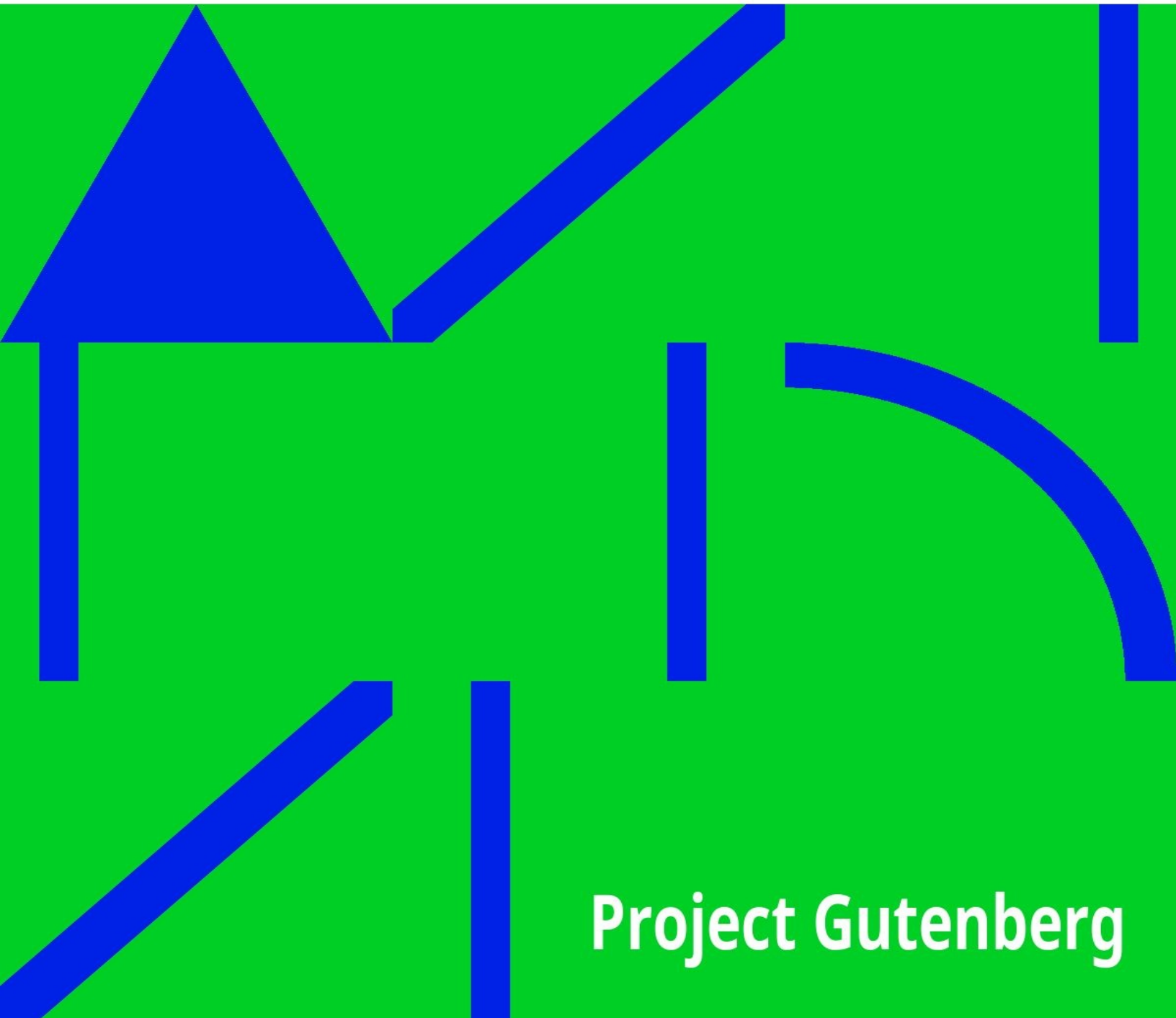
Anything Once

Isabel Ostrander



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ANYTHING ONCE
BY
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“THE SINGLE TRACK,” “BOOTY,”“THE FIFTH ACE,” ETC.
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CHAPTER I
A Roadside Meeting

The white dust, which lay thick upon the wide road between rolling fields of ripened grain, rose in little spirals from beneath the heavy feet of the plodding farm-horses drawing the empty hay-wagon, and had scarcely settled again upon the browning goldenrod and fuzzy milkweed which bordered the rail fences on either side when Ebb Fischel's itinerant butcher-jitney rattled past. Ebb Fischel's eyes were usually as sharp as the bargains he drove, but the dust must have obscured his vision. Otherwise he would have seen the man lying motionless beside the road, with his cap in the ditch and the pitiless sun of harvest-time caking the blood which had streamed from an ugly cut upon his temple.

But the meat-cart jolted on and out of sight, and for a long time nothing disturbed the stillness except the distant whirring of a reaper and nearer buzzing of a fat, inquisitive bluebottle fly, which paused to see what this strange thing might be, and then zoomed off excitedly to tell his associates.

At length there came a dry rustling in the tall standing wheat in the field on the opposite side of the road, and a head and shoulders appeared above the topmost fence-rail. It was a small head covered with tow-colored hair, which had been slicked back and braided so tightly that the short, meager cue curled outward and up in a crescent, as though it were wired, and the shoulders beneath the coarse blue-and-white striped cotton gown were thin and peaked.

The girl darted a swift, furtive glance up and down the road, and suddenly thrust a bundle tied in a greasy apron between the rails, letting it fall in the high, dusty weeds by the roadside. Next she climbed to the top of the fence, and for a moment perched there, displaying a slim length of coarse black stocking above clumping, square-toed shoes at least two sizes too large for her.

She looked like a very forlorn, feminine *Monte Cristo* indeed, as she scanned the world from her vantage-point, and yet there was a look of quiet satisfaction and achievement in her incongruously dark eyes which told of a momentous object accomplished.

Then all at once they stared and softened as she caught sight of that still figure lying across the road, and in two bounds she was beside him and lifted his head against her sharp knees. She noted only casually that he was a clean-shaven,

tanned young man with brown hair bleached by the sun to a warm gold, and that he wore shabby, weather-beaten clothes.

Had she realized that those same worn, faded garments bore the stamp of one of New York's most exclusive tailors! that the boots were London-made, and the golf-stockings which met the corduroy knickerbockers came from one of Scotland's famous mills, it would have meant just exactly nothing in her young life.

Her immediate attention was concentrated upon the jagged gash which ran unpleasantly close to his temple, and which had begun to bleed afresh as she raised his head.

The girl looked about her again and saw that a short distance ahead the road was bisected by a bridge of planks with willows bordering it at either side. She pulled at the strings which held a blue sunbonnet dangling between her narrow shoulder-blades, regarded the sleazy headgear ruefully, and then spying the cap in the ditch, she deposited her burden gently upon the grass once more and scrambled over to investigate her find.

The cap had an inner lining of something which seemed to be like rubber, and the girl flew off down the road to return with her improvised bowl filled with clear, cold spring water. Dropping on her knees beside the unconscious figure, she poured the contents of the cap over his face and head.

The young man sputtered, gasped, moaned a little, and opened astonished brown eyes upon her.

"How–how the devil did you come here?" he asked ungallantly.

"Over the fence." Her reply was laconic, but it bore an unmistakable hint that further query along that line would be highly unwelcome. "Just you lay still while I git some more water, an' I'll tie up that head of yourn."

The young man's hand went unsteadily to his aching brow and came away brightly pink, so he decided to take this uncomely vision's advice, and remained quiescent, wondering how he himself had come to be there, and what had happened to him.

According to the map, he had surely been on the right road, yet it had as assuredly not looked like this one; the other had been a broad, State highway, while this—

He closed his burning eyes to shield them from the glare of the sun, and a confused memory returned to him of that invitingly green, shady pasture which had tempted him as a short cut toward the next village, and of something which thundered down upon him from behind and lifted him into chaos. Good Lord, and he had only six days left!

"You'd better take a drink of this first an' I kin use the rest on your head." A

composed, practical voice advised by his side, and he looked up gratefully into the snub-nosed, freckled face of his benefactress as she held the brimming cap to his lips.

He drank deeply, then struggled to a sitting posture, his face whitening beneath its tan at the sudden wrench of pain which twisted the muscles of his back.

“Kin you hold the cap steady?” The girl thrust it into his hands without waiting for a reply, and, sitting down with her back to him, calmly turned back the hem of her gown and tore a wide strip from the coarse but immaculately white cambric petticoat beneath.

Dipping it into the water, she bandaged his head not unskilfully, and then rose.

“There! I gotta git you over to the shade of them trees, or you’ll have sunstroke. Wait till I fetch somethin’.”

She ran across the road and returned with her greasy bundle under one arm, offering the other to him with a gesture as frank as it was impersonal.

“Lean on me, an’ try to git along–and please kinder hurry!”

She added the last with a note of sudden urgency in her tones and the same furtively darting glance with which she had swept the road from the fence-top, but the young man was too deeply engrossed with his painful effort to rise to observe the look, although her change of tone aroused his curiosity. Was this scrawny but good-natured kid afraid some of her people would catch her talking to a stranger by the roadside?

Somehow he managed to hobble, with her aid, across the little bridge and down the bank of the swiftly racing brook at its farther side to a nest in the dense thicket of willow-shoots which completely screened them from the road.

The girl eased him down then upon the sward, and, seating herself beside him, unrolled the apron she had carried.

“It’s the ham that’s greased it all up like that,” she remarked. “I’d have brought a pail, only I didn’t want to take any more ’n I had to.”

The young man gasped with astonishment as the contents of the apron-bundle were exposed: a whole ham glistening with the brown sugar in which it had been baked, a long knife, a huge loaf of bread, and, wrapped separately in a piece of newspaper, a bar of soap, a box of matches, and a bit of broken comb.

“When there’s lots of them, ham sandwiches, together with spring water, ain’t so bad, an’ it’s near noon,” the girl observed, beginning to cut the loaf into meager slices with a practised hand. “I should’ve made them thicker, but I forgot.”

A starving gleam had come into the young man’s eyes at the sight of food, but he paused with the sandwich half-way to his lips to glance keenly at his

companion.

“You’ve enough here for an army,” he declared. “Were you taking it to men working in the fields somewhere?”

“No,” she replied without hesitation, but with the same air of finality with which she had responded to his first question. “You can rest easy here till sundown, when the men begin to come in from the harvestin’, an’ then if you holler real loud some of them will maybe stop an’ give you a lift on your way. There’s a railroad about four miles from here, an’ the slow freight goes by along about ten.”

The slow freight! So the girl thought he was a tramp! The young man smiled, and glanced down ruefully at his shabby attire. Well, so had others thought, whom he had encountered in his journey.

But who and what was the girl herself? She had asked no questions as to how he had come to the condition in which she found him, but had nursed his hurt, brought him to this cool resting-place; and was sharing her food with him as unconcernedly as though she had known him all her life.

That quantity of provisions, the package of humble toilet articles, and her furtiveness and haste to get away from the open road all pointed to one fact–the girl was running away. But from whom or what? She had taken him at his face value, and he had no right in the world to question her, at least without giving some sort of account of himself.

“I have no intention of traveling by rail,” he assured her. “A little while before you found me–I don’t quite know how long–I was crossing that pasture which adjoins the wheat-field, thinking that this road might be a short cut to Hudsondale, when something came after me from behind and butted me over the fence. I think my head must have been cut open by striking against a stone, for I don’t remember anything more until you poured that water over my face.”

The girl nodded.

“I seen the stone with blood on it right near you; you must have bumped off it an’ turned over,” she averred. “Anybody who goes traipsin’ through old Terwilliger’s pasture is apt to meet up with that bull of his.”

So she had reasoned his predicament out without asking any of the questions that another girl would have heaped upon him.

He turned to her suddenly with a fresh spark of interest in his eyes.

“How did you know that I didn’t belong here?” he demanded.

The corners of her lips curled upward in a comical little grimace of amusement, and he realized that before they had been set in a straight line far too mature for her evident youth.

“No grown men ’round these parts wears short pants, an’, anyhow, I knew you

were different from the way you talk; somethin' like the welfare workers, with the hell an' brimstone left out," the girl replied soberly. "I'm goin' to talk like you some day."

It was the first remark she had made voluntarily concerning herself, and he was quick to seize his advantage.

"Who are you, young lady? You've been awfully kind to me, and I don't know to whom my gratitude is due."

"Not to anybody." She turned her head away slightly, but not before he saw a flush mount beneath the superficial coating of freckles, and marveled at the whiteness of her skin. Hers was not the leathery tan of the typical farmer's daughter, inured to all weathers, yet her hands, although small, were toil-worn, and there was an odd incongruity between her dark eyes and the pale, flaxen hue of that ridiculous wisp of a braid.

"I didn't do any more for you than I'd do for a dog if I found him lyin' there."

Her naïve sincerity robbed the statement of its uncomplimentary suggestion, and the young man chuckled, but persisted.

"What is your name? Mine is James–er–Botts."

"Lou Lacey. It was 'L' day, you know, an' there was a teeny bit of lace on my dress. I ain't ever had any since."

She added the last with unconscious pathos in her tones, but in his increasing interest and mystification the man who called himself "Botts" was unaware of it. What on earth could she mean about L day, and if she were running away why did she appear so serenely unconcerned about the future as her manner indicated?

He felt that he must draw her out, and he seemed to have hit upon the right method by giving confidence for confidence; but just how much could he tell her about himself? James Botts's own face reddened.

"I'm walking to my home in New York," he explained. "But I'm late; I ought to make it by a certain date, and I don't think I'll be able to, since my encounter with Terwilliger's bull. Where do you live? I mean, where are you going? Where is your home?"

"Nowheres," Lou Lacey replied offhandedly, following with her eyes the graceful swoop of a dragonfly over the tumbling waters of the little stream.

"Great Scott!" The astounded young man sat up suddenly, with his hand to his head. "Why, everybody has a home, you know!"

"Not everybody," the girl dissented quietly.

"But–but surely you haven't been walking the roads?"

There was genuine horror in his tones. "Where did you come from this morning when you found me?"

“From Hess’s farm, back up the road a piece,” she replied with her usual unemotional literalness. “I been there a week, but I didn’t like it, so I came away. The welfare workers got me that place when my time was up.”

Her time! Good Heavens, could this little country girl with her artless manner and candid eyes be an ex-convict? Surely she was too young, too simple. Yet the gates of hideous reformatories had clanged shut behind younger and more innocent-appearing delinquents than she.

His eyes wandered over her thin, childish figure as she sat there beside him, still intent upon the movements of the glittering dragonfly, and he shuddered. Those horrible, shapeless shoes might very well have been prison-made, and the striped dress was exactly like those he had seen in some pictures of female convicts. Her freckles, too, might have been the result of only a few days’ exposure to the sun, and he had already observed the whiteness of the skin beneath; that whiteness which resembled the prison pallor.

Could it be that her very gawkiness and frank simplicity were the result not of bucolic nature, but of dissimulation? Every instinct within the man cried out against the thought, but a devil of doubt and uncertainty drove him on.

