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CHAPTER I.

Introducing Her.

None but the residents consider Mount Mark, Iowa, much of a town, and the very most patriotic of them all has no word of praise for the ugly little red C. B. & Q. railway station. Mount Mark is anything but proud of the little station. At the same time it certainly does owe the railroad and the state a debt of gratitude for its presence there. It is the favorite social rendezvous for the community! The arrival of a passenger train in Mount Mark is an event—something in the nature of a C. B. & Q. "at home," and is always attended by a large and enthusiastic gathering of "our best people." All that is lacking are the proverbial "light refreshments!"

So it happened that one sultry morning, late in the month of August, there was the usual flutter of excitement and confusion on the platform and in the waiting room of the station. The habitues were there in force. Conspicuous among them were four gayly dressed young men, smoking cigarettes and gazing with lack-luster eyes upon the animated scene, which evidently bored them.

The Daily News reporter, in a well-creased, light gray suit and tan shoes, and with eyeglasses scientifically balanced on his aquiline nose, was making pointed inquiries into the private plans of the travelers. The young woman going to Burlington to spend the week-end was surrounded with about fifteen other young women who had come to "see her off." Mount Mark is a very respectable town, be it understood, and girls do not go to the station without an excuse!

A man in a black business suit stood alone on the platform, his hands in his pockets, his eyes wandering from one to another of the strange faces about him. His plain white ready-made tie proclaimed his calling.

"It's the new Methodist minister," volunteered the baggage master, crossing the platform. "I know him. He's not a bad sort."

"They say he's got five kids, and most of 'em girls," responded the Adams express man. "I want to be on hand when they get here, to pick out a girl."

"Yah!" mocked the telegraph operator, bobbing his head through the window, "you need to. They tell me every girl in Mount Mark has turned you down a'ready."

But the Methodist minister, gazing away down the track, where a thin curl of smoke announced the coming of No. 9 and Prudence—heard nothing

"Run, Father, Run!"

of this conversation. He was not a handsome man. His hair was gray at the temples, his face was earnest, only saved from severity by the little clusters of lines at his eyes and mouth which proclaimed that he laughed often and with relish.

"Train going east!"

The minister stood back from the crowd, but when the train came pounding in a brightness leaped into his eyes. A slender girl stood in the vestibule, waving wildly at him a small gloved hand. When the train stopped she leaped lightly from the steps.

"Father!" she cried excitedly, and, small and slight as she was, she elbowed her way swiftly through the gaping crowd. "Oh, father!" And she flung her arms about him joyously, unconscious of admiring eyes. Her father kissed her warmly. "Where is your baggage?" he asked, a hand held out to relieve her.

"Here!" And with a radiant smile she thrust upon him a box of candy and a gaudy-covered magazine.

"Your suitcase," he explained patiently.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Run, father run! I left it on the train!"

Father did run, but Prudence, fleeter-footed, outdistanced him and clambered on board, panting.

When she rejoined her father her face was flushed. "Oh, father," she said quite snappily, "isn't that just like me?"

"Yes, very like," he agreed, and he smiled.

"And so this is Mount Mark! Isn't it a funny name, father? Why do they call it Mount Mark?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought to inquire. We turn here, Prudence. This is Main street. The city part of the town—the business part—is to the south."

"It's a pretty street, isn't it?" she cried. "Such nice big maples, and such shady, porchy houses. I love houses with porches, don't you? Has the parsonage a porch?"

"Yes, a big one on the south, and a tiny one in front. We have the house fixed up pretty well, Prudence, but of course you'll have to go over it yourself and arrange it as you like. I must go to a trustees' meeting at two o'clock, but we can get a good deal done before then. Mrs. Adams is coming to help you this afternoon. She is one of our Ladies, and very kind. There, that is the parsonage!"

