

Carolyn of the Corners

RUTH BELMONT ENDICOTT

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There was a wide-branched oak tree on a knoll overlooking the brook. Around its trunk Uncle Joe had built a seat. Carolyn May found this a grand place to sit and dream while Prince lay at her feet.

When they saw Aunt Rose in her bonnet going toward the fenced-in garden they both jumped up and bounded down the slope after her. It was just here at the corner of the garden fence that Carolyn May had her first adventure.

Prince, of course, disturbed the serenity of the poultry. The hens went shrieking one way, the guinea fowl lifted up their voices in angry chatter, the turkey hens scurried to cover, but the turkey cock, General Bolivar, a big white Holland fowl, was not molested.

She could not allow the child to pick them, however, so stopping she picked up Carolyn May, and tucked her comfortably into the house, laying her down on the sitting-room couch to have her nap out—as she supposed, without waking her.

Aunt Rose came away softly and closed the door and while she finished getting dinner she tried to make no noise which would awaken the child. Mr. Stagg came home at noon, quite as full of business as usual. To tell the truth, Mr. Stagg always felt better in Aunt Rose's presence; and he tried to hide his affliction by conversation. So he talked steadily through the meal.

But somewhere—about at the pot course, it was—he stopped and looked around curiously.

"There's me!" he exclaimed, "what's Hannah's Carolyn?"

"Taking a nap," said Aunt Rose composedly.

"Huh! Can't the child get up to her victuals?" demanded Mr. Stagg. "You being serving that young one separately and you'll make yourself work, Aunt Rose?"

"Never trouble about that which doesn't concern you, Joseph Stagg," responded his housekeeper rather tartly. "The Lord has placed the care of Hannah's Carolyn on you and me and I'll do my share and do it proper."

Mr. Stagg shook his head and left without a word. He had a great deal to say about the child, but he said nothing. "There are institutions," he said weakly; but Aunt Rose said quickly: "Joseph Stagg! I know you for what you are—other people's child. If the neighbors heard you say that you'd think you were a heathen. Your own child's child!"

"They've sent Tim, the blackman, to go shopping. The child hasn't a thing to wear but that funny little black frock, and she'll ruin that playing around. She's got to have frocks and shoes and another hat—all sorts of things. Seems a shame to dress a child like her in black—it's punishment. Makes her affliction double, I do say."

"Well, I suppose we've got to fatter Custom or Custom will weep," growled Mr. Stagg. "But where the money's coming from—"

"Didn't Carolyn's father leave money?" asked Aunt Rose promptly.

"Well—not what you'd call a fortune," admitted Mr. Stagg slowly. "Thanks be to God, plenty, then. And if you haven't I have," said the woman in a tone that quite closed the question of finances.

"Which shows me just where I got off at," muttered Joseph Stagg as he started down the walk for the store. "I know that young one would be a nuisance."

Carolyn May, who was quite used to taking a nap on the days that she did not go to school, woke up, as bright as a newly minted dollar, very soon after her Uncle Joe had left the store. "I'm awfully sorry I missed him," she confided to Aunt Rose when she danced into the kitchen. "You see, I want to get acquainted with Uncle Joe just as fast as possible. And he's at home so little I guess that it's going to be hard to do it."

"Oh, is that so?" said Aunt Rose. "With a final stroke Aunt Rose allowed the big fowl to go—and he ran away fast enough. "Your dog, child, does not know his manners. If he is going to stay here with you he must learn that dogs are not to be chased nor starved."

"Oh, Aunt Rose!" begged the little girl, "don't punish Prince! Not—set that way. Please don't! Why, he's never been spanked in his life! He wouldn't know what it meant. Dear Aunt Rose!"

"I shall not beat him, Carolyn May," interrupted Aunt Rose. "But he must learn his lesson. He must learn that liberty is not license. Bring him here, Carolyn May."

She led the way to an open coop of sorts in the middle of the back yard. This was a house in which she put broody hens when she wished to brood up their desire to set. She spread the gate of it and motioned Prince to enter.

The dog looked pleadingly at his little mistress's face, then into the woman's stern countenance. Seeing no register in either, with drooping head he slunk into the coop.

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With one hand clutching her frock over her heart, Carolyn May's big blue eyes overflowed.

"It's just as if he was arrested," she said. "Poor Prince! Has he got to stay there always, Aunt Rose?"

