The Little Red Chimney

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Author: Mary Finley Leonard

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[Illustration: THE CANDY MAN]

The Little Red Chimney

Being the Love Story of a Candy Man

BY MARY FINLEY LEONARD

Illustrations in Silhouette by KATHARINE GASSAWAY

New York−−Duffield & Company−−1914

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To George Madden Martin

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THE LITTLE RED CHIMNEY

CHAPTER ONE

In which the curtain rises on the Candy Wagon, and the leading characters are thrown together in a perfectly logical manner by Fate.

The Candy Wagon stood in its accustomed place on the Y.M.C.A. corner. The season was late October, and the leaves from the old sycamores, in league with the east wind, after waging a merry war with the janitor all morning, had swept, a triumphant host, across the broad sidewalk, to lie in heaps of golden brown along the curb and beneath the wheels of the Candy Wagon. In the intervals of trade, never brisk before noon, the Candy Man had watched the game, taking sides with the leaves.

Down the steps of the Y.M.C.A. building sauntered the Reporter. Perceiving the Candy Wagon at the curb he paused, scrutinising it jauntily, through a monocle formed by a thumb and finger.

The wagon, freshly emblazoned in legends of red, yellow and blue which advertised the character and merits of its wares, stood with its horseless shafts turned back and upward, in something of a prayerful attitude. The Reporter, advancing, lifted his arms in imitation, and recited: "Confident that upon investigation you will find everything as represented, we remain Yours to command, in fresh warpaint." He seated himself upon the adjacent carriage block and grinned widely at the Candy Man.

In spite of a former determination to confine his intercourse with the Reporter to strictly business lines, the Candy Man could not help a responsive grin.

The representative of the press demanded chewing gum, and receiving it, proceeded to remove its threefold wrappings and allow them to slip through his fingers to the street. "Women," he said, with seeming irrelevance and in a tone of defiance, "used to be at the bottom of everything; now they're on top."

The Candy Man was quick at putting two and two together. "I infer you are not in sympathy with the efforts of the Woman's Club and the Outdoor League to promote order and cleanliness in our home city," he observed, his eye on the débris so carelessly deposited upon the public thoroughfare.

"Right you are. Your inference is absolutely correct. The foundations of this American Commonwealth are threatened, and the *Evening Record* don't stand for it. Life's made a burden, liberty curtailed, happiness pursued at the point of the dust−pan. Here is the Democratic party of the State pledged to School Suffrage. The Equal Rights Association is to meet here next month, and−−the mischief is, the pretty ones are taking it up! The first thing you know the Girl of All Others will be saying, 'Embrace me, embrace my cause.' Why, my Cousin Augustus met a regular peach of a girl at the country club,−−visiting at the Gerrard Penningtons', don't you know, and almost the first question she asked him was did he believe in equal rights?" The Reporter paused for breath, pushing his hat back to the farthest limit and regarding the Candy Man curiously. "It is funny," he added, "how much you look like my Cousin Augustus. I wonder now if he could have been twins, and one stolen by the gypsies? You don't chance to have been stolen in infancy?"

This innocent question annoyed the Candy Man, although he ignored it, murmuring something to the effect that the Reporter's talents pointed to the stump. It might have been a guilty conscience or merely impatience at such flagrant nonsense, for surely he could not reasonably object to resembling Cousin Augustus. The Candy Man was a well−enough looking young fellow in his white jacket and cap, but nothing to brag of, that he need be haughty about a likeness to one so far above him in the social scale, whom in fact he had never seen.

The Reporter lingered in thoughtful silence while some westbound transfers purchased refreshment, then as a trio of theological students paused at the Candy Wagon, he restored his hat to its normal position and strolled away. On the Y.M.C.A. corner business had waked up.

For some time the Candy Wagon continued to reap a harvest from the rush of High School boys and younger children. Morning became afternoon, the clouds which the east wind had been industriously beating up gathered in force, and a fine rain began to fall. The throng on the street perceptibly lessened; the Candy Man had leisure once more to look about him.

A penetrating mist was veiling everything; the stone church, the seminary buildings, the tall apartment houses, the few old residences not yet crowded out, the drug store, the confectionery−−all were softly blurred. The asphalt became a grey lake in which all the colour and movement of the busy street was reflected, and upon whose bosom the Candy Wagon seemed afloat. As the Candy Man watched, gleams of light presently began to pierce the mist, from a hundred windows, from passing street cars and cabs, from darting machines now transformed into strange, double−eyed demons. It was a scene of enchantment, and with pleasure he felt himself part of it, as in his turn he lit up his wagon.

The traffic officer, whose shrill whistle sounded continually above the clang of the trolley cars and the hoarse screams of impatient machines, probably viewed the situation differently. Given slippery streets, intersecting car lines, an increasing throng of vehicles and pedestrians, with a fog growing denser each moment, and the utmost vigilance is often helpless to avert an accident. So it was now.

The Candy Man did not actually see the occurrence, but later it developed that an automobile, in attempting to turn the corner, skidded, grazing the front of a car which had stopped to discharge some passengers, then crashing into a telegraph pole on the opposite side of the street. What he did see was the frightened rush of the crowd to the sidewalk, and in the rush, a girl, just stepping from the car, caught and carried forward and jostled in such a manner that she lost her footing and fell almost beneath the wheels of the Candy Wagon, and dangerously near the hoofs of a huge draught horse, brought by its driver to a halt in the nick of time.

The Candy Man was out and at her side in an instant, assisting her to rise. The panic swept past them, leaving only a long−legged child in a red tam, and a sad−faced elderly man in its wake. The Candy Man had seen all three before. The wearer of the red tam was one of the apartment−house children, the sad man was popularly known to the neighbourhood as the Miser, and the girl, to whose assistance he had sprung−−well, he had seen her on two previous occasions.

As she stood in some bewilderment looking ruefully at the mud on her gloves and skirt, the merest glance showed her to be the sort of girl any one might have been glad to help.

"Thank you, I am not hurt−−only rather shaken," she said in answer to the Candy Man.

"Here's your bag," announced the long−legged child, fishing it out of the soggy mass of leaves beneath the wagon. "And you need not worry about your skirt. Take it to Bauer's just round the corner; they'll clean it," she added.

The owner of the bag received it and the accompanying advice with an adorable smile in which there was merriment as well as appreciation. The Miser plucked the Candy Man by the sleeve and asked if the young

lady did not wish a cab.

She answered for herself. "Thank you, no; I am quite all right−−only muddy. But was it a bad accident? What happened?"

The Miser crossed the street where the crowd had gathered, to investigate, and returning reported the chauffeur probably done for. While he was gone the conductor of the street car appeared in quest of the names and addresses of everybody within a radius of ten blocks. In this way the Candy Man learned that her name was Bentley. She gave it reluctantly, as persons do on such occasions, and he failed to catch her street and number.

"I'm very sorry! I suppose there is nothing one can do?" she exclaimed, apropos of the chauffeur, and the next the Candy Man knew she was walking away in the mist hand in hand with the long−legged child.

"An unusually charming face," the Miser remarked, raising his umbrella.

To the sober mind "unusually charming" would seem a not unworthy compliment, but the Candy Man, as he resumed his place in the wagon, smiled scornfully at what he was pleased to consider its grotesque inadequacy. If he had anything better to offer, the Miser did not stay to hear it, but with a courteous "good evening" disappeared in his turn in the mist. An ambulance carried away the injured man, the crowd dispersed; the remains of the machine were towed away to a near−by garage. Night fell; the throng grew less, the rain gathered courage and became a downpour. There would be little doing in the way of business to−night.

As he made ready for early closing the Candy Man fell to thinking of the girl whose name was Bentley. Not that the name interested him save as a means of further identification. It was a phrase used by the Reporter this morning that occurred to him now as peculiarly applicable to her. The Girl of All Others! He rolled it as a sweet morsel under his tongue, undisturbed by the reflection that such descriptive titles are at present overworked−−in dreams one has no need to be original.

Neither did it strike him as incongruous that he should have seen her first in the grocery kept by Mr. Simms, who catered to the needs of such as got their own breakfasts, and whose boiled ham was becoming famous, because it was really done. He went back to the experience, dwelling with pleasure upon each detail of it, even his annoyance at the grocer's daughter, who exchanged crochet patterns with the tailor's wife, after the manner of a French exercise, and ignored him. It was early and business had not yet begun on the Y.M.C.A. corner; still he could not wait forever. The grocer himself, who was attending to the wants of a lean and hungry−looking student, had just handed his rolls and smoked sausage across the counter, with a cheery "Breakfast is ready, ring the bell," when the door opened and the Girl of All Others came in.

She was tallish, but not very tall, and somewhat slight. She wore a grey suit−−the same which had suffered this afternoon from contact with the street, and a soft felt hat of the same colour jammed down anyhow on her bright hair and pinned with a pinkish quill−−or so it looked. The face beneath the bright hair was−−−− But at this point in his recollections the Candy Man all but lost himself in a maze of adjectives and adverbs. We know, at least, how the long−legged child ran to help, and finally went off hand in hand with her, and what the Miser said of her, and after all the best the Candy Man could do was to go back to the Reporter's phrase.

He had withdrawn a little behind a stack of breakfast foods where he could watch her, wondering that the clerks did not drop their several customers without ceremony and fly to do her bidding. She stood beside the counter and made overtures to a large Maltese cat who reposed there in solemn majesty. Beside the Maltese rose a pyramid of canned goods, and a placard announced, "Of interest to light house keepers." Upon this her eyes rested in evident surprise. "I didn't know there were any lighthouses in this part of the country," she said half aloud.

[Illustration: MARGARET ELIZABETH]

The Maltese laid a protesting paw upon her arm. It was not, however, the absurdity of her remark, but the cessation of her caresses he protested against. At the same moment her eyes met those of the Candy Man, across the stack of breakfast foods. His were laughing, and hers were instantly withdrawn. He saw her colour mounting as she exclaimed, addressing the cat, "How perfectly idiotic!"

He longed to assure her it was a perfectly natural mistake, the placard being but an amateurish affair; but he lacked the courage.

And then the grocer, having disposed of another customer, advanced to serve her, and the grocer's daughter, it seemed, was also at leisure; and though he would have preferred to watch the Girl of All Others doing the family marketing in a most competent manner, a thoughtful finger upon her lip, the Candy Man was forced to attend to his own business. In selecting a basket of grapes and ordering them sent to St. Mary's Hospital, he presently lost sight of her.

Once since then she had passed his corner on her way up the street. That was all until to−night. It seemed probable that she lived in the neighbourhood. Perhaps the Reporter would know.

Just here the recollection that he was a Candy Man brought him up short. His bright dreams began to fade. The Girl of All Others should of course be able to recognise true worth, even in a Candy Wagon, but such is the power of convention he was forced to own to himself it was more than possible she might not. Or if she did, her friends−−−−

But these disheartening reflections were curtailed by the sudden appearance of a stout, grey horse under the conduct of a small boy. The shafts were lowered, the grey horse placed between them, and, after a few more preliminaries, the Candy Wagon, Candy Man and all, were removed from the scene of action, leaving the Y.M.C.A. corner to the rain and the fog, the gleaming lights, and the ceaseless clang of the trolley cars.

CHAPTER TWO

In which the Candy Man walks abroad in citizen's clothes, and is mistaken for a person of wealth and social importance.

The Candy Man strolled along a park path. The October day was crisp, the sky the bluest blue, the sunny landscape glowing with autumn's fairest colours. It was a Sunday morning not many days after the events of the first chapter, and back in the city the church bells were ringing for eleven o'clock service.

In citizen's clothes, and well−fitting ones at that, the Candy Man was a presentable young fellow. If his face seemed at first glance a trifle stern, this sternness was offset by the light in his eyes; a steady, purposeful glow, through which played at the smallest excuse a humorous twinkle.

After the ceaseless stir of the Y.M.C.A. corner, the stillness of the park was most grateful. At this hour on Sunday, if he avoided the golf grounds, it was to all intents his own. His objective point was a rustic arbour hung with rose vines and clematis, where was to be had a view of the river as it made an abrupt turn around the opposite hills. Here he might read, or gaze and dream, as it pleased him, reasonably secure from interruption once he had possession.

The Candy Man breathed deeply, and smiled to himself. It was a day to inspire confident dreams, for the joy of fulfilment was over the land. Was it the sudden fear that some other dreamer might be before him, or a subconscious prevision of what actually awaited him, that caused him to quicken his steps as he neared the

arbour? However it may have been, as he took at a bound the three steps which led up to it, he came with startling suddenness upon Miss Bentley entering from the other side, her arms full of flowers. Their eyes met in a flash of recognition which there was no time to control. She bowed, not ungraciously, yet distantly, and with a faint puzzled frown on her brow, and he, as he lifted his hat, spoke her name, which, as he was not supposed to know it, he had no business to do; then they both laughed at the way in which they had bounced in at the same moment from opposite directions.

With some remark about the delightful day, the Candy Man, as a gentleman should, tried to pretend he was merely passing through, and though it was but a feeble performance, Miss Bentley should have accepted it without protest, then all would have been well. Instead, she said, still with that puzzled half frown, "Don't go, I am only waiting here a moment for my cousin, who has stopped at the superintendent's cottage." She motioned over her shoulder to a vine−covered dwelling just visible through the trees.

"Please do not put it in that way," he protested. "As if your being here did not add tremendously to my desire to remain. I am conscious of rushing in most unceremoniously upon you, and−−−−"

Hesitating there, hat in hand, his manners were disarmingly frank. Miss Bentley laughed again as she deposited her flowers, a mass of pink and white cosmos, upon a bench, and sat down beside them. She seemed willing to have him put it as he liked. She wore the same grey suit and soft felt hat, jammed down any way on her bright hair and pinned with a pinkish quill, and was somehow, more emphatically than before, the Girl of All Others.

How could a Candy Man be expected to know what he was about? What wonder that his next remark should be a hope that she had suffered no ill effects from the accident?

"None at all, thank you," Miss Bentley replied, and the puzzled expression faded. It was as if she inwardly exclaimed, "Now I know!" "Aunt Eleanor," she added, "was needlessly alarmed. I seem rather given to accidents of late." Thus saying she began to arrange her flowers.

The Candy Man dropped down on the step where the view−−of Miss Bentley−−was most charming, as she softly laid one bloom upon another in caressing fashion, her curling lashes now almost touching her cheek, now lifted as she looked away to the river, or bent her gaze upon the occupant of the step.

"Do you often come here?" she asked, adding when he replied that this was the third time, that she thought he had rather an air of proprietorship.

He laughed at this, and explained how he had set out to pay a visit to a sick boy at St. Mary's Hospital, but had allowed the glorious day to tempt him to the park.

Below them on the terraced hillside a guard sat reading his paper; across the meadow a few golfers were to be seen against the horizon. All about them the birds and squirrels were busily minding their own affairs; above them smiled the blue, blue sky, and the cousin, whoever he or she might be, considerately lingered.

Like the shining river their talk flowed on. Beginning like it as a shallow stream, it broadened and deepened on its way, till presently fairy godmothers became its theme.

Miss Bentley was never able to recall what led up to it. The Candy Man only remembered her face, as, holding a crimson bloom against her cheek, she smiled down upon him thoughtfully, and asked him to guess what she meant to do when some one left her a fortune. "I have a strange presentiment that some one is going to," she said.

"How delightful!" he exclaimed, but did not hazard a guess, and she continued without giving him a chance:

"I shall establish a Fairy Godmother Fund, the purpose of which shall be the distribution of good times; of pleasures large and small, among people who have few or none."

"It sounds," was the Candy Man's comment, "like the minutes of the first meeting. Please explain further. How will you select your beneficiaries?"

"I don't like your word," she objected. "Beneficiaries and fairy godmothers somehow do not go together. Still, I see what you mean, and while I have not as yet worked out the plan, I'm confident it could be managed. Suppose we know a poor teacher, for instance, who has nothing left over from her meagre salary after the necessary things are provided for, and who is, we'll say, hungry for grand opera. We would enclose opera tickets with a note asking her to go and have a good time, signed, 'Your Fairy Godmother,' and with a postscript something like this, 'If you cannot use them, hand them on to another of my godchildren.' Don't you think she would accept them?"

Under the spell of those lovely, serious eyes, the Candy Man rather thought she would.

"Of course," Miss Bentley went on, "it must be a secret society, never mentioned in the papers, unknown to those you call its beneficiaries. In this way there will be no occasion or demand for gratitude. No obligations will be imposed upon the recipients−−that word is as bad as yours−−let's call them godchildren−−and the fairy godmother will have her fun in giving the good times, without bothering over whether they are properly grateful."

"You seem to have a grievance against gratitude," said the Candy Man laughing.

"I have," she owned.

"There are people who contend that there is little or none of it in the world," he added.

"And I am not sure it was meant there should be−−much of it, I mean. It is an emotion−−would you call it an emotion?"

"You might," said the Candy Man.

"Well, an emotion that turns to dust and ashes when you try to experience it, or demand it of others," concluded Miss Bentley with emphasis. "And you needn't laugh," she added.

The Candy Man disclaimed any thought of such a thing. He was profoundly serious. "It is really a great idea," he said. "A human agency whose benefits could be received as we receive those of Nature or Providence−−as impersonally."

She nodded appreciatively. "You understand." And they were both aware of a sense of comradeship scarcely justified by the length of their acquaintance.

"May I ask your ideas as to the amount of this fund?" he said.

She considered a moment. "Well, say a hundred thousand," she suggested.

"You are expecting a large bequest, then."

