WIGGIN KATE SMITH

MOTHER CAREY'S CHICKENS

Kate Wiggin

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Содержание

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I
MOTHER CAREY HERSELF

"By and by there came along a flock of petrels, who are Mother Carey's own chickens…. They flitted along like a flock of swallows, hopping and skipping from wave to wave, lifting their little feet behind them so daintily that Tom fell in love with them at once."

Nancy stopped reading and laid down the copy of "Water Babies" on the sitting-room table. "No more just now, Peter-bird," she said; "I hear mother coming."

It was a cold, dreary day in late October, with an east wind and a chill of early winter in the air. The cab stood in front of Captain Carey's house, with a trunk beside the driver and a general air of expectancy on the part of neighbors at the opposite windows.

Mrs. Carey came down the front stairway followed by Gilbert and Kathleen; Gilbert with his mother's small bag and travelling cloak, Kathleen with her umbrella; while little Peter flew to the foot of the stairs with a small box of sandwiches pressed to his bosom.

Mrs. Carey did not wear her usual look of sweet serenity, but nothing could wholly mar the gracious dignity of her face and presence. As she came down the stairs with her quick, firm tread, her flock following her, she looked the ideal mother. Her fine height, her splendid carriage, her deep chest, her bright eye and fresh color all bespoke the happy, contented, active woman, though something in the way of transient anxiety lurked in the eyes and lips.

"The carriage is too early," she said; "let us come into the sitting room for five minutes. I have said my good-byes and kissed you all a dozen times, but I shall never be done until I am out of your sight."

"O mother, mother, how can we let you go!" wailed Kathleen.

"Kitty! how can you!" exclaimed Nancy. "What does it matter about us when mother has the long journey and father is so ill?"

"It will not be for very long,—it can't be," said Mrs. Carey wistfully. "The telegram only said 'symptoms of typhoid'; but these low fevers sometimes last a good while and are very weakening, so I may not be able to bring father back for two or three weeks; I ought to be in Fortress Monroe day after to-morrow; you must take turns in writing to me, children!"

"Every single day, mother!"

"Every single thing that happens."

"A fat letter every morning," they promised in chorus.

"If there is any real trouble remember to telegraph your Uncle Allan—did you write down his address, 11 Broad Street, New York? Don't bother him about little things, for he is not well, you know."

Gilbert displayed a note-book filled with memoranda and addresses.

"And in any small difficulty send for Cousin Ann," Mrs. Carey went on.

"The mere thought of her coming will make me toe the mark, I can tell you that!" was Gilbert's rejoinder.

"Better than any ogre or bug-a-boo, Cousin Ann is, even for Peter!" said Nancy.

"And will my Peter-bird be good and make Nancy no trouble?" said his mother, lifting him to her lap for one last hug.

"I'll be an angel boy pretty near all the time," he asserted between mouthfuls of apple, "or most pretty near," he added prudently, as if unwilling to promise anything superhuman in the way of behavior. As a matter of fact it required only a tolerable show of virtue for Peter to win encomiums at any time. He would brush his curly mop of hair away from his forehead, lift his eyes, part his lips, showing a row of tiny white teeth; then a dimple would appear in each cheek and a seraphic expression (wholly at variance with the facts) would overspread the baby face, whereupon the beholder—Mother Carey, his sisters, the cook or the chambermaid, everybody indeed but Cousin Ann, who could never be wheedled—would cry "Angel boy!" and kiss him. He was even kissed now, though he had done nothing at all but exist and be an enchanting personage, which is one of the injustices of a world where a large number of virtuous and well-behaved people go unkissed to their graves!

"I know Joanna and Ellen will take good care of the housekeeping," continued Mrs. Carey, "and you will be in school from nine to two, so that the time won't go heavily. For the rest I make Nancy responsible. If she is young, you must remember that you are all younger still, and I trust you to her."

"The last time you did it, it didn't work very well!" And Gilbert gave Nancy a sly wink to recall a little matter of family history when there had been a delinquency on somebody's part.

Nancy's face crimsoned and her lips parted for a quick retort, and none too pleasant a one, apparently.

Her mother intervened quietly. "We'll never speak of 'last times,' Gilly, or where would any of us be? We'll always think of 'next' times.

I shall trust Nancy next time, and next time and next time, and keep on trusting till I can trust her forever!"

Nancy's face lighted up with a passion of love and loyalty. She responded to the touch of her mother's faith as a harp to the favoring wind, but she said nothing; she only glowed and breathed hard and put her trembling hand about her mother's neck and under her chin.

"Now it's time! One more kiss all around. Remember you are Mother Carey's own chickens! There may be gales while I am away, but you must ride over the crests of the billows as merry as so many flying fish!

Good-by! Good-by! Oh, my littlest Peter-bird, how can mother leave you?"

"I opened the lunch box to see what Ellen gave you, but I only broke off two teenty, weenty corners of sandwiches and one little new-moon bite out of a cookie," said Peter, creating a diversion according to his wont.

Ellen and Joanna came to the front door and the children flocked down the frozen pathway to the gate after their mother, getting a touch of her wherever and whenever they could and jumping up and down between whiles to keep warm. Gilbert closed the door of the carriage, and it turned to go down the street. One window was open, and there was a last glimpse of the beloved face framed in the dark blue velvet bonnet, one last wave of a hand in a brown muff.

"Oh! she is so beautiful!" sobbed Kathleen, "her bonnet is just the color of her eyes; and she was crying!"

"There never was anybody like mother!" said Nancy, leaning on the gate, shivering with cold and emotion. "There never was, and there never will be! We can try and try, Kathleen, and we *must* try, all of us; but mother wouldn't have to try; mother must have been partly born so!"

II
THE CHICKENS

It was Captain Carey's favorite Admiral who was responsible for the phrase by which mother and children had been known for some years. The Captain (then a Lieutenant) had brought his friend home one Saturday afternoon a little earlier than had been expected, and they went to find the family in the garden.

Laughter and the sound of voices led them to the summer-house, and as they parted the syringa bushes they looked through them and surprised the charming group.

> A throng of children like to flowers were sown
> About the grass beside, or climbed her knee.
> I looked who were that favored company.

That is the way a poet would have described what the Admiral saw, and if you want to see anything truly and beautifully you must generally go to a poet.

Mrs. Carey held Peter, then a crowing baby, in her lap. Gilbert was tickling Peter's chin with a buttercup, Nancy was putting a wreath of leaves on her mother's hair, and Kathleen was swinging from an apple-tree bough, her yellow curls flying.

"Might I inquire what you think of that?" asked the father.

"Well," the Admiral said, "mothers and children make a pretty good picture at any time, but I should say this one couldn't be 'beat.' Two for the Navy, eh?"

"All four for the Navy, perhaps," laughed the young man. "Nancy has already chosen a Rear-Admiral and Kathleen a Commodore; they are modest little girls!"

"They do you credit, Peter!"

"I hope I've given them something,—I've tried hard enough, but they are mostly the work of the lady in the chair. Come on and say how d'ye do."

Before many Saturdays the Admiral's lap had superseded all other places as a gathering ground for the little Careys, whom he called the stormy petrels.

"Mother Carey," he explained to them, came from the Latin *mater cara*, this being not only his personal conviction, but one that had the backing of Brewer's "Dictionary of Phrase and Fable."

"The French call them *Les Oiseaux de Notre Dame*. That means 'The Birds of our Lady,' Kitty, and they are the sailors' friends. Mother Carey sends them to warn seafarers of approaching storms and bids them go out all over the seas to show the good birds the way home. You'll have your hands full if you're going to be Mother Carey's chickens."

"I'd love to show good birds the way home!" said Gilbert.

"Can a naughty bird show a good bird the way home, Addy?" This bland question came from Nancy, who had a decided talent for sarcasm, considering her years. (Of course the Admiral might have stopped the children from calling him Addy, but they seemed to do it because "Admiral" was difficult, and anyway they loved him so much they simply had to take some liberties with him. Besides, although he was the greatest disciplinarian that ever walked a deck, he was so soft and flexible on land that he was perfectly ridiculous and delightful.)

The day when the children were christened Mother Carey's chickens was Nancy's tenth birthday, a time when the family was striving to give her her proper name, having begun wrong with her at the outset. She was the first, you see, and the first is something of an event, take it how you will.

It is obvious that at the beginning they could not address a tiny thing on a pillow as Nancy, because she was too young. She was not even alluded to at that early date as "she," but always as "it,"

so they called her "baby" and let it go at that. Then there was a long period when she was still too young to be called Nancy, and though, so far as age was concerned, she might properly have held on to her name of baby, she couldn't with propriety, because there was Gilbert then, and he was baby. Moreover, she gradually became so indescribably quaint and bewitching and comical and saucy that every one sought diminutives for her; nicknames, fond names, little names, and all sorts of words that tried to describe her charm (and couldn't), so there was Poppet and Smiles and Minx and Rogue and Midget and Ladybird and finally Nan and Nannie by degrees, to soberer Nancy.

"Nancy is ten to-day," mused the Admiral. "Bless my soul, how time flies! You were a young Ensign, Carey, and I well remember the letter you wrote me when this little lass came into harbor! Just wait a minute; I believe the scrap of newspaper verse you enclosed has been in my wallet ever since. I always liked it."

"I recall writing to you," said Mr. Carey. "As you had lent me five hundred dollars to be married on, I thought I ought to keep you posted!"

"Oh, father! did you have to borrow money?" cried Kathleen.

"I did, my dear. There's no disgrace in borrowing, if you pay back, and I did. Your Uncle Allan was starting in business, and I had just put my little capital in with his when I met your mother. If you had met your mother wouldn't you have wanted to marry her?"

"Yes!" cried Nancy eagerly. "Fifty of her!" At which everybody laughed.

"And what became of the money you put in Uncle Allan's business?" asked Gilbert with unexpected intelligence.

There was a moment's embarrassment and an exchange of glances between mother and father before he replied, "Oh! that's coming back multiplied six times over, one of these days,—Allan has a very promising project on hand just now, Admiral."

"Glad to hear it! A delightful fellow, and straight as a die. I only wish he could perform once in a while, instead of promising."

