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KITTY TRENIRE

by

MABEL QUILLER-COUCH

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CHAPTER I.

FATE AND A RUSTY NAIL.

On such an afternoon, when all the rest of the world lay in the fierce glare of the scorching sun, who could blame the children for choosing to perch themselves on the old garden wall, where it was so cool, and shady, and enticing? And who, as Kitty often asked tragically in the days and weeks that followed, could have known that by doing so "they were altering their fates for ever"?

The four of them talked a great deal in those days of their "fates;" it sounded so mysterious and grand, and so interesting too, for, of course, no one could know what lay in store for them all, and the most wonderful and surprising events might happen. They did happen to some people, and why not to them?

"I am quite sure something will happen to me some day," said Betty, with a very wise and serious look.

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Dan with mock seriousness, "if something did."

"I mean something wonderful, of course," added Betty. "Don't," with a superior air, "be silly, Dan. Things must happen to somebody, or there would never be any."

Later that same day they realized for the first time that small events could be interesting and important too, and that while they were thinking of their "fates" as something to be spun and woven in the mysterious future, the shuttle was already flying fast.

As I said before, the old wall was particularly cool and tempting-looking that sunny afternoon, for the high, untrimmed laurel hedge on the other side of the path behind them threw a deep broad shadow over the flat top of it, and shade was what one appreciated most on that hot day. All the ground in Gorlay sloped, for Gorlay was built on two hills, while the gardens of all the houses on either side sloped either up or down another and a steeper hill. Dr. Trenire's house was on the left-hand side of the street, as one walked up it, and it was the steep slope up of the garden behind it that made the old wall so fascinating.

To reach the garden from the house one had to pass through a cobbled yard, with the back wing of the house and a stable on one side of it, and a coach-house and another stable on the other. The garden and the garden wall were at the end. From the yard the wall ran up to a good height—to the children it seemed immense, as high as the tower of Babel, though were they to go back now and look at it I dare say they would find it quite insignificant, for walls have a curious way of decreasing an inch or two with every year one grows older.

To the children, though, its two chief charms were that it had a broad flat top on which one could sit

and dangle one's legs over the abyss below, and that from the garden it was so low that by just walking over a flower-bed one could step right on to it, while from that eminence one could command a view of the back door, the side door, the stables, and all that went on in the yard. So that, in addition to being cool and shady, it really was a most attractive and alluring spot.

A vine with a wealth of pretty leaves and long graceful tendrils covered the front of the stable and side of the house, and some years there would be a few bunches of little green grapes hanging amongst the leaves. Through the open stable window, festooned by the vine, dear old Prue, Dr. Trenire's well-beloved and faithful mare, would thrust out her head and gaze dreamily at the life in the yard, or at nothing; and the children, if they were about, would rub her nose and fondle her lovingly, and bring her handfuls of grass, or carrots, or sugar. Sometimes, too, "Pinkie," the yellow cat, would seat herself on the narrow sill of the stable window, close to Prue's cheek, until, finding the air too chilly, or the children too noisy, or sleep overcoming her, she would go inside and curl herself up on Prue's back for a nap.

To-day, though, neither Prue nor Pinkie were to be seen. Apparently they were both indulging in an afternoon nap in the shady stable, for it really was a very hot day, and the sun fell full on the vine and the stable window.

Unfortunately it fell on the door too, and showed up a most inviting and enticing-looking spot where the sun had once raised a blister on the paint.

Every one will admit that there is a wonderful fascination about a nice soft paint-blister, and busy fingers had quickly peeled this one off, with the result that to-day there was a spot which made as good a target as any one could possibly desire, and just within range of their perch on the wall. There was also, unfortunately, quite close at hand a supply of perfect ammunition in the shape of a heap of small stones and rubbish which they had swept together a few days before when seized by a sudden mania for tidying up the garden. Of course, had they been really good children, they would have finished their job by shovelling up the heap and carrying it away; but they grew very tired, and the work was hard, and they felt they really had done a great deal for one day. So the heap was left in the path until, on this hot afternoon, they found a new and not at all tiring way of disposing of most of it.

They kept up such a sharp fire, and made such a noise, that presently Jabez, the coachman and general factotum, was dancing with rage in the yard below—rage at the noise they were making and the litter he foresaw he would have to sweep up before "the master" saw the place, and added rage at the calm unconcern with which they ignored his commands.

The children, though really very much attached to Jabez, unfortunately felt no fear of him, and above all things they loved to tease him. They would not willingly have hurt him on any account whatever, but, as they said afterwards, when he deliberately placed himself between them and their target, and dared them to throw another stone, why of course he had to put up with what he got; and what he got most particularly was a nasty blow on the forehead from a piece of old wood that Dan threw at him.

Dan, as he explained at the time, really selected the wood out of pure humanity, because he thought it would be softer than a stone if it should happen to strike any one; and, as he argued emphatically, "it was ridiculous to think he could have known that Jabez was going to duck his silly head at the very wrong moment, and it was even more ridiculous of Jabez to accuse him of knowing that there was a large rusty nail in the wood, for Jabez knew as well as possible that he, Dan, would have been only too jolly glad to have had the nail, for he was collecting old iron as hard as he could, intending to sell it the very next time the 'old-iron' man came round."

Instead of which it was taken by Jabez, along with his bleeding head, straight into the presence of Dr. Trenire, who happened at the moment to be sitting in his study, trying to get a little sorely-needed rest. The doctor had been out all the previous night at a most trying case, and body and brain were weary, his nerves all on edge, his patience nearly exhausted, and he had no time or inclination for unpleasant interruptions and unnecessary worries. Altogether there could not have been a much more unpropitious moment for any one to have gone to him than that which Jabez chose.

As a rule Dr. Trenire was only too gentle and kind and patient with his four motherless children; but to-day, when they slowly, and at a discreet distance, followed Jabez into the study, Kitty felt a sudden conviction that things were not going to be quite as simply and easily got over as usual. She saw a look cross her father's face such as she had never seen on it before, and for the first time in her careless, happy-go-lucky life realized with keen compunction what a sad, tired, patient face it was, and suddenly she found herself wanting to do things for him to try to cheer and help him, and wished most heartily that they had done anything but bring fresh worry and unpleasantness to him.

But before he inquired into the particulars of the squabble, Dr. Trenire attended to the wound. It was

only a surface one, but the skin was torn rather badly, and Jabez was bleeding a good deal, and groaning with all his might.

"Get me some hot water."

Only too glad to be able to do anything to help, Kitty ran off; but to run for hot water was one thing, to get it was quite another. The fire was out, the kitchen was littered with dishes and pots and pans, and Fanny the cook, with a dirty apron on and no cap, was fast asleep in her chair by the window, just as though she had not a care or a duty in the world. The squalor and muddle of the whole place could not fail to strike any one, even casual Kitty; and to her it brought a deeper feeling, one of trouble and remorse, for, in response to her own pleading, her father had made her his housekeeper—and this was how she had fulfilled her duties! In fact, she had given herself no duties; she had shirked them. She had left everything to the servants, and as long as she had been free and untroubled, and meals of a kind had been served at more or less regular intervals, had bothered no further.

"Fanny!" she called sharply, "do wake up! Why haven't you got a fire, and a kettle boiling?"

Fanny awoke with a start, which in itself is enough to make a person cross; and to have been caught asleep, with her work not done, made her crosser. "I don't want a great fire burning on a hot afternoon like this," she answered sharply. "You wouldn't like it yourself if you had to sit by it, Miss Kitty; and if it's your tea you'm wanting, well, it isn't tea-time yet. When 'tis, you will find 'tis ready."

"Um—m!" said Kitty loftily, in a tone that expressed most emphatic doubt of Fanny's statement.

"What is it you're routing about in the cupboards for, miss? I don't like to have folks coming into my kitchen, turning everything over and rummaging round. I shan't know where to find a thing when I wants to. What is it you'm looking for?"

"The methylated spirit and the little stove," said Kitty. "I *must* have some hot water, Fanny, and quickly. Father wants some. There has been an accident."

Fanny changed her tone, and her expression grew a little milder. "We haven't got a leak, miss. We ran out of it a week ago. I told Emily to tell you—but there, I might as well talk to the wind as talk to her—"

"Oh dear," interrupted Kitty, "whatever shall I do? Jabez is bleeding so he will bleed to death—"

"Jabez! Oh my! Whatever has happened, Miss Kitty?" Suddenly Fanny's whole manner changed to one of anxious eagerness and deep concern. "Is it—is it dangerous, miss? How did it happen? What's he done?" Fanny had been so sound asleep that she had not noticed the noise in the yard, or the little procession pass the kitchen window on its way to the study.

"I don't think it is very bad," said Kitty. "Dan threw a piece of wood, and it—it hit Jabez on the forehead, and—and oh, Fanny, what will father think? I believe he is angry with us already, and you know he was out all night and is very tired, and he will be more angry if there's no hot water or anything he wants, and I—I did so want to help him."

Fanny, who appeared more concerned about Jabez than about her master, was, with a lavish use of sticks, kindling a big blaze under a small kettle, and soon had water ready as hot as it was needed. Kitty, greatly relieved, ran back with it to her father.

"I suppose, as usual, there was none," he said gravely, "though I have said until I am tired that in a doctor's house there should always be a supply;" and Kitty could find nothing to say.

Jabez by this time was seated in a chair, facing the light. He was looking very pale and subdued. The thought of having his wound washed and dressed upset him far more than did the wound itself. Betty and Anthony were sitting on two of the stiffest and most uncomfortable-looking chairs in the room, with very grave expressions on their pale but not too clean faces. Dan was standing by the window looking intensely nervous and uncomfortable. He glanced frequently from Jabez to his father, and back again, and Kitty could see he was longing to say something, but did not know how to. She was very sorry that it had been Dan who had dealt the fatal blow. She almost wished that it had been she herself who had done it, for their father was never quite so severe with her or Betty as with the boys.

With the feeling still on her that trouble was coming, she tried to make herself as useful as possible; but as she knew little or nothing as to where anything was kept, she was more of a hindrance than a help, and her hopes were blighted by her father's order to them all to leave the room.

"I will see you presently," he said sternly. "I will either come to you or send for you when I am ready;"

and, feeling very crushed, they made their way to the old nursery, now called "the schoolroom," and there waited with curiously mingled feelings for what was to happen next. They did not expect it to be anything *very* serious; but they hated to vex their father, and they felt that now they really had vexed him.

Oh how slowly the minutes passed, and what a lot of them there were! It seemed to them that time enough had elapsed in which to have set every limb that Jabez possessed, and to hear the recital of every wrong he had ever received at their hands; and by the time they heard their father's footstep coming their hopes and fears had gone up and down again many times, and they had pictured themselves sentenced to every possible and impossible punishment that their minds could imagine.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEWS, AND HOW THEY RECEIVED IT.

When the door opened and Dr. Trenire came in with the heavy tread of a very weary man, and the face of a very worried one, another and a larger wave of shame and remorse rushed over them all.

Dan stepped forward at once to put his feelings into words. "I am fearfully sorry, father," he said impetuously. "I—I was a brute to throw the things at Jabez; but I—I never meant to hurt him. Is it very bad?"

"It is not a serious wound by any means," said the doctor slowly; "but, of course, the wood was old and dirty, and the nail rusty, and there is always danger of blood-poisoning."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," said Dan, looking alarmed.

"No, that is just it," sighed the doctor; "you don't think. No one in the house thinks, it seems to me. I suppose, though, it isn't your fault; you have no one to teach you," and he sighed a heavy, harassed sigh.

The children's mother had died nearly five years earlier, when Kitty was nine, and Anthony but a year old. For a time a housekeeper had been employed to manage both children and servants; but so uncomfortable had been her rule, so un-homelike the house, so curbed and dreary the children's lives, that when Kitty reached the mature age of thirteen her father, only too glad to banish the stranger from their midst, had given in to her pleading, and with high hopes of a home which would be happy and homelike once more, allowed her to become housekeeper and mistress of the house.

Unfortunately, though, Kitty had had no training. Her mother had been an excellent manager; but Kitty was only a little thing when she lost her, and her life had mostly been spent, happily enough, in nursery and schoolroom. Mrs. Trenire's wish had been that her children should have a happy childhood, so all family troubles, all anxieties, domestic worries and details, were kept from them, and the result was that, beyond the nursery and schoolroom life, they knew nothing. Kitty had not the least idea how rooms were cleaned, or meals provided, or anything. Then had come the housekeeper, who for other reasons had kept the children to their own quarters. She resented any interference or questioning, and objected to any trouble they might give her, but as long as they amused themselves and kept out of her way, they were free to do pretty much as they wished.

Under the circumstances it was not greatly to be wondered at that when Kitty took up the reins of management, life at Dr. Trenire's was not well-ordered and free from muddle, and that the doctor himself looked worried, and sad, and careworn.

The pity of it was that Kitty did not try to learn even the very simplest things in housekeeping, and in that lay the root of the trouble and the cause of all that followed. Though when four wild young spirits, that have been bottled up and corked down for years, suddenly find themselves free and able to do what they like when they like, without having to render an account to any one, it would be rather wonderful if they did settle down and become quite staid and steady all at once.

Kitty it was, though, who was most at fault. She had begged to be allowed to manage the house, and, having got her wish, she just seized the advantages and revelled in the freedom, but ignored the responsibilities; and no one was more acutely aware of this fact than was Kitty herself during the next half-hour, when their father talked so gravely to them all in the schoolroom.

"I have been thinking a great deal," he said, as he dropped wearily into the roomy old chair by the fireplace—the chair where their mother used to sit and tell them stories, and hear them say their

prayers before they went to bed. "I have thought over the whole situation, as well as my tired brain will let me, and I have come to the conclusion that for all our sakes I must get some one to come and look after us."

"O father!" gasped Kitty in utter dismay. She had never thought that anything as dreadful as this could happen.

"Evidently the management of the house and all of us is beyond Kitty," went on Dr. Trenire; "and that is not to be wondered at. We are a large family on the whole, and a doctor's house is not an ordinary one, and it is not surprising that everything should have got into a state of muddle and confusion."

Kitty felt, but could not say, that she had never really tried to manage it; that as long as things had gone on without any open fiasco, and they had been able to enjoy themselves, and the servants had not been bad-tempered, she had been quite content. She could not make that confession now, and if she had it would not have done any good.

"The house *must* be orderly and well managed, the meals properly arranged and served, and the servants kept in order, and I should be very culpable if I did not see that it was so," went on her father slowly. "So, after much thought and hesitation, for I am very reluctant to admit even a comparative stranger into our midst again, I feel that the only thing to be done is to write to your dear mother's cousin, Mrs. Pike, and ask her to come and make her home with us. She once offered to, and I think now, if she is still willing, it will be well to accept her kind offer."

A stifled cry of dismay broke from the four shocked listeners—a cry they could not repress. "Aunt Pike!" Aunt Pike, of all people, to come to live with them! Oh, it was too dreadful! It could not be—they could never bear it! She had stayed with them once for a fortnight, and it might have been a year from the impression it had left on their memories. When she had left they had had a thanksgiving service in the nursery, and Betty—solemn Betty—had prayed aloud, "From Aunt Pike, pestilence, and famine, please deliver us."

And now this dreaded aunt was to be asked to come again—not for a fortnight only, but for many fortnights; and not as a guest, but as head and mistress of them all, to manage them, to order them about, to make them do as she chose. Oh, it was overwhelming, appalling, too appalling to be true!

"But there is Anna!" gasped Kitty.

"I know," said Dr. Trenire, who really felt nearly as bad about it as did his children. "Anna will live here too, probably. Of course we could not expect her mother to leave her."

This was the hardest blow, the final drop of bitterness their cup could hold, the last straw on four overburdened camels.

"But we all hate Anna," said Betty with slow, deliberate emphasis; "and we shall hate her more if she is here always, wanting to play with us, and go about with us, and—and—"

"Betty, those remarks are unworthy of you," said her father gravely.

"But they are quite true, daddy," said Tony solemnly, "and we've *got* to speak the truth and shame the devil. Jabez told us so."

Dr. Trenire did not feel able or inclined to argue the point then. Betty drew nearer to him and leaned against his shoulder. "Daddy," she said in her grave, confiding way, "you won't like it either, a bit. When Anna was here before you often used to say, 'Oh, that child!' and you looked quite glad, as glad as we did, when she went away. I am sure you will be sorry if she comes, nearly as sorry as we shall be, only you will be able to go your rounds and get away from them every day; but we," pathetically, "can't do that."

Again Dr. Trenire was silent. He sometimes wished his younger daughter's memory was less acute, and her love of reasoning less strong. No one spoke, and until some one did, remarks would go on dropping from Betty's lips. It was a way she had. She had never been known to cease talking without being forcibly made to do so. "It does seem dreadful," she went on thoughtfully, "that just because Jabez got his head hit we must have Aunt Pike and Anna here for ever and ever, and be made very unhappy. I am sure Jabez would rather have us punished in some other way. Shall I ask him what he would like done to us instead?" she finished up eagerly.

"I don't want to punish you," said Dr. Trenire. "Don't run away with the idea, children, that I am doing it for that purpose. It is that I think it will be the best plan for all of us—for our comfort and happiness, and your future good. I can't have you all growing up like savages, untrained, uneducated, uncared for."

What would you all say to me when you grew up?" looking round at them with a smile.

"I would say, 'Thank you,'" said Betty gravely.

"I'd rather be a savage than anything," said Tony eagerly.

Kitty and Dan were silent. Dan was old enough to realize something of what his father meant; Kitty was altogether too upset to answer. She was thinking that it was she who had brought all this on them; that she might have saved them from it. The others blamed Jabez and his tale-bearing; but Kitty in her heart of hearts felt that Jabez with his cut forehead and his tale of woe was but a last link in the long chain which she had forged—a chain which was to grapple to them Aunt Pike and the unwelcome Anna. At the same time the injury to Jabez was a last link, without which the chain might never have been completed.

It was completed though, for that their father's mind was made up, his decision final, they recognized only too clearly, and the glorious summer day turned suddenly to blackest, dreariest night for all of them.

By-and-by, though, after their father had left them, and they had talked things over amongst themselves, some of Kitty's remorse gave way to a rebellion against fate. "How could they have known," she demanded tragically, "that by just sitting on the garden wall that afternoon they were changing and spoiling their lives for ever, and giving Aunt Pike the chance she had been longing for, the chance of coming there to 'boss' them? How was one to know what one might do and what one mightn't? What was the use of trying? There was no going against 'fate'! If it was their fate to have everything spoilt by her, she would have come even if Jabez had never been hurt at all, and everything had been quite right and perfect."

"I shall never sit on that old wall again without expecting something to happen," said Betty in solemn tones.

"And you will never be disappointed after *she* comes," Dan foreboded gloomily, "so it is just as well to be prepared." At which they all groaned in miserable chorus.

By-and-by they straggled downstairs again and out into the yard. The house was really unbearably hot, and seemed too small to allow their minds to grasp all they had to grasp. They had a sort of gloomy longing, too, to revisit the spot where so much had happened, to go over the familiar ground and see if the bright outer world looked different at all; there surely must be some sign of the tragedy that had befallen them.

In the outer world things had changed very much. The sun had disappeared, and the sky was heavy and overcast with threatenings of the storm that had been brewing all the day; the old wall looked gray, and sad, and uninviting.

"Just as though it knew," thought Kitty.

In the yard Prue was standing somewhat dejectedly, evidently waiting to be harnessed; Jabez was creeping about, getting out the carriage in preparation for a journey. He looked quite imposing with his bandaged head, and he was taking himself very seriously. He glanced furtively at the children, and bore himself with an air of patient but superior resignation. In his heart he was really vexed with himself for having complained of them, though he felt it would not do to let them know it.

Betty, Dan, and Tony felt so bitterly the ill turn he had done them that they walked through the yard and up into the garden without a word or a glance—a cut on the forehead seemed so trifling compared with what they had to bear. Jabez, who had expected anger or teasing on their parts, felt this coldness greatly; he was not used to that kind of treatment, and it hurt him. Kitty, though, was so struck by the sight of his preparations that for the moment she forgot him and his injuries.

"Father hasn't to go out again to-night, has he, Jabez?" she asked anxiously, staying behind while the others strolled on.

"Yes, miss, he hev. He've got to go to Welland to once. They've just sent in."

"Are you going too?" looking at his bandaged head.

"No, miss," with a resigned air. "Master says I'm to go 'ome and 'ave a good night's rest—that is if so be as I can get to sleep."

"But who is going to drive father?" interrupted Kitty.

"Master said as 'ow he'd drive hisself."

Kitty remembered the weary look on her father's face, the sleepless night he had had, the long, busy day. "Jabez," she said with quiet firmness, "I am going to drive father; then perhaps he will be able to sleep a little in the carriage. Don't say anything to him, but I'll be in the carriage when you drive it round for him, and then I expect he will let me go."

Jabez looked dubiously first at the sky and then at Kitty.

"I can drive; you know I can," she said eagerly. "Now don't be nasty, Jabez; we have got trouble enough as it is."

"'Tis my belief there's a nasty storm brewing—"

"I love a storm, especially when I am driving through it."

"I was putting in the old mare on purpose, 'cause she stands thunder and lightning better than what Billy does, but—"

"Jabez, you may say what you like, but I am going, unless father stops me; so don't bother to say any more about it. I know the way, and father trusts me to drive."

"I wasn't going against 'ee, Miss Kitty. If you'm set on it you'm set on it, and 't isn't no manner of use for me to talk."

Dan and the others came sauntering down from the garden again. "Jabez, you might give me the nail out of that bit of wood," said Dan; "every half-ounce counts, and I want to get enough iron to sell."

Jabez shook his head knowingly. He would rather not have had any further reference made to the affair, for he was really devoted to them all, and was ashamed of his part in it. He always made a point, though, of seeming to distrust them; he thought it safer.

"Ah, I ain't so sure," he began, "that it'd be wise of me to let 'ee 'ave it. I dunno what more 'arm you mightn't be doing with it."

"We couldn't do more harm than you have done already," snapped Dan. "You've nailed Aunt Pike fast to the house with it, and it will take more than we can do to get her away again."

"What be saying of, sir?" asked Jabez, bewildered, and suddenly realizing that their sombre faces and manner meant something more than usual. "Mrs. Pike—"

"Father is going to send and ask Aunt Pike to live here, and it's your fault," said Betty concisely. "It was your complaining about Dan that did it."

Jabez gasped. He knew the lady well, and preserved a vivid recollection of her former visit. "She hain't a-coming visiting here again, is she, sur?" he groaned.

"Visiting! It's much worse than that, a thousand times worse. She is coming here for good, to manage all of us—and you too!" they gasped.

Jabez dropped helpless on to an upturned bucket, the picture of hopeless dejection. "There won't be no peace in life no more," he said, "and I shan't be allowed to show my nose in the kitchen. I'd have had my old 'ead scat abroad every day of my life and never have told rather than I'd have helped to do this. Was it really me telling on 'ee, sur, that made the master settle it so?"

"Yes," nodded Dan, "that finished it."

Jabez groaned again in sheer misery. "I dunno, I'm sure, whatever made me take and do it. I've stood so much more from all of 'ee and never so much as opened my lips. I reckon 'twas the weather made me a bit peppery like—"

"It was fate," interposed Kitty gravely. "It must have been something, for sure," breathed Jabez, with a dreary shake of his head.

"Make haste and get Prue harnessed," said Kitty, "or the storm will begin before we start, and then father won't let me go;" and Jabez, with another gloomy shake of his head, rose from the upturned bucket and proceeded with his task.

A DRIVE AND A SLICE OF CAKE.

With one thing and another Jabez was so agitated as to be quite incapable of hurrying, and Kitty, who could harness or unharness a horse as well as any one, had to help him. She fastened the trace on one side, buckled up the girths, and finally clambered up into the carriage while Jabez was still fumbling with the bit and the reins. She caught the braid of her frock in the step as she mounted, and ripped down many inches of it, but that did not trouble her at all.

"Have you got a knife in your pocket, Dan?" she asked calmly; and Dan not only produced a knife, but hacked off the hanging braid for her and threw it away.

"I do wish I could go too," said Betty wistfully. "I'd love to drive all over the downs at night, particularly if there was a storm coming. May I come too, Kitty?"

But Kitty, for several reasons, vetoed the suggestion. For one thing she wanted to be alone with her father, to try her powers of argument and persuasion against the summoning of Aunt Pike and Anna into their midst; for another, she felt that to be driving in the dark, and probably through a storm, was responsibility enough, without the care of Betty added; and she felt, too, that though her father might be induced to let one of them go with him, he would, under such circumstances, shrink from the pleasure of their united company.

"No, Bet," she answered firmly, "you can't come to-night. I—I want to talk things over with father; but," with sudden inspiration, "I tell you what you can do, and it would be awfully sweet of you. You coax Fanny to get something very nice for supper by the time we come home, and see that Emily has the table properly laid, and that the glasses are clean, and that there are knives enough, and—oh, you know, all sorts of things."

"I know," said Betty, quite as delighted with the responsibility thrust on her as she would have been with permission to go for the drive.

Dr. Trenire came out presently with some letters in his hand, which he gave to Jabez. "Post those without fail," he said, then mounted to his seat. He was so absorbed, or bothered, or tired, that he did not at first observe Kitty's presence, or, at any rate, object to it; and when he did notice her, all he said was, "O Kitty, are you going to drive me? That is very good of you; but isn't it rather late for you?"

"No, father," said Kitty, relieved by his tone. "I love driving by night, and I—I thought it would rest you to have some one to drive. Perhaps you will be able to have a nap on the way."

"I shouldn't be surprised if I did," said her father, with a smile. "I feel as though my head is asleep already. Have we got the lamps?"

"Yes, I think everything is right," and, gathering up the reins, off she drove down through the street.

Every one they met smiled and saluted them in some way, and Kitty smiled back, well pleased. To be perched up on the box-seat, with the reins in her hand, in a position of real trust, gave her the happiest thrills imaginable. Horses, and riding and driving, were passions with her.

At the bottom of the street they branched to their left, and went more slowly up a steep hill, which wound on and on, gradually growing steeper and steeper, past villas and cottages and pretty gardens, until at last all dwellings were left behind, and only hedges bordered the wide road; and then the hedges were passed too, and they were out on the open downs with miles of rough level grassland stretching away on either side of them, broken only by the flat white road along which they rolled so easily.

Up here, on this height, with nothing to intercept it, a little breeze met them. It was a very faint little breeze, but it was refreshing. Kitty drew in deep breaths of it with pleasure, for the closeness and thunderousness of the atmosphere were very trying. The sky overhead looked heavy and angry, black, with a dull red glow burning through here and there, while a hot mist veiled the horizon.

For a time they drove on without speaking, Prue's regular footfalls, the noise of the wheels, and the sharp, clear calls of the birds alone breaking the silence. Kitty was thinking deeply, trying to summon courage to make her earnest, final appeal, and wondering how to begin.

"Father," she began at last, "I—I wish you would give us one more chance—trial, I mean. We would try to behave better, really we would; and—and I will do my best to look after the house and the servants properly. I am sure I can if I try. There shall always be hot water, and—well, you see I feel it is

all my fault, and I have brought it all on the others—"

Dr. Trenire came back with a start from his drowsy musings, and tried to gather what it was that his daughter was saying, for she was rather incoherent. Her voice shook at first with nervousness. "Eh, what?" he stammered.

It was disconcerting to Kitty to find that he had not been taking in a word of what it had cost her such an effort to say. "I will do my best to look after the house and the servants," she repeated desperately, "if—"

"But I am afraid, child, you really don't know how. It is not in anger, Kitty, that I am making this new arrangement. I am doing it because I feel you have a task entirely beyond your power, and for all your sakes I must see that you have an orderly and comfortable home, and—"

"It won't be *comfortable*," said Kitty pathetically. "It will never be that any more."

"You must not begin by being prejudiced against your aunt," reasoned her father gently.

"I am not, father, really; we are not prejudiced," she answered; "but we know, and—and every one else knows that—that—well, when I told Jabez what was going to happen, he sat down on a bucket and he looked—he looked at first as though he were going to faint, and then as though he would leave. I feel nearly certain he will not stay, I really do, father. Aunt Pike was always down on him."

Dr. Trenire felt a little uneasy. He hated changes amongst his servants when once he had grown used to them, and Jabez was a faithful and valuable one in spite of his peculiarities. "You should have thought of all this sooner," he said, rather crossly, "and not have made such a step necessary."

"But—but, father, if we promise now, and really mean it, and begin at once, and—and—" Kitty was so excited she could hardly get her words out, for she had quickly caught the signs of wavering in her father's voice and manner. Already she felt as though victory were near. "Anyhow, father, give us six months, or even three months more, just to let us show that—"

With an exclamation, Dr. Trenire leaned forward and pulled the right rein sharply. "Take care, child," he cried; "you will have us over in a moment. You have almost got this wheel over the edge of the ditch. You *must* learn to attend to the business in hand, or you will never succeed in anything. Another inch and you would have upset us, and probably have broken a spring."

