

"The Crick," a story by Ruth Suckow

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Always about their skirts was an irregular stained watermark, yellowish, with a crusting of sand about the hem.

"You've been down to that crick again!" mothers accused them.

All summer they lived in the "crick."

"If you children could ever keep out of the water!"

When they took off their shoes and stockings at night, dribs of sand shook out. Their legs, even above the knees, were coated with fine, grayish dirt, and between all their toes, and crusting the embroidered edges of their little white panties, was sand.

"How can any mother keep you clean as long as that crick is there? It's a nuisance!"

In the winter, while the boys were skating down beyond the bend, all Susan and Delight could do was to stand on the ridge and trace the gray scalloped edges of the crick and watch the cold black streak of wicked current. In February spreads of rough, thick, gray-white ice were cracked and tilted up, one side in the water and the other broken-edged above it, like the crusty film that hardens over sugar syrup left standing. The broken-down stalks of the thin brown weeds stuck through a glazed crust of dirty snow that lay down the gullies in the banks. The black iron railing of the bridge, with its crisscross pattern, made their hands ache with cold.

They longed for summer, for the hot dreamy hours when they explored beyond the bend where the weeds grew rank and high. Fearfully they would extend their orbit a little farther and farther, knowing they might be cut off from the safety of the house by Cricket Larson and those other girls from down the crick; but they had to experiment.

All through August the stream was dry, or sometimes only a slow trickle over at one side. The crick bed, deep between the split banks, was dry, burning dirt firm under a thin surface of dusty, glittering sand. Crossing the bridge, how the iron railing – brown now over the black – burned and shone against the blaze of blue

sky! The splintery boards were so heated that they had to hold their bare feet stiff and walk gingerly on balls and heels. . .

Summer – if only summer would come! Now there was a hope of it. The little girls were outdoors now; the games around the house couldn't hold them any longer. The sun began to have some warmth in it; and the crick – the crick down beyond the lot, between its rough banks – its water was shining, almost as if it were ready for wading again.

Anyway, Susan and Delight could look for the big girls – their own big girls, Susan's sister Irene, and Elsie and Gertie Cartey, who lived across the crick. They always played together on Gertie's side.

They bet they were down at the crick.

"Shall we look?"

"Yes, let's. I'm not afraid – not if we get switches and take them along."

They hunted all about the yard. Out under the plum tree they found a big dead branch with a lot of little twigs. It had broken off during the ice storm in the winter. The bark was black and flaky, and some of the twigs caught in their skirts as they tried to lift it. There! Let any Cricket Larson dare to run after them when she saw them with a stick like that! It was so big that both of them had to carry it. Their eyes were bright with danger as they stole around the corner of the church next door to the parsonage where Delight lived, and out to the vacant lot.

"Oh, Bluebell's following us!"

The Maltese cat had been sunning itself on the back porch, but now he wanted to see what they were doing.

"Oh, no, Bluebell, you mustn't come. Go back, go back," both little girls warned him earnestly.

"You hold the stick, Susan." Delight made a dive for him, caught him by the hind quarters, hugged him in her arms, and whispered anxiously: "Don't you know we can't take you, Bluebell, and have Cricket Larson and those girls get you? Now you go in the house – there!" She scampered back breathlessly to Susan.

There was no one at all in the vacant lot. Cricket Larson wasn't hiding behind the little tree or in the elderberry bushes. The last year's grass shone pale in the sun, and stiff brown weeds were standing. They could see the little pink house where Cricket Larson lived down the crick near the bend, with the yard empty and some one's washing blowing desolate on the line.

"Listen, I hear somebodies' voices!"

Awed and frightened, they stood clutching their plum branch, but inclined to drop it and run if Cricket Larson and those other girls should appear in the vacant lot. Yes, there were voices, very faint, a long way off, the voices of Elsie and Irene and Gertie.

"They're down at the crick!"

They dropped the plum branch, forgetting all about the dangers of this side of the crick, and scampered as fast as they could to the bank. The bright shallow water dazzled before their eyes. There they were! Elsie and Irene were clinging together at the edge of the stream – and then, with a run and a slide, a splash, a shriek, Gertie was in!