"He will if only he keeps his health, but he's heavily handicapped there, poor chap. Well, what's the verse?"

The Admiral put on his glasses, prettily assisted by Kathleen, who was on his knee and seized the opportunity to give him a French kiss when the spectacles were safely on the bridge of his nose. Whereupon he read:—

"There came to port last Sunday night
  The queerest little craft,
Without an inch of rigging on;
  I looked, and looked, and laughed.

"It seemed so curious that she
  Should cross the unknown water,
And moor herself within my room—
  My daughter, O my daughter!

"Yet, by these presents, witness all,
  She's welcome fifty times,
And comes consigned to Hope and Love
  And common metre rhymes.

"She has no manifest but this;
  No flag floats o'er the water;
She's rather new for British Lloyd's—

My daughter, O my daughter!

"Ring out, wild bells—and tame ones, too;
Ring out the lover's moon,
Ring in the little worsted socks,
Ring in the bib and spoon."[1]

"Oh, Peter, how pretty!" said Mother Carey all in a glow. "You never showed it to me!"

"You were too much occupied with the aforesaid 'queer little craft,' wasn't she, Nan—I mean Nancy!" and her father pinched her ear and pulled a curly lock.

Nancy was a lovely creature to the eye, and she came by her good looks naturally enough. For three generations her father's family had been known as the handsome Careys, and when Lieutenant Carey chose Margaret Gilbert for his wife, he was lucky enough to win the loveliest girl in her circle.

Thus it was still the handsome Careys in the time of our story, for all the children were well-favored and the general public could never decide whether Nancy or Kathleen was the belle of the family. Kathleen had fair curls, skin like a rose, and delicate features; not a blemish to mar her exquisite prettiness! All colors became her; all hats suited her hair. She was the Carey beauty so long as Nancy remained out of sight, but the moment that young person appeared Kathleen left something to be desired. Nancy piqued; Nancy sparkled; Nancy glowed; Nancy occasionally pouted and not infrequently blazed. Nancy's eyes had to be continually searched for news, both of herself and of the immediate world about her. If you did not keep looking at her every "once in so often" you couldn't keep up with the progress of events; she might flash a dozen telegrams to somebody, about something, while your head was turned away. Kathleen could be safely left unwatched for an hour or so without fear of change; her moods were less variable, her temper evener; her interest in the passing moment less keen, her absorption in the particular subject less intense. Walt Whitman might have been thinking of Nancy when he wrote:—

There was a child went forth every day
And the first object he looked upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the day
Or for many years, or stretching cycles of years.

Kathleen's nature needed to be stirred, Nancy's to be controlled, the impulse coming from within, the only way that counts in the end, though the guiding force may be applied from without.

Nancy was more impulsive than industrious, more generous than wise, more plucky than prudent; she had none too much perseverance and no patience at all.

Gilbert was a fiery youth of twelve, all for adventure. He kindled quickly, but did not burn long, so deeds of daring would be in his line; instantaneous ones, quickly settled, leaving the victor with a swelling chest and a feather in cap; rather an obvious feather suited Gilbert best.

Peter? Oh! Peter, aged four, can be dismissed in very few words as a consummate charmer and heart-breaker. The usual elements that go to the making of a small boy were all there, but mixed with white magic. It is painful to think of the dozens of girl babies in long clothes who must have been feeling premonitory pangs when Peter was four, to think they couldn't all marry him when they grew up!

[1] George W. Cable.

III
THE COMMON DENOMINATOR

Three weeks had gone by since Mother Carey's departure for Fortress Monroe, and the children had mounted from one moral triumph to another.

John Bunyan, looking in at the windows, might have exclaimed:—

> Who would true valor see
> Let him come hither.

It is easy to go wrong in a wicked world, but there are certain circumstances under which one is pledged to virtue; when, like a knight of the olden time, you wear your motto next your heart and fight for it,—"Death rather than defeat!" "We are able because we think we are able!" "Follow honor!" and the like. These sentiments look beautifully as class mottoes on summer graduation programmes, but some of them, apparently, disappear from circulation before cold weather sets in.

It is difficult to do right, we repeat, but not when mother is away from us for the first time since we were born; not when she who is the very sun of home is shining elsewhere, and we are groping in the dim light without her, only remembering her last words and our last promises. Not difficult when we think of the eyes the color of the blue velvet bonnet, and the tears falling from them. They are hundreds of miles away, but we see them looking at us a dozen times a day and the last thing at night.

Not difficult when we think of father; gay, gallant father, desperately ill and mother nursing him; father, with the kind smile and the jolly little sparkles of fun in his eyes; father, tall and broad-shouldered, splendid as the gods, in full uniform; father, so brave that if a naval battle ever did come his way, he would demolish the foe in an instant; father, with a warm strong hand clasping ours on high days and holidays, taking us on great expeditions where we see life at its best and taste incredible joys.

The most quarrelsome family, if the house burns down over their heads, will stop disputing until the emergency is over and they get under a new roof. Somehow, in times of great trial, calamity, sorrow, the differences that separate people are forgotten. Isn't it rather like the process in mathematics where we reduce fractions to a common denominator?

It was no time for anything but superior behavior in the Carey household; that was distinctly felt from kitchen to nursery. Ellen the cook was tidier, Joanna the second maid more amiable. Nancy, who was "responsible," rose earlier than the rest and went to bed later, after locking doors and windows that had been left unlocked since the flood. "I am responsible," she said three or four times each day, to herself, and, it is to be feared, to others! Her heavenly patience in dressing Peter every few hours without comment struck the most callous observer as admirable. Peter never remembered that he had any clothes on. He might have been a real stormy petrel, breasting the billows in his birthday suit and expecting his feathers to be dried when and how the Lord pleased. He comported himself in the presence of dust, mud, water, liquid refreshment, and sticky substances, exactly as if clean white sailor suits grew on every bush and could be renewed at pleasure.

Even Gilbert was moved to spontaneous admiration and respect at the sight of Nancy's zeal. "Nobody would know you, Nancy; it is simply wonderful, and I only wish it could last," he said. Even this style of encomium was received sweetly, though there had been moments in her previous history when Nancy would have retorted in a very pointed manner. When she was "responsible," not even had he gone the length of calling Nancy an unspeakable pig, would she have said anything. She had a blissful consciousness that, had she been examined, indications of angelic wings, and not bristles, would have been discovered under her blouse.

Gilbert, by the way, never suspected that the masters in his own school wondered whether he had experienced religion or was working on some sort of boyish wager. He took his two weekly reports home cautiously for fear that they might break on the way, pasted them on large pieces of paper, and framed them in elaborate red, white, and blue stars united by strips of gold paper. How Captain and Mrs. Carey laughed and cried over this characteristic message when it reached them! "Oh! they *are* darlings," Mother Carey cried. "Of course they are," the Captain murmured feebly. "Why shouldn't they be, considering you?"

"It is really just as easy to do right as wrong, Kathleen," said Nancy when the girls were going to bed one night.

"Ye-es!" assented Kathleen with some reservations in her tone, for she was more judicial and logical than her sister. "But you have to keep your mind on it so, and never relax a single bit! Then it's lots easier for a few weeks than it is for long stretches!"

"That's true," agreed Nancy; "it would be hard to keep it up forever. And you have to love somebody or something like fury every minute or you can't do it at all. How do the people manage that can't love like that, or haven't anybody to love?"

"I don't know." said Kathleen sleepily. "I'm so worn out with being good, that every night I just say my prayers and tumble into bed exhausted. Last night I fell asleep praying, I honestly did!"

"Tell that to the marines!" remarked Nancy incredulously.

IV
THE BROKEN CIRCLE

The three weeks were running into a month now, and virtue still reigned in the Carey household. But things were different. Everybody but Peter saw the difference. Peter dwelt from morn till eve in that Land of Pure Delight which is ignorance of death. The children no longer bounded to meet the postman, but waited till Joanna brought in the mail. Steadily, daily, the letters changed in tone. First they tried to be cheerful; later on they spoke of trusting that the worst was past; then of hoping that father was holding his own. "Oh! if he was holding *all* his own," sobbed Nancy. "If we were only there with him, helping mother!"

Ellen said to Joanna one morning in the kitchen: "It's my belief the Captain's not going to get well, and I'd like to go to Newburyport to see my cousin and not be in the house when the children's told!" And Joanna said, "Shame on you not to stand by 'em in their hour of trouble!" At which Ellen quailed and confessed herself a coward.

Finally came a day never to be forgotten; a day that swept all the former days clean out of memory, as a great wave engulfs all the little ones in its path; a day when, Uncle Allan being too ill to travel, Cousin Ann, of all people in the universe,—Cousin Ann came to bring the terrible news that Captain Carey was dead.

Never think that Cousin Ann did not suffer and sympathize and do her rocky best to comfort; she did indeed, but she was thankful that her task was of brief duration. Mrs. Carey knew how it would be, and had planned all so that she herself could arrive not long after the blow had fallen. Peter, by his mother's orders (she had thought of everything) was at a neighbor's house, the centre of all interest, the focus of all gayety. He was too young to see the tears of his elders with any profit; baby plants grow best in sunshine. The others were huddled together in a sad group at the front window, eyes swollen, handkerchiefs rolled into drenched, pathetic little wads.

Cousin Ann came in from the dining room with a tumbler and spoon in her hand. "See here, children!" she said bracingly, "you've been crying for the last twelve hours without stopping, and I don't blame you a mite. If I was the crying kind I'd do the same thing. Now do you think you've got grit enough—all three of you—to bear up for your mother's sake, when she first comes in? I've mixed you each a good dose of aromatic spirits of ammonia, and it's splendid for the nerves. Your mother must get a night's sleep somehow, and when she gets back a little of her strength you'll be the greatest comfort she has in the world. The way you're carrying on now you'll be the death of her!"

