

# Dandelion Cottage

CARROLL WATSON RANKIN



>

*Illustrated by Mary Stevens*

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*To*  
**RHODA, FRANCES, AND ELEANOR**

*whose lively interest made the writing of this little book a joyful task.*

## THE PERSONS OF THE STORY

Bettie Tucker }  
Jeanie Mapes } *The Dandelion Cottagers*  
Mabel Bennett }  
Marjory Vale }

The Tucker Family: *Mostly boys*

*The Mapes Family: Two parents, two boys*

Dr. and Mrs. Bennett: *Merely Parents*

*Aunty Jane: A Parental Substitute*

*Mrs. Crane: The Pleasantest Neighbor*

*Mr. Black: The Senior Warden*

*Mr. Downing: The Junior Warden*

Miss Blossom: *The Lodger*

*Mr. Blossom: The Organ Tuner*

*Grandma Pike: Another Neighbor*

Mr. and Mrs. Milligan }  
Laura Milligan }  
The Milligan Boy and } *The Unpleasantest Neighbors*  
the Milligan Baby }  
The Milligan Dog }

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# **Dandelion Cottage**



# CHAPTER 1

## Mr. Black's Terms

The little square cottage was unoccupied. It had stood for many years on the parish property, having indeed been built long before the parish bought the land for church purposes. It was easy to see how Dandelion Cottage came by its name at first, for growing all about it were great, fluffy, golden dandelions; but afterwards there was another good reason why the name was appropriate, as you will discover shortly.

The cottage stood almost directly behind the big stone church in Lakeville, a thriving Northern Michigan town, and did not show very plainly from the street because it was so small by contrast with everything else near it. This was fortunate, because, after the Tuckers had moved into the big new rectory, the smaller house looked decidedly forlorn and deserted.

"We'll leave it just where it stands," the church wardens had said, many years previously. "It's precisely the right size for Doctor and Mrs. Gunn, for they would rather have a small house than a large one. When they leave us and we are selecting another clergyman, we'll try to get one with a small family."

This plan worked beautifully for a number of years. It succeeded so well, in fact, that the vestry finally forgot to be cautious, and when at last it secured the services of Dr. Tucker, the church had grown so used to clergymen with small families that the vestrymen engaged the new



minister without remembering to ask if his family would fit Dandelion Cottage.

But when Dr. Tucker and Mrs. Tucker and eight little Tuckers, some on foot and some in baby carriages, arrived, the vestrymen regretted this oversight. They could see at a glance that the tiny cottage could never hold them all.

"We'll just have to build a rectory on the other lot," said Mr. Black, the senior warden. "That's all there is about it. The cottage is all out of repair, anyway. It wasn't well built in the first place, and the last three clergymen have complained bitterly of the inconvenience of having to hold up umbrellas in the different rooms every time it rained. Their wives objected to the wall paper and to being obliged to keep the potatoes in the bedroom closet. It's really time we had a new rectory."

"It certainly is," returned the junior warden, "and we'll all have to take turns entertaining all the little Tuckers that there isn't room for in the cottage while the new house is getting built."

Seven of the eight little Tuckers were boys. If it hadn't been for Bettie they would *all* have been boys, but Bettie saved the day. She was a slender twelve-year-old little Bettie, with big brown eyes, a mop of short brown curls, and such odd clothes. Busy Mrs. Tucker was so in the habit of making boys' garments that she could not help giving a boyish cut even to Bettie's dresses. There were always sailor collars to the waists, and the skirts were invariably kilted. Besides this, the little girl wore boys' shoes.

"You see," explained Bettie, who was a cheerful little body, "Tommy has to take them next, and of course it wouldn't pay to buy shoes for just one girl."

The little Tuckers were not the only children in the neighborhood. Bettie found a bosom friend in Dr. Bennett's Mabel, who lived next door to the rectory, another in Jeanie Mapes, who lived across the street, and still another in Marjory Vale, whose home was next door to Dandelion Cottage.

Jean, as her little friends best liked to call her, was a sweet-faced, gentle-voiced girl of fourteen. Mothers of other small girls were always glad to see their own more scatterbrained daughters tucked under Jean's loving wing, for thoroughly-nice Jean, without being in the least priggish, was considered a safe and desirable companion. It doesn't *always* follow that children like the persons it is considered best for them to like, but in Jean's

case both parents and daughters agreed that Jean was not only safe but delightful—the charming daughter of a charming mother.