"Hurray! I'm going to be the first in the water!"

"What's it like?" the other girls called fearfully. "Is it cold?"

"Why don't you come in? It's grand!"

Elsie held on to Irene, and Irene stiffened her little ankles to bear the first chill shock of the water, bent perilously to reach out her hand to Gertie.

"We're in, we're in! We're in the crick!" they sang out joyously.

The little girls stood away up on the edge of the steep bank. Their small figures were outlined forlornly against the blue of the big spring sky. Their skirts stood out uneven and stiff above the wrinkly knees of their stockings. At the very moment that the bigger girls saw them, the two little pairs of thin legs went scrambling down the bank.

"Don't you come down here!" Irene shrieked. "Susan Green! You go back."

"If you're in, we're coming in."

"Don't you dare! Nobody knows we're here. You stay where you are. Why, Mamma'd – Mamma'd –"

"It's too cold for you little kids in the water."

Now they were sitting squat on the bank, pulling off shoes and stockings.

Susan was wailing: "Irene! I can't get my garter unfastened."

Irene cried severely: "I don't care if you can't. I'm not going to help you. I haven't said you can come in the water."

"I can though! Mine are off!" Delight cried gleefully.

How wonderful it was to feel the bare earth warm under her feet again! She stepped down gingerly, squealing with glee as she felt the prickle of the old weeds. It was so dark and cool and strange down near the shadow of the bridge. "Nobody can see me down here," she thought happily.

Her mother might come out of the house, but she wouldn't know that Delight was down at the crick, or that she had her shoes and stockings off. She stopped and, standing on one foot, picked a tiny stone from the tender, dusty sole of the other.

"Don't you come in. Don't you dare!" the older girls were shouting.

"I do dare!" she shouted back at them; and tantalizingly, "Here I come!"

But she stood for what seemed a long while at the very edge of the crick. The bright water kept flowing, flowing past her. She thought, "When that little ripple gets past, I'll step in." And still the ripples went on and on, and there was never a moment when the water would stop for her.

"Go back, go back," they were calling.

She stepped straight into the water. It closed, chill and circling, around her little ankles. She started to wade across. Her feet left little hollows which filled with dirty water that spread slowly. The bright flow past her made her dizzy. There was nothing, nothing but water. She stood teetering above it, while the cold ripples lapped her ankles and her feet sank deeper and deeper into the cold slimy mud that went down, down in soft sucking pockets and slithered over her toes. It was so far – she would never get across. She stood weeping, small and lonely, out in the middle of the bright moving stream.

Then she heard Gertie's warm, protecting voice.

"I'll get you, 'Light. Gertie'll get you."

Gertie came splashing toward her, seized her scared little hand, and together they ran panting out of the water on to the warm sand.

Susan stood alone on the other side, still tugging at her garter. "Wah-wah! I'm all alone! IRENE, get me. Help me open my garter."

Irene said hard-heartedly: "Let her stay there. No, I don't care if you can't open your garter. You little kids have no business down here today."

"Look!"

Elsie seized her hand, and they stood transfixed with horror.

There, in the lot, were Cricket Larson and those other girls.

"Susan! Look out" they cried together.

"The bridge – run to the bridge!" Gertie shouted.

It was too late. They had seen her.

"Yah, yah, yah!" they began to yell while they danced along the bank in horrid triumph. They were picking up – sticks, stones, rocks? Susan gave a dreadful "Moo – OO!" of terror. A pebble hit her foot and she danced, shrieking. Forgetting all about her stocking, she scrambled up the tiny weedy path to the bridge and started wildly across, panting, sobbing, stubbing her toe and going on. Halfway across, Irene met her and dragged her into safety. Those other girls had stopped at the end of the bridge. They dared not come across. It was so high, so different, up here. The pale brown wood of the footwalk was warm to their chilled feet, and the soft dusty splinters did not hurt. Sunshine glared on the black iron. They were safe on their own side, where the road led, steep and brown, over the hill.

"You didn't get her!" Gertie shouted victoriously.

