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her aunt Miranda had never been, save at the very first, so censorious and so fault-finding. One Saturday Rebecca ran up-stairs and, bursting into a flood of tears, exclaimed, "Aunt Jane, it seems as if I never could stand her continual scoldings. Nothing I can do suits aunt Miranda; she's just said it will take me my whole life to get the Randall out of me, and I'm not convinced that I want it all out, so there we are!"

Aunt Jane, never demonstrative, cried with Rebecca as she attempted to soothe her.

"You must be patient," she said, wiping first her own eyes and then Rebecca's. "I haven't told you, for it isn't fair you should be troubled when you're studying so hard, but your aunt Miranda isn't well. One Monday morning about a month ago, she had a kind of faint spell; it wasn't bad, but the doctor is afraid it was a shock, and if so, it's the beginning of the end. Seems to me she's failing right along, and that's what makes her so fretful and easy vexed. She has other troubles, too, that you don't know anything about, and if you're not kind to your aunt Miranda now, child, you'll be dreadfully sorry some time."

All the temper faded from Rebecca's face, and she stopped crying to say penitently, "Oh! the poor, dear thing! I won't mind a bit what she says now. She's just asked me for some milk toast and I was dreading to take it to her, but this will make everything different. Don't worry yet, aunt Jane, for perhaps it won't be as bad as you think."

So when she carried the toast to her aunt a little later, it was in the best gilt-edged china bowl, with a fringed napkin on the tray, and a sprig of geranium lying across the salt cellar.

"Now, aunt Miranda," she said cheerily, "I expect you to smack your lips and say this is good; it's not Randall, but Sawyer milk toast."

"You've tried all kinds on me, one time an' another," Miranda answered. "This tastes real kind o' good; but I wish you hadn't wasted that nice geranium."

"You can't tell what's wasted," said Rebecca philosophically; "perhaps that geranium has been hoping this long time it could brighten somebody's supper, so don't disappoint it by making believe you don't like it. I've seen geraniums cry,—in the very early morning!"

The mysterious trouble to which Jane had alluded was a very real one, but it was held in profound secrecy. Twenty-five hundred dollars of the small Sawyer property had been invested in the business of a friend of their father's, and had returned them a regular annual income of a hundred dollars. The family friend had been dead for some five years, but his son had succeeded to his interests, and all went on as formerly. Suddenly there came a letter saying that the firm had gone into bankruptcy, that the business had been completely wrecked, and that the Sawyer money had been swept away with everything else.

The loss of one hundred dollars a year is a very trifling matter, but it made all the difference between comfort and self-denial to the old spinsters. Their manner of life had been so rigid and careful that it was difficult to economize any further, and the blow had fallen just when it was most inconvenient, for Rebecca's school and boarding expenses, small as they were, had to be paid promptly, and in cash.

"Can we possibly go on doing it? Shan't we have to give up and tell her why?" asked Jane tearfully of the elder sister.

"We have put our hand to the plough, and we can't turn back," answered Miranda in her grimmest tone; "we've taken her away from her mother and offered her an education, and we've got to keep our word. She's Aurelia's only hope for years to come, to my way o' thinkin'." Hannah's beau takes all her time 'n' thought, and when she gits a husband her mother 'll be out o' sight and out o' mind. John, instead of farmin', thinks he must be a doctor,—as if folks wasn't gettin' unhealthy enough these days, without turnin' out more young doctors to help 'em into their graves. No, Jane; we'll skimp 'n' do without, 'n' plan to git along on our interest-money somehow, but we won't break into our principal, whatever happens."

"Breaking into the principal" was, in

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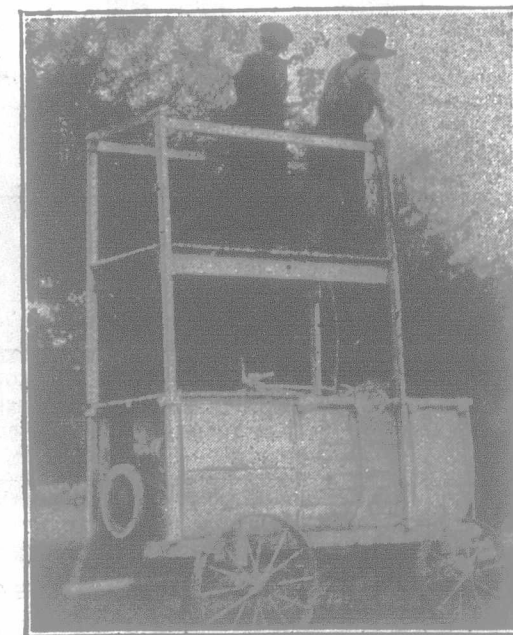
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