"Well, it may be that he learns his lesson," said Mrs. Kennedy grimly, and went on into the garden.

recker," put in Tim, the blackman. "May I come down the road to meet you, Aunt Rose?" asked the little girl. "I know the way to Uncle Joe's store."

"I don't know any reason why you can't come to meet me," replied Mrs. Kennedy. "Anyway, you can come along the road as far as the first house. You know that one?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Parlow's," said Carolyn May.

Carolyn May went back into the yard and sat on the front-porch steps and waited, yawning unhelpfully, curled down at her feet. There did not seem to be much to do at this place.

She had time now, had Carolyn May, to compare The Corners with the busy Harlem streets with which she had been familiar all her life.

"Goodness me!" thought Carolyn May, started by her own imagination, "suppose all the folks in all these houses around here were dead!"

"They might have been for all the human noises she heard.

"Goodness me!" she said again, and this time she jumped up, startling Prince from his nap. "Maybe there is a spot out over all this place," she said, "that's wide and open if we can't see it from here."

They went out of the yard together and took the dusty road toward the town.

They soon came in sight of the Parlow house and carpenter shop. "We can't go beyond that place," said Carolyn May. "Aunt Rose told us not to. And Uncle Joe says the carpenter-man isn't a pleasant man."

She looked wistfully at the premises. The cottage seemed quite as much under the "spell" as had been those dwellings at The Corners. But from the shop came the sound of a plane shrieking over a long board.

"Oh, Prince!" gasped Carolyn May. "I believe he's making long, curly shavings!"

If there was one thing Carolyn May aspired to was curls.

Suddenly Mr. Jeddiah Parlow looked up from the wretched, dust-streaked face under the black hat brim and above the black frock. He stared at her for fully a minute, pointing the plane over his work. Then he put it down and came to the door of the shop.

"Isn't that Hannah Stagg's little girl, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," she said, and sighed. Dear me, he knew who she was right away! There would not be any chance of her getting a suit of long curls.

"You've come here to live, have you?" said Mr. Parlow slowly.

"Yes, sir. You see, my papa and mamma were laid off, with the Duraven. It was a mistake, I guess," sighed the little girl, "for they weren't fighting anybody. But the Duraven got in the way of some ships that were fighting in a place called the Mediterranean ocean, and the Duraven was sunk, and only a few folks were saved from it. My papa and mamma weren't saved."

"So?" said the carpenter, pushing his big spectacles up to his forehead. "I read about it. Too bad—too mighty bad! I remember Hannah Stagg," he added, winking his eyes, Carolyn May thought, a good deal as Prince did. "You look like her."

"Do!" Carolyn May returned, drawing nearer. "I'm glad I do. And I'm glad I sleep in what used to be her bed, too. It doesn't seem so lonesome."

"So! I reckon you'd be lonesome up there at The Corners," said the carpenter.

Mr. Parlow stripped another shaving from the edge of the board he was planing.

wonderingly. "Most little girls that come here want shavings to play with," said the carpenter, quickly eyeing her over his work.

"Oh!" cried Carolyn May, almost jumping. "And do you give 'em to 'em?"

"Most always," admitted Mr. Parlow. "Oh! Can I have some?" she gasped.

"All you want," said Mr. Parlow. "When Tim's old back crawled along the road from town with Aunt Rose sitting inside, and she was a multitude of bundles, Carolyn May was bedecked with a veritable wig of long, crisp curls.

"Well, child, you certainly have made a mess of yourself," said the housekeeper. "Has she been annoying you, Jeddiah Parlow?"

"She's the only Stagg that ain't annoyed me since her mother went away," said the carpenter gruffly. "Aunt Rose looked at him levelly.

"I wonder," she said. "But you see, she ain't wholly a Stagg."

This, of course, did not explain matters to Carolyn May in the least. Nor did what Aunt Rose said to her on the way home in the hot, stuffy back of the little girl to understand the trouble between her uncle and Mr. Parlow.

"Better not let Joseph Stagg see you so friendly with Jeddiah Parlow. Let sleeping dogs lie," Mrs. Kennedy observed.

CHAPTER V. A Tragic Situation. Such was the introduction of Carolyn May to The Corners. It was not a very exciting life she had entered into, but the following two or three weeks were very full.

Aunt Rose insisted upon her being properly fitted out with clothing for the summer and fall. Carolyn May had to go to the dressmaker's house to be fitted and that is how she became acquainted with Chet Gormley's mother.