Prudence gazed in silence. Many would not have considered it a beautiful dwelling, but to Prudence it was heavenly. Fortunately the wide, grassy, shaded lawn greeted one first. Great, spreading maples bordered the street, and clustering rosebushes lined the walk leading up to the house. The parsonage, to Prudence's gratified eyes looked homey, and big, and inviting. There were many windows, and the well-known lace curtains looked down upon Prudence tripping happily up the little board walk—or so it seemed to her.

"Two whole stories, and an attic besides! Not to mention the bathroom! Oh, father, the night after you wrote there was a bathroom, Constance thanked God for it when she said her prayers. And a furnace, too! And electric lights! Oh, we have waited a long time for it, and we've been very patient indeed, but, between you and me, father, I am most mightily glad we've hit the luxury land at last. I'm sure we'll all feel much more religious in a parsonage that has a bathroom and electric lights! Oh, father!"

He had thrown open the door, and Prudence stood upon the threshold of her new home. Together she and her father went from room to room, upstairs and down, moving a table to the left, a bed to the right—according to her own good pleasure. Afterward they had a cozy luncheon for two in the "dining room."

"Oh, it is so elegant to have a dining room," breathed Prudence happily. "I always pretended it was rather fun, and a great saving of work, to eat and cook and study and live in one room, but inwardly the idea always outraged me. Is that the school over there?"

"Yes, that's where Connie will go. There is only one high school in Mount Mark, so the twins will have to go to the other side of town—a long walk, but in good weather they can come home for dinner."

"Oh, that's a lovely place over there, father!" exclaimed Prudence, looking from the living room windows toward the south. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes. The Avery family lives there. The parents are very old and feeble, and the daughters are all—elderly—and all schoolteachers. There are four of them, and the youngest is forty-six. Dear me, it is two o'clock already, and I must go at once. Mrs. Adams will be here in a few minutes, and you will not be lonely."

But when Mrs. Adams arrived at the parsonage she knocked repeatedly, and in vain. Finally she gathered her robes about her and went into the back yard. She peered into the woodshed, and saw no one. She went into the barn lot, and found it empty. In despair, she plunged into the barn—and stopped abruptly.

In a shadowy corner was a slender figure kneeling beside an overturned nailkeg, her face buried in her hands. Evidently this was Prudence engaged in prayer—and in the barn, of all places in the world!

"A—a—a—hem!" stammered Mrs. Adams inquiringly.

"Amen!" This was spoken aloud and hurriedly, and Prudence leaped to her feet. Her fair hair clung about her face in damp, babyish tendrils, and her face was flushed and dusty, but alight with friendly interest. She ran forward eagerly, thrusting forth a slim and grimy hand.

"You are Mrs. Adams, aren't you? I am Prudence Starr. It is so kind of you to come the very first day," she cried. "It makes me love you right at the start."

"Ye—yes, I am Mrs. Adams." Mrs. Adams was embarrassed. She could not banish from her mental vision that kneeling figure by the nailkeg. Interrogation was written all over her ample face, and Prudence promptly read it and hastened to reply.

"I do not generally say my prayers in the barn, Mrs. Adams, I assure you. But—well, when I found this grand, old, rambling barn, I was so thankful I couldn't resist praying about it."

"But a barn!" ejaculated the perplexed "member." "Do you call that a blessing?"

"Yes, indeed I do," declared Prudence. Then she explained patiently: "Oh, it is on the children's account, you know. They have always longed for a big, romantic barn to play in. That's why I couldn't resist saying my prayers—I was so happy I couldn't hold in."

As they walked slowly toward the house, Mrs. Adams looked at this parsonage girl in frank curiosity and some dismay, which she strongly endeavored to conceal from the bright-eyed Prudence. The Ladies had said it would be so nice to have a grown girl in the parsonage! Prudence was nineteen from all account, but she looked like a child, and—well, it was not exactly grown-up to give thanks for a barn, to say the very least! Yet this girl had full charge of four younger children, and was further burdened with the entire care of a minister-father! Well, well! Mrs. Adams sighed a little.

