back to old Mrs. Harrison. She seemed to set store by them.”

“Ha!”

“Now, the desk is hers. If she wants to sell it for twenty-five dollars—”

“You hush up! I’ll make my own bargain with her,” growled the professor.

“No you won’t, by jove!” exclaimed the city youth. “If you want the desk you’ll pay all its worth. Hey! Mrs. Harrison!”

The widow approached, wonderingly.

“I made up my mind,” said Harris, hurriedly, “that I’d give you these things here. You might like to have them in your room at Hillcrest.”

“Thank you, young man!” returned the widow, flushing. “I don’t know what makes you young folks so kind to me—”

255 “Hold on! there’s something else,” interrupted Harris. “Now, Professor Spink here wants to buy that desk.”

“And I’ll give ye a good price for it, Widder,” said Spink. “I want it to remember Bob by. I’ll give you—”

“He’s already offered me twenty-five dollars for it—”

“No, I ain’t!” exclaimed Spink.

“Oh, then, you don’t want it, after all,” returned Harris, coolly. “I thought you did.”

“Well! suppose I do offer you twenty-five for it, Mis’ Harrison?” exclaimed Spink, evidently greatly spurred by desire, yet curbed by his own natural penuriousness.

"Take my advice and bid him up, Mrs. Harrison," said Harris, with a wink. "He knows more about this old desk than he ought to, it seems to me."

"For the land's sake—" began the widow; but Spink burst forth in a rage:

"I'll make ye a last offer for it–you can take it or leave it." He drew forth a wad of bills and peeled off several into the widow's hand.

"There's fifty dollars. Is the desk mine?" he fairly yelled.

The vociferous speech of the professor drew people from the auction. They gathered around. 256
Harris nodded to the old lady, and her hand clamped upon the bills.

"Remember, this is Mrs. Harrison's own money," said young Colesworth, evenly. "The desk was bought at auction for two dollars."

"Well, is it mine?" demanded Spink.

"It is yours, Jud Spink," replied the old lady, stuffing the money into her handbag.

"Gimme that hatchet!" cried the professor, seizing the implement from a man who stood by. He attacked the old desk in a fury.

"Oh! that's too bad!" gasped Mrs. Harrison. "I *did* want the old thing."

Spink grinned at them. "I'll make you both sicker than you be!" he snarled. "Out o' the way!"

He banged the desk two or three more clips–and out fell a secret panel in the back of it.

"By cracky! money–real money!" yelled Lucas Pritchett. "Oh, Mr. Harris! we done it now!"

For from the shallow opening behind the panel there were scattered upon the ground several packets of apparently brand-new, if somewhat discolored banknotes.

Professor Spink dropped the axe and picked up the packages eagerly. Others crowded 257
around. They ran them over quickly.

"Five thousand dollars–if there's a cent!" gasped somebody, in an awed whisper.

"An' she sold it for fifty dollars," said Lucas, almost in tears.

CHAPTER XXIV 258

PROFESSOR SPINK'S BOTTLES

But Professor Lemuel Judson Spink did not look happy–not at all!

While the neighbors were crowding around, emitting "ohs" and "ahs" over his find in the broken old desk, the proprietor of "the breakfast for the million" began to look pretty sick.

"Five thousand dollars! My mercy!" gasped the Widow Harrison. "Then Bob *didn't* lie about bringing home that fortune when he came from the army."

"It's a shame, Widder!" cried one man. "That five thousand ought to belong to you."

"Dad got it right; didn't he?" said Lucas, shaking his head sadly. "He allus said Harrison was trying to tell him where it was hid when he had his last stroke."

Harris Colesworth spoke for the first time since the packages of notes were discovered:

"Mr. Harrison told Cyrus Pritchett that he had hid away 'that that would be wuth five 259
thousand.' It's plain what he had in his mind–and a whole lot of other foolish people had it in their minds just after the Civil War."

"What do you mean, Mr. Colesworth?" cried Lyddy, who was clinging to the widow's hand and patting it soothingly.

"Why," chuckled Harris, "there were folks who believed–and they believed it for years after the Civil War–that some day the Federal Government was going to redeem all the paper money printed by the Confederate States—"

"*What?*" bawled Lucas, fairly springing off the ground.

"Confederate money?" repeated the crowd in chorus.

No wonder Professor Spink looked sick. He broke through the group, flinging the neat packages of bills behind him as he strode away.

"How about the desk, Professor?" shouted Harris; "don't you want it?"

"Give it to the old woman–you swindler!" snarled Spink.

And then the crowd roared! The humor of the thing struck them and it was half an hour before the auctioneer could go on with the sale.

"No; I did not know the bills were there," Harris avowed. "But I thought the professor was so avaricious that he could be made to bid up the old desk. Had he bid on it when it was put 260
up by the auctioneer, however, Mrs. Harrison would not have benefited. You see, the best the auctioneer can do, what he gets from the sale will not entirely satisfy Spink's claim. But the money-grabber can't touch that fifty dollars in good money he paid over to Mrs. Harrison with his own hands."

"Oh, it was splendid, Harris!" gasped Lyddy, seizing both his hands. Then she retired suddenly to Mrs. Harrison's side and never said another word to the young man.

"Gee, cracky!" said Lucas, with a sigh. "I was scairt stiff when I seen them bills fall out of the old desk. I thought sure they were good."

"I confess I knew what they were immediately–and so did Spink," replied Harris.

The young folks had got enough of the vendue now, and so had Mrs. Pritchett. Lucas agreed to come up with the farm wagon for the pieces of furniture with which Harris had presented the Widow Harrison–including the broken desk–and transport them and the widow herself to Hillcrest before night.

Mrs. Pritchett was enthusiastic over the girls taking Mrs. Harrison to the farm, and she could not say enough in praise of it. So Lyddy was glad to get out of the buckboard with Harris Colesworth at the bottom of the lane.

"You all talk too much about it, Mrs. Pritchett!" she cried, when bidding the farmer's wife 261
good-bye. "But I'd be glad to have you come up here as often as you can–and talk on any other subject!" and she ran laughing into the house.

Lyddy feared that Professor Spink would make trouble. At least, he and Harris Colesworth must be at swords' point. And she was sorry now that she had so impulsively given the young chemist her commendation for what he had done for the Widow Harrison.

However, Harris went off at noon, walking to town to take the afternoon train to the city; and as the professor did not show up again until nightfall there was no friction that day at Hillcrest–nor for the rest of the week.