“I thought that didn’t look like the dress of a farmer’s daughter!” He essayed to laugh, but it seemed to him that there was a grating falsetto in his tones. “You haven’t worked in the garden much, either, have you?”

“Garden!” Lou sniffed. “They promised the welfare workers that they’d give me outdoor chores to build me up, but when I got there I found I had to cook for eighteen farm-hands, as well as the family, an’ wait on them, an’ clean up an’ all. Said they’d pay me twelve dollars a month, an’ I could take the first month’s money out by the week in clothes, an’ for the first week all they gave me was this sunbonnet an’ apron. I left them the other dress an’ things I had, an’ I figgered the rest of the money they owed me would just about pay for this ham an’ bread an’ the knife an’ soap. The comb was mine.”

She added the last in a tone of proud possession, and James Botts asked very soberly:

“The welfare workers found this position for you, Lou Lacey? But where did they find you?”

“Why, at the institootion,” she responded, as though surprised that he had not already guessed. “I ain’t ever been anywhere else; I’ve always been a orphin.”

CHAPTER II

Partners

For a moment James Botts turned his head away lest she see the deep red flood of shame which had suffused his face. Poor little skinny, homely, orphan kid, thrown out to buck the world for herself, and stopping in her first flight from injustice to help a stranger, only to have him think her a possible criminal! He was glad that his back twinged and his head throbbed; he ought to be kicked out into the ditch and left to die there for harboring such thoughts.

He was a cur, and she–hang it! There was something appealing about her in spite of her looks. Perhaps it was the sturdy self-reliance, which in itself betrayed her utter innocence and ignorance of the world, that made a fellow want to protect her.

In his own circle James Botts had never been known as a *Sir Galahad*, but he had been away from his own circle for exactly nineteen eventful days now, and in that space of time he had learned much. His heart went out in sympathy as he turned once more to her.

But at the moment Lou Lacey seemed in no momentary need of sympathetic understanding. She was pursuing a hapless frog with well-directed shots of small pebbles, and there was an impish grin upon her face.

"How old are you?" he asked suddenly.

Lou shrugged.

"I don't know. About seventeen or eighteen, I reckon; at least, they told me six years ago that I was twelve, an' I've kept track ever since. When I was sixteen, though, and it was time for me to be got a place somewhere, the matron put me back a couple of years; we were gettin' more babies from the poor-farm than usual, an' I was kinder handy with them. She had to let me go now because one of the visitin' deaconesses let out that she'd seen me there sixteen years ago herself, an' I was toddlin' round then. Oh, I missed him!"

The frog, with a triumphant *plop*, had disappeared beneath a flat, submerged stone, and Lou turned to note her companion's pain-drawn face.

"I'm goin' to fix that bandage on your head again," she declared as she sprang to her feet. "Is your back hurtin' you very much?"

"Not very." He forced a smile, but his face was grave, for, despite his

suffering, the problem which this accidental meeting had forced upon him filled his thoughts. What was he to do with this girl? In spite of the statement that she had “kept track” of her last few years he could not credit the fact that she was approximately eighteen; fourteen would be nearer the guess he would have made, and it was unthinkable that a child like that should wander about the country alone.

He could not bear the thought of betraying her innocent confidences by handing her over to the nearest authorities; it would mean her being held as a vagrant and possibly sent to the county poor-farm. Perhaps the people with whom she had been placed were not so bad, after all; if he took her back and reasoned with them, insisted upon their keeping to their bargain, and giving her lighter tasks to perform.

Then he remembered his own appearance, and smiled ruefully. Instead of listening they would in all probability set the dog on him. Perhaps he could persuade her to return of her own accord.

“The people you were working for; their name was ‘Hess’?” he asked.

She nodded as she finished fastening the cool compress about his forehead.

“Henry Hess an’ his wife, Freida, an’–an’ Max.”

Something in the quality of her tone more than her hesitation made him demand sharply:

“Who is Max?”

“Their son.” Her voice was very low, but for the first time it trembled slightly.

“You don’t like him, do you?” He waited a moment, and then added abruptly: “Why not?”

“Because he’s a–a beast! I don’t want to talk about him! I don’t want even to remember that such *things* as he is can be let live!”

James Botts turned and looked at her and then away, for the childish figure had been drawn up tensely with a sort of instinctive dignity which sat not ill upon it, and from her dark eyes insulted womanhood had blazed.

“I’d like to go back and lick him to a standstill!” to his own utter amazement Botts heard his own voice saying thickly.

The fire had died out of Lou’s face and she replied composedly:

“What for? He don’t matter any more, does he? We’re goin’ on.”

The last sentence recalled his problem once more to his mind. What in the world was he to do with this young creature whom fate had thrust upon his hands? Four quarters and a fifty-cent piece represented his entire capital at the moment, and if he did put her into the hands of the county authorities until his journey was completed and he could make other arrangements for her, it would mean a delay on his part now, when every hour counted for so much just now.

“Do you know how far we are from Hudsondale?” he asked.

“Not more’n two miles, the farm-hands used to walk there often of an evenin’ to the movies.”

The girl had cleaned her knife in the brook and was now wrapping it in the apron, together with the remains of their repast.

“They say that not more’n twenty miles from there you can see the big river, but I ain’t ever been.”

“That’s the way I was going,” he observed thoughtlessly. “From Hudsondale to Highvale, and right on down the west bank of the river to New York.”

Lou sat back on her heels reflectively.

“All right,” she said at last. “I ain’t ever figgered on goin’s far as New York, but I might as well go there as anywhere, and I guess I kin keep up with you now your back’s kinder sprained. We’ll go along together.”

James Botts gulped.

“Certainly not!” he retorted severely, when he could articulate. “It’s utterly out of the question! You’re not a little child any longer, and I’m not old enough to pose as your father. You must think what people would say!”

“Why must I?” Her clear eyes shamed him. “What’s it matter? I guess two kin puzzle out the roads better than one, an’ if I have been in a brick house with a high fence an’ a playground between where never a blade of grass grew, for about eighteen years, it looks to me as if I could take care of myself a lot better ’n you kin!”

“But you don’t understand!” he groaned. “There are certain conditions that I can’t very well explain, and if I did you’d think I had gone crazy.”

“Maybe,” Lou observed non-committally, but she settled herself on the bank once more with such an air of resigned anticipation that he felt forced to continue.

“You know an army has to obey orders, don’t you?” he floundered on desperately. “Well, I’m like a one-man army; there are a lot of rules I’ve got to follow. This is Monday afternoon, and I must reach New York by midnight on Saturday; that’s ninety miles or more, and you never could make it in the world. I’ve got just a dollar and a half, and I mustn’t beg, borrow, or steal food or a lift or anything, but work my way, and never take any job that’ll pay me more than twenty-five cents.

“Of course, if people invite me to get up and ride with them for a little I can accept, or if they offer me food, but I can’t ask. Even the money I earn in quarters here and there I mustn’t use for traveling, but only to buy food or medicine or clothes with. And the worst of it is that I cannot explain to a soul why I’m doing all this.”

Lou regarded him gravely, and opened her lips to speak, but closed them again and for an appreciable moment there was silence.

"Well, I don't see anythin' in that that says you can't have somebody travelin' along with you," she remarked, and that odd little smile flashed again across her face. "It don't make any difference to me what you can or can't do. *I'm* foot-loose!"

Not until later was the meaning of that final statement to be made manifest to her companion; the one fact upon his mind was that nothing he had said had moved her an iota from her original decision. They would go along together.

Well, why not? It was obvious that he could not send her back to the Hess farm nor hand her over to the authorities. His own appearance would not be conducive to confidence in his assurances if he attempted to leave her in the care of some country woman until he could return and make proper arrangements for her, and the only alternative was that she must tramp the roads by herself until she found work, and that was out of the question.

At least, he could protect her, and she looked wiry in spite of her skinniness; it was as possible that she might make the distance as he, with his aching back. But on one point he was determined: when they neared the suburbs of New York he would telephone to a certain gray-haired, aristocratically high-nosed old lady and persuade her to send out her car for this waif.

The child had been kind to him, and he would protect her from all harm, but not for all the gilt-edged securities in Wall Street would he have the story of his knight-errantry get abroad, nor the unprepossessing heroine of it revealed to his friends.

The old lady would find some suitable position for her, and, as she evidently possessed no reputation of any sort at the moment, a six-day journey in his company could harm it no more if the truth became known than if she had tramped upon her way alone.

"All right," he said. "We'll be partners, and I'll do my best to look out for you."

She laughed outright, a merry, tinkling little laugh like the brook rippling over the pebbles at her feet, and the man involuntarily stared. It was the sole attractive thing about her that he had observed.

"Reckon it'll be me that'll look after you!" she retorted. "Oh, there's somethin' comin'! Duck in here, quick!"

Seizing her bundle, she wiggled like an eel through the willow thicket until she was completely hidden from view, and Botts followed as well as he was able, with one hand fending off the supple young shoots from whipping back upon his wounded forehead.

He had heard nothing, yet the girl's quick ears had caught the faint creaking of a cart along the road, and now a cheerful but somewhat shrill whistle came to him in a vaguely reminiscent strain.

"That's Lem Mattles," Lou whispered as she reached behind him and drew the willows yet more screeningly about their trail. "He's whistlin' 'Ida-Ho'; it's the only tune he can remember."

"Who is he?" demanded her companion.

"The Hess's next-door neighbor. She'll stop him right away an' ask if he's seen me on the road, an' they'll all be after me, but they'll never think of the old cow-trail; one of the hands showed it to me an' told me it led clear to Hudsondale, an' came out by the freight-yards."

For a moment she paused with a little catch in her breath. "Think you kin make it, Mr. Botts?"

"Sure!" He smiled and held out his hand. "We're partners now, and I'm 'Jim' to my friends, Lou."

"All right, Jim," she responded indifferently, but she laid her little work-worn hand in his for a brief minute. "Come on."

With the bundle under her arm once more she led the way, and her partner followed her to where the brook dwindled and the thicket gave place to a stretch of woodland, between the trees of which a faint, narrow trail could be discerned.

"We're all right now if we kin keep on goin'," announced Lou. "Nobody comes this way any more, an' the feller said that the tracks runs through the woods clear to the Hunkie settlement by the yards. Feelin' all right, Jim?"

"I guess so." Jim put his hand to his side, where each breath brought a stab of pain, but brought it down again quickly lest her swift glance catch the motion. "It's pretty in here, isn't it?"

"It's longer," replied Lou practically. "An' the sun's gittin' low. Let's hurry."

There was little further talk between them, for Jim had already discovered that his companion was not one to speak unless she had something to say, and he was breathing in short snatches to stifle the pain. The track wound endlessly in and out among the trees, and in the dim light he would have lost it altogether more than once had it not been for her light touch upon his arm.

At length the track turned abruptly through the thinning trees and led down to a rough sort of road, on either side of which ramshackle wooden tenements leaned crazily against each other, with dingy rags hanging from lines on the crooked porches. Slatternly, dark-skinned women gazed curiously at them as they passed.

From somewhere came the squalling of a hurt child and a man's oath roughly silencing it, while through and above all other sounds came the bleating of a

harmonica ceaseless reiterating a monotonous, foreign air.

The sun had set, and from just beyond the squalid settlement came the crash and clang of freight-cars being shunted together. In spite of his pain, Jim realized that nowhere in this vicinity could his self-constituted companion rest for the night; open fields or dense woodland were safer far for her.

“Let us cross the tracks and push on up that hill road a little,” he suggested. “We can’t stay here, and they’ll think we are tramps if they catch us by the railroad.”

“I guess that’s what we are.” Lou wrinkled her already upturned nose. “But the country would be nicer again, if you ain’t give out.”

He assured her doggedly that he had not, and they crossed the tracks and started up the steep hill road past the coal-dump and the few scattered cottages to where the woodland closed in about them once more.

Jim picked up a stout stick and leaned heavily upon it as they plodded along, while the twilight deepened to darkness and the stars appeared. The girl’s step lagged now, but she kept up in little spurts and set her lips determinedly.

At length they came to another stream, a rushing mill-race this time, with an old mill, moss-covered and fallen into decay beside it, and by tacit consent they sank down on the worn step.

“I don’t believe we can go any farther,” Jim panted. “I guess this is as good a place as any to camp for the night, and you can sleep in there.”

He indicated the sagging door behind him, and Lou followed his gesture with a reluctant eye. Jim noted the glance and, misunderstanding it, added hastily:

“I don’t believe there are any rats in there, but if you’ll lend me your matches I’ll see.”

“Rats!” she repeated in withering scorn. “There was plenty of them in the insti–where I come from. I was just thinkin’ maybe somebody else was sleepin’ there already.”

She handed over the matches and Jim pushed open the door and entered, feeling carefully for rotten boards in the decayed flooring. A prolonged survey by the flickering light of the matches assured him that the ancient, cobwebbed place was deserted, and he turned again to the door, but its step was unoccupied and nowhere in the starlight could he discern a flutter of that blue-and-white striped dress.

Could she have run away from him? At the thought a forlorn sense of loneliness swept over him greater than he had known since he had started upon his tramp. She was tired out; could he in some way have frightened her, or had a mad spirit of adventure sent her on like a will-o’-the-wisp into the night?

“Lou!” he called, and his voice echoed back. “Lou!”

All at once he noticed what he had not observed before–a single light by the roadside in a clearing ahead. Perhaps she had gone there for more secure shelter.

His cogitations were abruptly interrupted by a dog's excited barking, subdued by distance, but deep-throated. The sound came from the direction of the clearing, and, taking up his heavy stick, Jim hobbled to the road. If Lou had got into any trouble—

The barking turned to growls; horrible, crunching growls which brought his heart up into his throat as he broke into a run, forgetting his pain. He had not gained the top of the rise in the road, however, when the growls gave place to wild yelps and howls which rapidly diminished in the distance and presently Lou appeared holding carefully before her something round and white which gleamed in the starlight.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed when she neared him. "What on earth have you been doing?"

"Git on back 'round the other side of the mill!" ordered Lou. "I gotta go slow or I'll spill it."

"What is it?"

But she vouchsafed him no reply until they reached a ledge of rock over the tumbling stream, well out of sight of that light on the hill. Then she set down the object she was carrying and he saw that it was a bright tin pan, filled almost to the brim with milk.

"I thought it would go good with our bread an' ham," she explained ingenuously. "I figgered from what I learned at that Hess place that they'd leave some out in the summer cellar to cream, for they ain't got any spring-house, an' they won't be likely to miss one pan out of fifteen. Besides, there's nothin' in them rules you told me that stops *me* from beggin' or borrowin', or stealin', either, an' if I *give* you some of this you ain't got any call to ask me where it come from."

This feminine logic left Jim almost speechless, but he managed to gasp out:

"The dog! Didn't he attack you?"

"I guess that was what he intended, but I put down the pan an' fit him off." She added, with evident pride. "I never spilled a drop, either!"

"Good Lord!" Jim ejaculated. "I believe you'd do anything once!"

