

#### IV. JANE'S BABY

Miss Rosetta Ellis, with her front hair in curl-papers, and her back hair bound with a checked apron, was out in her breezy side yard under the firs, shaking her parlor rugs, when Mr. Nathan Patterson drove in. Miss Rosetta had seen him coming down the long red hill, but she had not supposed he would be calling at that time of the morning. So she had not run. Miss Rosetta always ran if anybody called and her front hair was in curl-papers; and, though the errand of the said caller might be life or death, he or she had to wait until Miss Rosetta had taken her hair out. Everybody in Avonlea knew this, because everybody in Avonlea knew everything about everybody else.

But Mr. Patterson had wheeled into the lane so quickly and unexpectedly that Miss Rosetta had had no time to run; so, twitching off the checked apron, she stood her ground as calmly as might be under the disagreeable consciousness of curl-papers.

"Good morning, Miss Ellis," said Mr. Patterson, so somberly that Miss Rosetta instantly felt that he was the bearer of bad news. Usually Mr. Patterson's face was as broad and beaming as a harvest moon. Now his expression was very melancholy and his voice positively sepulchral.

"Good morning," returned Miss Rosetta, crisply and cheerfully.

She, at any rate, would not go into eclipse until she knew the reason therefor. "It is a fine day."

"A very fine day," assented Mr. Patterson, solemnly. "I have just come from the Wheeler place, Miss Ellis, and I regret to say--"

"Charlotte is sick!" cried Miss Rosetta, rapidly. "Charlotte has got another spell with her heart! I knew it! I've been expecting to hear it! Any woman that drives about the country as much as she does is liable to heart disease at any moment. I never go outside of my gate but I meet her gadding off somewhere. Goodness knows who looks after her place. I shouldn't like to trust as much to a hired man as she does. Well, it is very kind of you, Mr. Patterson, to put yourself out to the extent of calling to tell me that Charlotte is sick, but I don't really see why you should take so much trouble--I really don't. It doesn't matter to me whether Charlotte is sick or whether she isn't. YOU know that perfectly well, Mr. Patterson, if anybody does. When Charlotte went and got married, on the sly, to that good-for-nothing Jacob Wheeler--"

"Mrs. Wheeler is quite well," interrupted Mr. Patterson desperately. "Quite well. Nothing at all the matter with her, in fact. I only--"

"Then what do you mean by coming here and telling me she wasn't, and frightening me half to death?" demanded Miss Rosetta, indignantly. "My own heart isn't very strong--it runs in our family--and my doctor warned me to avoid all shocks and excitement. I don't want to be excited, Mr. Patterson. I won't be excited, not even if Charlotte has another spell. It's perfectly useless for you to try to excite me, Mr. Patterson."

"Bless the woman, I'm not trying to excite anybody!" declared Mr. Patterson in exasperation. "I merely called to tell you--"

"To tell me WHAT?" said Miss Rosetta. "How much longer do you mean to keep me in suspense, Mr. Patterson. No doubt you have abundance of spare time, but--I--have NOT."

--that your sister, Mrs. Wheeler, has had a letter from a cousin of yours, and she's in Charlottetown. Mrs. Roberts, I think her name is--"

"Jane Roberts," broke in Miss Rosetta. "Jane Ellis she was, before she was married. What was she writing to Charlotte about? Not that I want to know, of course. I'm not interested in Charlotte's correspondence, goodness knows. But if Jane had anything in particular to write about she should have written to ME. I am the oldest. Charlotte had no business to get a letter from Jane Roberts without consulting me. It's just like her

underhanded ways. She got married the same way. Never said a word to me about it, but just sneaked off with that unprincipled Jacob Wheeler--"

"Mrs. Roberts is very ill. I understand," persisted Mr. Patterson, nobly resolved to do what he had come to do, "dying, in fact, and--"

"Jane ill! Jane dying!" exclaimed Miss Rosetta. "Why, she was the healthiest girl I ever knew! But then I've never seen her, nor heard from her, since she got married fifteen years ago. I dare say her husband was a brute and neglected her, and she's pined away by slow degrees. I've no faith in husbands. Look at Charlotte! Everybody knows how Jacob Wheeler used her. To be sure, she deserved it, but--"

"Mrs. Roberts' husband is dead," said Mr. Patterson. "Died about two months ago, I understand, and she has a little baby six months old, and she thought perhaps Mrs. Wheeler would take it for old times' sake--"

"Did Charlotte ask you to call and tell me this?" demanded Miss Rosetta eagerly.