Mrs. Harrison came and got into the work "two-fisted," as she said herself. She was a strong old woman, and had been brought up to work. Lyddy and 'Phemie were at once relieved of many hard jobs–and none too quickly, for the girls were growing thin under the burden they had assumed.

That very week their advertisements brought them a gentleman and his wife with a little crippled daughter. It was getting warm enough now so that people were not afraid to come to board in a house that had no heating arrangements but open fireplaces. 262

As the numbers of the boarders increased, however, Lyddy did not find that the profit increased proportionately. She was now handling fifty-one dollars and a half each week; but the demands for vegetables and fresh eggs made a big item; and as yet there had been no returns from the garden, although everything was growing splendidly.

The chickens had hatched–seventy-two of them. Mr. Bray had taken up the study of the poultry papers and catalogs, and he declared himself well enough to take entire charge of the fluffy little fellows as soon as they came from the shell. He really did appear to be getting on a little; but the girls watched him closely and could scarcely believe that he made any material gain in health.

With Harris Colesworth's help one Saturday, he had knocked together a couple of home-made brooders and movable runs, and soon the flock, divided in half, were chirping gladly in the spring sunshine on the side lawn.

They fed them scientifically, and with care. Mr. Bray was at the pens every two hours all day–or oftener. At night, two jugs of hot water went into the brooders, and the little biddies never seemed to miss having a real mother. 263

Luckily Lyddy had chosen a hardy strain of fowl and during the first fortnight they lost only two of the fluffy little fellows. Lyddy saw the beginning of a profitable chicken business ahead of her; but, of course, it was only an expense as yet.

She could not see her way clear to buying the kitchen range that was so much needed; and the days were growing warmer. May promised to be the forerunner of an exceedingly hot summer.

At Hillcrest there was, however, almost always a breeze. Seldom did the huge piles of rocks at the back of the farm shut the house off from the cooling winds. The people who came to enjoy the simple comforts of the farmhouse were loud in their praises of the spot.

"If we can get along till July–or even the last of June," quoth Lyddy to her sister, "I feel sure that we will get the house well filled, the garden will help to support us, and we shall be on the way to making a good living—"

"If we aren't dead," sighed 'Phemie. "I *do* get so tired sometimes. It's a blessing we got Mother Harrison," for so they had come to call the widow.

"We knew we'd have to work if we took boarders," said Lyddy.

"Goodness me! we didn't know we had to work our fingers to the bone–mine are coming through the flesh–the bones, I mean." 264

"What nonsense!"

"And I know I have lost ten pounds. I'm only a skeleton. You could hang me up in that closet in the old doctor's office in place of that skeleton—"

"What's *that*, 'Phemie Bray?" demanded the older sister, in wonder.

'Phemie realized that she had almost let *that* secret out of the bag, and she jumped up with a sudden cry:

"Mercy! do you know the time, Lyd? If we're going to pick those wild strawberries for tea, we'd better be off at once. It's almost three o'clock."

And so she escaped telling Lyddy all she knew about what was behind the mysteriously locked green door at the end of the long corridor of the farmhouse.

Harris Colesworth, on his early Sunday morning jaunts to the swimming-hole in Pounder's Brook, had discovered a patch of wild strawberries, and had told the girls. Up to this time Lyddy and 'Phemie had found little time in which to walk over the farm. As for traversing the rocky part of it, as old Mr. Colesworth and Professor Spink did, that was out of the question. 265

But fruit was high, and the chance to pick a dish for supper–enough for all the boarders–was a great temptation to the frugal Lyddy.

She caught up her sunbonnet and pail and followed her sister. 'Phemie's bonnet was blue and Lyddy's was pink. As they crossed the cornfield, their bright tin pails flashing in the afternoon sunlight, Grandma Castle saw them from the shady porch.

"What do you think about those two girls, Mrs. Chadwick?" she demanded of the little lame girl's mother.

"I have been here so short a time I scarcely know how to answer that question, Mrs. Castle," responded the other lady.

"I'll tell you: They're wonderful!" declared Grandma Castle. "If my granddaughters had half the get-up-and-get to 'em that Lydia and Euphemia have, I'd be as proud as Mrs. Lucifer! So I would."

Meanwhile the girls of Hillcrest Farm had passed through the young corn–acres and acres of it, running clear down to Mr. Pritchett's line–and climbed the stone fence into the upper pasture.

Here a path, winding among the huge boulders, brought them within sound of Pounder's 266
Brook. 'Phemie laughed now at the remembrance of her intimate acquaintance with that brook the day they had first come to Hillcrest.

It broadened here in a deep brown pool under an overhanging boulder. A big beech tree, too, shaded it. It certainly was a most attractive place.

"Wish I was a boy!" gasped 'Phemie, in delight. "I certainly would get a bathing suit and come up here like Harris Colesworth. And Lucas comes here and plunges in after his day's work–he told me so."

"Dear me! I hope nobody will come here for a bath just now," observed Lyddy. "It would be rather awkward."

"And I reckon the water's cold, too," agreed her sister, with a giggle. "This stream is fed by a dozen different springs around among the rocks here, so Lucas says. And I expect one spring is just a little colder than another!"

"Oh, look!" exclaimed Lyddy. "There are the strawberries."

The girls were down upon their knees immediately, picking into their tins–and their mouths. They could not resist the luscious berries–"tame" strawberries never can be as sweet as the wild kind.

And this patch near the swimming hole afforded a splendid crop. The girls saw that they 267
might come here again and again to pick berries for their table–and every free boon of Nature like this helped in the management of the boarding house!

But suddenly–when their kettles were near full–'Phemie jumped up with a shrill whisper:

"What's that?"

"Hush, 'Phemie!" exclaimed her sister. "How you scared me."

"Hush yourself! don't you hear it?"

Lyddy did. Surely that was a strange clinking noise to be heard up here in the woods. It sounded like a milkman going along the street carrying a bunch of empty bottles.

"It's no wild animal–unless he's got glass teeth and is gnashing 'em," giggled 'Phemie. "Come on! I want to know what it means."

"I wouldn't, 'Phemie—"

"Well, *I* would, Lyddy. Come on! Who's afraid of bottles?"

"But *is* it bottles we hear?"

"We'll find out in a jiff," declared her younger sister, leading the way deeper into the woods.

The sound was from up stream. They followed the noisy brook for some hundreds of yards. Then they came suddenly upon a little hollow, where water dripped over a huge boulder into another still pool–but smaller than the swimming hole. 268

Behind the drip of the water was a ledge, and on this ledge stood a row of variously assorted bottles. A man was just setting several other bottles on the same ledge.

These were the bottles the girls had heard striking together as the man walked through the woods. And the man himself was Professor Spink.