"I b'lieve I would, provided I wanted to," Lou agreed placidly. Then her tone changed. "There's somebody comin' up the road from Hudsondale like all in creation was after 'em."

Indeed, the sound of a horse's mad gallop up the steep road by which they had come was plainly to be heard increasing in volume, and the grating jar of wheels as though a wagon were being thrown from side to side.

“Think it’s a runaway?” Jim rose and strained his eyes into the darkness at the farther end of the bridge.

“No; driver’s drunk, maybe,” Lou responded. “The horse’s dead beat an’ he’s lashin’ it on. Listen!”

Jim heard the wild gallop falter and drop into a weary trot, only to leap forward again with a wild scramble of hoofs on the rocky road as though the wretched animal was spurred on by sudden pain, and he clenched his hands.

As though reading his thoughts, Lou remarked:

“Only a beast himself would treat a horse that way. The folks at the farm where I was treated theirs somethin’ terrible. If he don’t look out he’ll go over the side of the bridge.”

Jim had already started for the road in front of the mill, and Lou followed him, just as a perilously swaying lantern came to view, showing an old-fashioned carriage of the “buggy” type containing a single occupant and drawn by a horse which was streaked with lather.

The light wagon hit the bridge with a bounce which almost sent it careening over into the rushing stream below, and at the same moment Lou uttered an odd exclamation, more of anger than fear, and straightened up to her full height.

“It’s Max!” she informed Jim. “You git back behind the mill; you ain’t fit to fight—”

“What do you take me for?” Jim demanded indignantly. “Max Hess, eh? The fellow who treated you so badly back at that farm? I wanted to get him this morning, the hound! You go straight back into the mill yourself, and leave me to handle him.”

But he was too late. The wagon had crossed the bridge and halted in front of them so suddenly that the horse slid along for a pace upon his haunches.

“Got yer!” a thick voice announced triumphantly, as a burly figure wrapped the reins around the whip socket and lumbered to the ground. “Yah! I thought there was a feller in it, somewheres!”

He approached them with menacingly clenched fists, but Jim asked coldly:

“Are you addressing this young woman?”

“Young thief, you mean! She’s gotter come—”

But Jim, too, had advanced a pace.

“Take that back and get in your wagon and beat it,” he announced distinctly, with a calmness which the other mistook for mildness. “If your name is Hess, this young woman is not going back with you, and I warn you now to be off.”

“So that’s it, is it?” the heavy voice sneered. “She’s my mother’s hired girl, an’ she stole a lot o’ food an’ ran away this mornin’. Comes o’ takin’ in an asylum brat—”

“Take that back, too, you blackguard!” Jim’s voice was beginning to shake.

“Take nothin’ back, ’cept Lou! What’s she doin’ with you, anyway? Might ha’ knowed she was this sort—”

He got no further, for something landed like a hammer upon his nose and the blood streamed down between his thick lips, choking him. With an inarticulate roar of rage he lowered his bull neck and drove at the other man, but the other man wasn’t there! Then another light, stinging blow landed upon his fat face and he flailed out again with a force that turned him completely around, for again his adversary had danced out of his way.

Every drop of bad blood in the lout was aroused now, for he was the bully and terror of his community, and he could not understand this way of fighting, nor why his own blows failed to land when this tramp could dodge in and punish him apparently whenever he chose.

Jim was many pounds lighter, and although the science of boxing was not unknown to him, he was dog-tired and his wrenched back agonized him at every move. The sheer weight of the other man was bearing him down, and Hess seemed to realize it, for with a grunt of satisfaction he swung in and landed a stiff body blow which staggered his adversary.

Hess’s left eye was closed, and his lips split, but he hammered at his man relentlessly, and at length caught him with a blow which brought him to his knees. All the bully’s blood-lust boiled at sight of his half-fallen victim, and he drew back his heavily shod foot for a murderous kick, but it was never delivered.

Something caught that foot from behind and tripped him heavily into the dust, then landed upon him like a wildcat and bit and tore at him until with a scream of pain he managed to throw it off. Even as he struggled to his feet it sprang again upon him, kicking and clawing, and he turned quickly, and scrambling into the buggy seat, gathered up the reins.

Lou stood where he had torn himself from her grasp, listening to the volley of oaths and clatter of horses’s feet until both had been swallowed up in the distance. Then she turned to where Jim stood swaying, with one hand pressed to his side, and the blood from the reopened cut upon his forehead making his face look ghastly in the starlight.

“Well,” she remarked with satisfaction. “I guess he got more ’n he come for, an’ we’ve seen the last of *him!*”

“But Lou!” There was admiration and awe in his tones. “Your method of fighting isn’t in the Queensberry rules, although I must say it was effective. I was going to try to protect you, and it turned out the other way!”

“Don’t know what queen you’re talkin’ about, nor what rules she made, but when *I* fight, I fight with everything I’ve got,” Lou declared with finality. “Come

and let me fix up your head again, an’ we’ll have supper.”

An hour later and throughout the night, a slim little figure, rolled in a man’s shabby coat, lay sleeping peacefully in a corner of the mill, while on the doorstep in his shirt sleeves and with a stout cudgel across his knees, a weary man drowsed fitfully, on guard.

CHAPTER III
The Vendor of Everything

When Lou awakened the next morning at dawn it was her turn to find herself deserted, but the fact failed to arouse any misgivings in her mind. She had found in her brief experience with menfolks that they were mostly queer, one way or another, but this one was dependable, and she felt no doubt that he would turn up when he got ready.

Unwrapping her bundle, she took the apron, soap, and broken comb, and wandered down the bank of the stream until in the seclusion beneath the bridge she came upon a pool formed by outjutting rocks, where she performed her limited toilet. Then, scrubbing the greasy apron vigorously, she hung it on a bramble bush behind the mill to dry, and scuttling across the road, made for the woods back of the house where she had committed her nocturnal depredation.

An hour later when Jim came slowly up the hill road from the direction of Hudsondale, he saw a tiny smudge of smoke rising from a rock well hidden in the rank undergrowth at the edge of the stream, and approaching it found Lou industriously brushing her coat with a broom which she had improvised of small twigs tied together. Beside her, carefully cradled in her sunbonnet, were half a dozen new-laid eggs.

“Good morning.” He greeted her with a little bow, and sank down on the rock. “Were you frightened to find yourself left all alone?”

“Oh, no. I knew you would come back,” she replied serenely. Then, as she noted his glance fall upon the eggs she added in swift self-defense: “You needn’t think I stole those; I found them back in the woods a piece. O-oh!”

He had carried a large paper package under his arm, and now as he unwrapped it her wonderment changed to swift rapture. It contained an overall apron of bright pink check, a cheap straw hat, and a remnant of green ribbon.

“I ain’t had a pink dress since I was ten!” Her dark eyes were perilously glistening. “I’d almost have died for one, but you had to wear blue after that, ’count of doin’ work ’round. Oh, an’ that hat! I kin put that ribbon on it as easy as—”

She halted suddenly and lowered her eyelashes, adding:

“But you hadn’t any call to buy them for me; I can’t pay you back right now.”

Jim’s reply was irrelevant.

“Why, your eyes aren’t black, after all! They’re violet-blue, the deepest blue I ever saw!” Then he caught himself up, reddening furiously, and after a moment said in a casual tone: “That’s all right about the things, Lou; you can pay me when you get some work to do. Now, go fix yourself up, and we’ll have breakfast.”

When she had disappeared into the mill he cursed himself for a fool. The child had trusted him as a comrade; what would she think if he began paying her compliments? What had come over him, anyway? He had seen women with violet-blue eyes in more countries than one; beautiful women with every enhancement which breeding and wealth could bestow. It must have been sheer surprise in discovering any attribute of prettiness at all about so uncompromisingly homely a girl as poor little Lou.

With this reassuring reflection he set about replenishing the fire, and presently his companion reappeared. The large, flapping hat sat oddly upon her small head with its tightly drawn-back hair, but the straight lines of the all-enveloping pink gown brought out the slender curves of her childish figure, and she didn’t seem quite so gawky, after all, as she moved toward him over the rocks.

“My, you look nice!” he said cheerfully. “I’ve brought some rolls from—”

“We’ll keep them for later,” Lou interrupted him firmly. “There’s still the end of the bread left, and goodness knows where we’ll eat again!”

They breakfasted gaily, drinking the remainder of the milk first and then boiling the eggs in the pan, but Lou’s remark about their next meal had made Jim think seriously of the immediate future. He had assumed a responsibility which he must fulfill, and his progress thus far under the handicaps he had spoken of had been difficult enough alone.

The little pink apron-frock had cost half of his capital, the hat twenty-five cents more, and the ribbon a dime. Five cents in addition for the rolls had left but thirty-five of the preciously hoarded pennies, and he was ninety miles from home, with a host of petty, but formidable, restrictions barring his way, and an adopted orphan on his hands.

He had been forced to turn his head sharply away when he passed the village tobacco store, for every nerve cried out for the solace of a good pipe, but he felt more than repaid for the sacrifice by Lou’s honest rapture over the poor things he had been able to get for her.

Breakfast finished, and the remainder of the ham stowed away in the milk-pan, they carefully skirted the house on the rise of the hill, and coming out once more upon the road, they forged ahead. The strained muscles of Jim’s back and side were still sore, but they troubled him less than the lack of a smoke, and for

Lou it was as though a new world had opened before her eyes.

The pleasant, wheat-growing valley had been left behind them, and the road from being hilly grew steeper and more steep until it became a mere rutted trail over the mountains. More or less dilapidated farm-houses, each with its patch of cleared ground, appeared now and then, and before the gate of one of these a huge, canvas-covered wagon stood, bearing the ambitious legend:

TRAVELING DEPARTMENT STORE

BENJ. PERKINS

A genial-looking fat man in a linen duster and a wide-brimmed hat was just clambering in over the wheel when he spied the two pedestrians gazing at the turnout, and called good-naturedly:

“Want a lift? I’m goin’ inter New Hartz.”

“Thanks. That is just where we are going, too,” Jim replied promptly. “It’s awfully good of you to take us along.”

“Git right in; plenty of room with me on the front seat here,” the proprietor of the extraordinary department store responded heartily. “Yer sister ’d be nigh tuckered out ef you tried ter walk her inter town on a hot day like this.”

Jim hoisted Lou in over the big wheel and as he climbed up beside her the driver slapped the reins over the broad backs of the two horses, and they were off.

“You are Mr. Perkins?” Jim asked, ignoring the assumption of Lou’s relationship to him.

“That’s me!” The other glanced at the fresh bandage about the young man’s head which Lou had applied just before they started out, and inquired: “You git hurt, some ways?”

Jim explained briefly, and changed the subject with a haste which would have been significant to a less obtuse host.

“You seem to have a little of everything back here in the van, Mr. Perkins.”

“Reckon I hev,” the other agreed complacently. “From a spool of thread to a pitchfork, and from a baby rattle to wax funeral wreaths, there ain’t nothin’ the folk hereabout hev use for that I don’t carry. The big ottermobile order trucks don’t hurt my business none; I ben workin’ up my trade around here fer twenty year.”

Mr. Perkins paused to draw a pipe and tobacco sack from his pocket, and Jim’s throat twitched. After filling the pipe the genial pedler offered the sack. “Hev some?”

Jim hesitated, and his face reddened, but at last he shook his head determinedly.

“Thanks; I–I don’t smoke.”

Lou, who had hunched about in her seat to stare at the assorted array of articles in the body of the van, turned and looked curiously at him. Surely that hard bulge in the coat upon which she had slept on the previous night had been the bowl of a pipe! The eyes which Jim had called “violet blue” narrowed for an instant in puzzled wonderment, then blurred as with swift understanding she glanced down at the new pink apron and stroked it softly. But Jim had gone on talking rather nervously.

“You don’t get much trade around here, do you? Not many houses in these mountains.”

“Oh, here and thar,” Mr. Perkins replied easily. “Here and thar.”

The conversation which ensued was all Greek to Lou, who took off her hat, leaned her head against the side of the van, and went peacefully to sleep.

She was awakened by a hand gently shaking her shoulder and found that the van had been halted in the middle of a maple-lined street before a big house which bore a sign labeled: “Congress Hotel.” Busy little shops shouldered it on either side, and a band-stand stood in the open square.

“Come down, Lou.” Jim stood on the sidewalk reaching up for her hands. “This is New Hartz.”

Mr. Perkins was not in the van, but as Lou scrambled over the wheel he appeared from the door of the hotel.

“Young man, I wish I was goin’ further, but I ain’t, and I want ter talk a little business with you.” He drew Jim aside. “You and your sister wouldn’t ha’ ben walkin’ it in from Hudsonvale if you could ha’ paid ter come any other way.”

“No, Mr. Perkins.” Jim backed away smilingly. “We couldn’t think of–of borrowing, but thanks for the ten-mile lift into New Hartz.”

“Glad ter hev your company.” Mr. Perkins suddenly dived around to the back of the van and his voice came to them muffled from the depths of its interior. “Wait jest a minute.”

He emerged, red and perspiring, with a small package wrapped in a square of something shimmering and white in his hands, which he offered to the wondering Lou.

“It’s jest a little present fer you, miss,” he said.

Lou accepted it gravely.

“Thank you, sir,” she said primly. “You ain’t got any call to give me this, not after bringin’ us all the way from Hudsondale.”

“I guess I can make a little present if I’m a mind ter, ter a pretty little girl like you.” Mr. Perkins turned to Jim. “Wish yer both luck on your way.”

They took leave of the kindly little fat man and moved off up the village street and beyond the inevitable car tracks to the dwindling country road once more. In

the shade of a big tree at a crossroads, Lou glanced up at her companion.

"Could we set down here for a spell?" she asked. "I ain't tired, Jim, but I feel like I'd die if I can't open this!"

She gestured with Mr. Perkins's gift, and Jim dropped laughingly on the grass.

"Of course. Let's see what's in it."

Gravely she seated herself beside him and unknotted the square of white. It contained three little handkerchiefs with pink borders, a small bottle of particularly strong scent, and a string of beads remotely resembling coral. The square in which the articles had been wrapped proved to be a large white silk handkerchief with an American flag stamped in the corner.

"That must be for you, Jim," Lou said slowly. As in a trance she slipped the string of beads over her head, opened the bottle, and poured a few drops of its contents upon one of the little handkerchiefs, inhaling the rank odor in ecstasy.

Jim watched her, amused but touched also. To that luxury-starved little soul the coarse handkerchiefs and cheap perfume meant rapture, and he resolved to see that the gray-haired lady in New York provided something better for Lou than a servant's position. Education, perhaps—

"It must be past noon, for the shadows have started to go the other way." Her voice broke in upon his meditations. "We'd better eat the rolls an' ham now. How far is it to where we're goin'?"

"Eight miles; I'm afraid it is a long way for you—"

"Then the sooner we git started the better," the girl interrupted. "I'll take the pan an' run back to that yellow house we just passed for some water."

Without waiting for a reply she tilted the little scent bottle carefully against the tree-trunk and departed, while Jim stretched himself out luxuriously in the grateful shade. He was tired, and the still heat of noon had a stupefying effect. Lou seemed long in returning, and his thoughts grew nebulous until he finally drifted off into slumber.