Marjory, a year younger and nearly a head shorter than Jean, often seemed older. Outwardly, she was a sedate small person, slight, blue-eyed, graceful, and very fair. Her manners at times were very pleasing, her self-possession almost remarkable; this was the result of careful training by a conscientious, but at that time sadly unappreciated, maiden aunt who was Marjory's sole guardian. There were moments, however, when Marjory, who was less sedate than she appeared, forgot to be polite. At such times, her ways were apt to be less pleasing than those of either Bettie or Jean, because her wit was nimbler, her tongue sharper, and her heart a trifle less tender. Her mother had died when Marjory was only a few weeks old, her father had lived only two years longer, and the rather solitary little girl had missed much of the warm family affection that had fallen to the lot of her three more fortunate friends. Those who knew her well found much in her to like, but among her schoolmates there were girls who said that Marjory was "stuck-up," affected, and "too smart."

Mabel, the fourth in this little quartet of friends, was eleven, large for her age and young for her years, always an unfortunate combination of circumstances. She was intensely human and therefore liable to err, and, it may be said, she very seldom missed an opportunity. In school she read with a tremendous amount of expression but mispronounced half the words; when questions were asked, she waved her hand triumphantly aloft and gave anything but the right answer; she had a surprising stock of energy, but most of it was misdirected. Warm-hearted, generous, heedless, hot-tempered, and always blundering, she was something of a trial at home and abroad; yet no one could help loving her, for everybody realized that she would grow up some day into a really fine woman, and that all that was needed in the meantime was considerable patience. Rearing Mabel was not unlike the task of bringing up a St. Bernard puppy. Mrs. Bennett was decidedly glad to note the growing friendship among the four girls, for she hoped that Mabel would in time grow dignified and sweet like Jean, thoughtful and tender like Bettie, graceful and prettily mannered like Marjory. But this happy result had yet to be achieved.

The little one-story cottage, too much out of repair to be rented, stood empty and neglected. To most persons it was an unattractive spot if not actually an eyesore. The steps sagged in a dispirited way, some of the windows were broken, and the fence, in sympathy perhaps with the house, had shed its pickets and leaned inward with a discouraged, hopeless air.

But Bettie looked at the little cottage longingly—she could gaze right down upon it from the back bedroom window—a great many times a day. It didn't seem a bit too big for a playhouse. Indeed, it seemed a great pity that such a delightful little building should go unoccupied when Bettie and her homeless dolls were simply suffering for just such a shelter.

"Wouldn't it be nice," said Bettie, one day in the early spring, "if we four girls could have Dandelion Cottage for our very own?"

"Wouldn't it be sweet," mimicked Marjory, "if we could have the moon and about twenty stars to play jacks with?"

"The cottage isn't *quite* so far away," said Jean. "It *would* be just lovely to have it, for we never have a place to play in comfortably."

"We're generally disturbing grown-ups, I notice," said Marjory, comically imitating her Aunt Jane's severest manner. "A little less noise, if you please. Is it really necessary to laugh so much and so often?"

"Even Mother gets tired of us sometimes," confided Jean. "There are days when no one seems to want all of us at once."

"I know it," said Bettie, pathetically, "but it's worse for me than it is for the rest of you. You have your rooms and nobody to meddle with your things. I no sooner get my dolls nicely settled in one corner than I have to move them into another, because the babies poke their eyes out. It's dreadful, too, to have to live with so many boys. I fixed up the cunningest playhouse under the clothes-reel last week, but the very minute it was finished Rob came home with a horrid porcupine and I had to move out in a hurry."

"Perhaps," suggested Marjory, "we could rent the cottage."

"Who'd pay the rent?" demanded Mabel. "My allowance is five cents a week and I have to pay a fine of one cent every time I'm late to meals."

"How much do you have left?" asked Jeanie, laughing.

"Not a cent. I was seven cents in debt at the end of last week."

"I get two cents a hundred for digging dandelions," said Marjory, "but it takes just forever to dig them, and ugh! I just hate it."

"I never have any money at all," sighed Bettie. "You see there are so many of us."

"Let's go peek in at the windows," suggested Mabel, springing up from the grass. "That much won't cost us anything at any rate."

Away scampered the four girls, taking a short cut through Bettie's back yard.

The cottage had been vacant for more than a year and had not improved in appearance. Rampant vines clambered over the windows and nowhere else in town were there such luxurious weeds as grew in the cottage yard. Nowhere else were there such mammoth dandelions or such prickly burrs. The girls waded fearlessly through them, parted the vines, and, pressing their noses against the glass, peered into the cottage parlor.

"What a nice, square little room!" said Marjory.

"I don't think the paper is very pretty," said Mabel.