Dr. Trenire's nerves were on edge, and he spoke more sharply than was usual with him. Kitty felt that she had made a bad beginning, her spirits sank, and she lapsed into silence. But when they were once more bowling smoothly along, her father's thoughts returned to her appeal.

"I am afraid it is too late now," he said gently, sorry for his momentary irritability. "I have already written to your aunt."

Kitty turned a stricken face to him, and her hold of the reins loosened again. "Written to Aunt Pike—already!" she gasped. "Oh!" But hope rose again a moment later. "But you haven't posted it?"

"Yes, I have. At least, I gave it, with some others, to Jabez to post. It will have gone by the time we reach home."

"Oh, how dreadful!" Kitty's fingers tightened on the reins. Her impulse was to turn and drive back furiously to try and intercept that fatal letter. "Father, do let me just drive quickly back and stop it," she pleaded; but her father shook his head.

"I must get on to see Sir James as speedily as I can. It would take us nearly an hour to go home and reach this far again; the old gentleman would think I wasn't coming to-night. Look at the sky, too; we must try and get to Welland, if not home again, before the storm bursts. It will be a bad one when it comes, and anything but pleasant or safe to be driving through over an exposed road such as this; and even now I am afraid it will be dark before we get home."

Kitty knew that; but everything seemed trifling in comparison with this affair of Aunt Pike, and she drove on in a state of mutiny and misery very hard to bear, until by-and-by another comforting thought came to her. If she could not recall that letter, perhaps she could induce her father to write another to her aunt, telling her that after all he had made other arrangements, and that there was no occasion to trouble her. She would not say anything about it now though, and presently other things occurred which helped to banish for the moment this particular trouble from her mind.

By the time they reached Welland it was very nearly dark, and Kitty felt not a little nervous as she

guided Prue through the gate leading into the Manor grounds; for the turning was an awkward one, and the gate not wide. She managed it, however, and drove along the drive and drew up before the door in quite a masterly fashion.

"I had better light the lamps by the time you come out," she said to her father as he got down from the carriage; but before he could tell her that One of the stablemen would probably come and see to the lamps and Prue too, the hall door was opened by an anxious-faced maid.

"We are glad you have come, sir," she exclaimed. "The master seems very bad, and the mistress is very anxious."

"I will be with your master in a moment," said the doctor cheerfully; then, turning again to Kitty, "Hadn't you better come inside, dear? You—"

"Oh no," cried shy Kitty, to whom the suggestion was full of horror. "Oh no. I would *much* rather stay here, please, father. It is cooler now, and I am very comfortable;" and Dr. Trenire, understanding her nature, let her have her way, and followed the impatient maid to the sickroom.

Kitty, greatly relieved, was fastening the reins to the splashboard before getting down to light the lamps, when a man appeared around the corner of the house, and came towards her.

"You had better go inside, miss, hadn't you?" he said, speaking as though he were bidding her to go rather than asking her a question. "I'll look after the mare."

"Thank you," said Kitty decisively, "I would rather stay here."

"I think we'm going to have a storm, and you'll get wet through before the doctor comes out. I reckon he'll be some time."

Kitty felt strongly inclined to say she would like nothing better than to get wet through, and that she preferred sitting out in a storm to anything else in the world. Why couldn't people let her do as she liked best? It seemed to her that it was only for her to want to do one thing, for every one to conspire to make her do another. And how aggravating it was to have the man glued to Prue's bridle all the time, as though Prue ever needed holding, or Kitty were absolutely incapable! He was not at all a pleasant man; he spoke very sulkily and never smiled. She wished for his departure even more fervently than he, she felt, was wishing for hers, but she could not summon up courage to tell him to go, nor could she get over her irritation with him sufficiently to talk to him. So there they stayed in gloomy silence, and Kitty, to add to her annoyance, was made to feel that she was acting foolishly, and ought to have done what she particularly objected to doing.

"Oh!"

A sudden vivid flash of lightning drew the exclamation from her, and made even quiet old Prue toss her head; and immediately after the flash came a violent peal of thunder just above their heads, so violent that it seemed as though the heavens themselves were being rent and shaken and the house tumbling about them. Then came a quick patter, patter, patter, swish, swish, and a storm of rain descended on them.

"If you'll get out, miss, and go into the house, I'll take the mare and the carriage round and put them under shelter, or the cushions and things'll be soaking wet by the time the doctor comes out."

There was a tone in the man's voice that Kitty could not ignore, though she disliked him intensely for it—the more so, perhaps, because she felt that he was in the right. He addressed her as though she were a little wilful child, whose foolishness he had endured for some time, but was not going to endure any longer.

Kitty was *so* annoyed that for a moment she felt that nothing would induce her to dismount, and that if he chose to put the carriage under shelter he could take her there along with it; but the prospect of having to endure his society the whole time made her pause, and while she paused the hall door was opened, and a lady appeared, peering out into the darkness. Standing outlined against the lighted hall Kitty could see her distinctly, while she, her eyes dazzled for the moment by the light, could see nothing.

"Did Dr. Trenire bring one of his little girls with him, Reuben?"

"Yes'm."

"Do come in at once, child. Which is it? Kitty?"

"Yes," answered Kitty reluctantly.

"Then do come in. Whatever makes you stay out in the storm?" cried Lady Kitson.

Kitty obediently, but most unwillingly, scrambled down from her seat. Even from the carriage, and through the darkness, she could see how charming and dainty Lady Kitson was looking. She had on a soft, flowing gray silk gown, with white lace about her shoulders and arms, and her beautiful golden hair gleamed brightly in the lamplight. Kitty, at sight of her, suddenly realized with overwhelming shame that in her zeal to drive her father and make her appeal, she had neither brushed her own hair nor washed her hands, nor changed her old garden hat or morning frock. She was, she knew, as disreputable-looking and untidy a daughter as any father could feel ashamed of.

"How stupid of me—how stupid of me," she thought, full of vexation with herself, "when I knew I was coming here, too."

There was nothing to be done, though, but to go in and live through this ordeal as best she might. "Why do these things always happen to me?" she groaned miserably. "If I had wanted very much to go in, and had had on all new beautiful clothes, I should have been left out here to spoil them. I wish father would come; he must have been gone quite half an hour, I am sure, and Sir James can't want him any longer."

In the hall Lady Kitson held out a delicate white hand, with sparkling rings on her fingers, and took Kitty's grubby one in hers. Some persons might not have noticed the roughness and stains and marks made by the reins, but Kitty knew that Lady Kitson did. Her keen eyes missed nothing, and probably before very long she would be retailing to Dr. Trenire all his daughter's shortcomings, and the crying necessity for sending her away to a good boarding-school at once.

None of the Trenire children liked Lady Kitson, though they could hardly have told you why. Poor Kitty felt now that she disliked her exceedingly.

"Come into the drawing-room; the girls are there."

"The girls" were Lady Kitson's step-daughters. They were both of them older than Kitty, but were inclined to be very friendly. The Trenire children, though, did not respond much to their advances; they found them uninteresting and silly, and never felt at home with them. The truth was, they had no tastes in common, and probably never would have.

Kitty felt glad of their presence now though, for anything would be better, she thought, than to have to sit for a long time with Lady Kitson alone. At least she felt glad until, having been directed to a low easy-chair facing them all, she suddenly caught sight of the two jagged ends of braid hanging from the front breadth of her dress—the braid Dan had hacked off with his knife. Both ends hung down two or three inches, and no eye could avoid seeing them. From them her glance travelled to her shabby old shoes, the spots on her frock, her hands. Her face flushed a fiery red and her eyes filled. Not for any consideration could she at that moment have raised her eyes. She knew, she felt those gimlet glances, the looks and meaning smiles that were being exchanged, and she writhed under them, while her heart felt very full and sore. She could not talk, her mind was weighed down. In her embarrassment she could think of nothing to say, and her hostesses were apparently too absorbed to make an effort either. Moment after moment of overwhelming wretchedness dragged by.

"I shall never, never forget this," thought Kitty, "all the rest of my life. It will make me miserable whenever I think of it."

At last, to every one's relief, Lady Kitson went upstairs to join her husband, and with her departure some, at least, of the stiffness was removed.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Lettice, the elder of the two girls.
"I am sure you must be after that long drive."

"No, thank you," said Kitty soberly.

"Oh, I think you must be.—Maude, do go and ask Parkin to give us some cake for Kitty. Be sure and say it is for Kitty."

"Can't you go yourself?" asked Maude. "Parkin is in a fearful temper with me because I told mother about her giving things to Reuben."

"Bother! You are always rubbing the servants the wrong way. I let them do as they like, for the sake of keeping them amiable. I am awfully hungry, and so is Kitty, if she would only admit it; but if she

refuses to, I suppose I must go hungry."

"We shall have dinner soon," said Maude sharply. "I should think you could wait until then."

"I will have some cake, if you really want me to," said Kitty, looking up at Lettice with a smile, the first she had been able to call to her lips. She liked Lettice the better of the two girls.

"Will you?" cried Lettice delightedly. "Then I will go and ask for something nice for you. I am sure Parkin will give me something if I promise her my little pansy brooch;" and off she went, returning a moment later with a plateful of huge slices of orange cake.

Kitty looked at the slices in dismay. "I can't eat a whole one," she said. "I shouldn't have time either, for I expect father will be down soon."

"Nonsense! you must. There is no knife to cut them smaller," cried Lettice, already making marked inroads on a slice herself. "Quick, take some, or I shall drop the plate."

Kitty unwillingly did as she was told, only to regret it bitterly as, at the first mouthful, a shower of crumbs descended on the polished floor. After that experience it took her so long to make up her mind to take a second bite, that just as she did so voices were heard outside the door, the handle was turned, and Lady Kitson, followed by Dr. Trenire, entered the room. At the first sounds Lettice had seized the plate of cake and made a hasty exit through the conservatory, but for Kitty there was no such escape.

"Well, dear, are you ready to face the storm?" asked her father, smiling down at her.

"I think I must lend you a wrap of some sort," said Lady Kitson. "I suppose you have none?"

Kitty, her mouth full of cake and one hand grasping the remainder, tried to swallow it hastily that she might reply, and, of course, choked. As she often remarked afterwards, the misery of that visit would not have been complete without that final blow. Covered with shame and confusion, she rose awkwardly from her chair, looking about her for some place whereon to deposit that dreadful cake. There was none. The tables were covered with books and frames, vases and ornaments, but the vases were full of flowers, and there was not even a friendly flower-pot saucer. There was nothing for her to do but carry it with her.

"Don't hurry," said Lady Kitson politely; "stay and finish your cake."

"I can't," said Kitty desperately.

She could not even say "thank you." In fact, there seemed so little to give thanks for that it never entered her head to do so.

"Then we will start at once," said her father briskly; and to her immense relief she soon found herself, her farewells said, mounting once more the dear homely carriage. With the reins between her fingers, and the responsibility on her of driving through the storm and darkness, some of her courage and self-respect returned, but not until she had flung that wretched cake far from her into the darkness.

"I shall hate orange cakes all the rest of my life," she thought.

"It was kind of Lady Kitson to take you in out of the storm," remarked her father absently.

"Was it?" she questioned doubtfully. "I suppose it was. But—another time I—I would rather stay out in the very worst storm that ever was," she added mentally. "Nothing *could* be worse than what I have gone through, and what I shall feel whenever I remember it."

CHAPTER IV.

STORMS AT HOME AND ABROAD.

Time might soften Kitty Trenire's recollections of that embarrassing visit of hers, but it could never dim her remembrance of the drive home that night over that wide expanse of moorland which stretched away black and mysterious under a sky which glowed like a furnace, until both were illuminated by lightning so vivid that one could but bow the head and close the eyes before it. A gusty wind, which had sprung up suddenly, chased the carriage all the way, while the rain, which came down in sheets, hissing as it struck the ground, thundered on the hood drawn over their heads, but left their vision clear to gaze in wondering awe at the marvels which surrounded them.

Dr. Trenire presently took the reins from Kitty, and tucking her well up in the wrap that had been lent her, left her free to gaze and gaze her fill. Prue did not relish the din and uproar in the heavens, the flashing lightning, or the rain beating on her; but though she shook her head and flapped her long ears in protest, she stepped out bravely.

When they came at last to the houses and the more shut-in roads the wild beauty was less impressive, and Kitty's thoughts turned with pleasure to home and dry clothes, and the nice meal Betty had undertaken to have in readiness for them. How jolly it all was, and how she did love her home, and the freedom and comfort of it.

The first sight of the house, though, decidedly tended to damp her pleasant anticipations, for there was not a light to be seen anywhere. All the windows were gaping wide to the storm, while from more than one a bedraggled curtain hung out wet and dirty.

Dr. Trenire drove straight in to the stable-yard, expecting to have to groom down and stable Prue himself. But Jabez had changed his mind about going home and early to bed, and was there ready to receive them. At the sight of his bandaged head Kitty's thoughts flew to the events of the day, to Aunt Pike and the fatal letter, and she simply ached with anxiety to know if Jabez had posted it or not.

While she was waiting for an opportunity to ask him Dr. Trenire solved the difficulty for her.

"Have you posted those letters I gave you, Jabez?" he asked, with, as it seemed to Kitty, extraordinary calm.

"Oh yes, sir," said Jabez cheerfully, very proud of himself for his unusual promptness. "I went down with 'em to once. When there's a hubbub on in the kitchen I'm only too glad to clear out."

For once Dr. Trenire did not appear particularly pleased with his assiduity, and Kitty turned dejectedly away. The letter, the fatal letter, was gone, her hopes were ended, fate was too strong for them. And to add to her trouble there had been a hubbub in the kitchen, which meant a quarrel. Oh dear, what could be the matter now? Emily was in a bad temper again, she supposed. Emily generally was.

As she went up to her room to change she met Emily coming down, and whatever else she might be in doubt about, she was in none as to the signs on Emily's face. It was at "very stormy," and no mistake.

"I am wet through," said Kitty brightly, hoping to smooth away the frown; "but oh it was grand to see the storm across the downs. I did enjoy it."

But Emily was not to be cajoled into taking an interest in anything. "I'm glad somebody's been able to enjoy themselves," she said pertly, and walked away down the stairs.

Poor Kitty's brightness vanished. Was there never to be anything but worry and unpleasantness? All her excitement, and interest, and hopefulness evaporated, leaving her depressed and dispirited. The memory rushed over her of former home-comings, before the dear mother died; the orderly comfort, the cheerfulness and joy which seemed always to be a part of the house in those days; and her eyes grew misty with the ache and loneliness of her heart, and the sense of failure which weighed her down. There rose before her that dear, happy face, with the bright smile and the ready interest that had never failed her.

"O mother, mother," she cried, "I want you so, I want you so! Everything is wrong, and I can't get them right. I am no use to any one, and I—I don't know how to do better."

The hot tears were brimming up and just about to fall over, when flying footsteps sounded on the stairs—Betty's footsteps. Kitty closed the door of her room, though she knew it was of no use. It was Betty's room too, and nothing, certainly not a mere hint, could keep Betty out; and she sighed, as she had often sighed before, for a room of her very own, for some place where she could be alone sometimes to think, or read, or make plans, or hide when the old heartache became too much for her.

But Betty shared her room, and Betty had every right to walk in, and Betty did so. She was quiet, and vouchsafed no account of her doings, but she was quite calm and unperturbed.

"What has made Emily in such a bad temper?" asked Kitty wearily.

"Emily always is in a bad temper, isn't she?" asked Betty placidly.
"I don't take any notice of her." Then with some slight interest,
"What did she say to you?"

"She didn't *say* anything," answered Kitty, "but she looked temper, and walked temper, and breathed

temper. Have you got a nice supper for us? I am starving, and I am sure father must be."

Betty did not answer enthusiastically; in fact, she gave no real answer at all, but merely remarked in an off-hand manner, "I shouldn't have thought any one could want much to eat in this weather."

"Is it ready?"

"I don't know."

"Well, will you go down and see, and tell them to take it in at once if they haven't done so? I know father wants his supper."

"I—think," said Betty thoughtfully, "—p'r'aps you had better go yourself. Fanny said—Fanny's manners are awful; I think father ought to send them both away—"

"What did Fanny say?"

"Fanny told me—well, she said she would rather I—didn't go into the kitchen again—yet."

Kitty groaned. "What have you done to vex them both so, Betty?"

"I only tried to see that the table was nicely laid, and everything just as you told me; and because I took out all the glasses and told Emily they were dirty, she got as cross as anything; and they really were dirty, for I showed her all the finger-marks, so it wasn't as if I was complaining about nothing. If I'd 'cused her wrongly I shouldn't wonder at her getting mad; but I hadn't, and she couldn't deny it. The forks were dirty too; at least I showed her six that were."

Without any comment Kitty left the room and descended to the kitchen. All the way she went she was dreading what she should find when she got there, and wondering how she should best approach matters, and it was a relief to her on opening the kitchen door to find that Fanny was alone. Fanny was looking cross enough at that moment to daunt any ordinary courage, but, somehow, Kitty never felt as alarmed of her as of Emily.

"Well, Fanny," she began, intending to ignore the hints and rumours that had reached her, "we have got back. We were wet through nearly, and now father and I are longing for our supper. Have you got something very nice for us?" She tried to speak cheerfully, but it cost her a great effort.

Fanny took up the poker and made an attack on the stove. "You never ordered nothing, Miss Kitty, and 'tisn't my place to say what you should have."

"Oh but, Fanny, you generally do," said Kitty, half inclined to be indignant at Fanny's injustice, for she could not help remembering how Fanny, as a rule, resented any attempt on her part to order or arrange the meals. She knew, though, that her only chance now was to be patient, and to ignore a good many things. "And you manage so well, so much better than I can." She felt she must say something to restore peace and amiability, if they were to have any supper at all that night, and not incur greater disgrace than she had already.

"I don't want to boast," said Fanny, "'tisn't my nature to do so, but if I'm gived a free hand, well—I can turn out a passable meal; but when one doesn't like this and the other doesn't like that, and nothing I do is right, and there's nothing but rows and squabbings in the kitchen, and no peace nowhere—well, I gives it all up! P'r'aps somebody else could manage better."

Fanny's voice rose more and more shrilly. Poor Kitty's head by this time was aching badly, and her nerves were all on edge. "Fanny, what *is* the matter?" she asked despairingly. "What has happened while we've been away? I thought we were coming home to a nice comfortable meal and a happy evening, and when we drive up the house is all dark, and the rain beating in at the windows. Emily is in a fury, and—and oh it is all so miserable. I—I'd rather be out alone on the downs in the storm without any home at all, or—or—" Here Kitty's voice faltered, and once more the tears brimmed up in her eyes—a most unusual occurrence with her; but the events of the day, the storm, and the difficulties that beset her, were proving too much for her.

Fanny, hearing the break in her voice, looked round quickly, just in time to see the tears, the white, tired face, and the look of dejection. "Why, Miss Kitty," she cried, her soft heart touched at once, "don't 'ee take it like that. Why, 'tisn't nothing to fret about; it'll all come right again, my dear," and she put her big red arm round her little mistress, and drew her head down to rest on her shoulder. But Kitty, completely overcome now, shook her head mournfully.

"No, it won't, Fanny; it is too late now. Aunt Pike is to come and live here to look after us. Father says we must have some one, and—and I think he is right. I don't seem able to manage things, everything

goes just as I don't want it to," and the tears brimmed over again and fell on Fanny's shoulder.

"Mrs. Pike!" gasped Fanny. "Mrs.—Pike—coming here—for good! Oh my! Miss Kitty, you don't really mean it!"

"Yes, I do," groaned Kitty. "It is really true. Father has written to her, and—oh I never dreamed such a thing *could* happen, or I would have tried and tried to be more careful. It must be fate, though, as well as our bad managing, for I've never before known Jabez post a letter when he was told to; but he must have gone right down to the post at once with the one to Aunt Pike that sealed all our fates. If he hadn't I do believe I could have got father not to send it, or at least to give us another chance."

Fanny shook her head solemnly. "It do seem like it," she groaned.

"What has happened while I have been out, Fanny? Has Betty been rude to Emily?"

"Well, you see, Miss Kitty," said Fanny, anxious to tell, but softened sufficiently to wish to make the best of the matter, "Miss Betty is so tackless. Emily's temper really wasn't so bad till Miss Betty kep' on with her. So soon as Emily had put the things on the table for supper, Miss Betty 'd bring them all out again one by one, and put them down before Emily, and every time she'd say, in that way she's got, 'Emily, that glass is filthy; you must wash it at once. I wonder you ain't ashamed to lay the things in such a state.' When she brought out the third lot Emily got mad, and when Miss Betty come out with the forks too—well, the storm bursted. Emily was cheeky, I don't deny, and Miss Betty was rude, and I had to tell 'em at last that they must go out of the kitchen if they was likely to go on like that. I wasn't going to have my place turned into a bear-garden."

"Emily shouldn't have put down dirty things," said Kitty, loyal to her sister. "She is always doing it, and she ought to know better." Her sympathies were all with Betty. She may have been "tackless," as Fanny called it, but however kindly Emily had been told of her carelessness she would have been certain to fly into a rage; and they had put up with so much from her without complaining, that no one could accuse them of being fidgety or captious.

As a matter of fact, Emily, who needed a very firm mistress of whom she would stand in awe, should have been sent away long before. Kitty could not manage her at all, and as she thought of all they had endured daily at Emily's hands, she felt almost thankful that soon the management of her would fall to Aunt Pike's lot.

"Did you say, Miss Kitty, that the master had asked Mrs. Pike to come here to live altogether, to look after us?"

Kitty nodded despairingly. After all, the managing of Emily seemed but a very trifling advantage to weigh against the Pike invasion and all that would follow on it. "O Fanny," she sighed brokenly, "if only—if only mother were alive! Nothing has gone right since, nor ever will again; and I feel it is almost all my fault that Aunt Pike has got to come, and—and—"

"Now don't take on like that, Miss Kitty," said Fanny, sniffing audibly, and not entirely able to throw off a sense of her own guilt in the matter. "'Tisn't nothing to do with you, I'm sure. If things 'as to be, they 'as to be, and we'll manage some'ow. I'm going to set about getting a nice supper so soon as ever I can. I think we'm all low with the thunder and the 'eat, and we'll be better when we've had some food. Now don't 'ee fret any more, that's a dear," and she wiped Kitty's eyes and then her own on her very soiled apron, but Kitty bore it gladly for the sake of the warm heart that beat beneath the soiled bib.

"Thank you, Fanny; you are a dear," she said gratefully; "and I will go and light some lights about the house by the time father has done with that patient he has in with him now."

Kitty had a great idea of making the house bright and cheerful, but in her zeal she forgot the heat of the night.

"Phew! my word!" gasped Dr. Trenire as he came presently to the dining-room. "Why, children, how can you breathe in this atmosphere? I have been turning down the gas all the way I've come. But how nice the table is looking, and how good something is smelling. I want some supper pretty badly; don't you, little woman?" with a friendly pull at Kitty's curls.

Kitty was not hungry now, but she was delighted by her father's appreciation, and she cut the bread very zealously, and passed him everything she thought he could want. It was not until she had done all that that the silence and the emptiness of the table struck her. "Why, where is Dan?" she cried.

"And where is Anthony?" asked Anthony's father.

Betty gave a little jump, but as quickly controlled herself again. "Oh, I'd quite forgotten about him," she said calmly. "Tony is in bed."

"In bed?" cried Dr. Trenire and Kitty at the same moment. "Isn't he well?"

None of them had ever been sent to bed for being naughty, so that illness was the only explanation that occurred to them.

"Oh yes, he is all right; but I made him get under the feather-bed because of the lightning—"

"The what?"

"The lightning. They say it can't strike you if you are covered with feathers, and of course I didn't want it to strike Tony, speshally with nobody here but me to—to take the 'sponsibility," looking at her father with the most serious face imaginable. "So I made him get into the spare-room bed, 'cause it's a feather-bed, and then I put all the eider-downs over him, and I expect he's as safe as can be."

Dr. Trenire gave a low whistle and started to his feet. "Very thoughtful of you, child," he said, trying not to smile, "and I expect Tony is safe enough, if he isn't cooked or suffocated. For my part, I should prefer the risk to such a protection in this weather. I'll go and rescue him." But Kitty had already flown.

"I forgot to tell Kitty," went on Betty thoughtfully, "that I think the moths have got into the eider-downs, such a lot of them flew out when I moved the quilts."

Dr. Trenire groaned. "I suppose the quilts have never been attended to or put away since we ceased to use them?"

"No," said Betty gravely. "You see, if they are on the spare-room bed they are all out in readiness for when we want them."

"And for the moths when they want them," sighed her father. "I expect they will not leave much for us."

Kitty, her father's half-jesting words filling her with a deep alarm, had meanwhile raced up to the spare room. Somehow, on this dreadful day, anything seemed possible, certainly anything that was terrible, and she remembered suddenly that the spare bedroom was the very hottest room in the house. It was over the kitchen, and caught every possible gleam of sunshine from morning till evening. Also she knew Betty's thoroughness only too well, and her mind's eye saw poor little Tony buried deep and tucked in completely, head and all.

The whole house was stiflingly hot. Kitty's own face grew crimson with her race upstairs, and when she opened the door of the spare bedroom the heat positively poured out; but a terrible load was lifted from her mind, for, mercifully, Tony's head was uncovered. He was the colour of a crimson peony, it is true, but at any rate he was not suffocated, unless—Kitty stepped quickly forward and touched his cheek. It almost made her sick with dread to do so; but the red cheek was very, very hot and lifelike to the touch, and at the same moment Tony opened a y pair of large sleepy eyes, and stared up at his sister wonderingly.

"I'm not struck, am I?" he asked half nervously. "I am very hot, Kitty. Is it the lightning?"

"No," said Kitty cheerfully, "it is feathers," and she flung back the pile of quilts. "Poor Tony. Get up, dear, and come down and have some supper. It is all ready, and father was wondering where you were."

Tony slipped with grateful obedience from his protection and followed Kitty, but rather languidly, it is true, for he was very hot and exhausted, and very rumped, all but his sweet temper, which was quite unruffled.

"Is Dan come back?" he asked eagerly, as he crept slowly down the stairs.

"Dan!" cried Kitty, stopping and looking back at him anxiously. She remembered again then that she had not seen Dan since her return. "Did he go out?"

"Yes, he went to catch some fishes for daddy's supper. He heard you tell Betty to have a nice one ready, and he said, 'There's sure to be nothing nice in the house; there never is. I'll go and catch some trout,' and he went. Do you think he was out in all that funder and lightning?" Then, seeing Kitty's startled look, Tony grew frightened too. "You don't fink he is hurt, do you, Kitty?" he asked anxiously.

"You don't think Dan has been struck, do you?"

But at that moment, to their intense relief, Dan himself crossed the hall. From his appearance he might have been actually in the stream, getting the trout out without rod or line. Water was running off his hat, his clothes, and his boots. Tony heard it squishing with every step he took, and thought how splendid and manly it seemed.

Kitty called out to him, but Dan did not stay to talk.

"Where's father?" he asked, turning a very flushed but very triumphant face towards them, and waving his basket proudly.

"In the dining-room," said Kitty, and Dan hastened on. His face fell a little, though, when he saw the table, and his father already eating.

"I'm awfully sorry I'm late," he said disappointedly. "I thought I should have been in heaps of time. I've got you some jolly fine trout, father. I meant them for your supper. Just look! Aren't they beauties?" and he thrust his basket over the table and held it right under his father's nose. The mud and green slime dripped on tablecloth and silver and on the bread, and even on Dr. Trenire's plate and the food he was eating.

The doctor's much-tried patience gave way at last. "Look at the mess you are making—all over my food too! Look at the filth you have brought in!" he exclaimed angrily. "Take it away! take it away! What do you mean by coming into the room in that condition, bringing a filthy thing like that and pushing it under my very nose when you see I am eating? And why, Dan, once more, are you not here and decently neat, when a meal is ready? It is perfectly disgraceful. Here am I, and supper has been on the table I don't know how long, and only one of you is ready to sit down with me. Anthony is in bed, or somewhere else, Kitty is racing the house to find him, and you—I am ashamed of you, sir, for coming into a room in such a condition. You are perfectly hopeless. Here, take away my plate, take everything; you have quite spoilt my appetite. I couldn't eat another mouthful at such a table!" and Dr. Trenire rose in hot impatience and flung out of the room.

For a second Dan seemed unable to believe his ears, then without a word he closed his basket and walked away. He was more deeply hurt than he had ever been in his life before, and his face showed it. Kitty and Tony, hesitating in the hall, saw it, and their eyes filled with tears. "Throw it away, will you?" he said in a choked voice, holding out the unfortunate basket to Kitty.

Kitty, knowing how she would have felt under similar circumstances, took it without looking at him; instinctive delicacy told her not to. "Father didn't mean it," she whispered consolingly. "You will come down and have some supper when you have changed, won't you?"

They were not a demonstrative family; in fact, any lavishly expressed sympathy or affection would have embarrassed them; but they understood each other, and most of them possessed in a marked degree the power of expressing both feelings without a word being spoken.