And then they all began to chant – "Didn't get her, didn't get her – ha, ha, ha! – ho, ho, ho!"

The water was really cold. It was early to go in wading – the first day in the year they had been in the "crick." They sat down on the rough warm earth holding out the chill pink soles of their feet to the sunshine, that glistened bright on the scattering of little stones all down the bank. Cricket Larson and those other girls couldn't touch them when they were on this side. But it was time to put on their shoes and stockings

"Oh!" Irene exclaimed in horror. "Their shoes and, stockings! "

The other girls were ahead of them. With howls of triumph, Cricket and her tribe slid and scrambled down the bank. Cricket Larson snatched up Susan's stocking and waved it gleefully. She was going to throw it into the "crick"!

"You put that down!"

"I've got it!"

Only when a man in a delivery wagon came driving over the rumbling bridge, looked down and out, and exclaimed goodnaturedly, "Hey! What's the trouble down there?" – Cricket flung it on the ground and made off up the bank with her thumb at her nose.

The girls, standing all together, were taking counsel together while Susan and Delight sobbed and whimpered on the edge of the circle.

"We've got to get those shoes and stockings. I don't dare take her home without. Mamma'll know we've been in the 'crick."

"Maybe that deliveryman would get them. Let's run after him!"

"He's gone 'way up the hill."

"Some one will have to cross the 'crick."

Oh, but the water was so cold and cruel now, so shining – the "crick" was so wide!

Cricket Larson and those other girls taunted and shouted from the vacant lot. The shoes and stockings lay in a forlorn huddle, and the toe of Susan's draggled little stocking moved this way and that with the water.

With a last resolution, they formed a concealing circle around Gertie, who, pale, her green eyes shining, was once more pulling off her shoes.

"You don't dare. Gertie, you don't dare."

"I've got to dare."

All at once the circle broke and Gertie went plunging down the bank and into the water that splashed up muddy and bright as she ran blindly across. . . .

"Delight! Wake up – you must!"

The little girl tore herself out of sleep and sat up blinking wildly. There was a strange, rushing roar outside the windows; voices in the house, too, and a sense of hurry and flight.

"We must hurry. Mr. Granger's here to take us up on the hill. "

Still crying and resisting, terrified at all the tumult and at the disordered, agitated air of the grown-ups, she was dragged from her warm bed and wrapped hastily in a quilt.

"What is it, Mamma? Why do we have to go up on the hill?"

"The crick," they told her; and Mr. Granger shouted,

"This is the time when the dry run ain't so dry!"

What did they mean? The crick, where only last Saturday she and Susan had been wading, trying to find gold in the stream bed like people in Alaska? She stared into the darkness outside the windows. The roar of wind and water was closing around the very house.

"Better hurry," Mr. Granger was saying. "We want to make it over the bridge in time. Let me take the little girl."

He picked her up with her quilt trailing.

She wailed: "Mamma, dress me! Mamma, I don't want to go like this!"

"Be still, Delight. Do you want the bridge to be swept away? We must get across."

Her mother gave a hasty, strained look about the little room with its beloved furniture and books and keepsakes. It was no use trying to save anything. They would not know where to begin. All that they could do was to shut their eyes and leave it.

"Bluebell, Mamma!" Delight began to struggle frantically in Mr. Granger's arms. "Papa, we haven't got Bluebell!"

"Come! We have no time to look for cats now."

"But he's my kitty! Papa – Bluebell! We can't go off and leave him."

As they carried her struggling to Mr. Granger's buggy, she kept straining to see through the pitch darkness, shrieking piteously,

"Come, Bluebell, come kitty, come kitty."

It almost seemed to her that she could hear his little miaow above that dreadful noise of water. But the buggy would not stop.

They drove through the dense black night. The bridge was still there. But as Mr. Granger's horses went pounding across, shaking their heads and rearing, it felt as if the roaring water were just beneath the buggy wheels. Her mother was sitting very still, clutching her with tense, quivering arms. The bridge was

shaking, almost whirling with the water, with the wind that came suddenly driving across. Then all at once the horses' hoofs made a different sound that told they were across and going up the hill.

