

## Chapter 1

THE WHIMPERING from the crib in the corner had been going on for some minutes before the girl on the cot could shake herself loose from the heavy sleep that kept pulling her back into its oblivion. She had been so tired when she went to bed that she had fallen asleep at once, and the piteous little voice that cried, "Mommy! Mommy!" in between the baby's half surrenders to sleep, was not sufficient to waken her quickly. But as the cries grew more insistent, with a shrill note of terror creeping in, she rolled over and reached an arm out to encircle the child. Still drugged with sleep she said, with love and impatience mingled in her voice, "Oh, you little 'fraid-cat! What *am* I going to do with you? Here, come over and spoil my sleep like you always do!"

She helped the little one over the side of the crib and drew her down to the cot.

"This bed's not big enough for one, yet every night you crawl in here with me. Can't you see I'm tired, honey? You never let me get one night of decent sleep. No wonder I can't work fast daytimes. Aren't you ashamed, you sweet little 'fraid-cat?"

The baby did not answer. Already she was fast asleep, snuggled contentedly against her mother's shoulder. Almost fiercely the girl held her close. She had wakened thoroughly now, and sleep would not be easy to recapture. How wonderful it would be to get one full night of sleep with no frightened baby voice to disturb her! She needed real rest at night if she were to meet the demands of the hard days at the shop. She had to hold her job. She *had* to! She was all that stood between this helpless, frightened baby and life's hardships and cruelty. She wanted so much to save the child from the things that had hurt and scarred her, the mother. She wanted to give her joy and love and security. She wanted to guide those little feet away from the pitfalls that lay so thickly around her. That was the reason she worked overtime at the shop. She wanted things for her baby.

More than anything else she wanted to be able to keep her in some better place than Mrs. Tuley's day nursery. She had a strong suspicion that Mrs. Tuley had been drinking last night when she stopped to pick up the baby. Did that happen regularly? Did Mrs. Tuley mistreat the nervous little one? Was that the cause of the fears that kept them both awake nights? Or were those fears the natural result of the apprehensions that had become the girl's own lot? If she left here, where could she find another place so cheap?

"Oh, you shouldn't ever have been born," she whispered in the darkness. "We planned so much for you and you'll have such a hard time. Everything has gone wrong. I'd do anything I could to keep you safe, but I get so tired! I haven't a thing to give you but my love and my

body. My love won't wear out, but I'm afraid my body will. I'm a 'fraid-cat too, honey. I'm scared stiff of what might happen to you if I — oh, dear God, I don't know what to do!"

She heard the even breathing of the baby and knew that the little one slept soundly now because her fear had been vanquished by her mother's encircling arm.

"I wish I had someone to hold me tight and to watch while I sleep. I wish there were someone to make me feel as safe as she does now. I wonder if God could do that if I knew Him better. Could He help me to go back to sleep and forget all about the things that frighten me? I wish I knew how to find out more about Him."

There was a church on the corner where she changed cars every day, a church whose doors stood open always. Would it do any good to ask there? If she went in some day through that side door where she sometimes saw the janitor at work, would he take her to the minister or someone who would listen to her? If she said, "I want to know about God. I need Him and I don't know how to find Him," would they tell her about Him and introduce her to Him so that she could tell Him how tired she was? And how she got so frightened in the night that she wanted to scream out in terror and only kept quiet for fear of waking the other 'fraid-cat beside her? Would God listen and help her? She needed Him so desperately. There wasn't anybody else — not *any* person in all the world. And she was so tired. Some days she felt that she could not possibly keep on working, for the weariness and the pain in her side. She'd stop tomorrow at that church and ask. They couldn't hurt her for just asking.

Anyway she would find out. *Somebody* had to help take care of her frightened baby, and who was there except God?

## Chapter 2

THE MATRON of the Susan Larrimore Home for Children sat at her desk filling out a long questionnaire. The minister's wife, in the chair in front of the desk was trying to quiet the sobs of the hysterical child on her lap and at the same time help the minister in answering the questions the matron asked.

"Yes, the name is JoAnne — JoAnne Mather. She is almost five. The date is on that birth certificate the mother left with us when she went to the hospital."

"No relatives, you say?"

"The mother said none."

"How long have you known her?"

The minister looked questioningly at his wife, seemed to calculate a bit, then he answered,

"About a year and a half, I think. Wasn't it just before Easter last year, Ethel? Wasn't Gracie one of the group that was baptized on Easter morning?"

"Oh, yes, I remember now. I took care of this baby then. Hush, honey girl! No one is going to hurt you."

The minister continued, "The mother came to us asking for help. She was very young, all alone in the world,

and ill from work and worry. She seemed to have a desperate yearning for God, and when she heard the gospel, responded eagerly. We got her a place to board with one of our families, and she was happy. The woman loved the baby and was glad to care for her. Two weeks ago the mother became ill — I think she had not been well for a long time — and she lived only a few days.