Dan understood Kitty, but it was too soon to be consoled yet. "No," he said bitterly, "I have had supper enough, thank you," and hurried away very fast.

It really did seem as if Kitty was not to reach the Supper-table that night. Telling Tony to go in and begin his meal, she flew off with the basket, and, heedless of anything but Dan's request, was just about to fling it away—fish, basket, and all—when she paused. It was a very good basket, and Dan had no other. Kitty hesitated, then opened it and looked in. Six fine trout lay at the bottom on a bed of bracken and wet moss, evidently placed so that they could look their best. The sight of Dan's little arrangements brought the tears to her eyes. No, she could not throw away what he had taken so much pride in.

She turned back and went to the kitchen. "Fanny," she said, "will you cook these for father's breakfast? Dan has caught them for him."

"And fine and proud he was too," said Fanny, looking in at Dan's catch.

"He was, but he isn't now. I wish," with a deep sigh, "we didn't always do things the wrong way. I wonder why nothing ever comes quite right with us?" Then she turned away hastily, that Emily, who at that moment came into the kitchen, might not see the tears that would start to her eyes.

When at last Kitty sat down to the meal which she no longer wanted, every one else had left the table. She was not sorry, for it saved her from having to make a pretence of eating, and left her free to indulge in her own moods. It gave her time, too, to think over all that had happened, and might yet

happen.

Before she went up to bed, though, she got a tray, and collecting on it a tempting meal, carried it to Dan's room. She hoped he would let her in, for she badly needed a talk with him, but just as she was about to knock at his door the murmur of voices within arrested her attention. Whom could Dan have got in there? she wondered in great surprise. Tony was in bed, and Betty was in her room. She listened more closely, and nearly dropped the tray in her astonishment, for the voice she heard was her father's, and she had never before known him go to their rooms to talk to them.

For a moment her heart sank with dread. Was he still angry? Was he scolding poor Dan again? he could hardly think so, for it was so unlike him to be harsh or severe with any of them.

Then, as the voice reached her again, though she caught only the tone of it, and not a word that was said, she knew that all was right, and with a sudden lightening of her heart, and a sense of happiness, she quietly crept away to her own room. All the time she was undressing she listened alertly for the sound of her father's footsteps, but she had been in bed some time before they passed down the corridor. "They must be having a nice long talk," she thought, as she lay listening, in a state of happy drowsiness; and she was almost in the land of Nod when a sudden thought turned her happiness to dismay, and drove all sleep from her.

"Oh!" she cried, springing up in her bed, "oh, how stupid of me! How perfectly dreadfully stupid of me!"

"Whatever is the matter?" demanded Betty crossly. "I was just beginning a most beautiful dream, and now you have sent it right away."

"Never mind your dream," groaned Kitty. "That's nothing compared with that letter. I did mean to get him to write it to-night, and I would have posted it, so that it could reach almost as soon as the other, and—and I *never* did it, I never even asked him to write it, and now the post has gone, and—"

"Whatever are you talking about?" interrupted Betty impatiently.

"Why, the letter to Aunt Pike, of course. I was going to coax father to write another letter to her to-night, to say it was all a mistake, that we didn't want her, and—"

"Oh, that's all right," answered Betty coolly. "Don't worry. I have written to Aunt Pike and told her all that, and I posted it myself to make sure of its going. She will get it almost as soon as she gets—"

"Betty, you haven't?"

"Yes, I have," said Betty quietly. "Why not? I am sure it was best to. Fanny wouldn't live with her, I know, and Jabez said it would be more than his life was worth, and you know father hates changing servants, so I wrote and told her exactly all about it. I wrote quite plainly, and I think she will understand."

"O Betty, you shouldn't have. What *will* father say?"

"Father will be very glad, I think. He hates writing letters himself."

"Um—m!" commented Kitty dubiously, but said no more, for at that moment Dan's door was opened, and she heard her father's steps pass lightly along the corridor.

A few moments later she slipped out of bed and carried Dan's tray to his room, but she did not go in with it. Her instinct told her that he would rather she did not just then; so, laying it on the floor, she tapped lightly at his door, told him what was there, and crept back to bed again.

"What a day it has been," she thought to herself as she nestled down under the cool sheet. "Yet it began like all the others. I wonder how all will end. Perhaps it won't be so bad after all. I hope that Betty's letter won't do more harm than good. I shouldn't be at all surprised, though, if it made Aunt Pike make up her mind to come. But I'll try not to think about it," and turning over on her pillow, Kitty had soon forgotten Aunt Pike, Anna, torn braid, orange cake, and Lady Kitson, and was once again driving dear old Prue across the moor with the storm beating and roaring about them, only this time it was a dreamland moor and a dreamland storm.

CHAPTER V.

IN WENMERE WOODS.

"I could not think, for the moment," said Kitty, sitting up in bed and clasping her knees, "why I woke with a feeling that something dreadful had happened. Of course it is Aunt Pike that is on my mind.

"She needn't be, then," said Betty, stretching herself luxuriously in her little bed. "My letter will settle all that worry."

"Um!" remarked Kitty thoughtfully, with none of the confidence shown by her young sister. "If your letter doesn't make her come by the very first train, it will only be because she missed it. I shouldn't be at all surprised to see her walk in, and Anna too."

"You don't *really* think she will?" Betty, struck by something in Kitty's voice, had stopped stretching herself, and looked across at her sister. "Kitty, you don't really mean that? Oh no, of course you don't; she couldn't really come to-day, she would have lots to do first—packing and saying 'good-byes.'"

"I should think she hadn't a friend to say 'good-bye' to," said Kitty naughtily. "Any way, I am not going to worry about her. If she doesn't come—oh, it'll be perfectly lovely; and if she does—well, we will get all the fun we can beforehand, and after, too, of course; but we will try and have some jolly times first, won't we? What shall we do to-day? I wonder if Dan has planned anything."

What Dan's plan might be was really the important point, for according to him the others, as a rule, shaped their day.

"I don't know if Dan has made any," cried Betty with sudden alertness, "but I know what would be simply lovely. Let's spend the day in Wenmere Woods, and take our lunch with us, and then have tea at the farm—ham and eggs, and cream, and cake, and—"

"Oh, I know," interrupted Kitty; "just what Mrs. Henderson always gives us—"

"No," interrupted Betty anxiously, "not what she always gives us; we will have fried ham and eggs as well, because, you see, it is a kind of special day."

"Very well, we will if we have money enough. I wonder if Dan will agree."

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight," clanged out the town clock viciously. Betty sprang up in bed at once. "It is time to get up, Kitty," she said peremptorily. "We've got to do everything right to-day, and be very punctual at meals, and very tidy and all that sort of thing, so that father will see that Aunt Pike isn't wanted. Do you think he will be vexed when he knows about my writing to her? P'r'aps she won't tell."

Kitty scoffed at such an idea. "Aunt Pike is sure to tell; but father is never *very* angry."

"But he might be," said Betty wisely; "he looked so last night when all the mud dropped on his plate; but, of course, this is different—there is nothing very bad about my writing the letter. I did it to save him trouble."

"Perhaps you had better tell father so," said Kitty dryly. "Honour bright, though, Betty, I really would tell him, and not let him first find it out from Aunt Pike."

"Um!" ejaculated Betty thoughtfully, as she collected Kitty's sponge and bath-towel before departing to the bathroom. But there was nothing very hearty in her tone.

When she returned, looking very fresh and rosy, and damp about the curls, she found Kitty sitting on the side of her bed, and still in her night-gown. Hearing Betty's returning footsteps, she had managed to get so far before the door was flung open, but that was all.

"Isn't it dreadful," she sighed wearily, "to think that day after day, year after year, all my life through, I shall have to get up in the morning and go through all the same bother of dressing, and I—I hate it so."

"P'r'aps you won't have to," said Betty cheerfully; "p'r'aps you'll be a bed-lier like Jane Trebilcock, and you won't have to have boots, or dresses, or hats."

But the prospect did not cheer Kitty very greatly. "I didn't say I didn't want dresses and things. I do. I want lots of them, but I don't want the bother of putting them on."

"Well, they wouldn't be much good if you didn't put them on," retorted practical Betty. "I hate getting up too"—Betty never failed in her experience of any form of suffering or unpleasantness—"but I try to make it a little different every day, to help me on. Sometimes I pretend the bath is the sea, and I am bathing; other times I only paddle my feet, and sometimes I don't bath at all—that's when I am playing that I am a gipsy or a tramp—"

"Betty, you nasty, horrid, dirty little thing!" cried Kitty, looking shocked.

But Betty was quite unabashed. "I've known you not wash either," she remarked calmly.

Kitty coloured. "But—but that was only once when I forgot; that is quite different."

"But I don't see that it is," said Betty firmly. You are not cleaner because you forget to wash than if you don't wash on purpose. Hark! O Kitty!"

"What shall I do?" cried Kitty despairingly as the boom of the breakfast-gong sounded through the house. "I haven't begun to dress, and—Fanny might have told me she was going to be punctual to-day."

"P'r'aps she didn't know it herself," said Betty, tugging away at her tangle of curls with a comb, and scattering the teeth of it in a shower. "I expect it is an accident."

"Then I wish she wouldn't have accidents," snapped Kitty. "It is awfully hard on other people."

Try as hard as one may, one cannot bath and dress in less than five minutes. Kitty declared she could have done it in that time, if Dan had not had possession of the bathroom, and Betty had not used her bath-towel and left it so wet that no one else could possibly use it.

"But I couldn't use my own," protested Betty, when the charge was brought against her, "for I hadn't one, and of course I had to use something."

When the discussion had proceeded for some time, Dr. Trenire looked up from his paper with a half-resigned air. "What is the matter, children? Haven't we bath-towels enough to go round? Kitty, you should tell me when things are needed. But never mind; your aunt will see to everything of that sort now."

"I don't think she will," murmured Betty knowingly, but her father did not hear her. Kitty felt too dismayed to speak; there was something so final in her father's tone, it made the coming of the dreaded aunt seem quite inevitable.

"What are you children going to do to-day?" he went on kindly. "It is a glorious morning after the storm. You ought to be out as much as possible, all of you. You should start as soon as you have finished your work with Miss Pooley."

Miss Pooley was the governess who came daily from ten till one to instruct them. At least she instructed them as often as she had the opportunity, but it very frequently happened that when she arrived she was told that the children had gone out for the day, or even oftener a little note to the same effect reached her, adding that as they would be engaged all day they wished to save her the trouble of coming for nothing.

This morning they had intended to do the same thing. Kitty was to write the note, and Tony to deliver it, but their father's remark, and his look, touched their consciences. Dan, too, for some reason or another, was against it; he said he thought that after all it was a bit sneaky and underhand, and he wasn't going to have any more of it. Betty felt the foundations of her world shake, and life bristled with new difficulties; but Dan had said it, so no one questioned. After Dan had put things in that light, Kitty suddenly realized that their conduct in the matter had been neither honourable nor honest.

"We will have our lessons and leave directly after," she planned cheerfully. "I will ask Fanny to let us have some food to take with us for our dinner, and then we will go to the farm for tea, and come home in time for supper. Won't it be jolly! And we will have our dinner down by the river—by that dear little silvery, sandy beach, you know."

"It sounds fine," said their father, returning to the room just in time to hear the arrangements. "I wish I could go too."

"I wish you could," cried Kitty. "Wouldn't it be fun to see father exploring the woods, and catching beetles and minnows, and paddling in the river, and—daddy, can't you come, just this once?"

"No, child, there is no paddling for me to-day, or playing wild man of the woods or anything else. I have a long round in the morning, and another in the afternoon. I have just been out interviewing Jabez."

"Oh," gasped Kitty, "I had forgotten Jabez. Of course he can't drive you, his head is all bandaged. I will go, father; I'd love to drive you." And she meant it. She would quite readily have given up her day in Wenmere Woods to go with him.

Dr. Trenire laid his hand tenderly on her shoulder. "It is all right, dear; I shall have Jabez. He has discarded his bandages, and is quite presentable. He says he took them off last night to have a look at the wound, and when he saw what a little bit of a place it was, he made up his mind he wasn't going about with his head tied up for people to poke fun at him later on when they saw what he had been bandaged up for. Go and enjoy yourself, child, and tell me all about it to-night; and do try to keep out of mischief, all of you."

In the kitchen, when Kitty at last reached it, Fanny was making pasties; and when Fanny chose she could make a pasty to perfection. She made them one each now with their initials on them, made of curly bits of pastry, and promised to have them baked and ready by the time Miss Pooley was gone. Emily was in a good temper too. The prospect of being free from the children all day, and of having no meals to get for them till supper, quite cheered her. She even, without being asked, cut them some sandwiches, filled a bottle with milk, and produced a store of apples, which she packed in their basket. When the children, having escaped from patient, easy-going Miss Pooley, rushed out to the kitchen for their pasties and milk, and found things in this unusually happy state, they marvelled at their good fortune, and accepted it thankfully.

"Fanny and Emily are quite nice sometimes," remarked Betty, as they left the house, "only the worst of it is you never know when they are going to be. Sometimes they laugh at everything one says, and another time they grumble."

"To-day they are like people are when you are ill and they are sorry for you," said Tony, who had been puzzling himself for some minutes to know how to express what he wanted to. "I fink they are sorry for us 'cause Aunt Pike is coming."

"O wise young judge!" said Dan, "I shouldn't be surprised if you were right." Dan had begun to read Shakespeare, and was full of quotations. "It is rather like living in the shadow of the gallows. I expect people in the French Revolution felt as we do."

"I don't feel the least little bit like French Revolutions, or gallows, or shadows, or even Aunt Pike and darling Anna, on such a glorious day as this," cried Kitty joyfully. "I can't think of them, and I am not going to—yet. Now, if you are all ready, let's race."

Their way led them down a steep hill almost opposite their own house— a hill with just a house here and there on either side of it, and a carpenter's shop, whence wafted out a sweet, fresh scent of newly-cut wood. The children raced to the very foot of it, and then retraced their steps to gather up the fragments of the milk-bottle, which had come to grief within the first twenty yards. Then on they went again, past more cottages and sundry turnings, until at last they reached a curious old rough-and-tumble wharf on one side of the road, where the coal which had been brought by train was piled up in great stacks for the coalmen to take round presently in their carts. Here, too, was drawn up a train— one such as only those who lived in those parts have ever been privileged to see. It was composed of an old-fashioned squat little engine called the "Rover," and a few open carriages, with seats along the sides for passengers, and some trucks for any goods that might be needed.

No passengers occupied the seats at that moment; in fact, they were generally conspicuous by their absence, save once a year, when the whole accommodation was bespoke for the Brianite Sunday-school treat. The "Rover," in fact, spent most of her noble life in drawing coal, clay, and sand up and down the seven miles which lay between Gorlay and Wenbridge. It seemed a limited sphere, but only to the ignorant, who knew nothing of her services to the dwellers by the roadside, the parcels she delivered, the boots she took to be mended and restored again to their owners, the messages she carried, and the hundred and one other little acts of usefulness which filled her daily round. I say "her," for to every one privileged to know her the "Rover" was a lady; one who deserved and received all men's deference and consideration, and the gentlest of handling too.

As Kitty and Dan lingered now by the gate to look at her, they saw Dumble, the driver, lovingly passing a cloth over her, as though to wipe the perspiration from her iron forehead, while Tonkin, the fireman, stood leaning against her, with his arm caressingly outstretched. Behind Dan and Kitty, on the farther side of the road, grew a high hawthorn hedge, under the shelter of which was a seat where people sat and sunned themselves by the hour, and at the same time gazed at the life and bustle with which the wharf woke up now and then. There were two old men on the seat now. They touched their hats to Dan and his sister, and with a melancholy shake of their old heads sighed in sympathy with Kitty as she cried, "O Dan, I wish we could all go by train, all the way to Wenbridge. It will be perfectly lovely down the line."

But Dan seemed less eager than Kitty or the old men. "We shall reach the woods before they do, if we walk on," he said, moving away; "and there is such a lot to see on the way."

Tony and Betty—who was carrying the basket because she felt she could trust no one else with it—were nearly out of sight, so Dan and Kitty hurried after them. One side of the road was lined by fields, the other by houses, and at the foot of their gardens ran the railway line until it emerged through some allotment gardens on to the open road, after which, for a while, train and foot passengers, and sometimes a drover, with a herd of cattle, meandered along side by side in pleasant talk or lively dispute—the latter usually, when Dan was on the road—until, about a mile farther on, two more cottages, and the last, having been passed, the road came to an abrupt end, and only the railway was left, with a rough footpath along its edge, which pedestrians had worn for themselves.

The quartette wandered on contentedly, stopping when they pleased, and that was every few minutes. Overhead the sky was a deep pure blue, and the larks were singing rapturously; the sun shone brilliantly, drawing out the smell of the tar from the "sleepers," and the scent from the flowers. Under the hawthorn hedges which bordered most of the way the petals lay in a thick carpet.

On one side of the road, just before it terminated, was a well, buried deep in a little green cave in the hedge, while the pure water from it flowed generously over the floor of the cave, and ran in a never-failing stream along one side of the way, past the gardens of the cottages, from which at one time a root or maybe a seed only of the "monkey plant" had been thrown, and taking root had flourished and flourished until the stream now was hidden beneath a mass of lush green leaves and stems crowned by tawny golden blossoms speckled and splashed with a deep rich brown.

At the well a halt was always called, for the water of it had healing properties, and from their babyhood the children had, as a matter of duty, tested its powers by bathing their eyes; but to-day, as they stooped over it, a weird shriek in the distance brought them to their feet again. Then came a great racket, as though a pile of all the loose iron in the world were tumbling over, the ground vibrated, and the noise drew closer and closer.

"The 'Rover';" cried Dan. "She is coming! Here's sport! I'll duck them."

Betty's was the only hat that would hold any quantity of water, and she lent it gladly; but the brim was limp with age and hard wear, and a broad-brimmed straw hat at its best is not an ideal vessel from which to throw water over a flying foe. The larger share of it Dan received in his own shoes amidst the derisive laughter of his two intended victims on the engine; and so completely mortified was he that Dumble, for a wonder, refrained from his usual revenge, that of squirting hot water from the engine over him.

Dan looked red and foolish, Betty was furious, Kitty wished they had let the men alone, but at the same moment began to wonder how she could avenge this humiliation they had put upon Dan.

After this little episode they walked on again, and for a while very soberly, Tony busily engaged in picking up stones and spars in search of some rare specimen that might please his father, Betty still clinging to the basket, though her arm was aching with the weight of it. By the time they at last reached the woods they were all rather tired and distinctly hungry, but they were never too tired or hungry to be roused to enthusiasm by the sight that met them there. No mere words can depict the charm and beauty of Wenmere Woods. No one can thoroughly appreciate them who has not actually seen them. No one who has seen them can forget them. To see them was to stand with a glad heart, speechless, wide-eyed, wondering, and thanking God for such a sanctuary, yet half incredulous that such a spot was real, was there always, untouched, undefiled, waiting for one. It might have been a fairy place, that would fade and vanish as soon as one turned one's eyes away.

The woods were of no great extent, the trees were of no great size, but, tall and graceful, they clothed the side of the hill without a break down to the very edge of the river which ran through a valley which was fairyland itself, and on the opposite side stretched away, almost from the river's brink, up, and up, and up, until to all seeming they met the sky. Delicate, feathery larches and quivering birches they were for the most part, and here and there, underneath their spreading branches, were open spaces carpeted with wind-flowers and bluebells, primroses and wild orchids, while ferns, large and small, grew in glorious profusion, some as tall as Tony, others as fragile and tiny as a fairy fern might be. In other spots large lichen-covered rocks raised their heads out of a tangle of bracken and bushes, while here and there, down by the river's brink, gleamed little bays of silver-white sand.

In Dr. Trenire's library were several large bound volumes of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King," illustrated by Gustav Dore, and Kitty had never a doubt in her mind that these were the woods the artist had depicted. There could be no others like them. Here Enid rode with Launcelot by her side; on that silvery beach, where the old bleached tree trunk lay as it must have lain for generations, Vivien had sat at Merlin's feet. There, in that space carpeted by wind-flowers and primroses, Queen Guinevere and Launcelot had said their last farewells.

To Kitty the whole beautiful spot was redolent of them. They had been there, ridden and walked, talked and laughed, loved, wept, and parted; and in that beauty and mystery and silence it seemed to her that some day, any day, they all would come again. They were only sleeping somewhere, waiting for some spell to be removed. She was sure of it, as sure as she was that King Arthur sat sleeping in his hidden cave, spellbound until some one, brave and good and strong enough, should find him and blow a huge blast on the horn which lay on the table before him, and so waken him from his long magic sleep. In her heart of hearts she had a secret conviction that some day she would find the magic cave, and Dan it would be who would possess the power to blow the magic horn.

She pictured herself dressed in flowing robes of white and gold, with her hair in long plaits reaching to her knees, riding away beside the king through those very woods, with the sunlight gleaming through the trees and flashing on the water, and on her other hand would ride Dan in shining armour, a second Sir Galahad. She saw herself a woman, such a beautiful, graceful woman, with earnest eyes and gentle face. She saw a knight, oh! such a splendid, courtly knight, and he looked at her and looked again, and—

A little way up the hill she sat alone, her chin on her hand, gazing down at the sun-flecked river, the shining sand, the fairy-like trees, and saw it all as plainly as though it were then happening. She saw the graceful steeds, richly caparisoned, daintily picking their way through underwood and rocks. A stick cracked somewhere near. Could they be coming? She hardly dared look about her lest she should be disappointed.

CHAPTER VI.

TEA AT THE FARM.

"Kitty, *are* you coming, or *are* you not? It is very mean of you to keep us waiting all this time when you know how hungry we are!"

With a deep, regretful sigh and a little shake Kitty rose and made her way to the large flat rock by the water's edge, on which the others had grouped themselves in more or less easy attitudes, with the food as a centrepiece. Betty had spread a sheet of white paper, and on it had arranged the pasties according to their length.

"You need not have waited for me," said Kitty, annoyed at having her dreams so broken in upon. "We have each got our own, and can eat them when we like."

"But we never do begin until we all begin together," said Betty reproachfully, "It would seem dreadfully mean; besides, we want you to say which is my pasty and which Dan's. The letter has been broken on one, and knocked right off another. I carried them ever and ever so carefully, so it can't be my fault. Don't you think this is meant for a 'D,' and that one"—holding out the largest—"without any letter at all, is mine?"

Dan felt so sure of getting his rights that he lay quite undisturbed, throwing bits of moss into the water, and left the others to settle the dispute.

"No, I don't," said Kitty, without the slightest hesitation. "Dan always has the largest, whether there is a letter on it or not, and you always have the smallest but one."

Betty accepted the decision without dispute. She had really not expected any other, but she liked to assert herself now and then.

"I can't see," she said musingly, "why you should be expected to want less to eat if you are only ten than if you are twelve. It seems to me so silly. It isn't your age that makes you hungry."

As a rule the others left Betty to find the answer to her own arguments, so she expected none from them. She got none now. They were all too busy and too hungry to argue. Tony alone was not eating. He was sitting with his pasty in one hand, while the other one was full of anemones that he had gathered on his way, intending to take them home to Fanny; but already the pretty delicate heads had begun to droop, and Tony was gazing with troubled eyes at them. He loved flowers so much he could never refrain from gathering them, but the clasp of his hot little hand was almost always fatal, and then he was grieved and remorseful.

Kitty, watching him, knew well what was in his mind. He looked up presently and caught her eye.

"I think I would put them in the river, if I were you, dear," she said. "You see we shan't get home for

hours yet, and they will be quite dead long before that. If you put them in the river they will revive."

"Won't it be drowning them?" asked Tony anxiously.

"No; they will float."

"I know what I will do," he said, cheered by an idea that had come into his head. He laid down his pasty and trotted down to the edge of the river. In the wet sand he made little holes with his fingers, put the stems in the holes, and covered them up as though they were growing; then, greatly relieved, he returned and ate his pasty contentedly.

A pasty, even to a Cornish child, makes a satisfying meal, and when it is flanked by sandwiches, and apples, and a good draught of river water, there is no disinclination to remain still for a little while. The four sat on quietly, and talked in a lazy, happy way of the present, the future, and the past—of what each one hoped to be, and of Dan's career in particular; whether he would go away to school, and where. Aunt Pike came under discussion too, but not with that spirit of bitterness which would have been displayed at home, or before a less satisfying repast. Here, in the midst of this beauty and peace, everything seemed different. Wrongs and worries appeared so much smaller and less important—any grievance was bearable while there was this to come to.

They talked so long that a change came over the aspect of the woods. The sun lost its first clear, penetrating brilliancy, and took on a deeper glow. Dan noticed it first, and sprang to his feet.

"Let's move on," he cried, "or it will be tea-time before we have done anything."

"If we are going to have ham and eggs for tea," said matter-of-fact Betty, "I think one of us had better order them soon, or Mrs. Henderson may say she can't cook them in time."

The appeal did not touch them so keenly as it would have done had their last meal been a more distant memory. But, at the same time, the ham and eggs and cream tea was to be a part of their day, and they were not going to be deprived of it. So they clambered up through the woods again till they reached the railway line, and strolled along it until they came to the farm.

Kitty, being the eldest, was chosen to go in and order the tea, while the others hung over the gate and sniffed in the mingled perfume of the roses, the pinks, and all the other sweet-scented flowers with which the little garden was stocked. Across the garden, in the hedge, was another gate through which they could see a steep sunny field stretching away down to the river bank, which was steeper here and higher, with old gnarled trees growing out of it, their large roots so exposed that one wondered how they managed to draw sustenance enough from the ground to support the great trunks and spreading branches.

"I have ordered ham and eggs, and cream, and jam, and cake," said Kitty, as she rejoined them, "and it will all be ready in an hour. It is three o'clock now."

"Only three!" sighed Dan in mock despair. "One whole hour to wait! Will it take all that time to get it ready?"

"I think it is a good thing," said Betty, "that we have to wait, for we are not *very* hungry now—at least I am not; and you see we've got to pay the same however little we eat, and it does seem a pity to waste our money."

"What a mind she has!" cried Dan, pretending to be lost in admiration. But at that same moment there once more reached their ears sounds as of an approaching earthquake.

"The train!" cried Betty, and seizing Tony's hand, drew him carefully back close to the gate.

Dan cast a hasty look around him for handy missiles. Kitty saw it, and knew what was in his mind.

"Don't throw things at them, Dan, please! Think of yesterday, and Jabez, and Aunt Pike. *Don't* throw anything to hurt them."

The "Rover" was lumbering nearer and nearer. The two men on it had already caught sight of the quartette at the gate, and were grinning at them derisively. It really was almost more than any human boy could be expected to endure.

"Ha, ha!" jeered the men, as they lumbered by, "be yer boots dry yet, sir? Wonderful cooling to the brain a wet 'at is—cooling to the feet, too, sometimes!"

Dan's blood rose. He felt he simply had to throw something, or do something desperate. Betty's

basket, still well supplied, was hanging on her arm close beside him. With one grab he seized the contents, and first an apple went flying through the air, then a paper packet. Tonkin, the fireman, caught the apple deftly; the packet hit Dumble on the chest, and dropped to the floor. Dumble himself was too fat to stoop, so Tonkin pounced on it. The engine was at a little distance now, and aim was easier. Another apple, well directed, hit Tonkin fair and square on the top of his head, while a third caught Dumble with no mean force full on his very broad nose, making him dance and shout with pain.

As the engine disappeared round the bend, with the two men grasping their spoils and their bruises, Dan felt himself avenged, and the one cloud on his day was lifted.

Kitty drew a deep sigh of relief that the episode was ended; Betty, one of regret.

"There were six large sandwiches in that packet," she said reproachfully, "and the apples were beauties. I wish now I had eaten more. I am sure I could have if I had tried."

Though there was plenty to do in the woods, that hour to tea-time seemed somehow a very long one, and quite ten minutes before it was up they were back at the farm to inquire if it was four o'clock yet. Mrs. Henderson smiled knowingly as she saw them gathered at the door, but she noticed that the eager faces were flushed and weary-looking, and she asked them in to sit down and rest, promising she would not keep them long.

As they were to have "a savour to their tea" they were to have the meal in the house, instead of in the garden, and glad enough they were to sink into the slippery, springless easy-chairs, which seemed to them then the most luxurious seats the world could produce—at least they did to Kitty and Dan, who took the only two; Betty got on the window-seat and stretched herself out; Tony, a very weary little man indeed, scrambled on to Kitty's lap; and all of them, too tired to talk much, gazed with interest about the long, low room.

It was not beautiful, and they knew it well, yet the fascination of it never failed. On the walls were hung large framed historical and scriptural scenes, worked in cross-stitch with wool's of the brightest hues, varied by a coloured print of a bird's-eye view of the battle of Tel-el-Kebir, an almanac for the current year, and a large oleograph of a young lady und a dog wreathed in roses that put every flower in the garden to shame for size and brilliancy. But none of these could give a tithe of the pleasure the worked ones did; there was such fascination in counting how many stitches went to the forming of a nose, how many red and how many white to the colouring of a cheek, or the shaping of the hands, and fingers, and toes.