"She's still holding!" Mr. Granger shouted back at them.

Windows on the hill were lighted. Another team came thudding past them. People shouted, "Hi!"— and something else that they could not catch, something about the flats being under water. Then they went from the damp blackness of the tumultuous night into the lighted hall of the Grangers' house that stood square and safe on its high lawn. Mrs. Granger was waiting for them in the doorway. She took Delight in her arms.

"The poor little thing! She's scared, ain't she? Come in, folkses. You're right at home here. You do just the same as you would in your own house. Don't cry, sweetie. We won't let that old crick get you."

While she spoke, she was hurrying out to the kitchen, where the red fire in the cracks of the cookstove, the warmth, and the smell of coffee put a sudden familiar cheerfulness into the strange commotion.

"While Mister was gone, thinks I, I'll just put on a little coffee for the folks. I knew you'd be chilled, tore out of bed like this. Well! And the water ain't reached the church yet! Ain't that a mercy? Who'd ever thought that old crick would take to rarin' up like this?"

"It ain't the first time," Mr. Granger said. "I remember back in —"

"Well, Mister, it ain't any time to stand around telling old stories about it when maybe other poor folks are getting their homes carried right out from under them. Them poor folks across the crick!"

He roared: "Well, I'm a-going! Let me git down a cup of coffee first."

The warm smell of the coffee filled the big clean kitchen.

"Mister, you go in and get some rockers," Mrs. Granger said.

Delight and her quilt were deposited close to the stove. Mrs. Granger stopped her bustlings to feel anxiously of the little, cold, bare feet and to tuck them up. The men put down their coffee cups and started out again.

"Don't cry, dearie. Your papa'll get across," Mrs. Granger said soothingly. "Men know how to take care of themselves."

The two women, left alone, talked it over as they drank more coffee out of cups patterned over with faded brownish leaves. How each had first heard the flood; how Mrs. Avery had wakened her husband and cried, "Richard, I believe the crick's overflowing!" how Mr. Granger had said, "The church is right next to the bridge, and it'll be the first thing to go," and Mrs. Granger had told him, "You hitch up this minute and go bring the minister's folks up here"; of how safe the crick had seemed, with the children beginning to wade only a few days ago!

Delight sat cuddled in her quilt, only her scared round eyes and ruffled hair showing. The tears had slowly dried on her cheeks, although she felt little thrusts of pain when she thought of Bluebell. Here beside the warm stove, in this familiar kitchen where so often she had watched fresh cookies baking, here with Mrs. Granger in her white apron, and the light making a yellow glow in the big lamp, the water could not touch her.

The school bell had begun to ring, sending a hard, frightening, iron clangor through the night. There were vague shouts, sounds of teams thundering past. Again and again they went to the window, straining to see something but blackness, thinking that any noise meant that the bridge was gone.

At last there were hurried steps, a commotion on the porch. Mrs. Granger rushed to the door. Delight hopped down from the big rocker, trying to hold up her quilt. It was her father and Mr. Granger. They had got across the bridge! And they had brought some one with them – Cricket Larson and Cricket's mother! Mrs. Larson had on an ancient coat over her rumpled nightdress. She was sobbing, and Cricket clung to her coat and sobbed, too. Delight looked at them in awe.

"Why, 'Lecta, these poor folks are all out of house and home. I found 'em over by the bridge."

"Land! Ain't it a shame?" Mrs. Granger cried. "Now, never you mind, Mrs. Larson. You come right into the kitchen and get warm. You're welcome to stay here as long as you please. House carried away! Why, ain't that awful!"

Mrs. Larson's torn nightdress was bedraggled with mud, her shoes were soaked. They had had to run right through the water in places. Just as they had got to the bridge, they had heard the crash and known that the house was gone! Mrs. Larson began to sob again, and to mourn in queer, disjointed phrases.

"All we've got in the world. . . I had Mrs. Dennison's washing in the house. . . I s'pose all those nice dresses of Maudie's . . ."