CHAPTER XXV 269

IN THE OLD DOCTOR'S OFFICE

The two girls, almost at once, began to shrink away through the bushes again–and this without a word or look having passed between them. Both Lyddy and 'Phemie were unwilling to meet the professor under these conditions.

They were back at the strawberry patch before either of them spoke aloud.

"What *do* you suppose he was about?" whispered 'Phemie.

"How do I know? And those bottles!"

"What do you think was in them?"

"Looked like water–nothing but water," said Lyddy. "It certainly *is* a puzzle."

"I should say so!"

"And there doesn't seem to be any sense in it," cried Lyddy. "Let's go home, 'Phemie. We've got enough berries for supper."

As they went along the pasture trail, the younger girl suggested:

"Do you suppose he could be making up another of his fake medicines? Like those 'Stonehedge Bitters?' Lucas says they ought to be called '*Stonefence* Bitters,' for they are just hard cider and bad whiskey–and that's what the folks hereabout call 'stonefence.'" 270

"It looked like only water in those bottles," Lyddy said, slowly.

"And he's so afraid old Mr. Colesworth–or Harris–will come up here and find him at work–or come across his water-bottles," continued 'Phemie. "Lucky this new boarder–Mr. Chadwick–isn't much for long walks. It would keep old Spink busier than a hen on a hot griddle, as Lucas says, to watch all of them."

"Well, I wish I knew what it meant. It puzzles me," remarked Lyddy. "And I never yet asked Mr. Pritchett about the evening we saw him and a man whom I now think must have been Professor Spink at the farmhouse."

"Ask him–do," urged 'Phemie, at last curious enough to have Lyddy share all the mystery that had been troubling her own mind since they first came to Hillcrest.

"I'll do so the very first time I see him," declared Lyddy.

But something else happened first–and something that brought the mystery regarding Professor Lemuel Judson Spink to a head for the time being, at least.

'Phemie lost the key to the green door! 271

Now, off and on, that missing key had troubled Lyddy. She had seldom spoken of it, for she had never even known it had been in the door when the girls came to Hillcrest. Only 'Phemie, it will be remembered, had the midnight adventure in the old doctor's suite of offices in the east wing.

Lyddy only said, occasionally, that it was odd Aunt Jane had not sent the key to the green door when she expressed all the other keys to her nieces when the project of keeping boarders at Hillcrest was first broached.

At these times 'Phemie had kept as still as a mouse. Sometimes the key was worn on a string around her neck; sometimes it was concealed in a cunning little pocket she had sewn into her skirt. But wherever it was, it always seemed–to 'Phemie–to be burning a hole in her garments and trying to make its appearance.

After finding Professor Spink filling the bottles with water up by Pounder's Brook, the girl was more than usually troubled about the east wing and the mystery.

She moved the key about from place to place. One day she wore it; another she hid it in some corner. And finally, one night when she came to go to bed, she found that the cord on 272
which she had worn the key that day was broken and the key was gone.

She screamed so loud at this discovery that her sister was sure she had seen a mouse, and she bounded into bed, half dressed as she was.

"Where–where is it, 'Phemie?" she gasped, for Lyddy was as afraid of mice as she was of rats.

"Oh, mercy me!" wailed 'Phemie, "that's what I'd like to know."

"Didn't you see it?" cried her trembling sister.

"It's gone!" returned 'Phemie.

Lyddy got gingerly down from the bed.

"Then I'd like to know what you yelled so for–if the mouse has disappeared?" she demanded, quite sternly.

And then 'Phemie, understanding her, and realizing that she had almost given her secret away, burst into a hysterical giggle, which nothing but Lyddy's shaking finally relieved.

"You're just as twittery as a sparrow," declared Lyddy. "I never *did* see such a girl. First you're squealing as though you were hurt, and then you laugh in a most idiotic way. Come! do behave yourself and go to bed!"

But even after 'Phemie obeyed she could not go to sleep.

Suppose somebody picked up that key? She had no idea, of course, where it had been 273
dropped. Certainly not on the floor of her bedroom. Some time during the day, inside, or outside of the house, the key, with its little brass tag stamped with the words "East Wing," had slipped to the ground.

Now–suppose it was found?

'Phemie got out of bed quietly, slipped on her slippers and shrugged herself into her robe. Somebody might be down there in old Dr. Phelps's offices right now.

And that somebody, of course, in 'Phemie's mind, meant just one person–Professor Lemuel Judson Spink.

Why had he come to Hillcrest to board, anyway? And why hadn't he gone away when he had been made the topic of many a joke about old Bob Harrison's treasure trove?

For nearly a fortnight now the professor had stood grimly the jokes and laughing comments aimed at him by the other boarders. The presence of Mrs. Harrison, too, in the house, was a

constant reminder to the breakfast food magnate of how his own acquisitiveness had made him over-reach himself.

'Phemie went downstairs, taking a comforter with her, and went into the long corridor leading from the west wing entry to the green door. The girls had never taken the old davenport out of this wide hall, and 'Phemie curled up on this–with its hard, hair-cloth-covered arm for a pillow–spread the quilt over her, and tried to compose her nerves here within sight and sound of the east wing entrance. 274

Suppose somebody was already in the offices?

The thought became so insistent that, after ten minutes, she was forced to creep along to the green door and try the latch.

With her hand on it, she heard a sudden sound from the room nearby. Was somebody astir in the Colesworth quarters?

This was late Saturday night–almost midnight, in fact; and of course Harris Colesworth was in the house. Sometimes he read until very late.

So 'Phemie turned again, after a moment, and lifted the latch. Then she pushed tentatively on the door, and—

It swung open!

'Phemie gasped–an appalling sound it seemed in the stillness of the corridor and at that hour of the night.

Often, while the key had been in her possession, she had tried the door as she passed it while working about the house. It had been securely locked.

Then, she told herself now, on the instant, the key had been found and it had been put to use. Somebody had already been in the old doctor's offices and had ransacked the rooms. 275

She crossed the threshold swiftly and groped her way to the door of the second room–the old doctor's consulting room. Here the light of the moon filtered through the shutters sufficiently to show her the place.

There seemed to be nobody there, and she stepped in, leaving the green door open behind her, but pulling shut the door between the anteroom and the office.

There was the old doctor's big desk, and the bookcases all about the room, and the jars with "specimens" in them and–yes!–the skeleton case in the corner.

She had advanced to the middle of the room when suddenly she saw that the door into the lumber room, or laboratory, at the back, was open. A white wand of light shot through this open door, and played upon the ceiling, then upon the wall, of the old doctor's office.