"An income of five thousand would not be too much," insisted Miss Bentley. "We should wish to do bigger things than opera tickets, you know."

"There are persons who perhaps need a fairy godmother, whom money cannot help," the Candy Man continued thoughtfully. "There's an old man−−not so old either−−a sad grey man, whom the children on our block call the Miser. I am not an adept in reading faces, but I am sure there is nothing mean in his. It is only sad. I get interested in people," he added.

"So do I," cried his companion. "And of course, you are right. The Fairy Godmother Society would have to have more than one department. Naturally opera tickets would not do your man any good−−unless we could get him to send them."

They laughed over this clever idea, and the Candy Man went on to say that there were lonely people in the world, who, through no fault of their own, were so circumstanced as to be cut off from those common human relationships which have much to do with the flavour of life.

"I don't quite understand," Miss Bentley began. But these young persons were not to be left to settle the affairs of the universe in one morning. A handkerchief waved in the distance by a stoutish lady, interrupted. "There's Cousin Prue," Miss Bentley cried, springing to her feet.

Hastily dividing her flowers into two bunches, she thrust one upon the Candy Man. "For your sick boy. You won't mind, as it isn't far. I have so enjoyed talking to you, Mr. McAllister. I shall hope to see you soon again. Aunt Eleanor often speaks of you."

This sudden descent to the conventional greatly embarrassed the Candy Man, but he had no time for a word. Miss Bentley was off like a flash, across the grass, before he could collect his scattered wits. He looked after her, till, in company with the stout lady, she disappeared from view. Then with a whimsical expression on his countenance, he took a leather case from his breast pocket, and opening it glanced at one of the cards within. It was as if he doubted his own identity and wished to be reassured.

The name engraved on the card was not McAllister, but Robert Deane Reynolds.

CHAPTER THREE

In which the Little Red Chimney appears on the horizon, but without a clue to its importance. In which also the Candy Man has a glimpse of high life and is foolishly depressed by it.

Starting from the Y.M.C.A. corner, walking up the avenue a block, then turning south, you came in a few steps to a modest grey house with a grass plat in front of it, a freshly reddened brick walk, and flower boxes in its windows. It was modest, not merely in the sense of being unpretentious, but also in that of a restrained propriety. You felt it to be a dwelling of character, wherein what should be done to−day, was never put off till to−morrow; where there was a place for everything and everything in it. Yet mingling with this propriety was an all−pervading cheer that appealed strongly to the homeless passerby.

The grey house presented a gable end to the street, and stretched a wing comfortably on either side. In one of these was a glass door, with "Office Hours 10−1," which caused you to glance again at the sign on the iron gate: "Dr. Prudence Vandegrift."

The other ell, which was of one story, had a double window, before which a rose bush grew, and when the blinds were up you had sometimes a glimpse of an opposite window, indicating that it was but one room deep. From its roof rose a small chimney that stood out from all the other chimneys, because, while they were grey like the house and its slate roof, it was red.

Strolling by in a leisure hour the Candy Man had remarked it and wondered why, and found himself continuing to wonder. Somehow that little red chimney took hold on his imagination. It was a magical chimney, poetic, alluring, at once a cheering and a depressing little chimney, for it stirred him to delicious dreams, which, when they faded, left him forlorn.

It was to Virginia he owed enlightenment. Virginia was the long−legged child who had fished Miss Bentley's bag from beneath the Candy Wagon, the indomitable leader of the Apartment House Pigeons, as the Candy Man had named them.

The Apartment House did not exclude children, neither did it encourage them, and when their individual quarters became too contracted to contain their exuberance, they perforce sought the street. Like pigeons they would descend in a flock, here, there, everywhere; perching in a blissful row before the soda fountain in the drug store; or if the state of the public purse did not warrant this, the curbstone and the wares of the Candy Wagon were cheerfully substituted. By virtue no doubt of her long legs and masterful spirit, Virginia ruled the flock. Under her guidance they made existence a weariness to the several janitors on the block.

As in defiance of law and order they circled one day on their roller skates, down the avenue and up the broad alley behind the Y.M.C.A., round and round, Virginia issued her orders: "You all go on, I want to talk to the Candy Man."

Being without as yet any theories, consistently democratic, she regarded him as a friend and brother. A state of society in which the position of Candy Man was next the throne, would have seemed perfectly logical to Virginia.

[Illustration: VIRGINIA]

"You don't look much like Tim," she volunteered, dangling her legs from the carriage block. Her hair was dark and severely bobbed; her miniature nose was covered with freckles, and she squinted a little.

"No?" responded the Candy Man.

"Tim was Irish," she continued.

During business hours conversation of necessity took on a disjointed character. Unless you had great power of concentration you forgot in the intervals what you had been talking about. When a group of High School boys had been served and had gone their hilarious way Virginia began again. "You know the house with the Little Red Chimney?" she asked.

The Candy Man did.

"Well, a nice old man named Uncle Bob lives there, and I asked him why that chimney was red, and he said because it was new. A branch of a tree fell on the old one. The tree where the squirrel house is, you know."

The Candy Man remembered the tree.

"He said the doctor was going to have it painted, but he kind of liked it red, and so did her ladyship."

"And who might her ladyship be?" the Candy Man inquired.

"That's what I asked him, and he said, 'You come over and see,' and then he said−−now listen to this, for it's just like a story." Virginia lifted an admonishing finger. "He said, whenever I saw smoke coming out of that Little Red Chimney, I might know her ladyship had come to town. You'd better believe I'm going to watch.

And what do you think! I can see it from our dining−room window!" she concluded.

"Most interesting," said the Candy Man politely, without the least idea how interesting it really was.

Virginia's gaze suddenly fastened on a small book lying on the seat of the Candy Wagon, and she had seized it before its owner could protest. "What a funny name," she said. "'E p i c t e t u s.' What does that spell? And what made you cut a hole in this page? It looks like a window."

The page was a fly leaf, from which a name, possibly that of a former owner, had been removed. Below it the Candy Man's own name was now written.

"It was so when I got it," he answered, holding out his hand for it. He had no mind to have his book in any other keeping, for somewhere within its leaves lay a crimson flower.

Before she returned it Virginia examined the back. "Vol. I, what does that mean?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer she tossed it back to him, and ran to join the other pigeons.

From this time Virginia began to be almost as constant a visitor as the Reporter. She had a way of bursting into conversation without any preface whatever, speaking entirely from the fullness of her heart at the moment.

"I'd give anything in the world to be pretty," she remarked one day, resting her school bag on the carriage block and sighing deeply.

"But now honestly," said the Candy Man, regarding her gravely, "it seems to me you are a very nice−looking little girl, and who knows but you may turn out a great beauty some day? That is the way it happens in story books."

Virginia returned his gaze steadily. "Do you really think there is any chance? You are not laughing?"

He assured her he was intensely serious.

"Well, you are the first person who ever told me that. Uncle Harry said, 'Is it possible, Cornelia, that this is your child?' Cornelia is my mother, and she is a beauty. My brother is awfully good looking, too. Everybody thinks he ought to have been the girl. I'll tell you who I want to look like when I grow up. Don't you know that young lady who fell in the mud?"

Oh, yes, the Candy Man knew, and applauded Virginia's ambition. He would have been pleased to enlarge on the subject, even to the extent of neglecting business, but just as she began to be interesting Virginia remembered an errand to the drug store, and ran away.

That Sunday morning meeting with Miss Bentley had been reviewed by the Candy Man from every possible standpoint, and always, in conclusion, with the same questions. Could he have done otherwise? What would she think when she discovered her mistake? Who was his unknown double?

The opportunity offering, he made some guarded inquiries of the Reporter.

"Bentley?" repeated that gentleman, as he sharpened a bright yellow pencil. "Seem to have heard the name somewhere recently."

It was a matter of no particular importance to the Candy Man. He had chanced to hear the name given to the conductor by the young lady who was thrown down the night of the accident, and wondered−−−−

The Reporter, who wasn't listening, here exclaimed: "I have it! It was this A.M. Maimie McHugh was interviewing Mrs. Gerrard Pennington over the office 'phone in regard to a luncheon she is giving this week in honour of her niece. Said niece's name me−thinks was Bentley. You will see it all in the social notes later. Covers for twelve, decorations in pink, La France roses, place cards from somewhere." He paused to laugh. "Maimie was doing it up brown, but she lacks tact. What does she do but ask for Miss Bentley's picture for the Saturday edition! I tried to stop her, but it was too late. You should have heard the 'phone buzz. 'My niece's picture in the *Evening Record*!' 'I don't care, mean old thing,' says Maimie, when she hung up. 'Nicer people than she is do it, and are glad to. 'That's all right, my honey,' I told her, 'but there are nice people and nice people, and it's up to you to know the variety you are dealing with, unless you like to be snubbed.' Still," the Reporter added reflectively, "Mrs. Gerrard Pennington and little McHugh can't afford to quarrel. After the luncheon Mrs. G.P. will probably send Maimie a pair of long white gloves, and when their pristine freshness has departed, Maimie will wear them to the office a time or two."

The Candy Man wished to know who Mrs. Gerrard Pennington was, anyway.

"She, my ignorant friend, is a four−ply Colonial Dame, so to speak. Distinguished grandfathers to burn, and the dough to support them, unlike another friend of mine who possessed every qualification needed to become a C.D. except on the clothes line."

"The joke," observed the Candy Man, "is old, but worth repeating. But did I understand you to say *another* friend? And am I to infer−−−−?"

"You are far too keen for a Candy Man," said the Reporter, laughing. "Mrs. G.P. is friendly with the wealthy branch of our family. She regards my Cousin Augustus as a son. Now I think of it, your Miss Bentley cannot be her niece. She could scarcely fall out of a street car. A victoria or a limousine would be necessary in her case."

The Candy Man did not see his way clear to disclaim proprietorship in Miss Bentley, so let it pass. Certainly, on other grounds his Miss Bentley, to call her so, could not be Mrs. Gerrard Pennington's niece. Not that she lacked the charm to grace any position however high, but her simplicity and friendliness, the fact that she walked in the country with a stoutish relative who was intimate with the family of the park superintendent, the marketing he had witnessed, all went to prove his point.

Yet on the occasion of a fashionable noon wedding at the stone church near the Y.M.C.A. corner, all this impressive evidence was brought to naught. In the crush of machines and carriages the Candy Wagon was all but engulfed in high life. When the crowd surged out after the bridal party, the congestion for a few minutes baffled the efforts of the corps of police.

The Candy Man, looking on with much amusement at the well−dressed throng, presently received a thrill at the sound of a clear young voice exclaiming, "Here is the car, Aunt Eleanor−−over here."

The haughtiest of limousines had taken up its station just beyond the Candy Wagon, and toward this the owner of the voice was piloting a majestic and breathless personage. If the Candy Man could have doubted his ears, he could not doubt his eyes. Here was the grace, the sparkle, the everything that made her his Miss Bentley, the Girl of All Others−−except the grey suit. Now she wore velvet, and wonderful white plumes framed her face and touched her bright hair. No, there was no mistaking her. Reviewing the evidence he found it baffling. That absurd exclamation about lighthouses alone might be taken as indicating an unfamiliarity with the humbler walks of life.

The Reporter was at this time in daily attendance upon a convention in progress in a neighbouring hall, and he rarely failed to stop at the carriage block and pass the time of day on his way to and fro.

"Ah ha!" he exclaimed, on one of these occasions, after perusing in silence the first edition of the _Evening Record_; "I see my Cousin Augustus, on his return from New York, is to give a dinner dance in honour of Mrs. Gerrard Pennington's niece."

"I appreciate your innocent pride in Cousin Augustus, but may I inquire if by chance he possesses another name?" The Candy Man spoke with uncalled−for asperity.

"Sure," responded the Reporter, with a quizzical glance at his questioner; "several of 'em. Augustus Vincent McAllister is what he calls himself every day."

CHAPTER FOUR

In which the Candy Man again sees the Grey Suit, and Virginia continues the story of the Little Red Chimney.

It was Saturday afternoon, possibly the very next Saturday, or at most the Saturday after that, and the Candy Wagon was making money. The day of the week was unmistakable, for the working classes were getting home early; fathers of families with something extra for Sunday in paper bags under their arms. And the hat boxes! They passed the Candy Man's corner by the hundreds. Every feminine person in the big apartment houses must be intending to wear a new hat to−morrow.

There was something special going on at the Country Club−−the Candy Man had taken to reading the social column−−and the people of leisure and semi−leisure were to be well represented there, to judge by the machines speeding up the avenue; among them quite probably Miss Bentley and Mr. Augustus McAllister.

This not altogether pleasing reflection had scarcely taken shape in his mind, when, in the act of handing change to a customer, he beheld Miss Bentley coming toward him; without a doubt his Miss Bentley this time, for she wore the grey suit and the felt hat, jammed down any way on her bright hair and pinned with the pinkish quill. She was not alone. By her side walked a rather shabby, elderly man, with a rosy face, whose pockets bulged with newspapers, and who carried a large parcel. She was looking at him and he was looking at her, and they were both laughing. Comradeship of the most delightful kind was indicated.

Without a glance in the direction of the Candy Wagon they passed. Well, at any rate she wasn't at the Country Club. But how queer!

Earlier in the afternoon Virginia had gone by in dancing−school array, accompanied by an absurdly youthful mother. "I've got something to tell you," she called, and the Candy Man could see her being reproved for this unseemly familiarity.

His curiosity was but mildly stirred; indeed, having other things to think of, he had quite forgotten the incident, when on Monday she presented herself swinging her school bag.

"Say," she began, "I have found out about her Ladyship and the Little Red Chimney."

"Oh, have you?" he answered vaguely.

Virginia, resting her bag on the carriage block, looked disappointed. "I have been crazy to tell you, and now you don't care a bit."

"Indeed I do," the Candy Man protested. "I'm a trifle absent−minded, that's all."

Thus reassured she began: "Don't you know I told you I could see that chimney from our dining−room, and that I was going to watch it? Well, the other day at lunch I happened to look toward the window, and I jumped right out of my chair and clapped my hands and said, 'It's smoking, it's smoking!' There was company, and mother said, 'Good gracious, Virginia! what's smoking? You do make me so nervous!' Then I was sorry I'd said anything, because she wouldn't understand, you know. Well, after lunch I took one of Ted's balls, and went over to Uncle Bob's, and I got a little darkey boy to throw it in the yard, and then I went in to look for it. You see if Uncle Bob wasn't there and anybody asked me what I was doing, I could say I was looking for my brother's ball."

"I fear you are a deep one," remarked the Candy Man.

"No, I'm not, but I'm rather good at thinking of things," Virginia owned complacently. "And then," she continued, "I poked around the rose bush, and peeped in at the window, and sure enough she was there, brushing the hearth. She saw me and came to the window, and when I ran away, 'cause I thought maybe she was mad, she rapped, and then opened the window and called: 'Come in, little girl, and talk to me.' And now who do you think she turned out to be?"

A suspicion had been deepening in the Candy Man's breast for the last few moments. His heart actually thumped. "Not−−you don't mean−−−−?"

Virginia nodded violently. "Yes, the lady who fell and got muddy. And she's perfectly lovely, and I'm going there again. She asked me to."

Why, oh, why should such luck fall to the lot of a long−legged, freckle−nosed little girl, and not to him, the Candy Man wondered. He burned to ask innumerable questions, but compromised on one. Did Virginia know whether or not she had come to stay?

"Why, I guess so. She didn't have her hat on, and she was cleaning up−−dusting, you know, and taking things out of a box."

"What sort of things?"

"Books and sofa pillows and pictures. I helped her, and by and by Uncle Bob came in."

"And what did he say?" asked the Candy Man, just to keep her going.

"Why, he said, didn't he tell me so? And wasn't it great to have her ladyship there?"

"And what did her ladyship say?"

"She said he was a dear, and I forget what else. Oh, but listen! I'll bet you can't guess what her name is."

He couldn't. He had racked his brain for a name at once sweet enough and possessing sufficient dignity. He had not found it for the good reason that no such name has been invented.

"It's a long name," said Virginia, "as long as mine. I am named for my grandmother, Mary Virginia, but they don't call me all of it." She paused to watch two white−plumed masons on their way to the commandery on the next block.

"Well?" said the Candy Man.

She laughed. "Oh, I forgot. Why, it is Margaret Elizabeth. The doctor came in; she's a lady doctor, you know,

and said, 'Margaret Elizabeth, there'll be muffins for tea.' And she said, 'All right. Dr. Prue.' And Dr. Prue said, 'And cherry preserves, if you and Uncle Bob want them,' and Margaret Elizabeth said, 'Goody!' And I must go now," Virginia finished. "There's Betty looking for me."

Virginia might go and welcome. He had enough to occupy his thought for the present. Margaret Elizabeth! Such a name would never have suggested itself to him, yet it suited her. Beneath her young gaiety and charm there was something the name fitted. Margaret Elizabeth! He loved it already.

Why had he not guessed that the Little Red Chimney belonged to her? Had not the sight of it stirred his heart? And why should that have been so, except for some subtle fairy godmother suggestion? The picture of Margaret Elizabeth and Uncle Bob eating cherry preserves was a pleasant one. It brought her nearer. The Candy Man was inclined to like Uncle Bob, to think of him as a broad−minded person whose prejudices against Candy Men, granting he had them, might in time be overcome.

From being a bit low in his mind, the Candy Man's mood became positively jovial. When the sad grey man known to the children as the Miser, and invested with mysterious and awful powers, stopped to buy some hoarhound drops, he wished him a cheery good afternoon.