Mrs. Gormley was helping the dressmaker and they both made much of Carolyn May. Aunt Rose allowed her to go for her fitting alone—of course with Prince as a companion—so, without doubt, Mrs. Gormley, who loved a "dash of gossip," talked more freely with the little girl than she would have done in Mrs. Kennedy's presence.

One afternoon the little girl appeared at the dressmaker's with Prince's collar decorated with short, curly shavings.

"I take it you've stopped at Jed Parlow's shop, child," said Mrs. Gormley with a sigh.

"Yes, ma'am," returned Carolyn May. "Do you know, he's very liberal."

"Liberal?" repeated Mrs. Gormley. "I never heard of old Jed Parlow being accused of that before. Did you, Mrs. Maine?"

Mrs. Maine was the dressmaker; and she bit off her words when she spoke, much as she bit her thumb.

"No, I never—heard Jed Parlow—called that—no!" declared Mrs. Maine emphatically.

"Why, yes," little Carolyn May said quite eagerly. "I guess folks don't just understand about Mr. Parlow," she added, "meaning what her uncle had said about the carpenter. "He is real liberal."

"It's a wonder in this town," declared Mrs. Gormley, "that he has a thing to do with a certain party, Mrs. Maine, considering how his daughter feels toward that certain party's relation. What'd you think?"

"I guess—there's a suspicion—to be said—on both sides of that controversy," responded the dressmaker. "Meanin' that maybe a certain party's relative feels just as cross as Mandy Parlow?" suggested Mrs. Gormley.

"Yes," agreed the other woman. Carolyn May listened, much puzzled. She was sure just what a certain party could be.

Mrs. Kennedy hadn't gone to keep house for Mr. Stagg then," replied Mrs. Gormley. "He tried several trifling critters there at the Stagg place before she took hold."

Carolyn May looked at Mrs. Gormley encouragingly. She was very much interested in Uncle Joe and Miss Amanda Parlow's love affair.

"Why didn't they get married—like my papa and mamma?" she asked.

"Oh, goodness knows!" exclaimed Mrs. Gormley. "Some says 'twas his fault and some says 'twas hers. And maybe 'twas a third party's that I might mention at that," added Mrs. Gormley, pursing up her lips in a wary, knowing way.

"One day," she said, "proving confidential," "it was in camp-meeting time—some day somebody seen Joe Stagg drivin' out with another girl—Charlotte Lenny, that was. She was married to a man over in Springdale long ago. Mr. Stagg took Charlotte to Faith camp meeting."

"Then, the very next week, Mandy went with Ryan Peckham to a barn dance at Crockett's, and nobody ain't ever seen your uncle and Mandy Parlow speak since, much less ever walk together."

One particularly uppity day Prince met the returning hardware merchant at the gate with volubrious barkings and a plain desire to implant a welcoming tongue on the man's cheek. He succeeded in nuzzling Mr. Stagg's suit with his front paws, and almost cast the angry man full length into a mud puddle.

"Drat the beast!" ejaculated Mr. Stagg. "I'd rather have an epileptic fit loose around here than him. Now, look at these clo'es! I declare, Carolyn, you've just got to tie that mousetrap—and keep him tied!"

"All the time, Uncle Joe!" whispered the little girl.

"Yes, ma'am, all the time! If I find him loose again, I'll tie a bag of rocks to his neck and drop him in the deepest hole in the brook."

After this awful threat Prince lived a precarious existence, and his mission was much worried for him. Aunt Rose said nothing, but she saw that both the little girl and her canine friend were very unhappy.

Mrs. Kennedy, however, had watched Mr. Joseph Stagg for years. In deed, she had known him as a boy, long before she had closed up her own little cottage around on the other road and come to the Stagg place to save the hardware merchant from the continued reign of those "trifling creatures" of whom Mrs. Gormley had spoken.

As a bachelor Joseph Stagg had been preyed upon by certain female hussies so prevalent in a country community. Some had flattered whom they partly supported out of Mr. Stagg's larder; some were widows who looked upon the well-to-do merchant as a marrying proposition.

Aunt Rose Kennedy did not need the position of Mr. Stagg's housekeeper and could not be accused of assuming it from mercenary motives. Over her backfence she had seen the hardware merchant in the Stagg household ever since she had died and left Mandy alone in the big house.