"No; she just told me what was in the letter. She didn't mention you; but I thought, perhaps, you ought to be told--"

"I knew it," said Miss Rosetta in a tone of bitter assurance. "I could have told you so. Charlotte wouldn't even let me know that Jane was ill. Charlotte would be afraid I would want to get the baby, seeing that Jane and I were such intimate friends long ago. And who has a better right to it than me, I should like to know? Ain't I the oldest? And haven't I had experience in bringing up babies? Charlotte needn't think she is going to run the affairs of our family just because she happened to get married. Jacob Wheeler--"

"I must be going," said Mr. Patterson, gathering up his reins thankfully.

"I am much obliged to you for coming to tell me about Jane," said Miss Rosetta, "even though you have wasted a lot of precious time getting it out. If it hadn't been for you I suppose I should never have known it at all. As it is, I shall start for town just as soon as I can get ready."

"You'll have to hurry if you want to get ahead of Mrs. Wheeler," advised Mr. Patterson. "She's packing her trunk and going on the morning train."

"I'll pack a valise and go on the afternoon train," retorted Miss Rosetta triumphantly. "I'll show Charlotte she isn't running the

Ellis affairs. She married out of them into the Wheelers. She can attend to them. Jacob Wheeler was the most--"

But Mr. Patterson had driven away. He felt that he had done his duty in the face of fearful odds, and he did not want to hear anything more about Jacob Wheeler.

Rosetta Ellis and Charlotte Wheeler had not exchanged a word for ten years. Before that time they had been devoted to each other, living together in the little Ellis cottage on the White Sands road, as they had done ever since their parents' death. The trouble began when Jacob Wheeler had commenced to pay attention to Charlotte, the younger and prettier of two women who had both ceased to be either very young or very pretty. Rosetta had been bitterly opposed to the match from the first. She vowed she had no use for Jacob Wheeler. There were not lacking malicious people to hint that this was because the aforesaid Jacob Wheeler had selected the wrong sister upon whom to bestow his affections. Be that as it might, Miss Rosetta certainly continued to render the course of Jacob Wheeler's true love exceedingly rough and tumultuous. The end of it was that Charlotte had gone quietly away one morning and married Jacob Wheeler without Miss Rosetta's knowing anything about it. Miss Rosetta had never forgiven her for it, and Charlotte had never forgiven the things Rosetta had said to her when she and Jacob returned to the Ellis cottage. Since then the sisters had been avowed and open foes, the only

difference being that Miss Rosetta aired her grievances publicly, in season and out of season, while Charlotte was never heard to mention Rosetta's name. Even the death of Jacob Wheeler, five years after the marriage, had not healed the breach.

Miss Rosetta took out her curl-papers, packed her valise, and caught the late afternoon train for Charlottetown, as she had threatened. All the way there she sat rigidly upright in her seat and held imaginary dialogues with Charlotte in her mind, running something like this on her part:--

"No, Charlotte Wheeler, you are not going to have Jane's baby, and you're very much mistaken if you think so. Oh, all right--we'll see! You don't know anything about babies, even if you are married. I do. Didn't I take William Ellis's baby, when his wife died? Tell me that, Charlotte Wheeler! And didn't the little thing thrive with me, and grow strong and healthy? Yes, even you have to admit that it did, Charlotte Wheeler. And yet you have the presumption to think that you ought to have Jane's baby! Yes, it is presumption, Charlotte Wheeler. And when William Ellis got married again, and took the baby, didn't the child cling to me and cry as if I was its real mother? You know it did, Charlotte Wheeler. I'm going to get and keep Jane's baby in spite of you, Charlotte Wheeler, and I'd like to see you try to prevent me--you that went and got married and never so much as let your own sister know of it! If I had got married in such a

fashion, Charlotte Wheeler, I'd be ashamed to look anybody in the face for the rest of my natural life!"

Miss Rosetta was so interested in thus laying down the law to Charlotte, and in planning out the future life of Jane's baby, that she didn't find the journey to Charlottetown so long or tedious as might have been expected, considering her haste. She soon found her way to the house where her cousin lived. There, to her dismay and real sorrow, she learned that Mrs. Roberts had died at four o'clock that afternoon.