CHAPTER XXVI 276

A BLOW-UP

'Phemie's heart beat quickly; but she was no more afraid than she had been the moment before, when she found the green door unlocked. There was somebody–the person who had found the lost key–still in the offices of the east wing.

The wand of white light playing about her was from an electric torch. She stooped, and literally crawled on all fours out of the range of the light from the rear doorway.

Before she knew it she was right beside the case containing the skeleton. Indeed, she hid in its shadow.

And her interest in that moving light–and the person behind it–made her forget her original terror of what was in the box.

She heard a rustle–then a step on the boards. It was a heavy person approaching. The door opened farther between the workshop and the room in which she was hidden.

Then she recognized the tall figure entering. It was as she had expected. It was Professor Spink.

The breakfast food magnate came directly toward the high, locked desk belonging to the dead and gone physician, who had been a kind friend and patron of this quack medicine man when he was a boy. 277

'Phemie had heard all the particulars of Spink's connection with Dr. Polly Phelps. The good old doctor had been called to attend the boy in some childish disease while he was an inmate of the county poorhouse. His parents–who were gypsies, or like wanderers–had deserted the boy and he had "gone on the town," as the saying was.

Dr. Polly had taken a fancy to the little fellow. He was then twelve years old–or thereabout–smart and sharp. The old doctor brought him home to Hillcrest, sent him to school, made him useful to him in a dozen ways, and began even to train him as a doctor.

For five years Jud Spink had remained with the old physician. Then he had run away with a medicine show. It was said, too, that he stole money from Dr. Polly when he went; but the physician had never said so, nor taken any means to punish the wayward boy if he returned.

And Jud Spink had never re-appeared in Bridleburg, or the vicinity, while the old doctor was alive.

Then his visits had been few and far between until, at last, coming back a few months before, a self-confessed rich man, he had declared his intention of settling down in the community. 278

But 'Phemie Bray believed that the false professor had come here to Hillcrest for a special object. He was money-mad–his avariciousness had been already well displayed.

She believed that there was something on Hillcrest that Jud Spink wanted–something he could make money out of.

She was not surprised, then, to see a short iron bar in the professor's hand. It was flattened and sharpened at one end.

By the light of the hand-lamp the man went to work on the locked desk. It was of heavy wood–no flimsy thing like that one which he had burst open so easily the day of the Widow Harrison's vendue.

The man inserted the sharp end of the jimmy between the lid and the upper shelf of the desk. 'Phemie heard the woodwork crack, and this time she did *not* suppress a gasp.

Why! this fellow was actually breaking open the old doctor's desk. Aunt Jane had not even sent *them* the keys of the desk and bookcases in this suite of rooms.

Then 'Phemie had a sudden thought. She was really afraid of the big man. She did not know what he might do to her if he found her here spying on his actions. And–she didn't want the lock of the old desk smashed. 279

She reached up softly and turned with shaking fingers the old-fashioned wooden button that held shut the door of the case beside which she crouched.

She remembered very clearly that it had snapped open before when she was investigating–and with a little click. The door of this case acted almost as though the hinges had springs coiled in them.

At once, when she released the door, it swung open–and in yawning it *did* make a suspicious sound.

Professor Spink started–he had been about to bear down on the bar again. He flashed a look back over his shoulder. But the corner was shrouded in darkness.

'Phemie sighed–this time with intent. She remembered how she had been frightened so herself at her former visit to this office–and she believed the marauder now before her had been partially the cause of her fright.

The jimmy dropped from Spink's hand and clattered on the floor. He wheeled and shot the white spot of his lamp into the corner.

By great good fortune the ray of the lantern missed the girl; but it struck into the yawning case and intensified the horrid appearance of the skeleton. 280

For half a minute Spink stood as if frozen in his tracks. If he had known the old doctor had such a possession as the skeleton, he had forgotten it. Nor did he see any part of the case that held it, but just the dangling, grinning Thing itself, revealed by the brilliance of his spotlight, but with a mass of deep shadow surrounding it.

Professor Spink had perhaps had many perilous experiences in his varied life; but never anything just like *this*.

He might not have been afraid of a man–or a dozen men; no emergency–which he could talk out of–would have feazed him; but a man doesn't feel like trying to talk down a skeleton!

He didn't even stop to pick up the jimmy. He shut off the spotlight; and he stumbled over his own feet in getting to the door.

He was running away!

'Phemie was up immediately and after him. She did not propose for him to get away with that key.

"Stop! stop!" she shouted.

Perhaps Professor Spink verily believed that the skeleton in the box called after him–that it was, indeed, in actual pursuit. 281

He didn't stop. He didn't reply. He went across the small anteroom and out of the open green door.

But he had made a lot of noise. A big man with the fear of the supernatural chilling his very soul does not tread lightly.

A frightened ox in the place could have made no more noise. He tumbled over two chairs and finally went full length over an old hassock. He brought up with an awful crash against the big davenport in the corridor, where 'Phemie had tried to keep watch.

And there, when he tried to scramble up, he got entangled in 'Phemie's quilt and went to the floor again just as a great light flashed into the corridor.

The Colesworths' door stood open. Out dashed Harris in his pajamas and a robe. He fell upon the big body of Spink as though he were making a "tackle" in a football game.

"Hold him! hold him!" gasped 'Phemie.

"I've got him," declared Harris. "What's the matter, Miss 'Phemie?"

"He's got the key," explained 'Phemie. "Make him give it up."

"Sure!" said Harris, and dexterously twitched the entangled Spink over on his back. 282

"By jove!" gasped the young man, standing up. "It's the professor!"

"But he's got the key!" the girl reiterated.

"What key?"

"The one to the green door."

"The door of the east wing?" demanded Harris, turning to stare at the open door, on the threshold of which 'Phemie stood.

"Yes. I lost it. He found it. He's got it somewhere. I found him trying to break into grandfather's desk."

"Bad, bad," muttered Harris, stepping back and allowing the professor room to sit up. "Your interest in old desks seems to be phenomenal, Professor. Did you expect to find Confederate notes in *this* one?"

"Confound you–both!" snarled Spink, slowly rising.

"I don't mind it," said Harris, quietly. "But don't include Miss Bray in your emphatic remarks. *Give me that key.*"

CHAPTER XXVII

THEY LOSE A BOARDER

283

Harris had something beside a square and determined jaw. He had muscular arms and he looked just then as though he were ready to use them. Spink gave him no provocation.

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a key.

"Is this the one, Miss 'Phemie?" asked the young fellow.