It was a good idea, and the dose had courage in it. Gilbert took the first sip, Kathleen the second, and Nancy the third, and hardly had the last swallow disappeared down the poor aching throats before a carriage drove up to the gate. Some one got out and handed out Mrs. Carey whose step used to be lighter than Nancy's. A strange gentleman, oh! not a stranger, it was the dear Admiral helping mother up the path. They had been unconsciously expecting the brown muff and blue velvet bonnet, but these had vanished, like father, and all the beautiful things of the past years, and in their place was black raiment that chilled their hearts. But the black figure had flung back the veil that hid her from the longing eyes of the children, and when she raised her face it was full of the old love. She was grief-stricken and she was pale, but she was mother, and the three young things tore open the door and clasped her in their arms, sobbing, choking, whispering all sorts of tender comfort, their childish tears falling like healing dew on her poor heart. The Admiral soothed and quieted them each in turn, all but Nancy. Cousin Ann's medicine was of no avail, and strangling with sobs Nancy fled to the attic until she was strong enough to say "for mother's sake" without a quiver in her voice. Then she crept down, and as she passed her mother's room on tiptoe she looked in and saw that the chair by the window, the chair that had been vacant for a month, was filled, and that the black-clad figure

was what was left to them; a strange, sad, quiet mother, who had lost part of herself somewhere,—the gay part, the cheerful part, the part that made her so piquantly and entrancingly different from other women. Nancy stole in softly and put her young smooth cheek against her mother's, quietly stroking her hair. "There are four of us to love you and take care of you," she said. "It isn't quite so bad as if there was nobody!"

Mrs. Carey clasped her close. "Oh! my Nancy! my first, my oldest, God will help me, I know that, but just now I need somebody close and warm and soft; somebody with arms to hold and breath to speak and lips to kiss! I ought not to sadden you, nor lean on you, you are too young, —but I must a little, just at the first. You see, dear, you come next to father!"

"Next to father!" Nancy's life was set to a new tune from that moment. Here was her spur, her creed; the incentive, the inspiration she had lacked. She did not suddenly grow older than her years, but simply, in the twinkling of an eye, came to a realization of herself, her opportunity, her privilege, her duty; the face of life had changed, and Nancy changed with it.

"Do you love me next to mother?" the Admiral had asked coaxingly once when Nancy was eight and on his lap as usual.

"Oh dear no!" said Nancy thoughtfully, shaking her head.

"Why, that's rather a blow to me," the Admiral exclaimed, pinching an ear and pulling a curl. "I flattered myself that when I was on my best behavior I came next to mother."

"It's this way, Addy dear," said Nancy, cuddling up to his waistcoat and giving a sigh of delight that there were so many nice people in the world. "It's just this way. First there's mother, and then all round mother there's a wide, wide space; and then father and you come next the space."

The Admiral smiled; a grave, lovely smile that often crept into his eyes when he held Mother Carey's chickens on his knee. He kissed Nancy on the little white spot behind the ear where the brown hair curled in tiny rings like grape tendrils, soft as silk and delicate as pencil strokes. He said nothing, but his boyish dreams were in the kiss, and certain hopes of manhood that had never been realized. He was thinking that Margaret Gilbert was a fortunate and happy woman to have become Mother Carey; such a mother, too, that all about her was a wide, wide space, and next the space, the rest of the world, nearer or farther according to their merits. He wondered if motherhood ought not to be like that, and he thought if it were it would be a great help to God.

V
HOW ABOUT JULIA?

We often speak of a family circle, but there are none too many of them. Parallel lines never meeting, squares, triangles, oblongs, and particularly those oblongs pulled askew, known as rhomboids, these and other geometrical figures abound, but circles are comparatively few. In a true family circle a father and a mother first clasp each other's hands, liking well to be thus clasped; then they stretch out a hand on either side, and these are speedily grasped by children, who hold one another firmly, and complete the ring. One child is better than nothing, a great deal better than nothing; it is at least an effort in the right direction, but the circle that ensues is not, even then, a truly nice shape. You can stand as handsomely as ever you like, but it simply won't "come round." The minute that two, three, four, five, join in, the "roundness" grows, and the merriment too, and the laughter, and the power to do things. (Responsibility and care also, but what is the use of discouraging circles when there are not enough of them anyway?)

The Carey family circle had been round and complete, with love and harmony between all its component parts. In family rhomboids, for instance, mother loves the children and father does not, or father does, but does not love mother, or father and mother love each other and the children do not get their share; it is impossible to enumerate all the little geometrical peculiarities which keep a rhomboid from being a circle, but one person can just "stand out" enough to spoil the shape, or put hands behind back and refuse to join at all. About the ugliest thing in the universe is that non-joining habit! You would think that anybody, however dull, might consider his hands, and guess by the look of them that they must be made to work, and help, and take hold of somebody else's hands! Miserable, useless, flabby paws, those of the non-joiner; that he feeds and dresses himself with, and then hangs to his selfish sides, or puts behind his beastly back!

When Captain Carey went on his long journey into the unknown and uncharted land, the rest of the Careys tried in vain for a few months to be still a family, and did not succeed at all. They clung as closely to one another as ever they could, but there was always a gap in the circle where father had been. Some men, silent, unresponsive, absent-minded and especially absorbed in business, might drop out and not be missed, but Captain Carey was full of vitality, warmth, and high spirits. It is strange so many men think that the possession of a child makes them a father; it does not; but it is a curious and very general misapprehension. Captain Carey was a boy with his boys, and a gallant lover with his girls; to his wife—oh! we will not even touch upon that ground; she never did, to any one or anything but her own heart! Such an one could never disappear from memory, such a loss could never be made wholly good. The only thing to do was to remember father's pride and justify it, to recall his care for mother and take his place so far as might be; the only thing for all, as the months went on, was to be what mother called the three b's,—brave, bright, and busy.

To be the last was by far the easiest, for the earliest effort at economy had been the reluctant dismissal of Joanna, the chambermaid. In old-fashioned novels the devoted servant always insisted on remaining without wages, but this story concerns itself with life at a later date. Joanna wept at the thought of leaving, but she never thought of the romantic and illogical expedient of staying on without compensation.

Captain Carey's salary had been five thousand dollars, or rather was to have been, for he had only attained his promotion three months before his death. There would have been an extra five hundred dollars a year when he was at sea, and on the strength of this addition to their former income he intended to increase the amount of his life insurance, but it had not yet been done when the sudden illness seized him, an illness that began so gently and innocently and terminated with such sudden and unexpected fatality.

The life insurance, such as it was, must be put into the bank for emergencies. Mrs. Carey realized that that was the only proper thing to do when there were four children under fifteen to be considered. The pressing question, however, was how to keep it in the bank, and subsist on a captain's pension of thirty dollars a month. There was the ten thousand, hers and the Captain's, in Allan Carey's business, but Allan was seriously ill with nervous prostration, and no money put into his business ever had come out, even in a modified form. The Admiral was at the other end of the world, and even had he been near at hand Mrs. Carey would never have confided the family difficulties to him. She could hardly have allowed him even to tide her over her immediate pressing anxieties, remembering his invalid sister and his many responsibilities. No, the years until Gilbert was able to help, or Nancy old enough to use her talents, or the years before the money invested with Allan would bring dividends, those must be years of self-sacrifice on everybody's part; and more even than that, they must be fruitful years, in which not mere saving and economizing, but earning, would be necessary.

It was only lately that Mrs. Carey had talked over matters with the three eldest children, but the present house was too expensive to be longer possible as a home, and the question of moving was a matter of general concern. Joanna had been, up to the present moment, the only economy, but alas! Joanna was but a drop in the necessary bucket.

On a certain morning in March Mrs. Carey sat in her room with a letter in her lap, the children surrounding her. It was from Mr. Manson, Allan Carey's younger partner; the sort of letter that dazed her, opening up as it did so many questions of expediency, duty, and responsibility. The gist of it was this: that Allan Carey was a broken man in mind and body; that both for the climate and for treatment he was to be sent to a rest cure in the Adirondacks; that sometime or other, in Mr. Manson's opinion, the firm's investments might be profitable if kept long enough, and there was no difficulty in keeping them, for nobody in the universe wanted them at the present moment; that Allan's little daughter Julia had no source of income whatever after her father's monthly bills were paid, and that her only relative outside of the Careys, a certain Miss Ann Chadwick, had refused to admit her into her house. "Mr. Carey only asked Miss Chadwick as a last resort," wrote Mr. Manson, "for his very soul quailed at the thought of letting you, his brother's widow, suffer any more by his losses than was necessary, and he studiously refused to let you know the nature and extent of his need. Miss Chadwick's only response to his request was, that she believed in every tub standing on its own bottom, and if he had harbored the same convictions he would not have been in his present extremity. I am telling you this, my dear Mrs. Carey," the writer went on, "just to get your advice about the child. I well know that your income will not support your own children; what therefore shall we do with Julia? I am a poor young bachelor, with two sisters to support. I shall find a position, of course, and I shall never cease nursing Carey's various affairs and projects during the time of his exile, but I cannot assume an ounce more of financial responsibility."

There had been quite a council over the letter, and parts of it had been read more than once by Mrs. Carey, but the children, though very sympathetic with Uncle Allan and loud in their exclamations of "Poor Julia!" had not suggested any remedy for the situation.

"Well," said Mrs. Carey, folding the letter, "there seems to be but one thing for us to do."

"Do you mean that you are going to have Julia come and live with us,—be one of the family?" exclaimed Gilbert.

"That is what I want to discuss," she replied. "You three are the family as well as I.—Come in!" she called, for she heard the swift feet of the youngest petrel ascending the stairs. "Come in! Where is there a sweeter Peter, a fleeter Peter, a neater Peter, than ours, I should like to know, and where a better adviser for the council?"

"*Neater*, mother! How *can* you?" inquired Kathleen.

"I meant neater when he is just washed and dressed," retorted Peter's mother. "Are you coming to the family council, sweet Pete?"

Peter climbed on his mother's knee and answered by a vague affirmative nod, his whole mind being on the extraction of a slippery marble from a long-necked bottle.

"Then be quiet, and speak only when we ask your advice," continued Mrs. Carey. "Unless I were obliged to, children, I should be sorry to go against all your wishes. I might be willing to bear my share of a burden, but more is needed than that."