"She seemed dreadful anxious to live until she heard from some of her folks out in Avonlea," said the woman who gave Miss Rosetta the information. "She had written to them about her little girl. She was my sister-in-law, and she lived with me ever since her husband died. I've done my best for her; but I've a big family of my own and I can't see how I'm to keep the child. Poor Jane looked and longed for some one to come from Avonlea, but she couldn't hold out. A patient, suffering creature she was!"

"I'm her cousin," said Miss Rosetta, wiping her eyes, "and I have come for the baby. I'll take it home with me after the funeral; and, if you please, Mrs. Gordon, let me see it right away, so it can get accustomed to me. Poor Jane! I wish I could have got here in time to see her, she and I were such friends long ago. We were far more intimate and confidential than ever her and



Charlotte was. Charlotte knows that, too!"

The vim with which Miss Rosetta snapped this out rather amazed Mrs. Gordon, who couldn't understand it at all. But she took Miss Rosetta upstairs to the room where the baby was sleeping.

"Oh, the little darling," cried Miss Rosetta, all her old maidishness and oddity falling away from her like a garment, and all her innate and denied motherhood shining out in her face like a transforming illumination. "Oh, the sweet, dear, pretty little thing!"

The baby was a darling--a six-months' old beauty with little golden ringlets curling and glistening all over its tiny head. As Miss Rosetta hung over it, it opened its eyes and then held out its tiny hands to her with a gurgle of confidence.

"Oh, you sweetest!" said Miss Rosetta rapturously, gathering it up in her arms. "You belong to me, darling--never, never, to that under-handed Charlotte! What is its name, Mrs. Gordon?"

"It wasn't named," said Mrs. Gordon. "Guess you'll have to name it yourself, Miss Ellis."

"Camilla Jane," said Miss Rosetta without a moment's hesitation.

"Jane after its mother, of course; and I have always thought

Camilla the prettiest name in the world. Charlotte would be sure to give it some perfectly heathenish name. I wouldn't put it past her calling the poor innocent Mehitable."

Miss Rosetta decided to stay in Charlottetown until after the funeral. That night she lay with the baby on her arm, listening with joy to its soft little breathing. She did not sleep or wish to sleep. Her waking fancies were more alluring than any visions of dreamland. Moreover, she gave a spice to them by occasionally snapping some vicious sentences out loud at Charlotte.

Miss Rosetta fully expected Charlotte along on the following morning and girded herself for the fray; but no Charlotte appeared. Night came; no Charlotte. Another morning and no Charlotte. Miss Rosetta was hopelessly puzzled. What had happened? Dear, dear, had Charlotte taken a bad heart spell, on hearing that she, Rosetta, had stolen a march on her to Charlottetown? It was quite likely. You never knew what to expect of a woman who had married Jacob Wheeler!

The truth was, that the very evening Miss Rosetta had left Avonlea Mrs. Jacob Wheeler's hired man had broken his leg and had had to be conveyed to his distant home on a feather bed in an express wagon. Mrs. Wheeler could not leave home until she had obtained another hired man. Consequently, it was the evening after the funeral when Mrs. Wheeler whisked up the steps of the

Gordon house and met Miss Rosetta coming out with a big white bundle in her arms.

The eyes of the two women met defiantly. Miss Rosetta's face wore an air of triumph, chastened by a remembrance of the funeral that afternoon. Mrs. Wheeler's face, except for eyes, was as expressionless as it usually was. Unlike the tall, fair, fat Miss Rosetta, Mrs. Wheeler was small and dark and thin, with an eager, careworn face.

"How is Jane?" she said abruptly, breaking the silence of ten years in saying it.

"Jane is dead and buried, poor thing," said Miss Rosetta calmly.

"I am taking her baby, little Camilla Jane, home with me."

"The baby belongs to me," cried Mrs. Wheeler passionately. "Jane wrote to me about her. Jane meant that I should have her. I've come for her."

"You'll go back without her then," said Miss Rosetta, serene in the possession that is nine points of the law. "The child is mine, and she is going to stay mine. You can make up your mind to that, Charlotte Wheeler. A woman who eloped to get married isn't fit to be trusted with a baby, anyhow. Jacob Wheeler--"

But Mrs. Wheeler had rushed past into the house. Miss Rosetta composedly stepped into the cab and drove to the station. She fairly bridled with triumph; and underneath the triumph ran a queer undercurrent of satisfaction over the fact that Charlotte had spoken to her at last. Miss Rosetta would not look at this satisfaction, or give it a name, but it was there.