When he awakened the shadows had lengthened to those of mid-afternoon, and there was a delicious, unaccustomed aroma in the air. He gazed about him in a bewildered fashion to find Lou sitting cross-legged in the grass, and spread upon it on the apron between them were the rolls and ham, and a huckleberry pie, still warm, and fairly exuding juice.

"Good Lord, where did you get it?" he demanded.

"Remember that yellow house where I went to git water?" Lou laughed, but there was a new note of shyness in her voice. "When we passed it first I saw that the currant bushes were just loaded down, an' a woman was out pickin' them, though it's ironin' day. I figgered if I pick for her she'd maybe pay me, an' she did. I–I guessed you was out of–this."

The freckles disappeared in a rosy blush as with a red-stained hand she held out a bag of tobacco.

“Lou! Why, you–you precious kid!” Jim stammered. “You worked in all this heat, while I lay here and slept.”

“It wasn’t far back to New Hartz, an’ I’d seen where the cigar-store was when we came by. The woman at the house, she give me the pie, an’ I’ve got ten cents left besides. I never had ten cents of my own before!”

CHAPTER IV
Under the Big Top

A very weary and dust-covered couple trudged to the top of the last hill just before sundown and paused, with Lou's hand instinctively clutching Jim's arm.

"Is that it; the Hudson?" She pointed over the fringe of treetops below them to the broad, winding ribbon of sparkling gray-blue, touched here and there with the reflection of the fleecy pink clouds drifting far overhead.

Jim turned to look at her, wondering what reaction the view would have upon the emotions of this child who, until a brief week ago, had known only the "brick house with a high fence and a playground where never a blade of grass grew."

Her big eyes followed the river's course until it was lost in a creeping mist behind high hills, and she drew a deep breath.

"How far does it go?" she asked.

"To New York; to the sea," he responded. "The ocean, you know."

"My!" There was wonder and a certain regret in her tone. "What a waste of good wash-water!"

Jim emitted an inarticulate remark, and added hastily:

"Let us get along down into Highvale. I must try to find a place for you to sleep, and remember, Lou, you're my sister if anyone starts to question you."

"All right; I don't mind, if you don't." She gave the floppy hat a yank that slued the ridiculous green bow to a more rakish angle, and then stopped suddenly in the road. "O-oh, look!"

A barn had been built close up to the side of the fence, and freshly pasted upon it was the vividly colored poster of a circus. The enthusiastic admiration which she had denied to her first view of the great river glowed now in Lou's eyes, and she stood transfixed.

"What is it, Jim? The pretty lady on the horse an' the other one up on the swing thing without–without any skirt to her, and the man with the funny pants an' the big hat that's shootin'—"

"There must be a circus in Highvale–yes, the date says to-night," Jim replied.

"'Trimble & Wells Great Circus & Sideshow,'" she read slowly. "I heard about them circuses; some of the children seen them before they came to–to

where I was, an' once one come to town an' sent free tickets to us, but the deaconesses said it was sinful an' so we couldn't go. It don't look sinful to me; it looks just grand–grand!"

She could have stood for an hour drinking in all the wonders of the poster, but Jim hurried her on although he was filled with sympathy. Poor little kid! What a rotten, black sort of life she must have had, and how he wished that he might take her to this tawdry, cheap affair and watch her naïve enjoyment.

But their combined capital would not have covered the price of the tickets, and there was supper to be thought of, and the hazards of the immediate future. For the present the circus must remain an unattained dream to Lou.

The steep little hill down to the village seemed very long, and twilight was almost upon them when they came to a big, open lot upon which a circular tent was in process of erection, with lesser oblong ones clustered at one side.

A fringe of small boys and village loungers lined the roadway watching the corps of men who were working like beavers within the lot, urged on by a bawling, cursing voice which seemed to proceed from a stout, choleric man who bounded about, alternately waving his arms and cupping his hands to improvise a megaphone.

Jim was tired, and his side throbbed dully, but a sudden inspiration came to him, and he drew Lou over to the other side of the road.

"Sit down here and wait for me," he told her. "I won't be long. That's where the circus is going to be, and perhaps I can fix it for you to see it."

Turning, he shouldered his way through the knot of loungers, and entering the lot, approached the stout gentleman.

"Want an extra hand?" he asked. "Anything from a ballyhoo to a rough-rider?"

The stout man wheeled and surveyed him in momentarily speechless wrath at the interruption. Then his eyes narrowed appraisingly as he noted the tall, lean, well-knit figure before him, and he demanded:

"How the h–l did you know that the Wild West act was all knocked to pieces?"

"It isn't now," Jim smiled. "Lend me a horse and a pair of chaps, and I'll show you in five minutes what's going to be your star act to-night."

"You're no circus man, nor a Westerner, neither." The boss still stared. "And you don't look like a bum. What's your game, anyway?"

"To pick up a little loose change and get a horse between my knees again."

The thought of the forlorn little figure which he had left by the roadside kept Jim's smile steady, and added a desperate artificial buoyancy to his tired tones:

"Never mind who I am or where I came from; I can ride, and that's what you

want, isn’t it?”

There was an instant’s pause, and then the boss bawled a stentorian order and grabbed him by the arm.

“Come on. I’ll give you a chance to show me what you can do, but if you’re takin’ up my time on a bluff I’ll break every bone in your ——body!”

He led Jim to an open space behind the tents where presently there appeared a living convulsion in the shape of a bucking, squealing bronco seemingly held down to earth by two sweating, shirtless men.

As Jim surveyed that wickedly lowered head with its small eyes rolling viciously, his heart misgave him for a moment. What if he should fail? It was long since he had practiced those rough-riding stunts that had made him in demand for those society circuses of the ante-bellum days, and longer yet since he had learned to break a bronco on the ranch, which had been Bill Hollis’s hobby for a season.

What if that devil of a pony should best him in the struggle, and he should be thrown ignominiously from the lot before the eyes of the girl who was waiting patiently for him?

The next instant he had vaulted lightly into the high, Western saddle, the two men had jumped back, and the fight was on. The bronco lashed out viciously with his heels, leaped sidewise, and then, after a running start, attempted to throw his rider over his head, but Jim clung to him like a burr; he flung himself down and rolled over, but the young man jumped clear and was back into the saddle as the enraged animal regained his feet.

The struggle was strenuous but brief, and Jim found himself rejoicing that none of the old tricks had failed him, and that the wicked little brute was realizing that he had at length been mastered.

When the bronco was thoroughly subjected, Jim rode quietly up to where the boss stood with the two other men.

“Want me to pick up a handkerchief for you, or any other of the old stunts, now?” he asked. “Don’t want to tire this old plug too much for the show.”

The boss chuckled.

“Get down and talk business with me, young feller,” he said. “You won’t ride Jazz in the ring to-night; he’s the rottenest, most treacherous little wretch with the outfit, and I only put you on him to call your bluff. Want to join the show? We had to leave our rough-rider back in the last town with a broken leg.”

Jim shook his head.

“Only for to-night,” he replied. “My sister and I are beating it South.”

“Well, I’ll give you five dollars—”

“No, you won’t,” Jim smiled. “I’ll work for you to-night for just twenty-five

cents.”

“Say, you ain’t bughouse, are you?” The boss stared again.

“The fourth part of a dollar, two bits!” Jim replied doggedly. Then his gaze wandered as though casually over to the cook tent, and he added: “However, if you could suggest anything to two hungry people, and something else for a little girl who has never seen a circus, Mr. Trimble-and-Wells, and who is waiting for me in the road—”

The boss roared.

“D–d if I don’t think you’re dippy, but you certainly can ride like h–l!” he exclaimed. “I’ll take you up on that; go get the kid and bring her in to supper, and I’ll see that she gets a reserved seat for the show. Holy smoke! A feller that can stick on Jazz, and wants to work for a quarter!”

Thus it was that when the clown came tumbling into the ring to the blaring of the band that night, a girl with the green bow all askew upon her hat and her violet-blue eyes a shade darker and snapping with excitement was perched on one of the front row planks which served as seats, clutching a bag of peanuts and waiting in an ecstasy for the wonders about to be unfolded.

The ride in the pedler’s van, the hours of currant-picking, and the hot, hilly, eight-mile trudge were forgotten, and she felt like pinching herself to see if she would wake up all of a sudden to find herself once more back in the attic at the Hess farm.

The beautiful lady with the fluffy skirts rode round the ring on tiptoe and jumped through the flaming hoops at the behest of the gentleman with the high silk hat and the long whip; the other lady “without any skirt to her” flew dizzily through the air from one trapeze to the other, and the performing elephant went through his time-worn tricks with the air of a resigned philosopher, and still Lou sat entranced.

Then the dingy curtains parted, and a man loped easily into the ring on a wiry, little Western horse. He was the same man she had seen in the poster that afternoon; the one with the funny pants and the big hat and the red handkerchief knotted around his throat, and he proceeded to do marvelous things.

It is highly probable that many a better exhibition of rough-riding had been given beneath the big top, but to Lou, as to the villagers surrounding her in densely packed rows, it was a supreme display of horsemanship, and they expressed themselves with vociferous applause when he uncoiled a rope from the peak of his saddle and dexterously brought down the bewildered steer which had been chivvied into the ring.

In the row directly in front of Lou sat a quartet who were obviously out of place among their bucolic neighbors, but as obviously bent on amusing

themselves. The ladies of the party wore brilliant sweaters beneath their long silk motor coats, and veils floated from their small round hats, and the gentlemen wore long coats, too, and had goggles pushed up on their caps.

Bits of their chatter, and low-voiced, well-bred laughter drifted back to the girl's ears between pauses in the louder comments of her immediate neighbors and the intermittent din of the band, and Lou was amazed.

Could it be that they were laughing at this glorious, wonderful thing that was called a "circus?" Were they ridiculing it, trying to pretend that they had seen anything more marvelous in all the world?

They didn't laugh at the rough-rider, she noticed. The ladies applauded daintily, and once the stouter of the two gentlemen called out: "Good work!" as the rider executed a seemingly daring feat, and the other gentleman consulted his flimsy play bill.

Then all thought of the four was banished from Lou's mind, for the rider had cantered from the ring and dropped a large white handkerchief upon the sawdust of the outer circle just before her. Wasn't that bit of color in a corner of a handkerchief an American flag? Jim had told her that he was to do some work outside for the circus people that night, and the boss had kindly offered her a seat, but that handkerchief—

Suddenly the rider swept by with his horse at a dead run, and swooping down, seized the square of white in his teeth, and while the tent rang with applause, Lou sat very still. It was Jim! It was he, her "partner," whom the people were all clapping their hands at, who was doing all these wonderful things! But his face had looked somewhat pale beneath that big hat, and his smile sort of fixed.

The bandage was gone from his head, and the plaster which had replaced it was hidden, but she could not have been mistaken. What if he were suffering, if his back and side were paining him again? She recalled the exhaustion with which he had slept at noontime, and the long, weary hike that followed it, and her heart contracted within her. It was for her that he was doing this, so that she might see the show!

One of the ladies in the seats before her leaned forward and exclaimed:

"Didn't he look like Jimmie Abbott? If we didn't know that he was on a fishing trip up in Canada—"

Lou did not catch the rest of the remark. Her eyes were glued upon the rider and her ears stilled to everything around her. With a final flourish he dashed for the dingy curtain at the exit and it parted to let him pass. It did not close quickly enough behind him, however; not quickly enough to conceal from the gaping audience his lurching fall from the saddle into the group of acrobats waiting to come on in their turn.

Then it was that a small, pink-checked cyclone whirled through the rows of closely packed humanity and half-way round the arena to the curtain, while above the clamor of the band arose a shrill cry; “Jim! Jim!”

“Did you see her?” The lady who had commented upon the rider’s appearance demanded of the gentleman beside her. “She called him Jim, too; isn’t that odd? Do you suppose, Jack, that she is with the circus; that little country girl?”

“Oh, it was only part of the show,” the stout gentleman replied in a bored tone. “Or else the chap was tight. He certainly rode as if he had some red-eye tucked under his belt; wonder where he got it around here?”

CHAPTER V
Concerning an Omelet

There was a confused babel of sound in Jim's ears when he awoke Wednesday morning; hammering and clanging and the squeak of ropes, shouting and cursing, and now and then the roar or yell of some protesting animal.

He was lying on a narrow bunk in a tent, and opposite him a husky-looking individual was climbing into a pair of checked trousers and yawning vociferously.

Jim's head ached confoundedly, and he was stiff and sore, but his mind cleared rapidly from the mists of slumber. What sort of a place was this, and how had he got there? Then all at once he remembered, and there came a horrifying thought. What had become of Lou?

"Where's Lou? M–my sister?" he demanded, sitting bolt upright.

"Hello, there! Come out of it all right, did you?" The occupant of the tent hitched a suspender over one shoulder and grinned cheerfully. "The kid's took care of! She's with Ma Billings. That was a nasty header you took last night. O. K. now? We gotter pull out in an hour."

"Oh, I'm all right; but say, did I pull that bonehead stuff out there before all of them?" Jim reddened beneath his tan at the thought. "Fall off the horse like that, I mean?"

"In the ring? No, you made a grand exit, and then slumped; nobody saw it but the little girl, and she beat it right down to the ring and out after you. Fit like a wildcat, too, when we tried to keep her away from you till we could find out what had struck you." The other grinned once more.

"Some sister, ol'-timer! When we found that big muscle bruise on your side, and she told us that you had been tossed by a bull a couple of days ago, we didn't wonder you keeled over."

Jim sat up dizzily.

"It was mighty good of you people to take us in for the night," he said. "Who is Ma Billings?"

"Marie LaBelle she used to be; worked up on the flyin' rings until she got too hefty," his companion explained. "Now she takes care of the wardrobes and sort of looks out that the Human Doll don't get lost in the shuffle; the midget, you

know. Now peel, and I'll give you a rub-down with some liniment."

Jim tried to protest, but the husky individual only grinned the broader.

"You may be some boy when it comes to bronco-bustin', but I'm the Strong Man in the sideshow, and you haven't a chance."

Meekly Jim submitted to his companion's kindly ministrations, and then dressing quickly, made his way out into the glare of the early morning sun.

The big top was down, and poles and animal cages were being loaded on long trucks as he emerged. An appetizing odor of fried pork floated upon the air from the direction of the cook tent, and people seemed to be rushing all over the lot in wildest confusion, but Jim caught a glimpse of a bit of pink-and-white check through the mêlée, and headed for it.

Lou was sitting on the grass in cordial confab with a melancholy-looking, lantern-jawed man, but at his approach she jumped up precipitately and ran to him.

"Oh, Jim, you feelin' all right?" There was a little tremble in her voice. "I knew it was you the minute you rode past an' picked up that handkerchief Mr. Perkins give you yesterday, an' when you pitched off that horse I thought you was dead. You hadn't no call to take any chance like that with your back hurt an' that long tramp an' all; but it was splendid."