"I think," said Nancy suddenly, aware now of the trend of her mother's secret convictions, "I think Julia is a smug, conceited, vain, affected little pea—" Here she caught her mother's eye and suddenly she heard inside of her head or heart or conscience a chime of words. "*Next to father*!" Making a magnificent oratorical leap she finished her sentence with only a second's break, —"peacock, but if mother thinks Julia is a duty, a duty she is, and we must brace up and do her. Must we love her, mother, or can we just be good and polite to her, giving her the breast and taking the drumstick? *She* won't ever say, '*Don't let me rob you*!' like Cousin Ann, when *she* takes the breast!"

Kathleen looked distinctly unresigned. She hated drumsticks and all that they stood for in life. She disliked the wall side of the bed, the middle seat in the carriage, the heel of the loaf, the underdone biscuit, the tail part of the fish, the scorched end of the omelet. "It will make more difference to me than anybody," she said gloomily.

"Everything makes more difference to you, Kitty," remarked Gilbert.

"I mean I'm always fourth when the cake plate's passed,—in everything! Now Julia'll be fourth, and I shall be fifth; it's lucky people can't tumble off the floor!"

"Poor abused Kathleen!" cried Gilbert. "Well, mother, you're always right, but I can't see why you take another one into the family, when we've been saying for a week there isn't even enough for us five to live on. It looks mighty queer to put me in the public school and spend the money you save that way, on Julia!"

Way down deep in her heart Mother Carey felt a pang. There was a little seed of hard self-love in Gilbert that she wanted him to dig up from the soil and get rid of before it sprouted and waxed too strong.

"Julia is a Carey chicken after all, Gilbert," she said.

"But she's Uncle Allan's chicken, and I'm Captain Carey's eldest son."

"That's the very note I should strike if I were you," his mother responded, "only with a little different accent. What would Captain Carey's eldest son like to do for his only cousin, a little girl younger than himself,—a girl who had a very silly, unwise, unhappy mother for the first five years of her life, and who is now practically fatherless, for a time at least?"

Gilbert wriggled as if in great moral discomfort, as indeed he was.

"Well," he said, "I don't want to be selfish, and if the girls say yes, I'll have to fall in; but it isn't logic, all the same, to ask a sixth to share what isn't enough for five."

"I agree with you there, Gilly!" smiled his mother. "The only question before the council is, does logic belong at the top, in the scale of reasons why we do certain things? If we ask Julia to come, she will have to 'fall into line,' as you say, and share the family misfortunes as best she can."

"She's a regular shirk, and always was." This from Kathleen.

"She would never come at all if she guessed her cousins' opinion of her, that is very certain!" remarked Mrs. Carey pointedly.

"Now, mother, look me in the eye and speak the whole truth," asked Nancy. "*Do you like Julia Carey*?"

Mrs. Carey laughed as she answered, "Frankly then, I do not! But," she continued, "I do not like several of the remarks that have been made at this council, yet I manage to bear them."

"Of course I shan't call Julia smug and conceited to her face," asserted Nancy encouragingly. "I hope that her bosom friend Gladys Ferguson has disappeared from view. The last time Julia visited us, Kitty and I got so tired of Gladys Ferguson's dresses, her French maid, her bedroom furniture, and her travels abroad, that we wrote her name on a piece of paper, put it in a box, and buried it in

the back yard the minute Julia left the house. When you write, mother, tell Julia there's a piece of breast for her, but not a mouthful of my drumstick goes to Gladys Ferguson."

"The more the hungrier; better invite Gladys too," suggested Gilbert, "then we can say like that simple little kid in Wordsworth:—

"'Sisters and brother, little maid,
How many may you be?'
'How many? Seven in all,' she said,
And wondering looked at me!"

"Then it goes on thus," laughed Nancy:—

"'And who are they? I pray you tell.'
She answered, 'Seven are we;
Mother with us makes five, and then
There's Gladys and Julee!'"

Everybody joined in the laugh then, including Peter, who was especially uproarious, and who had an idea he had made the joke himself, else why did they all kiss him?

"How about Julia? What do you say, Peter?" asked his mother.

"I want her. She played horse once," said Peter. The opinion that the earth revolved around his one small person was natural at the age of four, but the same idea of the universe still existed in Gilbert's mind. A boy of thirteen ought perhaps to have a clearer idea of the relative sizes of world and individual; at least that was the conviction in Mother Carey's mind.

VI
NANCY'S IDEA

Nancy had a great many ideas, first and last. They were generally unique and interesting at least, though it is to be feared that few of them were practical. However, it was Nancy's idea to build Peter a playhouse in the plot of ground at the back of the Charlestown house, and it was she who was the architect and head carpenter. That plan had brought much happiness to Peter and much comfort to the family. It was Nancy's idea that she, Gilbert, and Kathleen should all be so equally polite to Cousin Ann Chadwick that there should be no favorite to receive an undue share of invitations to the Chadwick house. Nancy had made two visits in succession, both offered in the nature of tributes to her charms and virtues, and she did not wish a third.

"If you two can't be *more* attractive, then I'll be *less*, that's all," was her edict. "'Turn and turn about' has got to be the rule in this matter. I'm not going to wear the martyr's crown alone; it will adorn your young brows every now and then or I'll know the reason why!"

It was Nancy's idea to let Joanna go, and divide her work among the various members of the family. It was also Nancy's idea that, there being no strictly masculine bit of martyrdom to give to Gilbert, he should polish the silver for his share. This was an idea that proved so unpopular with Gilbert that it was speedily relinquished. Gilbert was wonderful with tools, so wonderful that Mother Carey feared he would be a carpenter instead of the commander of a great war ship; but there seemed to be no odd jobs to offer him. There came a day when even Peter realized that life was real and life was earnest. When the floor was strewn with playthings his habit had been to stand amid the wreckage and smile, whereupon Joanna would fly and restore everything to its accustomed place. After the passing of Joanna, Mother Carey sat placidly in her chair in the nursery and Peter stood ankle deep among his toys, smiling.

"Now put everything where it belongs, sweet Pete," said mother.

"You do it," smiled Peter.

"I am very busy darning your stockings, Peter."

"I don't like to pick up, Muddy."

"No, it isn't much fun, but it has to be done."

Peter went over to the window and gazed at the landscape. "I dess I'll go play with Ellen," he remarked in honeyed tones.

"That would be nice, after you clear away your toys and blocks."

"I dess I'll play with Ellen first," suggested Peter, starting slowly towards the door.

"No, we always work first and play afterwards!" said mother, going on darning.

Peter felt caught in a net of irresistible and pitiless logic.

"Come and help me, Muddy?" he coaxed, and as she looked up he suddenly let fly all his armory of weapons at once,—two dimples, tossing back of curls, parted lips, tiny white teeth, sweet voice.

Mother Carey's impulse was to cast herself on the floor and request him simply to smile on her and she would do his lightest bidding, but controlling her secret desires she answered: "I would help if you needed me, but you don't. You're a great big boy now!"

"I'm not a great big boy!" cried Peter, "I'm only a great big little boy!"

"Don't waste time, sweet Pete; go to work!"

"*I want Joanna*!" roared Peter with the voice of an infant bull.

"So we all do. It's because she had to go that I'm darning stockings."

The net tightened round Peter's defenceless body and he hurled himself against his rocking, horse and dragged it brutally to a corner. Having disposed of most of his strength and temper in this

operation, he put away the rest of his goods and chattels more quietly, but with streaming eyes and heaving bosom.

"Splendid!" commented Mother Carey. "Joanna couldn't have done it better, and it won't be half so much work next time." Peter heard the words "next time" distinctly, and knew the grim face of Duty at last, though he was less than five.

The second and far more tragic time was when he was requested to make himself ready for luncheon,—Kathleen to stand near and help "a little" if really necessary. Now Peter *au fond* was absolutely clean. French phrases are detestable where there is any English equivalent, but in this case there is none, so I will explain to the youngest reader—who may speak only one language—that the base of Peter was always clean. He received one full bath and several partial ones in every twenty-four hours, but su-per-im-posed on this base were evidences of his eternal activities, and indeed of other people's! They were divided into three classes,—those contracted in the society of Joanna when she took him out-of-doors: such as sand, water, mud, grass stains, paint, lime, putty, or varnish; those derived from visits to his sisters at their occupations: such as ink, paints, lead pencils, paste, glue, and mucilage; those amassed in his stays with Ellen in the kitchen: sugar, molasses, spice, pudding sauce, black currants, raisins, dough, berry stains (assorted, according to season), chocolate, jelly, jam, and preserves; these deposits were not deep, but were simply dabs on the facade of Peter, and through them the eyes and soul of him shone, delicious and radiant. They could be rubbed off with a moist handkerchief if water were handy, and otherwise if it were not, and the person who rubbed always wanted for some mysterious reason to kiss him immediately afterwards, for Peter had the largest kissing acquaintance in Charlestown.

When Peter had scrubbed the parts of him that showed most, and had performed what he considered his whole duty to his hair, he appeared for the first time at the family table in such a guise that if the children had not been warned they would have gone into hysterics, but he gradually grew to be proud of his toilets and careful that they should not occur too often in the same day, since it appeared to be the family opinion that he should make them himself.

There was a tacit feeling, not always expressed, that Nancy, after mother, held the reins of authority, and also that she was a person of infinite resource. The Gloom-Dispeller had been her father's name for her, but he had never thought of her as a Path-Finder, a gallant adventurer into unknown and untried regions, because there had been small opportunity to test her courage or her ingenuity.

Mrs. Carey often found herself leaning on Nancy nowadays; not as a dead weight, but with just the hint of need, just the suggestion of confidence, that youth and strength and buoyancy respond to so gladly. It had been decided that the house should be vacated as soon as a tenant could be found, but the "what next" had not been settled. Julia had confirmed Nancy's worst fears by accepting her aunt's offer of a home, but had requested time to make Gladys Ferguson a short visit at Palm Beach, all expenses being borne by the Parents of Gladys. This estimable lady and gentleman had no other names or titles and were never spoken of as if they had any separate existence. They had lived and loved and married and accumulated vast wealth, and borne Gladys. After that they had sunk into the background and Gladys had taken the stage.

"I'm sure I'm glad she is going to the Fergusons," exclaimed Kathleen.

"One month less of her!"