Miss Rosetta arrived safely back in Avonlea with Camilla Jane and within ten hours everybody in the settlement knew the whole story, and every woman who could stand on her feet had been up to the Ellis cottage to see the baby. Mrs. Wheeler arrived home twenty-four hours later, and silently betook herself to her farm. When her Avonlea neighbors sympathized with her in her disappointment, she said nothing, but looked all the more darkly determined. Also, a week later, Mr. William J. Blair, the Carmody storekeeper, had an odd tale to tell. Mrs. Wheeler had come to the store and bought a lot of fine flannel and muslin and valenciennes. Now, what in the name of time, did Mrs. Wheeler want with such stuff? Mr. William J. Blair couldn't make head or tail of it, and it worried him. Mr. Blair was so accustomed to know what everybody bought anything for that such a mystery quite upset him.

Miss Rosetta had exulted in the possession of little Camilla Jane for a month, and had been so happy that she had almost given up

inveighing against Charlotte. Her conversations, instead of tending always to Jacob Wheeler, now ran Camilla Janeward; and this, folks thought, was an improvement.

One afternoon, Miss Rosetta, leaving Camilla Jane snugly sleeping in her cradle in the kitchen, had slipped down to the bottom of the garden to pick her currants. The house was hidden from her sight by the copse of cherry trees, but she had left the kitchen window open, so that she could hear the baby if it awakened and cried. Miss Rosetta sang happily as she picked her currants. For the first time since Charlotte had married Jacob Wheeler Miss Rosetta felt really happy--so happy that at there was no room in her heart for bitterness. In fancy she looked forward to the coming years, and saw Camilla Jane growing up into girlhood, fair and lovable.

"She'll be a beauty," reflected Miss Rosetta complacently. "Jane was a handsome girl. She shall always be dressed as nice as I can manage it, and I'll get her an organ, and have her take painting and music lessons. Parties, too! I'll give her a real coming-out party when she's eighteen and the very prettiest dress that's to be had. Dear me, I can hardly wait for her to grow up, though she's sweet enough now to make one wish she could stay a baby forever."

When Miss Rosetta returned to the kitchen, her eyes fell on an

empty cradle. Camilla Jane was gone!

Miss Rosetta promptly screamed. She understood at a glance what had happened. Six months' old babies do not get out of their cradles and disappear through closed doors without any assistance.

"Charlotte has been here," gasped Miss Rosetta. "Charlotte has stolen Camilla Jane! I might have expected it. I might have known when I heard that story about her buying muslin and flannel. It's just like Charlotte to do such an underhand trick. But I'll go after her! I'll show her! She'll find out she has got Rosetta Ellis to deal with and no Wheeler!"

Like a frantic creature and wholly forgetting that her hair was in curl-papers, Miss Rosetta hurried up the hill and down the shore road to the Wheeler Farm--a place she had never visited in her life before.

The wind was off-shore and only broke the bay's surface into long silvery ripples, and sent sheeny shadows flying out across it from every point and headland, like transparent wings.

The little gray house, so close to the purring waves that in storms their spray splashed over its very doorstep, seemed deserted. Miss Rosetta pounded lustily on the front door. This

producing no result, she marched around to the back door and knocked. No answer. Miss Rosetta tried the door. It was locked.

"Guilty conscience," sniffed Miss Rosetta. "Well, I shall stay here until I see that perfidious Charlotte, if I have to camp in the yard all night."

Miss Rosetta was quite capable of doing this, but she was spared the necessity; walking boldly up to the kitchen window, and peering through it, she felt her heart swell with anger as she beheld Charlotte sitting calmly by the table with Camilla Jane on her knee. Beside her was a befrilled and bemuslined cradle, and on a chair lay the garments in which Miss Rosetta had dressed the baby. It was clad in an entirely new outfit, and seemed quite at home with its new possessor. It was laughing and cooing, and making little dabs at her with its dimpled hands.

"Charlotte Wheeler," cried Miss Rosetta, rapping sharply on the window-pane. "I've come for that child! Bring her out to me at once--at once, I say! How dare you come to my house and steal a baby? You're no better than a common burglar. Give me Camilla Jane, I say!"

Charlotte came over to the window with the baby in her arms and triumph glittering in her eyes.

"There is no such child as Camilla Jane here," she said. "This is Barbara Jane. She belongs to me."

With that Mrs. Wheeler pulled down the shade.

