

An excerpt from
Up and Down the River
by Rebecca Caudill

1. The Peddler

I do wish we could find some way to get rich, like Althy!" said Bonnie.

Bonnie was talking half to herself, half to Debby. She was stretched on the grass under an apple tree, looking at the advertisements on the back pages of Mother's magazine. Debby was sitting near her, making a pink clover chain to wear around her neck.

Out in the orchard bees buzzed and stopped for business on each big bushy, swaying head of clover. It was late May, and the sun was warm, and the sweet smell of the blossoms clung to the air.

From the house came the sound of the organ. Sometimes the notes flowed along smoothly like the pebbly stream that skirted the orchard. That was Althy playing. Sometimes the notes balked like a stubborn donkey. That was Clarissy Huff taking a lesson from Althy.

"Althy'll surely be rich before summer's over," said Debby, tying another clover head to her chain. "She gets ten cents for every organ lesson she gives. And she's going to give nine every week."

"How much does that make?" asked Bonnie, who was six and didn't know her multiplication tables yet.

"Ninety cents," said Debby, who was eight and knew her tables straight through twelve times twelve.

"And Emmy's chickens will be hatching out any day now," said Bonnie. "Two hens setting on fifteen eggs apiece--if Emmy sells the chickens for fifty cents apiece, how rich will she be, Debby?"

That was too much arithmetic for Debby to do without a slate and pencil. She answered instead, "You don't count your chickens before they're hatched, Bonnie."

"And Chris will get rich selling ginseng," said Bonnie. "The magazine said, 'Get rich selling ginseng.' He found a little bit in the woods yesterday."

Debby tied another clover head to her chain.

"Can't you find any advertisement in the magazine that tells us how to make money, Bonnie?" she asked.

"Here's something free," said Bonnie. Although she couldn't read words off quickly the way Debby could, she knew the word "free."

Carefully Debby laid aside her clover chain, stretched out beside Bonnie on the grass, and studied the free offer.

The advertisement pictured the State of Ohio, freckled all over with dots as if everybody from Ashtabula to Cincinnati had suddenly broken out with the measles.

"Grand Contest! Big Prizes Free! Two Pianos! Cash! Organs! Free!" read Debby. She roared in a loud voice as she read, because the words were big and black on the page.

"We could get a piano for Althy maybe," Bonnie brightened up. "Althy wants a piano. Does it say how to get it, Debby?"

Debby studied the advertisement.

"It's just what I was afraid of," she complained after a moment. "It's just a trick. First you have to count the dots. Then it says, 'Counts must be accompanied by subscription to magazine. Fifty cents pays for one year and one count. One dollar pays for two years and three counts. You get fifty dollars extra if you have three counts. It will pay you to have three.' "

"Better look for something else," advised Bonnie. "Here's something."

Debby followed Bonnie's finger that pointed to the word "free" underneath the picture of a horse.

"Oh!" she sighed. "That's Dan Patch. 'Free picture of Dan Patch, the world's most famous racing horse!" she read. " 'It shows Dan flying through the air with every foot off the ground. Picture, in six brilliant colors, absolutely free with every order of stock food.' "

"Hmm-m-m!" said Bonnie.

She began looking again.

"What's this?" she asked, pointing to another free offer.

" 'Free post cards with your name written on each one in gold,' " read Debby.

"Oh, I'd love my name in gold on a post card!" sighed Bonnie, "I'd just love it! Wouldn't you, Debby?"

"Your name on a post card won't make you rich," Debby told her. "Not even if it's written in gold." And Debby measured the length of her clover chain around her neck.

In a few moments Bonnie sat upright. Her voice tingled with excitement.

"Listen to this, Debby!" she said. " 'Earn one d-o-l-l-a-r, dollar.' "

Quickly Debby laid aside the chain again and read the advertisement. " 'Earn one dollar. Sell twenty of our beautiful colored pictures at ten cents each. Every home wants one. You collect two dollars. Send us one. You keep one.' "

"You don't have to subscribe to anything?" asked Bonnie.

"It doesn't say so."

"Nor buy anything?"

"No."

"Let's see it."

Bonnie read the advertisement, pointing out each word with her finger.