"Yes," Nancy replied, "but she'll be much worse, more spoiled, more vain, more luxurious than before. She'll want a gold chicken breast now. We've just packed away the finger bowls; but out they'll have to come again."

"Let her wash her own finger bowl a few days and she'll clamor for the simple life," said Kathleen shrewdly. "Oh, what a relief if the Fergusons would adopt Julia, just to keep Gladys company!"

"Nobody would ever adopt Julia," returned Nancy. "If she was yours you couldn't help it; you'd just take her 'to the Lord in prayer,' as the Sunday-school hymn says, but you'd never go out and adopt her."

Matters were in this uncertain and unsettled state when Nancy came into her mother's room one evening when the rest of the house was asleep.

"I saw your light, so I knew you were reading, Muddy. I've had such a bright idea I couldn't rest."

"Muddy" is not an attractive name unless you happen to know its true derivation and significance. First there was "mother dear," and as persons under fifteen are always pressed for time and uniformly breathless, this appellation was shortened to "Motherdy," and Peter being unable to struggle with that term, had abbreviated it into "Muddy." "Muddy" in itself is undistinguished and even unpleasant, but when accompanied by a close strangling hug, pats on the cheek, and ardent if somewhat sticky kisses, grows by degrees to possess delightful associations. Mother Carey enjoyed it so much from Peter that she even permitted it to be taken up by the elder children.

"You mustn't have ideas after nine P.M., Nancy!" chided her mother.

"Wrap the blue blanket around you and sit down with me near the fire."

"You're not to say I'm romantic or unpractical," insisted Nancy, leaning against her mother's knees and looking up into her face,—"indeed, you're not to say anything of any importance till I'm all finished. I'm going to tell it in a long story, too, so as to work on your feelings and make you say yes."

"Very well, I'm all ears!"

"Now put on your thinking cap! Do you remember once, years and years ago, before Peter it was, that father took us on a driving trip through some dear little villages in Maine?"

(The Careys never dated their happenings eighteen hundred and anything.

It was always: Just before Peter, Immediately after Peter, or A Long Time after Peter, which answered all purposes.)

"I remember."

"It was one of Gilbert's thirsty days, and we stopped at nearly every convenient pump to give him drinks of water, and at noon we came to the loveliest wayside well with a real moss-covered bucket; do you remember?"

"I remember."

"And we all clambered out, and father said it was time for luncheon, and we unpacked the baskets on the greensward near a beautiful tree, and father said, 'Don't spread the table too near the house, dears, or they'll cry when they see our doughnuts!' and Kitty, who had been running about, came up and cried, 'It's an empty house; come and look!'"

"I remember."

"And we all went in the gate and loved every bit of it: the stone steps, the hollyhocks growing under the windows, the yellow paint and the green blinds; and father looked in the windows, and the rooms were large and sunny, and we wanted to drive the horse into the barn and stay there forever!"

"I remember."

"And Gilbert tore his trousers climbing on the gate, and father laid him upside down on your lap and I ran and got your work-bag and you mended the seat of his little trousers. And father looked and looked at the house and said, 'Bless its heart!' and said if he were rich he would buy the dear thing that afternoon and sleep in it that night; and asked you if you didn't wish you'd married the other man, and you said there never was another man, and you asked father if he thought on the whole that he was the poorest man in the world, and father said no, the very richest, and he kissed us all round, do you remember?"

"Do I remember? O Nancy, Nancy! What do you think I am made of that I could ever forget?"

"Don't cry, Muddy darling, don't! It was so beautiful, and we have so many things like that to remember."

"Yes," said Mrs. Carey, "I know it. Part of my tears are grateful ones that none of you can ever recall an unloving word between your father and mother!"

"The idea," said Nancy suddenly and briefly, "is to go and live in that darling house!"

"Nancy! What for?"

"We've got to leave this place, and where could we live on less than in that tiny village? It had a beautiful white-painted academy, don't you remember, so we could go to school there,—Kathleen and I anyway, if you could get enough money to keep Gilly at Eastover."

"Of course I've thought of the country, but that far-away spot never occurred to me. What was its quaint little name,—Mizpah or Shiloh or Deborah or something like that?"

"It was Beulah," said Nancy; "and father thought it exactly matched the place!"

"We even named the house," recalled Mother Carey with a tearful smile. "There were vegetables growing behind it, and flowers in front, and your father suggested Garden Fore-and-Aft and I chose Happy Half-Acre, but father thought the fields that stretched back of the vegetable garden might belong to the place, and if so there would be far more than a half-acre of land."

"And do you remember father said he wished we could do something to thank the house for our happy hour, and I thought of the little box of plants we had bought at a wayside nursery?"

"Oh! I do indeed! I hadn't thought of it for years! Father and you planted a tiny crimson rambler at the corner of the piazza at the side."

"Do you suppose it ever 'rambled,' Muddy? Because it would be ever so high now, and full of roses in summer."

"I wonder!" mused Mother Carey. "Oh! it was a sweet, tranquil, restful place! I wonder how we could find out about it? It seems impossible that it should not have been rented or sold before this. Let me see, that was five years ago."

"There was a nice old gentleman farther down the street, quite in the village, somebody who had known father when he was a boy."

"So there was; he had a quaint little law office not much larger than Peter's playhouse. Perhaps we could find him. He was very, very old. He may not be alive, and I cannot remember his name."

"Father called him 'Colonel,' I know that. Oh, how I wish dear Addy was here to help us!"

"If he were he would want to help us too much! We must learn to bear our own burdens. They won't seem so strange and heavy when we are more used to them. Now go to bed, dear. We'll think of Beulah, you and I; and perhaps, as we have been all adrift, waiting for a wind to stir our sails, 'Nancy's idea' will be the thing to start us on our new voyage. Beulah means land of promise;—that's a good omen!"

"And father found Beulah; and father found the house, and father blessed it and loved it and named it; that makes ever so many more good omens, more than enough to start housekeeping on," Nancy answered, kissing her mother goodnight.

VII
"OLD BEASTS INTO NEW"

Mother Carey went to sleep that night in greater peace than she had felt for months. It had seemed to her, all these last sad weeks, as though she and her brood had been breasting stormy waters with no harbor in sight. There were friends in plenty here and there, but no kith and kin, and the problems to be settled were graver and more complex than ordinary friendship could untangle, vexed as it always was by its own problems. She had but one keen desire: to go to some quiet place where temptations for spending money would be as few as possible, and there live for three or four years, putting her heart and mind and soul on fitting the children for life. If she could keep strength enough to guide and guard, train and develop them into happy, useful, agreeable human beings,—masters of their own powers; wise and discreet enough, when years of discretion were reached, to choose right paths,—that, she conceived, was her chief task in life, and no easy one. "Happy I must contrive that they shall be," she thought, "for unhappiness and discontent are among the foxes that spoil the vines. Stupid they shall not be, while I can think of any force to stir their brains; they have ordinary intelligence, all of them, and they shall learn to use it; dull and sleepy children I can't abide. Fairly good they will be, if they are busy and happy, and clever enough to see the folly of being anything *but* good! And so, month after month, for many years to come, I must be helping Nancy and Kathleen to be the right sort of women, and wives, and mothers, and Gilbert and Peter the proper kind of men, and husbands, and fathers. Mother Carey's chickens must be able to show the good birds the way home, as the Admiral said, and I should think they ought to be able to set a few bad birds on the right track now and then!"

Well, all this would be a task to frighten and stagger many a person, but it only kindled Mrs. Carey's love and courage to a white heat.

Do you remember where Kingsley's redoubtable Tom the Water Baby swims past Shiny Wall, and reaches at last Peacepool? Peacepool, where the good whales lie, waiting till Mother Carey shall send for them "to make them out of old beasts into new"?

Tom swims up to the nearest whale and asks the way to Mother Carey.

"There she is in the middle," says the whale, though Tom sees nothing but a glittering white peak like an iceberg. "That's Mother Carey," spouts the whale, "as you will find if you get to her. There she sits making old beasts into new all the year round."

"How does she do that?" asks Tom.

"That's her concern, not mine!" the whale remarks discreetly.

And when Tom came nearer to the white glittering peak it took the form of something like a lovely woman sitting on a white marble throne. And from the foot of the throne, you remember, there swam away, out and out into the sea, millions of new-born creatures of more shapes and colors than man ever dreamed. And they were Mother Carey's children whom she makes all day long.

Tom expected,—I am still telling you what happened to the famous water baby,—Tom expected (like some grown people who ought to know better) that he would find Mother Carey snipping, piecing, fitting, stitching, cobbling, basting, filing, planing, hammering, turning, polishing, moulding, measuring, chiselling, clipping, and so forth, as men do when they go to work to make anything. But instead of that she sat quite still with her chin upon her hand, looking down into the sea with two great blue eyes as blue as the sea itself. (As blue as our own mother's blue velvet bonnet, Kitty would have said.)

Was Beulah the right place, wondered Mrs. Carey as she dropped asleep. And all night long she heard in dreams the voice of that shining little river that ran under the bridge near Beulah village; and all night long she walked in fields of buttercups and daisies, and saw the June breeze blow the tall

grasses. She entered the yellow painted house and put the children to bed in the different rooms, and the instant she saw them sleeping there it became home, and her heart put out little roots that were like tendrils; but they grew so fast that by morning they held the yellow house fast and refused to let it go.

She looked from its windows onto the gardens "fore and aft," and they seemed, like the rest of little Beulah village, full of sweet promise. In the back were all sorts of good things to eat growing in profusion, but modestly out of sight; and in front, where passers-by could see their beauty and sniff their fragrance, old-fashioned posies bloomed and rioted and tossed gay, perfumed heads in the sunshine.

She awoke refreshed and strong and brave, not the same woman who took Nancy's idea to bed with her; for this woman's heart and hope had somehow flown from the brick house in Charlestown and had built itself a new nest in Beulah's green trees, the elms and willows that overhung the shining river.