"I didn't know that Robert Bruce had six toes!" said Betty, very solemn with the importance of her discovery, her eyes fastened on a representation of that hero asleep in a cave, while a spider as large as his head wove a web of cables across the opening. "Did you, Dan?"

"Didn't you?" answered Dan gravely. "Don't you know that in Scotland they have an extra toe in case one should get frost-bitten and drop off?"

"Of course I know it is very cold up there," said Betty, who was never willing to admit ignorance of anything; "but supposing two got frost-bitten and dropped off, what would they do then?"

Dan, pretending not to hear her question, strolled over to the bookcase.

"Surely it must be tea-time!" he exclaimed.

Betty, seeing that no answer was forthcoming, slipped from her seat to examine more closely some wax fruit which, under a glass case, adorned a side-table.

"I do think it is wonderful how they make them," she said impressively; "they are so exactly like real fruit."

Mrs. Henderson, coming into the room at that moment, heard the remark, and her heart was won. She had more than once had a suspicion that some of her visitors laughed at her treasured ornaments, and made jokes about them, and the thought had hurt her, for her affections clung to them, and particularly to the wax fruit, which had been one of her most prized wedding gifts, so Betty's remark went straight to her heart. She beamed on Betty, and Betty beamed back on her.

"You have such a lot of beautiful things, Mrs. Henderson," she said in her politest manner. "I can't help admiring them."

"It's very kind of you, I'm sure, miss. Of course we all get attached to what's our own, specially when 'tis gived to us; and I'm very proud of my fruit, same as I am of my worked pictures."

"I think they are wonderful," breathed Betty, turning from the wax fruit to gaze at Eli and Samuel. "Did you"—in a voice full of awe— "really work them yourself, Mrs. Henderson?"

"I did, missie, every stitch of them," said their owner proudly; "and all while I was walking out with Henderson."

"While you were walking!" gasped Betty. "But how could you see where you were going?"

Mrs. Henderson laughed. "No, missie; I mean the years we was courting."

"How interesting," said Betty solemnly. "I think I shall work some for my house when I am married. Do you work them on canvas? Can I get it in Gorlay?"

"Yes, miss; but you needn't hurry to begin to-night," said Mrs. Henderson, laughing. "If you want any help, though, when you do begin, or would like to copy mine, I'll be very glad to do what I can for you."

"Oh, thank you very much. I should like to do some exactly like yours," cried Betty excitedly. "Then, when I'm far away, they'll always remind me of you and the farm, and—and I'd like to begin with Robert Bruce and his six toes, and—"

"You would never have patience to do work like that," interrupted Dan cruelly, "nor the money either; and I don't suppose you will ever get out of Gorlay."

"You wait," said Betty, very much annoyed by his humiliating outspokenness. "You wait"—with a toss of her head—"until I am grown up, then I shall marry some one, and I shall travel, and—"

"All right," said Dan, "I will wait; and I hope I never have a headache till it happens."

CHAPTER VII.

THE "ROVER" TAKES THEM HOME.

Tony was nearly asleep on Kitty's shoulder, and Kitty herself was distinctly drowsy, but the arrival of the teapot and the ham and eggs roused them effectually. Kitty took her place before the tea-tray, Dan before the hot dish, Betty got as near the cream as she could, and Tony drew a chair close to Kitty, and very soon their spirits began to rise to their highest, and their tiredness vanished. The tea was refreshing, the ham and home-made bread and everything on the table were perfectly delicious, and they ate, and ate, and talked and laughed until Kitty wondered how it was that Mrs. Henderson did not come in and ask them to be quiet. They had all, at the same moment, reached that mood when everything one says, or thinks, or does, sounds or seems amusing; and they laughed and laughed without being able to check themselves, until at last Kitty found herself with her head in the tea-tray, while Dan hung limply over the back of his chair, and Betty and Tony laid their heads on the table and held their aching sides.

"Oh dear!" cried Kitty, straightening herself and trying to compose her face. "They say it is unlucky to laugh so much. I wonder if it is true. It does seem hard, doesn't it?"

The thought sobered them a little, and they gave themselves up to their tea.

"I never know," said Betty thoughtfully, after a somewhat long silence, "whether it is better to begin with ham and end with cream and jam, or to begin with cream and then have the ham, but it seems to me that it is just the same whichever I do—I *can't* eat much of both. I have tried and tried."

"I call that a real affliction," said Dan soberly. "Of course there is just a chance that you may grow out of it in time, but it is hard lines."

"Yes," sighed Betty, "it really is," and lapsed into quietness. "Another time," she said at last, very gravely, "I think I shall come twice, and not have both at the same tea."

"Perhaps you would like Mrs. Henderson to save you some till to-morrow," suggested Dan ironically.

"No—o," said Betty seriously, "I don't think I will. I don't expect I shall want any more as soon as to-morrow, but—"

"You aren't feeling ill, are you?" asked Kitty anxiously, as she studied Betty's face.

"No—o," answered Betty slowly, "not ill; but it's funny that what is so nice to think about before tea isn't half as nice after."

"If I were you," said Dan pointedly, "I would go and sit in the meadow for a bit, and keep very still until it is time to go home."

"I think I will," said Betty gravely, and started; but they had all finished their meal by this time, and following Dan's advice, strolled out once more to the scented garden, and down through the sloping meadow to the riverside. It was nearly time to wind their way homewards, but they must have a little rest first, and one more look at the river and the woods, so they perched themselves about on the old tree roots, which formed most comfortable and convenient seats—all but Dan, who seemed to prefer to perch on a rock which stood in the middle of the river, which was shallower here and wider. To get to it he had to take off his shoes and stockings and wade, which perhaps made up for the uncomfortableness of the seat when he reached it, and soon sent him wading back through the cool rippling water again.

The handkerchiefs of the family having been commandeered in place of a towel, and Dan's feet clad once more, they all sat on in a state of lazy, happy content, playing "Ducks and Drakes," or talking, until at last Kitty, looking at the sky, saw with a shock that the sun was already setting, and realizing that they still had the long walk home before them, roused the party to sudden activity.

They were all on their feet in a moment. "I think we had better get out on the road by this gate, instead of going back to the house again," she said, hurrying towards one at the end of the field which brought them at once out on to the road.

"But hadn't you better pay Mrs. Henderson?" questioned Betty, as she panted after her hurrying sister.

"Oh!" Kitty stood still and gasped, "I had quite forgotten! How stupid of me! I am glad you remembered, Betty," and they all streamed back to the farm again and into the little garden, more heavily scented than ever now as the flowers revived in the dew and cooler air.

Mrs. Henderson came out to them quite smilingly, and apparently not at all concerned about their debt to her. In her hand she was holding a flower-pot with a sturdy-looking little rose bush flowering in it. The children eyed it admiringly. It had two delicate pink roses in full bloom on it, and several little buds. "I was wondering, missie," she said, turning to Betty, and holding out the rose to her, "if you would be pleased to have this little plant; 'tis off my old monthly rose that I've had for so many years. I planted this one last year and it has come on nicely. Would you be pleased to accept it?"

Betty gasped. For a moment she was so surprised and overjoyed as to be speechless. "Me! For me!" she cried at last. "Oh, how lovely! Thank you *so* much, Mrs. Henderson. I'll keep it always, and 'tend to it myself every day. I have never had a plant of my own before, and I shall love it," and Betty took her rose in her arms and hugged it in pure joy.

"You have made Betty very happy now, Mrs. Henderson," said Kitty, without a trace of envy in her heart. "Thank you for all you have done for us. Good-night."

"Good-night, and thank you for our fine tea," said Dan, and one by one they passed out of the scented garden, and on their homeward way.

A soft evening mist was creeping slowly up over the river and the sloping meadow; the distant woods looked desolate, and almost awesome. Kitty could not picture them now peopled as they had been in the morning, and her efforts to do so were soon interrupted by a little piteous voice beside her.

"My feets do hurt me," said Tony plaintively. "I s'pose I mustn't take off my boots?"

"Poor old Tony," cried Dan. "Here, let me carry you," and he hoisted his tired little brother on to his shoulders. But Dan was tired too, and the way was long, and they had either to walk in single file along the tiny track worn beside the sleepers, or over the sleepers themselves, and that meant progressing by a series of hops and jumps, which might perhaps be amusing for a few minutes at the beginning of a day's pleasuring, but is very far from amusing when one is tired and the way is long. The summer evening was warm too.

"I wish the old 'Rover' would come along," panted Dan at the end of about a quarter of an hour's march. "I'd get those fellows to give us a lift for part of the way at any rate."

"Oh," sighed Betty, "how lovely that would be! But things don't happen when you want them to, do they?"

Miss Betty's sad and cynical view of life was wrong though, for not so very much later the familiar

rumbling and shaking, and puffing and rattling, reached their ears once more, and coming, too, from the direction of Wenbridge.

In a state of anxious excitement they all stood to await it. "Hadn't we better hold up a pocket-handkerchief for a white flag to show them we are friendly?" asked Betty anxiously.

"They wouldn't understand if we did," said Dan impatiently. "They'd only think we were trying to frighten them. Kitty, if you go back towards them, holding up your hand, they will know it's all right. They will trust you. It's only me they are down on, really."

Kitty went back at once, and fortunately, just as she was trying to attract their attention and make them understand that she had only friendly intentions, they brought the engine to a standstill for Tonkin to get down and collect some faggots which lay beside the way. The engine snorted, and spit, and panted, and Dumble watched Kitty's approach with an eye which was not encouraging; but Kitty, though her heart was quaking a little, advanced bravely.

"Dumble," she called to him, in a friendly, conciliating voice, stretching up to him confidently—"Dumble, we are *so* tired. My little brother Tony can hardly get on at all, his feet are hurting him so badly, and he is too heavy for Dan to carry all the way; and Dan is tired too, and—and we wondered if—you would give us a lift, even if it is only for a little way. Will you?"

Dumble, his face rather flushed, straightened himself. "Look at my nose, miss," he said meaningly. "Look at my nose," pointing to that poor feature, which certainly looked red and swollen. "That's your brother's doings, heaving apples and not caring what he strikes with 'em, and yet after that you can come and ask me to take 'ee all aboard of my train."

"I am very sorry, Dumble, that you got hit, I am really, but—well, you did get the apples and some nice sandwiches too, you know; and when you aim at Dan it is never with anything nicer than hot water, and you know you did really scald him once but he never told how it was done."

Dumble looked rather foolish. "Didn't 'ee now?" he said, but his tone was less indignant. "Yes, we had the apples, and fine ones they were too. Well, come along. Tell 'em all to look sharp and hop up, for 'tis 'bout time we was to 'ome, and the 'Rover' put up for the night."

Gladly enough the others obeyed her eager signals. Joyfully they scrambled up into the high carriage and dropped on the dusty, gritty seats. Dan and his enemies exchanged broad, sheepish smiles, but they were amiable smiles. Tonkin flung up the last of the faggots and climbed up on the engine, and off they started. And *what* a journey it was! All about them stretched the country, vast and still and empty, they themselves, seemingly, the only living creatures in it, the panting and rumbling of the engine the only sound to be heard, for it drowned all such gentle sounds as the "good-nights" of the birds, the distant lowing of cows, the rippling of the brook beside the way.

Daylight was fading fast. Here and there the way was narrow, and the hedges so high that the hawthorns almost met overhead; and here and there, where tall fir trees lined the road on either side, it was very nearly dark.

By two of them, at least, that journey in the fading light was never forgotten. It had been such a happy day, so free from worries and naughtiness or squabbles, or any cause for regret; and now they were going home, happy but tired, and longing to be in the dear old untidy, shabby home again. Kitty, with Tony nestling against her, leaned back in her corner restfully, and thought of her home with a depth of feeling she could not have defined. "If it could only be like this always," she said to herself, "and there is no reason why it shouldn't if only we were good and every one was nice. I wonder, I wonder if I cannot make it so that father wouldn't want any one to live with us."

On they rattled and jolted, past the two cottages, with their windows lighted up now and the blinds drawn; past the little well, its cave looking dark and mysterious under its green canopy. Kitty, lost to the others and their talk, gazed with loving eyes at everything. "Dear little well," she thought. "Dear old 'Rover,' and Gorlay, and home, how I do love every inch and stick and stone of it! I think I should die if I had to leave—"

"Kitty, *have you got* a shilling?" Dan shrieked in her ear with such vigour that Kitty really leaped in her seat.

"What *is* the matter?" she demanded crossly. It was not pleasant to be roused from her musings and brought back thus to everyday, prosaic matters; and it happened to her so often, or so it seemed.

"I have asked you three times already. Have you got a shilling? We shall have to get down presently,

or we shall be seen, and the men and all of us will get into a row because we are travelling without tickets. We had better get down when they come to the 'lotment gardens, and we must tip them; but Betty has only got tuppence, and I have only fourpence, and that is all in coppers, mostly ha'pennies. I don't like to offer it to them."

"I haven't a shilling," said Kitty regretfully. "I have only eightpence left; the tea cost a good deal," and she produced from her purse a sixpenny bit and two pennies.

Dan looked at their combined wealth disgustedly. "They'll think we've been saving up for this little go," he said in a mortified voice; "but I'll give them the lot, and tell them it is all we have left."

"I don't suppose they will mind ha'pennies," said Kitty consolingly.

"Of course they won't," said Betty, who was rather cross at having to lay down her beloved rose and dive for her purse; "they aren't so silly. Besides, they have had our apples and sandwiches already."

"Well, don't remind them of that again," said Kitty anxiously, for it was just the kind of thing Betty would do; but before she could extract a promise the engine slowed down and they hastily prepared to dismount.

Dan coloured as he put the sixpenny bit and the coppers into Dumble's grimy hand. "I am sorry there's such a lot of pence," he said shyly; "but it is all we've got left, and—and—"

"Aw," said Dumble, who had expected nothing, and was rather embarrassed than otherwise by their generosity, "thank 'ee kindly, sirs, and young leddies; there wasn't no 'casion to give us nothing; but thank 'ee very much all the same, and 'nother time we'll be glad to 'blige 'ee with 'nother lift."

"Thank you very much," said Dan. "But it isn't as much as it looks; it is only fourteen pence altogether. I—I thought I'd tell you for fear you'd be disappointed;" and thankful for the darkness which hid his embarrassment, he joined the others, and with many friendly "Good-nights" to the "Rover" they started on the last stage of their journey.

Briskly enough they started; but their pace soon changed; their feet were weary, and there was really no great need to hurry now. There would be no scoldings or punishments when they got home, even if they were late, for no one there was very particular as to time, and there was so much to see that they did not usually see that they stopped repeatedly to look about them. The cottages were all lighted up now, and in some of them the blinds had been left undrawn and the windows open. Even the old wharf, too, had here and there a light gleaming out of its blackness, adding to the weird mystery of the place, and then in rattled the "Rover," and drew up panting and throwing out deep breaths of steam and smoke and sparks, as though she had come at breakneck speed on urgent business from the extreme limits of the earth, and could scarcely be restrained from starting off again. In the dim light they could see Dumble and Tonkin wandering round and lovingly criticizing their fiery steed. "'Er 'ave gone well to-day," they heard Dumble saying proudly. "'Er 'ave gone like a little 'are."

"Ay, ay, proper!" responded Tonkin with solemn emphasis. "Since 'er was cleaned I'd back 'er agin all the new-fangled engines in the world. Give the 'Rover' a fair bit of line to travel over, and 'er'll—well, 'er'll do it."

The children chuckled to themselves and moved on. "To-night, with the 'Rover' drawn up in it, it doesn't look quite so much like Quilp's Wharf as usual," said Kitty, looking back lingeringly at the black, ramshackle collection of old tarred sheds; "but I am sure I shall see Quilp's boy standing on his head there one day."

CHAPTER VIII.

A BAD BEGINNING.

On again they went, past more cottages with groups of people gossiping at their doors, or sitting about on low steps or the edges of the pavement, enjoying the cool and calm of the summer evening; up the steep hill where the milk-bottle had come to grief in the morning, past the carpenter's shop, fast closed now, all but the scent of the wood, which nothing could keep in.

It was a stiff pull to the top for tired people, but it was reached at last. With a deep sigh of satisfaction they crossed the quiet street in leisurely fashion to their own front door, where, summoning what energy they had left, they gave a friendly "whoop!" to let their arrival be known, and burst into the house pell-mell; then stopped abruptly, almost tumbling over each other with the shock, and stared

before them in silent, speechless amazement at a pile of luggage which filled the centre of the hall. Betty stepped back and looked at the plate on the door to make quite sure that they had not burst into the wrong house; but Kitty, with a swift presentiment, realized to whom that luggage belonged and what it meant, and her heart sank down, down to a depth she had never known it sink before.

Before she could speak, though, Emily appeared from somewhere, her face a picture of rage, offended dignity, and fierce determination; but as soon as she caught sight of the bewildered, wondering quartette, her whole expression changed. She came to them, as Kitty said afterwards, as though there had been a death in the family and she had to break the news to them. But it was an arrival she had to announce, not a departure, and she announced it abruptly.

"She's come!" she gasped in a whisper more penetrating than a shout; and her face added, "You poor, poor things, I am sorry for you."

For once Emily's sympathies were with them, and even while staggering under the blow they had just received, Kitty could not help noticing the fact.

"What?—not Aunt Pike?—to stay?" gasped Dan.

Emily nodded, a world of meaning in the action. "You'd best go up and speak to her at once, or she'll be crosser than she is now, if that's possible. She's as vexed as can be 'cause there wasn't nobody to the station to meet her, nor nobody here when she come."

"But we didn't know. How could we? And who could have even dreamed of her coming to-day!" they argued hotly and all at once.

"A tellygram come soon after you'd a-gone," said Emily, with a sniff; "but there wasn't nobody here to open it. And how was we to know what was inside of it; we can't see through envelopes, though to hear some people talk you would think we ought to be able to."

Kitty knew it was her duty to check Emily's rude way of speaking of her aunt, but a common trouble was uniting them, and she felt she could not be severe then.

"Doesn't father know yet?" she asked.

"No, miss."

"Poor father! Has Aunt Pike really come to *stay*, Emily?"

"I can't make out for certain, miss; but if she isn't going to stay now, she is coming later on. I gathered that much from the way she talked. She said it didn't need a very clever person to see that 'twas high time somebody was here to look after things, instead of me being with my 'ead out of win—I mean, you all out racing the country to all hours of the night, and nothing in the house fit to eat—"

Kitty groaned.

"I've got to go and get the spare-room ready as soon as she comes out of it," went on Emily. "A pretty time for anybody to have to set to to sweep and dust."

Kitty, though, could not show any great sympathy there; having to sweep and dust seemed to her at that moment such trifling troubles. "Where is she now, Emily?"

"In the spare-room."

"Oh, the dust under the bed!" groaned Kitty. "She is sure to see it; it blows out to meet you every time you move!"

"Never mind that now," said Dan; "it is pretty dark everywhere. But we had better do a bunk and clean ourselves up a bit before she sees us," and he set the example by kicking off his shoes and disappearing like a streak up the stairs.

In another moment the hall was empty, save for eight very dirty shoes and the pile of severe-looking luggage.

To convince Aunt Pike that her presence and care were absolutely unnecessary was the one great aim and object which now filled them all, and as a means to this end their first idea was to dress, act, and talk as correctly and unblamably as boys and girls could. So, by the time the worthy lady was heard descending, they were all in the drawing-room, seated primly on the stiffest chairs they could find, and apparently absorbed in the books they gazed at with serious faces and furrowed brows. To the trained eye the "high-water marks" around faces and wrists were rather more apparent and speaking than their

interest in their books. Their heads, too, were strikingly wet and smooth around their brows, but conspicuously tangled and unkempt-looking at the back.

However, on the whole they appeared well-behaved and orderly, and the expression of welcome their faces assumed as soon as their aunt was heard approaching was striking, if a little overdone. It was unfortunate, though, that they and Emily had forgotten to remove their dirty shoes from the hall, or to light the gas, for Aunt Pike, groping her way downstairs in the dark, stumbled over the lot of them—stumbled, staggered, and fell! And of all unyielding things in the world to fall against, the corner of a tin box is perhaps the worst.

The expression of welcome died out of the four faces, their cheeks grew white; Kitty flew to the rescue.

"I'm jolly glad it isn't my luggage," murmured Dan, preparing to follow.

"She shouldn't have left it there," said Betty primly.

"I expect it's our shoes she's felled over," whispered Tony in a scared voice. "I jumped over them when I came down, but I don't 'spect Aunt Pike could."

Dan and Betty looked at each other with guilty, desperate eyes.

"Well, you left yours first," said Betty, anxious to shift all blame, "and you ran upstairs first, and—and we did as you did, of course."

"Oh, of course," snapped Dan crossly, "you always do as I do, don't you? Now go out and tell Aunt Pike that, and suck up to her. If she's going to live here, it's best to be first favourite." At which unusual outburst on the part of her big brother Betty was so overcome that she collapsed on to her chair again, and had to clench her hands tightly and wink hard to disperse the mist which clouded her eyes and threatened to turn to rain.

But a moment later the entrance of Aunt Pike helped her to recover herself—Aunt Pike, with a white face and an expression on it which said plainly that her mind was made up and nothing would unmake it. Betty and Tony stepped forward to meet her.

"How do you do, Elizabeth?—How do you do, Anthony? I should have gone to your bedrooms to see you, thinking naturally that you two, at least, would be in bed, but I was told you were still racing the country. Anna goes to bed at seven-thirty, and she is a year older than you," looking at Betty very severely.

"Is Anna here too?" asked Kitty, saying anything that came into her head by way of making a diversion.

"No, she is not. She will join me later. We were just about to move to another hydropathic establishment when your poor father's letter reached me, and I felt that, no matter at what sacrifice on my part, it was my duty to throw up all my own plans and come here at once."

"Then the postman must have missed my letter," said Betty indignantly. "What a pity! for it would have told you we didn't want—I mean, it would have saved you the trouble—"

"It was your letter, Elizabeth, which decided me to come," said Mrs. Pike, turning her attention to poor Betty. "It reached me by the same post as your poor father's, and when I read it I felt that I must come at once—that my place was indeed here. So I confided Anna to the care of friends, and came, though at the greatest possible inconvenience, by the next train. And what," looking round severely at them all, "did I find on my arrival? No one in the house to greet me! My nephews and nieces out roaming the country alone, no one knew where! One maid out without leave, and the other—well, you might almost say she was out too, for her head protruded so far from her bedroom window that I could see it almost from the bottom of the street."

"Emily *will* hang out of window," sighed Kitty.

"And when I reprimanded her she was most impertinent. Is she always so when she is reprimanded, Katherine?"

"We—we don't reprimand her," admitted Kitty. "I am afraid she would be if we did," she added honestly.

At that moment Dan burst into the room carrying a bottle. "If you put some of this on the bruises," he said, offering it to his aunt, "it'll take the pain out like anything. Jabez has it for the horses, and I've

used it too; it is capital stuff."

Mrs. Pike looked at the bottle with an eye which for a moment made Kitty quake, for Dan had brought it in with the fine crust of dirt and grease on it that it had accumulated during a long sojourn in the coach-house. But something, perhaps it was Dan's thoughtfulness, checked the severe remark which had almost burst from her lips.

"Thank you, Daniel," she said, almost graciously. "If you will ask one of the servants to clean the outside of the bottle, I shall be very glad of the contents, for I feel sure I have bruised myself severely."

Betty was about to offer her pocket-handkerchief for the purpose when she remembered that she had not one with her, and so saved herself from further humiliation.

"At what hour do you dine—or sup?" asked Mrs. Pike, turning to Kitty.

"We have supper at—at—oh, when father is home, or we—or we come home, or—when it is convenient."

"Or when the servants choose to get it for you, perhaps," said Aunt Pike sarcastically, but hitting the truth with such nicety that Kitty coloured. "Well," she went on, "if you can induce the maids to give us a meal soon I shall be thankful, for I have had nothing since my lunch; and I really feel, with all the agitation and shocks and blows I have had this day, as though I were nearly fainting."

Poor Kitty, with a sinking heart, ran off at once, glad to escape, but overwhelmed with dread of what lay before her. To her relief she found that Fanny had returned; but Fanny was hot with the first outburst of indignation at the news that awaited her, and was angry and mutinous, and determined to do nothing to make life more bearable for any of them.

In response to Kitty's meek efforts to induce her to do her best to make the supper-table presentable, and not a shame to them all, she refused point-blank to stir a finger.

"There's meat pasties, and there's a gooseberry tart, and cheese, and cold plum-pudding, and cake, and butter and jam," she said, enumerating thing after thing, designed, so it seemed to Kitty, expressly for the purpose of giving Aunt Pike a nightmare; "and I've got some fish for the master, that I am going to cook when he comes, and not before."

"O Fanny, do cook it for Aunt Pike, please. It is just the thing for her, and I am sure father would rather she should have it than that she should complain that she had nothing to eat—"

"Well, Miss Kitty," burst in Fanny indignantly, "I don't know what *you* calls nothing. I calls it a-plenty and running over; and if what's good enough for us all isn't good enough for Mrs. Pike, well—"

"It is *good* enough, Fanny," urged Kitty; "only, you see, we like it and can eat it, but Aunt Pike can't. You know the last time she was here she said everything gave her indigestion—"

"Them folks that is so afflicted," said Fanny, "should stay in their own 'omes, or the 'ospital. I'm sure master don't want patients indoors so well as out, and be giving up the food out of his own mouth to them. The bit of fish I've got for master I'm going to keep for master. If anybody's got to have the indigestion it won't be him, not if I knows it; he's had nothing to eat to-day yet to speak of, and if nobody else don't consider him, well, I *must*," and with this parting thrust Fanny left the kitchen to go to her bedroom.

Kitty longed to be able to depart to her room too, to lock herself in and fasten out all the worries and bothers, and all thoughts of supper and Aunt Pike, and everything else that was worrying. "I wish I had stayed in the woods," she thought crossly; "there would be peace there at any rate," and her mind wandered away to the river and the little silvery bays, and the tree-covered slopes rising up and up, and she tried to picture it as it must be looking then at that moment, so still, and lonely, and mysterious.

"I'll see that it all looks nice, Miss Kitty," said Emily with unusual graciousness. She felt really sorry for Kitty and the position she was in, and having quite made up her mind to leave now that this new and very different mistress had come, she was not only beginning already to feel a little sad at the thought of parting from them all, but a lively desire to side with them against the common enemy. She failed quite to realize that her past behaviour had reconciled Kitty more than anything to the "enemy's" presence, and made her coming almost a relief. "I'll get Fanny to poach some eggs, or make an omelette or something. Don't you worry about it."

Kitty, immensely relieved and only too glad to follow Emily's last bit of advice, wandered out and through the yard towards the garden. She felt she could not go back to the company of Aunt Pike again, for a few moments at any rate.

Prue was standing with her head out of her window, anxiously wondering where Jabez was with her supper. Kitty spoke to her and passed on. She strolled slowly up the steps, past the fateful garden wall and the terrace above to the next terrace, where stood a pretty creeper-covered summer-house. It was a warm night, and very still and airless. Kitty sat down on the step in the doorway of the summer-house, and staring before her into the dimness, tried to grasp all that had happened, and what it would mean to them. She thought of their lazy mornings, when they lay in bed till the spirit moved them to get up; of the other mornings when they chose to rise early and go for a long walk to Lantig, or down to Trevor, the stretch of desolate moorland which lay about a mile outside the town, and was so full of surprises—of unexpected dips and trickling streams, of dangerous bogs, and stores of fruits and berries and unknown delights—that, well though they knew it, they had not yet discovered the half of them. She thought of their excursions, such as to-day's, to Wenmere Woods, and those others to Helbarrow Tors. They usually took a donkey and cart, and food for a long day, when they went to this last. Her mind travelled, too, back over their favourite games and walks, and what she, perhaps, loved best of all, those drives, when she would have the carriage and Prue all to herself, and would wander with them over the face of the country for miles.

At those times she felt no nervousness, no loneliness, nothing but pure, unalloyed happiness. Sometimes she would take a book with her, and when she came to a spot that pleased her, she would turn Prue into the hedge to graze, while she herself would stay in the carriage and read, or dismount and climb some hedge, or tree, or gate, and gaze about her, or lie on the heather, thinking or reading; and by-and-by she would turn the old horse's head homewards, and arrive at last laden with honeysuckle or dog-roses, bog-myrtle, ferns, or rich-brown bracken and berries.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COMING OF ANNA.

The next week or two were full of change, excitement, and unrest. No one knew what the next day might bring forth, and the children never felt sure of anything. Any hour might bring a surprise to them, and it was not likely to be a pleasant surprise—of that they felt sure. One of the changes decided on was that Dan was to go very soon—the next term, in fact—to a public school as a boarder.

To all but Dan the news came as an overwhelming blow. Katherine and Elizabeth, as their aunt persisted in calling them, considered it one of the most cruel and treacherous acts that Mrs. Pike could have been guilty of. Of course they blamed her entirely for it. "Dan was to be turned out of his home-banished—and by Aunt Pike!" they told each other.

