

Friendly Gables

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

Hilda van Stockum



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*To “Miffy”
with happy memories*

Contents

1. Good News	1
2. Troubles	10
3. More Mischief	18
4. "Homework"	25
5. The Fight	36
6. Sugaring Off	48
7. Uncle Armand	60
8. The Statue	71
9. Paul	83
10. Changes	92
11. Festivities	101
12. A Party for Miss Thorpe	108
About the Author	118
More Mitchells Books	119



1. Good News

IT WAS the twenty-first of March, the birthday of spring, but in Canada winter still reigned. Snow was whirling all over Quebec, all over its fields and wooded hills, all over the mute St. Lawrence River in its prison of ice.

Steadily the snow came down, covering with its pure mantle the rusty confusion of railway yards and the smoking factories of Lachine, a suburb of Montreal. It also fell silently and daintily on the houses and gardens of its residential district. One of the largest gardens belonged to Friendly Gables, the home of the Mitchells. They had lived there most of the two years since they had moved to Canada from Washington, D.C.

The snow kept falling, falling, muffling all sounds, so that cars whispered past and pedestrians moved like ghosts. In this stillness, if someone had stood at the front gate of Friendly Gables and listened carefully, he could have heard a baby wailing in Mrs. Mitchell's bedroom.

One of the twins had been put into Mrs. Mitchell's arms. The other was being powdered and pinned and bundled by the nurse. The doctor had gone; there was only a slight smell of disinfectant left in the room; the perfumes of powder and baby oil were taking over.

Mother lay back on her pillows, one newborn son firmly nestled against her. She watched the other one longingly.

"Is he almost ready, Miss Thorpe?" she asked.

"Just a minute, just a minute," answered Miss Thorpe. She was a tall, angular woman with a firm mouth. Her hands were capable and strong—too strong, thought Mother. No wonder the baby was yelling, he must be seasick, the way Miss Thorpe tossed him about.

"Don't you think he's dressed enough now?" she pleaded. "I want to see if they're alike."

"All babies are alike," mumbled Miss Thorpe through the safety pin she held between her teeth.

"Oh no, they aren't. Mine were all different," protested Mother.

"That's your imagination," said Miss Thorpe, rolling the baby in a blanket as if she were wrapping a loaf.

"Give him to me," Mother begged.

"Here you are, then." And Miss Thorpe handed her the second baby, who stopped crying at once. Mother laid the babies side by side on her lap and compared them. They both had red, crumpled faces and lots of dark, wiry hair.

"They *are* alike, aren't they?" she said. "I'm going to call them Johnny and Jimmy, after my husband and his brother. Won't John be surprised when he hears it's twins! We wanted another boy, but we didn't dream we'd get two! That makes it even—four boys and four girls. Does he know yet?"

"The doctor said he'd phone him," answered Miss Thorpe. "I have my hands full. Twins make twice the work."

"Yes, and I wonder—have we enough diapers and things? I've only *one* cradle . . ." A worried flush spread over Mother's face.

"Never mind, Mrs. Mitchell, they'll both fit in the one for a while, and I'd get diaper service, if I were you. It's no fun, washing for twins."

"No—you're right," agreed Mother. She glanced at the clock. "It's almost three," she said. "The children will soon be coming home from school. I'm longing to show them the babies—the girls will be delighted! Is Catherine awake yet?"

"No, sound asleep," said Miss Thorpe. "Thank goodness. I had trouble enough getting her to bed. She knew something was happening and she kept wondering what the doctor was bringing in his black bag—was it a kitty? I asked her, wouldn't she rather have a little brother or sister, but she said *no*. She seems a very determined young lady. Are they all like that?"

"Oh, you haven't met the others yet, have you?" Mother raised herself on an elbow and listened. "There's Timmy." A pleased smile warmed her face. "Do you hear him?"

"No," said the nurse, folding up some towels. "I don't hear anything." But presently she did notice a faint, clear thread of sound rising from the road below and growing louder all the time.

"Good news, Mommy!" it said. "Good news!"

"Timmy is our evangelist," explained Mother. "He always has good news, and he starts shouting at the beginning of our avenue and keeps on all the way up. Sometimes it's a good mark he got at school, or a game he has won, or a friend he's made, but it's always *good* news. I wonder what it is this time?"

"You're not thinking of letting him come up here, near the babies?" asked Miss Thorpe, horrified.

"Why not?" asked Mother calmly.

"But—he'll be full of germs," warned the nurse.

Mother looked surprised. "I've always let my children see my newborn babies and no harm ever came of it," she protested.