The girl stepped forward, and in the lamplight from the bedroom doorway identified the key of the green door–with its tag attached.

"All right, then. Go to your room, Professor," said Harris. "Unless you want him for something further, Miss 'Phemie?"

"My goodness me! No!" cried 'Phemie. "I never want to see him again."

The professor was already aiming for the stairs, and he quickly disappeared. Harris turned to the still shaking girl.

"What's it all about, Miss 'Phemie?" he asked.

284

"That's what I'd really like to know myself," she replied, eagerly. "He is after something—"

"So my father says," interposed Harris. "Father says Spink has something hidden–or has made some discovery–up there in the rocks."

"I don't know whether he really has found what he has been looking for—"

"And that is?" suggested Harris.

"I wish we knew!" cried 'Phemie. "But we don't. At least, *I* don't–nor does Lyddy. But he tried to buy the farm of Aunt Jane once–only he offered a very small price.

"He has been hanging around here for months trying to find something. He got into the old offices to-night, and tried to break into grandfather's desk—"

Harris nodded thoughtfully.

"We want to look into this," he said. "I hope you and your sister will not refuse my aid. This Spink may be more of a knave than a fool. Now, go back to bed and–and assure Miss Lyddy that I will be only too glad to help 'thwart the villain'–if he really has some plan to better himself at your expense."

285

'Phemie picked up her quilt, locked the green door, and returned to her room. Throughout all the excitement Lyddy had slept; but 'Phemie's coming to bed aroused her.

The younger girl was too shaken by what had transpired to hide her excitement, and Lyddy quickly was broad awake listening to 'Phemie's story. The latter told all that had happened, including her experiences on the night they had come to Hillcrest. There was no sleep for the two girls just then–not, at least, until they had discussed Professor Spink and the secret of the rocks at the back of the farm, from every possible angle.

"I shall tell him that his absence will be better appreciated than his company–at once!" declared Lyddy, finally.

"But sending him away isn't going to explain the mystery," wailed 'Phemie.

In the morning, before many of the other boarders were astir, the two girls caught the oily professor just starting off with a handbag.

"You'd better get the remainder of your baggage ready to go too, sir," said Lyddy, sharply, "for we don't want you here."

"It's packed, young lady," returned Professor Spink, with a sneer. "I shall send a man for it from the hotel in town."

"Well, *that's* all right," quoth the girl, warmly. "You've paid your board in advance, and I cannot complain. But I would like to have you explain what your actions last night mean?" 286

"I don't know what you are talking about. I heard people moving about the house and–naturally–I went to see—"

"Oh, you story-teller!" gasped 'Phemie.

"Ha! I can see that you have both made up your minds not to believe me," said the odd boarder, haughtily. "Good-morning!"

"I honestly believe we ought to get a warrant out and have him arrested," observed the older girl, thoughtfully.

"What for? I don't believe he took anything," said 'Phemie.

"Well! he was trying to break into grandfather's desk, just the same," said Lyddy, and then Harris Colesworth joined them.

Now, Lyddy believed that this young man was altogether too prone to meddle with other people's affairs; yet ever since the Widow Harrison's vendue she had been more friendly with Harris.

And now when he began to talk about the professor and his strange actions over night, she could only thank the young chemist for his assistance.

"Of course, we have no idea that that man took anything," she concluded.

"But you know that he is after *something*. There is a mystery about his actions–both here at the house and up there in the rocks," said Harris. 287

"Well–ye-es."

"I have been talking to father about it. Father has seen him wandering about there so much. His anxiety not to be seen has piqued father's curiosity, too. To tell the truth, that is what has kept father so much interested in getting specimens up yonder," and the young man laughed.

"He tells me that he is sure there can be no great mineral wealth on the farm; yet Spink has found, or is trying to find, some deposit of value here—"

"Do tell him about the bottles, Lyd!" cried 'Phemie.

"Oh, well, that may be nothing—"

"What bottles?" demanded Harris, quickly. "Come on, girls, why not take me fully into your confidence? I might be of some use, you know."

"But they were nothing but bottles of water," objected Lyddy.

"Bottles of water?" repeated the young chemist, slowly. "Who had them?"

"Spink," replied 'Phemie.

"What was he doing with them?"

She told him how they had watched the professor with his inexplicable water bottles. 288

"Foolish; isn't it?" asked Lyddy.

"Sure–until we get the clue to it. Foolish to us, but mighty important to Professor Spink. Therefore we ought to look into it. Father doesn't know anything about this bottle business."

"Well, it's Sunday," sighed 'Phemie. "We can't do anything about the mystery to-day."

But her sister was fully roused, and when Lyddy determined on a thing, something usually came of it.

After breakfast, and after she had seen Lucas and his mother and Sairy drive past on their way to chapel, she put on her sunbonnet and started boldly for the neighboring farm, determined to have an interview with Cyrus Pritchett.

CHAPTER XXVIII

289

THE SECRET REVEALED

Lyddy did not have to go all the way to the Pritchett farm to speak with its proprietor. The farmer was wandering up Hillcrest way, looking at the growing corn, and she met him at the corner where the two farms came together.

"Mr. Pritchett," she said, abruptly, "I want to ask you a serious question."

He looked at her in his surly way–from under his heavy brows–and said nothing.

"You knew Mr. Spink when you were both boys; didn't you?"

The old man's look sharpened, but he only nodded. Cyrus was very chary of words.

"Mr. Spink left Hillcrest this morning. Last night my sister caught him in the east wing, trying to break open grandfather's desk with a burglar's jimmy. I am not at all sure that I shan't have him arrested, anyway," said Lyddy, with rising wrath, as she thought of the false professor's actions.

"Ha!" grunted Mr. Pritchett.

"Now, sir, you know *why* Spink came to Hillcrest, *why* he has been searching up there among the rocks, and *why* he wanted to get at grandfather's papers." 290

"No, I don't," returned the farmer, flatly.

"You and Spink were up at Hillcrest the first night we girls slept there. And you frightened my sister half to death."

The old man blinked at her, but never said a word.

"And you were there with Spink the evening Lucas took 'Phemie and me down to the Temperance Club–the first time," said Lyddy, with surety. "You slipped out of sight when we drove into the yard. But it was you."

"Oh, it was; eh?" growled Mr. Pritchett.

"Yes, sir. And I want to know what it means. What is Spink's intention? What does he want up here?"

"I couldn't tell ye," responded Pritchett.

"You mean you won't tell me?"

"No. I say what I mean," growled Pritchett. "Jud Spink never told me what he wanted. I was up to the house with him–yep. I let him go into the cellar that night you say your sister was scart. But I didn't leave him alone there."