She paused, breathless, and he patted her shoulder. Somehow she didn't look so downright homely this morning, or else he was growing used to her little, turned-up nose. Her tow-colored hair was looser about her face, and where the sun struck a strand of it, it shone like spun gold.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "But who was that man you were talking to just now?"

"Him? Oh, that was the clown," Lou replied. "He says the old man is just crazy 'bout your ridin', an' if you'll stay along with the show he can teach me to stand still for the knife-thrower; the last girl got scared, an' quit just because she got a little scratch on the neck. The clown says I got the nerve for it, an' I guess I have, only they ain't goin' towards New York."

She added the last almost reluctantly, and Jim shuddered. The knife-thrower! What wouldn't the little dare-devil be willing to try next?

"I guess you have got the nerve," he admitted grimly. "But we're going to be in New York by Saturday night, remember. As soon as I get my quarter from the stout gentleman over there with the striped vest, we'll be on our way."

But it was nearly an hour before they took to the road again. The boss insisted on starting them off with a hearty breakfast, and there were good-bys to be said to the rough, kindly folk who had taken them in as friends. Except for the litter of hand-bills and peanut-shells, the last vestiges of the circus were being

removed from the lot as they finally departed, and what had been to Lou a wondrous, glittering pageant had become but a memory.

"I dunno but I'd as lief join a circus," she observed, meditatively, after they had traveled a mile or more. "Maybe I could learn in New York how to do some of them tricks. I could git the hang of that business up on them swings in no time, only I don't like the way that girl dressed—"

"Nonsense!" Jim snapped, and wondered at his own indignation. "We'll find something suitable for you to do, or you can go to school—"

"School!" she interrupted him in her turn. "I–I'd like to learn things an' be like other folks, but I ain't–I mean I'm not–goin' to any institootion."

He glanced at her curiously. This was the first time she had made any conscious effort to correct herself, the first evidence she had given that she had noted the difference between his speech and hers.

"I didn't mean an institution, but a real school, Lou," he explained gently. "One where you'll have no uniform to wear, and no work to do except to learn."

"I quit learnin' when I was twelve." There was an unconscious note of wistfulness in her tones. "I kin read an' do a little figgerin', but I don't know much of anythin' else. I couldn't go to school an' begin again where I left off, Jim; I'd be sort of ashamed. Oh, look at that big wagon drivin' out of that gate! Maybe we'll git a lift."

She had turned at the creak of wheels, and now, as the cart loaded with crates and pulled by two lean, sorry-looking horses passed, she gazed expectantly at the driver. He was as lean as his team, with a sharp nose and a tuft of gray hair sticking out from his chin, and his close-set eyes straight ahead of him, as though he were determined not to see to the two wayfarers.

"He looks kinder mean, don't he?" Lou remarked. Then impulsively she ran after the wagon: "Say, mister, will you give us a lift?"

The old man pulled in his horses and regarded her sourly.

"What'll you pay?" he demanded.

"What's in them crates," she parried.

"Eggs." The response was laconic. "What you gittin' at, sis?"

"Who unloads them when you git to where you're goin'?" Lou persisted.

"At the Riverburgh dock? I do, unless I'm late, an' then I have to give a couple o' them loafers around there a quarter apiece to help. I'm late to-day, an' if you ain't got any money to ride–Giddap!"

But Lou halted him determinedly.

"If you'll give me and Jim–I mean my brother–a ride, he'll unload the crates for you for nothin' when we git there. You'll be savin' fifty cents, and the ride won't cost you nothin'."

“Well”–the old man considered for a moment–“I’ll do it, if it’s only to spite them fellers that’s allus hangin’ ’round the docks. Reg’lar robbers, they be. Quarter apiece, an’ chicken-feed gone up the way’t is. Git in.”

Jim had overtaken the wagon in time to hear the end of the brief conversation, and he wasted no further time in parley, but hoisted Lou up over the wheel and climbed in beside her.

As the reluctant horses started off once more the driver turned to him:

“Hope you’re a hustler, young man; got to git them eggs off the wagon in a jiffy when we git to Riverburgh, in time to ketch the boat. Don’t you try no scuttlin’ off on me after I give you the ride; Riverburgh’s a reg’lar city, an’ they’s a policeman on the docks.”

“I’ll keep the bargain my sister made for me,” Jim answered shortly. He had observed the poultry-farm from which the old man had started, with its miserable little hovel of a house and immense spread of chicken-runs, and drawn his own conclusions as to the character of its owner. “You needn’t be afraid I’ll shirk.”

“Well,” grumbled the other, “I don’t hold with pickin’ up tramps in the road, but I’m sick of handin’ out good money to them loafers at the dock to unload, an’ I ain’t got a hired man to take along no more; they’re allus lazy, good-for-nothin’ fellers that eat more’n they work out, let alone their wages goin’ sky-hootin’!”

“But you must be making a handsome profit, with the price of eggs going up, too, all the time,” Jim remarked.

The old man gave him a sly glance.

“That’s how you look at it,” he replied. “They oughter go up twice the price they be. My wife’s doin’ the hired man’s work now, an’ she’s allus pesterin’ me to git an incubator, but them things cost a powerful sight of money, an’ I don’t hold with new-fangled notions; too much resk to them. You can allus sell hens when they git too old to set or lay, but what’re you going to do with a wore-out incubator?”

He cackled shrilly at his own witticism and then grew morose again. “The way things is, there ain’t no profit skeercely in nothin’.”

They jogged along drowsily through the slumberous heat, while the old man continued his harangue against the cost of everything except his own commodity, and the underfed horses strained to drag their burden over the hilly road. The mountains had been left behind, and all over the rolling hillsides about them on either hand the vineyards stretched in undulating lines, each heavy with the load of purpling grapes.

Mile after mile passed slowly beneath the creaking wheels of the wagon; noon came, and still Riverburgh remained tantalizingly ahead. At last, on the rise of a

hill, the old man pulled up and pointed with his whip to the spreading sweep of brick buildings fronting on the river's edge below.

"There's the town," he announced, adding, with a touch of regret: "We're ahead of time, after all, an' I could have unloaded by myself. Well, it don't matter noways except for the extra drag on the horses. Giddap!"

"There's–there's an ottermobile comin' up behind," Lou ventured. "They been tootin' at you for some time, mister."

"Let 'em," the old man cackled shrilly once more. "I've been drivin' on these roads afore them things was heard of, an' I don't calc'late to turn out for 'em."

The warning of the siren sounded again disturbingly close, and the rush of the oncoming car could be plainly heard. Jim glanced at the old man, and, noting the stubborn set of his jaw, said nothing; but Lou spoke again, and her voice held no note of alarm, but rather indignation at the obvious lack of fair play.

"But they got a right; you're on their side of the road," she exclaimed. "If you'd give them their half, mister, they could pass easy."

"Don't calc'late to let 'em," he responded obstinately. "Ain't goin' to take their dust if I kin help it."

Deliberately he tugged on the left reins and headed the team straight across the road. Lou gave a quick glance over the side of the wagon and behind, and then gripped Jim's arm. He turned and caught one glimpse of her set face, and then with a roar and a grinding crash they both felt themselves lifted into the air and landed in some golden, slimy fluid in the ditch.

"Lou, are you hurt?" Jim tried to wipe the clinging stuff from his eyes and ears with his sleeve. "Where are you?"

The rapidly diminishing clatter of horses' hoofs down the hill, and the old man's vigorously roared recriminations assured him of the safety of the rest of the entourage even before Lou replied.

"Not hurt a mite, but I'm laughin'!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Oh, Jim, you–you should have seen it. That ottermobile hit square in the middle of the wagon, and there ain't–isn't–a single egg—"

"Here, you!" the old man, dripping from head to foot with the golden slime, rushed up and tugged excitedly at Jim's arm. "Come on an' help me to ketch them horses! What'd I bring you along for? Let the girl be, I don't ker if her neck's broke! I got to lodge a complaint against them rascals, an' have 'em stopped! You're my witnesses that they run into me, an' I'll make 'em pay a pretty penny—"

"I care whether my sister's neck is broken or not!" Jim retorted grimly. "Go after your own horses. I engaged to unload eggs, and it looks as if the job was finished. Lou, are you sure you're all right?"

The old man danced up and down in the road, spattering flecks of egg about him.

"We'll see about that," he shrilled. "You come along with me! You're my witnesses—"

"We'll be your witnesses that you were on the wrong side of the road, and knew it," Jim helped Lou to her feet. "They warned you, and you wouldn't turn out."

With an outburst of inarticulate rage the old man dashed off down the road, and Lou, helpless with laughter, clung to Jim's slippery sleeve.

"Don't mind him," she gasped. "Old skinflint! Oh, Jim, you l-look like an omelet."

CHAPTER VI
The Red Note-Book

For a moment Jim laughed with her; then the seriousness of their situation was borne in upon him, and his face sobered.

“It’s the kind of an omelet that won’t come off in a hurry, I’m afraid,” he said. “How on earth are we going to walk into Riverburgh like this?”

It was the first time that he had appealed to her, and Lou’s laughter ceased also, but her cheerful confidence did not fail her.

“We gotter find some place where we can git cleaned up, that’s all,” she replied practically. “Most anybody would let you do that, I guess, if you told them what happened, an’ if you can’t ask–why, I kin. Anybody ’cept a mean old thing like that! I s’pose I ought to be sorry that his wagon’s broke an’ his eggs are all over us instead of where they was goin’, but I’m not a mite. Long’s he wasn’t hurt, I’m kinder glad.”

“Still, those people in the car ought to have stopped to see the extent of the damage they had done, even if they did have the right-of-way,” Jim observed. “The old fellow had his grievance, but he got my goat when he said he didn’t care if your neck was broken or not, and I wouldn’t have helped him if I could.”

“‘Goat’?” Lou repeated.

Jim had no opportunity to explain, for at that moment a woman in a faded gingham gown toiled hurriedly over the brow of the hill, and, on seeing them, stopped, with one hand at her breast.

“Oh!” she gasped. “There’s wasn’t anyone hurt, was there? I saw the accident from my porch, and I came just as quick as I could.”

Jim explained, and the woman listened, wide-eyed.

“You both come straight along with me,” she invited when he had finished. “I’ll lend you some overalls, and you and the little girl can just sit around while your clothes dry.”

She led the way back to a tiny but very neat cottage, with flowers blooming in the door-yard and a well-tended truck-garden in the rear. Broad hay-fields stretched on either side, but only two little boys were visible, tossing the hay awkwardly with pitchforks almost bigger than they were themselves.

The woman left them standing for a minute on the back porch, and then came

out to them, bearing a cake of soap, a towel, and a pair of overalls and shirt, which, although immaculately clean, bore many patches and darns, and were deeply creased, as though they had been laid away a long time.

"Take these down to the barn." She handed them to Jim. "You'll find a spigot there, and cold water's best for egg-stains. I left some rags in the empty box-stall that you can use to clean your shoes, and then, if you'll give me your clothes that you've got on now, I'll soak them and get them out while the sun's high; corduroy takes a long time to dry."

When Jim had expressed his gratitude and departed for the barn, the woman led Lou into the kitchen, and, providing her also with clean garments, she dragged a wash-tub out on the porch.

"I–if you'll let me, I'd like to wash my own things and Jim's." Lou appeared shyly in the door in a gown several sizes too large for her. "He'd like it, too, I think, and he can help with the hayin' till the things git dried out enough, so's we kin go on."

"Oh, would he?" the woman asked quickly. "I'd pay him well if he's looking for work; I can't get any hands, though I've tried, and the hay is rotting for want of being turned. I didn't think I'd seen you two around here before, but I've known old Mr. Weeble always."

"You mean that–that with the egg-wagon? He was givin' us a lift into Riverburgh; we're just traveling through," Lou added shortly.

"Did he pick you up back near his place?" At Lou's nod the woman exclaimed: "Then you two haven't had a bite of dinner! You put your things to soak and I'll go right in the house and get you up a little something; it's past two."

Lou started to protest, but the woman disappeared into the kitchen, and Jim appeared from the barn. He was attired in a shirt which strained at his broad shoulders, and overalls which barely reached his shoe-tops.

The girl noticed something else also as he turned for a moment to look toward the field where the little boys were so valiantly at work; a red-leather note-book, which she had never known that he carried, bulged now from the all too small overall-pocket.

"You can bet I'll pitch hay for her till sundown," he declared, when Lou had explained the situation to him. He dropped beside the tub the bundle of egg-soaked clothing which he carried, and added: "It is mighty good of her to do all this for us, isn't it? I tell you, Lou, the credit side of the list is going up even if it did have a bit of a jolt this morning, and you're the biggest item on it."

This speech was wholly unintelligible to the girl, but she bent over the tub without reply, and Jim went on hurriedly, aware that he had made a slip of some

sort.

"I wonder where all the men of the family are? She can't get any hands—"

"*There* are all the men of the family." The woman had reappeared in time to catch his last remark, and she pointed out toward the two small toilers with a faint smile. "There was another, their father–my son–but he died; so we're doin' the best we can by ourselves. But there's a little bite ready for you on the end of the kitchen-table, and it's getting cold."

The food tasted good, and the little red cloth beneath the dishes was clean, but the signs of carefully concealed poverty were everywhere visible to Jim's eyes, and he suspected another reason for the lack of farm-hands than scarcity of labor. He hurried through his meal, and went at once to the hay-field, while Lou, after insisting on clearing the dishes away, went back to the wash-tub, and their hostess returned to her own belated ironing.

Upon the girl's usually serene brow there was a frown of perplexity as she worked, and her thoughts were far afield, for in that backward glance which she had given from the egg-wagon to the approaching car just before the crash came she had recognized in its occupants the quartet who sat in front of her at the circus the previous evening. The ladies were closely swathed in their veils, but she remembered the distinctive plaids of their silk coats, and the stout gentleman who sat between them in the tonneau, with goggles and hat snatched off in the excitement of the impending smash-up, was unmistakably the one who had called out "Good work!" when Jim was performing on the horse.

The other gentleman who had made up the quartet was the one who drove the car, and her quick glance showed her that he was even then trying to avoid the crash.

The details had been photographed upon her brain with instantaneous clarity, but it was not with these that her thoughts were busied; the remark which the younger lady had made at the circus just before Jim rode toward the exit-flap of the curtain had returned and could not be banished from her mind:

"Didn't he look like Jimmie Abbott?"

Her companion had told the girl that his name was Botts, but beyond that, and the fact that he was on the way to New York, he had vouchsafed no further information about himself, nor had Lou asked. She could not understand why his journey was hedged about with so many silly rules, nor why he chose to obey them; that was his affair, and he was just a part of this wonderful adventure which had started with her departure from the Hess farm.

Yet away down in her heart was a little hurt feeling for which she could not have assigned a cause even to herself. Of course she trusted him, and he would not have lied to her, but could there really be another "Jim" in the world who

looked quite like him, and whose name was so nearly the same?

She had sensed instinctively, and the more clearly perhaps because of her lack of worldly experience, that he was different, not only from herself, but from all whom they had encountered upon their journey, yet could he really be that grand young lady's "Jimmie," after all?