The Miser was evidently surprised, but responded courteously, and recalling the accident of two weeks ago, asked if the Candy Man had heard anything of the injured chauffeur.

It chanced that he had heard the Reporter say, only yesterday, that the man was doing well and likely to recover.

"And the young lady? I think I saw her the other day going into a house across the street from my own."

"The house with the Little Red Chimney?" asked the Candy Man indiscreetly, forgetting himself for the moment.

A smile slowly dawned on the face of the sad man, but quickly faded, as a flock of naughty pigeons tore by, screaming, "Lizer, Lizer, look out for the Miser!" If he had been about to make a comment, he thought better of it, and turned away.

Having identified the Little Red Chimney as the property of the Girl of All Others, the Candy Man now made a new discovery. He had a room in one of the old residences of the neighbourhood, so many of which in these days were being given over to boarding and lodging. Its windows overlooked a back yard, in which grew a great ash, and he had been interested to observe how long after other trees were bare this one kept its foliage. He found it one morning, however, giving up its leaves by the wholesale, under the touch of a sharp frost; and, wonder of wonders! through its bared branches that magical chimney came into view, with a corner of grey roof.

Not far away rose the big smoke stack belonging to the apartment houses, impressive in its loftiness, but to his fancy the Little Red Chimney held its own with dignity, standing for something unattainable by great smoke stacks, however important.

The Candy Man, it will be seen, did not attempt to reconcile conflicting evidence. He took what suited him and ignored the rest. Was Miss Bentley the niece of Mrs. Gerrard Pennington? She was also the niece of Uncle Bob. Did she ride in haughty limousines? She also rode in street cars. Was she wined and dined by the rich? She also ate muffins and cherry preserves, and brushed up the hearth of the Little Red Chimney.

CHAPTER FIVE

In which the double life led by the heroine is explained, and Augustus McAllister proves an alibi.

"Yes," said Miss Bentley, "I liked him. He turned out to be altogether different from my first impressions. That afternoon at the Country Club he seemed rather stiff−−nice, assured manners, of course, but unresponsive. But then the way in which we bounced in upon each other was enough to break any amount of ice." She laughed at the recollection, clasping her hands behind her head.

Instead of the little grey hat jammed down anyhow, she wore this morning the most bewitching and frivolous of boudoir caps upon her bright head, and a shimmery, lacy empire something, that clung caressingly about her, and fell back becomingly from her round white arms. Miles and miles away from the Candy Wagon was Margaret Elizabeth, who had so recently hobnobbed down the avenue with Uncle Bob.

Mrs. Gerrard Pennington, in a similar garb, leaned an elbow on her desk, a dainty French trifle, and gazed, perhaps a bit wistfully, at Margaret Elizabeth's endearing young charms. "I am delighted that you like Augustus. He is a young man of sterling qualities. His mother and I were warm friends; I take a deep interest in him. Of course he is not showy; perhaps he might be called a little slow; but he is substantial, and while I should be the last to place an undue emphasis upon wealth, one need not overlook its advantages. Augustus has had unusual opportunities."

"Is Mr. McAllister rich?" Margaret Elizabeth dropped her arms in a surprise which in its turn stirred a like emotion in her aunt's breast, for Miss Bentley put rather a peculiar emphasis, it would seem, upon the word rich. "I should never have guessed it," she added.

If Mrs. Pennington had been perfectly honest with herself, she would have perceived that her own surprise indicated a suspicion that minus his wealth the aforesaid sterling qualities were something of a dead weight, but not for worlds would she have owned this. It would be a great thing for Margaret Elizabeth, if she liked him. If she could be the means of establishing dear old Richard's child in a position such as the future Mrs. Augustus would occupy, she would feel she had done her full duty. Mrs. Pennington was strong in the matter of duty.

"I should never have guessed it," Margaret Elizabeth repeated, after a minute spent in a quick review of that talk in the summer house.

"It is not always possible, surely, to gauge a person's bank account in the course of one conversation," her aunt suggested.

"I don't mean that; but don't you think, Aunt Eleanor, you can usually tell very rich people? They are apt to be limited, in a way. Not always, of course, but often. I can't explain it exactly. Perhaps it is over−refined."

"If to be refined is to be limited, I prefer to be limited," Mrs. Pennington remarked.

It was plain that unless Margaret Elizabeth went to the length of retailing the whole of that Sunday morning conversation, which was out of the question, she could not hope to make her meaning clear.

"What surprises me," her aunt went on, "is that you should have met Augustus in a public park. It is very unlike him. I wonder what he thought of you?"

This brought out Miss Bentley's dimples, as she owned he had seemed not displeased to meet her. "I explained that I was waiting for Dr. Prue, who had gone in to see one of the superintendent's children." She further assured her aunt that River Bend Park was a delightful place in which to enjoy nature, on Sunday morning or

any other time.

"I confess I do not choose a public park when I wish to enjoy nature−−except for driving, of course. Perhaps," added Mrs. Pennington, "that is what you call over−refined."

Margaret Elizabeth considered this thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is," she said. "Not being able to enjoy things that are free to everybody."

But Margaret Elizabeth in that frivolously−becoming cap was an antidote to her own remarks. Mrs. Pennington smiled indulgently. Richard's daughter came honestly by some eccentricities, not to mention those Vandegrifts, whose influence she greatly deplored.

"You will outgrow these socialistic ideas, my dear," she said. "But I am still puzzled, the more I think of it, at your meeting Augustus on Sunday morning. Was it two weeks ago? I am under the impression he left for New York that very day."

"He didn't mention it, but there are afternoon trains," answered Margaret Elizabeth. "He merely said something about a sick boy he was going to see at St. Mary's."

This again was very unlike Augustus, but Mrs. Pennington said no more. Meanwhile the faintest shadow of a doubt was dawning in her niece's mind; so shadowy she was scarcely aware of it, until, glowing from her walk across the park, she entered the drawing−room that afternoon.

There is, by the way, a difference between walking in Sunset Park, the abode of the elect, with a huge St. Bernard in leash, and taking the same exercise at River Bend, unchaperoned save by a chance guard. Any right−minded person must see this.

A young man, who sat talking to Mrs. Gerrard Pennington before the fire, rose at her entrance.

"I am glad you have come, Margaret Elizabeth," her aunt exclaimed. "I think you know Mr. McAllister? But we have rather a good joke on you, for August says he was never in his life in River Bend Park."

"How do you do, Miss Bentley. Awfully glad to see you. That is, except to motor through, don't you know, Mrs. Pennington."

Miss Bentley's brown eyes met Mr. McAllister's blue ones, and in the period of one brief glance she experienced almost as many sensations, and reviewed as much past history, as the proverbial drowning man. The casual resemblance was striking. But the eyes−−these were not the friendly, merry eyes to which she had confided the fairy godmother nonsense. Fancy so much as mentioning fairy godmothers in the presence of these steely orbs.

Margaret Elizabeth was game, however.

"I was mistaken, of course," she owned lightly, as she shook hands. "I have met so many people, and am stupid at connecting names and faces. I recall Mr. McAllister perfectly." And straightway she plunged into New York and what was going on there. Had he seen "Grumpy" and wasn't it dear? And so on, and so on. Margaret Elizabeth could talk, and more than this she could look bewitching, and did, when she slipped out of her long coat, and with many graceful upward motions, removed her hat and fluffed her hair.

She would make tea, she loved to, in fact she seemed bent upon luring Augustus away from the fire and Mrs. Pennington. This young gentleman, whose mental processes were not rapid, and who habitually overworked any idea that found lodgment in his mind, was disposed to dwell upon River Bend Park and Miss Bentley's

strange mistake in thinking she had seen him there, when actually, don't you know, he was on his way to New York. It was just as well not to have the situation complicated by the presence of her more alert relative, whose amused glances kept the glow on Margaret Elizabeth's cheek at a most becoming pitch. Perhaps, too, the subconscious thinking concerning that same queer mistake, which went on while she chatted so gaily, so skilfully leading the way to safer ground, had something to do with it.

Augustus, unaware that he was led, was as clay in her hands. He warmed to her expressions of pleasure in the proposed dinner dance, which were indeed entirely genuine. A dance was a dance, and Miss Bentley was young. As she poured tea her curling lashes rested now on her cheek, were now lifted in smiling glances at the complacent Augustus, much as when on a certain Sunday morning, while softly laying bloom against bloom, her eyes had now and again met the eyes of the Candy Man. There were other callers, other tea drinkers, but to none did Mr. McAllister surrender his place of vantage.

"If she keeps on like this, Augustus is hers−−if she wants him," Mr. Gerrard Pennington remarked to his wife later in the evening.

"If I could have her all to myself," Mrs. Pennington sighed; "but any impression I may make is neutralised by her association with those Vandegrifts. It is an absurd arrangement, spending half her time down there."

"I think you are rather in the lead, aren't you, my dear?"

Mrs. Pennington shrugged her shoulders, but there was some triumph in her smile. "She is a dear child, in spite of some absurd notions, and I long to see her well and safely settled. I don't quite know in what her charm most lies, but she has it."

"Oh, it's her youth, and the conviction that it is all so jolly well worth while. She is so keen about everything." There was an odd twinkle in Mr. Pennington's eyes, usually so piercing beneath their bushy grey brows. Margaret Elizabeth called him Uncle Gerry. It was amusing. He liked it, and enjoyed playing the part of Uncle Gerry. "Of course she's bound to get over that. Still, I shouldn't be in any haste to settle her."

His wife thought of her brother, the Professor of Archæology, now in the Far East. "It is queer, but Dick never has," she said, answering the first part of his sentence. But when she spoke again, it was to say energetically: "The Towers needs a mistress, and August is irreproachable. Really, I am devoted to the boy."

Mr. Pennington found this amusing.

"If only it were a colonial house. It is handsome, but I prefer simpler lines," Mrs. Pennington continued meditatively.

The Towers was a combination of feudal castle and Swiss châlet erected thirty years before by the parents of Augustus, and occupying a commanding position on Sunset Ridge. The irreverent sometimes referred to it as the Salt Shakers.

Margaret Elizabeth meanwhile, in the solitude of her own room, was asking herself questions, for which she found no answers.

"Who−−oh, who was this person with the nice friendly eyes that led one on to talk about fairy godmothers?"

She considered it in profound seriousness for a time, then suddenly broke into unrestrained laughter.

CHAPTER SIX

In which Margaret Elizabeth is discussed at the Breakfast Table; in which also, later on, she and Virginia and Uncle Bob talk before the fire, and in which finally Margaret Elizabeth seeks consolation by relating to Uncle Bob her adventure in the park.

"No, she is not regularly beautiful," remarked Dr. Prue in her diagnostician manner as she poured her father's second cup of coffee, "but there is much that is captivating about her. Her hair grows prettily on her forehead, the firmness of her chin, the line of her lips in repose−−−−"

"Mercy on us! You talk like a novel," interrupted Uncle Bob, who was longing to get in an oar. "Now I like her best when she laughs."

"But I was speaking of her face in repose."

"And any way," persisted Uncle Bob, "if she isn't a beauty, I don't know what you call it. She has the witchingest ways!"

"We were speaking of features, not ways. If you dissect her−−−−"

"Good Heavens, Prue! Find another word."

"If you dissect her," the doctor repeated firmly, "you will find nothing remarkable in her separate features."

"But I insist," Uncle Bob spoke in a loud tone, and brought his fist down so emphatically his coffee spilled over into the saucer, "that beauty is a complex thing consisting of ways as well as features." The sentence was concluded in a milder tone, owing to the coffee.

"Nancy, give Mr. Vandegrift another saucer," said Dr. Prue.

"My dear, there is no need. I can pour this back," he protested. Then, a fresh saucer having been substituted, he went on: "Take a landscape−−−−"

"I haven't time for landscapes this morning, father. I am due at the hospital at nine. You'll have to excuse me."

"Well, what I was going to say is, that it is the combination of all her separate qualities and characteristics, manifested in ways and otherwise, that is beautiful−−that constitutes beauty. The something that makes her Margaret Elizabeth, that subtle−−" Uncle Bob was talking against time.

"Now, father," Dr. Prue pushed back her chair and rose, "there is nothing subtle about Margaret Elizabeth, and you know it. She is a thoroughly nice, quite pretty girl, and that is all there is to it. If those Penningtons don't spoil her." With this the doctor disappeared.

"Miss Prue and her pa do argufy to beat the band," Nancy remarked to Jenny the cook as she waited for hot cakes.

"That's all, Nancy. I shan't want any more," her master told her when she carried them into the dining−room. "You needn't wait." As the door closed behind her he smiled to himself. He always enjoyed the leisurely comfort of those last cakes.

The morning sun shone in brightly, emphasising the pleasant, substantial appointments of the room and the breakfast table. Its glint in the old silver coffee pot was a joy to him; the unopened paper at his elbow spoke to

him of the interests of a day, like it, not yet unfolded. Uncle Bob after his own fashion savoured life....

[Illustration: DR. PRUE]

The sun had travelled around the house and was looking in at the west window of the Little Red Chimney Room, when Virginia discovered her ladyship sitting on a low stool by her hearthstone deep in meditation. "I saw the smoke," she announced, "so I thought I'd come over."

"I am glad to see you," Margaret Elizabeth said, waking up. "But what smoke do you mean?" And now it developed that although Miss Bentley was of course aware of the Little Red Chimney, and indeed preferred it red, she had not understood its significance.

In amused interest she listened while Virginia explained. "That dear, ridiculous Uncle Bob!" she cried, hugging her knees. "And what fun, Virginia!"

Virginia nodded. "Like a fairy−tale," she said.

"So it is," Miss Bentley agreed, and became again lost in thought.

From the other side of the hearth Virginia watched her. Her ladyship to−day wore a grey−blue gown with a broad white collar, and she contrasted harmoniously with the soft browns and greens of her surroundings. Uncle Bob should have been there to enjoy the glint of the sunshine in her hair.

It was an unobtrusive room, abounding in pleasant suggestions if you sat still and let them sink in: books around the walls, a few water colours and bits of porcelain, an open piano, a work table, a broad divan with many cushions, ferns in the windows, and the fire.

Virginia, however, saw nothing of this; she was looking at Margaret Elizabeth. "The Candy Man wanted to know where you stayed when you weren't here," she remarked at length.

Miss Bentley came out of her brown study in great surprise. Who in the world was the Candy Man?

"Why, you know the Candy Wagon on the Y.M.C.A. corner! And don't you remember how you fell in the mud, and the Candy Man helped you up, and I gave you your bag, and the Miser was there too?" Virginia spoke in patient toleration of Miss Bentley's strange lapse of memory.

"Naturally I was rather shaken and didn't notice. Was it a Candy Man who picked me up? And a miser, you say?" Chin in hand Margaret Elizabeth regarded her visitor. "It is all very interesting, but why should the Candy Man wish to know about me?"

Virginia owned that she had mentioned the Little Red Chimney to him, and that when the identity of her ladyship had come to light, he had exclaimed, "I might have guessed!"

"Well, really," said Miss Bentley, sitting up very straight, "what business is it of his to be guessing about me?"

"He isn't Irish like Tim," Virginia hastened to assure her. "He's very nice. He's a friend of mine."

Margaret Elizabeth laughed. "That makes it all right, I suppose; and if he picked me up−−But who is the Miser?"

"He lives over there," Virginia pointed toward the front window, "in that stone house with the vine on it. Aleck says he has rooms and rooms full of money."

The house she indicated was almost black with time and soot, but its fine proportions suggested spacious, high−ceiled rooms, and whatever its present condition, a past of dignity and importance.

"How extremely interesting! What a remarkable neighbourhood this seems to be!"

"Is it like a fairy−tale where you stay when you aren't here?" Virginia asked.

Sudden illumination came to Margaret Elizabeth. "That is just what it isn't," she cried. "It's splendid and beautiful, and all sorts of things, except a fairy−tale. I wonder why? I love fairy−tales and Little Red Chimneys."

"So does the Candy Man," exclaimed Virginia, charmed at the coincidence. "It must be fun to be a Candy Man," she continued. "It isn't much like a fairy−tale where I live. I should like to live in a sure−enough house with stairs."

"You talk like a squirrel who lives in a tree. And speaking of squirrels, you and I must buy some nuts for our bunny sometime, from this Candy Man. If he picked me up I suppose I ought to patronise him. All the same, Virginia," and now Miss Bentley spoke with great seriousness, "I wish you not to say anything about me to him. It is rather silly, you know."

Virginia did not know, but she longed to do in every particular what Miss Bentley desired, so she promised.

The opal lights in the western sky were the only reminders left of the sunny day, when Uncle Bob, seated comfortably in the big armchair, listened to Margaret Elizabeth's confession, the flames dancing and curling around a fresh log meanwhile. In size it was but a modest log, for the fireplace was neither wide nor deep like those at Pennington Park, but the Little Red Chimney did its part so merrily and well that upon no other hearth could the flames dance and curl so gaily. At least so it had seemed to Margaret Elizabeth, sitting there chin in hand, after Virginia's departure.

"And you are certain you never met him before?" Uncle Bob ran his fingers through his hair and frowned thoughtfully.

"Perfectly certain. You see the resemblance was remarkable, all but the eyes, and I thought Mr. McAllister had simply waked up. People are sometimes stiff when you first meet them. He knew who I was, for he called me Miss Bentley. Naturally I thought it was some one I had met−−particularly when he mentioned the accident. You see, in getting out of the machine at the Country Club a day or two before I caught my skirt in the door and fell, striking my elbow. It didn't amount to anything, though it hurt for a minute, but Aunt Eleanor made a great fuss. He may have been somewhere about at the time, but I didn't meet him. And it makes me furious," Margaret Elizabeth continued, "when I think of his not telling me."