An idea of her own ran out and met Nancy's half way. Instead of going herself to spy out the land of Beulah, why not send Gilbert? It was a short, inexpensive railway journey, with no change of cars. Gilbert was nearly fourteen, and thus far seemed to have no notion of life as a difficult enterprise. No mother who respects her boy, or respects herself, can ask him flatly, "Do you intend to grow up with the idea of taking care of me; of having an eye to your sisters; or do you consider that, since I brought you into the world, I must provide both for myself and you until you are a man,—or forever and a day after, if you feel inclined to shirk your part in the affair?"

Gilbert talked of his college course as confidently as he had before his father's death. It was Nancy who as the eldest seemed the head of the family, but Gilbert, only a year or so her junior, ought to grow into the head, somehow or other. The way to begin would be to give him a few delightful responsibilities, such as would appeal to his pride and sense of importance, and gradually to mingle with them certain duties of headship neither so simple nor so agreeable. Beulah would be a delightful beginning. Nancy the Pathfinder would have packed a bag and gone to Beulah on an hour's notice; found the real-estate dealer, in case there was such a metropolitan article in the village; looked up her father's old friend the Colonel with the forgotten surname; discovered the owner of the charming house, rented it, and brought back the key in triumph! But Nancy was a girl rich in courage and enterprise, while Gilbert's manliness and leadership and discretion and consideration for others needed a vigorous, decisive, continued push.

If Nancy's idea was good, Mother Carey's idea matched it! To see Gilbert, valise in hand, eight dollars in pocket, leaving Charlestown on a Friday noon after school, was equal to watching Columbus depart for an unknown land. Thrilling is the only word that will properly describe it, and the group that followed his departure from the upper windows used it freely and generously. He had gone gayly downstairs and Nancy flung after him a small packet in an envelope, just as he reached the door.

"There's a photograph of your mother and sisters!" she called. "In case the owner refuses to rent the house to *you*, just show him the rest of the family! And don't forget to say that the rent is exorbitant, whatever it is!"

They watched him go jauntily down the street, Mother Carey with special pride in her eyes. He had on his second best suit, and it looked well on his straight slim figure. He had a gallant air, had Gilbert, and one could not truly say it was surface gallantry either; it simply did not, at present, go very deep. "No one could call him anything but a fine boy," thought the mother, "and surely the outside is a key to what is within!—His firm chin, his erect head, his bright eye, his quick tread, his air of alert self-reliance,—surely here is enough, for any mother to build on!"

VIII
THE KNIGHT OF BEULAH CASTLE

Nancy's flushed face was glued to the window-pane until Gilbert turned the corner. He looked back, took off his cap, threw a kiss to them, and was out of sight!

"Oh! how I wish *I* could have gone!" cried Nancy. "I hope he won't forget what he went for! I hope he won't take 'No' for an answer. Oh! why wasn't I a boy!"

Mrs. Carey laughed as she turned from the window.

"It will be a great adventure for the man of the house, Nancy, so never mind. What would the Pathfinder have done if she had gone, instead of her brother?"

"I? Oh! Millions of things!" said Nancy, pacing the sitting-room floor, her head bent a little, her hands behind her back. "I should be going to the new railway station in Boston now, and presently I should be at the little grated window asking for a return ticket to Greentown station. 'Four ten,' the man would say, and I would fling my whole eight dollars in front of the wicket to show him what manner of person I was.

"Then I would pick up the naught-from-naught-is-naught, one-from-ten-is-nine, five-from-eight-is-three,—three dollars and ninety cents or thereabouts and turn away.

"'Parlor car seat, Miss?' the young man would say,—a warm, worried young man in a seersucker coat, and I would answer, 'No thank you; I always go in the common car to study human nature.' That's what the Admiral says, but of course the ticket man couldn't know that the Admiral is an intimate friend of mine, and would think I said it myself.

"Then I would go down the platform and take the common car for Greentown. Soon we would be off and I would ask the conductor if Greentown was the station where one could change and drive to Beulah, darling little Beulah, shiny-rivered Beulah; not breathing a word about the yellow house for fear he would jump off the train and rent it first. Then he would say he never heard of Beulah. I would look pityingly at him, but make no reply because it would be no use, and anyway I know Greentown *is* the changing place, because I've asked three men before; but Cousin Ann always likes to make conductors acknowledge they don't know as much as she does.

"Then I present a few peanuts or peppermints to a small boy, and hold an infant for a tired mother, because this is what good children do in the Sunday-school books, but I do not mingle much with the passengers because my brow is furrowed with thought and I am travelling on important business."

You can well imagine that by this time Mother Carey has taken out her darning, and Kathleen her oversewing, to which she pays little attention because she so adores Nancy's tales. Peter has sat like a small statue ever since his quick ear caught the sound of a story. His eyes follow Nancy as she walks up and down improvising, and the only interruption she ever receives from her audience is Kathleen's or Mother Carey's occasional laugh at some especially ridiculous sentence.

"The hours fly by like minutes," continues Nancy, stopping by the side window and twirling the curtain tassel absently. "I scan the surrounding country to see if anything compares with Beulah, and nothing does. No such river, no such trees, no such well, no such old oaken bucket, and above all no such Yellow House. All the other houses I see are but as huts compared with the Yellow House of Beulah. Soon the car door opens; a brakeman looks in and calls in a rich baritone voice, 'Greentown! Greentown! Do-not-leave-any-passles in the car!' And if you know beforehand what he is going to say you can understand him quite nicely, so I take up my bag and go down the aisle with dignity. 'Step lively, Miss!' cries the brakeman, but I do not heed him; it is not likely that a person renting country houses will move save with majesty. Alighting, I inquire if there is any conveyance for Beulah, and there is, a wagon and a white horse. I ask the driver boldly to drive me to the Colonel's office. He

does not ask which Colonel, or what Colonel, he simply says, 'Colonel Foster, I s'pose,' and I say, 'Certainly.' We arrive at the office and when I introduce myself as Captain Carey's daughter I receive a glad welcome. The Colonel rings a bell and an aged beldame approaches, making a deep curtsy and offering me a beaker of milk, a crusty loaf, a few venison pasties, and a cold goose stuffed with humming birds. When I have reduced these to nothingness I ask if the yellow house on the outskirts of the village is still vacant, and the Colonel replies that it is, at which unexpected but hoped-for answer I fall into a deep swoon. When I awake the aged Colonel is bending over me, his long white goat's beard tickling my chin."

(Mother Carey stops her darning now and Kathleen makes no pretence of sewing; the story is fast approaching its climax,—everybody feels that, including Peter, who hopes that he will be in it, in some guise or other, before it ends.)

"'Art thou married, lady?' the aged one asks courteously, 'and if not, wilt thou be mine?'"

"I tremble, because he does not seem to notice that he is eighty or ninety and I but fifteen, yet I fear if I reject him too scornfully and speedily the Yellow House will never be mine. 'Grant me a little time in which to fit myself for this great honor,' I say modestly, and a mighty good idea, too, that I got out of a book the other day; when suddenly, as I gaze upward, my suitor's white hair turns to brown, his beard drops off, his wrinkles disappear, and he stands before me a young Knight, in full armor. 'Wilt go to the yellow castle with me, sweet lady?' he asks. '*Wilt I*!' I cry in ecstasy, and we leap on the back of a charger hitched to the Colonel's horseblock. We dash down the avenue of elms and maples that line the village street, and we are at our journey's end before the Knight has had time to explain to me that he was changed into the guise of an old man by an evil sorcerer some years before, and could never return to his own person until some one appeared who wished to live in the yellow house, which is Beulah Castle.

"We approach the well-known spot and the little picket gate, and the Knight lifts me from the charger's back. 'Here are house and lands, and all are yours, sweet lady, if you have a younger brother. There is treasure hidden in the ground behind the castle, and no one ever finds such things save younger brothers.'

"'I have a younger brother,' I cry, '*and his name is Peter*!'"

At this point in Nancy's chronicle Peter is nearly beside himself with excitement. He has been sitting on his hassock, his hands outspread upon his fat knees, his lips parted, his eyes shining. Somewhere, sometime, in Nancy's stories there is always a Peter. He lives for that moment!

Nancy, stifling her laughter, goes on rapidly:

"And so the Knight summons Younger Brother Peter to come, and he flies in a great air ship from Charlestown to Beulah. And when he arrives the Knight asks him to dig for the buried treasure."

(Peter here turns up his sleeves to his dimpled elbows and seizes an imaginary implement.)

"Peter goes to the back of the castle, and there is a beautiful garden filled with corn and beans and peas and lettuce and potatoes and beets and onions and turnips and carrots and parsnips and tomatoes and cabbages. He takes his magic spade and it leads him to the cabbages. He digs and digs, and in a moment the spade strikes metal!

"'He has found the gold!' cries the Knight, and Peter speedily lifts from the ground pots and pots of ducats and florins, and gulden and doubloons."

(Peter nods his head at the mention of each precious coin and then claps his hands, and hugs himself with joy, and rocks himself to and fro on the hassock, in his ecstasy at being the little god in the machine.)

"Then down the village street there is the sound of hurrying horses' feet, and in a twinkling a gayly painted chariot comes into view, and in it are sitting the Queen Mother and the Crown Prince and Princess of the House of Carey. They alight; Peter meets them at the gate, a pot of gold in each hand. They enter the castle and put their umbrellas in one corner of the front hall and their rubbers in the other one, behind the door. Lady Nancibel trips up the steps after them and, turning, says

graciously to her Knight, 'Would you just as soon marry somebody else? I am very much attached to my family, and they will need me dreadfully while they are getting settled.'

"'I did not recall the fact that I had asked you to be mine,' courteously answers the youth.

"'You did,' she responds, very much embarrassed, as she supposed of course he would remember his offer made when he was an old man with a goat's beard; 'but gladly will I forget all, if you will relinquish my hand.'

"'As you please!' answers the Knight generously. 'I can deny you nothing when I remember you have brought me back my youth. Prithee, is the other lady bespoke, she of the golden hair?'

"'Many have asked, but I have chosen none,' answers the Crown Princess Kitty modestly, as is her wont.

"'Then you will do nicely,' says the Knight, 'since all I wish is to be son-in-law to the Queen Mother!'

"'Right you are, my hearty!' cries Prince Gilbert de Carey, 'and as we much do need a hand at the silver-polishing I will gladly give my sister in marriage!'

