

1. Ease and Security

Anna Proust pressed her face against the window lattice. When small she had learned that through a crack in the shutters she could catch sight of her brother Peter as he came home from school. The narrow street outside was empty, though the trampled snow spoke of many feet passing that way. Timbered houses, four or five stories high, stood close together on both sides of the street. Slanting rays from the westerly sun turned the snowy rooftops into dazzling crowns of gold.

“I wish . . .” murmured sixteen-year-old Anna. “I wish I could be out there enjoying the snow and the sunshine. I’m so tired of sitting inside and sewing.”

“What was that you said?” asked Mama briskly.

Anna turned sheepishly and smiled at Mama, who was actually not her mother but her grandmother. She sat by the fireplace, a tiny woman several inches shorter than Anna. Mellow light from the fire played over Mama’s wrinkled face and over the pleasant kitchen with its low-beamed ceiling and simple furnishings.

“Really, I wasn’t saying much,” Anna replied, “except that I wished I could be out in the sunshine like Peter.”

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A smile crinkled Mama's face. "Why don't we go to meet him when he comes home from school?"

Anna clapped her hands in delight. "Let's do that! I'll get our shawls. And I must wear the high leather boots Papa made for me. They'll help to keep out the snow." Soon she pushed open the heavy, wooden door and they were outside, taking deep breaths of the fresh, chilly air. "Let's hurry," she said, grabbing Mama's hand and practically dragging her up the street. "If we want a really good view of the mountains, we'll have to reach the top of the hill before Peter comes. The houses are so tall here we can barely see the peaks."

Though tall, the houses were very narrow—only the width of a room—and crowded closely together. When people needed more space, they would add another room to the top of their house, because there was nowhere to go but up. The town could not expand outward because it was surrounded by a stout, stone wall. Many of the houses had a shop on the first floor, with room for the family on the floors above it.

"Maybe soon our house will grow taller too," Anna said eagerly, eyeing the four-story home of her friend, Marie Vanier. "But instead of a weaving shop like the Vaniers, we'll have a shoe shop on our first floor."

"It won't be long now," Mama replied with great satisfaction. "Papa is nearly finished learning the shoe-making trade from Hugh." Her breath was coming in gasps because the street grew steeper and more slippery as they neared the top.

"You're getting tired!" exclaimed Anna. "Maybe I should go on alone."

But Mama responded in horror. "You know I

wouldn't leave you alone. I promised your mother on the day she died that I would take care of you, and I'm going to do my best."

Anna grew pensively silent. When Mother died, Peter had been a tiny baby and she was only two. She could not even remember her mother's face.

At last they reached the top of the street, where they had a clear view of the mountains. All around the valley they towered, peak upon jagged peak, dazzling white and blinding blue and somber gray, breathtaking in height and glorious in beauty. No matter how many times she came here, this view always left Anna speechless with awe.

Beyond the town gate a road wound up toward the mountains. It led past the monastery where Peter went to school and on to the castle of Verchennes, with its majestic array of battlements and turrets. Centuries had passed since the castle of Verchennes was built; even in this year of 1198, it was already more than two hundred years old.

And above the castle soared Shining Face Mountain, the most beautiful mountain of all. Its slopes were broad and smooth and white compared to the other craggy heights. Anna's eyes ached with the brilliance of the afternoon sun radiating from Shining Face Mountain.

To the east, a wedge-shaped piece of blue sky sliced down between Shining Face and Herald Mountain. Here lay the North Pass, the only road from the north into the Valley of Verchennes. Southward, below Montbourg, the Verchennes River cut between the mountains to form the South Pass.

"School is out!" Mama's voice broke into Anna's thoughts. The monastery gate was swinging open, spilling a sudden tide of boys like young goats let out to spring

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pasture. Soon fourteen-year-old Peter came grinning toward them, his curly black hair all tousled and his dark blue eyes shining. "Did you think I needed someone to safeguard me on my way home?"

"No, of course not. We just needed some fresh air," Anna retorted as she and Mama fell into step beside him. "Please don't walk so fast, or we can't keep up with you."

Peter shortened his stride. "I'm used to hurrying as fast as I can to get home before darkness falls. See, it won't be long till the sun disappears behind the mountains."

"These winter days seem so short," Anna panted.

"That's because we live in such a high place," explained her brother.

Anna shook her head in bewilderment. "I can never understand why you talk of living high up. Our valley is much lower than the mountains!"

"Well, of course, since you've never been to school," Peter began condescendingly, "you wouldn't understand concepts like height above sea level."

"I can't help it that I'm uneducated," Anna broke in hotly. "I've begged and begged to go to the convent school for girls, but Papa says we can't afford it."

"That's right," Peter said, soothingly, patting her arm. "And Papa keeps reminding me that I'm responsible to pass along my education to you."

"Don't argue," Mama admonished the two teenagers. "Everyone will hear you." The streets were now thronged with people, each intent upon getting home before darkness threw its cloak over the valley.

Mama was the first to reach the Proust door. "We'll have to get supper quickly. Henry will soon be home." Usually she called her son "Papa," the way the children

did, but sometimes she forgot and called him Henry.

Anna shrugged off her shawl and helped to prepare the cabbage-and-potato soup. She set a pewter bowl, a mug, and a spoon at each place on the rough wooden table. From the cupboard she brought a long, black loaf of bread and began to slice it. Thick hunks of cheese completed the meal.

Every now and then, Anna cast anxious glances toward the door. She had heard so many stories of robberies in dark streets! “What could be keeping Papa this late?” she fretted.

“He said this morning he wouldn’t leave Master Hugh’s shop until that pair of boots for Lord Alden is finished,” Mama reminded her. “I’m glad he’s so devoted to his work. It won’t be long until the Shoemakers’ Guild will let Papa start a shop for himself.”

“Then this kitchen will become a shoe store, and we’ll have to move one story up,” Peter said dreamily.

Mama beamed at him. “And you’ll be able to serve your apprenticeship under your very own papa instead of going all the way down to Hugh’s shop on Alfort Street. Ah, you children have such a different life from what I had in my young days. You don’t need to do backbreaking work all day long the way we did when we were serfs on the castle manor.”

“Tell us again about your childhood,” Anna coaxed, sitting close to Mama on the hearth. “Listening to your stories will help pass the time till Papa comes.”

Mama closed her eyes to let her mind fly backward over the years. “We lived near the castle of Verchennes, in huts about half as big as this kitchen. And those huts didn’t have second and third stories, either! We had no