"Don't worry about Maudie Dennison's clothes!" Mrs. Granger cried indignantly. "Do her good to lose a few of them." She added angrily: "I always knew that crick was a dangerous thing. Right there in the center of the town – dividing the town

in two. One side's always bound to suffer. And now for it to go on a rampage like this!"

Delight was staring gravely. Cricket Larson was here in this room. She was not so big after all. When she stood on the bank of the crick, shrieking and brandishing a whip that she had picked up on the bridge, she had seemed a giantess. Her hair was all ruffled above the skinny little pigtails, and her freckled face was swollen with tears. Cricket Larson! When Delight and Susan had found their palace down near the crick spoiled, all the little shells broken and the "precious stones" scattered, they "bet Cricket Larson had done it." Always, whenever they waded, they had kept an anxious watch on Cricket's house down the crick. And now the little pink house, with the washing blowing in the wind, was gone.

Cricket buried her face in her mother's draggled coat and sobbed. "My little chickies!"

"What's that?" Mrs. Granger asked anxiously.

"Oh, them little chicks she thought so much of," Mrs. Larson said, a little shamed. "Yes, if they was all we'd lost —"

Her rough, veined hand crept over Cricket's head. She began to cry again, weakly and helplessly, with a faint sense of apology because of the other ladies, making unobtrusive dabs at her overflowing eyes with the handkerchief that Mrs. Granger brought her.

"Poor thing!" Mrs. Granger whispered. "I expect that house was all she had."

Cricket leaned against her mother's arm. She had stopped crying, and now her bright, small eyes were full of a shrewd childish curiosity. She and Delight stared solemnly at each other.

"Why, look what that child's got on!" Mrs. Granger cried. "She's wet as sop, and so are you, Mrs. Larson. We needn't all wait for them men to come back. I'll get some of my nightgowns. "

And when Mrs. Larson protested, saying that they "would be all right here," she urged:

"Why, those children can hardly keep their eyes open! Why don't we put 'em in together in the little room upstairs?"

At that, Delight began to cry wildly, clinging to her mother and sobbing: "No! I don't want to go to bed! No! I won't leave Mamma. I want to stay here."

Her mother and Mrs. Granger urged anxiously; but she would not go upstairs with Cricket, she didn't want to go to sleep, she didn't care about the little room. Although she could not say it, she would never, never stay in a room with Cricket Larson.

There was an interval of sleep, as she sat cuddled on her mother's lap. Then she woke again to noise and voices. The men had got home, this time to stay. They were telling about the flood. It was a story now, exciting, wonderful.

Was the bridge gone? No, the bridge was still there. But they were bailing water out of the stores in town.

"Papa, is our house gone?"

No, it was standing – the house and the church. Delight settled back with a little sigh. Everything was safe: the piano, the little doll cradle – perhaps even Bluebell had got up in the barn, as Mrs. Granger said, and was crouched away up on the dusty rafters. But Cricket's house was gone. Maybe it would land somewhere away off, with the furniture still in it – and the little chickens – and Cricket and her mother would live there.

The epic of the flood was thrilling as they listened to it in this safe, warm kitchen. Sheds had come floating down the crick; trees, fences, barns were carried away. The flood had come from above Langley. It had started with a cloudburst. The whole town of Langley was washed out, people were saying. "Wiped off the face of the map."

"Katie Rausch and her mother slept through the whole thing. Didn't know there was a flood until Wesley Hobart went with a rowboat to the upstairs window after them."

"Land, Mister! Have they got rowboats out?"

"Duck boats and everything they can find. There's fugitives all over this town tonight."

They were talked out at last. There would be another day, Mrs. Granger reminded them. Little enough of the night was left, but they might get such sleep as they could.

"Now will you go to the little room?"

Delight trembled. But Cricket Larson did not look so dreadful, leaning against her mother's shoulder and crying again as she thought of the flood. Her little chickens were gone. Her house had gone down the crick. And Delight's own house was

safe, just as she had left it; Papa had said that it was. Her little bed, the dolls that she had left in their red chairs with the one boy doll tucked into the doll cradle. . .

No, she wouldn't "put Mrs. Granger to so much trouble." She wouldn't "be a nuisance." She would go upstairs with Cricket Larson.