"Telling you that you didn't know him?" asked Uncle Bob.

"Certainly, he should have said at the very beginning, 'Miss Bentley, you are mistaken in thinking you know me.'"

"Ha! ha!" laughed Uncle Bob.

"Now what are you laughing at?" his niece demanded. "Honestly, don't you think he should have?" But she laughed herself.

"Well, perhaps," he owned, reflecting, however, that if Margaret Elizabeth looked half so alluring that morning as she did now in her grey−blue frock, with her bright hair a bit tumbled, it was asking a good deal of

human nature.

"Now, of course, Uncle Bob, this is strictly confidential. I wouldn't have Dr. Prue know for the world. It is bad enough to have Aunt Eleanor smiling sarcastically, though she doesn't know half. I think I have at length quieted her, and the great Augustus is entirely mollified." She paused to laugh again, then continued tragically, "Sympathy is what I need now. To begin with, it was the most perfect day−−the sort to make you forget tiresome conventions."

Uncle Bob nodded. "Perhaps he forgot, too," he suggested.

Margaret Elizabeth bit her lip. "That's true. I must try to be fair. He had nice eyes, Uncle Bob−−with a twinkle in them." A smile played over her lips, her dimple came and went. She gazed absently at the curling flame. Suddenly she rose from her ottoman, and seated herself bolt upright on the sofa with one of the plumpest cushions behind her. "All the same it was inexcusable in me," she declared sternly.

"What was?" asked her uncle.

"The nonsense I talked. About a Fairy Godmother Society! No doubt he was laughing in his sleeve all the time."

"Oh, I guess not. It sounds quite original and interesting. Have you copyrighted the idea?"

"Uncle Bob, you are a dear. Some time I'll tell you all about it−−when I get over feeling so terribly, if I ever do."

"Now, really," insisted Uncle Bob, "I don't see why you should worry. You are almost certain to meet him again, and−−−−"

"I shall die if I do," Margaret Elizabeth declared; but somehow the assertion failed to ring true.

"From what you have said he is plainly a gentleman, and altogether matters might be worse," Uncle Bob concluded.

Miss Bentley shook her head. "I don't see how they could be," she insisted.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shows how the Candy Wagon is visited in behalf of the Squirrel, and how pride suffers a fall; how Miss Bentley turns to Vedantic Philosophy to drown her annoyance, and discovers how hard it is to forget when you wish to.

"When I reflect upon the small weight attaching to true worth unsupported by personal charm, I am tempted to turn cynic."

Dr. Prue closed her bag with a snap and lifted her arms to adjust a hatpin.

"Youth and beauty take the trick, that's a fact." Uncle Bob laughed as if he found it a delicious comedy.

They stood before the office window. At the gate the Apartment Pigeons were fluttering around Margaret Elizabeth, while her ladyship gravely admonished them for some piece of mischief.

"I believe she is taming the terrors," remarked the doctor.

"She had them all in the other afternoon," said Uncle Bob, "sitting cross−legged on the floor like little Orientals, while she told them stories. Margaret Elizabeth can manage them!" His tone thrilled with pride.

"Yes, and Miss Kitty Molloy will drop anything she has on hand to work for Miss Bentley; the market−man picks out his choicest fruit for her; and so it goes, if you call it managing. Well, I must be off. Good−by."

As Dr. Prue went out, Margaret Elizabeth, having dismissed the pigeons for the time being, came in, and sat down at her desk to finish a letter.

She wrote: "Yes, Uncle Bob and Cousin Prue argue as much as ever, and I suspect that more often than not I am the subject upon which they disagree. I am in a state of disagreement about myself, father dear. Society is absorbing beyond anything I dreamed of, and if I had not promised you to stop and think for at least ten minutes out of the fourteen hundred and forty, I fear I should have already become a real Society Person."

At this point Uncle Bob looked in. "Well, how many parties on hand now?" he asked.

Margaret Elizabeth laid down her pen and counted them off on her fingers, beginning with a tea at five, theatre and supper afterward, and so on, till the supply of fingers threatened to become exhausted.

"Go on, I'll lend you mine," said Uncle Bob. "Prue says," he added, "that it is enough to kill you, but you look pretty strong."

"She wouldn't mind if I worked my fingers to the bone for her hospital or the Suffrage Association, but I want a little fun first, Uncle Bob." Margaret Elizabeth supported an adorable chin in a pink palm and regarded her relative appealingly.

"That's what I tell Prue. It is natural you should like best to stay at Pennington Park, and go about in a splendid machine. I don't blame you in the least, and I don't wish you to feel bound to come down here when you don't really care to. Much as I love to have you, I shall not be hurt." Uncle Bob nodded at Margaret Elizabeth with a reassuring smile that in spite of intentions was a bit wistful too.

"I don't believe you understand, and for that matter, neither do I. I love you best, and the Little Red Chimney, and this darling room. There aren't any fairies at Pennington Park, but−−I do like the whirl, the fun, the pretty things, and−−−−"

"The admiration, Margaret Elizabeth; out with it. You'll feel better," said Uncle Bob.

"Well, yes, people *do* like me, and oh, I must show you something!" She sprang up, and from a box lying on the sofa she took a filmy, rose−coloured fabric. "What do you think of this?" she demanded, shaking out the shimmering folds before his surprised eyes.

He rose nobly to the occasion. "Why, it looks like a sunset cloud. Is it to wear?"

"Certainly. It is a pattern robe. Miss Kitty across the street is going to put it together for me. She is a genius. Sunset cloud is very poetic. Thank you, Uncle Bob. And now I must finish my letter before I go over to Miss Kitty's, and then I promised the children I'd go with them to buy some nuts for the squirrel. A bunny who has the courage to live so far downtown should be rewarded. I wish you had been here, Uncle Bob, to join our society." Margaret Elizabeth sat down with the rosy cloud all about her, and laughed at the recollection. "Never again will they throw a stone at his bunnyship. We laid our hands together so, and swore by the paw of the cinnamon bear and the ear of the tailless cat, to take the part of our brother beasts and birds. It was all on

the spur of the moment, or I might have done better, but they were impressed."

[Illustration: UNCLE BOB]

"I should think so, indeed," remarked her uncle. "You are a sort of philanthropist after all."

"Yes, I have a very marked bump. That reminds me, if I don't see Dr. Prue, you tell her, please, that I am going to take Augustus McAllister to the Suffrage meeting."

Having returned her robe to its box, Miss Bentley sat down at her desk and wrote furiously for five minutes, then folded her letter, put it in the envelope, and addressed, stamped, and sealed it, concluding the business with a resolute fist. Shortly after, in the familiar grey suit, with the little grey hat jammed down anyhow on her bright hair, she went forth, the box containing the sunset cloud under her arm.

Homage and admiration attended upon her within Miss Kitty's humble establishment, and waited outside in the persons of the adoring pigeons. Virginia, having been unable to keep the story of the Little Red Chimney to herself, must now in consequence share her ladyship with the flock. But certain privileges were hers−−to walk next to Miss Bentley and clasp her disengaged hand; to carry her bag or book; to act as her prime minister in keeping order.

Thus Miss Bentley went her triumphant way that afternoon, all unconscious that there was any triumph about it. Not that she was wholly unaware of her own charm. As she confessed to Uncle Bob, she knew people liked her, and the knowledge was pleasing. She was now on her way to be gracious to the Candy Man, and in this connection she had rehearsed a neat little scene in which she stood by and allowed the children to make their purchases, and then at the right moment asked easily if there had been any more accidents on the corner of late, adding something about his kindness in helping her up, and so on. The Candy Man would of course touch his cap, for from Virginia's account he was rather a nice Candy Man, and reply, "Not at all, Miss," or "That's all right"; then she would smile upon him and the incident would be closed.

The first half of the scene went off perfectly. The Candy Man was selling taffy to a nurse−maid when they approached, and if he saw who was coming, and if his heart was in his mouth, and if he felt a wild longing to escape from the Candy Wagon, he gave no sign. To Margaret Elizabeth, as they waited, he was a Candy Man in white jacket and cap, and nothing more.

The pigeons fluttered joyously. Miss Bentley uttered an impersonal good afternoon, Virginia advanced, a silver quarter in her palm, and demanded chestnuts for the squirrel. The bag was filled and held out to her, and as she handed over the quarter in exchange she explained, gratuitously, "We'll perhaps eat *some* of them ourselves."

At this the Candy Man looked up with a smile in his eyes, and met the glance of Miss Bentley, who immediately forgot all she had intended to say, for these were the eyes that were not the eyes of Augustus. There was no excuse for arguing the question. She knew it.

The point was, after all, Margaret Elizabeth concluded in the solitude of her own hearth−stone, not whether she had been equal to the occasion to−day−−and she hadn't−−but that he on a former occasion had been guilty of base behaviour. If this were a real Candy Man, one might excuse him, but he plainly was not. There was a mystery, and she loathed mysteries. She was annoyed to the point of exasperation. She would dismiss him from her mind now and forever.

Uncle Bob, reading the evening paper in the dining−room while Nancy set the table, admitting as she passed back and forth an occasional savoury odor from the kitchen region, became aware of sounds in the hall which betokened some one descending the stairs in haste. The next moment Margaret Elizabeth stood in the

doorway.

"Uncle Bob," she said, as she drew a long white glove over her elbow, her face shadowed by her plumy hat, "you remember you said it might be worse, and I insisted it couldn't be? You were right, it is infinitely worse."

With this she was gone, and a premonitory buzz of great dignity and reserve from the street presently indicated that she was being borne away in the Pennington car.

And now it was that Miss Bentley discovered how impossible it is to forget when you wish to. You may assist a treacherous memory with a memorandum, but no corresponding resource offers when you wish to forget. You may succeed in diverting your thoughts for a time, but sooner or later, ten to one, in the most illogical manner, the very thing you seek to avoid forces itself upon your attention. What could have seemed further away from the Candy Man than ancient Hindoo Philosophy? And into this she plunged to drown her annoyance, and incidentally help a fellow member of the Tuesday Club. Margaret Elizabeth was ever ready to fill in a breach, and when Miss Allen came to her in despair, having been positively forbidden to use her eyes, she obligingly agreed to help her.

The subject grew, as all subjects have a way of doing. It was a providential ordering, Uncle Bob remarked, enabling the writers of papers to take refuge from criticism in the impressive statement that it is impossible to treat of the matter adequately in so short a space. Margaret Elizabeth laughed, and crossed out a paragraph at the bottom of her first page, and then set out for the Public Library.

Seated in the Reference Room, with more books than she could read in a year on the table before her, behold Miss Bentley presently inconsolable for lack of a certain authority she chanced to remember in the college library at home. The whole force of the Reference Room mourned with her, for Margaret Elizabeth in the part of earnest student was no less captivating than in her other roles.

"I know where there is a copy," said the youngest and wisest of the force, "but it won't do you any good. Mr. Knight, the man the children call the Miser, has one."

"I'll go and ask him to let me see it. I'd like to know a real live miser." Margaret Elizabeth closed the book she had in hand and rose.

The force gasped at her temerity. They had heard he was a horrid old man; but the youngest observed wisely that probably he wouldn't bite.

Miss Bentley, however, having recently developed a bump of discretion, did first consult Dr. Prue in the matter, who responded, "Why certainly, I see no objection to your asking to see the book. Mr. Knight is a harmless, studious man. I have met him on two occasions when I was called in to attend his housekeeper, Mrs. Sampson, and he was courtesy itself. I will go with you and introduce you, if you like."

Virginia, hanging around and overhearing, begged to be allowed to go too. "I'd love to see the inside of his house," she urged.

She was assured she would find it stupid, but this was as nothing compared with the glory of entering the abode of the Miser in company with her ladyship, and the other pigeons looking enviously on outside.

Dr. Prue, of course, had no time to waste, so Margaret Elizabeth hastened to find her pad and pencil, and across the street they went forthwith. The Miser was discovered in his library, a spacious, shabby room, yet not too shabby for dignity, full of valuable and even rare things, such as old prints and engravings, and most of all of books, which overflowed their shelves in a scholarly disorder not unfamiliar to Margaret Elizabeth.

With businesslike brevity Dr. Vandegrift presented her cousin and her credentials to Mr. Knight, who, with a quaint and formal courtesy, was happy to oblige the daughter of an author so distinguished in his chosen field.

Miss Bentley in her turn presented, with suitable gravity, Miss Virginia Brooks, who promised to be quiet as a mouse, and whose eyes betrayed her disappointment on discovering the inside of the Miser's house to be so much like any other.

After the necessary stir attending upon the finding of the desired volume, and getting settled to work, profound quiet again rested upon the library. Margaret Elizabeth wrote busily, her book propped upon a small stand before her, while across the room Virginia softly turned the leaves of a huge volume of engravings, pausing now and then to rest her cheek in her palm and regard the Miser steadily for a moment.

The master of the library had the air of having forgotten their presence altogether. Aided by a microscope, with a grave absorbed face, he studied and compared a series of prints spread before him. So quiet was it all, that the crackle and purr of the coal fire in the old−fashioned grate made itself quite audible, and the leisurely tick of the clock in the hall marked time solemnly.

Margaret Elizabeth's interest in Vedantic Philosophy began after a time to wane, and she allowed her attention to wander about the room, from object to object, until it concentrated upon the student himself. Was he really a miser? she wondered. He did not look it. His was rather the face of an ascetic. Suddenly it flashed into her mind that here was the sad, grey man of that unforgettable conversation in the park.

Virginia slipped down and came to her side. "Is there really a room full of gold?" she whispered.

Margaret Elizabeth shook her head sternly. It was time they were going. Her hand was tired. She would ask permission to come again. As she returned her book to the shelf, she displaced a smaller one, a shabby leather−bound book, at which she scarcely glanced, but upon which Virginia seized.

"The Candy Man has one like this," she said. "Such a funny name! See? Only his is Vol. one and this is Vol. two."

Miss Bentley cared not at all what strange books the Candy Man owned, and said so, frowning so severely you could scarcely have believed her to be the same person who only a few minutes later was thanking the Miser with such alluring grace of manner.

She was welcome to come when she chose, she was assured, with grave politeness. His library was at her disposal.

"You have many beautiful things," said Margaret Elizabeth. "This portrait above the mantel, for instance, seems to me very interesting."

The portrait in question was rather a splendid one of a military−looking man probably in his thirties. One of the best examples of Jouett's work it was generally considered, Mr. Knight explained, and said to have been an admirable likeness of his uncle, General Waite, at the time it was painted.

It was inexplicable that as Margaret Elizabeth gazed up at the general the eyes beneath the stern brows should become the eyes of the Candy Man. But her exasperation at this absurd illusion passed quickly into horrified embarrassment, when Virginia, edging toward the master of the house, asked explosively, "Say, have you really got a room full of gold?"

"There is one thing certain, you can never go there with me again," said Miss Bentley, on their way across the street.

"But Aleck said−−−−" began the culprit.

"Never mind what he said. Aleck is a very ignorant little boy. People don't keep gold in rooms. If they have it they put it in the bank or send it to the mint."

CHAPTER EIGHT

In which the Miser's past history is touched upon; which shows how his solitude is again invaded, and how he makes a new friend.

"There isn't any mystery about *him*, so far as I know," said the Reporter, who was seated as usual upon the carriage block. The Candy Wagon continued to act as a magnet for him, and in season and out his genial presence confronted the Candy Man.

If his emphasis upon the pronoun was noticed, it was ignored. The mystery was, the Candy Man replied, how with such a face he could be a miser.

"Oh, he's a bit nutty, of course. My grandmother says his money came to him unexpectedly and the shock was too much for him. They say he has a notion he is holding it in trust. He is rational enough in every other way, a shrewd investor, in fact. His uncle, General Waite, who left him the money, was a connection of my grandmother's."

"The Miser is a cousin then?"

"Not on your tintype, my friend. Old Knight was a nephew of the general's wife, you see."

"And there were no other heirs?" asked the Candy Man.

"There was an own nephew, I have heard, who mysteriously disappeared shortly before the general's death. I have heard my grandmother mention it, but it was long before my day. Why are you interested?"

Even to himself the Candy Man could not quite explain his interest in this sad and lonely man, except that, as he had told Miss Bentley in their first and only conversation, he had a habit of getting interested in people. For example, in the house where he roomed there was a young couple who just now engaged his sympathies. The husband, a teacher in the Boys' High School, had been ill with typhoid, and the little wife's anxious face haunted the Candy Man. The husband was recovering, but of course the long illness had overtaxed their small resources, and−−But, oh dear! weren't there hundreds of such cases? What was the good of thinking about it! Yet suppose there were a Fairy Godmother Society?

The Candy Man was a foolish dreamer, and his favourite dream in these days was of some time sitting beside the Little Red Chimney hearth, and discussing the Fairy Godmother Society with Miss Bentley. These bright dreams, however, were interspersed by moments of extreme depression, in which he cursed the day upon which he had become a Candy Man; moments when the horrified surprise in the eyes of Miss Bentley as she recognised him, rose up to torment him.

It was in one of these that the Reporter had presented himself this time, and when he was gone the Candy Man returned to his gloom. Having nothing else to do just then he opened the shabby book with the funny name, and looked at the crimson flower. Through the stain of the flower he read:

"If a person is fearful and abject, what else is necessary but to apply for permission to bury him as if he were dead."