"I expect she will banish us next," said Betty. "If she does, I shall run away from school and become something—a robber, or a gipsy, or a heroine."

But the cruellest part, perhaps, of the blow was that Dan himself did not resent it. In fact, he showed every sign of delight with the plan, and was wild with excitement for the term to begin. To the girls this seemed rank treachery, a complete going over to the enemy, and they felt it keenly.

"I didn't think Dan would have changed so," said Kitty dejectedly, as she and Betty lay in their beds discussing the serious state of affairs.

"I don't know," said Betty darkly. "I thought he was very odd the night Aunt Pike came. First there was the rude way he spoke to me about my making up to her, and then *he* went and got that bottle of emercation for her. I called *that* sucking up to her."

"But Dan is always polite," said Kitty, warm in defence of him at once. She might sometimes admit to herself that there was a flaw in her brother, but she could not endure that any one else should see one; "and he is always sorry for people when they are hurt, and it was our fault that she was hurt."

"Yes, it was his fault really," said Betty, whose memory was a good one—too good at times, some said—"for he was the first to kick off his boots and leave them there."

"I know; but he didn't tell us to do the same. And you see we had all agreed to be polite to Aunt Pike, and you could have got the embrocation for her if you had liked."

"But I don't see why it should be called 'polite' if Dan does it, but 'sucking up' if *I* do it," argued Betty.

Kitty sighed. She often wished that Betty would not want things explained so carefully. She never made allowances for changes of mood or sudden impulses. Kitty herself so constantly experienced both,

that she could sympathize with others who did the same, and as she put it to herself—"What can you do if you feel sorry for a person that you hated only a little while before?"

Kitty could not understand the right and the wrong of these things, or what to do under such circumstances. She wished she could, for they made her feel mean to one side or the other, and nothing was really further from her intention.

The next arrangement made—and this was an even greater blow to them than the "banishment" of Dan—was that Kitty and Betty were to go as day girls to school, instead of having Miss Pooley to the house.

The plan, being Aunt Pike's, would probably have been objected to in any case; but to Kitty, with her shy dread of strangers—particularly girls of her own age—the prospect was appalling, and she contemplated it with a deep dread such as could not be understood by most girls.

Betty complained loudly, but soon found consolation. "At any rate," she said, "we need not walk to school with Anna, and we needn't see as much of her there as we should have to at home; and I think it will be rather jolly to know a lot of girls."

"Do you?" sighed Kitty, looking at her sister with curious, wondering eyes, and a feeling of awe. "I can't think so. I can't bear strange girls." It seemed to her incredible that any one should *want* to know strangers, or could even contemplate doing so without horror. She envied them, though, for being able to. "It must make one feel ever so much more happy and comfortable," she thought, "to have nothing to be afraid of." She would have given a very great deal not to feel shy and embarrassed when with strangers, and to be able to think of something to say to them. But she never could. Nothing that she had to say seemed interesting or worth saying. Betty, with her self-confidence and fluent tongue, was a constant source of admiration to Kitty.

"You will get on all right," she said, with another sigh; "but I was never meant to go where there are other people."

"That is why you've got to go. It is good for you; I heard Aunt Pike saying so to father. She said you were growing up shy and *gauche*. I don't know what *gauche* means; do you?"

"No," said Kitty, colouring. "I expect I ought to, and I expect it is something dreadful; but if I am happier so, why can't I go on being *gauche*?"

"Father said you were very shy, but he didn't think you were the other thing—*gauche*."

"Did he?" cried poor Kitty, brightening; but her face soon fell again. "Father doesn't notice things as quickly as some people do—Aunt Pike, and Lady Kitson, and others; and I expect they are right. It is always the disagreeable people and the disagreeable things that are right. Did Aunt Pike say the same thing of you?"

"No; she said I had too much—it was a long word—too much self—self—oh, I know, confidence—self-confidence. I don't know what it means, but I am sure I haven't got it; and if I have," wound up Betty defiantly, "I *won't* get cured of it. Do you know what it means, Kitty?"

"Yes," said Kitty thoughtfully, "I think I do; but I don't see how going to the same school can cure us both."

At the end of a few days Mrs. Pike went away to get Anna, and to collect their numerous belongings; and the doctor's household felt that it had before it one week of glorious freedom, but only one.

In anticipation of this, their last happy free time, the children had made plans for each day of it, intending to enjoy them to the utmost. Somehow, though, things were different. There was a shadow even over their freedom—if it was not there in the morning, it fell before night—and they returned home each day weighted with a sense of weariness and depression. There was the shadow, too, of Dan's departure, and a very deep shadow it was.

"Things will never, never be the same again," said Kitty sagely. "Dan won't know about all that we do; and when he gets a lot of boy friends he won't care very much."

There was also the shadow of their own school and the constant companionship of Anna, and this was a dense shadow indeed.

"It wouldn't be so bad if she was jolly and nice, but it will be like having a spy always with us," said Betty. "She will tell Aunt Pike everything."

"You don't know," said Dan, to tease them. "Anna may have grown up quite different from what she was, and be as jolly as possible." But the suggestion did not console the girls; to them it only seemed that Dan was already forsaking them, that this was but another step over to the enemy.

"She couldn't be jolly," said Betty firmly. "She wouldn't know how, and Aunt Pike wouldn't let her if she wanted to. And even if she seemed so, I shouldn't feel that I could trust her."

"Bosh!" said Dan emphatically. "One can always tell if a person is to be trusted or not."

"Well, I can tell that I shall *not* trust Anna *ever*," cried Betty viciously, roused to deep anger by Dan's championship of Anna Pike.

But Dan was not impressed. "Oh well," he said, turning carelessly on his heel, "if you are so narrow-minded and have made up your mind not to like her, it is no use to say anything more."

"I am not narrow-minded," cried Betty hotly. "I don't know what you mean."

"I don't suppose you do," laughed Dan. "Never mind. Cheer up, Elizabeth, I will give you a dictionary on your birthday."

"No, you won't, 'cause you won't have money enough," said Betty; "and— and I wouldn't accept it if you got it."

"I'll leave you my old one when I go to school, and I advise you to study it well before you go to Miss Richards's. It may save you from putting your foot in it sometimes."

"I wonder," said Betty, with a sudden thought, "if it would tell me what self-confidence is?"

"I can tell you that," said Dan. "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh—oh, because—but tell me first what it means, and then I will tell you—perhaps."

"Well, it means—oh—you know—"

"No, I don't; and—and I don't believe you do either," nodding her head very knowingly at her brother.

"Yes, I do," cried Dan hotly. "It means having a too jolly good opinion of yourself, and thinking you can do anything. Now, tell me why you wanted to know."

But Betty was walking away with her head held very high, and her cheeks very red. "I think it is quite time you started for the station to meet Aunt Pike and Anna," she called back over her shoulder.

"Don't be late, whatever you do."

"But you are coming too, Bet, aren't you?"

"No," she answered frigidly, as she closed the door, "I am not," and to herself she added, with proud indignation, "After Aunt Pike's calling me such a name as that, I shouldn't think of going to meet her."

Kitty, Dan, and Tony were on the platform when the train arrived. Their father had expressly wished them to go to meet their aunt and cousin, as he was unable to; so they went to please him, they told each other. But they would put up with a good deal for the sake of a jaunt to the station, and there really was some little anxiety and excitement, too, in their hearts as to what Anna would be like.

When she had stayed with them before she had been a little fair, slight thing, with a small face, frightened restless eyes, and a fragile body as restless as her eyes. Anna Pike gave one the impression of being all nerves, and in a perpetual state of tremor. She was said to be very clever and intellectual, and certainly if being always with a book was a proof of it, she was; but there were some who thought she did little with her books beyond holding them, and that it would have been better for her in every way if she had sometimes held a doll, or a skipping-rope, or a branch of a tree instead.

"She was rather pretty, I think, wasn't she?" said Kitty musingly, as they strolled up and down the platform waiting for the train.

"She was awfully skinny," said Dan.

"Will Anna be bigger than me?" asked Tony, who did not remember her.

"Oh yes, she is as old as Dan, I think; but I always feel as though she were older even than I am. She used to seem so grown-up and clever, and she always did the right thing; and, oh dear, how dreadful it

will be if she is still the same."

Tony sighed. "I wish there was somebody little, like me, to play with," he said wistfully; "somebody as young as me."

"But, Tony darling, you don't feel you want some one else, do you? Why, we all play with you," cried Kitty reproachfully.

"Yes, I know; but you only pretend. You don't think things are really-truly, like I do."

"But I do, dear, I do, really; only yours are fairies and giants, and mine are knights and kings and ladies," and her thoughts flashed right away from the busy station, with its brick platform and gleaming rails, the ordinary-looking men and women pacing up and down, and the noise and rattle of the place, to the quiet, still woods and hurrying river, with their mystery and calm, and to those other men and women pacing so stately amidst the silence and beauty. But Tony, tugging at her hand, very soon brought her abruptly back to her real surroundings.

"It is coming! it is coming!" he cried. "I hear it."

And a moment later, with a fast-increasing roar, the engine rounded the curve, and gradually slowing down, drew up alongside the platform.

Mrs. Pike was one of those persons who keep their seats until all other passengers have left the carriage, and make every one belonging to them do the same; and Kitty and Dan had twice walked the whole length of the train, and were just turning away, not quite certain whether they felt relieved or not at seeing no sign of their travellers, when they heard a well-remembered voice calling to them, and, turning, saw their aunt standing in a carriage doorway, beckoning to them as frantically as an armful of parcels and bags would allow her. She retreated when she had attracted their attention, and in her place there stepped from the carriage a tall, lanky girl, who was evidently very shy and embarrassed at being thrust out alone to greet her strange cousins.

It was Anna. Though she had grown enormously, they knew her in a moment, for the thin white face was the same, the restless eyes, the nervous fidgeting movements of the hands and feet and body. Her straight, light hair had grown enormously too; it was a perfect mane now, long, and thick, and heavy—too heavy and long, it seemed, for the thin neck and little head. Kitty eyed it enviously, though; her own dark hair was frizzy and thick as could be, but it never had grown, and never would grow more than shoulder length, she feared, and she did so admire long, straight, glossy hair.

But when she looked from her cousin's hair to her cousin, a sudden sense of shyness came over her, and it was awkwardly enough that she advanced.

"Ought I to kiss her," she was asking herself, "on a platform like this, and before a lot of people? She might think it silly;" and while she was still debating the point, she had held out her hand and shaken Anna's stiffly, with a prim "How do you do," and that was all.

Her aunt she had overlooked entirely, until that lady recalled her wandering wits peremptorily. "Well, Katherine, is this the way you greet your aunt and cousin? Have you quite forgotten me? Come and kiss us both in a proper manner.—Well, Daniel, how are you? Yes, I shall be obliged to you if you will go in search of our luggage;" for Dan, fearing that he, too, might be ordered to kiss them both, had shaken hands heartily but hastily, while uttering burning desires to assist them by finding their boxes.—"Anthony, come and be introduced to your cousin Anna. I dare say you scarcely remember her."

Tony kissed his severe-looking cousin obediently, but his hopes of a playmate died there and then.

"Elizabeth, I do not see her!"

"No—o; she has not come, Aunt Pike," said Kitty lamely. She felt absolutely incapable at that moment of giving any reason why Betty had absented herself, so she said no more.

"Anna was particularly anxious to meet her cousin Elizabeth," continued Mrs. Pike. "Being so near of an age, she hopes to make her her special companion.—Don't you, Anna?"

"Yes, mother," said Anna, rubbing her cotton-gloved hands together nervously, and setting Kitty's teeth on edge to such an extent that she could scarcely speak. But somehow the enthusiasm of Anna's actions was not echoed in her voice.

Dan, who had rejoined them, smiled to himself wickedly as he thought of Betty's last speech about her cousin.

"The porter is taking the luggage out to the omnibus," he said. "Will you come out and get up?" He led the way, and they all followed. The big yellow 'bus with its four horses stood in the roadway outside the platform palings. The driver and conductor, who knew the Trenires quite well, beamed on them, and touched their hats.

"I've kept the front seat for you, missie," said Weller, the conductor, to Kitty, and he moved towards the short ladder placed against the 'bus in readiness for her to mount. "Will the other ladies go 'pon top, too?" he asked; and Kitty, with one foot on the lower step, looked round at her aunt to offer her her seat.

"Katherine! Katherine! what *are* you doing? Come down, child, at once. You surely aren't thinking of clambering up that ladder? Let Dan do so if he likes, but you will please come inside with Anna and me."

Kitty's face fell visibly. She could hardly believe, though, that she had heard aright. "I feel ill if I go inside, Aunt Pike," she explained. "Father always lets us go on top; he tells us to. He says it is healthier; and it is such a lovely evening, too, and the drive is beautiful. I am sure you would—"

"Katherine, please, I must ask you not to stand there arguing in that rude manner with me," said Mrs. Pike with intense severity, "Get inside the omnibus at once. I will speak to your father on the subject when I get home." And poor Kitty, so long mistress of her own actions, walked, bitterly humiliated, under the eyes of the many onlookers, and got into the hot, close 'bus, where the air was already heavy with the mixed smell of straw and paint and velvet cushions, which she never could endure.

"Anthony, you may go outside with Daniel if you prefer it, as the 'bus is rather full inside," said Mrs. Pike, stopping him as he clambered in after Kitty. But Tony declined the offer.

"I would rather go with Kitty, please," he said loyally. "I'd—I'd rather." He had a feeling that by so doing he was somehow helping her.

Kitty, with compressed lips and flashing eyes, took her seat. She did not notice who was beside her; her only object was to get as far as possible from her aunt, for, feeling as she felt then, she could not possibly talk to her.

"It is a *shame* to make us go inside. It always makes me feel ill too; but I've always got to," whispered a low, indignant voice through the rattling and rumbling of the 'bus. With a start of surprise Kitty turned quickly to see who had spoken, and found that she had seated herself beside her cousin Anna.

For a moment Kitty stared at her, bewildered. It could not have been Anna who spoke, for Anna was staring absorbedly out of the window opposite her, apparently lost in thought, or fascinated by the scenery through which they were passing. But just as she had determined that she had made a mistake, a side-long glance from Anna's restless eyes convinced her that she had not.

"Are you feeling ill now?" asked Kitty, but Anna in reply only glanced nervously at her mother, and bestowed on Kitty a warning kick; and Kitty, indignant with them both, could not bring herself to address another remark to her. All through that long, wretched drive home Kitty's indignation waxed hotter and hotter, for she kept her gaze studiously on the window, and the glimpses she got of all the beauty they were passing through only served to increase it. Here the way lay through the soft dimness of a plantation of young larches, their green, feathery branches almost meeting across the road; then came a long steep hill, up which the horses walked in a leisurely way—quite delightful if one were outside and able to gaze down at the glorious valley which spread away and away below, until a curve in the road suddenly cut it off from view, but infinitely wearying when every moment was spent in a hot, stuffy atmosphere, with nothing before one's eyes but the hedge or one's fellow-passengers.

Oh the relief in such case when the top of the hill was reached, and the driver stirred up his horses to a canter, and the heavy 'bus covered the level ground quickly and rumbled down the next steep hill at a good pace. How Kitty did hate it all now, and how she did love it ordinarily! Winter and summer, hitherto, she had always gone to and fro mounted high up on the front seat, and knew every curve and corner, and hill and dip; but best of all, perhaps, did she love that quick run down the steep hill, when the horses cantered along at their smartest, and the 'bus came rumbling and swaying after them, as though at any moment it would break loose entirely and go its own wild way. And then would come the demurer pace as they came to the town, and the narrow streets where sharp corners had to be turned carefully, and where, from the high 'bus-top, one could quite easily see into the funny little rooms of the old houses on either side. Then came the main street—to the Trenire children fit to vie in breadth and beauty with any street in any city in the world—and then home!

To Kitty it had always been the greatest joy to come home. No matter where she had stayed, or how delightful the visit had been, she had always been glad to get home again, and her heart beat faster,

and her breath caught with something that was not merely excitement or pleasure, at the sight of the low, broad old house in the bare, wind-swept street, that was the only home she had known, or wanted to know. But now, for the first time, she felt no joy, only misery and indignation, and a sense of hopeless, helpless resentment that all the old joy and freedom was ended, that everything was to be altered and spoiled for them.

By degrees the 'bus emptied of all passengers but themselves, and Aunt Pike drew nearer to Kitty. "I hope," she said, "that things have gone on nicely while I have been away, and that the house has been kept in a neat and orderly fashion."

Kitty did not answer for a moment, for the simple reason that she had no answer to give. They had all been too much occupied in making the most of their spell of freedom to observe how the house was kept. "I—I believe so," she stammered at last.

"And I hope you have arranged a nice little meal for us," went on Mrs. Pike, "to welcome Anna on her first arrival in her new home. I did not say anything about it, as I thought it would be so good for you to have the arranging of it."

At this Kitty really did jump in her seat, and her heart beat fast with shame and dismay, for she had not only not arranged a "nice little meal," but had never given a thought to any meal at all.

It is fair to say she had never been told that it was left to her to do so. When first her aunt had come Kitty had handed over to her the reins of government, willy-nilly, and she had not thought it her duty to take them up again in Mrs. Pike's absence; but it is to be feared that in any case she would not have prepared a feast of welcome for Anna. And the result was that they would arrive tired and hungry after their long, hot journey, and probably find no preparations at all made for them, no welcome, not even food enough for a meal—certainly no special feast.

Kitty had not been wilfully careless. She would have seen to things had she thought of it; but the obstinate fact remained that, if not wilfully, she had been culpably careless, and her heart sank with shame. She hoped—oh, how devoutly she hoped—that Fanny had been more thoughtful; but the prospect was slight, and for the rest of the way she sat in a perfect panic of dread and shame.

The very moment the omnibus drew up before the house she sprang out of it, and, regardless of what her aunt might think, rushed in and through the house to the kitchen.

"O Fanny," she cried, desperation in face and voice; but even in that distressful moment she remembered a former occasion when Aunt Pike's arrival had thrown her into just such a frantic state, "what about supper? Aunt Pike has asked about it, and I hadn't even thought about it; and—oh, what *can* I do? I suppose there is nothing in the house?"

For a second or two Fanny went on calmly and deliberately with what she was about. "Well, miss," she said at last in her severest tone, "there is something, and a plenty, thanks to me and Miss Betty. If there 'adn't a been, it wouldn't 'ave been no manner of use to come rushing out to me now, when it's time for it to be on the table. Of course, when folks comes unexpected that's one thing, but—"

Kitty in her great relief did not heed Fanny's lecture in the least. "O Fanny, you are a dear," she cried joyfully. "I will do something for you some day.—Hullo! Betty," for Betty at that moment came tiptoeing into the kitchen.

"'Twas Miss Betty as first thought of it," said Fanny honestly. "I s'pose 'twould 'ave come into my 'ead some time, but I'm bound to say it 'adn't till Miss Betty mentioned it."

Betty beamed with pleased importance, but tried to look indifferent. "I wanted Aunt Pike to see that we do know how to do things. What is Anna like?" she broke off to ask anxiously.

"She is like Anna exactly," said Kitty bluntly, "and no one else; she never could be. She'll never change, not if she lives to be eighty. Come along up, and get ready. Oh, I *am* so glad you thought about the supper, Betty dear. How clever you are! Aunt Pike would have thought worse of me than ever if you hadn't, and—"

"Um!" responded Betty, with a toss of her head, "perhaps if Aunt Pike knew that if it hadn't been for me she'd have had no supper, she wouldn't say rude things about me again. I think it's awfully hard. If you don't do things you are scolded, and if you *do* do them you are called too self—self-confidential."

"I wouldn't mind what I was called," said Kitty, as she hurried away to get ready, "as long as I could manage to do the right thing sometimes, and not always forget till too late."

LESSONS, ALARMS, AND WARNINGS.

The days that followed were strange and very trying. It was not at all easy for any of them to settle down to the new life. Kitty, though, did not feel the giving up of the keys and the *role* of housekeeper as much as she had expected to; for, in the first place, the keys had generally been lost, and in the second, she had never really "kept house" in the true meaning of the term, and it really was a great relief to find the meals appearing regularly and satisfactorily without any effort on her part, or, perhaps, one should say, without any remorse, or occasion for remorse, for not having made any effort.

It was really a comfort, too, not to have to try to manage the servants, or blame herself for not doing so. But, on the other hand, they all missed their freedom dreadfully—their freedom of speech and act, their freedom in getting up and going to bed, in their goings and comings; for Aunt Pike believed, quite rightly, of course, in punctuality and early rising, and keeping oneself profitably employed, and she disapproved strongly of their roaming the country over, as they had done, as strongly as she disapproved of their sitting on garden walls, wandering in and out of stables, coach-house, and kitchen, talking to the servants, or teasing Jabez.

Jabez grew quite moped during the weeks that followed, for he was not even allowed to come into the kitchen for a comforting cup of tea as of old. "And if anybody can't have a bit of a clack sometimes," groaned poor Jabez, "nor a cup of tea neither, why he might so well be dumb to once. I've ackshally got to talk to the 'orses and the cat to keep my powers of speech from leaving me."

Life seemed very dull and dreary to all the household, except, perhaps, to Mrs. Pike and Dr. Trenire. The latter was too busy just then to realize the changes going on in his home; while Mrs. Pike was fully occupied with all that lay at her hand to do.

Anna's presence did not add at all to the liveliness of the house. She was shy and nervous. Of Dan she was, or pretended to be, quite afraid, and if she happened to have blossomed into talk during his absence, she would stop the moment he appeared—a habit which annoyed him extremely. To Betty, who was to have been her special companion, she showed no desire to attach herself, but to Kitty she clung in a most embarrassing fashion, monopolizing her in a way that Kitty found most irksome, and made Betty furious, for hitherto Kitty had been Betty's whenever Betty needed her. Now she was rarely to be found without Anna. But Kitty, along with the others, never felt that she could trust Anna; and they could not throw off the feeling that they had a spy in their midst.

And, worst of all, the beautiful summer days glided away unappreciated, and there were many bitter groans over what might have been had they been alone. They thought longingly of the excursions and picnics, the drives, and the free happy days in the open that they might have had.

"I do think it is so silly," cried Betty, "to have one's meals always at the same time, sitting around a table in a room in a house, when one can enjoy them *ever* so much more if they come at all sorts of times, and in all sorts of places."

"Oh, but it wouldn't be right to have them like that often," said Anna primly. "You would have indigestion if you didn't have your meals at regular hours." Anna was always full of ideas as to what was right and good for her health.

"I didn't know I had an indigestion," said Betty shortly, with a toss of her head, "and you wouldn't either, Anna, if you didn't think so much about it." Which was truer than Betty imagined. "I think it is a pity you talk so much about such things."

In September Dan went off to school. He was very homesick and not at all happy when the last day came—a fact which consoled Kitty somewhat for all the pleasure and excitement he had shown up to that point. "If it hadn't been for Aunt Pike and Anna I believe he would have been frightfully sorry all the time," she told herself, "instead of seeming as though he was quite glad to go."

"You'll—you'll write to a fellow pretty often, won't you, Kit?" he asked, coming into her room for about the fiftieth time, and wandering about it irresolutely. He spoke in an off-hand manner, and made a show of looking over her bookshelves whilst he was speaking. But Kitty understood, and in her heart she vowed that nothing should prevent her writing, neither health, nor work, nor other interests. Dan wanted her letters, and Dan should have them.

But it was after he was gone that the blow of his departure was felt most, and then the blank seemed almost too great to be borne. It was so great that the girls were really almost glad when their own school opened, that they might have an entirely new life in place of the old one so changed.

"Though I would rather go right away, ever so far, to a boarding school," declared Betty, "where everything and everybody would be quite, quite different." But Kitty could not agree to this. It was quite bad enough for her as it was; to leave Gorlay would be more than she could bear.

"Hillside," the school to which they were being sent—the only one of its kind in Gorlay, in fact—was about ten minutes' walk from Dr. Trenire's house. It was quite a small school, consisting of about a dozen pupils only, several of whom were boarders; and Miss Richards (the head of it), Miss Melinda (her sister), and a French governess instructed the twelve.

"It is not, in the strict sense of the word, a school," Miss Richards always remarked to the parents of new pupils. "We want it to be 'a home from home' for our pupils, and I think I may say it is that."

"If our homes were in the least bit like it we should never want any holidays," one girl remarked; but we know that it is almost a point of honour with some girls never to admit—until they have left it—that school is anything but a place of exile and unhappiness,—though when they have left it they talk of it as all that was delightful.

Amongst the boarders, and loudest in their complaints of all they had to endure, were Lettice and Maude Kitson, who had been placed there by their step-mother for a year to "finish" their education before they "came out." It was a pity, for they were too old for the school, and it would have been better for themselves and every one had they been sent amongst older girls and stricter teachers, where they would not have been the leading pupils and young ladies of social importance. They laughed and scoffed at the usual simple tastes and amusements of schoolgirls, and, one being seventeen and the other eighteen, they considered themselves women, who, had it not been for their unkind stepmother, would have been out in society now instead of at school grinding away at lessons and studies quite beneath them. Their talk and their ideas were worldly and foolish too, and as they lacked the sense and the good taste which might have checked them, they were anything but improving to any girls they came in contact with.

Kitty had never liked either of the Kitson girls; they had nothing in common, and everything Lettice and Maude did jarred on her. They seemed to her silly and vulgar, and they did little petty, mean things, and laughed and sneered at people in a way that hurt Kitty's feelings. Yet now, so great was her nervous dread of the school and all the strangers she would have to meet, she felt quite pleased that there would be at least those two familiar faces amongst them. "And that will show how much I dread it," she said miserably to Betty the night before. "Think of my being glad to see the Kitsons!"

"Oh well," said Betty cheerfully, "they will be some one to speak to, and they will tell us the ways of the school, so that we shan't look silly standing about not knowing what to do. They won't let the others treat us as they treat new girls sometimes either, and that will be a good thing," which was Betty's chief dread in going to the school.

Anna expressed no opinion on the matter at all. She was more than usually nervous and fidgety in her manner, but she said nothing; and whether she greatly dreaded the ordeal, or was quite calmly indifferent about it, no one could tell.

But the feelings of the three as they walked to the school that first morning were curiously alike, yet unlike. All three were very nervous. Kitty felt a longing, such as she could hardly resist, to rush away to Wenmere Woods and never be heard of again. Betty was so determined that no one should guess the state of tremor she was in, lest they should take advantage of it and tease her, that she quite overdid her air of calm indifference, and appeared almost rudely contemptuous. Anna, though outwardly by far the most nervous of the three, had her plans ready and her mind made up. She was not going to be put upon, and she was not going to let any one get the better of her; at the same time she was going to be popular; though how she was going to manage it all she could not decide until she saw her fellow-pupils and had gathered something of what they were like. In the meantime nothing escaped her sharp eyes or ears. All that Kitty or Betty could tell her about the school, or Miss Richards, or the girls, especially the Kitsons, she drank in and stored up in her memory, and they would have been astonished beyond measure could they have known how much her hasty wandering glances told her, resting, as they did, apparently on nothing.

Before the first morning was over she knew that Helen Rawson was admired but feared; that Joyce Pearse was the most popular girl in the school, and had taken a dislike to herself, but liked Kitty and Betty; that Netta Anderson was Miss Richards's favourite pupil, and that she herself did not like Netta; and that Lettice Kitson was not very wise and not very honourable, and that Maude was the same, but was the more clever of the two.

To Betty the morning had been interesting, though alarming at times; to Kitty it was all dreadful, and she went through it weighed down by a gloomy despair at the thought that this was to go on day after

day, perhaps for years.

The most terrifying experience of all to her was the examination she had to undergo to determine her position in the school. Anna was used to it, so bore it better, and to Betty it was not so appalling, but to Kitty it was the most awful ordeal she had ever experienced. "Having teeth out is nothing to it," she said afterwards, and her relief when it was over was so intense that she thought nothing about the result, and was not at all concerned about the position assigned her, until Anna came up to her brimming over with condolences, and apologies, and scarcely concealed delight.

"O Katherine, I *am* so sorry, but it *really* wasn't my fault. I didn't know I was doing so well, and—and that they would put me in the same class as you! Of course I thought you would be ever so much higher than me—being so much older."

Kitty had scarcely realized the fact before, certainly she had not been shamed by it, but Anna's remarks and apologies roused her to a sudden sense of mortification, and Anna's manner annoyed her greatly.

"Did you, really?" she said doubtingly. "Well," proudly, "don't worry about it any more. If you don't mind, I don't," and she walked away with her head in the air. "I can't understand Anna," she thought to herself; "she pretends to be so fond of me, but I feel all the time that she doesn't like me a bit really, and she will work night and day now to get ahead of me." Which was exactly what Anna meant to do. "But," she added, with determination, "I will show her that I can work too." Which was what Anna had not expected; but for once she had overreached herself, and in trying to humiliate Kitty she had given her the very spur she needed, and so had done her one of the greatest possible kindnesses.