"Now!" Mrs. Granger cried. "You two can have this little room all to yourselves. I can make up your ma's bed on the lounge – then we're fixed." And she went away.

The two children eyed each other. Cricket looked small and frightened in Mrs. Granger's big nightgown with the sleeves dangling and the long skirt festooning the floor. Slowly they crept into bed, where they lay self-conscious and stiff, the two little bodies side by side.

In the kitchen their eyes had been dazzled and closing. But now they were wide-awake again. Cricket began to wiggle. She sat up in bed and stared around her, bounced down. After a while she whispered:

"I ain't sleepy. Are you?"

"No. I'm never going to be sleepy."

"I bet you're afraid up here!"

"Honest, I'm not."

It was strange, but now she wasn't afraid. Mrs. Granger's feather bed was warm and soft. She couldn't see Cricket in the darkness. Cricket didn't seem like that mean Cricket Larson. It was fun to be here in the little room. They began to giggle and hop about on the bed.

"We won't go to sleep tonight, will we, Cricket?" Delight whispered confidently.

"No, we won't ever go to sleep."

Two little hot hands fumbled for each other and clutched. Face to face, they clung to each other, laughing, gleeful, and naughty.

"I know what I'm going to do when the water goes down," Cricket whispered. "Gonna explore. Because, gee, you don't know what might have got carried down the crick!"

"Cricket, are you going to look for your house?"

"I'm going right down the bank looking until I find it," Cricket murmured dreamily.

"What if it's gone clear to Sioux City! What if it's gone clear to Chicago! What if it's gone all around the world! Cricket –" she gave a little jump –" what if you should find it upside down?"

"Then I'd live in it upside down."

"Eat upside down?"

"Yes, and sleep upside down."

"And dress upside down?"

"Yes!"

They giggled wildly.

"Cricket. Listen. Wouldn't it be fun if you and me'd go exploring, and instead of your house we'd find a lovely little playhouse come down the crick – just big enough for us to get into – and we'd have it for a palace! We'd take all my doll furniture – my little doll cradle that Uncle Charlie sent me. You never saw my little doll cradle, Cricket. And my little piano. Oh, my little piano's so cute, Cricket!"

Cricket said jealously, "No, there'd be furniture already in it."

"Oh, yes, what if it would be all full of furniture! Cricket, if it was little gold furniture! Little gold dishes, and gold knives and forks –"

"And gold things to eat!"

"Yes! Gold bananas – and gold candy –"

"And gold ice cream!"

Again they laughed hilariously. Delight popped up and looked at the door; and then they giggled harder. She snuggled close to Cricket and whispered:

"We'd keep it for a secret, wouldn't we, Cricket? It'd be all hidden in some bushes, and nobody but us would know where to find our little door. Only we'd let Bluebell in! We'd let animals in! Rabbits could come in, and birds could. I guess maybe we'd let Susan in, too. Maybe once I'd let in Harvey Taylor. When he goes past our house, he says, 'There's my girl.' But don't you ever tell, Cricket."

She flopped over, thinking ecstatically of the palace, planning the little gold meals. . . The lights, the shouts, the roar of the water, the pounding of the hoofs

on the bridge, Cricket and the palace and Harvey Taylor going past the house in his red jockey cap – all blended into sleep.

Morning – was this morning? Sunshine flickered on the tree leaves outside. Bright, motionless, a faint muddy scent in the air. . .

It was Mrs. Granger's little room! There was the dresser, and Mrs. Granger's winter dresses hanging in a corner. Cricket was gone!

A murmur of voices went on downstairs. Delight sat up in bed and called plaintively,

"Mamma!"

No answer but that interminable feminine murmur.

"Mamma!" She pattered out to the hall. "Ma-muh!" The nap of the stair carpet was harsh to her bare feet. The kitchen door was open, and she stood there, sleepy and forlorn.

"Well!" Mrs. Granger cried. "If here ain't our little girl! Did she think she'd wake up this morning?"

"Mamma, come and dress me."