The book had come into his possession by a curious chance not long before, and he treasured it, not so much for its sturdy philosophy, as because it was in some sort a link to the shadowy past of his early childhood.

The adjectives "fearful" and "abject" brought him up short. What manner of man was he to be so quickly overwhelmed by difficulties? As for being a Candy Man, did he not owe to this despised position his good fortune in meeting Miss Bentley at all?

Somewhere about eight o'clock the next evening, being Sunday, he might have been seen strolling by the house of the Little Red Chimney. That particular architectural feature had lost its identity in the shades of evening, but he was indulging the characteristic desire of a lover to gaze at his lady's window under the kindly cover of the night.

The blind was drawn within a few inches of the sill, but these inches allowed him a glimpse of a blazing fire, and while he lingered a shadow flitted across the curtain in its direction, and then another, until in his mind's eye he beheld Margaret Elizabeth and Uncle Bob seated beside the hearth. For aught he knew, it might be Augustus McAllister making an evening call, but the Candy Man was just then too determinedly optimistic to harbour such an idea.

[Illustration: THE MISER]

As he passed on he was occupied in trying to picture to himself her ladyship sitting before her fire, but that familiar little grey hat, which was so entirely inappropriate, would persist, in spite of all he could do, in getting into the picture. Only once, when curling plumes took its place, had he seen her without it, and though for an instant he would succeed in removing it, presto! before he knew it, there it was again, jammed down anyhow on her bright hair.

With odds in favour of the hat, the struggle came to a sudden pause at sight of a tall figure leaning heavily and in evident pain against one of the ornamental iron fences which prevailed along this street. At once proffering his assistance, he recognised Mr. Knight, the Miser.

It was plain the sufferer would have preferred to decline help. It would soon pass. It was nothing. He had had such attacks before. He spoke brokenly, adding, "I thank you," in a tone of dismissal.

The Candy Man showed himself to be, when occasion demanded, a masterful person. Without arguing the point, he supported the Miser with a firm arm and began to urge him in the direction of his home. Mr. Knight, half fainting as he was, submitted without a word until his door was reached; then, there being no response to his companion's vigorous ring, he murmured something about the servants having gone, and began to fumble in his pocket.

The Candy Man, taking the latch key from his trembling fingers, opened the door, and ignoring the evident expectation conveyed in his renewed thanks, continued to assert authority, supporting the invalid into his library. "I shall not leave you alone until you are relieved," he said.

Again Mr. Knight submitted to his captor's will, and lying back in his arm−chair directed him to the restorative that was prescribed for these seizures. When it had been administered he lay quiet with closed eyes.

The Candy Man now turned his attention to the fire, which had burned low, coaxing it skilfully out of its sullen apathy. He was brushing up tidily, when Mr. Knight, to whose face the colour was returning, spoke.

"You are very kind," he said, adding as the Candy Man felt his pulse and nodded his satisfaction, "are you a physician?"

"No," was the smiling answer. "Merely something of a nurse. My father was an invalid for some years."

The sick man said "Ah!" his eyes resting, perhaps a little wistfully, upon the vigorous young fellow before him. "Don't let me keep you," he added. "I am quite relieved, and my housekeeper will return very shortly from church."

Instead of leaving him the Candy Man sat down. "I have nothing to do this evening, Mr. Knight, and unless you turn me out forcibly I mean to stay with you till some member of your household comes in."

"I fear my strength is hardly equal to turning you out," the Miser replied with a smile. "You are most kind." Then after a pause he added apologetically: "Will you kindly tell me your name? Your face is familiar, but my memory is at fault."

"My name is Reynolds, Robert Reynolds, and I am at present conducting a candy wagon on the Y.M.C.A. corner. That is where you have seen me." He had no mind to sail under false colours again.

The sick man's "Indeed!" was spoken with careful courtesy, but his surprise was plain enough.

The Candy Man leaned forward, an arm on his crossed knee; his eyes met those of the older man frankly. "It is not my chosen profession," he said. "I happened to be free to follow any chance impulse, and the opportunity offered to help in this way a friend in need. It may have been foolish. I am alone in the world, and entirely unacquainted here. I should not care for the permanent job, but there's more in it than you would suppose. More enjoyment, I mean."

"I recall now you mentioned the Little Red Chimney," said Mr. Knight.

The Candy Man grew red. Why had he been so imprudent? The Miser's memory certainly might be worse.

"And now I know why your face is so familiar," the invalid went on. "I sat opposite to you in the car going to the park one Sunday morning. My physician prescribes fresh air. And later I saw you with that bright−faced young girl, Miss Bentley. You were talking together in the pavilion near the river. You both seemed exceedingly merry. I envied you. I seemed to realise how old and lonely I am. I think I envied you her friendship."

"Your impression is natural," answered the Candy Man, "but the truth is I do not know Miss Bentley. We met unexpectedly in the pavilion that morning. I did not at the time realise it, I was unpardonably dense, but she took me for some one else. On the occasion of the accident that foggy evening−−you perhaps remember it−−I overheard the name she gave to the conductor. Well, it seems she had no idea she was talking to a Candy Man that morning in the park, and I should have known it."

The Miser leaned his head on a thin hand, and certainly there was nothing sordid, nothing mean, in the eyes which looked so kindly at his companion. It was not perhaps a strong face, nor yet quite a weak one; rather it indicated an over−sensitive, brooding nature. "You will not always be a Candy Man," he said. "I have made Miss Bentley's acquaintance recently. She is friendliness itself."

At this moment a grey slip of a woman, with a prayer−book in her hand, entered, and was presented as Mrs. Sampson, the housekeeper. The Candy Man rose to go, but Mr. Knight seemed now in no haste to release him.

"I should be glad to see you again, if some evening you have nothing better to do," he said. "You may perhaps be interested in some of my treasures." He glanced about the room. "You say you too are alone in the world?"

"Quite," the Candy Man answered. "Everyone I know has some relative, or at least an hereditary friend, but

owing to the peculiar circumstances of my life, I have none. I do not mean I am friendless, you understand. I have some school and college friends, good ones. It is in background I am particularly lacking," he concluded.

"I have allowed my friends to slip away from me," confessed the Miser. "It was the force of circumstances in my case, too, though I brought it upon myself. I have been justly misunderstood."

"'Justly misunderstood.'" The Candy Man repeated the words to himself as he walked home in the frosty night. They were strange words, but he did not believe them irrational.

CHAPTER NINE

Shows how Miss Bentley and the Reporter take refuge in a cave, and how in the course of the conversation which follows, she hears something which disposes her to feel more kindly toward the Candy Man; shows also how Uncle Bob proves faithless to his trust, and his niece finds herself locked out in consequence.

"Let's pretend we are pursued by wild Indians and take refuge in this cave."

The scene was one of those afternoon crushes which everybody attends and few enjoy. Miss Bentley, struggling with an ice, which the state of the atmosphere rendered eminently desirable, and the density of the crowd made indulgence in precarious, addressed her next neighbour, whom she had catalogued as a nice, friendly boy. "It's Mr. Brown, isn't it?" she added in triumph at so easily associating the name with the face.

The young man's beaming countenance showed his delight. "Good for you, Miss Bentley! It would be great. Let me have your plate while you squeeze in."

This corner behind a mass of greens seemed to have been left with the intention of protecting an elaborate cabinet that occupied a shallow recess. However it might be, here was a refuge, difficult of access, but possible. Margaret Elizabeth held on to her hat and dived in.

"Grand!" she cried. "This is beyond my wildest hopes," and she perched herself on a short step−ladder, left here no doubt by the decorators, and held out her hands for the plates. Mr. Brown found a more lowly seat beneath a bay tree. They looked at each other and laughed.

"My position is a ticklish one, so to speak," he observed, vainly trying to dodge the palm leaves to the right of him; "but I think we are reasonably safe from pursuit."

"I haven't the remotest idea where my aunt is," Margaret Elizabeth remarked, eating her ice in serene unconcern.

"Say, Miss Bentley, I have heard my cousin speak of you−−Augustus McAllister, you know."

"Are you Mr. McAllister's cousin?" Miss Bentley's tone and smile left it to be inferred that this fact above any other was a passport to her favour. It must be regretfully recognised, however, that it would have been the same if Mr. Brown had mentioned the market−man.

Having thus successfully established his claim to notice, the Reporter, as was his custom, went on to explain that he belonged to the moneyless branch of the family.

Margaret Elizabeth assured him, in a grandmotherly manner, that it was much better for a young man to have his way to make in the world than to have too much money.

The Reporter owned this seemed to be the consensus of opinion. How the strange notion had gained such vogue he could not understand, but there was no use kicking when you were up against it.

"Of course, it must be hard work, but it must be interesting. Don't you have exciting experiences?" Miss Bentley asked.

Oh, he had, certainly, and met such queer people, too. There was a fellow who ran a Candy Wagon on the Y.M.C.A. corner, for instance. "You ought to meet him, really, Miss Bentley, though, of course, you couldn't very well. He's a character, and I have puzzled my brains to discover what he's doing it for."

Miss Bentley was interested and requested further enlightenment.

"Well, I have two theories in regard to him. He is an educated man, and a gentleman, so far as I can tell, and I think he is either studying some social problem, or he is a detective on some trail."

"I never thought−−−−" began Margaret Elizabeth. "I mean," hastily correcting herself, "I should never have thought of such an explanation."

"He's up to something, you may be sure," Mr. Brown continued. "I like to talk to him, and do, every chance I get."

Margaret Elizabeth certainly showed a flattering interest in all the Reporter had to say. "Some day when you have become a great editor," she assured him at parting, "I shall refer proudly to the afternoon when we sat together in a cave and ate ice cream."

"Oh, now, Miss Bentley," the Reporter protested in some embarrassment, "I'm sure I shall always think of it with pride, whatever I get to be, though that probably won't be much."

This conversation was not without its influence upon Miss Bentley's subsequent attitude toward the Candy Man. That some one else had found him a unique and interesting personality was reassuring, and the thought that he might be engaged on some secret mission was novel and suggestive. She began to reconsider and readjust, and in future, although she still avoided the Y.M.C.A. corner, she allowed her thoughts to turn once in a while in that direction.

Meanwhile she paid two more visits to the Miser's library, on these occasions laying deliberate siege to his reserve with all the charm of her bright friendliness. She asked questions about his beloved prints; intelligent questions, for Margaret Elizabeth had grown up in an atmosphere of appreciation for things rare and fine. She chatted about her father and his work, and even ventured some wise advice about fresh air and its tonic effect. Indeed, it is a cause for wonder that she was able at the same time to collect the material which took shape later in that most erudite paper.

Under this invasion of youth and gaiety, the sombre, student atmosphere became charged with a new, electric current. It was not owing solely to Miss Bentley, however, for Sunday evening now frequently found the Candy Man dropping in sociably to chat with Mr. Knight in his library.

In these days the Miser often sat leaning his head on his hand, a meditative, half whimsical expression on his face, as if he found both wonder and amusement in the chance that had so strangely brought these young people across his threshold.

One Sunday afternoon the Pennington motor, having deposited Margaret Elizabeth at the Vandegrift gate, with a scornful snort went on its swift way to more select regions. It was the first really cold weather of the season, and while she waited at the door Margaret Elizabeth examined the thermometer, and then buried her

nose in her muff. "Dear me!" she exclaimed impatiently. "Why doesn't somebody come?"

She rang again with no uncertain touch upon the button this time, and then, crunching across the frozen grass, peeped in at her own window, where a glimpse of smouldering fire rewarded her. She returned to the door to ring and rap, still with no response.

This was a most unusual state of affairs, for it was an inexorable decree of Dr. Prue's that the telephone must never be left alone. Somebody must have gone to sleep. The cold and the darkness deepened and it became more and more evident that she was locked out. What should she do? After canvassing the situation thoroughly, she could think of nothing for it but to seek refuge with the Miser. Her acquaintance in the neighbourhood was limited. Miss Kitty the dressmaker had gone to vespers, and her cottage was dark. The apartment house was too far away. From the Miser's library she could watch for the light which would betoken the waking up of the delinquent one. So across the street, her nose in her muff, ran Margaret Elizabeth.

The little housekeeper, Mrs. Sampson, who opened the door, was all solicitude. Such a cold evening to be locked out! She knew Mr. Knight would be glad to have her wait in the library. He had stepped out for a little walk, though she had warned him it was too cold. Thus saying, Mrs. Sampson ushered her in, and followed to see if the fire was all it should be.

It was, for the Candy Man had just given it a vigorous poking and put on fresh coal. The room was full of its pleasant light.

Mrs. Sampson was surprised to find him there. "Miss Bentley, this is Mr. Reynolds, a friend of Mr. Knight's," she explained, adding that Miss Bentley was locked out, and wished to sit by the window and watch for her uncle to come back. "And if you'll excuse me, Miss Bentley, the cook has her Sunday evenings out, and I get supper myself," she added as she withdrew.

Margaret Elizabeth and the Candy Man faced each other in silence for a second or two, then she said, very gravely indeed, "I am glad to meet you, Mr. Reynolds."

"Thank you, Miss Bentley. May I give you a chair?" he asked.

"Thank you, I will sit here by the window." The window was some distance from the fire, but as she sat down Margaret Elizabeth loosened her furs as if she felt its heat.

The Candy Man waited, uncertain what course he should pursue.

"Please sit down, Mr. Reynolds. I should like to talk to you, now the opportunity has so unexpectedly offered." She regarded him still seriously, her hands clasped within her large muff. "I think you owe me an explanation."

"I am not sure I understand." The Candy Man's heart was beating in an absurd and disconcerting way, but he would keep his head and follow her lead.

"Of course you are aware that you allowed me to talk to you that morning in the park, in a−−most unsuitable manner, without even−−−−"

"How could I?" cried the Candy Man entreatingly. "I did not know."

"Did not know what?" demanded Miss Bentley sternly, as he hesitated.

"I thought perhaps−−I was dreadfully lonely, you see, and I thought−−it was preposterous−−but I hoped you−−don't you see?−−didn't mind talking to an unknown Candy Man."

"Oh! was that it?" exclaimed Margaret Elizabeth in a tone difficult to interpret. Did she think it preposterous, or not? It seemed to indicate she found something preposterous. "Then you were disappointed in me," she added.

Never would the Candy Man admit such a thing. He had realised since then what a cad he must have seemed, but−−−−

"That, however, is neither here nor there," she continued, "since I did not recognise you. It was−−−−"

"Preposterous?" he suggested.

"Yes, preposterous, to suppose that I could. Why, it was nearly dark that afternoon, and I−−−−"

"Please don't rub it in. I know. You see I knew you so well."

"Me?" cried Margaret Elizabeth.

"I had seen you pass, I mean."

Again Miss Bentley said "Oh!" adding: "You are also the person who laughed when I made an idiotic remark about lighthouses in the grocery."

The Candy Man protested. He had not laughed.

"Your eyes laughed. That is how I first discovered my mistake. Your resemblance to Mr. McAllister is remarkable."

"So I have been told." The Candy Man shrugged his shoulders, ever so little.

"However, to go back, I think you owe me an explanation, Mr. Reynolds, considering how you allowed me to talk to you under a false impression. I am not absolutely lacking in grey matter," she added, while a smile curled her lips, "and I think you owe it to me to tell me why you became a Candy Man."

"In return for the Fairy Godmother idea?" he asked mischievously.

Miss Bentley's brows drew together. "If you knew how bitterly I have regretted all the foolish things I said that day, you would not laugh," she cried.

"Do not say that, please, Miss Bentley. I beg your pardon, and I am not laughing. I could not. If you only knew what it all meant to me. How I−−−−"

His distress was so genuine that Margaret Elizabeth was touched. "Well, never mind now. It can't be helped, and I am willing to have it in return for the Fairy Godmother nonsense, if you choose to put it so."

And now perforce the Candy Man must explain himself.

"You see," he began, "I had been knocked out of everything through a bad accident that occurred at my home near Chicago−−a runaway. Speaking of grey matter, there was some doubt for a time whether mine was not permanently injured. However, I gradually recovered, but I was still forbidden for another six months at least

to do any brain work, and ordered by my doctor to loaf in the fresh air. Doing nothing when you are longing to get to work is no easy job. I left home with the intention of going South, and stopped off here for no particular reason. Perhaps I should have said that I have no family. My father died something over a year ago. Oddly enough, in front of the station here I met an Irish woman, once a servant in my father's house. She was overjoyed to see me, and poured out her troubles. Her son, who ran a candy wagon, had been taken ill with fever, and his employers would not promise to keep the place for him, and altogether she was in hard lines, this boy being the main support of a large family. So now you see how the idea occurred to me. To amuse myself and keep the boy's place. And having no family or friends to be disgraced−−−−"

"No one has intimated there was any disgrace about it," Miss Bentley interrupted. "At worst it can be called eccentric. It was also very, very kind."

"Oh, now, Miss Bentley, thank you, but I can't let you overrate that. Any help I have given was merely by the way. You must remember I was in need of some occupation, and I assure you it has been very much of a lark."

"Yes?" said Miss Bentley. "Then no doubt before long you will be writing 'The Impressions of a Candy Man,' or 'Life as Seen from a Candy Wagon.' It will be new."

"Thanks for the suggestion, I'll consider it. But for the chance that made me a Candy Man I should have missed a great deal−−for one thing, a realisation of the opportunity that awaits the Fairy Godmother Society."

"But Tim will soon be about again," said Margaret Elizabeth.