As she stepped aside to lift the basket into which the sodden garments had fallen from the wringer, her foot chanced to crunch upon something that yielded with a crisp rustle, and she glanced down. It was the little red note-book which she had seen in Jim's overall-pocket when he came from the barn; it must have fallen out as he crossed the porch to go to the hay-field.

It had opened, and the front cover was pressed back, with the stamp of her heel, showing plainly upon the first page, and as she stooped slowly and picked it up Lou could not help reading the three words which were written across it in a bold, characteristic hand:

JAMES TARRISFORD ABBOTT

There was something else, an address, no doubt, written below, but Lou closed the book quickly and dropped it upon a near-by bench, as though it burned her fingers. For a moment she stood very still with her eyes closed and her little water-shriveled hands tightly interlocked, and in that instant of time the happy, careless co-adventurer of the last two marvelous days vanished, and in his place there appeared a stranger, a man of the world, in which that young lady of the motor-car moved.

For the first time in Lou's life a panic seized her, a desperate longing to run away. She opened her eyes and looked across the hay-fields to where that tall, stalwart figure worked beside the two smaller ones. Even from that distance he looked different, somehow; he wasn't the same Jim.

Slowly, with a mist before her eyes she picked up the heavy basket, and, descending the steps of the porch, spread the garments upon the bleaching grass to dry. The glittering glories of the circus had turned all at once to a black shadow in her memory, and she wished fervently that she had never seen it nor those rich people who had come to make a mock of it, but had stayed to applaud Jim.

But why shouldn't they, even if they hadn't recognized him? He belonged to their world, not hers. Then a new, inexpressibly forlorn thought came to her; what was her world, anyway? She didn't belong anywhere; there was no place for her unless she made one for herself, some time.

With that, in spite of this strange, new weariness which dragged at her heart, Lou's indomitable spirit reasserted itself, and her small teeth clamped together.

She *would* make herself a place somewhere, somehow.

Returning to the house, she took the ironing from her tired hostess's hands, and worked steadily until at sundown the high treble of childish voices came to her ears, and Jim's merry, laughing tones in reply sent a quick stab through her, but she put down the iron and went determinedly out on the porch.

The two little boys came shyly on up the steps, but Jim had paused to feel of his coat, as it lay on the grass, and looked ruefully at her.

"It's wet still, I'm afraid," she remarked composedly, as she picked up the red note-book and held it out to him. "Is this yourn? It looks as though it must have dropped out of your pocket an' somebody stepped on it."

If the girl noted the swift change which came over his face she gave no sign as he came forward and took the book from her hands.

"Yes, it's mine." He opened and closed it again, and then looked up uncertainly into her face as she stood on the steps above him, but Lou was gazing in seeming serenity out over the fields, which were still shimmering in the last rays of the sun. "I–I'll tell you about this some time, Lou. It's funny."

"What's funny?" she asked, with a little start, as though he had interrupted some train of thought of her own, far removed from hateful little red books.

"If you think it's goin' to be funny to travel in wet clothes to-night, just wait till you git started."

But they did not start upon their journey again that night, after all. Their kindly hostess insisted upon their remaining until the morning, at least, and when the supper dishes were cleared away Lou wandered off by herself down the little lane which led to the pasture.

There would be three days more, and then their journey's end. Upon one thing she had decided: there would be no school for her! She was going to work as quickly as she could find something to do. Mr. James Abbott must be paid back for the little pink-checked frock and the hat with the green bow, and then she would drop from his sight. Surely in that great city, with its hundreds and hundreds of people, she would be able to disappear.

Reaching the pasture, she stood at the gate with her arms resting upon the topmost rail, and was so deep in reflection that she did not hear a step behind her until a hand touched her shoulder, and Jim's voice asked quietly:

"What are you doing off here by yourself, Lou? Mrs. Bemis didn't know what had become of you, and I've been looking everywhere."

"I dunno," Lou answered truthfully enough. "I been thinkin' 'bout the institootion where I come from; it was seein' them little boys put me in mind of it, I reckon. I was kinder wonderin' what it would be like to really belong to anybody."

There was neither pathos nor self-pity in her tone, but rather a cold, dispassionate speculation that froze the words of awkward sympathy which rose to his lips, and he remained silent.

“I did once, you know,” she continued, “belong to some–body, I mean. I had on a white dress all trimmed with lace when they found me in the station at the junction an’ took me up to the institootion; it was the only white dress I ever had.”

“Where was this institution, Lou?” Jim asked. “You’ve never told me, you know.”

Lou shrugged.

“Oh, it was ’way up at a place called Mayfield’s Corners; I was most three hours on the train before I got to the station nearest Hess’s farm.”

A vicious desire came over her to shock and repulse that inexplicable thing in him which set him apart from her and made him one with the world in which those others moved; that stout gentleman and the young lady who had called him Jimmie. She added deliberately:

“I told you what I did there–at the institootion, I mean: scrubbed an’ cooked an’ washed an’ tended babies an’ wore a uniform, just like any other norphin, I guess. Slep’ in the garret with the rats runnin’ over the floor, an’ got up in the mornin’ to the same old work. It warn’t a State institootion, you see; just a kind of a charity one, run by the deacons of the church; I ain’t got much use for charity.”

“I shouldn’t think you would have,” he exclaimed. “But it’s all behind you now, Lou. We made fourteen miles to-day from Highvale–or will have when we walk down the hill to Riverburgh to-morrow, and it is only sixty miles further to New York.”

“That’s good,” Lou said, but without enthusiasm. “Do we start at sun-up?”

“I thought I’d like to work for Mrs. Bemis for a couple of hours first and get the hay turned in that south field,” Jim answered. “She’s been so good to us, and she’ll need the stuff this winter for those two old plugs out there.”

He pointed out into the pasture, where two horses made mere blotches of deeper shadow beneath a tree.

Lou laughed suddenly, softly, but it seemed to him that the rippling, liquid note had vanished.

“What’s funny?” he asked.

“Oh, nothin’. I was just thinkin’ of you last night in that circus. You rode so–so wonderfully. I wasn’t laughin’ at that, but it just come to me how funny it would have been if any of your friends was to have seen you!”

Jim glanced at her sharply, but in the starlight her face seemed merely amused

as at a whimsical thought.

“Why would it have been funny?” he insisted. “Of course I never rode in a real circus before, and I guess I was pretty rotten, but why would my friends have laughed?”

“I dunno.” Lou dropped her arms from the fence-rail and turned away. “Let’s go back to the house. I–I’m pretty tired.”

CHAPTER VII
Revelations

The next morning was a trying one for them both. Jim felt dully that something was the matter, but the girl's manner baffled him, and he could not make up his mind as to whether she had glanced in the note-book or not. It did not seem like her to do so deliberately, but if she had he could only make things worse by broaching the subject, since he was not at the moment in a position to explain.

As for Lou, she was trying her best to appear her old self with him, but dissimulation was an art in which she was as yet unversed, and her whole nature rebelled against playing a part. Only her pride kept her from betraying her disappointment in him and running away. She told herself fiercely that he didn't care what she thought of him; they were only partners met by chance on the road, and perhaps never to see each other again after the city was reached.

If he had lied to her about his name that was his own business, and she would not admit even to herself that this deception was not the only reason for the strange, hurt feeling about her heart.

She rose at dawn, and, creeping down from the clean little room which Mrs. Bemis had given her, she had the stove going and breakfast on the table by the time the little family was awake, and Jim appeared from the barn, where he had slept in the loft.

While he worked in the field during the early morning hours, she finished the ironing, and by ten o'clock they were ready once more to start upon their way.

Mrs. Bemis insisted upon paying them both for their work, but it was only out of consideration for her pride that Jim would accept fifty cents of the two dollars she offered him.

"I only work for a quarter a time," he told her gravely. "One for yesterday and one for this morning; my sister can tell you that. I–I would like to write to you if I may when we reach home, Mrs. Bemis. Will you tell me what address will find you? You see, I want to thank you properly for all your kindness to us, and I don't know whether this is the township of Riverburgh or not."

"It's the Stilton post-office," the little woman stammered. "Of course, I'd like to hear from both of you, but you mustn't thank me! I don't know what I should have done without your help with the hay! And your sister, too; I do hope you

both find work where you're going."

To Lou's amazement Jim produced the little red note-book and wrote the address carefully in it, adding what appeared to be some figures at one side. Then he thanked their good Samaritan and they took their leave.

"That makes a dollar and ten cents!" he remarked confidentially as he and Lou went down the hill road together toward the bustling little city nestled at the river's edge. "Quite a fortune, isn't it?"

"She gave me a quarter for helping with the ironing, too, so that's thirty-five that I've got." Lou exhibited a hard knot tied in the corner of her handkerchief. "I couldn't get all of the egg out of my hat, but it's good enough. Where do we go from Riverburgh?"

Jim gave a groan of mock despair.

"That's the dev–I mean, the deuce of it!" he exclaimed. "We've got to cross the river there someway, and go on down on the other side. We can't keep on this, or we will run into New Jersey and–and I mustn't leave the State."

He blurted the last out in a dogged, uncomfortable way, but Lou did not appear to notice his change of tone.

"Well, there look to be plenty of boats goin' back an' forth," she observed placidly. "I guess we can get over."

"But you don't understand. I–I can't pay our way over; that's another of the things I mustn't do." Jim flushed hotly.

"I wish I could tell you all about it."

"It don't make any difference." Lou kept her eyes fixed straight ahead of her. "There ought to be some way for you to work your way across."

The road dipped sharply, and became all at once a pleasant, tree-lined street with pretty suburban cottages on either hand. To the east and north hung the smoke cloud of countless factories, but their way led them through the modest residential quarter. The street presently turned into a paved one, and trolley lines appeared; then brick buildings and shops, and before they knew it they were in the busy, crowded business thoroughfare.

Lou would have paused, gaping and wondering if New York could be anything like this, but Jim hurried her down the steep, cobbled way which led to the ferry. Once there, he took her to a seat in the waiting-room.

"Sit here and wait for me," he directed. "I'm going to run back up to the shops and get some provisions for us to carry along, and then I'll arrange about getting across. I shan't be long."

When he came down the hill again some twenty minutes later laden with packages, he found Lou waiting for him at the door of the ferry-house, with a little exultant smile about her lips.

“Come on,” she commanded shortly. “I’ve fixed it for us to get over, but we gotta hurry. The boat’s a’most ready to start.”

“How in the world—” he began, but without deigning to explain she led him to the gate. It was only after he had perforce preceded her that he saw her hand two tickets to the officials at the turnstile.

“Lou!” he exclaimed reproachfully.

“Well, it’s all right, isn’t it?” she demanded. “You kin ride if anybody asks you, can’t you? I’m invitin’ you to ride on this boat with me, Mr. Botts!”

In spite of her assumed gaiety, however, the trip across the river was a silent one, and when the landing was reached and they hurried out of the settlement to the open country once more, both were acutely aware that the intangible rift was widening. It was as though they walked on opposite sides of the road, and neither could bridge the distance between.

Both doggedly immersed in their own reflections, they walked on rapidly in spite of the heat and with no thought of time or distance until Jim realized that his companion was lagging, and glanced up to see that the sun had started well upon the western trail.

“By Jove! You must be almost starved!” he cried. “I never thought–why didn’t you wake me out of this trance I seem to have been in, and tell me it was long past time for chow? We must have walked miles!”

“I didn’t think, either.” Lou glanced about her wearily. “I don’t see any house, but I kinder think I hear a little brook somewhere, don’t you? Let’s find it, an’ then hurry on; if we’ve got to do sixty miles by the day after to-morrow we got to be movin’ right steady.”

They found the little brook, and ate of their supplies and drank heartily, for they were both famished by the long walk, but all the carefree joyousness seemed to have gone out of the adventure, and when Lou discovered that the knot in the corner of her handkerchief had become untied and the remainder of her capital was gone, it appeared to be the last cloud needed to immerse her in gloom.

Her feet were blistered and every muscle ached with fatigue, but she shook her head when Jim asked if she were too tired to go on, and limped determinedly out into the road after him. She had accepted his companionship to New York, and she would drop in her tracks before she would be a drag on him and prevent his reaching there in the time which was so mysteriously important to him.

A mile farther on, however, an empty motor van picked them up, and seated at the back with her feet hanging over, Lou promptly fell asleep, her head sagging unconsciously against Jim’s shoulder. He did not touch her, but moved so that her head should fall into a more comfortable position, and looked down with

new tenderness at the tow-colored hair. The ridiculous, outstanding braid was gone, and instead, a soft knot appeared low on the slender, sun-burned neck, with tiny tendrils of curls escaping from it.

What a game little sport she had proved herself to be! He wondered how many girls of his own set would have had the courage and endurance for such a test. Then to his own amazement he found himself thinking of them with a certain sense of disparagement, almost contempt. They would not have had the moral courage, let alone physical endurance.

Of course, this sort of vagabondage would be outrageous and utterly impossible from a conventional standpoint, but with Lou it had been a mere venture into Arcady, as innocent as the wanderings of two children. And Saturday it must end!

At the outskirts of Parksville he called to the good-natured truckman who sat behind the wheel, and the latter obligingly put on the brakes.

“My sister and I don’t want to go right into the town, so we’ll get out here if you don’t mind,” Jim said. “This lift has been a godsend, and I can’t thank you, but I’ve got the name of the company you’re working for in New York and I’ll drop around some night when I’m flush and you’re knocking off, and we’ll see if the old burg is as dry as it’s supposed to be.”

“You’re on!” The driver grinned. “Got a job waitin’ for yer? We need some helpers.”

“I’ve got a job.” Jim thought of that “job” in the mahogany-lined suite of offices which bore his name on the door, but he did not smile. “I’ll look you up soon. Come on, Lou; here’s where we change cars.”

She rubbed her eyes and gazed about her bewilderedly in the gathering darkness as he lifted her to the ground and the truck rumbled off.

“Where–where are we now?” she asked sleepily.

“Just outside Parksville; see those lights over there?” he replied. “We must have walked more than ten miles before that motor van came along, so it isn’t any wonder that you were tired, even if you wouldn’t admit it. Just think, nineteen miles to-day!”

He was wondering, even as he spoke, what they were to do for the night. He had not enough money to secure even the humblest of lodgings for her, and he knew that if they ventured as vagrants into the town they would be in danger of apprehension by the authorities. But Lou solved the question quite simply.

“Isn’t that big thing stickin’ up in that field a haystack? I–I’d like a piece of that sponge cake that’s left from what we ate at noon, and then crawl in there an’ sleep straight through till to-morrow,” she declared. “Did you want to go on any further to-night?”

“Heavens, no. I was just wondering–I don’t see why it couldn’t be done,” he replied somewhat haltingly. “There isn’t any house near, and I don’t think anything will hurt you.”

The latter probability seemed of no moment to Lou. She fell asleep again with her sponge cake half eaten, and he picked her up and nestled her in the hay as though she were in very truth a child. Then, as on the first night at the deserted mill near Hudsondale, he sat down at the foot of the haystack, on guard.