"But *why*?" gasped Lyddy.

"I can easy tell you my side of it," said the farmer. "Jud and me was something like chums when we was boys. When he come back here a spell ago he heard I was storing something in the cellar under the east wing of the house. He told me he wanted to get into that cellar for something. 291

"So I met him up there that night. I opened the cellar door and we went down. I kept a lantern there. Then I found out he wanted to go farther. There's a hatch there in the floor of the old doctor's workshop—"

"A trap door?"

"Yes."

"And you let him up there?"

"Naw, I didn't. He wouldn't tell me what he wanted in the old doctor's offices. I stayed there a while with him–us argyfyin' all the time. Then we come away."

"And the other time?"

"On Saturday night? I caught him trying to break in at the cellar door. I warned him not to try no more tricks, and I told him if he did I'd make it public. We ain't been right good friends since," declared Mr. Pritchett, chewing reflectively on a stalk of grass.

"And you don't know what it's all about?" demanded Lyddy, disappointedly.

"No more'n you do," declared Mr. Pritchett; "or as much."

"Oh, dear me!" cried Lyddy. "Then I'm just where I was when I started!" 292

"You wanter watch Jud Spink," grumbled Mr. Pritchett, rising from the fence-rail on which he had been squatting. "Does he want to buy the farm?"

"Why–I guess not. He only made Aunt Jane a small offer for it."

"He'll make a bigger," said Pritchett, clamping his jaws down tight on that word, and turned on his heel.

She knew there was no use in trying to get more out of him then. Cyrus Pritchett had "said his say."

When Lyddy got back to the house again she found that Grandma Castle's folks had come to see her in their big automobile, and she and 'Phemie had to hustle about with Mother Harrison to re-set the enlarged dining table and make other extra preparations for the unexpected visitors.

So busy were they that the girls did not miss Harris Colesworth and his father. They appeared just before the late dinner, rather warm and hungry-looking for the Sabbath, Harris bearing something in his arms carefully wrapped about in newspapers.

"Oh, what have you got?" 'Phemie gasped, having just a minute to speak to the young man.

"Samples of the water Spink has bottled up there," returned Harris. 293

"What is it?"

"I don't know. But we'll find out. Father has an idea, and if it's *so*—"

"Oh, what?" cried 'Phemie.

"You just wait!" returned Harris, hurrying away.

"Mean thing!" 'Phemie called after him. "You oughtn't to have any dinner."

But there was little chance for Harris to talk with the girls that day. Before the dinner dishes were cleared away, a thunder cloud suddenly topped the ridge, and soon a furious shower fell, with the thunder reverberating from hill to hill, and the lightning flashing dazzlingly.

Behind this shower came a wind-storm that threatened, for a couple of hours, to do much damage. Everybody was kept indoors, and as the night fell dark and threatening the Castles had to be put up until morning.

The wind quieted down at last; so did the nervous members of the party inside Hillcrest. When Lyddy and 'Phemie thought almost everybody else was abed but themselves, and they were about to lock up the house and retire, a candle appeared in the long corridor, and behind the candle was Harris Colesworth, fully dressed.

"Sunday is about over, girls," he said, "and I can't possibly sleep. I must do something. Didn't you tell me, Miss 'Phemie, there were retorts and test-tubes, and the like, in your grandfather's rooms?" 294

"In the east wing?" cried Lyddy.

"Yes."

"Why, the back room was his laboratory. All the things are there," said the younger girl.

"Let me go in there, then," said Harris, eagerly. "I want to test these samples of water father and I brought down from the rocks to-day."

"My mercy me!" gasped 'Phemie. "You don't suppose there's gold–or silver–held in solution in that water—"

Lyddy laughed. "How ridiculous!" she said.

"Perhaps not exactly ridiculous," returned Harris, shaking his head, and smiling.

"Why, Harris Colesworth! who ever heard of such a thing?" cried Lyddy. "I'm no chemist, but I know *that* would be impossible."

"Will you let me have the key of the green door?" he demanded.

"Yes!" cried 'Phemie, who had continued to carry it tied around her neck. "But we'll go with you and see you perform your nefarious rites, Mr. Magician!"

Lyddy went for a lamp and brought it, lighted. "A candle won't do you much good in there," she said to Harris. 295

"Verily, it is so!" admitted the young man, with an humble bow.

"Now, let me go first!" cried 'Phemie. "You'd both be scared stiff by my friend, Mr. Boneypart."

"Your friend *who*?" cried Lyddy.

Harris began to laugh. "So you claim Napoleon as your friend; do you, Miss 'Phemie? What do you suppose old Spink thinks about him?"

'Phemie giggled as she ran ahead with the young man's candle and closed the door of the skeleton case in the inner office.

"For the simple tests I have to make," said Harris, as Lyddy's lamp threw a mellow light into the room, "I see no reason why those old tubes won't do. Yes! there's about what I want on that bench."

"But, oh! the dust!" sighed Lyddy, trying to find a clean place on which to set the lamp.

"Your grandfather must have been something of a chemist as well as a medical sharp," observed Harris, gazing about. "I'm curious to look this place over."

"We ought to ask Aunt Jane," said Lyddy, doubtfully. "We really haven't any business in here." 296

"She's never told us we shouldn't come," 'Phemie returned, quickly.

"Now you young ladies sit down and keep still," commanded Harris, authoritatively, removing his coat and tying an apron around his waist–the apron being produced from his own pocket.

"Now if you had your straw cuffs you'd look just as you used to—"

"At the shop, eh?" finished Harris, when Lyddy caught herself up quick in the middle of this audible comment.

"Ye-es."

"So you *did* notice me a bit when you were working around the little kitchen of that flat?" chuckled the young man.

"Well!" gasped Lyddy. "I couldn't very well help remembering how you looked the night of the fire when you came sliding across to our window on that plank. *That* was so ridiculous!"

"Just so," responded Harris, calmly. "Now, please be still, young ladies and–watch the professor!"

And for an hour the girls did actually manage to keep as still as mice. Their friend certainly was absorbed in the work before him. He tested one sample of water after another, and finally went back and did the work all over upon one particular bottle that he had brought down from Spink's hiding place among the rocks. 297

"Just as I thought," he declared, with a satisfied smile. "And just as father suspected. Prepared to be surprised–pleasantly. Your Aunt Jane must be warned not to sell Hillcrest at *any* price–just yet."

"Oh, why not?" cried 'Phemie.