"Then I must look out for another job; but your remark implies some further knowledge of Tim. I was not aware I had mentioned his name even."

Miss Bentley bit her lip, then decided to smile frankly. "I met Tim the other day," she said. "My cousin, Dr. Vandegrift, often visits St. Mary's, and I sometimes go with her. Tim is a nice boy, and full of praises for the kind gentleman who has done so much for him."

"And also, let me add, for the lovely young lady who gave him a red rose, and−−−−"

Margaret Elizabeth laughed. There was no getting ahead of this Candy Man. Had he known all along, or had he just guessed? "I see a light at last," she said, rising. "I must go, or they will be wondering what has become of me." ...

"Yes, I know it was my afternoon in," said Uncle Bob plaintively, while Margaret Elizabeth made toast at the grate and Dr. Prue set the table. "I merely ran over to the drug store for a second, but Barlow was there and I got to talking."

"It is quite unnecessary to explain, but I do wish, father, you would refrain from speaking as if you were required to stay in. It was your own proposition to let Nancy go. I could have made other arrangements." Dr. Prue was aggrieved. There was no telling how many telephone calls had been unanswered.

Margaret Elizabeth laughed. "You are absolutely untrustworthy, Uncle Bob. Hereafter I shall carry a latch key."

"By the way, who was that young man who brought you home?" the doctor asked.

"His name is Reynolds. He is a stranger here. I have met him once or twice." This casual explanation was accompanied by side glances which indicated to Uncle Bob that there was more in it than appeared on the

surface.

Margaret Elizabeth had been extremely reserved upon the subject of the Candy Man. Uncle Bob had not heard a word of it till now, when, beside the Little Red Chimney hearth, supper having been cleared away, and Dr. Prue resting with a book on the office lounge, she told him the whole story.

"You don't say so! That beats anything I ever heard. Well, I said it would come out all right, didn't I?" Margaret Elizabeth's narrative was punctured, as Mrs. Partington would have said, with many exclamations such as these.

"I own you were right. It isn't as bad as it seemed. He is really very gentlemanly and nice. Still, it is a bit awkward too," she added thoughtfully.

It is possible she was thinking of Mrs. Gerrard Pennington at the moment.

CHAPTER TEN

In which the Little Red Chimney keeps Festival, and the Candy Man receives an unexpected Invitation.

The Candy Man, letting himself in at his lodging house, one gloomy Sunday afternoon, stumbled upon a deputation of pigeons, in a state of fluttering impatience.

"She said to wait, and we thought you were never, never coming!" was their chorus.

"Never is a long day," said the Candy Man. "What will you have?"

It appeared they were the bearers of a missive which read briefly and to the point: "Her ladyship requests the pleasure of the Candy Man's presence at the Pigeons' Christmas Tree, at four o'clock this afternoon."

It had seemed to the Candy Man that he was altogether outside the holiday world, that for him Christmas had ended with his visit to the hospital that afternoon. He had ventured to send a basket of fruit to his fellow lodgers, the invalid professor and his wife, and had played Santa Claus to two or three newsboys who frequented the Y.M.C.A. corner and to the small Malones, and the state of his exchequer scarcely warranted anything more. The social calendar in the morning paper overflowed with festivities for the week, and he had pleased his fancy by picturing Miss Bentley, radiant and lovely, in the midst of them. He, the lonely Candy Man, without the pale, could yet enjoy her pleasure in imagination. And lo! this lonely Candy Man was bidden to a tree on Christmas Eve, by her ladyship. He could not believe his eyes.

"It takes you a long time to read it," said Virginia. "You'd better come. It's late."

Dark was beginning to fall outside, but the Little Red Chimney room was full of firelight when the Candy Man was ushered in, in the wake of the children, by cordial Uncle Bob. It was a frolicsome, magical light that played about a row of red stockings hanging from the shelf above it; that advanced to the farthest corner and then retreated; that coaxed and dared the unlighted Christmas tree by the piano to wake up and do its part; that gleamed in Miss Bentley's hair as she seated the pigeons in a semicircle on the rug.

Was it the magic of the firelight, or the absence of the grey hat, or the blue frock with its deep white collar, or, or−−The Candy Man got no further with his questions, for just then Margaret Elizabeth turned and gave him her hand, explaining that they were so much stiller when they sat on the floor. She added that it was very good of him to come−−a purely conventional and entirely inaccurate statement. He was also instructed to sit on the sofa with Uncle Bob.

"And now," began Miss Bentley, standing with her back to the row of red stockings and looking into the upturned faces, "we are going to be rather quiet, for this, you know, is both Christmas Eve and Sunday. First, we'll sing 'While Shepherds Watched,' very softly."

She sat down at the piano and struck a few chords, then her voice rose, clear and sweet, the pigeons following her lead, a bit quaveringly at first, but doing wonderfully well considering they were not song birds. "She's been training them for weeks," Uncle Bob whispered.

After this came "Stille Nacht," and Uncle Bob joined in, and then the Candy Man, and presently the entrance of Dr. Prue was proclaimed by a vigorous alto. The effect was most gratifying to the performers, and from the piano Margaret Elizabeth murmured, "Very good."

When the singing was over she took her seat on a low ottoman in the midst of the children, who drew closer. "Next," she said, patting the hand Virginia slipped within her arm, "comes the story, which on Christmas Eve everybody should either hear or read for himself."

Stillness fell on the Little Red Chimney room, the pigeons listened in breathless absorption, while, forgetting herself and her audience, her hands loosely clasped on her knees, Margaret Elizabeth began the story which, as often as it may be told, yet throbs with tenderness and wonder. As she went on her eyes grew dark and deep, and in her face shone something more than the sweetness and charm hitherto so endearing. Was it a prophecy? A glimpse into the unsounded heart of her?

Dr. Prue shaded her eyes with her hand; Uncle Bob wiped his glasses; the Candy Man's soul was stirred within him, but he gave no sign.

"And they brought gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh, to the little Child in the manger; so now in keeping his birthday, we give each other gifts and are happy because of the wonderful night so long ago," ended Margaret Elizabeth.

After that it was no longer still in the Little Red Chimney room. Uncle Bob set the tree alight, and her ladyship distributed the red stockings. Nobody was left out, not even the Candy Man, or Nancy and Jenny hovering in the background.

Upon occasions like the Pigeons' Christmas Tree we long to linger, but they are evanescent. The Candy Man must see the children home after a few brief words with Miss Bentley.

"The Fairy Godmother Society must have been organised, and my name entered among its beneficiaries," he told her.

"I am glad if you liked it," she replied. "I thought you would. To−morrow I am going to Pennington Park to stay till after New Year's, but Christmas Eve belonged by rights to the Little Red Chimney." She smiled, and the Candy Man nodded understandingly.

This much in the midst of the chatter that accompanied the putting on of small coats and leggings.

"And I may hope that I am forgiven?" he had a chance to add as she gave him her hand at parting.

Miss Bentley's eyes twinkled. "It will do no harm to hope," she told him.

The Candy Man, his red stocking protruding from his overcoat pocket, conducted the noisy flock to their homes, then turning southward he walked on and on toward the edge of the town. As is fitting on Christmas Eve, a fine snow had begun to fall, sifting silently over everything, transforming even the ugly and pitiful with

a mantle of beauty.

The Candy Man, striding on through the night, felt an unreasoning joy as he thought of Margaret Elizabeth telling the story with the firelight on her face. The world seemed throbbing with expectancy. Who could tell what splendid event awaited its near fulfilment?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In which a radical change of atmosphere is at once noticed; which shows how Miss Bentley repents of a too coming−on disposition, and lends an ear to the advantages of wealth.

The Christmas fire was not cold upon the hearth of the Little Red Chimney before Miss Bentley was whisked away to other scenes, into an atmosphere so different that of necessity things took on another aspect.

Mrs. Gerrard Pennington found intense satisfaction in her niece's social success. Given every advantage, she pointed out, one could never tell how a girl would take, and Dick had brought up his daughter in such an odd way. Yet in spite of everything, even this awkward arrangement of living in two places, Margaret Elizabeth was popular beyond her fondest hopes.

There were not wanting those who remarked that it would be a marvel if she were not spoiled. Probably they were right, and Margaret Elizabeth, at the flood tide of her social career, courted, fêted, the kingdoms of this world at her feet, was in danger.

"And who sent this?" Mrs. Pennington demanded.

It was Christmas Day, and "this" was an Indian basket of holly and mistletoe, conspicuous, among many costly floral offerings, by its simplicity. The card which accompanied it read, "To her Ladyship, from the Candy Man," but this Mrs. Pennington had not seen.

"Oh," answered her niece, "I don't know how to tell you who he is. He is a stranger here−−a Mr. Reynolds. I met him at Mr. Knight's, where you remember I went to get some material for my paper for the Tuesday Club."

This was all true, and, unaccompanied by a heightened colour, might have allayed her aunt's lurking suspicions, born of that unexplained interview in the park with some one who was not Augustus.

Only once had Mrs. Pennington referred to this, asking half jokingly if Margaret Elizabeth had ever discovered the identity of that person; putting a somewhat disdainful emphasis upon "person."

"Never," Margaret Elizabeth could at that time assure her, and she added, "I do not expect to, and certainly do not wish to."

Mrs. Pennington, however, had her intuitions in regard to this unknown individual. She anticipated his reappearance, and, like a wise general, in time of peace prepared for war. Keeping her vague fears to herself, she increased her vigilance.

Annoyed because of that uncalled−for blush, far away from the Little Red Chimney, with fairy−tales forgot, Margaret Elizabeth repeated her aunt's question. After all, who was Mr. Reynolds? That which had so lately seemed an adventure compounded of kindliness and fun, she now beheld only as an awkward situation. She began to feel that she had overstepped the bounds in asking him to the Christmas tree; and the red stocking! What nonsense! Why should she have felt concerned over his loneliness? Were there not many lonely people

in the world? Might he not infer from it all a rather excessive interest in him and his affairs? Her interview with Tim at the hospital, for instance, though it had come about by the purest chance, looked on the surface as if she had been bent upon investigating him.

The Candy Man's offering, which she at first found so happily significant and appropriate, now began to seem almost a piece of presumption. It lay ignored if not forgotten, till its brown and withered contents were tossed into the fire by one of the maids. Did Miss Bentley wish her to save the basket?

No, Miss Bentley cared nothing for it. Or, wait−−she liked sweet grass, and on second thought she would keep it.

Never had the holiday season been so gay. There was not time for a minute's connected thought. Margaret Elizabeth honestly tried to keep her promise to stop and reflect for at least ten minutes a day, but either she went to sleep, or fell into a waking dream that bore small relation to the sober realities upon which she was supposed to dwell.

There were guests at Pennington Park for the holidays−−English friends of her uncle and aunt, persons of a broader culture than Margaret Elizabeth had ever before encountered. They afforded her an object lesson of the best that accrues from wealth and tradition, and is only to be attained by means of them. Within herself she was aware of an aptitude of her own for these things.

But half divining her niece's mood, Mrs. Gerrard Pennington skilfully and subtly fostered it, and Augustus McAllister, with unexpected tact, followed her lead.

Augustus was genuinely in love, and it brought out the best that was in him. For the first time in his life something resembling humility manifested itself, a humility which sat gracefully upon the possessor of variously estimated millions. It seemed to say: "Here is one who, although not brilliant, may be led into any desirable path." And with his other substantial attractions he combined his full share of good looks.

To be unresponsive was not in Miss Bentley's make−up, and the attentions of Augustus assumed in these days a delicate and pleasing character. What girl could be indifferent to the prestige born of the generally accepted opinion that the position of mistress of the Towers was hers for the word?

In truth, all this homage−−and Augustus was far from being alone in it−−was to Margaret Elizabeth an exciting game, that need not be taken too seriously. It was only when she thought of the Candy Man that she became serious and annoyed. How impossible, in the atmosphere of Pennington Park, appeared any explanation or justification of so absurd a position as his!

[Illustration: COUSIN AUGUSTUS]

When, after a morning recital by the Musical Club, Miss Bentley was seen walking down the avenue with Augustus McAllister, society seized upon it as confirming an interesting rumour. It was absurd, of course. Margaret Elizabeth did it quite innocently. She really felt the need of exercise in the open air, and could not very easily dismiss Mr. McAllister, who had accompanied her aunt and herself to the concert, and who also felt the need of air.

Did she think of the Candy Man when they passed the Y.M.C.A. corner? Yes, she did. Though she gave not so much as half a glance in the direction of the Candy Wagon, she hoped he was not too busy to observe. It might counteract possible false impressions in the past.

A few days later there appeared in a column of the *Evening Record*, given up to such matters, an item regarding the soon−to−be−announced engagement of a certain charming and beautiful girl, only recently a

resident of the city, and a young man of wealth and social position.

It brought Miss Bentley up short. She disliked newspaper gossip extremely, and an allusion so faintly veiled that everyone must understand, was under the circumstances most embarrassing, for the truth was she had not been asked. Her cheeks burned. Yet it was thanks only to some clever fencing on her part, and perhaps some words of caution to Augustus from his mentor, that she had not been, and she knew in her heart it must come soon.

Just when you were having a good time and did not wish to be bothered, it was tiresome to have to decide momentous questions, she told herself almost fretfully, as she was borne swiftly and smoothly downtown one afternoon. There was the usual detention at the Y.M.C.A. corner, and Margaret Elizabeth looked out and almost into the Candy Wagon before she knew it. But there was no cause for alarm. Beneath the white cap of the Candy Man shone the round Irish countenance of Tim Malone.

Was it Tim after all who had viewed her triumphal walk down the avenue? The question brought not a hint of a smile to Miss Bentley's lips; and this was a very grave symptom.

If Uncle Bob had been within reach! But he wasn't. He had run down to Florida to look after his orange grove, and Dr. Prue was up to her eyes in grip cases. There was every reason why Margaret Elizabeth should stay on at Pennington Park.

So the Little Red Chimney had no chance to get in its work. In vain Virginia looked from the dining−room window for its curling smoke. In vain did the invalid sister of Miss Kitty, the dressmaker, dream of the beautiful young lady who brought her roses. In vain did the postman and the market−man inquire of Nancy when Miss Bentley was coming back. To the Miser alone, who from his study window had also noted the deadness of the Little Red Chimney, was the privilege of a word with the enchantress accorded. It came about through Mrs. Gerrard Pennington's interest in the furnishing of the new quarters of the Colonial Dames.

Hearing of a desirable print owned by Mr. Knight, which it was understood he might be induced to part with, she drove thither to canvass the matter, accompanied by her niece. On the way they picked up Augustus, who knew nothing of prints, but was pleased to join the expedition.

The Miser, beneath his grave courtesy, seemed taken aback by this invasion of his solitude. Mrs. Pennington's conventional suavity plainly embarrassed him. He smiled indeed at Margaret Elizabeth, remarking as he spread out his engravings that it had been long since he last saw her.

The impulse was strong upon her to follow him to his desk and ask if he had any news of the Candy Man. There were moments when she thought it strange she had had no word. These were but fleeting moments, however; for the most part she succeeded, or thought she succeeded, in dismissing him to the limbo of the past. So now she resisted the impulse to ask news of him.

When it came to negotiations Margaret Elizabeth and Augustus, leaving Mrs. Pennington to conduct them, moved about the room, viewing the Miser's curios.

"Do you care for mezzotints?" she asked him.

"I don't know the first thing about them," Augustus owned. "In fact never saw one."

She laughed. "Oh, yes, you have. Ever so many of the Reynolds and Romney portraits were reproduced in mezzotint. If I am not mistaken there is one hanging in your own hall."

Augustus gazed at her in undisguised admiration. "I don't see how you learn so much, Miss Bentley. I have no

doubt I have a lot of things you could help me to appreciate."

From this dangerous ground she moved hastily, calling attention to the portrait above the mantel. Mr. McAllister was more at home here.

"A rattling good picture. General Waite, by the way," he informed her, "was own cousin to my grandmother on my mother's side. My great grandfather and his father were brothers, don't you know."

"Indeed!" said Margaret Elizabeth, politely. The relationship did not interest her, but she wondered, in annoyance, why the cousin of Augustus, on his mother's side, should look down on her with the eyes of the Candy Man. Stern eyes they were, with a sparkle of humour behind the sternness.

On the way home Mrs. Pennington was stirred to reminiscence. "One of the first parties I ever attended was in that old house," she said. "It must have been thirty−five years ago. I was a very young girl−−barely seventeen. General Waite was a most courtly man, and his wife was quite famous for her beauty. It was there I met Mr. Pennington. He and the general's nephew, Robert Waite, were great friends. They went to college together. He disappeared strangely. I remember Gerrard was dread fully upset about it at the time. It was just before our marriage."

To all this Margaret Elizabeth only half listened. The eyes of the general lingered reproachfully with her, and perhaps were at the bottom of that policy of postponement with which Augustus was met when the inevitable moment came.

Just a little time was all she asked. Mr. McAllister was talking of a trip to Panama; let him go, and on his return he should have his answer.

Miss Bentley was very sweet as she spoke thus; eminently worth waiting for. So Augustus went to Panama, and she was left to argue matters with herself.

During the process she grew pale. Mixed up with her arguments was that foolish idea that she ought to have heard something from the Candy Man. Had he seen that item in the _Evening Record_?

Mrs. Pennington noticed the pallor, but treated it lightly. Margaret Elizabeth was tired out, but now Lent was here she would rest. She was worn to death herself, but she would recuperate, and surely her niece, who was years younger, could do the same. She failed to take into consideration the complications lacking in her own case. In fact, having brought matters to the present status, Mrs. Pennington allowed herself to relax.