It was well for them, however, that the haying was done in that particular field, and no farmer appeared from the big white house just over the hill, for in spite of his most valiant efforts Jim, too, slumbered, and it was broad day when he awoke.

Lou had vanished from the haystack, but he found her at a little spring in a strip of woodland on the other side of the road, and they breakfasted hastily, conserving the last fragments of food for their midday meal, and started off.

They had left the last chimney of Parksville well behind them when Jim suddenly observed:

“You’re limping, Lou. Let me see your shoes.”

She drew away from him.

“It’s nothin’,” she denied. “My shoes are all right. I–I must’ve slept too long last night an’ got sort of stiffened up.”

The freckles were swamped in a deep flood of color, but Jim repeated insistently: “Hold up your foot, Lou.”

Reluctantly she obeyed, disclosing a battered sole through the worn places of which something green showed.

“I–I stuffed it with leaves,” she confessed, defensively. “They’re real comfortable, honestly. I’m just stiff—”

Jim groaned.

“I suppose they will have to do until we reach the next town, but you should have told me.”

“I kin take care of myself,” Lou asserted. “I’ve walked in pretty near as bad as these in the institootion. We’d better get along to where there’s some houses ’cause it looks to me like a storm was comin’ up.”

The sun was still blazing down upon them, but it was through a murky haze, and the air seemed lifeless and heavy. Great, white-crested thunder heads were mounting in the sky, and behind them a dense blackness spread.

“You’re right; I never noticed—” Jim paused guiltily. After leaving the vicinity of Parksville he had purposely led her on a detour back into the farming country to avoid the main highway, for along the river front were the estates of some people he knew and he shrank from meeting them in his tramplike condition if

they should motor past. There was Lou, too, to be considered. He might have offered some possible explanation for his own appearance, but no interpretation could be placed upon her presence at his side save that which he must prevent at all costs.

Rolling fields and woodland stretched away illimitably on both sides of the road, and not even a cow shed appeared as they hurried onward, while the clouds mounted higher, and the rumble of thunder grew upon the air. The sun had vanished, and a strange, anticipatory stillness enveloped them, broken only by that hollow muttering.

“It’s comin’ up fast.” Lou broke the silence with one of her seldomly volunteered remarks. “Shall we git into the woods? I’d as lief dodge trees as be drowned in the road.”

“No!” Jim shook his head. “There is some kind of a shack just ahead there; I think we can make it before the storm comes.”

They were fairly running now, but the darkness was settling fast and a fork of lightning darted blindingly across their path. The object which Jim had taken for a shack proved to be merely a pile of rotting telegraph poles, but no other shelter offered, and they crouched in the lee of it, awaiting the onslaught of rain.

“Take this, Lou.” Jim wrapped his coat about her in spite of her protestations. “You’re not afraid, are you?”

“No, I ain’t–I’m not–but you’re goin’ to get soaked through! I heard you coughin’ once or twice at the bottom of that haystack last night.” He thrilled unconsciously to the motherliness in her tone. Then she added reflectively: “I don’t guess I’m afraid of anythin’ I’ve seen yet, but I ain’t–I haven’t seen much.”

She ended with a sharp intake of her breath as a sudden gust of wind whirled the dust up into their faces and another streak of white light flashed before their eyes. Then with a rush and roar the storm burst.

The woods marched straight down to the roadside at this point, and the trees back of the heap of poles moaned and writhed like tortured creatures while great branches lashed over their heads with now and then an ominous crackle, but it was lost in the surge of the winds and the ceaseless crash and roar of the thunder. Jagged forks of lightning played all about them like rapiers of steel, and at last the rain came.

The brim of Lou’s hat, hopelessly limp since its cleansing of the previous day, now flopped stringily against her face until she tore it off and gasping, buried her head in her arms as the sheets of rain pelted down. Jim’s coat was sodden, and the thin cotton gown beneath clung to her drenched body, but she crouched closer to the poles while each volley of thunder shook her as with invisible hands.

Her lashes were glued to her cheeks, but she forced them open and turned to see how Jim was faring. He had flattened himself against the poles at their farther end, and just as she looked his way a flash of lightning seemed to split the air between them and the huge old tree which reared its branches just above his head, snapped like a dry twig beneath some giant heel.

Lou saw the great oak totter and then sway, while a sickening swirl of branches filled the air, and scarcely conscious of her own act she hurled herself upon Jim. With all the strength borne of her terror she pushed him from the heap of poles, sending him rolling out into the middle of the road, to safety. Then she tried to spring after him, but a hideous, waiting lethargy seemed to encompass her, and then with a mighty crash the tree fell athwart the poles.

Half stunned by the unexpected onslaught upon him and the rending blast of the falling tree, Jim lay motionless for an instant, then with a sharp cry sprang to his feet and turned to look for Lou, but the pile of telegraph poles was hidden beneath a broad sweep of branches and across the place where she had crouched the great trunk of the tree lay prone.

“Lou!” The cry burst from his very heart as he sprang forward and began to tear frantically at the stout limbs which barred his way. “Oh, God, she isn’t crushed! Don’t take her now, she’s so little and young, and I want her, I need her so! God!”

He was unconscious that he was praying aloud, unconscious of the words which issued sobbingly from his lips. He tugged and tore at the branches while the skin ripped like ribbons from his hands and the boughs whipped back to raise great welts upon his face.

He was unconscious, too, of a stir at the other side of the fallen tree and a rustle of sodden leaves, as, very much after the manner of a prairie dog emerging from his hole, Lou crawled out into the rain, and sitting up, sneezed.

At the sound of that meek sternutation Jim whirled about.

“Lou!”

“Jim! Oh, Jim! You’re not killed!” A muddy, bedraggled little figure that once had been pink and white flew straight to him, and two soft arms swept about him and clung convulsively. “I seen it comin’, an’–an’ I tried to shove you out of the way—”

“Thank God, little girl! Thank God you aren’t hurt!” he murmured brokenly. “I thought the tree had fallen on you!”

“Only the boughs of it, but they held me down. Oh, Jim, if you’d been killed I wouldn’t ’a’ cared what happened to me!”

His heart leaped, and his own arms tightened about her at the naïve, unconscious revelation which had issued from her lips. Then all at once he

realized what it had meant, that hideous feeling of loss when he thought that she lay buried beneath the tree. It had come to them both, revealed as by a flash of the lightning which was now traveling toward the east, and in the wonder and joy of it he held her close for a moment and then put her gently from him.

Sternly repressing the words which would have rushed from his heart, he said quietly:

“Thank God we were both spared. Come, little Lou, we must find shelter.”

CHAPTER VIII

Journey's End

The rain had ceased, and as they walked down the muddy road the sun came out even before the final mutterings of the thunder had died away in the distance, and so they came at last upon a little house which sat well back among a group of dripping trees.

"Take your coat, Jim," Lou said, breaking a long silence which had fallen between them. "That porch is so wet now that we can't get it any wetter an' I'm goin' to ask for a chance to get dry."

But they had scarcely passed through the gate when the front door opened and a young woman rushed out.

"Oh! Will you run to the next house for me and telephone for the doctor?" she cried, all in one breath. Her eyes were staring and her breast heaved convulsively.

Jim quickened his pace.

"Where is the next house, and what doctor shall I send for?" he asked pleasantly.

"It's just over the ridge there; the Colberts. They know Dr. Blair's number. My husband would go himself but he can't step on his hurt foot and I don't dare leave. Tell the Colberts that it's the baby! He's dying, and I don't know what to do!"

Jim turned, and hurried off over the ridge, but Lou took a step forward.

"Baby! I've been takin' care of babies all my life, seems like. You let me look at it, ma'am."

"Oh, do you think you could do anything, a little thing like you?"

The young woman eyed the forlornly drenched figure before her rather doubtfully, but something she read in Lou's steady, confident gaze seemed to reassure her, and she threw wide the door. "Come in, please! He's all blue."

Lou unceremoniously pushed past her down the clean little hallway and paused for a moment upon the threshold of the room at its end. It was a kitchen, small, but as immaculately clean as the hall, and in a rocking-chair near the window sat an anxious-eyed young man with his bandaged foot up on another chair before him, and in his arms a tiny, rigid little form.

Lou went straight to him and unceremoniously possessed herself of the baby.

Its small face was waxen, with a bluish tinge about the mouth, and half-closed, glazing eyes.

“How long’s it been like this?” Lou demanded sharply.

“Only just a few minutes. It–it seemed like a sort of fit that he had.” The young woman turned to her husband. “Jack, this little girl stopped by and said she knew all about babies, and the man with her, he’s gone for—”

“I want some hot water, quick!” Lou interrupted the explanations brusquely. “Boiling hot, and a tub or a big pan. Have you got the kettle on?”

“Y-yes, but I’m afraid I’ve let the fire go out,” the woman faltered. “I was so worried—”

With an exclamation of impatience Lou rewrapped the baby which she had been examining and thrust it into the man’s arms. Then turning to the woman with exasperation in her eyes and voice she demanded:

“I s’pose you can find some dry chips, somewhere, can’t you? If I don’t get this baby into a hot bath right away it’ll be all up with him.”

The woman gasped, and ran out of the back door while the young man in the chair groaned:

“It’s awful to sit here helpless and watch him suffer! If I could only put my foot to the floor—”

“How old is he, anyway?” Lou, who was busily searching the shelf of groceries, asked over her shoulder. “He looks to be under a year.”

“Ten months, miss,” he answered. “What do you think is the matter with him?”

“Convulsion,” Lou replied succinctly, as the woman rushed in once more with her apron full of chips. “Git some more, it don’t matter how you clog the stove with wood ashes; we gotta git boilin’ water as quick as we kin.”

Meanwhile Jim found the Colbert house, explained his mission, and having accomplished it, hastened back. He pulled the bell, but no one came, and knocking, found that the door yielded to his touch. Entering, he went down the hall and paused at the kitchen door just as the woman stammered:

“I d-don’t think there are any dry kindlings left.”

“Then chop some! Ain’t you got any old boxes? Oh, Jim!” Lou caught sight of him in the doorway. “Find a hatchet and some light, dry wood, will you?”

The fire was roaring in the stove at last, but the water was long in boiling, and the little figure in the man’s arms seemed to be undergoing a subtle but inevitable change. His lips were still parted, but no faintest stir of breath emanated from them, and the rigidity had taken on a marble-like cast.

The mother bent over him, moaning once more, but Lou turned upon her in

swift scorn.

"For goodness' sake, where's that tub or pan I asked you for? He's got a chance, a *good* chance if you don't waste any more time! What you been givin' him, anyway?" she added, as the woman flew to do her bidding.

"Nothing but a little green corn. He relishes it, and it's so cute to see him try to chew it—"

"Green corn!" Lou repeated, as she seized the heavy kettle and began pouring its steaming contents into the tub. "Ain't *nobody* in your family ever had any babies before?"

She hastily added to the tub a quantity of yellowish powder from a can which she had found upon the shelf of groceries, and marched determinedly over to the man who was seated in the chair.

"Give me that baby!" she demanded.

"But, miss, that water's boiling!" he gasped.

"You're not going to put my baby in that?" The woman came quickly from her apathy of dismay and sprang forward, while Jim, too, advanced, his anxiety for another reason.

"Lou! You'll blister yourself horribly—"

"Let me alone, all of you!" Lou turned upon them even as she stripped the wrappings from the child. "Haven't I done this a hundred times? He ain't even goin' to feel the heat of the mustard, he's so far gone! I guess I know what I'm doin'!"

The woman buried her face in her hands with a sob, and even Jim turned away his eyes, but no one thought to interfere further with the assured little nurse. There was a splash of water, a little gasp from Lou, and then after a period which seemed interminable her matter-of-fact voice remarked:

"He's comin' round."

The tiny body was scarcely tinged with pink, but it had lost its dreadful rigidity, and a faint cry came from it as Lou wrapped it in a shawl and laid it in its mother's arms.

"He'll do now, anyway till that doctor comes."

Amid the rejoicing of the parents Jim advanced to Lou and demanded:

"Let me see your arms."

"They're all right–" She tried to put them behind her as she spoke, but he drew them forward. A network of blisters covered them almost to the shoulders.

"Oh, Lou! Lou!" he murmured brokenly. "What won't you do next?"

She smiled faintly.

"You said I'd do anything once, but I've done this lots of times before—"

"Well, well, good people! What's going on here?" A kindly voice sounded

from the doorway, and the woman turned with a little cry.

“Oh, Dr. Blair, she saved the baby! Put him down in that scalding water and held him right there with her hands, and she’s burned herself something terrible, but she saved him! I never saw a braver—”

“Let me see.”

The doctor examined the baby with professional gravity and then looked up.

“I should say you did save him, young woman! I couldn’t have done better for him myself! Now let me have a look at those arms of yours.”

After he had bandaged her blisters the woman prepared food and coffee for them all and then took Lou upstairs with her, while Jim dried his soaking clothes by the kitchen fire and the three men talked in a desultory way of the topics of the countryside.

Dr. Blair had just ascertained that Jim and his “sister” were strangers, traveling toward New York, and had offered to drive them both to the trolley line in his little car, when the woman of the house reappeared with Lou, and Jim stared with all his eyes.

Could this be the little scarecrow of a girl he had met on the road only five days before; this unbelievably tall, slender young woman in the dark blue silk gown with filmy ruffles falling about her neck and wrists, and soft puffs of blond hair over her ears?

“It’s me, though I kin hardly believe it myself!” Lou answered his unspoken thought. Then drawing him aside she added: “Mis’ Tooker–that’s her name–gave me a pair of shoes, too, an’ a hat an’ five whole dollars! Are we goin’ to a place called Pelton?”

Jim nodded.

“That is where I hoped we would be by to-night, but it must be at least twelve miles away.”

“Well, Mis’ Tooker says the trolley goes right into Pelton, and she gave me a letter to a friend of hers there who’ll take us in for the night—”

The doctor interrupted with an intimation of another patient to be visited, and they bade farewell to the grateful young couple and started away. The sun was still high, and save for the mud which splashed up with each turn of the wheels, all traces of the storm had vanished.

“Jennie Tooker always was a fool!” Dr. Blair grumbled. “How many babies have you taken care of, young woman?”

“More’n twenty, I guess, off an’ on,” Lou responded. “I–I used to work in an institootion up-State.”

Fearing further revelations, Jim hastily took a hand in the conversation, and he and the doctor chatted until the trolley line was reached. There, when they had

descended from the little car Lou turned to Jim and asked a trifle shyly:

"You–you're goin' to let me ask you to ride, aren't you? You bought all the food in Riverburgh, you know."

"And you seem to have financed all the rest of the trip," he said with a rueful laugh. "I thought, when you suggested that we should travel together, I would be the one to take care of you, but it has been the other way around. Oh, Lou, I've so much to say to you when we reach our journey's end!"

They arrived at Pelton before dark and found Mrs. Tooker's friend, who ran a small boarding-house for store employees, and was glad to take them in at a dollar a head. Lou disappeared after supper, and although Lou waited long for him on the little porch, he did not return until through sheer fatigue she was forced to go to bed.