"So they all went into Beulah Castle and locked the door behind them, and there they lived in great happiness and comfort all the days of their lives, and there they died when it came their time, and they were all buried by the shores of the shining river of Beulah!"

"Oh! it is perfectly splendid!" cried Kathleen. "About the best one you ever told! But do change the end a bit, Nancy dear! It's dreadful for him to marry Kitty when he chose Nancibel first. I'd like him awfully, but I don't want to take him that way!"

"Well, how would this do?" and Nancy pondered a moment before going on: "'Right you are, my hearty!' cries Prince Gilbert de Carey, 'and as we do need a hand at the silver-polishing I will gladly give my sister in marriage.'

"'Hold!' cries the Queen Mother. 'All is not as it should be in this coil! How can you tell,' she says, turning to the knightly stranger, 'that memory will not awake one day, and you recall the adoration you felt when you first beheld the Lady Nancibel in a deep swoon?'

"The Young Knight's eyes took on a far-away look and he put his hand to his forehead.

"'It comes back to me now!' he sighed. 'I did love the Lady Nancibel passionately, and I cannot think how it slipped my mind!'

"'I release you willingly!' exclaimed the Crown Princess Kitty haughtily, 'for a million suitors await my nod, and thou wert never really mine!'

"'But the other lady rejects me also!' responds the luckless youth, the tears flowing from his eagle eyes onto his crimson mantle.

"'Wilt delay the nuptials until I am eighteen and the castle is set in order?' asks the Lady Nancibel relentingly.

"'Since it must be, I do pledge thee my vow to wait,' says the Knight. 'And I do beg the fair one with the golden locks to consider the claims of my brother, not my equal perhaps, but still a gallant youth.'

"'I will enter him on my waiting list as number Three Hundred and Seventeen,' responds the Crown Princess Kitty, than whom no violet could be more shy. "Tis all he can expect and more than I should promise.'

"So they all lived in the yellow castle in great happiness forever after, and were buried by the shores of the shining river of Beulah!—Does that suit you better?"

"Simply lovely!" cried Kitty, "and the bit about my modesty is too funny for words!—Oh, if some of it would only happen! But I am afraid Gilbert will not stir up any fairy stories and set them going."

"Some of it will happen!" exclaimed Peter. "I shall dig every single day till I find the gold-pots."

"You are a pot of gold yourself, filled full and running over!"

"Now, Nancy, run and write down your fairy tale while you remember it!" said Mother Carey.

"It is as good an exercise as any other, and you still tell a story far better than you write it!"

Nancy did this sort of improvising every now and then, and had done it from earliest childhood; and sometimes, of late, Mother Carey looked at her eldest chicken and wondered if after all she had hatched in her a bird of brighter plumage or rarer song than the rest, or a young eagle whose strong wings would bear her to a higher flight!

IX
GILBERT'S EMBASSY

The new station had just been built in Boston, and it seemed a great enterprise to Gilbert to be threading his way through the enormous spaces, getting his information by his own wits and not asking questions like a stupid schoolboy. Like all children of naval officers, the Careys had travelled ever since their birth; still, this was Gilbert's first journey alone, and nobody was ever more conscious of the situation, nor more anxious to carry it off effectively.

He entered the car, opened his bag, took out his travelling cap and his copy of "Ben Hur," then threw the bag in a lordly way into the brass rack above the seat. He opened his book, but immediately became interested in a young couple just in front of him. They were carefully dressed, even to details of hats and gloves, and they had an unmistakable air of wedding journey about them that interested the curious boy.

Presently the conductor came in. Pausing in front of the groom he said, "Tickets, please"; then: "You're on the wrong train!" "Wrong train? Of course I'm not on the wrong train! You must be mistaken! The ticket agent told me to take this train."

"Can't help that, sir, this train don't go to Lawrence."

"It's very curious. I asked the brakeman, and two porters. Ain't this the 3.05?"

"This is the 3.05."

"Where does it go, then?"

"Goes to Lowell. Lowell the first stop."

"But I don't want to go to Lowell!"

"What's the matter with Lowell? It's a good place all right!"

"But I have an appointment in Lawrence at four o'clock."

"I'm dretful sorry, but you'll have to keep it in Lowell, I guess!—Tickets, please!" this to a pretty girl on the opposite side from Gilbert, a pink and white, unsophisticated maiden, very much interested in the woes of the bride and groom and entirely sympathetic with the groom's helpless wrath.

"On the wrong train, Miss!" said the conductor.

"On the wrong train?" She spoke in a tone of anguish, getting up and catching her valise frantically. "It *can't* be the wrong train! Isn't it the White Mountain train?"

"Yes, Miss, but it don't go to North Conway; it goes to Fabyan's."

"But my father *put* me on this train and everybody *said* it was the White Mountain train!"

"So it is, Miss, but if you wanted to stop at North Conway you'd ought to have taken the 3.55, platform 8."

"Put me off, then, please, and let me wait for the 3.55."

"Can't do it, Miss; this is an express train; only stops at Lowell, where this gentleman is going!"

(Here the conductor gave a sportive wink at the bridegroom who had an appointment in Lawrence.)

The pretty girl burst into a flood of tears and turned her face despairingly to the window, while the bride talked to the groom excitedly about what they ought to have done and what they would have done had she been consulted.

Gilbert could hardly conceal his enjoyment of the situation, and indeed everybody within hearing—that is, anybody who chanced to be on the right train—looked at the bride and groom and the pretty girl, and tittered audibly.

"Why don't people make inquiries?" thought Gilbert superciliously. "Perhaps they have never been anywhere before, but even that's no excuse."

He handed his ticket to the conductor with a broad smile, saying in an undertone, "What kind of passengers are we carrying this afternoon?"

"The usual kind, I guess!—You're on the wrong train, sonny!"

Gilbert almost leaped into the air, and committed himself by making a motion to reach down his valise.

"I, on the wrong train?" he asked haughtily. "That *can't* be so; the ticket agent told me the 3.05 was the only fast train to Greentown!"

"Mebbe he thought you said Greenville; this train goes to Greenville, if that'll do you! Folks ain't used to the new station yet, and the ticket agents are all bran' new too,—guess you got hold of a tenderfoot!"

"But Greenville will *not* 'do' for me," exclaimed Gilbert. "I want to go to *Greentown*."

"Well, get off at Lowell, the first stop,—you'll know when you come to it because this gentleman that wanted to go to Lawrence will get off there, and this young lady that was intendin' to go to North Conway. There'll be four of you; jest a nice party."

Gilbert choked with wrath as he saw the mirth of the other passengers.

"What train shall I be able to take to Greentown," he managed to call after the conductor.

"Don't know, sonny! Ask the ticket agent in the Lowell deepot; he's an old hand and he'll know!"

Gilbert's pride was terribly wounded, but his spirits rose a little later when he found that he would only have to wait twenty minutes in the Lowell station before a slow train for Greentown would pick him up, and that he should still reach his destination before bedtime, and need never disclose his stupidity.

After all, this proved to be his only error, for everything moved smoothly from that moment, and he was as prudent and successful an ambassador as Mother Carey could have chosen. He found the Colonel, whose name was not Foster, by the way, but Wheeler; and the Colonel would not allow him to go to the Mansion House, Beulah's one small hotel, but insisted that he should be his guest. That evening he heard from the Colonel the history of the yellow house, and the next morning the Colonel drove him to the store of the man who had charge of it during the owner's absence in Europe, after which Gilbert was conducted in due form to the premises for a critical examination.

The Yellow House, as Garden Fore-and-Aft seemed destined to be chiefly called, was indeed the only house of that color for ten miles square. It had belonged to the various branches of a certain family of Hamiltons for fifty years or more, but in course of time, when it fell into the hands of the Lemuel Hamiltons, it had no sort of relation to their mode of existence. One summer, a year or two before the Careys had seen it, the sons and daughters had come on from Boston and begged their father to let them put it in such order that they could take house parties of young people there for the week end. Mr. Hamilton indulgently allowed them a certain amount to be expended as they wished, and with the help of a local carpenter, they succeeded in doing several things to their own complete satisfaction, though it could not be said that they added to the value of the property. The house they regarded merely as a camping-out place, and after they had painted some bedroom floors, set up some cots, bought a kitchen stove and some pine tables and chairs, they regarded that part of the difficulty as solved; expending the rest of the money in turning the dilapidated barn into a place where they could hold high revels of various innocent sorts. The two freshman sons, two boarding-school daughters, and a married sister barely old enough to chaperon her own baby, brought parties of gay young friends with them several weeks in succession. These excursions were a great delight to the villagers, who thus enjoyed all the pleasures and excitements of a circus with none of its attendant expenses. They were of short duration, however, for Lemuel Hamilton was appointed consul to a foreign port and took his wife and daughters with him. The married sister died, and in course of time one of the sons went to China to learn tea-planting and the other established himself on a ranch in Texas. Thus the Lemuel Hamiltons were scattered far and wide, and as the Yellow House in Beulah

had small value as real estate and had never played any part in their lives, it was almost forgotten as the busy years went by.

"Mr. Hamilton told me four years ago, when I went up to Boston to meet him, that if I could get any rent from respectable parties I might let the house, though he wouldn't lay out a cent on repairs in order to get a tenant. But, land! there ain't no call for houses in Beulah, nor hain't been for twenty years," so Bill Harmon, the storekeeper, told Gilbert. "The house has got a tight roof and good underpinnin', and if your folks feel like payin' out a little money for paint 'n' paper you can fix it up neat's a pin. The Hamilton boys jest raised Cain out in the barn, so 't you can't keep no critters there."

"We couldn't have a horse or a cow anyway," said Gilbert.

"Well, it's lucky you can't. I could 'a' rented the house twice over if there'd been any barn room; but them confounded young scalawags ripped out the horse and cow stalls, cleared away the pig pen, and laid a floor they could dance on. The barn chamber 's full o' their stuff, so 't no hay can go in; altogether there ain't any nameable kind of a fool-trick them young varmints didn't play on these premises. When a farmer's lookin' for a home for his family and stock 't ain't no use to show him a dance hall. The only dancin' a Maine farmer ever does is dancin' round to git his livin' out o' the earth;—that keeps his feet flyin', fast enough."