Mr. Gerrard Pennington looked at Margaret Elizabeth from beneath his bushy brows. Confound them, what were they doing to her? She had a way of joining him in the library, and sitting with a book in her lap, which she seldom read.

One day, laying down his paper, and after a cautious glance over his shoulder, he remarked: "Did it ever occur to you, Margaret Elizabeth, that you don't have to marry anybody?"

She stared at him with surprised eyes, in which a smile slowly dawned. "Why, Uncle Gerry, what do you mean? Of course I don't have to."

"There is a great deal in suggestion," continued Mr. Pennington. "Keep telling people a certain thing, confront them with it on all occasions, and they will be influenced in spite of themselves; and it has occurred to me−−−−"

"Yes?" said Margaret Elizabeth.

"Well, that it applies in your case." Mr. Pennington cleared his throat. "A certain person whom we know has behaved very well of late; better than I thought was in him, but−−unless you are pretty sure you can't live without him−−Now this is rank treason on my part, but don't be too soft−hearted, Margaret Elizabeth."

Mr. Pennington returned to his stock−market reports, and silence reigned, but presently two hands rested on his shoulders, and a velvet cheek touched his for a moment. "Thank you, Uncle Gerry," said Margaret Elizabeth.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Which shows Miss Bentley recovering from a fit of what Uncle Bob calls Cantankerousness; in which a shipwrecked letter is brought to light, and Dr. Prue is called again to visit the child of the Park Superintendent.

"And he turned into a splendid prince (he had been one all the time really, you know), and he laid all his riches at Violetta's feet, and made her a princess, because she had been true to him through thick and thin."

Virginia's voice rose in triumphant climax.

"That's all very fine in a fairy−tale, Virginia, and it is an extremely good one for a little girl like you to make up out of her own head. But you know in real life it is different." Margaret Elizabeth gazed pensively into the fire.

Virginia, prone upon the hearth−rug, was disposed to argue what she did not understand. "How different?"

"Well, in a fairy−tale you can have things as you want them, but in real life you get tangled up in what other people want, and with duty and common sense; and when you determine to follow your−−" Margaret Elizabeth was going to say "heart," but changed to "intuitions," "you are left high and dry on a desert island."

Virginia was to be excused if she failed to make head or tail of this. "I wish the Candy Man would come back," she remarked irrelevantly. "He was much nicer than Tim. He liked fairy−tales. He said he was coming some time."

"Oh, did he?" said Miss Bentley.

The reference to a desert island, and a disposition to quarrel with fairy−tales, go to show that while she was decidedly more like herself than in the last chapter, her recovery was not yet complete. In fact Margaret Elizabeth was suffering from the irritability that so often accompanies convalescence. Cantankerousness was Uncle Bob's word for it, and he defended it with all the eloquence of which he was master, his finger on the page in the dictionary where it was to be found in good and regular standing.

It really did not matter what you called it; the point was, that in an argument with her aunt, Margaret Elizabeth had gone further than she intended; had said what had better have been left unsaid. This she confessed to Dr. Prue.

"Let me see your tongue," commanded that professional lady, regarding her searchingly.

Margaret Elizabeth displayed the unruly member, laughing as she did so.

"What did you say to Mrs. Pennington?"

"We were speaking," Margaret Elizabeth answered meekly, "of gratitude, and Aunt Eleanor said, as you are always hearing people say, that there is little or none of it in the world. You see, in some matter which came up in the Colonial Dames, Nancy Lane sided against her. 'And after all I've done for her!' cried Aunt Eleanor. I said I thought gratitude was an overrated virtue anyway, and that to expect a person to vote your way because you had been good to her, was a kind of graft."

"Humph!" said Dr. Prue.

"I know it was a dreadful, dreadful thing to say." Tears were in Margaret Elizabeth's eyes. "When she has been loveliness itself to me. There it is, you see. I have thought about it, and thought about it, until I'm all mixed up."

"What did your aunt say?"

"She was very dignified. She had not expected to hear such a thing from me. Then she walked away."

"I hope you asked her pardon."

"I had no chance. She has gone to Chicago−−was on her way to the station then. I will, of course."

"For a young thing your ideas are not bad, though your problem is entangled in foolish convention, personal pride and so on. But neither you nor I was born to set the world right. Now cheer up and think no more about it for the present. Be ready at two o'clock to go to the park with me. The superintendent's child is ill again."

Having delivered her prescription, Dr. Prue left, and her patient returned to her hearth−stone and an endeavour to be honest with herself. Virginia had interrupted this most difficult process with her fairy−tale. While it could not be said to bear upon the situation, after she had left Margaret Elizabeth was conscious of a faint lightening of the fog.

As they sped smoothly toward the park, in the new electric, Margaret Elizabeth driving, Dr. Prue exclaimed, "There, I'm forgetting that letter again." Unfastening her bag she held it open while she continued, "I hope you'll forgive whoever is to blame, but when the hall was being cleaned yesterday, James fished this out of the umbrella jar. Dear knows how it got there or when; it looks as if it had been in a shipwreck." She produced a stained and sorry−looking missive from her bag. "You can just make out the address, the postmark is quite gone," she added, laying it in her companion's lap. "You haven't missed an important letter, have you?"

"Not that I know of," Margaret Elizabeth replied with a laugh that was a bit unsteady. "It is probably nothing of value." She kept her gaze on the road ahead. "Just slip it in my pocket, please."

All the rest of the way to the park her heart thumped uncomfortably. Could it be? Of course not, it was an advertisement. Why get excited? Meanwhile she chatted pleasantly with Dr. Prue.

"All you need is fresh air and a simple life for a while. Your colour has come back wonderfully," the doctor remarked as they drew up at the cottage gate. "Will you wait for me here?"

"If you don't mind, I think I'll go into the park, and if I'm not back by the time you are ready, don't wait. I can take the street car."

Turning in at the entrance to the park, Margaret Elizabeth was for a fleeting moment aware of a Candy Wagon standing at the curb a few yards away. There was nothing unusual in this except the odd way in which it fitted into the situation, and the next moment she had forgotten everything but the letter in her hand.

She walked slowly down the path. The April sunshine sifted through a faint and feathery greenness overhead, the air was clear and fresh. She was thinking that she had seen just one little scrap of the Candy Man's writing−−on the card accompanying the Christmas basket; and this on the letter was blurred and stained, yet she was sure of it. He had written. She had been sure he would. She was glad. She would be honest with herself. She wanted him for a friend. In many ways she liked him better than any one she had met this winter. She wanted to know more about him.

She tried to tear the letter open, but for all it was so damaged the paper had remained tough. She would wait to read it till she reached the summer house. That little vine−hung arbour had been in her thought ever since Dr. Prue proposed to bring her down to the park. She had a foolish desire to sit there and look at the river, and go on being honest with herself.

Margaret Elizabeth, mounting the steps and looking at her letter as she did so, was confronted by somebody who started up in surprise from the bench where she had sat with her flowers that autumn day.

For one surprised moment she and the stranger faced each other, then Miss Bentley exclaimed, "I saw the wagon at the gate, but I didn't know it was yours." And then the mischief faded into simple honest gladness as she held out her hand. "I certainly did not expect to see you," she added, "but you are an unexpected sort of person."

"Nothing so wonderful as the chance of meeting you occurred to me for a moment," the Candy Man assured her. "In fact I was not certain you cared to see me." Those same pleasant eyes, so emphatically not the eyes of Augustus, looked into hers questioningly.

Margaret Elizabeth held up the letter. "It was shipwrecked," she said. "I got it only a few minutes ago. I haven't read it. I thought it was you who didn't care to be friends."

The Candy Man did not exactly understand how a letter could be shipwrecked in an overland journey of ten hours, but he dismissed it as of no importance. "It isn't worth reading now," he said. "It was just to make my adieus and ask if some time when I had lived down my past," here he smiled, "I might come back and tell you my strange story. I was counting on your willingness to be friends. You remember you said it would do no harm to hope."

"Oh, did I? And when you did not hear from me, what did you think? Honestly," asked Margaret Elizabeth.

"I thought of course there must be a reason. A shipwreck did not occur to me."

"Do you mean a reason for not being friends? But you came."

"The suspense was too much for me. I haven't many friends; and besides, this is on the way to Texas."

"So you are going to Texas this time?"

It seemed the Candy Man had heard of an opening there.

Margaret Elizabeth wanted to ask why he had come to the park, but something told her not to; instead she said, looking away to the shining river, "I know of no reason why we should not be friends. So I am ready to hear the story you speak of. Is it more strange than the adventures of a Candy Wagon?" Her eyes came back and met his as they had done the day when the conversation turned upon fairy godmothers. Margaret Elizabeth was not spoiled.

"It is more serious," was his reply. "In fact, it is very serious. The Candy Wagon was a mere episode. What I

wish to tell you now goes deeper."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In which the Candy Man relates his story, and the Miser comes upon Volume I of the shabby book with the funny name.

"I want you to know all about me," began the Candy Man, taking from his pocket the shabby little book Virginia had once remarked on, "so there may be no more wrong impressions."

They sat in the sunshine on the top step of the little pavilion, facing the river. Margaret Elizabeth, supporting her chin in her hand, regarded him gravely. The west wind was cool on their faces.

"I have often imagined myself telling you," he went on. "Not that there is much to it, besides its strangeness. In fact, to be brief, I don't know who I am."

The surprise in Miss Bentley's eyes caused him to add quickly: "Not that I am a foundling. But my father and mother were lost at sea when I was three years old. We were coming from Victoria to San Francisco, when the steamer went down. Only a few of the passengers were saved, I among them."

"How sad and terrible!" cried Margaret Elizabeth. "Can you remember it? How lost and lonely you must have been! Poor little child!"

"I recall it only in a vague way," he answered, "confused with what has since been told me. When it was known that my parents were lost, a man and his wife, fellow passengers, offered to adopt me. Beyond the name 'Robert Deane, Wife and Child,' on the list at the ship's office, they were unable to learn anything about me, and I was too young and bewildered to give any clue."

"That is very strange," said Margaret Elizabeth. "Your new father and mother were kind to you?"

"So kind I soon forgot the terror and loneliness, and grew happy and content. Everything was done to make me forget, and I think while they made every effort to find out something about me, they were glad when they failed. I wish now that my childish memories might have been fostered, for I find myself reaching back into a mist full of vague shapes.

"My new father was a civil engineer, whose work took him here, there and everywhere throughout the broad West. I never knew a permanent home. My adopted mother died when I was twelve. After that came boarding school and college. About the time I left college my father's health failed, and for several years he was helpless and very dependent upon me, so I gave up my plan of entering a mining school.

"It was during his illness that he began to speak to me of my own parents. He had talked to them on several occasions during the voyage, and he described them as young people of refinement and education. My mother, he thought from her speech, was English. They rather held aloof, he said, and seemed disinclined to mention their own affairs. While he was ill the news came to us of the finding in a storage warehouse in San Francisco of an old trunk which it seemed probable had belonged to my parents. Without going into detail, I may say it was through an old acquaintance of my adopted father's, who knew the circumstances of my adoption, that we heard of it. He had some interest in the warehouse, which was about to be torn down and rebuilt. This trunk was found in some forgotten corner where it had lain for twenty−five years."

"And did it throw any light?" asked Margaret Elizabeth.

"Not much, it rather deepened the mystery. There was little of significance in it, but this book and a package of letters. From them I learned nothing definite, but gathered the unwelcome probability that my father was under some sort of cloud, and was not using his real name. This was a matter of inference−−of deduction, largely, but it was plain he had left his home in some sort of trouble.

"It is not easy to piece together scattered allusions, when you have no clue. The letters were most of them written by my father to my mother, just before and soon after their marriage, with one or two from her to him. One of these, which I found between the leaves of this little book, I want you to read. It concludes my story, and to my mind lightens it a little."

The letter the Candy Man held out to Margaret Elizabeth was written on thin paper, in a delicate angular hand.

"Ought I to read it?" she demurred. "Are you sure she would like it?"

"Somehow I am very sure," he answered. "And I feel that it will be a grip on our friendship. I have told you the worst, I wish you to know the best of me."

She acquiesced, and, an elbow on her knee, shading her eyes with her hand, she read the letter, whose date was thirty years ago. Far back in the past this seemed to Margaret Elizabeth, yet it was a girl like herself who wrote.

The first sentences were almost meaningless, so strong was the feeling that she had no right to be reading it at all, but as she went on she forgot her scruples. It was evidently a reply to a letter from her lover in which he had spoken of the cloud that hung over his name, and it was a confession of her faith in him, girlish, sweet and tender. "I trust you, Robert," it said. "It is in you to do heedless things, to be reckless, if only because you are young and eager and strong; but it is not in you to be dishonourable; of this I am as certain as I am of anything in life. Some day the truth will be known and you will be cleared, but whether it is or no, I choose to walk beside you. I choose it gladly, happily. I write the words again, gladly, happily, Robert. Yours, Mary."

"Oh!" cried Margaret Elizabeth, lifting a glowing face, "I love Mary."

"She was brave and unselfish," said the Candy Man.

Margaret Elizabeth nodded. "Yes, that is one side of it. Still, you see, she was sure, and it was, as she says, a joy to cast in her lot with him. 'Gladly, happily.'" Her eyes shone. She gazed far away down the river. The wind blew little tendrils of bright hair across her cheek. "It must be so when you care very much," she went on.

"But," argued the Candy Man, "under the stress of very noble feeling people sometimes do foolish things, do they not?"

"But this was not. Do you think for a moment Mary ever regretted it? I see what you mean by the best of you. It is something to have such credentials." Margaret Elizabeth's gaze met the Candy Man's, and her eyes were deep as they had been on Christmas Eve, in the firelight.

Oh, Margaret Elizabeth, it is your own fault, for being so dear, so unworldly! Could you, can you, cast in your lot with an unknown Candy Man? He has no business to ask you. He did not mean to, but only to prepare the way. He knows he is no great catch, even from the point of view of a Little Red Chimney. These are not the precise words of the Candy Man, but something like them....

So absorbed was Margaret Elizabeth in the thought of Mary, she was a bit slow in taking in their meaning. She gave him one startled glance, and then looked down, as it happened, upon the shabby little book which

lay on the step between them. Absently she drew it toward her, and with fingers that trembled, opened it, as if to find her answer in its pages. Then a smile began faintly to curl about her lips, and she read aloud from the book:

"What we find then to accord with love and reason, that we may safely pronounce right and good."

"Judged at the bar of reason I fear my case is hopeless," protested the Candy Man, putting out his hand to close the book.

But Margaret Elizabeth clasped it to her breast. "I see nothing unreasonable in it," she declared stoutly. As she spoke a faded crimson flower fell in her lap.

Somewhat later in the afternoon, Miss Bentley and the Candy Man, walking together along the river path, had they not been so engrossed in their own affairs, might have recognised the tall, stooping figure of the Miser strolling slowly ahead of them. It was for a minute only, for near a turn in the path he bent forward and disappeared in a thicket of althea bushes. At this season it was not a dense thicket, and Mr. Knight, poking in the soft mould with his cane in search of a certain tiny plant, had no thought of hiding, but, as it chanced, was unobserved by his friends.

"Oh, Margaret Elizabeth," her companion was saying as they passed, "you are so dear! I have no business to be telling you so, but indeed I can't help it."

And she with a little laugh replied: "I am glad you can't, Candy Man." And the next moment they were gone around the turn.

That was all, but it was enough. What rarer flower was likely to come the Miser's way, on this or any day?

He stood and looked after them. These two had brought into his grey life the touch of golden youth. He began to tremble under the force of a wonderful thought. He sought a bench and sank upon it. It would be a solution of his problem. He had come out to−day into the spring sunshine, feeling his burden more than he could bear, for in his pocket was a letter which put an end to the hope he had long cherished of at length righting a great wrong.

There must be a way of doing what he wished. The consent of the Candy Man once gained, that hateful fortune, which through these years had been slowly crushing him, might become a minister of joy and well being, might make possible for others those best things of life that he had missed.

The thought thrilled him. He rose and walked on, back to the pavilion, where he paused again to rest. There on the step lay the shabby book with the funny name and the small oval bit cut from the fly leaf, beneath which was the Candy Man's name, Robert Deane Reynolds.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Shows how Mrs. Gerrard Pennington, unhappy and distraught, beseeches Uncle Bob to help her save Margaret Elisabeth; also how Mr. Gerrard Pennington comes to the rescue, and how in the end his wife submits gracefully to the inevitable, which is not so bad after all.

When Mrs. Gerrard Pennington was shown into the room of the Little Red Chimney, there was nobody there. A chilly wind outside, which dashed the rain against the windows, only served to call attention to the pleasantness within. It was indeed an aggressively cheerful room, entirely out of keeping with Mrs. Pennington's mood. The open piano, the row of thrifty ferns on the window−sill, the new novel on the table

with a foreign letter between its leaves, and the work basket beside it−−which, by the way, was of sweet grass−−all sang the same song to the accompaniment of the fire's quiet crackle.

The burden of the song was Margaret Elizabeth. You saw her sitting bolt upright on the sofa, being very intense about something, or lost in thought, elbows on knees, on the ottoman beside the hearth, or occupied with that bit of embroidery, her curling lashes almost on her cheek. Oh, Margaret Elizabeth, how could you? How could you?

Mrs. Pennington, pacing uneasily back and forth, glanced at the music on the piano rack.