In the morning, however, when they met before breakfast in the lower hall he jingled a handful of silver in his pocket.

"However did you git it?" she demanded.

"Garage," he responded succinctly. "Didn't know I was a chauffeur, did you, Lou?"

A peculiar little smile hovered for a moment about her lips, but she merely remarked:

"I thought you wouldn't only take a quarter—"

"For each job," he interrupted her. "A lot of cars came in that needed tinkering with after the storm, and they were short of hands. I made more than two dollars, and we'll ride in state into Hunnikers!"

Lou made no reply, but after breakfast she drew him out on the little porch.

"Jim, I–I'm not goin' on."

"What!" he exclaimed.

"The woman that runs this place, she–she wants a girl to help her, an' I guess I'll stay." Lou's tones were none too steady, and she did not meet his eyes. "I–I don't believe I'd like New York."

"You, a servant here?" He took one of her hands very gently in his. "I didn't mean to tell you until we were nearly there, and as it is, there is a lot that I can't tell you even now, but this much I want you to know. You're not going to work any more, Lou. You're going to a lovely old lady who lives in a big house all by herself, and there you are going to study and play until you are really grown up, and know as much as anybody."

She smiled and shook her head.

"This is the sort of place for me, Jim. I wasn't meant for anythin' else, an' if I should live to be a hundred I could never know as much as that lady at the circus who called you 'Jimmie Abbott.'"

“What–” Jim exploded for the second time.

“At least, she said you looked like him, and if she didn’t know you were in Canada—”

“Good Lord! What was she doing there?”

“She was with another lady an’ two gentlemen, an’ I guess they come in an ottermobile,” Lou explained. “They was in one the next day, anyway–the one that slammed into the egg-wagon.”

She described in detail the two occurrences, and added miserably:

“I didn’t mean to tell you, Jim, but as long as I’m not goin’ on with you I might as well. It was me that walked on your note-book back there on Mrs. Bemis’s porch. It had fallen open on the floor, an’ when I picked it up I couldn’t help seein’ the name that was written across the page. It was your own business, of course, if you didn’t want to give your real name to anybody—”

“Listen, Lou.” He had caught her other hand now and was holding them both very tightly. “You *are* going on with me! I can’t explain now about my name, but it doesn’t matter; nothing matters except that you are not going to be a quitter! You said that you would go on to New York with me, and you’re going to keep your word.”

“I know better now,” she replied quietly. “It’s–it’s been a wonderful time, but I’ve got to work an’ earn my keep an’ try to learn as I go along. It isn’t just exactly breakin’ my word; I didn’t realize—”

“Realize what?” he demanded as she hesitated.

“I thought at first that you were kinder like me; it wasn’t until I saw that lady an’ found you were a friend of hers, that I knew you were different.”

Her eyes were still downcast, and now a tinge of color mounted in her cheeks. “I couldn’t bear to have you take me to that other lady in the city and be a-ashamed of me—”

“Ashamed of you!” he repeated, and something in his tone deepened the color in her cheeks into a crimson tide. “Lou, look at me!”

Obediently she raised her eyes for an instant; then lowered them again quickly, and after a pause she said in a very small voice:

“All right, Jim. I–I’ll go. I guess I wouldn’t just want to be a–a quitter, after all.”

It was mid-afternoon when they walked into Hunnikers and although they had come ten long miles with only a stop for a picnic lunch between, they bore no traces of fatigue. Rather they appeared to have been treading on air, and although Jim had scrupulously avoided any further reference to the future, there was a certain buoyant assurance about him which indicated that in his own mind, at least, there remained no room for doubt.

He needed all the assurance he could muster as, after ensconcing Lou at the soda counter in the drug-store, he approached the telephone booth farthest from her ears and closed the door carefully behind him. Lou consumed her soda to its last delectable drop, glanced down anxiously at the worn, but spotless, little silk gown to see if she had spilled any upon it, and then wandered over to the showcase.

Jim's voice came to her indistinguishably once or twice, but it was a full half-hour before he emerged from the booth. He looked wilted but triumphant, and he beamed blissfully as he came toward her, mopping his brow. He suspected that at the other end of the wire a certain gray-haired, aristocratic old lady was having violent hysterics to the immediate concern of three maids and an asthmatic Pekinese, but it did not disturb his equanimity.

"It's all right," he announced. "Aunt Emmy expects you; I didn't tell you, did I, that the lady I'm taking you to is my aunt? No matter. She's awfully easy if you get on the right side of her; I've always managed her beautifully ever since I was a kid, and you'll have her rolling over and playing dead in no time. Fifteen miles more to go, Lou, and we'll be—"

"Hello, there, Jim." An oil-soaked and greasy glove clapped his shoulder and as he turned, the same voice, suddenly altered, stammered: "Oh, I beg your pardon—"

"'Lo, Harry!" Jim turned to greet a tall, lean individual more tanned than himself, with little, fine, weather lines about his eyes and an abrupt quickness of gesture which denoted his hair-triggered nerves. "What are you doing in this man's town?"

"Motoring down from the Hilton's," the other responded. "Pete was coming with me, but at the last minute he decided to stay over the week-end. I'm off to Washington to-night to see about my passport; sailing next Wednesday for Labrador, you know."

"Then you're alone?" Jim turned. "Miss Lacey, let me present Mr. Van Ness; he spends his time trailing all over the earth to find something to kill. Miss Lacey is a young friend of my aunt's; I'm taking her down to her for a visit."

The explanation sounded somewhat involved, but Mr. Van Ness seemed to grasp it, and bowed.

"You're motoring, too?" he asked.

"No. I–The fact is–" Jim stammered in his turn. "We were thinking of taking the train—"

"Why not let me take you both down in the car?" The other rose to the occasion with evident alacrity. "Miss Lacy will like it better than the train, I'm sure, and I haven't seen you for an age, old man."

Jim accepted with a promptitude which proclaimed a mind relieved of its final burden, and he turned to Lou. Mr. Van Ness had gone out to see to his car, and they were alone at a far corner of the counter.

“How about it, Lou? The last lap! The last fifteen miles. It’s been a long pull sometimes, and we’ve had some rough going, but it was worth it, wasn’t it?”

Her eyes all unconsciously gave him answer even before she repeated softly:

“‘The last lap.’ Oh, Jim, shall I see you some time, at this lady’s house where you are takin’ me?”

“Every day,” he promised, adding with cheerful mendacity: “I dine with her nearly all the time; have for years. Come on, Lou. Harry’s waving at us.”

Through the village and the pleasant rolling country beyond; past huge, wide-spreading estates and tiny cottages, and clusters of small shops with the trolley winding like a thread between, the big maroon car sped, while the two men talked together of many things, and the girl sat back in her corner of the roomy tonneau and gave herself up to vague dreams.

Then the cottages gave place to sporadic growths of brick and mortar with more open lots between, but even these gaps finally closed, and Lou found herself being borne swiftly through street after street of towering houses out upon a broad avenue with palaces such as she had never dreamed of on one side, and on the other the seared, drooping green of a city park in late summer.

It was still light when the big car swept into an exclusive street of brownstone houses of an earlier and still more exclusive period, and stopped before the proudest of these.

Jim alighted and held out his hand.

“Come, Lou,” he said. “Journey’s end.”

CHAPTER IX
The Long, Long Trail

Three hours later, in that same proudly exclusive house, an elderly lady with gray hair and an aristocratically high, thin nose paced the floor of her drawing-room with a vigor which denoted some strong emotion.

"I must say, John, that I think the whole affair, whatever it may be, is highly reprehensible. I supposed James to be up in Canada on a fishing trip when he telephoned me this morning from somewhere near town with a–a most extraordinary message—"

She broke off, glancing cautiously toward a room across the hall, and added: "He said he had something to tell me, and he would be here this evening. Now you come, and you appear to know something about it, but I cannot get a word out of you!"

"All I can tell you, Mrs. Abbott, is that if Jimmie does come to-night, I've got to pay him a thousand bones–dollars, I mean. It was a sort of a wager, and that must be what he wants to tell you about."

It was an exceedingly stout young man with a round, cherubic countenance standing by the mantel who replied to her, and the old lady glanced at him sharply.

"A wager? H-m! Possibly." She paused suddenly. "There's the bell."

A moment later James Tarrisford Abbott, in the most immaculate of dinner clothes, entered and greeted his aunt, halting with a slight frown as he encountered the beaming face of the young man who fell upon him.

"Good boy, Jimmie! You made it, after all!"

"With a few hours to spare." Jim darted a questioning glance at his aunt, and seemed relieved at her emphatic shake of the head.

"I knew we'd lost when Mrs. Abbott told me that you had telephoned to her from just a little way out of town to-day," Jack Trimble responded. "I ran over on my way to the club to give her a message from my mother. Did you have a hard time of it, old man?"

"Hard?" Jim smiled. "I've been a rough-rider in a circus—"

Mrs. Abbott groaned, but Jack Trimble's eyes opened as roundly and wide as his mouth.

“Thundering–So it was you after all!”

“Me?” Jim demanded with ungrammatical haste.

“You–rough-rider–circus!” Jack exclaimed. “Vera said the chap looked like you, but it never occurred to me that it could possibly be!”

“So it was Vera, was it?” Jim smiled. “I heard what she said–I mean, it was repeated to me. You were one of that party?”

“Yes. We were with the Lentilhons in their car, and the funniest thing happened the next day on the way home! Crusty old farmer wouldn’t turn out on the road, and Guy Lentilhon lost control and smashed straight through his wagon!” Jack laughed. “W-what do you think it was loaded with?”

“Eggs!” responded Jim crisply. “I happened to be on it at the time, my boy, and your sense of humor–I hope you all got what I did! But I must explain to Aunt Emmy here, or she will think that we are both quite mad!”

“And I must be off to the club,” Jack announced. “I’ll break the news to Billy Hollis that we’ve lost. See you later, and we’ll all settle up. Good evening, Mrs. Abbott.”

When the stout young man had taken his departure, Mrs. Abbott turned to her nephew between laughter and tears.

“James, this is the maddest of all mad things that you have ever done!”

“Jack doesn’t know anything about Lou?” Jim demanded anxiously.

“Certainly not. He has only been here a quarter of an hour, and I kept her out of the way. But, James, you cannot be serious! You cannot mean to marry this nameless waif?”

“Stop right there, Aunt Emmy,” he interrupted her firmly. “I’m going to marry, if she will have me, your ward whom you have legally adopted; I mean, you will have adopted her by the time she has grown up. But I don’t intend to be nosed out by any of these debutante-grabbers; I’m going to have everything settled before her studies are finished and you bring her out. I saw her first!”

“H-m. We shall see,” Aunt Emmy remarked dryly, adding: “But that can wait for the moment. What was this ridiculous wager all about, and how did you get into such horrible scrapes?”

“The whole thing came out of an idle discussion Jack Trimble, Billy Hollis and I had at the club one night concerning human nature. It drifted into a debate about charity in general and the kindness shown toward strangers by country folk in particular, with myself in the minority, of course,” Jim explained.

“They each wagered me a thousand against my five hundred that I couldn’t walk from Buffalo to New York in twenty-five days with only five dollars in my pocket to start with, and work my way home without begging nor accepting more than a quarter for each job I managed to secure in any one time.

“The idea was to see how many of these hard-boiled up-State farmers we hear so much about would offer you the hospitality reputed to be extended only by the rural population of the South and West, and how many would give a foot-sore and weary traveler a lift upon the way. There were other conditions, too; I was not to use my own surname, not to go a foot out of the State into either Pennsylvania or New Jersey. I was not to beg, borrow, or steal, and for the occasional twenty-five cents I might earn I could only purchase food or actual necessities, not use it for transportation, and I must not beat my way by stealing rides on boats or trains or any other conveyances.”

While Aunt Emmy sat staring at him in speechless amazement, Jim produced his little red note-book and laid it before her.

“There’s the route I chose over the mountains, my expense account for each day, and the names and addresses of the people who helped to prove my contention that, take them by and large, the people of my own State are as big-hearted as any in the Union, and Jack’s money and Billy’s says that they are!

“I’m going to return some of that kindness, Aunt Emmy. There are two little boys near Riverburgh whose father is dead and who are trying to do the farm work of men. They are going to a good school this winter, and there are a few other people who are going to be surprised! By Jove, I never realized what money was for until now! But best of all, I found Lou!”

“And what makes you so sure that I am going to adopt her and educate her and bring her out?” demanded Aunt Emmy. “My dear boy, when you started on this Canadian fishing trip of yours I knew that something extraordinary would come of it, but I did not anticipate anything so bizarre as this! Why do you think that I will interest myself in this child?”

“Because you won’t be able to help it.” His face had sobered, and there was a note in his voice that his aunt had never heard before. “You won’t be able to help loving her when you find out how courageous she is, and sincere and true! She is the biggest-hearted, most candid, naïve little—”

“She is quite that!” Aunt Emmy interrupted in her turn, with emphasis. “How I am ever to hide her away until I’ve had her coached not to drop her g’s, and to realize that there is a ‘u’ in the alphabet I don’t know, but I’ll try. James–I think there are distinct possibilities there.”

“I knew it!” Jim cried. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist her! For the Lord’s sake, Aunt Emmy, don’t let them spoil her! She’s so sweet and simple-hearted, don’t let them make her cynical and worldly-wise! I’ll promise not to speak to her, not to let her know how I feel until you say that I may.”

“Will you, James?” There was a faint smile about the delicately lined lips. “She is a child in many ways, a blank page for most impressions to be made

upon, but in other things she is very much of a woman, and I rather fancy that what you have to tell her will not be so much of a surprise."

"You old dear!" Jim sprang to his feet and folded his aunt in his embrace which threatened her coiffure. "Where is she?"

"In the library waiting for you, Jamie!"

She used the old nursery name, and caught his arm. "She is very young, but the heart sometimes breaks easily then. Don't speak unless you yourself are very sure."

Jim smiled, and throwing back his head looked straight into the kindly old eyes. Then without a word he turned and disappeared through the door.

"And you're going to be happy here?" It was some time later when Jim had explained about the wager, and they were sitting together in the window-seat.

"Happy? Why, Jim, I can't believe I'm awake! I'm going to study an' work an' try my best to be like her. Seems to me it'll take the rest of my life, but she says that in a year or two there won't anybody hardly tell the difference."

"And then, Lou, when the time is past? What then?"

"I don't know." Her tone was serenely unconcerned.

"That trail we've followed together for the last week wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked. "You were happy in spite of the hardships?"

"It was wonderful!" She drew a deep breath. "I–I wish we could start again, Jim, and do it all over again, every step of the way!"

"If you feel like that, dear, perhaps some day when you have finished your studies we will start again on a longer trail." He took one of the little toil-worn hands in his. "The long, long trail, Lou, only we will be together! When that day comes, will you take the new road with me?"

She bowed her head, and somehow he found it nestling in the hollow of his shoulder, and his arms were about her. After a long minute, she stirred and smiled.

"Well–" she hesitated. "You knew from the very beginning, Jim, that I'd do anything once!"

THE END

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