"And look here, Debby!" she cried as her eyes wandered farther down the page. " 'Sell s-e-n-s-a-t-i-o-n-a-l--' "

" 'Sensational,' " Debby said, taking the magazine and reading. " 'Sell sensational new bluing! Try it yourself. Sell it to your friends. We send you twenty packages. Sell them at ten cents each. Collect two dollars. Send us one. You keep one.' "

"You don't have to subscribe to anything?" asked Bonnie.

"It doesn't say so."

"Nor buy anything?"

"No."

"What's 'sensational,' Debby?"

"I think that means whiter than snow," said Debby. "The bluing makes your clothes whiter than snow."

"How do you get the bluing?" asked Bonnie. "And the pictures?"

"You have to fill out the coupons with our names and address, and send for them," Debby told her. "Let's sell them together, Bonnie, shall we? I'll go to the house and fill out the coupons right now if you'll carry in my share of the stove wood. Then we can go across the river to Mr. Flinchum's store and mail the letters."

"People who don't want pictures will be sure to want bluing, won't they?" said Bonnie, her wide eyes sparkling as she got up from the grass and started toward the wood lot.

"And people who don't want bluing will likely want a picture," said Debby. "Just think, Bonnie! We'll earn two dollars. A dollar for the pictures and a dollar for the bluing. One dollar for you, and one for me."

"A whole dollar!" sighed Bonnie. "What will we do with so much money, Debby?"

"Why, when we have that much money, we'll be rich, of course," said Debby.

When Debby had filled out the coupons and addressed the envelopes, and Bonnie had carried in the stovewood, Mother said they might ride the little mare, Mag, across the river to the post office, which was in one corner of Mr. Flinchum's store. Mother gave Debby four pennies from her egg money with which to buy stamps for the envelopes.

Debby put the bridle on Mag and led her to the front gate. Bonnie held the bridle while Debby climbed to the top of the fence, mounted the mare, and took the reins in her hands. Then Debby held Mag still while Bonnie climbed to the top of the fence and mounted behind her. In one hand Bonnie held the envelopes, while with the other she hugged Debby's waist to keep from falling off.

Down the dusty road sauntered Mag. Debby slapped her with the reins. She clucked to her, and kicked her in the ribs with her bare heels to make her gallop. But Mag only paced a few steps and slowed down to a walk.

"When we earn our money, we'd better pay Mother four pennies of it for stamps," said Bonnie.

"Or we could set the supper table every day," said Bonnie.

"We already set the supper table every day," said Debby.

"We could set every day without being told," said Bonnie. "Mother would think that was special."

"We'll set it the minute we get home," said Debby. And she clucked to Mag and kicked her in the ribs again to make her gallop. But Mag only paced a few steps and slowed down to a walk. Finally, she splashed across the river and up to the porch of Mr. Flinchum's store, where Debby and Bonnie slid off her back. Debby tied the reins to Mr. Flinchum's hitching post.

"Well, well!" said Mr. Flinchum when he saw Debby and Bonnie. "What can I sell you today?"

"We don't want to buy anything," Debby told him.

"We've come to mail some letters," said Bonnie.

"We're sending for something," said Debby.

"We're going to get rich," said Bonnie.

"Well! Well!" said Mr. Flinchum again, and this time he was really surprised.

The next day Bonnie and Debby climbed on Mag and rode across the river to the post office to see if the pictures and the bluing had come.

"You're in too big a hurry to get rich," teased Mr. Flinchum. "Pictures and bluing are slow travelers. They won't come for several days. For a week. Maybe two weeks."

Debby and Bonnie decided they would wait a week before riding back again. But the next afternoon Bonnie thought they ought to ride Mag over and see if Mr. Flinchum hadn't been mistaken.

Every day for ten days they rode over to the post office. And for ten days there was no sign of a package.

"Nothing but a snail could travel so slowly as pictures and bluing," Bonnie said to Debby on the eleventh day, as they went riding once more to the post office.

They found Mr. Flinchum weighing sugar for a customer in the back of the store. "Just walk around and look in the box, girls," he called to them.

Around the counter they went to the little cage where Mr. Flinchum kept the mail. There lay a long, round package. Beside it lay a short, square one.

"Oh, Debby!" said Bonnie. "They've come!"

She snatched up the packages.