“The child is very difficult, as you can judge by her present tantrum, and no one wants to keep her. The woman who had her is not well and cannot accept the responsibility. We have three small children in our home and my wife must not take this one, much as she would desire to. We have had her for four days and we are ready to accept defeat. She refuses to eat, she awakens in terror several times every night, and goes into hysterics at each new face.”

The matron rose and went over to the chair. “Here, dear,” she said softly. “Won’t you come with me? We’ll go out and see the other children.”

She took hold of one of the little hands and tried to draw the child toward her. But instantly the cries that had begun to soften to sobs rose again to shrieks. The matron drew back in haste.

“Does she cry *all* the time?” she asked anxiously.

“No. When she becomes accustomed to a situation she will play contentedly for hours. She is timid with other children, but loves them when she becomes acquainted with them. She is unselfish and anxious to please. These spells of hysteria constitute the only problem. Night always terrifies her. Her mother never went out evenings because of that. Just now she is worse than usual because

she misses her mother and can't understand her absence."

While this conversation was going on the minister's wife had taken the child to the window to watch the children at play outside. The matron turned toward the pair again saying confidently,

"I think we can manage her all right. We have all kinds here, and even the most difficult adjust happily eventually. Just leave her with me and don't worry."

She reached again for the child, and although the screams increased in intensity, she lifted the little one into her own arms and held her. The minister's wife looked yearningly at JoAnne for a minute as if she considered taking her back and adding her to her own already full nursery. But the minister drew her away, so with one last smile of would-be reassurance she went off.

The matron watched the car go down the drive, then carried the still crying child to her room where two helpers were summoned to her assistance. After an hour they had to acknowledge themselves defeated. For one so tiny and seemingly frail, JoAnne had amazing powers of endurance.

"I think we ought to call the doctor," said one of the young women sinking into a chair. "I don't think she can stop."

"I don't like to be defeated by a four-year-old," said the matron, "but she is in a state of hysteria that is beyond me. I wish —"

"Say, what's the matter here?" asked a new voice. "Boy, is that kid raisin' the roof! I heard the noise half-way down the block. What's the matter with her?"

"If you can answer that question, Nona, you will be

wiser than we are," answered the matron, smiling at the small girl who stood in the doorway.

"Let me have her. Why, the poor baby's scared to death!"

She put her own thin little arms about the child and, to the amazement of the women, drew her, unresisting, from the matron.

"You poor little 'fraid-cat," she soothed. "You poor scared little, sweet little 'fraid-cat!"

The sobs grew fainter, the baby arms clung to the rescuer, and Nona swayed back and forth as she hummed a lullaby. The matron gave a sigh of relief as she said,

"Will you let her sleep with you tonight, Nona? We'll begin the adjusting process tomorrow."

"Sure! We'll just cuddle together in my bed. I can handle her O.K. She's just a scared-to-death little honey."

The room at the end of the second floor hall was dark and quiet. The great tree outside shaded the window and kept out the beams of the street light on the corner. The sky was overcast with heavy clouds and even the outlines of the window were undiscernible. JoAnne had never known such blackness. In the room at Mrs. Byrd's where she and Mommy lived there was always light even when she woke up in the night. There was a light outside their window all night long, and Mommy never had to turn on the light when she had to get JoAnne a drink. Now, roused by the backfiring of a passing car, she looked for that sign. It was not there. And Mommy wasn't there either. She had been gone so long and hadn't come back. All around was this heavy blackness that pressed against her face. That blackness might hold any-

thing! She drew in her breath with a quivering little sound that was almost a sob. But it wasn't really crying. It was just trying not to. She had promised she would try hard not to cry while Mommy went away to be made well at the hospital. She had forgotten about that and cried hard yesterday when she came to this place. But that was because everything was so strange. She didn't know the people and she was afraid of the queer shapes and shadows in the rooms. She was beginning to wonder, too, about Mommy. Aunty Byrd had said she couldn't ever come back but JoAnne was sure she would for she had promised. But it had been a long time, and this was a very lonesome place to be.

The wind was rising and the branches made a harsh, rasping sound on the roof. The moon came from behind the clouds and cast weird tossing shadows on the wall. JoAnne gazed in frightened wonder at them, then as the long arms seemed to reach toward her she forgot her promise. With a little shriek of terror she cowered into the pillow. Quickly two comforting arms came around her and Nona's voice, still thick with sleep but full of tenderness, said,

"It's all right, honeybunch. Nona's right here and everything's O.K. Don't cry — it's only the wind making that noise. Sh-sh, honey! Come on, go to sleep. I'll sing and you close your eyes and just listen."

While she rocked back and forth in the bed she sang softly to a tune of her own making,

Bye low, by low, baby bye low!

Bye low, bye low, baby bye!

At first the nervous little hands clutched her fiercely,

but as the soothing melody ran on and on, they relaxed and JoAnne fell asleep. Nona placed her back on the pillow and settled to her own rest again.