Betty, to her disgust and mortification, was placed in a lower class altogether. She had not expected to be with Kitty, but she certainly had not expected to be placed below Anna, and the blow was a great one. "But I'll—I'll beat her," declared Betty hotly. "I will. I don't believe she is so awfully, awfully clever as they say, and nobody knows but what I may be clever too, only people haven't noticed it yet. I am sure I feel as if I might be."

It was unfortunate, though, for the Trenire girls that Mrs. Pike had settled all the arrangements for their going to "Hillside;" it was unfortunate for them too that Miss Richards and Miss Melinda placed unquestioning reliance on what was told them, and had no powers of observation of their own, or failed to use them, for it meant to them that they started unfairly handicapped. Miss Richards was warned that she would find Dr. Trenire's daughters backward and badly taught, and entirely unused to discipline or control. "Of course the poor dear doctor had not been able to give them all the attention they needed, and he was such a gentle, kind father, perhaps *too* kind and gentle, which made it rather trying for others. It was to be hoped that dear Miss Richards would not find the children *too* trying. She must be very strict with them; it would, of course, be for their own good eventually." "Dear Miss Richards" felt quite sure of that, and had no doubt that she would be able to manage them. She had had much success with girls. She was glad, though, to be warned that there was need of special care—in fact, dear Lady Kitson had hinted at very much the same thing.

So the paths of Katherine and Elizabeth were strewn with thorns and stumbling-blocks from the outset, and, unfortunately, they were not the girls to see and avoid them, or even guess they were there until they fell over them.

Anna, having been brought up under her mother's eye, was, of course, quite, quite different; Anna was really a credit to the care which had been lavished on her. Miss Richards and Miss Melinda did not doubt it; they declared that it was evident at the first glance, and acted accordingly. Which was, no doubt, pleasant for Anna, but, on the whole, turned out in the end worse for her than for her cousins.

Anna certainly had been well trained in one respect—she could learn her home lessons and prepare her home work under any conditions, it seemed, and she always did them well. Kitty had an idea, a very foolish one, of course, that she could only work when alone and quiet, say in her bedroom, or in the barn, or lying in the grass in the garden, or in the woods. All of which was inelegant, unladylike, and nonsensical. Kitty must get the better of such ideas at once, and must learn her lessons as Anna did, sitting primly at the square table in the playroom.

Anna learnt her lessons by repeating them half aloud, and making a hissing noise through her teeth all the time. The sound alone drove Kitty nearly distracted, while the sitting up so primly to the table seemed to destroy all her interest in the lesson and her power of concentrating her mind on the study in hand.

"I can't learn in this way, Aunt Pike," she pleaded earnestly; "I can't get on a bit. I dare say it is silly of me, but my own way doesn't do any one any harm, and I can learn my lessons in half the time, and

remember them better."

"Katherine, do not argue with me, but do as I tell you. It is the right way for a young lady to sit to her studies, and it will strengthen not only your back-bone, but your character as well. You are sadly undisciplined."

So Kitty, irritated, sore, and chafing, struggled on once more with her lessons. But to get her work done she had, after all, to take her books to bed with her, and there, far into the night, and early in the morning, she struggled bravely not only to learn, but to learn how to learn, which is one of the greatest difficulties of all to those who have grown up drinking in their knowledge not according to school methods.

Nothing but her determination not to let Anna outstrip her could have made her persevere as she did at this time, and she got on well until Anna, whether consciously or unconsciously she alone knew, interfered to stop her.

"Mother! mother!" Anna in a straight, plain dressing-gown, her hair in two long plaits down her back, tapped softly in the dead of night at her mother's door, and in a blood-curdling whisper called her name through the keyhole.

Mrs. Pike roused and alarmed, flew at once at her daughter's summons. "What is the matter? Are you ill? I thought you were drinking rather much lemonade. Jump into my bed, and I will—"

"No, it isn't me, mother, I am all right; it's—it's the girls. I saw a light shining under their door, and I was so frightened. Do you think it's a fire?"

Considering the awfulness of that which she feared, Anna was curiously deliberate and calm. It did not seem to have struck her that her wisest course would have been to have first rushed in and roused her cousins, and have given them at least a chance of escape from burning or suffocation. Now, too, instead of running with her mother to their help, she crept into the bed and lay down, apparently overcome with terror, though with her ears very much on the alert for any sounds which might reach them. Perhaps she shrank from the sight that might meet her eyes when the door was opened.

Mrs. Pike, far more agitated than her daughter, without waiting to hear any more, rushed along the corridor and up the stairs to the upper landing where all the children's rooms were, and flinging herself on Kitty's door, had burst it open before either Betty or Kitty could realize what was happening. Betty, seriously frightened, sprang up in her bed with a shriek. Kitty dropped her book hurriedly and sprang out on the floor.

"What is the matter?" she cried, filled with an awful fear. "Who is ill? Father? Tony?" But at the violent change in her aunt's expression from alarm to anger her words died on her lips.

"How dare you! How dare you! You wicked, disobedient, daring girl, setting the place on fire and risking our lives, and wasting candles, and—and you know I do not allow reading in bed."

"I wasn't reading," stammered Kitty—"I mean, not stories. I was only learning my lessons. I *must* learn them somehow, and I can't—I really can't—learn them downstairs, Aunt Pike, with Anna whistling and hissing all the time; it is no use. I have tried and tried, and I *must* know them. I wasn't setting the place on fire; it is quite safe. I had stood the candle-stick in a basin. I always do."

"Always do! Do you mean to say that you are in the habit of reading in bed?"

"Yes," said Kitty honestly, "we always have. Father does too."

"Even after you knew I did not allow it?" cried Aunt Pike, ignoring Kitty's reference to her father.

"I didn't know you didn't allow it," said Kitty doggedly. "I had never heard you say anything about it; and as father did it, I didn't think there was any harm."

"No harm! no harm to frighten poor Anna so that she flew from her bed and came rushing through the dark house to me quite white and trembling. She was afraid your room was on fire, and was dreadfully frightened of course. She will probably feel the ill effects of the shock for some time."

Betty, having got over her fright, had been sitting up in bed all this time embracing her knees. When Anna's name was mentioned her eyes began to sparkle. "If Anna had come in here first to see, she needn't have trembled or been frightened," she remarked shrewdly.

"Anna naturally ran to her mother," said Mrs. Pike sharply.

"Anna naturally ran to sneak," said Betty to herself, "and I don't believe she really thought there was a fire at all, and I'll tell her so when I get her by herself." Aloud she said, "I wonder what made her get out of bed and look under our door. She couldn't have smelt fire, for of course there wasn't any to smell."

"Be quiet, Elizabeth.—Remember, Katherine," her aunt went on, turning to her, "that if ever I hear of or see any behaviour of this kind again, I shall have you to sleep in my room, and put Anna in here with Elizabeth." Which was a threat so full of horror to both the girls that they subsided speechless.

"I think," whispered Betty, as soon as their aunt's footsteps had ceased to sound—"no, I don't think, I know that Anna is the *very meanest* sneak I ever met."

"I hope I shall never know a meaner," groaned Kitty; "but I—I won't be beaten by her. I won't! I won't!"

"And I'll beat her too," snapped Betty.

"I am ashamed that she is a relation," said Kitty in hot disgust.

"She isn't a real one," said Betty scornfully, "and for the future I shan't count her one at all. We won't own such a mean thing in the family."

"I wonder why she is so horrid," sighed Kitty, who was more distressed by these things than was Betty. "We never did her any harm. Perhaps she can't help it. It must be awful to be mean, and a sneak, and to feel you can't help it."

"Why doesn't Aunt Pike teach her better? She is always telling us what to do, and that it is good for us to try and be different, and—and all that sort of thing."

"But Aunt Pike wouldn't believe that Anna is mean; she thinks she is perfection," said Kitty.

"Oh, well, I s'pose a jewel's a duck in a toad's eye," misquoted Betty complacently; "at least, that is what Fanny said, and I think she is right. Fanny often is."

When they met the next day Betty gave her cousin another shock, perhaps more severe than the one she had had during the night, for frankness always shocked Anna Pike.

"I do think, Anna," she said gravely, "it is a pity you let yourself do such mean things. Of course you didn't really think our room was on fire last night, and every one but Aunt Pike knows you were only sneaking. If you go on like that, you won't be able to stop yourself when you want to, and nobody will ever like you."

Anna's little restless eyes grew hard and unpleasant-looking. "I have more friends than you have, or Kitty either," she retorted, "and I am ever so much more friendly with the girls at school than you are." A remark which stung Miss Betty sharply, for though she did not like either Lettice or Maude Kitson, she resented the way in which they had gone over to Anna, with whom Lettice in particular had struck up a violent friendship—the sort of friendship which requires secret signals, long whisperings in corners, the passing of many surreptitious notes, and is particularly aggravating to all lookers-on.

Kitty saw it all too, of course, but instead of feeling annoyed as Betty did by it, she felt a sense of relief that Anna had ceased to be her shadow, and had attached herself to some one else.

"If Anna isn't sorry some day for being so chummy with Lettice," said Betty seriously, "Lettice will be for being so chummy with Anna." But Kitty could not see that. She did not care for Lettice, but it never occurred to her that her behaviour was worse than foolish, or that she should warn Anna against the friendship. Not that it would have done any good, probably, if she had.

It might have been better for them all, though, if Kitty had been more suspicious and alert, for she might then have seen what was happening, and perhaps have avoided the catastrophe to which they were all hastening. But, of course, if you have no suspicions of people, you cannot be on your guard against something that you do not know exists; and Kitty suspected nothing, not even when Betty came home one day with an unpleasant tale of foolishness to tell.

"I won't walk home with Anna any more," she cried hotly. "She asks me to go with her, and then tries to get rid of me. I know why she wanted to, though: she had a letter to post and didn't want me to see it. I suppose," indignantly, "she thought I would try to read the address, or would sneak about it!"

"You must have made a mistake," said Kitty. "It is too silly to think she should want to get rid of you while she posted a letter. Why shouldn't she post one? I don't see anything in it."

"Well, *I* do," said Betty solemnly. "To tell you isn't really sneaking, is it? Anna posts letters for Lettice Kitson—letters to people she isn't allowed to write to—and she takes letters to her. She does really, Kitty, and I think Anna ought to be spoken to. Lettice was nearly expelled from her last school for the same thing. Violet told me so."

"Nonsense," cried Kitty scornfully. "I believe the girls make up stories, and you shouldn't listen to them, Betty; it is horrid."

"I am sure Violet wouldn't make up stories," said Betty; "and if Lettice does such things, Anna ought not to help her. You should stop her, Kitty. Tell her we won't have it."

"O Betty, don't talk so. Don't tell me any more that I ought to do. It seems to me I ought to do everything that is horrid! And why should I look after Anna? She never takes any notice of what I say; and after all it is nothing very bad—nothing to make a fuss about, I mean. I haven't seen anything myself."

"Well, *I* think it is a good deal more than nothing," said Betty gravely; "and I wish you would see, Kitty, I wish you would notice things more."

"But what good could I do? What can I say?" cried Kitty distractedly, growing really distressed.

"Say? Oh, say that we won't stand it, and let her see that we won't," said Betty. "We ought to be able to do that."

CHAPTER XI.

POOR KITTY!

Only a few days later Kitty's eyes were opened for her, and opened violently. Autumn had come on apace. The days were short now, and the evenings long and dark. Already the girls were counting that there were only five or six weeks before Dan came home; and at school there was much talk of the break-up party, and the tableaux which were to be the chief feature of the festivity this year. Kitty was to take part in one tableau at least. She was to be Enid in one of her dearly loved Arthurian legends—Enid, where, clad in her faded gown, she met Queen Guinevere for the first time, who,

"descending, met them at the gates,
Embraced her with all welcome as a friend,
And did her honour as the prince's bride."

And Kitty was to wear a wig such as she had always longed for, with golden plaits reaching to her knees, and she was almost beside herself with joy.

On the evening that the storm broke, she, little dreaming of what was coming, was doing her home work and taking occasional dips into her volume of Tennyson. Betty had finished her home lessons and was curled up in a chair reading. Anna was not in the room; in fact, she had left it almost as soon as they had settled down to their work after tea as usual. It was now nearly supper-time.

Mrs. Pike was absent at a Shakespeare reading. Dr. Trenire had been out all day, a long round over bleak country, and had not been home more than an hour. Kitty had heard him come, and had longed—as she had never longed in the days when she was free to do as she liked—to go and superintend his meal, and hear all about his day. But she knew what a to-do there would be if she did not stay where she was and do her lessons, and she had just lost herself again in the story of "Enid," when, to her surprise, she heard her father's footsteps coming along the passage and stopping at the door of the school-room. She was even more surprised when, on opening the door, he said very quietly and gravely, "Kitty, will you come to me in my study at once? I wish to speak to you."

She had looked up with a smile, but the expression on her father's face caused her smile to die away, and left her perplexed and troubled.

"What was it? Was Dan in trouble—or ill—or—or what had happened?"

It never occurred to her as she got up and hurried after her father to his room that the trouble might be of her causing. When she reached the study she found Dr. Trenire standing by the table holding a letter which he was reading. He looked up from it when she entered, and in answer to the alarmed questioning in her eyes, he, after hesitating a moment, put the letter into her hand. "Read that," he said

sternly, "and tell me what it means."

Kitty took the letter, but she was so bewildered and troubled by her father's manner, and the mystery, and her own dread, that she gazed at it for seconds, unable to take in a word that it contained.

"Well?"

"I—I haven't read it yet, father," she stammered. "Do tell me; is it— is it anything about Dan?"

Dr. Trenire looked at her very searchingly. "This is not the time for trifling, Kitty," he said. "The letter is about you, I am sorry to say. I am so shocked, so grieved, and astonished at what it tells me, that I—I cannot make myself believe it unless you tell me that I must. Read it."

Kitty read it this time—read it with the blood rushing over her face and neck, her eyes smarting, her cheeks tingling; and as she more and more clearly grasped the meaning, her heart beat hot and fast with indignation.

When she looked up, her hurt, shamed eyes struck reproach to Dr. Trenire's heart. "Father, you didn't—you didn't think that I—I—that what that letter says is true?" The feeling that he had, if only for a moment, done so hurt her far more than did the letter, which was from Miss Richards.

"It had been discovered," wrote Miss Richards, evidently in a great state of wrath and indignation, "that one of the boarders had been in the habit of writing to and receiving surreptitious letters from a person with whom she had been forbidden to correspond. This she could only have accomplished with the aid of some one outside the school. On that very evening a letter had been intercepted, and the messenger almost caught; but though she had escaped she had been partially recognized by the governess, who had fortunately discovered these shocking and flagrantly daring misdoings, and the governess had no doubt in her mind that the culprit was Dr. Trenire's elder daughter." Miss Richards was deeply grieved to have to write such unpleasant tidings to him, but she begged he would make strict inquiries into the matter at once. In the meantime Miss Lettice Kitson, who was forbidden to leave her room, refused to make any communication on the matter.

"How dare she!" cried Kitty. "How dare she accuse me of doing such a thing! I hardly ever speak to Lettice. We are not at all friendly, and Miss Richards knows it. I have never liked her, and—and," she broke off hotly—"as if, even if I did like her, I would behave so. Father, you know I wouldn't; don't you?" she entreated passionately.

"Have you any idea who the real culprit is?" asked her father, greatly troubled. In his heart he implicitly believed her, but he had to inquire into the matter without prejudice. "If you have a suspicion, do give me the clue, that you may be cleared. Of course it wouldn't be Betty—"

"Oh no, of course not," cried Kitty emphatically. "She has been in the playroom with me all the evening; besides, Betty wouldn't behave so. Why, only the other day she was fearfully disgusted with—"

Kitty stopped abruptly, a flood of colour pouring over her face as a sudden suspicion rushed over her mind with overwhelming force.

Dr. Trenire was watching her closely. "You have some suspicion?"

Kitty opened her lips, then closed them. "I—I have nothing I can say, father," she said at last in a muffled tone.

"But you must clear yourself, Kitty," he said gravely.

"Lettice Kitson can clear me," she replied. "She knows, and of course she will tell Miss Richards when she hears that they are accusing me. You believe me; don't you, father?" she asked again, looking up at him pleadingly.

"Certainly, Kitty," he said heartily, unable to withstand the appeal in her gray eyes. "I would not believe you capable of such dishonourable conduct unless you yourself told me you were guilty."

In the joy and relief of her heart Kitty forgot all about any suspicions others might entertain, until Dr. Trenire mentioned Mrs. Pike. At the mention of that name her heart sank down and down. "O father," she cried, "Aunt Pike need not know anything about it, need she?"

"Of course she need, dear. Why should she not? You have nothing to fear from her knowing it. When you deny the guilt there will be an inquiry into the matter, of course, so that it must come to the

knowledge of, at any rate, the elder girls and the parents, and Anna will be amongst the elder ones, I suppose. At any rate she is as tall as you are, and in your class."

"As tall as you are." The words struck Kitty with a new suggestiveness. She remembered suddenly that Anna had not been with them all the evening; that she had left the schoolroom soon after they had begun their work, and had not returned.

"Oh, where was she? What had she been doing? Where had she been?" Kitty was in a fever of alarm, and could barely conceal her dismay.

"Well," said Dr. Trenire, "that will do, dear. I shall write to Miss Richards at once, and tell her that you absolutely deny any knowledge of or part in the matter, and that you have given me your word that you have not left the house since you returned from school at four-thirty. That should settle the matter as far as you are concerned."

"Yes," said poor trusting Kitty, "that must set it all right for me, of course." It did not occur to her then that any one could refuse to accept her word; and with no further fears for herself, she hurried away in search of Anna.

First she went to her bedroom, but a glance showed her that no one was there; and as it never occurred to Kitty to look under the bed, she did not see a pair of shoes covered with wet mud, and a splashed skirt and cloak. All, to her, looked neat and orderly, and with puzzled sigh she went thoughtfully down to the schoolroom again. If Anna had not been in her bedroom all the evening, where had she been? she thought anxiously. And when, a second later, she opened the schoolroom door and saw Anna sitting at the table facing her, her books spread out before her, her head bent low over them, she really wondered for the moment whether she was mad or dreaming. Betty was in her big chair, just as she had left her, her book in her hand, but she was glancing beyond it at Anna more than at the pages, and her face was full of grave perplexity.

"Anna has such a cough," she said, when Kitty appeared, "and she can't breathe, and her face is so red. I'm sure she has got a bad cold."

Anna was certainly very flushed, and she held her handkerchief up to her face a good deal.

"Have you a cold?" asked Kitty. She could not control her feelings sufficiently to speak quite naturally, and her voice sounded unsympathetic. She was vexed, and puzzled, and full of fears as to what might be to come. She could not help feeling in her heart a strong distrust of Anna, yet she felt sorry for her, and dreaded what might be in store for her.

"No—at least I don't think so. Perhaps I have, though. I don't feel well," she stammered. She spoke confusedly, and did not look at Kitty.

"I should think you had better go to bed and have some hot milk," said Betty in her serious, old-fashioned way.

"Oh no. I am all right, thank you," said Anna, shrinking from the thought of her mother's visits to her room, and her searching inquiries as to how she could possibly have got a cold. "Do be quiet, Betty, and let me do my work. You know it is nearly bedtime."

"Well, you haven't seemed in a hurry till now," said Betty sharply. "You haven't been learning your lessons in your room, because I saw your bag and your books on your bed just now, and you hadn't touched them then."

"I do wish people wouldn't always be prying after me," said Anna angrily, and this time it was Kitty who looked guilty.

Supper was a very silent meal that night, and soon after it the three went to bed, scarcely another word having been spoken.

Kitty and Betty had been in bed an hour perhaps, and Betty was fast asleep, when Kitty, restless and sleepless with the new trouble she had on her mind, was surprised by the gentle opening of the door of the room. Half alarmed, she rose up in bed, peering anxiously through the gloom. Then—"O Anna!" she cried, "what is the matter? Are you ill?"

"No—o, I don't think I am, but I—I am sure I shall be. O Kitty, I am in *such* trouble. I *must* tell some one."

"I think I know what it is," said Kitty gently.

"Oh no, you don't," groaned Anna. "You can't. It is worse than copying my sums, or—or cribbing, or anything."

"I know," said Kitty again.

But Anna did not hear her. She was looking at Betty. "Come to my room, do!" she said. "Betty may wake up, and I don't want her to hear."

"Very well," said Kitty, slipping out of bed and into her dressing-gown. "I expect, though, she will have to know. It is bound to reach all the girls. I only wish it wasn't."

Anna, creeping back to her room, did not answer till she got there. Then she turned round sharply. "What do you mean? Know what?" she demanded.

Kitty looked surprised. "Why, about Lettice and—and you, and those letters, of course."

Anna dropped on to a chair, her face chalk-white, her eyes starting. "Lettice and—and—and me—and—who told—what do you mean? I don't understand."

"Anna, don't!" cried Kitty, ashamed and distressed. "Don't try to pretend. There is no mistake, and every one must know soon about Lettice. Whoever it was who nearly caught you made a mistake, for she thought it was me, and Miss Richards wrote to father accusing me, but, of course—"

"Accusing you!" cried Anna in astonishment. But her voice had changed. It was less full of terror than it had been. For a moment after Kitty ceased speaking she sat lost in thought.

"Of course father does not believe it, and he has written to tell Miss Richards so, and that I was at home all the evening, so there would have to be an inquiry of course, to try and find out which of the other girls it was, and everybody would have to know all about it; but now, when you tell Miss Richards that it was you, it needn't go any farther. Of course there will be a row, and probably you and Lettice will be punished, but no one else need ever hear anything more about it."

"Oh, but I couldn't!" cried Anna. She was so intensely relieved to find that, as yet, she was not suspected, that much of her courage and boldness came back. "And, of course, I shouldn't, unless they asked me, and—and for mother's sake it would be very foolish to—to get myself into a scrape when I needn't."

"But—but, Anna"—Anna's speech left Kitty almost voiceless—"it is—it is so dishonourable, so dishonest, so—"

"No, it isn't," snapped Anna crossly. She bitterly regretted now that she had taken Kitty into her confidence. She had done it in a moment of panic when she felt that detection was certain, and she must get help from somewhere. As soon as she knew that she was not suspected her courage and hopes had rallied. "You need not mind; you will be cleared; and they can't find and punish any one else, for there is no one else to find, so it can't do any one any harm."

"There is Lettice," said Kitty coldly. "You know you can't trust her, and if she tells, things will look ever so much worse for you than—"

"I don't think Lettice will tell," interrupted Anna meaningly. "She knows that if she tells tales I can tell some too."

"You count on other people having some honour, though you have none yourself," said Kitty scathingly, and she turned away, choking with disgust. Anna made her feel positively ill. When she got to the door she stood and looked back. Her face was very white and stern, her eyes full of a burning contempt. "I do think, Anna," she said slowly and scornfully, "that you are the meanest, most dishonourable girl I ever heard of in all my life. You are going to leave all the girls in the school under suspicion because you haven't the honesty or courage to own up."

"It isn't anything to do with honesty," muttered Anna, very white and angry and sullen. "You have no right to say such things, Kitty. If you didn't do it, it can't do you any harm; and if no one suspects me, it isn't likely that I shall make them. I shan't be telling a story. I simply shan't say anything."

"I see no difference between telling a lie and acting one," flashed Kitty, and she walked back to her own room without another word. She had not been there long, though, before Anna came creeping in again.

"Kitty," she said anxiously, "you won't tell any one, will you, even if you are mad with me? You know I never *said* I—I—you accused me, but I didn't say—"

"I am not a sneak," said Kitty coldly. "Now go away. Go out of my room. I don't like to see you near Betty. Go away, do you hear!" and Anna vanished again into the darkness.

Though strong and secure in her own innocence, Kitty awoke in the morning with the feeling weighing heavily on her that though the matter would soon be ended, yet something very painful had to be faced first. Kitty, though, was counting too much on her own guiltlessness, and the certainty of others believing in it; and she had more cause than she imagined for waking with a weight on her mind.

When the dreaded inquiry took place, and all the senior girls were called into the "study" to undergo a rigorous cross-examination, she soon found that Miss Richards was very far from accepting her unsupported denial as conclusive.

"Yes, but who can bear out your statement that you did not leave the room or the house throughout the evening?" she asked sternly.

"Betty can," said Kitty. "Betty was in the room with me all the time."

"Ah! Betty! But she is very young, and very attached to you, and would of course be prejudiced."

Kitty's cheeks flamed with indignation, and she had to set her teeth to keep herself from answering.

"Have you no older—more responsible witnesses?"

"No one could be more honest and truthful than Betty," said Kitty proudly. "She wouldn't dream of saying I was there if I wasn't."

"But your father, or your aunt—"

"They were both out," said Kitty. "Anna saw me go to the schoolroom, and saw me begin my lessons, and I never moved until father came to me."

So Anna was called.

"Can you support your cousin's statement that she was in the schoolroom all the evening, and never once left it?"

Anna was about to say "yes," when she hesitated, and grew very red and confused. "I—I couldn't say," she stammered, and those listening thought she was embarrassed by her desire to shield Kitty, and at the same time tell the truth. Kitty looked at her with wide, horrified eyes. Surely Anna would say why she could not give the required assurance. But only too soon the conviction was borne in on her that Anna did not mean to tell, and Anna was an adept at saying nothing, yet conveying a stronger impression than if she had said much. Those looking on read in Kitty's horrified eyes only a fear of what Anna might admit, and opinion was strengthened against her.

"Speak out frankly, Anna," said Miss Richards encouragingly. "Did you notice her absence?"

"She—a—Kitty wasn't there once when I went back to the room," murmured Anna, apparently with great reluctance.

Kitty's head reeled. She could not believe that she had heard aright. Anna was not only concealing her own guilt, but was actually fastening it on to her. "I think I must be going mad, or going to faint," she thought to herself. "I can't take in what they are saying." "But, Anna," she cried, in her extremity forgetting judge and jury, "you know father had come to me with Miss Richards's letter. I was with him when you came in."

"No," said Anna, with a look of injured innocence, "I didn't know. You didn't tell me. Of course I—I knew you were somewhere," she stammered lamely. "I don't say you were out of the house, only—well I couldn't say you were in the room if you weren't, could I?" with a glance at Miss Richards for approbation, and a half-glance at Kitty, whose gray eyes were full of a scorn that was not pleasant to meet.

Kitty could not speak for a moment, her indignation and disgust were too intense. She felt herself degraded by stooping to ask for evidence as to her own innocence.

Miss Melinda whispered to Miss Richards. Miss Richards looked at Kitty and bade her turn round. Kitty, wondering, obeyed.

"How do you account for the fact that your dress is splashed to the waist with mud?" Miss Richards asked frigidly. "Yesterday was quite fine until after you had all gone home from school, then heavy rain fell."

Poor Kitty. Here was Nemesis indeed! Two days ago that skirt had been put aside to be brushed, and now, to-day, without giving a thought to the mud on it, she had put it on and worn it. With crimsoning cheeks she wheeled around. "That mud has been there for days, Miss Richards," she said shamefacedly. "I ought to have brushed it yesterday, but I didn't, and to-day I forgot it." But she saw and felt that no one believed her, and Betty, the only one who could have borne out her words, was not there.

"You can all go back to your classes—all but Katherine Trenire," said Miss Richards, ignoring her speech; and the girls, with looks of sympathy or alarm, filed out, leaving Kitty alone.

"Now, Katherine," said Miss Richards firmly, "be a sensible, honest girl and tell the truth, and my sister and I will consult together as to the punishment we feel we must inflict. We do not wish to be too severe, but such conduct must be punished. Now, tell us the truth."

"I have told the truth," said Kitty proudly, "and I have no more to tell. Lettice can clear me if she likes, so can—the girl who was with her, but I can't do any more. If you won't believe me, what can I do?" and suddenly poor Kitty's proud eyes filled with tears.

Miss Melinda took this as a sign of relenting. She thought confession was coming, and unbent encouragingly. "There, there, that is better, Katherine. Now be advised by us, and get this dreadful load off your mind. You will be so much happier when you have."

Kitty drove back her tears and her weakness, and her gray eyes grew clear enough to show plainly the hurt and the anger which burnt in her brain as she listened to this insulting cajoling, as she termed it in her own mind.

"How dare you!" she cried indignantly. "How dare you fasten it on to me! I know who the girl was, and she knows that I know, but you *want* to believe that I did it, and—and you can if you want to. You are both very wicked and unjust, and—and I will never set foot in your house again!" And Kitty, beside herself with indignation, her head very erect, her face white, her eyes blazing, marched out of the room and out of the house, and not even her mud splashes could take from the dignity of her exit.

CHAPTER XII.

THOSE DREADFUL STOCKINGS.

Dr. Trenire was extremely annoyed and very indignant when he heard of the inquiry and the result—so indignant that Kitty's words came true, and she never did set foot within the doors of Hillside again, for her father removed her, and Betty too, from the school at once. Of course Betty could not continue there after all that had happened.

He did not tell the girls what he thought about the matter, but he told Miss Richards plainly that he considered the inquiry was a prejudiced one, and that an injustice had been done. They had made up their minds that Kitty was guilty, and had not made sufficient inquiries as regarded the other pupils.