Miss Rosetta had to go home. There was nothing else for her to do. On her way she met Mr. Patterson and told him in full the story of her wrongs. It was all over Avonlea by night, and created quite a sensation. Avonlea had not had such a toothsome bit of gossip for a long time.

Mrs. Wheeler exulted in the possession of Barbara Jane for six weeks, during which Miss Rosetta broke her heart with loneliness and longing, and meditated futile plots for the recovery of the baby. It was hopeless to think of stealing it back or she would have tried to. The hired man at the Wheeler place reported that Mrs. Wheeler never left it night or day for a single moment. She even carried it with her when she went to milk the cows.

"But my turn will come," said Miss Rosetta grimly. "Camilla Jane is mine, and if she was called Barbara for a century it wouldn't alter that fact! Barbara, indeed! Why not have called her Methusaleh and have done with it?"

One afternoon in October, when Miss Rosetta was picking her



apples and thinking drearily about lost Camilla Jane, a woman came running breathlessly down the hill and into the yard. Miss Rosetta gave an exclamation of amazement and dropped her basket of apples. Of all incredible things! The woman was Charlotte-- Charlotte who had never set foot on the grounds of the Ellis cottage since her marriage ten years ago, Charlotte, bare-headed, wild-eyed, distraught, wringing her hands and sobbing.

Miss Rosetta flew to meet her.

"You've scalded Camilla Jane to death!" she exclaimed. "I always knew you would--always expected it!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, come quick, Rosetta!" gasped Charlotte.

"Barbara Jane is in convulsions and I don't know what to do. The hired man has gone for the doctor. You were the nearest, so I came to you. Jenny White was there when they came on, so I left her and ran. Oh, Rosetta, come, come, if you have a spark of humanity in you! You know what to do for convulsions--you saved the Ellis baby when it had them. Oh, come and save Barbara Jane!"

"You mean Camilla Jane, I presume?" said Miss Rosetta firmly, in spite of her agitation.

For a second Charlotte Wheeler hesitated. Then she said

passionately: "Yes, yes, Camilla Jane--any name you like! Only come."

Miss Rosetta went, and not a moment too soon, either. The doctor lived eight miles away and the baby was very bad. The two women and Jenny White worked over her for hours. It was not until dark, when the baby was sleeping soundly and the doctor had gone, after telling Miss Rosetta that she had saved the child's life, that a realization of the situation came home to them.

"Well," said Miss Rosetta, dropping into an armchair with a long sigh of weariness, "I guess you'll admit now, Charlotte Wheeler, that you are hardly a fit person to have charge of a baby, even if you had to go and steal it from me. I should think your conscience would reproach you--that is, if any woman who would marry Jacob Wheeler in such an underhanded fashion has a--"

"I--I wanted the baby," sobbed Charlotte, tremulously. "I was so lonely here. I didn't think it was any harm to take her, because Jane gave her to me in her letter. But you have saved her life, Rosetta, and you--you can have her back, although it will break my heart to give her up. But, oh, Rosetta, won't you let me come and see her sometimes? I love her so I can't bear to give her up entirely."

"Charlotte," said Miss Rosetta firmly, "the most sensible thing

for you to do is just to come back with the baby. You are worried to death trying to run this farm with the debt Jacob Wheeler left on it for you. Sell it, and come home with me. And we'll both have the baby then."

"Oh, Rosetta, I'd love to," faltered Charlotte. "I've--I've wanted to be good friends with you again so much. But I thought you were so hard and bitter you'd never make up."

"Maybe I've talked too much," conceded Miss Rosetta, "but you ought to know me well enough to know I didn't mean a word of it. It was your never saying anything, no matter what I said, that riled me up so bad. Let bygones be bygones, and come home, Charlotte."

"I will," said Charlotte resolutely, wiping away her tears. "I'm sick of living here and putting up with hired men. I'll be real glad to go home, Rosetta, and that's the truth. I've had a hard enough time. I s'pose you'll say I deserved it; but I was fond of Jacob, and--"

"Of course, of course. Why shouldn't you be?" said Miss Rosetta briskly. "I'm sure Jacob Wheeler was a good enough soul, if he was a little slack-twisted. I'd like to hear anybody say a word against him in my presence. Look at that blessed child, Charlotte. Isn't she the sweetest thing? I'm desperate glad you

are coming back home, Charlotte. I've never been able to put up a decent mess of mustard pickles since you went away, and you were always such a hand with them! We'll be real snug and cozy again--you and me and little Camilla Barbara Jane."