"You are tired," said Prudence sympathetically. "It's so hot walking, isn't it? Let's sit on the porch until you are nicely rested."

"This is a fine chance for us to get acquainted," said the good woman with eagerness.

Now, if the truth must be told, there had been some ill-feeling in the Ladies' Aid society concerning the reception of Prudence. After the session of con-

In the Barn of All Places.

ference, when Rev. Mr. Starr was assigned to Mount Mark, the Ladies of the church had felt great interest in the man and his family. They inquired on every hand, and learned several interesting items. The mother had been taken from the family five years before, after a long illness, and Prudence, the eldest daughter, had taken charge of the household. There were five children. So much was known, and being women, they looked forward with eager curiosity to the coming of Prudence, the young mistress of the parsonage.

Mr. Starr had arrived at Mount Mark a week ahead of his family. Prudence and the other children had spent the week visiting at the home of their aunt, and Prudence had come on a day in advance of the others to "wind everything up," as she had expressed it.

But to return to the Ladies—the parsonage girls always capitalized the Ladies of their father's church—"One of us should go and help the dear child," said Mrs. Scott, the president of the Aids, when they assembled for their business meeting, "help her, and welcome her, and advise her."

"I was thinking of going over," said one, and another, and several others.

"Oh, that will not do at all," said the president. "I think in a case like this the president herself should represent the society. Therefore, I will undertake this duty for you."

But this called forth a storm of protest and it became so clamorous that it was unofficially decided to draw cuts! Which was done, and in consequence of that drawing of cuts, Mrs. Adams now sat on the front porch of the old gray parsonage, cheered by the knowledge that every other Lady of the Aid was envying her!

"Now, just be real sociable and tell me all about yourself, and the others, too," urged Mrs. Adams. "I want to know all about every one of you. Tell me everything."

"There isn't much to tell," said Prudence, smiling. "There are five of us; I am the oldest—I am nineteen. Then comes Fairy, then the twins, and then the baby."

"Are the twins boys, or a boy and a girl?"

"Neither," said Prudence, "they are both girls."

"More girls!" gasped Mrs. Adams. "And the baby?"

"She is a girl, too." And Prudence laughed. "In short, we are all girls except father. He couldn't be, of course—or I suppose he would, for our family does seem to run to girls."

"Prudence is a very nice name for a minister's daughter," said Mrs. Adams suggestively.

"Yes—for some ministers' daughters," assented Prudence. "But is sadly unsuitable for me."

Mrs. Adams looked critically at this young daughter of the parsonage. Then her eyes wandered down to her clothes, and lingered, in silent questioning, on Prudence's dress. It was a very peculiar color. In fact, it was no color at all—no named color. Prudence's eyes had followed Mrs. Adams' glance, and she spoke frankly.

"I suppose you're wondering if this dress is any color! Well, I think it really is, but it isn't any of the regular shades. It is my own invention, but I've never named it. Fairy grew up and out and around, and one day when I was so nearly out of clothes I hardly felt I could attend church any more, she suggested that I cut an old one of hers down for me! At first I laughed, and then I was insulted. Fairy is three years younger than I, and before then she had got my handed-downs. But now the tables were turned. From that time on Fairy's clothes were cut down for me. I still feel bitter about it. Fairy is dark, and dark blues are becoming to her. She handed down this dress—it was dark blue then. But I was not wanting a dark blue, and I thought it would be less recognizable if I gave it a contrasting color. I chose lavender. I dyed it four times, and this was the result."

"Do the twins dress alike?" inquired Mrs. Adams, when she could control her voice.

"Yes—unfortunately for Connie. They do it on purpose to escape the handed-downs! They won't even have hair ribbons different. And the result is that poor Connie never gets one new thing except shoes. She says she cannot help thanking the Lord in her prayers that all of us outwear our shoes before we can outgrow them.—Connie is only nine. Fairy is sixteen, and the twins are thirteen. They are a very clever lot of girls."