"Why, sweetheart, you haven't any clothes. You'll have to wait until Papa comes back with some."

That was dreadful. She felt sleepy and queer, and began to whimper. The kitchen clock said nearly eleven. She sat at the kitchen table in her bare feet and her nightgown while Mrs. Granger brought her a biscuit and a banana.

"Your papa went a long time ago to see how your house was."

"Why don't he come back with my clothes?"

"He'll come; don't you worry. Do you want to get home?"

"I want to find Bluebell."

Cricket's uncle had come for her and Mrs. Larson hours ago. The two women talked about it as Mrs. Granger whacked down the rolling pin and busily opened the oven door, and as Mrs. Avery sat picking over cherries that were bright and red in the morning sunshine.

"I hope Bert Fitch does something for poor Mrs. Larson now. There he's got those three children and no wife. Why don't he keep her to look after things?"

"Well, I suppose he doesn't make much."

"He makes good wages when he's a mind to work. It ain't that – he could provide. He's after that Miller girl that lives down by the tracks. Lot of a mother she'd be to those young ones! No, he won't do anything for his sister. I was surprised he even come for her this morning. Oh, some men is so selfish!" Mrs. Granger slapped down the rolling pin. "Think of that poor thing losing her home – just the one that couldn't afford it. Well, that's the way. Yes, sir. In spite of the Lord's care, it does seem like when a flood or anything comes, it takes away from those that need things most. Well, there's lots of things we don't understand."

Had there really been a flood last night? The yellow roses were sweet and warm outside the window. Bright drops glittered on the leaves and on the rich grass. The cherries were red and clear in the thick white bowl. Morning peace lay over the hill.

The little girl listened dreamily as the two women talked about the flood. How much the banks had caved in, how deep the water was in the stores; all the epic of the night, exciting and stirring even now, but with a faint foreshadowing of aftermath that was like that dank scent of mud lingering in the fresh air.

"It's a treacherous thing!" Mrs. Granger said. "These they call dry runs is always the worst. You can't count on 'em. This old crick has ruined more property than a river twice its size. And yet I guess it's what makes the land valuable. If it wasn't for that, I suppose we'd have it as dry as it is over in Dakoty.

"Them poor families down by the bank!" she cried. "I never did like the idee of the crick cutting the town in two, like. Why couldn't they all build over on this side? But that's it –the town's gone and made all these lots so high. No, sir, I ain't got any use for that crick. It's the meanest thing around here."

Delight listened solemnly. Was this her crick, where all the girls went wading, where they sat and watched the boys turn tiny fleets of black water bugs this way and that with a dry stick? She remembered how it was down under the shadow of the bridge, squatting on the cool smooth strip of bank and leaning away over to dig "cornelians" from the crick bed; calling up to the feet sounding hollowly above them and casting momentary moving shadows over the bright cracks – "Hi! Look down here! You don't know who we are!" They were hidden and secure, no more than faintly echoing childish voices to the people passing. Even the hot summer water cooled and flowed more silently, as it went through that deep shadow with the fiery cracks of light. A horse and wagon crossed, going over their heads with hollow mysterious rumble and thunder. It would seem that the bridge was coming

down, and they would stand trembling, ready to flee out to the hot open brightness . . .

"But it's a mercy how it left the church property alone!" Mrs. Granger went on. "I always said it was a mistake to put the church on that side."

"Well, of course it's on high ground."

"But it ain't all that. No, I tell ye, Mrs. Avery, I think after all, and with all we can't make out, God kind of looks after these things."

Delight's eyes were wide with awe. It was true, then. God, with a big curly beard and His arms spread out, sat on a cloud watching. He had kept the water from their house. She could not help feeling the fine importance of being specially looked out for by God. But it was mean of God to have let Cricket's house – and the chickens! – be carried away. She wanted God to have sent a little board down the crick for the chickens to float on.

Her father came back. Mr. Granger had the horse and buggy waiting, and they went off down the hill.