"We could cover most of the spots with pictures," suggested practical Marjory.

"It looks to me sort of spidery," said Mabel, who was always somewhat pessimistic. "Probably there's rats, too."

"I know how to stop up rat holes," said Bettie, who had not lived with seven brothers without acquiring a number of useful accomplishments. "I'm not afraid of spiders—that is, not so *very* much."

"What are you doing here?" demanded a gruff voice so suddenly that everybody jumped.

The startled girls wheeled about. There stood Bettie's most devoted friend, the senior warden.

"Oh!" cried Bettie, "it's only Mr. Black."

"Were you looking for something?" asked Mr. Black.

"Yes," said Bettie. "We're looking for a house. We'd like to rent this one, only we haven't a scrap of money."

"And what in the name of common sense would you do with it?"

"We want it for our dolls," said Bettie, turning a pair of big pleading brown eyes upon Mr. Black. "You see, we haven't any place to play. Marjory's Aunt Jane won't let her cut papers in the house, so she can't have any paper dolls, and I can't play any place because I have so many brothers. They tomahawk all my dolls when they play Indian, shoot them with beans when they play soldiers, and drown them all when they play shipwreck. Don't you think we might be allowed to use the cottage if we'd promise to be very careful and not do any damage?"

"We'd clean it up," offered Marjory, as an inducement.

"We'd mend the rat holes," offered Jean, looking hopefully at Bettie.

"Would you dig the weeds?" demanded Mr. Black.

There was a deep silence. The girls looked at the sea of dandelions and then at one another.

"Yes," said Marjory, finally breaking the silence. "We'd even dig the weeds."

"Yes," echoed the others. "We'd even dig the weeds—and there's just millions of 'em."

"Good!" said Mr. Black. "Now, we'll all sit down on the steps and I'll tell you what we'll do. It happens that the Village Improvement Society has just notified the vestry that the weeds on this lot must be removed before they go to seed—the neighbors have complained about them. It would cost the parish several dollars to hire a man to do the work, and we're short of funds just now. Now, if you four girls will pull up every weed in this place before the end of next week you shall have the use of the cottage for all the rest of the summer in return for your services. How does that strike you?"

"Oh!" cried Bettie, throwing her arms about Mr. Black's neck. "Do let me hug you. Oh, I'm glad—glad!"

"There, there!" cried stout Mr. Black, shaking Bettie off and dropping her where the dandelions grew thickest. "I didn't say I was to be strangled as part of the bargain. You'd better save your muscle for the dandelions. Remember, you've got to pay your rent in advance. I shan't hand over the key until the last weed is dug."

"We'll begin this minute!" cried enthusiastic Mabel. "I'm going straight home for a knife."



## CHAPTER 2

### Paying the Rent

"This is a whopping big yard," said Mabel, looking disconsolately at two dandelions and one burdock in the bottom of a bushel basket. "There doesn't seem to be any place to begin."

"I'm going to weed out a place big enough to sit in," announced Bettie. "Then I'll make it bigger and bigger all around me in every direction until it joins the clearing next to mine."

"I'm a soldier," said Marjory, brandishing a trowel, "vanquishing my enemies. You know in books the hero always battles single-handed with about a million foes and always kills them all and everybody lives happy ever after—zip! There goes one!"

"I'm a pioneer," said Jean, slashing away at a huge, tough burdock. "I'm chopping down the forest primeval to make a potato patch. The dandelions are skulking Indians, and I'm capturing them to put in my bushel-basket prison."

"I'm just digging weeds," said prosaic Mabel, "and I don't like it."

"Neither does anybody else," said Marjory, "but I guess having the cottage will be worth it. Just pretend it's something else and then you won't mind it so much. Play you're digging for diamonds."

"I can't," returned Mabel, hopelessly. "I haven't any imagination. This is just plain dirt and I can't make myself believe it's anything else."

By supper time the cottage yard presented a decidedly disreputable appearance. Before the weeds had been disturbed they stood upright, presenting an even surface of green with a light crest of dandelion gold. But now it was different. Although the number of weeds was not greatly decreased, the yard looked as if, indeed, a battle had been fought there. Mr. Black, passing by on his way to town, began to wonder if he had been quite wise in turning it over to the girls.

At four o'clock the following morning, sleepy Bettie tumbled out of bed and into her clothes. Then she slipped quietly downstairs, out of doors, through the convenient hole in the back fence, and into the cottage yard. She had been digging for more than an hour when Jean, rubbing a pair of sleepy eyes, put in her appearance.