"Because I believe there is a valuable mineral spring on it. This is a sample of it here. Mineral waters with such medicinal properties as this contains can be put on the market at an enormous profit for the owner of the spring.

"I won't go into the scientific jargon of it now," he concluded. "But the spring is here–up there among the rocks. Spink knows where it is. That is his secret. *We* must learn where the water flows from, and likewise, see to it that your Aunt Jane makes no sale of the place until the matter is well thrashed out and the value of the water privilege discovered."

CHAPTER XXIX 298

AN AUTOMOBILE RACE

Lyddy was to write to Aunt Jane the next day. That was the decision when Harris started for town after breakfast, too. No time was to be lost in acquainting Aunt Jane with the fact that the old doctor spoke truly when he had said that "there were curative waters on Hillcrest."

In Dr. Polly Phelps's day a mineral spring would have been of small value compared to what it would be worth now. Jud Spink, of course, had known something about the old doctor's using in his practise the water from somewhere among the rocks. On the lookout for every chance to make money in these days, the owner of "Stonehedge Bitters" and

"Diamond Grits–the Breakfast of the Million" had determined to get hold of Hillcrest and put the mineral water on the market–if so be the spring was to be discovered.

Too penurious to take any risk, however, Spink had wished to be sure that the mineral spring was there, and of its value, before he risked his good money in the purchase of the property.

The question now was: Had he satisfied himself as to these facts? Had he found the mineral spring quite by chance, and was he not still in doubt as to the wisdom of buying Hillcrest? 299

It would seem, by his trying to get at the old doctor's papers, that Spink wished to assure himself further before he went ahead with his scheme.

"We'll put a spoke in his wheel–that's sure," said Harris, as he bade the two girls good-bye that Monday morning, while Lucas and the restive ponies waited for him.

In two hours he was back at the farmhouse. The ponies stopped at the door all of a lather, and both Harris and Lucas looked desperately excited. Tom Castle, as well as the Bray girls, ran out to see what was the matter.

"He's off!" shouted Lucas Pritchett. "He's goin' to beat ye to it!"

"What *are* you talking about, Lucas?" demanded 'Phemie.

"Where does your aunt live, Miss Lyddy?" asked the young chemist. "Not at Easthampton?"

"No. At Hambleton. She is at home now—"

"And that Spink just bought a ticket for Hambleton, and has taken the train for that particular burg," declared Harris, with emphasis. "If I'd only been sure of your Aunt Jane's address I would have gone with him." 300

"Do you really think he's gone to try to buy the farm of her?" questioned Lyddy.

"I most certainly do. He couldn't have made connections easily had he started yesterday after you drove him away from Hillcrest. But he's after the farm."

"And she'll sell it! she'll sell it!" wailed 'Phemie.

"Perhaps not," ventured Lyddy, but her lips were white.

"He can get an option. That's enough," urged Harris. "We've got to head him off."

"How?" cried the older girl, clasping her hands.

"Jumping horse chestnuts!" ejaculated Tom Castle. "It's a cinch! It's easy. You can beat that fellow to Hambleton by way of Adams—"

"But there's no other train that connects at the junction till afternoon," objected Lucas.

"Aw, poof!" exclaimed Tom. "Haven't we got the old buzz-wagon right here? I'll run and see father. He'll let me take it. We'll go over the hill and down to Adams, and take the east road to Hambleton. Why, say! that Spink man won't beat us much."

"It's a great scheme, Tommy!" shouted Harris Colesworth "Go ahead. Tell your father I can run the car, if you can't." 301

In twenty minutes the big car was rolled out of the barn, and Mr. Castle came out to see the quartette off,–the two girls in the tonneau and Harris and Tom Castle on the front seat.

"You see that he doesn't play hob with that machine, Mr. Colesworth," called Mr. Castle, as they started. "It cost me seven thousand dollars."

"What's seven thousand dollars," demanded Master Tom, recklessly, "to putting the Indian sign on that Professor Spink?"

They were not at all sure, however, that they were going to be able to do this. Professor Spink might easily beat them to Aunt Jane's residence in Hambleton.

But at the speed Tom took the descent of the ridge on the other side, one might have thought that the professor was due to board a flying machine if he wished to travel faster. 'Phemie declared she lost her breath at the top of the hill and that it didn't overtake her again until they stopped at the public garage in Adams to get a supply of gasoline.

The boys behind the wind-break, and the girls crouching in the tonneau, saw little of the landscape through which the car rushed.

They rolled into Hambleton without mishap, and before noon. A word from Lyddy put Master Tom on the right track of Aunt Jane's house, for he had been in the town before. 302

"We're here quicker than we could have had a telegram delivered," declared Harris, as he helped the girls out of the car. "I'm going in with you, Miss Lyddy–if you don't mind?"

"Why, of course you shall come!" returned Lyddy, really allowing her gratitude to "spill over" for the moment.

"Me–oh, my!" whispered 'Phemie, walking demurely behind them. "The end of the world has now *came*. Lyd is showing that poor young man some favor."

But 'Phemie, as well as the other two, grew serious when the girl who opened the door told them Mrs. Hammond had company in the parlor.

"Two gentlemen, Miss–on business," said the maid.

Just then they heard Professor Spink's booming voice.

"Oh, oh! he's here ahead of us!" cried 'Phemie, and she flung open the door and ran into the room.

CHAPTER XXX 303

THE HILLCREST COMPANY, LIMITED

"Don't sign it!" shrieked 'Phemie, seeing Aunt Jane, her bonnet on as usual, with a pen in her hand.

"For the good land's sake, child! how you scart me," complained the old lady.

"Don't sign anything, Aunt!" urged 'Phemie. "That man is trying to cheat you," and she pointed a scornful finger at Professor Spink.

"What do you mean, girl?" demanded the other man present, who was sitting next to Mrs. Hammond. He looked like what he was–a shyster lawyer.

"This girl is crazy," snarled Spink, glaring at the party of young people.

"So are we all, then," Harris Colesworth responded. "I assure you, Mrs. Hammond, that these men are trying to trick you."

"I dunno you, young man; but I *do* know my own mind. This man, Spink, has finally made me a good offer for Hillcrest Farm."

"And if you don't sign that paper at once, ma'am," suggested the lawyer, softly, "the deal is off." 304

"That's right," declared Spink, rising. "I've made my last offer–take it or leave it."

"How much do they offer you for the farm, Mrs. Hammond–if that's not a rude question?" demanded Harris.

"Never *you* mind!" blustered Spink.

But Aunt Jane stated the amount frankly.

"It's worth more," said Harris, sharply.