"Well," said Gilbert, "I think if you can put the rent cheap enough so that we could make the necessary repairs, I *think* my mother would consider it."

"Would you want it for more 'n this summer?" asked Mr. Harmon.

"Oh! yes, we want to live here!"

"*Want to live here*!" exclaimed the astonished Harmon. "Well, it's been a long time sence we heard anybody say that, eh, Colonel?

"Well now, sonny" (Gilbert did wish that respect for budding manhood could be stretched a little further in this locality), "I tell you what, I ain't goin' to stick no fancy price on these premises—"

"It wouldn't be any use," said Gilbert boldly. "My father has died within a year; there are four of us beside my mother, and there's a cousin, too, who is dependent on us. We have nothing but a small pension and the interest on five thousand dollars life insurance. Mother says we must go away from all our friends, live cheaply, and do our own work until Nancy, Kitty, and I grow old enough to earn something."

Colonel Wheeler and Mr. Harmon both liked Gilbert Carey at sight, and as he stood there uttering his boyish confidences with great friendliness and complete candor, both men would have been glad to meet him halfway.

"Well, Harmon, it seems to me we shall get some good neighbors if we can make terms with Mrs. Carey," said the Colonel. "If you'll fix a reasonable figure I'll undertake to write to Hamilton and interest him in the affair."

"All right. Now, Colonel, I'd like to make a proposition right on the spot, before you, and you can advise sonny, here. You see Lem has got his taxes to pay,—they're small, of course, but they're an expense,—and he'd ought to carry a little insurance on his buildings, tho' he ain't had any up to now. On the other hand, if he can get a tenant that'll put on a few shingles and clapboards now and then, or a coat o' paint 'n' a roll o' wall paper, his premises won't go to rack 'n' ruin same's they're in danger o' doin' at the present time. Now, sonny, would your mother feel like keepin' up things a little mite if we should say sixty dollars a year rent, payable monthly or quarterly as is convenient?"

Gilbert's head swam and his eyes beheld such myriads of stars that he felt it must be night instead of day. The rent of the Charlestown house was seven hundred dollars a year, and the last words of his mother had been to the effect that two hundred was the limit he must offer for the yellow house, as she did not see clearly at the moment how they could afford even that sum.

"What would be your advice, Colonel?" stammered the boy.

"I think sixty dollars is not exorbitant," the Colonel answered calmly (he had seen Beulah real estate fall a peg a year for twenty successive years), "though naturally you cannot pay that sum and make any extravagant repairs."

"Then I will take the house," Gilbert remarked largely. "My mother left the matter of rent to my judgment, and we will pay promptly in advance. Shall I sign any papers?"

"Land o' Goshen! the marks your little fist would make on a paper wouldn't cut much of a figure in a court o' law!" chuckled old Harmon. "You jest let the Colonel fix up matters with your ma."

"Can I walk back, Colonel?" asked Gilbert, trying to preserve some dignity under the storekeeper's attacks. "I'd like to take some measurements and make some sketches of the rooms for my mother."

"All right," the Colonel responded. "Your train doesn't go till two o'clock. I'll give you a bite of lunch and take you to the station."

If Mother Carey had watched Gilbert during the next half-hour she would have been gratified, for every moment of the time he grew more and more into the likeness of the head of a family. He looked at the cellar, at the shed, at the closets and cupboards all over the house, and at the fireplaces. He "paced off" all the rooms and set down their proportions in his note-book; he even decided as to who should occupy each room, and for what purposes they should be used, his judgment in every case being thought ridiculous by the feminine portion of his family when they looked at his plans. Then he locked the doors carefully with a fine sense of ownership and strolled away with many a backward look and thought at the yellow house.

At the station he sent a telegram to his mother. Nancy had secretly given him thirty-five cents when he left home. "I am hoarding for the Admiral's Christmas present," she whispered, "but it's no use, I cannot endure the suspense about the house a moment longer than is necessary. Just telegraph us yes or no, and we shall get the news four hours before your train arrives. One can die several times in four hours, and I'm going to commit one last extravagance,—at the Admiral's expense!"

At three o'clock on Saturday afternoon a telegraph boy came through the gate and rang the front door bell.

"You go, Kitty, I haven't the courage!" said Nancy, sitting down on the sofa heavily. A moment later the two girls and Peter (who for once didn't count) gazed at their mother breathlessly as she opened the envelope. Her face lighted as she read aloud:—

> "*Victory perches on my banners. Have accomplished all I went for.*
> GILBERT."

"Hurrah!" cried both girls. "The yellow house is the House of Carey forevermore."

"Will Peter go too?" asked the youngest Carey eagerly, his nose quivering as it always did in excitement, when it became an animated question point.

"I should think he would," exclaimed Kitty, clasping him in her arms.

"What would the yellow house be without Peter?"

"I wish Gilbert wouldn't talk about *his* banners," said Nancy critically, as she looked at the telegram over her mother's shoulder. "They're not his banners at all, they're ours,—Carey banners; that's what they are!"

Mother Carey had wished the same thing, but hoped that Nancy had not noticed the Gilbertian flaw in the telegram.

X
THE CAREYS' FLITTING

The Charlestown house was now put immediately into the hands of several agents, for Mrs. Carey's lease had still four years to run and she was naturally anxious to escape from this financial responsibility as soon as possible. As a matter of fact only three days elapsed before she obtained a tenant, and the agent had easily secured an advance of a hundred dollars a year to the good, as Captain Carey had obtained a very favorable figure when he took the house.

It was the beginning of April, and letters from Colonel Wheeler had already asked instructions about having the vegetable garden ploughed. It was finally decided that the girls should leave their spring term of school unfinished, and that the family should move to Beulah during Gilbert's Easter vacation.

Mother Carey gave due reflection to the interrupted studies, but concluded that for two girls like Nancy and Kathleen the making of a new home would be more instructive and inspiring, and more fruitful in its results, than weeks of book learning.

Youth delights in change, in the prospect of new scenes and fresh adventures, and as it is never troubled by any doubts as to the wisdom of its plans, the Carey children were full of vigor and energy just now. Charlestown, the old house, the daily life, all had grown sad and dreary to them since father had gone. Everything spoke of him. Even mother longed for something to lift her thought out of the past and give it wings, so that it might fly into the future and find some hope and comfort there. There was a continual bustle from morning till night, and a spirit of merriment that had long been absent.

The Scotch have a much prettier word than we for all this, and what we term moving they call "flitting." The word is not only prettier, but in this instance more appropriate. It was such a buoyant, youthful affair, this Carey flitting. Light forms darted up and down the stairs and past the windows, appearing now at the back, now at the front of the house, with a picture, or a postage stamp, or a dish, or a penwiper, or a pillow, or a basket, or a spool. The chorus of "Where shall we put this, Muddy?" "Where will this go?" "May we throw this away?" would have distracted a less patient parent. When Gilbert returned from school at four, the air was filled with sounds of hammering and sawing and filing, screwing and unscrewing, and it was joy unspeakable to be obliged (or at least almost obliged) to call in clarion tones to one another, across the din and fanfare, and to compel answers in a high key. Peter took a constant succession of articles to the shed, where packing was going on, but his chief treasures were deposited in a basket at the front gate, with the idea that they would be transported as his personal baggage. The pile grew and grew: a woolly lamb, two Noah's arks, bottles and marbles innumerable, a bag of pebbles, a broken steam engine, two china nest-eggs, an orange, a banana and some walnuts, a fishing line, a trowel, a ball of string. These give an idea of the quality of Peter's effects, but not of the quantity.

Ellen the cook labored loyally, for it was her last week's work with the family. She would be left behind, like Charlestown and all the old life, when Mother Carey and the stormy petrels flitted across unknown waters from one haven to another. Joanna having earlier proved utterly unromantic in her attitude, Nancy went further with Ellen and gave her an English novel called, "The Merriweathers," in which an old family servant had not only followed her employers from castle to hovel, remaining there without Wages for years, but had insisted on lending all her savings to the Mistress of the Manor. Ellen the cook had loved "The Merriweathers," saying it was about the best book that ever she had read, and Miss Nancy would like to know, always being so interested, that she (Ellen) had found a place near Joanna in Salem, where she was offered five dollars a month more than she had received with the Careys. Nancy congratulated her warmly and then, tearing "The Merriweathers" to shreds, she put them in the kitchen stove in Ellen's temporary absence. "If ever I write a book," she

ejaculated, as she "stoked" the fire with Gwendolen and Reginald Merriweather, with the Mistress of the Manor, and especially with the romantic family servitor, "if ever I write a book," she repeated, with emphatic gestures, "it won't have any fibs in it;—and I suppose it will be dull," she reflected, as she remembered how she had wept when the Merriweathers' Bridget brought her savings of a hundred pounds to her mistress in a handkerchief.

During these preparations for the flitting Nancy had a fresh idea every minute or two, and gained immense prestige in the family.

Inspired by her eldest daughter Mrs. Carey sold her grand piano, getting an old-fashioned square one and a hundred and fifty dollars in exchange. It had been a wedding present from a good old uncle, who, if he had been still alive, would have been glad to serve his niece now that she was in difficulties.

Nancy, her sleeves rolled up, her curly hair flecked with dust and cobwebs, flew down from the attic into Kathleen's room just after supper. "I have an idea!" she said in a loud whisper.

"You mustn't have too many or we shan't take any interest in them," Kitty answered provokingly.

"This is for your ears alone, Kitty!"

"Oh! that's different. Tell me quickly."

"It's an idea to get rid of the Curse of the House of Carey!"

"It can't be done, Nancy; you know it can't! Even if you could think out a way, mother couldn't be made to agree."

"She must never know. I would not think of mixing up a good lovely woman like mother in such an affair!"

This was said so mysteriously that Kathleen almost suspected that bloodshed was included in Nancy's plan. It must be explained that when young Ensign Carey and Margaret Gilbert had been married, Cousin Ann Chadwick had presented them with four tall black and white marble mantel ornaments shaped like funeral urns; and then, feeling that she had not yet shown her approval of the match sufficiently, she purchased a large group of clay statuary entitled You Dirty Boy.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.