"And what are you going to do?" inquired Mrs. Adams, looking with real affection at the bright, sweet face. "You ought to go to school. You're just a girl yourself."

"I don't want to go to school," laughed Prudence. "Not any more. I like it, just taking care of father and the girls—with Fairy to keep me balanced! I read, but I do not like to study.—No, you'll have to get along with me just the way I am, Mrs. Adams. It's all I can do to keep things going now, without spending half the time dreaming of big things to do in the future."

"Don't you have dreams?" gasped Mrs. Adams. "Don't you have dreams of the future? Girls in books nowadays dream—"

"Yes, I dream," interrupted Prudence, "I dream lots—but it's mostly of what Fairy and others will do when I get them properly raised. You'll like the girls, Mrs. Adams, I know you will. They really are a gifted little bunch—except me. I'm just common little Prudence of the Parsonage—but the others!" And Prudence flung out her hands dramatically.

CHAPTER II.

The Rest of the Family.

It was Saturday morning when the four young parsonage girls arrived in Mount Mark. The elderly Misses Avery, next door, looked out of their windows, pending their appearance on Main street, with interest and concern. They were Episcopalians themselves, and in all their long lives they had never so much as heard of a widower-rector with five daughters and no housekeeper. There was something blood-curdling in the bare idea.

The Misses Avery considered Prudence herself rather a sweet, silly little thing.

"You have some real nice people in the Methodist church," Miss Dora had told her. "I dare say you will find a few of them very likable."

"Oh, I will like them all," said Prudence quickly and seriously.

"Like them all," echoed Miss Dora. "Oh, impossible!"

"Not for us," said Prudence. "We are used to it, you know. When we dislike people at first sight, we visit

"Quick! They Are Coming!"

them, and talk to them, and invite them to the parsonage, and entertain them with our best linen and silverware, and keep on getting friendlier and friendlier, and—first thing you know, we like them fine!"

So the Misses Avery concluded that Prudence was not entirely responsible. And they wondered, with something akin to an agony of fear, if the younger girls "had it, too!" and when Miss Alice cried excitedly, "Quick! Quick! They are coming!" they trooped to Miss Alice's window with a speed that would have done credit to the parsonage girls themselves.

First came the minister, whom they knew very well by this time, and considered quite respectable. He was lively, as was to be expected of a Methodist minister, and told jokes, and laughed at them! Now, a comical rector—oh, a very different matter—it wasn't done, that's all! At any rate, here came the Methodist minister, laughing, and on one side of him tripped a small, earnest-looking maiden, clasping his hand, and gazing alternately up into his face and down at the stylish cement sidewalk beneath her feet. On the other side was Fairy. The Misses Avery knew the girls by name already—having talked much with Prudence.

"Such a Fairy!" gasped Miss Millicent, and the others echoed the gasp but wordlessly.

For Fairy was very nearly as tall as her father, built upon generous lines, rather commanding in appearance, a little splendid-looking. Even from their windows they could discern something distinctly Junolike in this sixteen-year-old girl, with the easy, elastic stride that matched her father's, and the graceful head, well carried. A young goddess—named Fairy!

Behind them, laughing and chattering, like three children, as they were—came the twins with Prudence, each with an arm around her waist. And Prudence was a very little taller than they. When they reached the fence that bordered the parsonage, the scene for a moment resembled a miniature riot. The smaller girls jumped and exclaimed, and clasped their hands. Fairy leaned over the fence, and stared intently at this, their parsonage home. Then the serious little girl scrambled under the fence, followed closely by the lithe-limbed twins. A pause, a very short one—and then Prudence, too, was wriggling beneath the fence.

"Hold the wire up for me, papa!" cried Fairy. "I'm too fat." And a second later she was running gracefully across the lawn toward the parsonage. The Methodist minister laughed boyishly, and placing his hands on the fence post, he vaulted lightly over, and reached the house with his daughters. Then the Misses Avery, schoolteachers and elderly, looked at one another.