“She’s mine!” she whispered to herself. “Nobody else can manage her and I can! They won’t dare take her away like they did the kitten and the bird. I’ll teach her not to be so scared. She’ll learn I’ll take care of her.”

## Chapter 3

IT WAS SUNDAY AFTERNOON. Dinner was over, and JoAnne and Nona were on the "dishpan shift." Two of the older girls were washing, four of the "middlers" were doing the drying, while JoAnne trotted about putting dishes away. Nona watched her closely, and said proudly to her nearest neighbor,

"Isn't she pretty?"

"Not so very. She's too little and scrawny."

"She's not. She's just dainty."

"I call it skinny. And she looks like an owl in those glasses."

"You're jealous. She's going to be a very bee-yutiful person when she is bigger. You just wish you had that pretty hair and those brown eyes."

"Eyes are meant to see with, and JoAnne's are no good. She can't tell a cat from a dog across the yard."

"She can so, since she got her glasses. She never stumbles anymore, and she hasn't upset her milk for six months. I know so, Miss Smarty, and you're just jealous."

JoAnne was waiting at the pantry door, so Nona departed leaving her partner to hang up the towels. She

marched off across the lawn with JoAnne trudging after her.

“Where we going, Nona?”

“To find a little peace and quiet.”

“What do we want with *that*?”

“I want to have a talk with you all by ourselves.”

“But where will you find peace and quiet?”

“How do I know? But I’ll find some. You just watch me.”

She led the way through the gate and down the street. JoAnne, trotting at her side, was appalled. Even twelve-year-olds like Nona weren’t supposed to go so far.

“Nona! Are we running away? We’re never allowed to come this way.”

“Well, we are this time. I asked Mom Sperry and she said yes.”

Across the street, through a vacant field, then into the woods.

“Oh-h-h! Are we going to the river?”

“Yes. Mom said we could if we would stay clear back by this tree. I promised her we would, and you’d better mind or I’ll tend to you.”

“I will, Nona. Honest I will. I haven’t been naughty once since I was eight years old.”

They sat down under the big oak and JoAnne waited expectantly. She had as yet no inkling as to the nature of the special occasion, but she knew better than to be inquisitive. Nona was provokingly slow, almost as if she did not know how to begin. She looked out over the little stream for what seemed to JoAnne a long time. Then she drew a deep breath and began.

“JoAnne, you’ve got to be saved!”

“What?”

“You’ve got to be saved. You’re eight years old and that’s plenty old enough. I’m sure you’ve reached the age of recountability.”

JoAnne stared at her in horrified surprise. “What does that mean?” she gasped.

Nona was nonplussed for a minute, then she replied, “It means you’re old enough to know better and if you don’t behave yourself and if you don’t get saved you’ll go to hell.”

JoAnne was still skeptical. “Where did you learn all that stuff? Where did you get that big word? I don’t believe it is a word.”

“It is so! My Sunday school teacher said it. And about hell, I learned it out of the Bible my own self!”

“Well, what do I have to be saved from?”

“From hell, I said. And I guess you have to be saved from being a bad person, cause the verse said the wicked shall be cast into hell.”

“I’m not a bad person, and I don’t want to be one so I’ll save myself from it.”

“You can’t.”

“I can, too. I can make me behave.”

“That won’t help. You’ve already been bad lots of times. And God says the soul that sinneth has to die. I read that too in a little paper I took off the table at church. You can’t say you *never* sinned!”

JoAnne looked distressed. The oval face, framed by the little curls that had crept out from her braids, was lifted to Nona’s while the brown eyes behind the thick

glasses were wide with fright. Nona noticed the signs of terror and hastened to explain.

"But you don't really have to die on account of your sins, 'cause Jesus died for you. You know that, don't you?"

"Oh, sure. There's lots of songs say that, but I didn't know —"

"That's why I'm telling you. This is just what it means. You *should* have to die, but 'cause Jesus died you don't have to, if you'll let Him save you."

"Oh, I *will*!"

"You've got to understand and get it straight. It's like this. We *all* have sinned. That means everybody, JoAnne, — even me."

"Yes, I know you have," agreed JoAnne. "I can remem —"

"We can't talk about that now," interrupted Nona hastily. "We have to hurry. All of us — everybody — sinned and God hates sin. Miss Pearson said so. So everybody was s'posed to die. But God didn't want them to, so he told Jesus that if He'd come down and get killed it would count for all of us. Now when folks want to get saved they tell God they're sorry and ask Him to forgive them. And He does for Jesus' sake."

"Are you saved, Nona? Did you do that?"

"Yes, I did, and I want you to. It wouldn't be worthwhile at all for me to go to heaven if you weren't there. I'd worry myself sick!"

"But I'll be there. Let me do it now, Nona. I *am* sorry, truly I am."

Under the big tree by the side of the river two little

girls knelt and prayed, then rose to their feet with an assurance that they had completed an important transaction.