The bridge stood. But where were the old weedy banks with their familiar cracks and gullies? Brown water covered everything, wide as a river, with wicked foamy swirls and branches and debris floating. Gone were the tiny bays, the ripply wading places. Great chunks of yellow clay had caved in on the banks. The little tree at the bend was gone, stood no more glistening and green against the summer sky, would drop no golden leaves to make "kings' and queens' crowns" in the autumn. Delight cried in hurt, bewildered protest at this betrayal:

"I think the crick's mean! I hate the old crick!"

The church was safe on its rise of ground, the house dry and snug beside it. But Cricket Larson's little pink house – the back yard, the line, the washing – all had disappeared. The other little houses stood, but water-stained to the windows, their yards a muddy waste. The vacant lot was under water, the weeds crushed level with the ground and crusted with mud. Part of a buggy lay in the middle of the lot.

There were the dolls in their chairs, the boy doll still asleep in the cradle. . . Bluebell! Delight's heart began to thump. She ran out into the back yard. "Bluebell! Come, Bluebell!" she called.

She went into the barn. "Bluebell!" It was all silent. "Miaow!"

She was sure she had heard it – a faint little miaow somewhere.

Away up there among the packing boxes in the dark corner just under the rafters, there was a moving, a little cracking sound. Bluebell stood up, stretched his hind paws and then his front, looked at her, gave two or three reluctant squeaks, and leaped down. She caught him up and snuggled his furry head against her cheek.

"Precious Bluebell! You knew where to go. You knew it was safest in the barn. The water couldn't get you, Bluebell. God saved our house and our church and our barn."

She felt the thrill of his purr in his soft furry sides. She loved his little whiskers and his round golden eyes, his dainty paws with the silvery toes that made her think of pussywillow buds. His little claws were as pretty as shells. They would never scratch her.

"Bluebell, I didn't want to go off and leave you. They made me, Bluebell."

Her eyes filled slowly with tears. In spite of all her warnings to Bluebell when he started off for the vacant lot, mousing, now she murmured, with her tears dripping into his fur "Oh, Bluebell. All Cricket's little chickies got drowned! We'n sorry, aren't we? We hate the old crick, don't we?"

Oh, yes, the crick was a mean old thing, just as Mrs. Grange had said. It had drowned horses and pigs and cattle, and ever some people in Langley. It had rooted out the trees and covered the ground with mud and branches and leaves and fence wire all tangled up together.

And yet, for a few days, there was strange excitement all about. The crick, after dividing the town for so long, had brought it together through disaster. All the men were bailing water from the cellars of the stores. And all the children gathered in the vacant lot to dig and explore. Patiently day after day they went over the evil-smelling ground, poking about through the mud with long sticks and broom handles, and digging up here a broken buggy shaft, there a draggled chicken. They found no little house with gold furniture. But other things consoled them: a twisted shoe, the rocker from a chair, the buggy shaft that Harvey Taylor said could be made into a teeter-totter. They all toiled together: Delight and Susan and Irene and Gertie, and Cricket Larson and those other girls. Cricket, whose house had gone down in the flood, was the heroine among them. Feuds were forgotten while the high water held.

Then it was only a memory. The summer was dry. The water stayed muddy, and receded and receded. The new banks grew familiar, weeds sprang up, paths were trodden by bare feet down the sides. The children played again in the crick. Cricket Larson began to say that they couldn't take any pebbles from her side; and Gertie Cartey, that they couldn't pick any flowers on her side. Soon it was:

"This is our side of the crick! You can't have anything on this side."

"If you come over to this side, you know what you'll get!"

"Wear white pants and think you're smart! We found more things on our side than you did on your side."

"We wouldn't have your old drowned side!"

"You throw back that buggy wheel."

"Come and get it if you want it!"

Cricket Larson was the worst.

Now when Cricket came to the back door of the parsonage, with the washing in a clothes basket covered with a blue apron on her little wagon, she stared at Delight with bright hostile eyes. Delight picked up Bluebell from his snug place on the chair and stood clutching him. When Cricket was gone, Delight whispered in solemn warning:

"No, Bluebell, I can't let you out. I can't let you go where that Cricket Larson might get you. Because she's mean. She throws rocks. She lives 'way down the crick, and she plays with those other girls."