Miss Richards was, of course, indignant and greatly upset, and Aunt Pike was in a great dilemma. She scarcely liked to keep Anna at the school after her cousins were withdrawn from it, yet she was very loth to deprive her of the companionship of such desirable friends as she considered she was thrown amongst there. Also, in her heart of hearts, Aunt Pike did not feel at all sure that Kitty was innocent.

"They are such extraordinary children," she said to herself, "I would not be surprised at anything they did—not from bad motives, perhaps, but from sheer ignorance of the difference between right and wrong."

So Anna was to stay on at Hillside, at any rate until the term and the term's notice should be up; and Miss Pooley came again to teach Kitty and Betty and Tony, greatly to Tony's delight, for he had been having a dull time, poor little man, and had not found much joy in doing lessons with Aunt Pike.

So the rest of the term wore away, and time healed the wound to some extent; and by-and-by the Christmas holidays drew near and the date of Dan's return, and that was sufficient to drive unwelcome thoughts from their minds and lighten every trouble.

"When the day comes, the real right day," said Kitty, "I shall be quite perfectly happy—"

"Touch wood," said Betty anxiously; "you know it is unlucky to talk like that. Fanny says so."

"Pooh! nonsense!" cried Kitty, growing daring in her excitement. "What could be lovelier than for Dan

to be coming home, and Christmas coming, and the holidays; and oh, Betty, it does seem too good to be true, but it *is* true, and I am sure nothing could spoil it all."

But Kitty had not touched wood, and had reckoned without Aunt Pike; and even when that lady came into their room with a paper parcel in her hand they suspected no harm—in fact, they looked at the parcel with pleasure and excitement for a moment, even after she had said, "Children, I have got you some winter stockings, and you must put them on at once, the weather has become so cold." They even agreed heartily, and Betty plumped right down on the floor there and then, and bared one foot in readiness by the time the parcel was opened.

And then the parcel was opened, and dismay and horror fell on them, for the stockings were not only of an ugly pale gray, with white stripes going round and round the legs, but they were woollen ones!—rough, harsh, scratchy woollen ones! The colour was bad enough, but that was as nothing compared with the awful fact of their being woolly; for two children with more painfully sensitive skins than Katherine and Elizabeth Trenire could not be found in the whole wide world, and for them to wear anything in the shape of wool was a torture more dreaded than any other.

Betty instinctively drew her pretty bare feet under her for protection, and looked from Aunt Pike to Kitty with eyes full of horror. Kitty was desperate.

"I am very sorry, Aunt Pike," she said, quite gently and nicely, but very emphatically, "but we cannot wear woollen stockings. They drive us nearly mad—"

"Nonsense," interrupted Aunt Pike, with the complete indifference of a person not afflicted with a sensitive skin. "You will get over that in an hour or two. If you don't think about it you won't notice anything. Try them on at once. I want to see if they fit."

"It—it would really be better not to put them on," urged Kitty, "for we really couldn't wear them if you bought them, aunt, and the people won't take them back if they are creased."

"They will not be required to take them back," said Mrs. Pike firmly. "I have bought you six pairs each"—Betty groaned—"Don't make that noise, Elizabeth—and if they fit they will be kept. They are very fine and quite soft; any one could wear them quite comfortably, and so can you, unless, of course," severely, "you make up your minds not to."

Persons who are not afflicted with sensitive skins cannot, or will not, be made to understand how great and real the torment is, and young though Kitty was, she had, already learned this, and her heart sank.

"I hate light stockings too," said Betty; "they look so ugly with black shoes."

It was an unfortunate remark to make just then.

"Ah," said Aunt Pike triumphantly, "I suspected that vanity was at the bottom of it all! Now try on this one at once, Katherine; make haste." She went to the door.—"Anthony," she called, "come here to Kitty's room, I want you," and she stood over the three victims until their poor shrinking legs were encased in the hideous, irritating gray horrors.

Oh, the anger of Kitty and the dismay of Betty! Oh, the horrible, damp, sticky feeling that new stockings seem never to be without! Betty's blue eyes filled with tears of helpless misery, Kitty's gray ones with rebellion. Why should they be tormented in this way? It was so cruel, so unjust! They had not suffered from the cold more than had other people, certainly they had not complained of it—not half as much as had Mrs. Pike and Anna, who were clad in wool from their throats to their toes.

Tony sat looking at his poor little legs disgustedly, but it was the ugliness of his new footgear that struck him most; he did not feel the torment as his sisters did. Then quite suddenly Betty stripped off the detestable things.

"Thank you," she said, "I'll wear my old ones. I prefer the cold."

Mrs. Pike coloured with annoyance and set her lips firmly. "How dare you defy me in that way, Elizabeth!" she cried. "I have told you to wear those stockings, and you *are* to wear them. Remember, I mean what I say. I wonder your father has not insisted long before this on your wearing flannel next your skin. Don't you know that by going about in flimsy cotton things in all weathers you are laying up for yourself a rheumatic old age, and all kinds of serious illness?"

Kitty shuddered, but not at the prospect drawn for her by her aunt. "Father knows that we can't," she said seriously, "so he never tried to make us."

Betty, who had been absorbed in thought, looked up eagerly. "I would much rather have rheumatism than itchy stockings," she protested quite gravely. "I don't mind a bit, Aunt Pike. And—well, you see we can't be sure that we shall have an old age, or rheumatics."

Mrs. Pike grew really angry. "Put on those stockings at once, miss, and fasten them to your suspenders.—Kitty, fasten yours too."

"Oh, please let me wait," cried Kitty, "before I pull them tight; it is so awful."

"Nonsense! It is more than half of it fancy. Remember you are to wear them until the warm weather comes," and with that Aunt Pike walked away triumphant.

"Oh, how hideous they are!" groaned Kitty, as she looked disgustedly at her striped legs; "how perfectly hideous! I shall be ashamed to go out in them. What will Dan say when he sees them?"

"It is worse for me," wailed Betty, "my dress is so short. O Kitty, how can we ever walk in these dreadful things?"

"I don't know," said Kitty bitterly, "but we've *got* to. It is a good thing we have something nice to do to-day, for it may help us to forget." But nothing made them do that; the discomfort went with them everywhere, and destroyed their pleasure in everything.

Earlier in the day Dr. Trenire had said that they might all go to the station to meet Dan; and they went on top of the 'bus, and alone too, for Anna did not break up until the next day, and the weather was lovely, and everything might have been perfect, if only they could have forgotten their tortured legs. But to do that was more than they were capable of, for, in addition to the torture of them, there was the consciousness of their extraordinary ugliness, an ugliness which caught every eye.

"What on earth have you all got yourselves up in?" was almost Dan's first greeting. "I say, you aren't going to do it often, are you?"

And Betty straightway explained with much vehemence and feeling the torment of mind and body to which they had been condemned.

"They look like Aunt Pike," said Dan. "No one else could have unearthed such things. There is one comfort—we shall always be able to see you coming when you have them on. Now then, mount, or we shan't get outside seats."

But when Kitty, more than ever conscious after Dan's comments, looked at the steps and the little crowd of people who would witness her ascent, and thought of her dreadful stockings, her heart failed her. "I—I think I will go inside," she said hastily.

"So will I," said Betty, shamefaced too.

"Nonsense," cried Dan, guessing at once what was the matter. "You two skip up first, and I'll follow close to hide your le—retreat, I mean. I am not going to be done out of our drive home together. Now then, courage—up you get!"

And up they did get, but it did require courage: and the getting down was even worse—their cheeks blazed and their hearts grew hot with anger, and oh! the irritation of their poor unhappy legs.

"Kitty," whispered Betty eagerly, as they hurried into the house, "come upstairs, quick; I've thought of something. It's a splendid idea!"

With the excuse that they were going to take off their hats and coats, they rushed up to their bedroom and shut themselves in. Aunt Pike was a little surprised at their neatness; Dan was a little hurt at being left so soon, but Betty could not think of that then.

"Kitty," she breathed, as she closed the door and leaned against it, "I know what we will do. We will wear our cotton stockings underneath these horrors! They won't scratch us then, will they? And our holidays won't be spoiled, and Aunt Pike won't know, and—don't you think it's a perfectly splendid idea?"

"Splendid," cried Kitty enthusiastically, dropping on to the floor and beginning to unlace her boots that very moment. "Oh, quickly let us make haste and change them; I cannot, cannot endure this torment a minute longer. O Betty, why didn't you think of it sooner?" Then, holding up one of the offending gray stockings between the tips of her fingers, "Did you—did any one ever see anything in all this world so hideous?"

"We can do away with their itchiness, but we shall never, never be able to hide their ugliness," said Betty ruefully. "*Nothing* could do that."

But the ugliness did not seem to matter so much when the irritation was stopped; and they had such a grand time that evening, there was so much to tell, and hear, and do, and show, that all other things were forgotten, at least for the time.

And how lovely it was to wake in the morning and remember at once that the holidays had come, and Dan was home; and then to wander about the house and garden with him, looking up old haunts, and visiting Prue and Billy and Jabez in the stables; for Aunt Pike had allowed them that much licence on this the first day of the holidays. Then after dinner they all went up to Dan's room to help him to unpack, and there was no end of running backwards and forwards, looking at new treasures and old ones, and talking incessantly until the afternoon had nearly worn away without their realizing it.

"Um!" said Dan at last, pausing on the landing to hang over the banisters and sniff audibly. "A—ha! methinks I smell the soul-inspiring smell of saffron! For thirteen long, weary weeks I have not smelt that glorious smell. Oh yes, I have though, once. There was a saffron cake in the hamper. Fanny's own, too. Why," with sudden recollection, "I haven't had a good talk with Fanny yet. Aunt Pike was about all the time, and dried up the words in my throat. I'm going down to see her this very moment as ever is." And that moment he went.

The other three followed swiftly but silently, for Anna was at home and in her bedroom, resting, preparatory to going to a party that evening—the break-up party at Hillside—at least she was supposed to be resting. Her sharp ears, though, were ever on the alert, and if she guessed what was going on, she would come out and spoil everything. Mrs. Pike was shopping—buying gloves, and elastic for Anna's shoes, and a few trifles for herself, for she too was going to the party.

The kitchen was very snug and warm and full of business, as well as savoury odours, when they reached it. Fanny had a large Christmas cake out cooling on the table, and mince pies and tartlets all ready to go into the oven, while on a clean white cloth at one end of the table were laid half a dozen large saffron cakes and a lot of saffron nubbies to cool.

"O Fanny, how I adore you!" cried Dan, hugging her warmly. "No one in the world reads my thoughts as you do. The one thing I wanted at this moment was a nubby, and here it is." And seizing a couple he began to eat them with a rapidity that was positively alarming. "I know, though you don't say much, that you are overjoyed to see me home again; I can see it in your eyes. The house is a different place when I am home, isn't it?"

"It is *different* certainly," said Fanny with emphasis and a sniff, but not quite the emphasis Dan had asked for. Her coolness did not put him out, though. Fanny had a soft spot in her heart for him, and he knew it, the scamp; but though Dan was perhaps her favourite, at any rate for the moment, the others benefited by the favour shown to him.

"I knew you would feel it," he said sympathetically; "I was afraid it would tell on you. How thin you have gone, Fanny," with an anxious glance at Fanny's plump cheeks.

"Get along with your iteming. Master Dan," she said severely. "I should have thought they'd have learnt you better at school; and if anybody'd asked me, I should have said that the kitchen wasn't the place for young gentlemen."

"But nobody has asked you," said Dan. "And how," melodramatically, "could you expect me to keep away when you are here, and I smelt new saffron cake?"

"And how do you expect me to do all I've a-got to do with the lot of you thronging up every inch of my kitchen?" she went on, ignoring his flattery.

"Ask me another," said Dan, handing nubbies the while to all the others. "I give that one up. But I knew you would be frightfully cut up if I didn't come."

Fanny snorted in a most contemptuous manner, and tossed her head with great scorn. "Oh! I'd have managed to survive it, I dare say, and I don't suppose I should break down if you was to go."

"Do you know, Fanny dear," said Dan, suddenly growing very serious, "when I went away I never expected to see you still in this dear old kitchen when I came home, and the thought nearly broke my heart; it did really. I didn't think you could have stood—you know who, so long."

"Well, I reckon you won't see me here next time you comes home," said Fanny, trying hard not to look pleasant; "and as for this 'dear old kitchen,' as you call it—dear old barn, I call it, with its draughts and its old rough floor—it isn't never no credit to me, do what I will to it, and Mrs. Pike is always going on at me about the place. I says sometimes I'll give up and let it go, and then some folks'll see the

difference."

Kitty remembered the time when Fanny, not so many months back, had let it go, and she had seen the difference. But she said nothing, and munched contentedly at her nubby; and Fanny, who really loved her big, homelike old kitchen almost as well as she did the children, continued to talk.

"I wish Jabez would come in," said Dan. "He used to love hot cake, and I have hardly had a chance to say anything to him since I came."

"Nobody gets a chance to nowadays," said Fanny sharply. "He gets his head took off—not by me—if he so much as sets foot inside these doors; and Jabez isn't partial to having his head took off."

"I should think his foot should be taken off, not his head," giggled Betty; but no one but herself laughed at her joke.

Kitty, who had been sitting on the corner of the table which stood in the window, munching her nubby and thinking very busily, suddenly looked up, her face alight with eagerness.

"Fanny," she cried, "don't you want to do something very, very nice and kind and—and lovely, something that would make us all love you more than ever?"

Fanny glanced up quickly; but as she was always suspicious that some joke was being played on her, she, as usual, made a cautious answer. She was not going to be drawn into anything until she knew more. "Well, I dunno as I wants to do more than I'm doing—letting 'ee eat my cake so fast as I bakes it."

"But, Fanny, listen!" Kitty was so eager she scarcely knew how to explain. "You know that Aunt Pike and Anna are going out this evening?"

"Yes, miss," with a sigh of relief; "from four to ten."

"Well," springing off the table in her excitement, "let us have a party too; a jolly little one at home here by ourselves. Shall we?"

Betty slipped down from her perch on the clothes-press, Tony got off the fender, and all clustered round Kitty in a state of eager excitement to hear the rest of her plan. They felt certain there was more. Fanny could not conceal her interest either.

"And what will be best of all," went on Kitty, "will be for you to ask us to tea in the kitchen, and we will ask Jabez too, and Grace, of course" —Grace was Emily's successor—"and we will have a really lovely time, just as we used to have sometimes. Shall we? O Fanny, do say yes!"

"Seems to me," said Fanny, "there isn't no need. 'Tis all settled, to my thinking." But there was a twinkle in her eye, and a flush of excitement on her cheek, and any one who knew Fanny could see that she was almost as pleased as the children.

"You are a Briton!" cried Dan, clapping her on the back resoundingly.

"I ain't no such thing," said Fanny, who usually thought it safest to contradict everything they said to her. "I'm a Demshur girl, born and bred, and my father and mother was the same before me. I ain't none of your Britons nor Cornish pasties neither, nor nothing like 'em."

"No, you are a thoroughbred Devonshire dumpling, we know," said Dan soothingly, "and not so bad considering, and you can make a pasty like a native, though you aren't one, and never will be. It is a pity too, for Jabez only likes—"

"I don't care nothing about Jabez, nor what he likes, nor what he doesn't," cried Fanny, bending down over her oven to hide a conscious blush which would spread over her round cheeks. "There's good and bad of every sort, and I don't despise none. I only pities 'em if they ain't Demshur."

"That is awfully good of you," said Dan solemnly. "We can cheer up again after that. Fanny," more eagerly, "do tell us what you are going to give us to eat."

But Fanny could not be coaxed into that. "I haven't said yet as I'm going to give 'ee anything," she said sharply; but there was a twinkle in her eye, and matters were soon settled satisfactorily. There was to be a substantial "plate tea" in the kitchen at half-past five, which would allow plenty of time for the laying of the cloth and other preparations after Mrs. Pike and Anna had departed. Then they were to have games and forfeits, and tell ghost stories, and anything else that came into their minds to do, and a nice supper was to wind up the evening, and by ten o'clock all signs of their feast were to be tidied away, and the children were to go as quietly to bed as though Aunt Pike stood at their doors.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN EXCITING NIGHT.

Had Aunt Pike had even the faintest suspicion of what was to happen during her absence he would have given up her party then and there and have remained at home, even though Anna was to receive a prize and to recite.

But, fortunately for her peace of mind, she suspected nothing, and they both went off quite cheerful and excited through the cold and mist of the December evening to the scene of the triumph of Anna's genius— Anna with her head enveloped in shawls, her feet in goloshes, her muslin skirts covered with a mackintosh and a fur-lined cloak.

When it came to the moment of departure she felt so sorry for those left behind that she could not help expressing it. "I wish you could have come too, and had some of the fun," she said excitedly.

"Do you?" said Betty bluntly. "Well, I don't. So you needn't feel unhappy about it. We would rather have 'bread and scrape,' or nothing at all, at home. We shall enjoy ourselves, you may be quite sure. Don't worry about us," which was wickedness on Betty's part, for she knew that Anna always suspected that they enjoyed themselves more without her, and resented it.

And there was no denying that Anna's suspicions were correct. Before she and her proud mamma had reached the gates of Hillside, Kitty and Betty had stripped off the detested stockings, and were arraying themselves in their last summer's muslin frocks, intending to be quite as partified as Anna; and Kitty tied her hair with a red ribbon, and Betty's with a blue one to match her turquoise locket, and down they went to the feast.

Jabez had not yet arrived, but he was momentarily expected. Dan was already there in his new "Eton's," with a sprig of mistletoe in his button-hole. Tony was in his best white sailor suit, and Fanny and Grace had holly in their caps, and wore their Jubilee medals. The table was loaded with cakes and pasties, and "splits" with cream and jam on them; and then, just as they were getting tired of waiting, Jabez arrived. He was in his best suit, and was very shy, very embarrassed, yet very pleased at having been invited.

"Simmeth like old times, don't it!" he gasped, seating himself on the extreme edge of the hard chair nearest the door, a chair and a position no one ever dreamed of occupying at any ordinary time.

To Kitty, who always felt shy if others were, it was as little like old times as could be, for every one seemed borne down with an unnatural politeness and quiet, and of them all Jabez suffered most. He had never been asked to a party before, not a full-dress party, and he found it embarrassing. But Dan came to the rescue, and with his jokes and his laughs and his funny stories soon made them all feel more at ease, so that by the time the first cups of tea were drunk, and the dish of "splits" emptied, the ice had been melted and all was going well.

"Jabez," said Dan, turning to him with a very solemn face, "it is you we have to thank for this feast."

Jabez stared, bewildered. "I don't take your meaning, sir," he answered in a puzzled voice. "Tedn't nothing to do with me. I am the invited guest, I am, and proud so to be. I only wishes I'd a-got a bit of a place fitty for to ask 'ee and the young leddies to come to, sir."

"Never mind, Jabez; we can wait. Perhaps you'll have one soon," said Dan consolingly, and he glanced knowingly round the table, letting his eye rest for a moment longer on Fanny than any one else. "By another Christmas we may—dear me, I think this room must be very hot," he remarked, breaking off abruptly to look at Fanny's rosy cheeks. But Fanny rather tartly told him to "go on with his tea and never mind nothing 'bout hot rooms, nor anything else that didn't concern him," and quite unabashed he turned to Jabez again.

"You see," he explained, "if you hadn't gone to father that day I shied the wood at you, we shouldn't have had Aunt Pike here, and Fanny wouldn't have asked us out here to tea because Aunt Pike was out, because, you see, she wouldn't be here to go out, and we couldn't be glad about her going, for we shouldn't know anything about it to be glad about, and so there wouldn't be anything special to ask us here for, and so—"

"Master Dan," cried Jabez piteously, "if you don't stop to once, the little bit of brain I've got'll be addled! Iss, my word, addled beyond recovery, and me a poor man with my living to get."

"It do put me in mind of my old granny," said Grace, laughing, "when poor grandfather died, and she

was getting her bit of mourning. 'Well,' she saith, 'if my poor dear Samuel had died a week sooner or later, and Miss Peek had put her clearance sale back or fore a week, I should have missed that there remlet of merino and lost a good bargain, whereas now it'll always be a pleasure to me to look at and feel I saved two shillings on it.'

"Now, Fanny," cried Dan, "a story from you, please."

Fanny demurred a little, of course. People never like to be told to tell stories. They prefer to drift naturally into them, without a lot of people waiting expectantly for what they are going to say.

But Fanny had such stores of tales of ghosts, fairies, witches, and other thrilling subjects, that she never failed to fascinate her listeners. She did so now, when once she had begun, until they were all almost afraid to look round the dim kitchen, and Jabez wished, though he would not have owned it, that he had not got that walk home in the dark.

Then they burnt nuts, and melted lead in an iron spoon and poured it into tumblers of cold water, and Fanny's took the shape of the masts and rigging of a ship, though Jabez declared it wasn't nothing of the sort, but was more like clothes-postens with the lines stretched to them, yes, and the very clothes themselves hanging to them. All but Jabez, though, preferred to think it a ship; it was more exciting. Grace's lead formed tents of all sizes, and Grace seemed quite pleased.

Of Kitty's they could make nothing at all.

"That looks to me like a rolling-pin lying at the bottom," cried Dan excitedly, "and a beautiful palace, almost like a fairy palace, and—but I don't know what all those little pieces can be meant for. I think it must mean that you are going to be a cook in a large house—a palace, perhaps."

"I fink those are fairies," chimed in Tony thoughtfully, "and that's a fairy palace, and—and—"

"And the rolling-pin is me in the midst of it all," cried Kitty, throwing her arm round her little brother. "Tony, you are a dear; you always say something nice."

"I shouldn't think it very nice to be called a rolling-pin," said Betty. "But do tell me what mine is, Kitty!"

"I really can't," said Kitty, after they had each gazed at it solemnly. "I can't tell whether it is meant for a ship, or an iceberg, or a tent. Perhaps it is all three, and means that you are going to travel, Bettikins."

"Oh yes," said Betty, "I shouldn't be surprised. I mean to travel when I am grown up, and I always feel that I shall do something some day."

"I feel I shall do something to-night if I don't get something to eat soon," interrupted Dan, in a tone intended to touch Fanny's heart. "It is half-past eight, and tea has been over for more than two hours."

"Well," said Jabez, as the tumblers and the mysterious lead figures were whisked away, "'tis just as well nobody couldn't attempt to tell what mine was, for I wouldn't 'ave 'urt anybody's ingenooity with trying to. If 'twasn't a blacksmith's shop, 'twas a vegetable stall; and if 'twasn't that, 'twasn't nothing; and things when they'm like that is best left alone, it's my belief."

"P'r'aps it was the table with supper laid on it," suggested Kitty.

"P'r'aps 'twas, Miss Kitty; but I'm sorry for us all if 'twas, for the dishes, if dishes they was, was empty, and that wouldn't suit us at the present minute."

But it exactly depicted the state of the dishes half an hour later, for, as Fanny said when they wanted the kitchen cleared for games, "there wasn't nothing to clear but empty things."

By that time all stiffness had worn away, every one was in the highest spirits, and the games went on furiously, so furiously that the striking of the hall clock and the town clock were overlooked, and the first thing that recalled them to themselves was a loud ringing of the front-door bell.

For one second they stood looking at each other in utter dismay, then—"The back stairs," whispered Dan. "Fly, children, scoot, and hop into bed as you are.—Jabez—"

But Jabez had already vanished through the back door and had shut himself in Prue's stable. Up the back stairs the children scuttled, shoes in hand, and melted away into their various rooms without a sound. Kitty stayed a moment with Tony to help him into bed, and as she crept out of his room the sound of voices in the hall reached her.

"Grace needn't have hurried so to let them in," she thought. "She could at least have pretended she was asleep and didn't hear the knock, and so have given us a few minutes more." But Grace's promptness was such that Kitty had barely time to draw her nightgown on over her frock and creep into her bed before she heard her aunt's footsteps on the stairs.

Mrs. Pike went first to Tony's room, and Kitty, leaning up, listened in a perfect tremor of nervousness for what might follow. Tony was no good at pretending, but, as good luck would have it, there was no need of make-believe on his part, for he had been so tired he had fallen fast asleep as soon as he had cuddled down under the bedclothes, and Mrs. Pike, after just a glance, came away quite satisfied. Then Kitty heard her approaching their room.

"Oh!" she thought with dismay, "she is bringing Anna with her;" for Mrs. Pike was talking to some one in a low voice. "What bad luck; Anna sees through everything. I wonder if Betty hears too. If she doesn't she is sure to jump. Betty! Betty!" she called, as loud as she dared, but the next moment the door opened and Aunt Pike entered with a candle in her hand, and followed by Anna.

"Dear, dear," she said, as she tripped over something, "how untidy! What is it, Anna?"

Anna stooped and picked up one of Betty's discarded gray stockings. For once Betty's untidiness served them a good turn. Seeing the stockings on the floor, it never occurred to Aunt Pike but that they had both undressed and got into bed in the usual fashion. The first thing, though, that caught Anna's eye was the red bow in Kitty's hair.

"I—I didn't know—" she began, then glanced quickly at Betty's head, where the blue bow showed up against the pillow, but instead of remarking on it she suddenly grew silent. Kitty marvelled, for she had remembered their hair ribbons almost at the same moment as Anna had caught sight of them, and it was all she could do not to put up her hand and grab hers off. With the remembrance she almost gave up hope of escaping detection, and wished devoutly that they had stayed downstairs and faced the consequences; for to be found out now, hiding in bed in this fashion, made a discreditable matter of what was really not a very bad one. But, to her increasing amazement, Anna said nothing, not even when Aunt Pike said, "I must speak to Katherine in the morning. She has either neglected to brush her hair at all, or she is very extravagant in tying it up for the night with a good piece of ribbon. Now come away, darling; it is quite time you were in bed. I am sure you must be quite exhausted. You know I did tell you I thought you would not be able to show them your prize to-night."

"Prize!" gasped Betty, sitting up in bed as soon as ever their visitors' backs were turned. "Has she *really* got a prize? I didn't think it could be true when Aunt Pike said she would get one. Anyhow, I wonder she isn't ashamed to show it, for she knows it would have been yours if she hadn't behaved so disgustingly. But Anna is never ashamed of what she does, no matter how bad it is."

"Oh yes, she is," said Kitty thoughtfully. "I think she is dreadfully ashamed sometimes of some things, and very sorry."

"Then why doesn't she say so?" snapped Betty crossly.

"I believe she doesn't know how to. She is shy, or—or something; but I do believe she would like to be able to." And she thought of the abject way in which Anna had followed her about for days after that affair at Hillside, and had tried to do things for her; and in her heart she knew that it was Anna's curious way of expressing her gratitude to her for not exposing her meanness. "I believe," she went on musingly, "that if she could undo all that—that fuss in any other way than by owning up, that she would; but there isn't any other way, and she hasn't got pluck enough to do it in the right one. I believe she would rather die than have Aunt Pike know how she behaved. Oh dear, I do wish I hadn't to get up again and undress."

"So do I," agreed Betty. "I really can't brush my hair to-night, I am *so* sleepy."

"I wouldn't," said Kitty, who had a little habit of saying the most comfortable thing. "Give it an extra brushing to-morrow; that will do."

"Very well," agreed Betty, "I will remember," and in another moment was fast asleep.

Kitty lay down and drew the bedclothes cosily about her until a few dark curls and a scarlet bow were all that were visible, but go to sleep she could not. Thoughts went racing through her brain in the most distracting manner—thoughts of the school and all the unpleasant ending of her short connection with it; thoughts of Anna and her mother, and Anna's want of courage.

"I believe she isn't really a bad sort," mused Kitty, "and yet—and yet she does do such mean things, and doesn't seem to see that they are mean; and she thinks that the only way to please people is to say nasty things of some one else to them; and then, of course, one feels that to other people she says the same of oneself. One can't help it. I do wish she was different. I believe I could like her if she was."

Presently her thoughts merged into dreams, but such unpleasant ones that she was quite glad to awaken from them; and so, constantly dozing and half-waking, and dozing again, the hours wore on until at last she awoke really wide awake, with a very strong and alarming feeling that something was amiss, or that something unusual was happening. She had not the faintest idea what it could be, and though she sat up in bed and listened, she could not see or hear anything. The house seemed quiet and still, and yet there were sounds—curious, mysterious sounds that ceased while she listened for them, and left her wondering if she were still dreaming, or if her ears were playing her tricks. Her first fear was that there might be something the matter with Tony; then she thought of Dan.

"I must go and see," she thought, and slipped very gently out of bed and into her dressing-gown. When she was outside the door she paused to listen. Yes, there certainly were sounds, and they came from Dan's room, sounds of whispering and movements, and—yes, there was a curious smell. "I believe it is fire!" she gasped, and ran down the corridor. Dan's room was nearly at the end of it, and faced the staircase. Tony's was a tiny room between the girls' and Dan's, while Anna's room was beyond Dan's again. Kitty looked in at Tony, and found him safe, and sleeping comfortably; then she hurried on. Dan's door was slightly ajar, and there was a dim light within; here also was the curious smell which had greeted Kitty's nose, only stronger, and here also was Anna, in her gray dressing-gown, sitting on the floor, and apparently hugging herself in an agony of pain. "What has happened? What is the matter? Dan, tell me!"