They heard the clomp-clomp-clomp of boots on the stairs, and then the door of the bedroom was flung open and a six-year-old little boy tramped in, snow still melting on his blond hair, his cheeks red, his hazel eyes shining. He was breathing out the frosty air and brought a fresh smell into the room.

"Good news, Mommy," he began. Then he stopped as he noticed the bundles on either side of Mother.

"Two!!" he cried. "Two *babies*! You've got *two*! They came! Two of them!"

"Yes, twins, isn't it wonderful?" Mother smiled.

"Ooooh—twins," breathed Timmy, tiptoeing nearer, a holy awe on his face. "*Real* twins. I thought they only happened in books." He touched the bundles gently with his finger. "They're rather small, though, aren't they?" he said in a worried way. "I

don't think you rested enough, Mother. They don't look quite finished."

"They'll grow," Mother assured him.

"Are they girls?" asked Timmy.

"No, boys."

"Oh, goody!" Timmy sat down at the edge of the bed.

"Do you think they'll ever be big enough to play with?" he asked.

"I'm sure they will, dear—sooner than you think."

"May I hold one?" asked Timmy.

"Not yet, dear; wait till they're a little older. You might hurt them."

"But when they're older I won't want to hold them," said Timmy wisely.

Mother smiled. "What's your good news?" she asked.

"Oh, I forgot!" Timmy's face regained its radiance. "There's a new girl in our class, called Philosophy."

"Philosophy?" asked Mother. "I've never heard that name before."

"I don't call that good news," came the cool voice of the nurse suddenly. "I call that bad news." Timmy looked around, startled.

"That's Miss Thorpe, dear, my nurse," explained Mother.

"Oh! How do you do," said Timmy politely.

"Pleased to meet you," said Miss Thorpe, but she didn't smile and Timmy wondered whether she really *was*.

"Well, tell me more about Philosophy," asked Mother.

Timmy heaved a sigh. "She is pretty," he said.

"She'd better be, with that name," said Miss Thorpe.

There was a ring at the door, and Timmy clattered out of the room to answer it, his loose shoelaces tick-ticking on the floor. A little later the door opened again to admit what seemed at first a basket of flowers on legs. Then the basket tumbled on the bed, giving Mother's big toe a jolt, and from behind it emerged a breathless Timmy, waving an envelope.

"Here," he said. "This says who sent it."

The nurse took the flowers and put them on the table by the window. She clucked her tongue in admiration. "Such lovely yellow tulips," she said with a sigh. "They go so well with the pink hyacinths. You'd think spring was here already." And she sighed again, for she came from England, and there the fields are green in

March, and little white lambs gambol over the first primroses. Miss Thorpe found the long Canadian winters hard to bear.

Mother had been reading the note. "They're from my husband—isn't it *extravagant!*" she cried, flushing happily. "He says he'll come home as soon as his meeting is over."

"Yes, and you should be taking a nap, Mrs. Mitchell," warned Miss Thorpe. "You know what the doctor said."

"But the other children haven't seen the babies yet," murmured Mother. Her eyes were falling shut. She *was* sleepy.

The nurse chased Timmy out of the room and lowered the shades. Then she settled herself in an easy chair with a book. Soon there was only the sound of breathing and the whirring of the electric clock in the room. Mother and babies were fast asleep.

Timmy felt very important. None of the others knew about the twins. He would have to tell them. Their schools got out much later than his. He put on his ski jacket and boots again and stood outside. The snow was still falling in feathery flakes. Timmy saw Mrs. Garneau pass. She was an aristocratic French lady who lived in the brick mansion opposite Friendly Gables.

"We've twins!" he shouted.

The lady stopped. "*Comment?*" she asked.

Timmy searched for the right French word. "*Deux b  b  s,*" he said, holding up two fingers.

"*Tiens!*" Madame Garneau didn't look happy. Already there were too many young Mitchells so far as she was concerned. Two more seemed an imposition. How much extra noise would that make? She hurried into her house.

Timmy waited. He looked longingly down the avenue, where trees marched one after the other, wearing jaunty caps of snow. In the distance he could see the gray streak of the St. Lawrence River, still in its prison of ice.

He could hear the streetcar singing along the wires, coming closer and closer. Now the others would soon be here. Timmy ran to meet the streetcar, the loose straps of his galoshes flapping about his ankles. "Good news," he shouted, "good news!"

He wasn't watching where he was going and ran full tilt into a thick overcoat. Thus abruptly stopped, he looked up into the laughing face of the mailman, who asked, "Ai, ai, where hare you go-