One day the old Quaker-like woman could stand no more. She put on her sunbonnet, came around by the road to the front door of the Stagg house, which she found open, and walked through to the rear porch which the woman who then held the situation of housekeeper was wrapping up the best feather bed and pillows in a pair of the best homespun sheets, preparatory to their removal.

The neighbor enjoyed what followed. Aunt Rose, in her usual dignified manner, as dignified and untroubled as ever; the retiring incumbent went away wrathfully, shaking the dust of the premises from her garments as a testimony against "any such actions."

When Mr. Stagg came home at supper time he found the best of the bed and already a different air about the place.

"Goodness me, Aunt Rose," he said, biting into her blarney ravenously. "I was a-going down to the mill-lards' hotel to board. I couldn't stand it no longer. If you'd stay here and do for me, I'd feel like a new man."

"You ought to be made over into a new man, Joseph Stagg," the woman said sternly. "A married man."

"No, no! Never that!" gasped the hardware dealer.

"If I come here, Joseph Stagg, it would cost you more money than you've been paying these no-account women."

"I don't care," said Mr. Stagg recklessly. "Go ahead. Do what you please. Say what you want, I'm game."

Thereby he had put himself into Aunt Rose's power, she had renovated the old kitchen and some of the other rooms. If Mr. Stagg at first trembled for his bank balance, he was made so comfortable that he had not the heart to murmur.

Of course, Carolyn May let Prince run at large when she was sure Uncle Joe was well out of sight of the house, but she was very careful to chain him up again long before her uncle was expected to return.

Prince had learned not to chase any dog who wore feathers; Aunt Rose herself had to admit that he was a very intelligent dog and knew what punishment was for. But how did he know that in trying to dig out a mole he would be doing more harm than good?

The mole in question lived under a piece of rock wall near the garden fence.

When Uncle Joe came home to dinner on one particular Saturday he

walked down to the corner of the garden fence, and there saw the hardware Prince had wrought. In following the mole's last tunnel he had worked his way under the picket fence and had torn up two current bushes and done some damage in the strawberry patch.

"And the worst of it is," grumbled the hardware dealer, "he nigger caught the mole. That mongrel, really isn't worth a bag of dollars to him in the brook. But that's what he's going to get this very evening when I come home. I won't stand for him a day longer."

Carolyn May positively turned pale as she crouched beside the mole-chained-up Prince, both arms about his rough neck. He licked her cheek. Fortunately, he could not understand everything that was said to him, therefore the pronouncement of this terrible sentence did not agitate him as it would have done.

Carolyn May sat for a long time under the tree beside the sleeping dog and thought how different this life at The Corners was from that she had lived with her father and mother in the city home.

If only that big ship, the Duraven, had not sailed away with her papa and her mamma!

Carolyn May had been very brave at that occasion. She had gone ashore with Mrs. Price and Edna after her mother's last clinging embrace and her father's husky "Good-by, daughter," with scarcely a tear.

Of course she had been brave! Mamma would return in a few weeks, and then, after a time, papa would likewise come back—and oh! so rosy and stout!

And then, in two weeks, came the fatal news of the sinking of the Duraven and the loss of all but a small part of her crew and passengers.

Vaguely these facts had become known to Carolyn May. She never spoke of them. They did not seem real to the little girl.

But now, sitting beside the condemned Prince—her companion and only real comfort—during those weeks of her orphanhood—the little girl felt bitterly her loneliness and grief.

"If Uncle Joe did as he had threatened, what should she do? There seemed to be no place for her and Prince to run away to.

"I'm quite sure I don't want to live," thought Carolyn May dismally. "If papa and mamma and Prince are all dead—why! there aren't enough other folks left in the world to make it worth while living in. I don't believe, if Prince isn't going to be alive, then I don't want to be alive, either."

By and by Prince began to get very uneasy. It was long past his dinner hour, and every time he heard the screen door slam he jumped up and gazed eagerly and with cocked ears and wagging tail in that direction.

"You poor thing, you," said Carolyn May at last. "I s'pose you are hungry. It ain't going to do you a bit of good to eat; but you don't know it. I'll ask Aunt Rose if she has something for you."

She got up wearily and went across the yard. Aunt Rose stood just inside the screen door.

"Don't you want any dinner, Carolyn May?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. I guess I'd better not eat," said the child. "Why not?"

"Cause my stomach's so trembly.