"Did you ever?" gasped the oldest Miss Avery, and the others slowly shook their heads.

Now, think! Did you ever see a rector jumping a three-wire fence, and running full speed across his front yard in pursuit of a flying family? It may possibly have occurred—we have never seen it. Neither had the three Misses Avery. Nor did they ever expect to. And if they had seen it, it is quite likely they would have joined the backsliders at that instant.

But without wasting much time on this gruesome thought, they hurried to a window commanding the best view of the parsonage, and raised it. Then they clustered behind the curtains, and watched and listened. There was plenty to hear! From the parsonage windows came the sound of scampering feet and banging doors. Once there was the unmistakable clatter of a chair overturned. With it all there was a constant chorus of "Oh, look!" "Oh! Oh!" "Oh, how sweet!" "Oh, papa!" "Oh, Prudence!" "Look, Larkie, look at this!"

Then the eldest Miss Avery closed the window overlooking the parsonage and confronted her sisters.

"We must just make the best of it," she said quietly.

But next door the gray old parsonage was full to overflowing with satisfaction and happiness and love. Everyone has experienced the ecstatic, creepy sensation of sleeping in a brand-new home. The parsonage girls reveled in the memory of that first night for many days. "It may be haunted for all we know," cried Carol deliciously. "Just think, Connie, there may be seven ghosts camped on the head of your bed, waiting—"

"Carol!"

When the family gathered for worship on that first Sabbath morning, Mr. Starr said, as he turned the leaves of his well-worn Bible, "I think it would be well for you to help with the morning worship now. When I finish reading the chapter, Connie, you will make the first prayer. Just pray for whatever you wish as you do at night for yourself. I will follow you."

Connie's eyes were wide with responsibility during the reading of the chapter, but when she began to speak her voice did not falter. Connie had nine years of good Methodist experience back of her!

"Our Father, who art in heaven, we bow ourselves before thy footstool in humility and reverence. Thou art our God, our Creator, our Savior. Bless us this day, and cause thy face to shine upon us. Blot out our transgressions, pardon our trespasses. Wash us, that we may be whiter than snow. Hide not thy face from the eyes of thy children, turn not upon us in wrath. Pity us, Lord, as we kneel here prostrate before thy majesty and glory. Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. And finally save us, an unbroken family around thy throne in heaven, for Jesus' sake. Amen."

This was followed by an electric silence. Prudence was biting her lips painfully, and counting by tens as fast as she could. Fairy was mentally going over the prayer, sentence by sentence, and attributing each petition to the individual member in the old church at Exminster to whom it belonged. The twins were a little amazed, and quite proud. [illegible] an honor to the parsonage [illegible] were concerned lest they [illegible] should not do quite so well [illegible] days came.

But in less than a mo[illegible] ister-father began his pray[illegible] he said "Amen," Prudence [illegible] feet and half-way upstairs [illegible] others were fairly risen. [illegible] gazing intently out of the [illegible] a moment, and then went [illegible] barn to see if the horse was [illegible] eating. Mr. Starr walked [illegible] soberly out the front door, and [illegible] the house. He ran into Fairy [illegible] out the kitchen door, and they [illegible] quickly at each other.

"Hurry, papa," she whispe[illegible] can't hold in much longer! [illegible] can I!"

And together, choking [illegible] ter, they hurried into the [illegible] gave full vent to their feel[illegible]

So it was that the twins [illegible] were alone for a while.

"You did a pretty good job," said Carol approvingly.

"Yes, I think I did myself," [illegible] complacent answer. "But I [illegible] to put in, 'Keep us as the [illegible] eye, hold us in the hollow of [illegible] and I forgot it until I had [illegible] I had a notion to put in a [illegible] but I believe that isn't done."

"Never mind," said Carol, [illegible] that in mine, tomorrow."

