

Samantha

1904

The Gift



Nellie

CHAPTER 1



Samantha Parkington leaned over the porch railing and looked out over the broad lawn toward the road, listening for the heavy clip-clop of the milkman's horse, a big dapple-gray named Cloudy. Samantha had saved her apple core for Cloudy. She loved the tickly feeling of the gentle horse taking the apple from her hand. But so far, the road was quiet and empty, except for two young men whizzing by on bicycles. Their bicycles looked so tall and spindly, it was hard to believe they could hold the weight of a rider. *Ridiculous contraptions*, Grandmary called them. Samantha knew her grandmother thought bicycles were dangerous, and she couldn't imagine riding one herself. Even if she could, she was sure Grandmary would say that bicycle riding wasn't ladylike.

Just then, at the big yellow house across the yard, a side door opened and a girl appeared. She was dressed in a gray servant's uniform and carried an enormous wicker basket of laundry. *Why, she doesn't look any older than I am*, thought Samantha, who was nine. *I wonder who she is*.

Samantha heard a clinking noise by the kitchen door.

Mrs. Hawkins, Grandmary's cook, stepped outside carrying a basket of empty milk bottles. She set them down for the milkman to collect.

"What are you doing out here so early this morning, Miss Samantha?" asked Mrs. Hawkins.

"I'm waiting for Cloudy, so I can feed him my apple core," said Samantha. "But look, Mrs. Hawkins—there's a new girl working next door! She seems awfully small to carry such a big basket by herself."

"I'm sure she's accustomed to hard work," Mrs. Hawkins replied. "Not every child is as fortunate as you, Miss Samantha." Mrs. Hawkins went back into the kitchen.

Samantha sighed. Sometimes she couldn't help feeling lonely. She loved her grandmother very much, but it wasn't the same as having a mother and father or brothers and sisters.

Next door, the girl had begun hanging the laundry on long clotheslines. The heavy, wet sheets were much larger than she was, and she had to keep the sheets from touching the ground as she stood on a stool and clipped each sheet corner onto a clothesline with wooden pegs.



Samantha hopped off the porch and crossed the yard to where the girl was working. "May I help?" she asked,

picking up a sheet. "It will be easier with two."

"Oh, no, miss—I can do it myself," the girl said quickly. "You mustn't trouble yourself."

"It's no trouble," said Samantha. "I'm just waiting for the milkman, so I might as well help you while I wait. My name is Samantha Parkington," she added, remembering her manners. "Please, what's yours?"

"I'm Nellie O'Malley, miss," the girl said shyly, bobbing in a quick curtsy.

"It's very nice to meet you, Nellie," said Samantha. "When did you begin working here?"

"Two days ago," said Nellie. "I used to live in the city with my family. I was working in a thread factory, but the bad air made me cough, so my parents sent me here to work instead."

"You had to leave your family?" Samantha asked in disbelief. Imagine leaving your family, if you were lucky enough to have one!

"Yes, miss. But things are better for me here," said Nellie. "The air is clean, and I'm not coughing anymore. There's more food to eat here, too, and I can even go to school." She reached for a pillowcase and shook out the wrinkles. "But I do miss my family," she added.

"Well, I'm glad you're here," said Samantha. "My parents died when I was five, so I live with Grandmary—that's

my grandmother. And I have an uncle who lives in the city." Her eyes lit up. "Say, I've just had the most wonderful idea, Nellie! The next time we go to the city to visit my uncle, you could come with us and visit your family!"

Nellie shook her head. "Oh, thank you, but no, miss. I don't think I'd be permitted to—" Suddenly Nellie went silent, and Samantha felt a hand gripping her shoulder.

"Sakes alive, Miss Samantha, I've been looking all over for you!" It was Elsa, Grandmary's maid, who loved to scold. "Your grandmother wants you. She won't be pleased to know that you've been hobnobbing with servant girls." Elsa jabbed a finger at Nellie. "You there—stick to your work and stop bothering Miss Samantha," she ordered, putting her hand against Samantha's back and steering her toward the house. Samantha quickly tossed her apple core into the bushes and gave Nellie a sorry look.