"I expect it is; but it ain't worth no more to me," replied the old lady, calmly.

"I'll raise their offer a hundred dollars," said Harris, quickly. "My name's Colesworth. My father and I are well known here and in Easthampton. We are amply able to pay you cash for the place."

"Well, now," observed Aunt Jane, with satisfaction, while the girls stared at the young fellow in wonder, "you are talking business. A hundred dollars more is not to be sneezed at—"

"We'll raise the young man's bid another hundred, Mrs. Hammond," interposed the lawyer, eagerly. "But you must sign the agreement—"

"Raise you another hundred," said Harris.

The lawyer looked at his client for instructions. Professor Spink's face was of an apoplectic hue and his eyes fairly snapped.

"No, no!" he shouted, pounding one fat fist into his other hand. "I know this smooth swindler. He did me once before just this way. He sha'n't do it now. He's got some inside information about that farm. It's all off! I wouldn't buy the old place now at any price!" 305

He grabbed his hat and rushed for the door. The little lawyer followed, seized his coattails, and tried to drag him back; but Professor Spink was the heavier, and he steamed out into the hall, towing the lawyer, opened the door, and finally dashed down the steps. He and his legal adviser disappeared from sight.

"Well, young man," said Mrs. Hammond, calmly, "I expect you know what you have done? You've spoiled that sale for me; I may hold you to your offer."

"If you want to, I shall not worry," laughed Harris, sitting down. "But let us tell you all about it, Mrs. Hammond, and then I believe you will think twice before you sell Hillcrest at *any* price."

Right in that boarding-house parlor was laid the foundation of the now very wealthy mineral water concern known as "The Hillcrest Company, Limited." But, of course, it was months before the concern was launched and the wonderfully curative waters of Hillcrest Spring were put upon the market. 306

For once the fact was established that the mineral spring was there among the rocks at the back of the farm, it was only a matter of searching for it.

The spring was finally located in the very wildest part of the farm–in a deep thicket, where the cattle, or other animals, never went to drink. So the spring was thickly overgrown.

"And by cracky! you can't blame a cow for not wanting to drink *that* stuff," declared Lucas Pritchett when he first tasted the water.

Medicinally, however, it was a valuable discovery. Bottled and put on sale, it was soon being recommended by men high in the medical world.

"The old doctor knew a thing or two, even if he *did* live back here on the lonesomest hill in the State," said Aunt Jane. "No! I won't stay, children. You've treated me fust-rate; but give me the town. I want life. I don't see how Mrs. Castle can stand it. I'd vegetate here in a week and take sech deep root that you couldn't pull me out with a stump-puller.

"Besides, I'm going to have money enough now to live jest like I want to in town. And I'm going to have one of these automobile cars–yes, sir! I'll begin to really and truly *live*, I will. You jest watch me." 307

But in her joy of suddenly acquired wealth she did not forget her nieces–the girls who had really made her good fortune possible. Both Lyddy and 'Phemie owned stock in the mineral water company; and then Aunt Jane assured them that when she died they should own the farm jointly. She had only sold the spring rights to the company.

The rest of the corporation consisted of Harris Colesworth and his father, Rufus Castle, his mother, Grandma Castle, Lucas Pritchett and–last but not least–Mother Harrison. The widow had asked the privilege of investing in the stock of the company the fifty dollars that Professor Spink had paid her for her husband's old desk.

And as that stock is becoming more and more valuable as time goes on, it was not an unwise investment on the widow's part. As for Lucas, it was by 'Phemie's advice that the young farmer put *his* money into the stock of the mineral water concern, instead of into a red-wheeled buggy.

"Wait a while, Lucas," said 'Phemie, "and you'll make money enough to own a motor car instead of a buggy."

"And you'll take the first ride in it with me?" demanded Lucas, shrewdly.

"Yes! I'll verily risk my life in your buzz-wagon," laughed the girl. "But now! that's a long way ahead yet, Lucas." 308

The summer had passed ere all these things were done and said. Nor had the Bray girls lost a single opportunity of making their original venture–that of keeping boarders at Hillcrest–a success.

Lyddy had bought her cooking stove, her chickens had turned out a nice little flock for the next year, the garden had done splendidly, and when the corn was harvested the girls banked a hundred dollars over and above the cost of raising the crop.

Best of all, their father's state of health had so much improved, during these last few weeks, that the girls could look forward with confidence to his complete restoration, in time, to a really robust condition.

Hillcrest had been his salvation. The sun and air of the mountainside home had finally brought him well on the road to recovery; and the joy his two daughters felt because of this fact can scarcely be expressed in words.

Grandma Castle and the Chadwicks wanted to remain until New Year's, so the girls got no real vacation. Several automobile parties had now found their way to the house on the hill, and the old-fashioned viands, the huge rooms, open fires, and all the "queer" furniture induced them to return from time to time. 309

So Lyddy and 'Phemie decided to be prepared for such parties, or for other people who wished to board for a week or so at a time, all winter.

Mr. Bray had grown so much stronger by now that sometimes he expressed his belief that he ought to go back to the shop and earn money, too.

"Wait till next season, Father," Lydia urged him, softly. "We can all pull together here, and if we have only a measure of good fortune, we shall be independent indeed by *next* fall."

The prospect was surely bright–as bright as that which lay before Lyddy and Harris Colesworth one Indian summer day as they strolled down the lane to the highroad.

"I don't see how Aunt Jane can find this place lonely," sighed Lyddy, leaning just a little on the young man's arm, but with her gaze sweeping all the fair mountainside.

"*You* couldn't leave it, Lyddy?" he asked, with sudden wistfulness.

"No, indeed! Not for long. No other place would seem like *home* to me after our experience here. It's more like home than the house I was born in at Easthampton.

"You see, we have struggled, and worked, and accomplished something here–'Phemie and I. And Aunt Jane says it shall some day be ours–all of Hillcrest. I love it all."

"Well–I don't blame you!" exclaimed Harris, suddenly swinging about and seizing her hands. "But, say, Lyddy! don't be stingy about it."

"Stingy–about what?" she asked him, rather frightened, but looking up into his sparkling eyes.

"Don't be stingy with Hillcrest. If you are determined to stay here–all your life long–you know— Don't you suppose you could find it in your heart to let *me* come here and–and stay, too?"

Nobody heard Lyddy Bray make an audible reply to this–not even the curious squirrel chattering in the big beech over their heads. But Harris seemed to see just the reply he craved in the girl's eyes, for he cried, suddenly:

"You *dear*, you!"

Then they walked on together, side by side, over the carpet of flame-colored leaves.

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