"Better be sure they're for us," Debby told her.

Debby looked at the label on the long, round package. "Miss Bonnie Fairchild," it said. She looked at the label on the short, square package. "Miss Deborah Fairchild," it said.

"That's us," said Bonnie.

Without another word, Bonnie tucked the long, round package under her arm and held the short, square one in her hand. Then she and Debby climbed on Mag.

"Hold tight, Bonnie! We're going fast!" said Debby.

She kicked Mag in the ribs and clucked to her, and away they went. She didn't need to kick and cluck, however. Mag always went like the wind when she was headed home.

They couldn't take the time to turn Mag into the pasture. They hitched her at the front gate while they ran for the scissors to open the packages.

"I'll open the pictures," said Bonnie. She began to tear the wrappings from the long, round package. Debby began opening the short, square package.

"Oh!" sighed Bonnie. "Do look, Debby. Look at this!" She held up a picture of three horses, a white one, a sorrel one, and a black one, their heads together, looking over a fence.

"That's a million times prettier than Dan Patch!" said Debby.

"Even with all four feet off the ground," agreed Bonnie.

"And look!" said Debby, picking up the next picture in the roll. "Just look at this, Bonnie." Hanging to nails in a wall were two braces of wild ducks, heads down, their webbed feet tied together, their beautiful feathers shimmering green and purple, red and gray, and as soft as a puff of wind.

"Oh," said Bonnie, "why did they shoot them? I'd rather have them alive."

"Somebody who likes to hunt ducks will buy this one," suggested Debby.

"And look at this one!" cried Bonnie, holding up the next picture, a bowl of fruit. "Every home will surely want one of these, all right. I'd like one, I know. But I like the horses best." Hurriedly they glanced through the rest of the pictures, but found them all like the first three—horses, ducks, and fruit.

"Let's see the bluing," said Bonnie.

Debby opened the box, and turned it upside down. Out fell twenty small envelopes. Bonnie lifted the flap of one package. Inside were twenty little sheets of dark blue paper.

"Humph!" said Bonnie. "Bluing comes in a box. You have to sprinkle it out. I don't believe this is bluing."

"This is different," Debby told her. "Have you forgotten it's sensational?" She began reading the directions on the envelope. "It says here just to put one of these sheets in the rinsing water," she said, "and the bluing comes right off. Then you have exactly enough. No guessing. Not too much. Not too little. Too much streaks the clothes with blue. Too little leaves them yellow. This is just right."

After supper Mother and Father, Althy, Chris and Emmy gathered around to see the pictures and the bluing.

Chris thought the picture of the ducks the most beautiful picture he had ever seen. He'd give a hundred dollars for that one, he said, if he had it. But he didn't have even a dime.

Althy liked the bowl of fruit. It was just the picture to put on a dining-room wall, she said. If only she could spare ten cents she'd buy it.

Emmy liked the horses. But she couldn't buy it because she hadn't sold her chickens. In fact, her chickens hadn't even hatched.

Father said their home needed a new picture, and he would buy one. He asked Mother to choose one.

Mother chose the picture of the horses. Right away Father tacked it over the mantel. Mother said she was almost out of bluing, and she would buy a package of the bluing papers. She said, too, that the little peddlers selling pictures and bluing up and down the river needed a purse to put their money in. Father found an old leather purse in his dresser drawer. Mother tied a long stout string to the metal fasteners so that Debby might carry it across her shoulder.

Father took two dimes from his pocket and put them into the purse. Debby clicked the metal fasteners shut.

Carefully Bonnie rolled up the rest of the pictures and carried them upstairs. She carried the old purse slung from her shoulder.

Upstairs they took their best calico dresses, clean and stiffly starched, from the clothes rack and hung them beside the bed in which they slept together. They looked in the drawer and found hair ribbons to match their dresses. Then they went to bed.

When they were almost but not quite asleep, Bonnie whispered to Debby, "How rich did you say we would be, Debby, when we sell all the pictures? And all the bluing?" she asked.

"We'll have one dollar from the pictures," said Debby. "And another dollar from the bluing. That makes two dollars. One for you and one for me."

"Umm-m-m!" sighed Bonnie sleepily. "We'll be richer than almost anybody in the world, won't we, Debby?"

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