It cannot be said that the family worship was a great [illegible] The twins were invariably [illegible] cut and dried. They thanked [illegible] for the beautiful morning, [illegible] friends, for health, and family [illegible] sonage. Connie always prayed [illegible] tences extracted from the [illegible] others she had often heard, [illegible] time with nearly disastrous [illegible]

But later on the morning [illegible] went better. The prayers of [illegible] dren changed—became more [illegible] less flowery. They remembered [illegible] when they knelt they were [illegible] feet of God, and speaking [illegible] him.

The family had been in the [illegible] sonage only three weeks, when [illegible] iting minister called on them [illegible] about ten minutes before [illegible] eon hour at the time of [illegible] Mr. Starr was in the country, [illegible] so the girls received him [illegible] was an unfortunate day for [illegible] Fairy had been at college [illegible] and Prudence had been [illegible] the attic, getting it ready for [illegible] day and winter playroom [illegible] younger girls. She was [illegible] tired.

The luncheon hour arrived, [illegible] girls came in from school, [illegible] up and away again. Still [illegible] young minister sat discussing [illegible] serious topics with the [illegible] dence—and in spite of [illegible] spiration, she was good to [illegible] Rev. Mr. Morgan realized [illegible] could not tear himself away. [illegible] Prudence sighed.

"Do you like sweet corn, Morgan?"

This was entirely out of [illegible] their conversation, and for a [illegible] he faltered. "Sweet corn?" [illegible]

"Yes, roasting ears, you [illegible] cooked on the cob."

Then he smiled. "Oh, yes. Very much," he said.

"Well," she began her [illegible] rather drearily, "I was busy [illegible] ing and did not prepare [illegible] eon. We are very fond of [illegible] and I cooked an enormous [illegible] that's all we have for lunch [illegible] corn and butter. We have [illegible] bread, because I am going to [illegible] afternoon, and we never [illegible] sweet corn, anyhow. Now, if [illegible] to eat sweet corn and [illegible] canned peaches, we'd just [illegible] you stay for luncheon with [illegible]

Rev. Mr. Morgan was [illegible] said so. So Prudence [illegible] kitchen, opened the peaches [illegible] and fished out a clean [illegible] guest. Then they gathered [illegible] table, five girls and the [illegible] ister. It was really a [illegible] that table. In the center [illegible] vase of goldenrod. On [illegible] the vase was a great platter [illegible] with sweet corn, on the [illegible] the table were six plates, [illegible] essary silverware, and a [illegible] ter for each. There was [illegible] dish of peaches at each [illegible] individual plate of butter. [illegible] all—except the napkins. [illegible] made no apologies. She was [illegible] ter of the parsonage! She [illegible] Mr. Morgan to his place [illegible] and sweetly as though she [illegible] ing him in to a twenty-[illegible] banquet.

"Will you return thanks, Morgan?" she said.

And the girls bowed [illegible] Rev. Mr. Morgan cleared [illegible] and began: "Our Father we [illegible] for this table."

There was more of the [illegible] the parsonage girls heard [illegible] ditional phrase—except [illegible] followed him conscientiously [illegible] every word. Carol burst [illegible] laughter, close upon his [illegible] "Amen"—and after one [illegible] at her sister, Prudence joined [illegible] soon it was a rollicking [illegible] the parsonage table. Mr. [illegible] self smiled uncertainly. He [illegible] zled. More, he was embarrassed [illegible] as soon as Carol could get [illegible] she gasped out an explanation.

"You were just—right, Mr. [illegible] to give thanks—for the table [illegible] nothing—on it—to be thankful [illegible]

And the whole family [illegible] more into peals of laughter.

Mr. Morgan had very little [illegible] that day. He did not [illegible] fond of sweet corn as he [illegible] Prudence. He talked very [illegible] And as soon as possible [illegible] hat and walked hurriedly [illegible]

To Be Continued Next [illegible]