"Oh, stay at home, my heart, and rest, Home−keeping hearts are happiest,"

it admonished her. In this disarming atmosphere she began to feel herself the victim of some wretched dream. Yet here in her bag was Margaret Elizabeth's note, found awaiting her on her return from Chicago an hour ago.

In it her niece apologised contritely for the inexcusable manner in which she had spoken, and continued: "It makes me unhappy, dearest Aunt Eleanor, to think of disappointing you, for you have been the kindest aunt in the world, but I have discovered in the last few days what I ought to have known all along, that I cannot marry Mr. McAllister. The reason is there is some one else. He is neither rich nor of distinguished family, but there are things that count for more, at least to me. I shall see you very soon, and explain more fully. In the meantime think kindly, if you can, of your niece,

MARGARET ELIZABETH."

[Illustration: MRS. GERRARD PENNINGTON]

This as it stood was bad enough, wrecking her dearest hopes at the moment when they had seemed most secure; but taken in connection with a story related in artless innocence by her travelling companion of yesterday, Teddy Brown, to use one of that gentleman's cherished phrases, it spelled tragedy.

The Reporter had not been bent on mischief. Far from it. He was merely grappling bravely with the task of being agreeable to the great lady. Surely it was but natural that in the course of a long conversation the Candy Man's curious resemblance to Augustus should suggest itself as a topic; and given a gleam of something like interest in his companion's eyes, it was easy to continue from bad to worse.

He lived in the same apartment house as Virginia, and from her he had heard of the Christmas tree, and the Candy Man's presence on the occasion; also of that old accident on the corner in which the Candy Man had figured as Miss Bentley's rescuer. No wonder those intuitions regarding a person who was not Augustus should have risen to torture Mrs. Pennington. All this circumstantial evidence was very black against Margaret Elizabeth, seemingly so honest and frank. No wonder Mrs. Pennington was distraught.

Meanwhile, wherever her heart might be, Margaret Elizabeth herself was out. Uncle Bob, coming in, paper in hand, to greet the visitor cordially, could not imagine where she had gone, and peered around the room as if after all she might have escaped their notice. If she wasn't in, he was confident she would be, in the course of a few minutes, which confidence was not a logical deduction from known facts, but merely an untrustworthy inference, born of his surprise at finding her out at all.

Placing a chair for Mrs. Pennington, he took one himself and regarded her genially. Some minutes of polite conversation followed, in the course of which Mrs. Pennington, concealing her agitation, spoke of her journey to Chicago in quest of colonial furnishings. Mr. Vandegrift in his turn brought forward Florida and orange groves.

But Margaret Elizabeth delayed her coming, and Mrs. Pennington could stand it no longer. "Mr. Vandegrift," she began, after the silence that followed the last word on oranges, "I regret that my niece is not here, yet it may be as well to speak to you first. I may say, to make an appeal to you. You are, I am sure, fond of Margaret Elizabeth." She played nervously with the fastening of her shopping bag.

Uncle Bob looked at her in surprise, then at the toe of his shoe. "I think I may safely admit it," he owned, crossing his knees and nodding his head.

"Then, Mr. Vandegrift, I beseech you, with all the feeling of which I am capable, to unite with me in saving this misguided girl." At this point all her intuitions and fears rallied around Mrs. Pennington, and gave a quiver to her voice.

Uncle Bob was astonished at her tone, and said so.

"I assure you, Mr. Vandegrift, I have her own word for it." She produced a note from her bag.

"Her word for what?" he asked.

"Why, for−−oh, Mr. Vandegrift, let us not waste time in futile fencing. You must know that Margaret Elizabeth has deceived me; has been guilty of base ingratitude; has been meeting clandestinely a person−−a mere adventurer. I can scarcely bring myself to say it. My brother Richard's daughter!" Mrs. Pennington had recourse to her handkerchief.

Uncle Bob uncrossed his knees and sat bolt upright. "Madame," he exclaimed, "I am sorry for your distress, whatever its cause, but let me assure you, you are under some grave mistake. My niece has met no one clandestinely, and is incapable of deceit and treachery."

"Do I understand then that it was with your connivance?"

"I have connived at nothing, Madame, and I know of no adventurer." Uncle Bob took his penknife from his pocket and tapped on the table with it. His manner was legal in the extreme. He was enjoying himself.

Mrs. Pennington looked over her handkerchief. "But she says, herself−−−−"

"Says she has been guilty of deceit and treachery? Has been meeting an adventurer clandestinely? Pardon me, but this is incredible."

"What is incredible, Uncle Bob?" came a voice from the half−open door, unmistakably that of the accused. "I'll be there as soon as I get off my raincoat," it added.

"It is hopeless to try to make you understand," Mrs. Pennington almost sobbed, the while sounds from the hall indicated that some one beside Margaret Elizabeth was removing a raincoat. A horrible dread suddenly smote her, lest it be that person. A sleepless night and her distress had unnerved her. She felt herself unequal to the encounter.

She glanced about helplessly for a way of escape, but there was none. "Tell him not to come in. I cannot see him now," she begged tragically of Uncle Bob, who, honestly mystified now, stood between her and the door, looking from it to her.

"She says not to come in," he repeated to Margaret Elizabeth's companion, who was following her in.

"Why, Aunt Eleanor, I didn't know it was you! They told me your train was late. And oh, what is the matter?

What are you crying about? Is it I?" Margaret Elizabeth, with raindrops on her hair, knelt beside her aunt and embraced her, pressing a cool cheek against that lady's fevered one.

Mrs. Pennington, her face hidden in her hands, continued to murmur, "I cannot see him. I cannot see him."

"In the name of heaven, Eleanor, why can't you see me? Why must I not come in?" demanded a familiar voice which brought her to with a shock.

"Gerrard!" she cried, in her surprise revealing a sadly tear−stained countenance.

Uncle Bob beat a retreat into the hall, where he paused, chuckling to himself.

"Certainly it is I. Who should it be?" said her husband, taking a seat beside her. "Why are you making such a sight of yourself, my dear? When I telephoned out to know if you had arrived, they said you had and had gone out again immediately, no one knew where. I came out to talk over some business with William Knight, and when I was leaving I saw your car over here, and thought I'd join you; but if my presence is unbearable, I will withdraw." Mr. Pennington smiled at Margaret Elizabeth.

"Don't be silly, please, I have had a most trying day. I don't expect you to understand."

Mrs. Pennington was recovering her poise. There was something irresistibly steadying in her husband's matter−of−fact statement, and in the sight of her niece sitting back on her heels and looking up at her with lovely, solicitous eyes. Treachery and deceit became meaningless terms in such connection.

"You haven't given us a chance to understand, Eleanor. What is the trouble?" Mr. Pennington demanded.

"Uncle Gerry, I am afraid it is I," said Margaret Elizabeth, picking up the note from the floor where it had fallen. "I am sorry, you know I am, that I can't do as she wishes, but you understand that I can't. Tell her, please, that I did honestly try to think I could, but it wasn't of any use."

"Oh, come now, Eleanor, if that is it, of course we wanted Margaret Elizabeth up at the Park; but the young people of this generation like to manage their own affairs, as we did before them." Mr. Pennington looked quizzically at his niece. "She's been getting up a bit of melodrama for our benefit, that's all. If you will pardon the suggestion, my dear, I think possibly it is you who do not understand."

Margaret Elizabeth, rising from her lowly position, threw him a kiss over her aunt's head.

"How can I be expected to, with everything shrouded in mystery?" cried Mrs. Pennington. "Why have I never heard of this person before? Why was I left to be told dreadful things by a reporter?"

"A reporter!" cried Margaret Elizabeth, in her turn aghast.

"Nonsense! If you heard anything dreadful you know Margaret Elizabeth well enough to know it was not true. But how in the world could a reporter have got hold of it?"

"You speak so confidently, Gerrard, tell me, what do you know about this man?" Mrs. Pennington looked from her niece to her husband. "Margaret Elizabeth seems to have completely won you to her side," she added.

"It is really a very strange story, Eleanor, and to begin at the end of it, we have quite sufficient evidence, in my opinion, to prove that he is the son of my old comrade, Robert Waite."

Mrs. Pennington fixed surprised eyes upon her husband. Margaret Elizabeth sat down and folded her hands in her lap.

"You recall how Rob disappeared, without a word to any of his friends? It was not till some years after the general's death that I had the least clue to it; then William Knight came to me to know if I could give any help in tracing him. He owned that there had been some trouble between General Waite and Robert, and that the latter had been unjustly treated. I couldn't give him any assistance, and I never discussed it with him again. Knight was always close−mouthed, and it was only the other day that I learned what the trouble was. It seems the general suspected his nephew of taking a large sum of money from the safe in his library. It was one of those cases of complete circumstantial evidence. Rob was known to have lost money on the races. He was the only one beside the general himself who had access to the safe, and who knew that this money, several thousand dollars, was there at this time. That is, so it was supposed.

"Knowing them both, one can easily understand the outcome. Robert disappeared, and a few years later, when the general died, he left his fortune to William Knight, his wife's nephew. Then after some little time the real thief turned up. I won't go into that, further than to say that it was through a deathbed confession to a priest. Since then Knight has been searching far and wide for some trace of Robert, only to receive last week the evidence of his death twenty−five years ago. And now comes the strange part of the story. The very day on which he received this news, Knight came by chance upon a book which he recognised as once the property of Robert Waite. The owner's name was cut from the fly leaf, but below it was written the name of a young man whose acquaintance he had made last winter, Robert Deane Reynolds. Deane was Rob's middle name, so naturally it led to an investigation."

Mr. Pennington looked over at Margaret Elizabeth. "Have I told a straight story?" he asked.

"There were letters, you know," she prompted.

"Oh, yes. This young man had letters which I could have identified anywhere."

Mrs. Pennington was interested. She asked questions. That absurd story about a Candy Wagon was untrue then? But how had Margaret Elizabeth met this person? She still referred to him as a person. And somehow the united efforts of Margaret Elizabeth and Mr. Pennington failed to clear up the mystery, though they did their best.

Even if the Candy Wagon episode was to be regarded as humorous, though it did not present itself in that light to Mrs. Pennington, how could Margaret Elizabeth have asked a Candy Man to her Christmas tree?

"But you see, by that time I knew he wasn't real, Aunt Eleanor, and anyway−−"

"Now go slow, Margaret Elizabeth," cautioned her uncle. "At heart you are a confounded little socialist, but take my advice and keep it to yourself." He was thinking of what she had said to him only the day before: "You see, Uncle Gerry, you can't have everything. You have to choose. And while I like bigness and richness, I like Little Red Chimneys and what they stand for, best. I want to be on speaking terms with both ends, you see."

"It is odd," Mr. Pennington went on, "the tricks heredity plays, and that this young man and Augustus McAllister should both hark back to a common ancestor for their general characteristics of build and feature. I was struck with the resemblance, myself."

"It was what first attracted me," owned Margaret Elizabeth demurely.

The name of Augustus still had painful associations for Mrs. Pennington. She rose. "Really we must be

going," she said. At some future time she felt she might be able to meet Mr. Reynolds or Waite, or whatever his name was, with equanimity, but now she was thankful to hear he had gone back to Chicago for some papers.

She received Margaret Elizabeth's farewell embrace languidly. "Since there is such weight of authority in your favour, and matters have developed so strangely, there is nothing for me to say. I dislike mystery, and prefer to have things go on regularly and according to precedent. It is your welfare I have at heart."

Mr. Pennington's good−by was different.

"I don't wonder you like it down here, Margaret Elizabeth−−this room, you know," he said.

As they drove homeward Mrs. Pennington was engaged in mentally reconstructing affairs. "Of course," she heard herself saying, "it was a disappointment to me, but romantic girls are not to be controlled by common−sense aunts, and really it might be worse." And she remarked aloud: "The fact that he is a nephew of General Waite means something."

"That's so," assented her husband. "Something like half a million. Old Knight is determined to hand it all over." He smiled to himself, then added: "He came to see me−−the young man, I mean. I liked him. He suggested Rob a little without resembling him. Very gentlemanly; nice eyes."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In which the Fairy Godmother Society is again mentioned, among other things.

"But it is really embarrassing when I had made up my mind to marry a poor Candy Man to have it turn out so. I rather liked defying common sense," said Margaret Elizabeth.

The Candy Man had made a hurried journey to Chicago, and was back before the rain was over, and while it was still cold enough for a fire, so that his old dream of sometime sitting by the Little Red Chimney's hearth was coming true. Margaret Elizabeth in the blue dress, by request, though she declared it wasn't fit to be seen, occupied the ottoman, her elbows on her knees, the firelight playing in her bright hair.

"It is the way it happens in fairy−tales," urged the Candy Man. "And I really couldn't help it."

"Of course you are right," she agreed. "As Virginia's story runs, 'He turned into a prince, and because Violetta had been true to him through thick and thin, he made her a princess.' Anyhow, Candy Man, I'm glad I chose you before your good fortune came."

"It was an extremely venturesome thing to do, Girl of All Others, as I have told you before, though immensely flattering to me. I have to take the money, there is no way out of it. I believe it would break our Miser's heart if I refused. Do you know what he was proposing to do before he found the book?"

"What?" asked Margaret Elizabeth.

"To adopt me. You see we had come to be pretty good friends last winter, and I think he suspected from the start that I had rather lofty aspirations for a Candy Man. In a Little Red Chimney direction−−you understand?"

"Perfectly−−go on."

"Well, he saw us in the park−−−−"

"And his suspicions were confirmed, I suppose," put in Margaret Elizabeth, coolly.

"Exactly. And knowing from what I had told him previously that I had my fortune to seek, it occurred to him that as the channel he had been hoping for had been closed, the next best thing would be to make it possible for two young persons to−−−−"

"The dear old Miser!" interrupted Margaret Elizabeth. "But why is he so unwilling to use the money himself? It is honestly his."

"I may not fully understand, but I think from things he has said, that as a boy he was jealous of my father. This feeling would naturally make him, when it came to the test, not unwilling to believe in his guilt. Then, being reticent and introspective, he magnified all this a thousandfold when the truth came out, and he realised he had profited by the unjust suspicion. By dwelling upon it he came to feel as if he had actually obtained the money himself by unfair means. But I am convinced that if he did encourage his uncle to believe in my father's guilt, it was because he firmly believed it himself. Never since the facts were known has he regarded the money as his, and not until he had almost exhausted his own means in the effort to trace the rightful owner, as he regarded him, did he use a penny of it."

"It is so touching to see his surprise and gratitude that I do not feel resentful toward him," added the Candy Man. "His joy at handing over this fortune is wonderful. He already looks a different man."

"We must make it up to him in some way," said Margaret Elizabeth. "I mean for all these lonely years. Speaking of money, I'll tell you what I have been thinking. When we build our house, as I suppose we shall some day, when we come back from our search for the Archæologist−−−−"

"By all means. That is one mitigating circumstance. We can build a house," responded the Candy Man.

"Well, as I was going to say, we must have a Little Red Chimney. The house will be broad and low," she extended her arms, "and with wings; I love wings. One of them shall have a Little Red Chimney all its own. It shall stand for our ideals. If we should be tempted to a sort of life that separates us from our fellows, it will remind us, you, that you once sat in a Candy Wagon, me, that I fell in love with a Candy Man. And I'll tell you what, speaking of the Miser. Don't you remember? It was he you meant that day when we were talking about the Fairy Godmother Society, and−−−−"

Of course the Candy Man remembered.

"Then, let's organise and make him chief agent while we are gone. I know of a number of things to be done."

"So do I," said the Candy Man. "There is my fellow lodger, the one I told you about, a teacher in the High School. He needs a real change this summer, he and his wife."

"Oh, I am sure we can work it out," cried Margaret Elizabeth.

"I am sure we can," he assented.

"You see it will begin where organised charity leaves off, of necessity. Also where that can't possibly penetrate, and it will be singularly free, because secret."

"Again you sound like the minutes of the first meeting," said the Candy Man.

"Margaret Elizabeth!"

It was Uncle Bob's voice at the door. "I hate to disturb you, but that old bore at the club wants your father's address."

"You aren't disturbing. Come in and hear about the Fairy Godmother Society."

"You don't mean really?" Uncle Bob stood before the hearth and looked from his niece to the Candy Man.

"Indeed we do," she answered. "You see we have ten times as much money as we thought we had. So why not?"

"Quite correct, as we thought we hadn't any," murmured the Candy Man.

Uncle Bob rubbed his hands in delight. "I told Prue you'd do something of the sort; that you wouldn't just settle down to be ordinary rich people. But Prue says riches bring caution."

Margaret Elizabeth, going to her desk for the address, laughed. "We aren't going to forget our humble beginning," she said; "and we'll act quickly before we are inured to our new estate."

"But then, you know, there is another side to it," her uncle interposed, in a sudden access of prudence. "You must consider the matter carefully with an eye to the future. For instance now, there may be heirs."

A silence fell. The fire crackled, and the clock ticked with unusual distinctness. Then Margaret Elizabeth spoke.

"Here's the address," she said. "I'll put it in your pocket, where you can't forget it." And as she tucked it in, she added, stoutly, with a lovely deepening of the colour in her cheek: "If there are, Uncle Bob, they will be fairy god−brothers and sisters, so it will be all right."

It was after the door had closed upon Uncle Bob, and Margaret Elizabeth was back on her low seat again, that the Candy Man left his chair and sat on the rug beside her. "Girl of All Others, is there any one else in the world as happy as I?" he asked.

Margaret Elizabeth smiled at him with eyes that answered the question before she spoke. Then she said, slipping her hand into his, "One other."

THE END

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