Elsa led Samantha into the parlor, where Grandmary was sitting in a high-back chair. "Begging your pardon, ma'am, here is Miss Samantha," said Elsa. "I found her next door, hanging laundry with the new servant girl!"

"That will be all, Elsa," said Grandmary. The maid nodded briskly, turned on her heel, and left the parlor.

"Come here, Samantha," said Grandmary. "Would you like to tell me what you were doing next door?"

"Yes, Grandmary," Samantha said earnestly. "I was



helping Nellie with the big sheets. Nellie's quite small, and it was hard for her to hang them all by herself."

"I see," said Grandmary.

"Nellie used to work in a thread factory in the city," Samantha went on, "but the air was making her cough. So her parents sent her here to Mount Bedford to work. I think she's about my same age, and now she lives right next door to us!"

Grandmary looked thoughtful. "I know you mean well, my dear," she said, "but remember, you and Nellie cannot be friends."

Samantha's face fell. "But—but why not?"

"Because you are a proper young lady, and Nellie is

a servant," said Grandmary. "She is not a suitable friend for you."

Samantha hid her disappointment. She knew she must not contradict Grandmary, so she said, "Yes, ma'am. But Nellie is all alone here." She wanted to add, *And so am I*, but instead she said, "It must be hard for her to be so far away from her family."

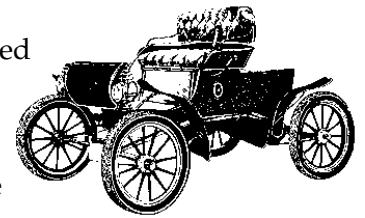
Grandmary took Samantha's hand in hers. "Perhaps it is. Still, you must respect her position as a servant and not distract her from her responsibilities," Grandmary said gently. Then she squeezed Samantha's hand and said, "Although you may not play with Nellie, you are permitted to *help* her."

Samantha brightened. "That's just what I was doing!"

"Very well, then." Grandmary reached up and straightened Samantha's hair bow. "Now, please go and practice the piano for an hour. Gardner is coming for lunch, and he's bringing his friend Miss Cornelia Pitt." A smile flickered across her face. "If only he wouldn't insist on bringing that noisy automobile, too. How a fine lady such as Miss Pitt can abide being carried about in such a contraption, I simply can't imagine."

Samantha could. Once Uncle Gard had taken her for a ride in his automobile, and she had found it thrilling—so much faster and smoother than riding in a horse-drawn

carriage! Never before had she moved with such speed! She wondered what Miss Pitt thought of riding in an automobile: Did she enjoy it, like Samantha, or frown on it, like Grandmary?



Samantha went into the music room, settled down at the piano, and began to play a scale, but her mind wasn't on the music. She was still thinking about Miss Cornelia Pitt. Grandmary had told her a little bit about Uncle Gard's new friend, the lovely young lady named Cornelia. Samantha was curious about her. But funnily enough, now that Samantha was going to meet her, she felt uneasy. Her Uncle Gard was special. He always seemed to understand Samantha in a way that no one else did, and he always made her feel as if she was his favorite person in the world. Would things be the same when Miss Pitt was here, too? Or would her uncle give this Miss Cornelia Pitt his attention instead?

With both hands, Samantha banged a C-sharp chord. C for Cornelia. *I'm not sure I want to meet her after all*, thought Samantha. Why couldn't Miss Pitt just stay in New York City and let Samantha have Uncle Gard all to herself in Mount Bedford?

"Land sakes, Miss Samantha," scolded Elsa, as she bustled about the music room with her feather duster.

“What has that piano ever done to you that you treat it so severely?”

Samantha flushed as she hurried through the rest of her scales. After Elsa left the room, Samantha closed the lid of the piano and stood up. She went to the window and peeked out, hoping for another glimpse of Nellie. Instead, she heard several noisy pops followed by a loud rumble and the crunch of tires on gravel. A sleek black roadster pulled into the driveway and sputtered to a stop.

“Grandmary!” Samantha called out, too filled with excitement to be proper and ladylike. “It’s Uncle Gard! He’s here!”



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