"Oh!" cried Jean, disappointedly. "I meant to have a huge bare field to show you when you came, and here you are ahead of me. What a lot you've done!"

"Yes," assented Bettie, happily. "There's room for me and my basket, too, in my patch. I'll have to go home after a while to help dress the children."

Young though she was—she was only twelve—Bettie was a most helpful young person. It is hard to imagine what Mrs. Tucker would have done without her cheerful little daughter. Bettie always spoke of the boys as "the children," and she helped her mother darn their stockings, sew on their buttons, and sort out their collars. The care of the family baby, too, fell to her lot.

The boys were good boys, but they were boys. They were willing to do errands or pile wood or carry out ashes, but none of them ever thought of doing one of these things without first being told—sometimes they had to be told a great many times. It was different with Bettie. If Tom ate crackers on the front porch, it was Bettie who ran for the broom to brush up the crumbs. If the second-baby-but-one needed his face washed—and it seemed to Bettie that there never was a time when he *didn't* need it washed—it was Bettie who attended to it. If the cat looked hungry, it was Bettie who gave her a saucer of milk. Dick's rabbits and Rob's porcupine would have starved if Bettie had not fed them, and Donald's dog knew that if no one else remembered his bone kind Bettie would bear it in mind.

The boys' legs were round and sturdy, but Bettie's were very much like pipe stems.

"I don't have time to get fat," Bettie would say. "But you don't need to worry about me. I think I'm the healthiest person in the house. At least I'm the only one that hasn't had to have breakfast in bed this week."

Neither Marjory nor Mabel appeared during the morning to dig their share of the weeds, but when school was out that afternoon they were all on hand with their baskets.

"I had to stay," said Mabel, who was the last to arrive. "I missed two words in spelling."

"What were they?" asked Marjory.

"'Parachute' and 'dandelion.' I hate dandelions, anyway. I don't know what parachutes are, but if they're any sort of weeds I hate them, too."

The girls laughed. Mabel always looked on the gloomiest side of things and always grumbled. She seemed to thrive on it, however, for she was built very much like a barrel and her cheeks were like a pair of round red apples. She was always honest, if a little too frank in expressing her opinions, and the girls liked her in spite of her blunt ways. She was the youngest of the quartet, being only eleven.

"There doesn't seem to be much grass left after the weeds are out," said Bettie, surveying the bare, sandy patch she had made.

"This has *always* been a weedy old place," replied Jean. "I think the whole neighborhood will feel obliged to us if we ever get the lot cleared. Perhaps our landlord will plant grass seed. It would be fine to have a lawn."

"Perhaps," said Marjory, "he'll let us have some flower beds. Wouldn't it be lovely to have nasturtiums running right up the sides of the house?"

"They'd be lovely among the vines," agreed Bettie. "I've some poppy seeds that we might plant in a long narrow bed by the fence."

"There are hundreds of little pansy plants coming up all over our yard," said Jean. "We might make a little round bed of them right here where I'm sitting. What are you going to plant in *your* bed, Mabel?"

"Butter-beans," said that practical young person, promptly.



"Well," said Bettie, with a long sigh, "we'll have to work faster than this or summer will be over before we have a chance to plant *anything*. This is the biggest *little* yard I ever did see."

For a time there was silence. Marjory, the soldier, fell upon her foes with renewed vigor, and soon had an entire regiment in durance vile. Jean, the pioneer, fell upon the forest with so much energy that its speedy extermination was threatened. Mabel seized upon the biggest and toughest burdock she could find and pulled with both hands and all her might, until, with a sharp crack, the root suddenly parted and Mabel, very much to her own surprise, turned a back somersault and landed in Bettie's basket.

"Hi there!" cried a voice from the road. "How are you youngsters getting along?"

The girls jumped to their feet—all but Mabel, who was still wedged tightly in Bettie's basket. There was Mr. Black, with his elbows on the fence, and with him was the president of the Village Improvement Society; both were smiling broadly.

"Sick of your bargain?" asked Mr. Black.

The four girls shook their heads emphatically.

"Hard work?"

Four heads bobbed up and down.

"Well," said Mr. Black, encouragingly, "you've made considerable headway today."

"Where are you putting the weeds?" asked the president of the Village Improvement Society.

"On the back porch in a piano box," said Bettie. "We had a big pile of them last night, but they shrank like everything before morning. If they do that *every* time, it won't be necessary for Mabel to jump on them to press them down."

"Let me know when you have a wagon load," said Mr. Black. "I'll have them hauled away for you."

For the rest of the week the girls worked early and late. They began almost at daylight, and the mosquitoes found them still digging at dusk.

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