At the first sound of her voice Dan wheeled round, and Anna started up with a scream.

"How you did startle me!" cried Dan in a hoarse whisper. "But I'm awfully glad you've come." Dan's face was perfectly white, and he was trembling visibly. "Kitty, what *can* I do? I have been such a—such a fool; worse than a fool. Look!" holding up a paper partly burnt, and pointing to a scorched mark on the curtain.

"Oh!" gasped Kitty. "O Dan, how did it happen? What were you doing? Reading in bed? You might have been burnt to death."

"I should have been—we all should have been, and the house burnt down, if it hadn't been for Anna," groaned Dan. "It'll teach me never to read in bed again. I thought I was quite wide awake too. But look at Anna; do try and do something for her. She has burnt her hands horribly, and I didn't know what to put on them. What can I do? Kitty, do do something; she is in frightful pain, and she was so plucky."

Even in her great pain Anna looked up gratified by this praise. Kitty gently lifted her hands and looked at them, then laid them down again with a little shocked cry, for the whole of the palms and the fingers were covered with burns.

"Oh you poor, poor thing!" she cried.—"Dan, do creep down to the surgery, and bring up the bottle of carron oil. You will find it on the floor by the window. Father always keeps it there.—O Anna," putting her arms round her cousin's quivering shoulders, "how you must be suffering! I am *so* sorry. I wish I could bear it for you."

Anna was almost beyond speaking, but she laid her head back against Kitty's arm with a sigh of relief. "O Kitty, I am so glad to have done something for you—that's all I think of. I don't mind the pain. You have done so much for me, and I—I wanted to make it up to you somehow."

"Don't you ever think of that again," said Kitty solemnly. "You have saved Dan's life, perhaps all our lives, and that wipes out everything. But oh! poor Dan, won't he be in a scrape to-morrow when this is all found out!"

"But it won't be found out," said Anna. "We can easily get rid of the paper, and the mark on the curtain won't show unless one looks for it; and, you see, it won't be taken down till the winter is over, and then—"

"But your hands," cried Kitty. "How can we explain about your burns?"

"Oh—h," said Anna slowly, as she tried to think of some plan, "I will just say it is an accident—I needn't explain."

"But I shall," said Kitty firmly. "I am not going to have any deceitfulness. We will all stand together, but you aren't going to suffer for Dan. Dan wouldn't stand it, and I should be ashamed of him if he did."

Anna did not answer, and Kitty thought she had won. Dan returned with the oil, and from his own drawer produced a generous supply of torn handkerchiefs.

"How did you find out about the fire?" questioned Kitty, as she bound up the poor hands as skilfully as she knew how. Her "skill" would have made a surgeon or a nurse smile, but the result was soothing and comforting.

"I woke up suddenly and thought I smelt burning; then I was sure I did, and I got out and opened my door and saw a bright light shining under Dan's door." Here Anna had the grace to blush, for she remembered another occasion when she had seen a light shining under a door, and had *not* flown in a frenzy of fear to save those inside. "I crept down the passage, and then I knew that the smell of burning was coming from Dan's room. I knocked, but he didn't answer, and the light grew so bright that I got frightened, and I rushed in and snatched the paper out of his hand, and beat out the flames." Her face, which had been very flushed, was now deadly white. "I think I will go back to bed now," she said faintly, "I am dreadfully tired."

And dreadfully tired she was too, thoroughly exhausted and overcome. Kitty helped her to her room and tucked her in her bed, and as she was bending over her, Anna raised her usually restless eyes to her very pleadingly.

"Kitty, you must let me have my own way, or I shan't feel that I've done anything towards—towards wiping out—you know what I mean."

"I know," said Kitty. "We won't talk any more about it to-night. We will wait until to-morrow. Good-night, Anna," and for the first time in her life she kissed Anna willingly.

CHAPTER XIV.

MOKUS AND CARROTS.

Kitty heard Dan go downstairs the next morning just as she was finishing dressing, and her heart thumped painfully, for she knew he was going to confess. When confessions had to be made Dan always made them as quickly as possible so as to get them off his mind. Kitty hurriedly finished her dressing, and followed him with some vague idea in her mind of helping him.

But when they got down there was no one else about, and before they had seen any one to whom to confess, Mrs. Pike burst into the dining-room where they stood, miserably enough, waiting.

"Kitty, Dan, do either of you know where your father is? I want him to come to Anna. She is so unwell, and in some extraordinary way has burnt her hands dreadfully. Oh dear! oh dear! what troubles do come upon me. I suppose it was foolish of me to leave her last night to put herself to bed when she was so tired. I might have known she would tumble over the lamp, or do something equally careless. It was kind of you, Kitty, to attend to her burns for her, poor child, but you should have come and called me." There were tears in Aunt Pike's eyes as she turned to thank her niece. "You—she—Anna need not have been afraid. I did not know I was so harsh with her that she was afraid to—" and poor Aunt Pike broke off, quite overcome. The shock of finding Anna feverish and ill, and with her hands bandaged, had upset her greatly.

Dan, sincerely touched and conscience-stricken, stepped forward. "Aunt Pike," he began, "I—"

But Kitty with a look and a sign checked him. "Wait," she whispered. "I think you had better wait, or you may make things worse for Anna."

Dan looked distressed. "I don't think I shall," he answered testily, as Aunt Pike went out of the room. "I hate mystery. Why can't we speak out and have it over? I am going to, Kitty."

"I want you to, as much as you do," she answered in a troubled voice, "but we have to think of Anna. She did so much for us last night, and— well, I believe if we were to tell Aunt Pike all about it now, it would hurt her more than ever, because she would think Anna had been deceiving her; and Anna did not mean to, she only meant to be kind to us."

So Dan, though most unwillingly, had to agree. It annoyed him, and hurt his dignity, and offended his sense of honour to have to let Anna bear the weight of his misdoing; but he still hoped that when he could see Anna she might consent to his making a full confession. Here, though, he was again doomed to disappointment, for Anna only turned to him pleadingly. "Don't say anything about it," she cried. "O

Dan, don't! If mother was to know now she would be more angry than ever, and she would never trust me again, or forgive either of us."

So Dan, out of his gratitude to her, had to give in; and there the matter rested for the time at least. But it had brought about two important changes—it cured Dan, and all of them, for some time, of their love of reading in bed; and it made them more tolerant in their feelings towards Anna.

Christmas, since that last one their mother had spent with them, had never been a festive or a happy season in Dr. Trenire's house. To the doctor it was too full of sad memories for him to be able to make it gay or cheerful for his children, and the children did not know how to set about making it so for themselves, while Aunt Pike had no ideas on the subject beyond sending and receiving a few cards, giving Anna a half-sovereign to put in the savings bank, and ordering a rather more elaborate dinner on Christmas Day.

Kitty, Dan, and Betty this year felt a real yearning for a Christmas such as they had read of, and discussed all manner of impossible plans, but there it all ended. Dr. Trenire gave them a book each, and they sat around the schoolroom fire reading them and munching the sweets they had clubbed together to buy, and that was all the festivity they had that year.

It was a damp, mild season, unseasonable and depressing, pleasant neither for going out nor for staying indoors; and Dan, who had less than five weeks' holidays, and had already had one of them spoiled by the weather, grumbled loudly, fully convinced that he had every reason to do so.

But with January came a change to high, cold winds, which dried up the mud, and, having done that much service, departed, to be followed by days of glorious sunshine. Just about the middle of the month Mrs. Pike had to go away for a week or two to visit her sister in Yorkshire, and with this circumstance, and the lovely weather combined, the children's spirits rose. Dan had but a fortnight's holiday left, it is true, but they meant to enjoy every possible minute of that fortnight, and to begin with they decided on an expedition to Helbarrow Tors, one of their most beloved of picnic places. Anna had never seen that wonderful spot, and Anna, who did not accompany her mother on her Yorkshire visit, was to be introduced to all its beauties on the very day after her mother's departure.

As though knowing what was expected of it, the day broke most promisingly. Of course it was not really light until about eight o'clock—in fact, they got up and had their breakfast by gaslight, for they really could not stay in bed late with such prospects as they had before them; but already the weather signs were good, and Jabez was most encouraging.

"I'll back a mist like that there," he said, "agin anything for turning out a fine day. You mark my words now, Miss Kitty; and I'll go right along and get that there donkey and cart for fear anybody else should be put in the mind to 'ave a little egscursion too, and get un furst."

Fanny was as amiable as Jabez. When Kitty went out to the kitchen to see about their food for the day she found her with a row of baskets on the table before her, and Dan sitting on the corner of it superintending her doings.

"There, Miss Kitty," she exclaimed, "that's the salt I've just put in, so don't anybody say I forgot it, and don't anybody go unpacking it any'ow or it'll be upset; and we don't want no bad luck, do we?"

Kitty looked at the baskets joyfully.

"I've put in what I calls a good allowance for six. Do 'ee think that'll be enough?" asked Fanny anxiously, "or shall I put in a bit more cake, and a pasty or two extra? P'r'aps I'd better."

"Perhaps you had," said Kitty thoughtfully. "You see, we have the whole day, and one does get hungry out of doors, and there is never a shop anywhere near—and if there is, we never have any money to spend in it."

Even while she was speaking Fanny was stowing the extra pasties and cake into the basket. "Now, Master Dan, remember that's the basket you'm to carry," pointing to a large square one with the cover securely fastened down. "There's nothing to eat in it, but it's the 'eaviest, 'cause it's got the milk in it, and a bottle of methylated spirits and the little stove in case you can't get no sticks nor no fire."

"O Fanny, you *are* cruel," sighed Dan. "I really don't know," with a very good imitation of a catch in his voice, "how you can say to me the nasty things you do."

"Ah!" said Fanny, with a knowing shake of her head. "I may be cruel, and I have my failings, but I can read you through and through, Master Dan, same as if you was a printed book. You take my word for that."

"X rays aren't in it," cried Dan. "Eyes of a hawk, and a heart of stone. What a combination!"

"That there littlest basket," went on Fanny, turning to Kitty, "is for Master Tony; and you must see that Master Dan don't get hold of it, and let his little brother wear hisself out carrying the 'eavy one."

"Fanny, what do you take me for?"

"I take 'ee for what you are," said Fanny calmly—"an anointed young limb, and as artful as you are high."

"Wait till I have gone back to school," said Dan wistfully, "then every cruel and unjust thing you have said and thought of me will come back to you, and 'Too late, ah, too late,' you will moan as you sob yourself ill; 'and I loved that boy better than any one in the whole wide world!'"

Which had enough of truth in it to make Fanny quite cross, or seem to be.

"Master Tony's basket has got some lunch in it for you all to eat on your way. There's a little pasty each, and some biscuits. I did put in a big one for Master Dan, but I've more'n half a mind to take it out again, seeing as he's be'aving so, sitting on the table and swinging his legs. I s'pose those are the manners they learns him to school!"

Dan chuckled. "I wish they did," he said. "No, it's only you who let me behave myself as I like, Fanny. No one else in the wide world is so kind to me. O Fanny, I wish you were coming with us."

"So do I," cried Kitty. "Wouldn't it be fun!" And Fanny, quite mollified, did not remove Dan's big pasty.

The door opened and Jabez came in. "I've got the moke," he said; "he's in the yard; and I've put a few carrots in the cart for 'ee to 'tice un along with, for if that there creetur haven't made up his mind a'ready not to see Helbarrow Tor this day—well, I'm a Dutchman, and whatever my failings I ain't that yet."

"The only enticing he'll get from me will be with the whip," said Dan with great scorn, "so you can take out the carrots again." But Jabez shook his head wisely.

"They won't take up much room," he said. "I'll put 'em in the nose-bag, and if you don't need 'em on the way, you can give 'em to the creetur when he gets there, by way of encouraging un another time. Now, are you all ready, miss? It's best for 'ee to start before he falls asleep again, for they'm always poor-tempered if they'm woke up, and then they'm obstinater than ever."

The five of them could not all get into the cart at once, at least not with any comfort, so they always, on these excursions, took it in turn to ride and tie; and Dan, who did not crave for the glory of driving Mokus through the street, walked on with Betty, leaving the others to follow.

It was certainly cold when first they started; the air was fresh and biting, with a touch of frost in it, and the sun had not yet come out. Anna shivered beneath her fur-lined cloak, and Tony, thrusting his hands deep down in his pockets, snuggled down between Kitty and Anna, and felt very glad for once that he was not allowed an outside seat.

But by degrees the sun shone through the misty grayness, bathing the road before them, and lighting up the bare hedges on either side until it really seemed that spring had come, that the fresh morning air was certainly full of the scent of primroses and violets, and the sweet earthy smell of moss. The birds evidently thought so too, for they came fluttering and flying from all manner of cosy hiding-places, and, undaunted by the sight of the brown branches and the leafless twigs, boldly perched themselves on telegraph wires and trees to survey the scene while they made their summer plans.

What more could one want than brown branches if the sun was on them! And how could one hurry or worry, or do anything but revel quietly in the beauty that lay all about one, and tell oneself there were no gray days to come!

Mokus, for one, evidently felt that this was no occasion for haste, and Kitty did not contradict him. She herself felt that she wanted to linger over every moment, and get the fullest enjoyment out of it all.

Dan, however, had other views, and when, at the foot of Tremellen Hill, they found him and Betty perched on a low bridge awaiting them, he upbraided them plaintively for their waste of time.

"But no girl ever could drive, even a donkey," he said loftily. "He will find out now that he has met his master. Get up, Betty. Do be quick. I want to reach Helbarrow to-day, and it must be lunch-time already." At which Tony, who was scrambling down from the cart, reached back for his basket.

"I fink I'd better take it wiv me," he said gravely. "If they are going so fast, p'r'aps we shan't see them any more till we get there."

"I think we needn't be afraid of that," said Anna sarcastically, "if we don't walk too fast."

Oh what a day it was! and what a donkey! and what a journey! And oh the time it took! and how they did enjoy it all! When they had walked for about a mile or more, the three sat down to rest and await the carriage folk, of whom they had not caught a glimpse since they walked away and left them. Then by degrees Tony's luncheon basket assumed a prominent position in their thoughts and before their eyes. Morning air, particularly in January, is hungry air; and to wait, with the food under your very nose, and not be free to eat it, is not easy.

"I really must go back a little way to see if they are anywhere near," said Kitty at last, growing impatient and hungry. Anna and Tony were hungry too, but they were too comfortable and lazy to move, so they leaned luxuriously amongst the dry twigs and leaves and dead grass in the hedge, and watched Kitty as she walked eagerly back again along the level road they had just travelled. When she reached the brow of the hill she stopped, and the next moment a peal of laughter announced the fact that she had caught sight of the laggards.

It was unkind, perhaps, of her to laugh. Dan thought it was "beastly mean," but then he was not in a frame of mind to see the humour of the situation, for up the whole of that long steep hill he had marched at Mokus's head, tugging with all his might at the bridle with one hand, while the other held a huge carrot just beyond the obstinate creature's reach. Dan was not only hot and tired and out of patience, but he was extremely mortified.

"Where is Betty?" called Kitty, trying to check her laughter.

Betty, hearing her name, came round from the back of the cart; she was almost purple in the face, and looked quite exhausted.

"I've been pushing," she gasped. "I believe it would have been easier to have been harnessed in the shafts."

"You poor little thing," cried Kitty. "You must rest now and I'll take a turn, and you shall both have our turn in the cart after lunch, and we will walk. We aren't a bit tired."

"Thank you," they said, with stern decision in their voices, "we would rather walk; it is so much easier."

Kitty felt quite sorry for them. "Anna and Tony are only a little way ahead," she said encouragingly. "We've got such a jolly place to have our lunch in, and we will have a nice rest there. Give the poor thing the carrot now, Dan."

"Give him the carrot!" cried Dan indignantly. "I should like to see myself! After his behaviour, he'll never even have a sniff of it again, if I can help it," and Dan sent the carrot flying over the hedge to show that he meant what he said.

A good lunch, though, restored both his strength and his temper, and after it was over they all managed to pack into the cart for the rest of the short distance they had to go. Anna took the reins this time, and whether it was that Mokus felt the firmness of her grip, or guessed that rest and freedom for a few hours lay awaiting him at the end of another mile, no one knew, but he started off down the next hill at quite a quick trot, which he never once slackened until he was drawn up beside the low stone hedge which in some long-past age had been erected around the foot of the tors. Dan declared it was the weight of himself and Betty on the tail-board which made him go, and having once been started he could not stop if he wanted to. In any case Mokus was forgiven, and it was with very kindly hands and many a pat that they unharnessed him from the cart and tethered him by a long rope to the stump of a stunted hawthorn bush, close to the remains of a little hut, which, with the old wall, had often caused the children much speculation as to when and why it was built there, and by whom.

Then, each carrying a basket, they started to climb to the top to find first of all a cosy, sheltered spot for a dining-room. On the tors the sun was shining and the wild thyme smelling as sweetly as though it were April rather than January.

"Oh, look at the robins!" cried Tony delightedly. They were pausing in their climb, and the little bright-eyed, warm-breasted creatures were hopping about them quite boldly. "Kitty, do let me give them some crumbs, they are such darlings, and I think they are quite glad to see us. They aren't a bit afraid."

"To see a robin in a cage
Puts all heaven in a rage,"

quoted Kitty dreamily.

Anna looked quite shocked. "O Kitty," she said, "how can you? You are quite profane."

Kitty laughed. "Am I?" she said. "What a dreadful word to use! I didn't mean to be. I didn't make up those lines, you know. Oh, don't you think," she went on eagerly, "it would be a nice game to try how many different verses about robins we can remember?"

"Do you mean nursery verses and all?" asked Dan. Kitty nodded; her brain was already busy.

"I think it will be lovely," said Betty. "I know quite a lot."

"Go ahead then," urged Dan, "and remember to give author and book."

"Nursery verses and nursery rhymes haven't got any author," said Betty with a very superior air.

Dan was on the alert at once; he loved to torment Betty.

"No author! Oh! oh! what an appalling display of childish ignorance," he cried in pretended horror, "and after all the trouble I have taken with you too. My dear child, don't you know that some one must have composed them or they wouldn't be—but there, I suppose little children can't be expected to understand these things."

"But I do," cried Betty indignantly. "You don't know all I know. I know a great deal more than you think, though you may not think so."

"Dear me! Do you really now?" said Dan, pretending to be enormously impressed. "What a genius we may have in the family without our ever suspecting it. Tell us who wrote:

"And when they were dead,
The robins so red
Took strawberry leaves and over them spread,"

"What would be the good?" said Betty, with a sigh as if of hopeless despair. "You wouldn't reckonize the name if I told you."

"No, I don't expect I should," laughed Dan derisively. "Not the way you would pronounce it, at least."

"Stop teasing her, Dan," cried Kitty. "We all of us have to think. Let us take it in turns. Now then, you begin."

For a moment Dan looked somewhat taken aback, then memory came suddenly to him.

"Who killed Cock Robin?
"I," said the Spar—"

"That is not right," said Betty; "you are not beginning at the beginning; you are missing out half."

"Of course, as if I didn't know that," retorted Dan, but he looked rather foolish; "but we are only here for the day, after all, and I am not going to spend it all in saying nursery rhymes. If we were going to stay a week it would be different."

"That's all very well, but *I* believe you don't know it," said Betty softly but decisively.

Whereupon Dan in great wrath burst forth,—

"It was on a merry time
When Jenny Wren was young," etc., etc.

When he had chanted three verses, they begged him to stop. When he had reached the twelfth they all went on their knees to him and implored him to stop; but no, on he went, and on and on to the very last line. "Next time," he said, turning to Betty when he had reached the end, "I hope you will believe me."

"If I don't I won't say so," remarked Betty softly, with a sigh of relief; "but of course I can't make myself believe you if I don't."

"Oh, can't you?" said Dan. "You try once and see. Now then, Anna, your turn."

"I don't know anything about robins," said Anna. "Mother thought nursery rhymes were foolish. So do I."

"Oh no, you don't really," cried four voices in tones of mingled amazement and disgust.

"Yes, I do. Why not?"

"What a pity," said Kitty softly. "I think they are beautiful. I am glad my mother thought so too, But it need not be a nursery rhyme, Anna. Don't you know,

"'Little bird with bosom red,
Welcome to my humble shed,'

"or any other?"

"Ye—es," said Anna doubtfully. "I had to learn that once at school, but, somehow, I didn't think that it was about a robin."

"What did you think it was about?" asked Kitty.

"Oh, I don't know. I thought it was just poetry. I never think poetry has any meaning in it. It seems to me such silly stuff, all about nothing."

"I suppose even poetry must be about something," said Dan sarcastically.

"I don't think so," said Anna. She, the prize-winner of her class, was not going to be snubbed by her cousins. "As long as the words rhyme, it doesn't matter what the rest is like."

To Kitty that seemed neither the time nor the place to argue with Anna, so she let the subject drop. "Now then, Betty."

"I know so many," said Betty very anxiously, "that they seem to be all jumbled up in my head, and I can't get one quite right. Let me see now—"

"Do let me say mine while you are finking. Shall I?" pleaded Tony eagerly.

"Little Robin Redbreast
Perched upon a tree,
Up went Pussy Cat
And down went he."

By the time he reached the end of the second verse he was almost breathless. "I was afraid you would say it before me," he gasped as he concluded the last line; "that's why I hurried so."

"Oh, I was trying to think of something much more—more, well, not so babyish; more like what Kitty said than what you and Dan said."

"Perhaps you had better compose something yourself," said Dan, "and we will go on and light the fire and get the dinner ready while you are about it."

"You needn't be in a bad temper," retorted Betty severely, "even if you couldn't make the donkey go." And Dan thought perhaps it might be wiser not to torment his younger sister any more.

CHAPTER XV.

MISSING!

They all struggled to their feet after that, collected their baskets, and resumed their climb, over big boulders, through furze and bracken, dead now and withered, but beautiful in the glow of the clear wintry sunshine, until at last they came to an immense flat rock, with another rising high behind it, sheltering them from the wind and catching every gleam of sunshine that possibly could be caught.

Here they spread their cloth, laying large pebbles on the corners of it to keep it down, and on it they spread their feast, and then at last there was nothing left to do but sit down and enjoy it. The sun shone quite warmly, a soft little breeze blew up from the valley, bringing with it the mingled scents of peat smoke, crushed thyme, and wet moss. From their high perch they looked down on long stretches of brown fields ploughed in ridges, with here and there a big gray rock dropped into the middle of it, and here and there a roughly-built cottage, not much bigger, seemingly, than some of the rocks. In a distant

field a man was carrying mangolds to a flock of sheep. The bleating of the sheep floated up to them through the still air, and, with the voices of the birds, made the only sounds of life that reached them. The scene, though lovely in the eyes of the children, was desolate to a degree. Scarcely a tree marked the landscape, and those there were were bowed and stunted, leaning landwards as though running before the cold winds which blew with such force across the few miles of flat, bare country which alone lay between them and the Atlantic Ocean.

To-day, though, it was hard to believe that that sunny spot was often so bleak and storm-swept that man and beast avoided it. Anna gazed about her wonderingly, but somewhat awed.

"It seems dreadfully wild and lonely," she said, with a shiver. "And how flat and ugly it is, all but these tors. I wonder how they came to be here like this. I should think the people who used to live here must have piled up all these rocks to clear them out of the fields. They left a good many behind, though."

"No one could have lifted rocks like these, and piled them up like this," said Dan scornfully. "They were thrown up like this by an earthquake, father says, and after the earthquake the sea—you know the sea used to cover all the country as far as we can see—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Anna. "Now you are trying to take me in; but you won't make me believe such nonsense as that."

"Very well," crossly, "don't believe it then; only don't ask questions another time if you mean to turn round and sneer when a fellow tries to explain. I suppose you won't believe either that giants used to live here?"

Anna laughed even more scornfully. "No, I will not," she said loftily. "I am not quite stupid enough to believe all the nonsense you would like to make me."

"If you could only realize it, it is you who are talking nonsense," said Dan crushingly, and he turned away from her. He was not going to tell any of his beloved legends and stories for Anna to sneer at. "It is simply a sign of ignorance," he said, with his most superior air, "not to believe in things because we haven't actually seen them with our very own eyes. I suppose you will not believe that St. Michael's Mount used to be surrounded with woods where there is sea now, until a huge wave rushed in and swamped everything, right up to the foot of the Mount, and never went back again?"

"No," said Anna obstinately, "of course I shouldn't believe it. Such things couldn't happen. It is silly to tell such stories as you Cornish people do, and expect other people to believe them."

Kitty looked at her in pained surprise. It seemed to her that Anna's way of speaking was quite irreverent. She longed to know, yet shrank from asking her, if she scorned, too, those other stories, so precious and real to Kitty, the story of King Arthur in his hidden resting-place, waiting to be roused from his long sleep; of Tristram and Iseult asleep in the little chapel beneath the sea; of—oh, a hundred others of giants and fairies, witches and spectres. But she held her peace rather than hear them scoffed at and discredited.

The sunshine, chased by a cloud and a fresh little breeze, disappeared. Anna shivered and looked about her.

"Oh, how gloomy and lonely it all looks directly the sun goes in!" she cried. "I should hate to be here in the dark, or in a storm. Shouldn't you, Kitty? I think I should die of fright; I know I should if I were here alone."

"I'd love to be here in a storm," said Kitty firmly, "a real thunderstorm. It would be grand to watch it all from the top of the tors. I don't think I would very much mind being up here all night either. You see, there is nothing that could possibly hurt one, no wild beasts or robbers. Bad people would be afraid to come."

"I think it would be perfectly dreadful," shuddered Anna. "You would never know who was coming round the rocks, or who was hiding; and robbers could come behind you and catch you, and you wouldn't be able to see or hear them until they were right on you; and you might scream and scream with all your might and main and no one would hear you."

"If I sneered at giants, I wouldn't talk of robbers if I were you," said Dan severely. "Imagine robbers coming to a place like this! Why, there's nothing and nobody to rob."

"They would come here to hide, of course, not to rob," said Anna crushingly, and Dan felt rather

small.

Betty and Tony began to feel bored.

"I am going to get sticks for the fire," said Betty. "Come along, Tony. You others can come, too, if you like."

"Betty is beginning to think of her tea already," laughed Dan, but they all joined her in her search—not that there was any need to search, for dry sticks and furze bushes lay all around them in profusion.

"Oh, here's the cromlech," cried Kitty, coming suddenly on the great rock, which was poised so lightly on top of other great rocks that it would sway under the lightest touch, yet had remained unmoved by all the storms and hurricanes of the ages that had passed over it. She ran lightly up and on to it, and stood there swaying gently, the breeze fluttering out her skirts and flushing her cheeks.

"You must make a wish while you are standing on it, and then if you can make the rock move you will get your wish," explained Betty to Anna. "It isn't every one who can. I don't suppose you could, 'cause you don't believe in things like we do."

Nevertheless Anna was bent on trying, and grew quite cross because the rock would not move for her. "No, I don't believe it," she snapped. "You Cornish people are so suppositios; and it is *dreadfully* ignorant to be so. Mother said so."

Dan fairly shrieked with delight; he always did when Anna or Betty used a wrong word, particularly if it was a long one.

"Though it is so early, I am going to light the fire now," said Kitty, anxious to make a diversion and prevent squabbles, "because I want to smell the smell of the burning fuz."

Which she did then and there; and then, perhaps in absent-mindedness, she put the kettle on, and it boiled before any one could believe the water was even warm, and then, of course, there was nothing to be done but make the tea and drink it. But the air up there was so wonderful that no matter how quickly the meals came the appetites were ready.

"The smell of the smoke was feast enough in itself," Kitty said.

But she did not omit to take a liberal share of more solid food as well. And oh! how good it all tasted—the tea, the bread and butter, the saffron cake, all had a flavour such as they never had elsewhere, and the air was growing fresh enough to make the hot tea very acceptable and comfortable.

They did not sit long after they had done, for it really was beginning to grow chilly.

"Now you had all better go and have a game of some kind or other," said Kitty, "and I will pack the baskets ready to go into the cart, and then I'll come and play too."

It took her longer, though, than she had counted on to pack all the things so that they would travel safely, and she had put them in and taken them out again so many times that when at last she had done, and glanced up with a sigh of relief to look for the others, she saw with dismay that the short winter's day was well-nigh over. The sun had disappeared quite suddenly, leaving behind it a leaden, lowering sky, while in the distance hung a thick mist, which told of heavy rain not far off.

"I will call the others. I think we had better be starting soon; the weather has changed," she murmured, and, springing to her feet, she shouted, and shouted, and shouted again. No answer came.

Still calling, she went around the tors to another point, but she could catch no glimpse of any living being, and in that great waste of rocks and furze and underbrush it was not surprising. Kitty, though, was surprised and a little bit alarmed, and she ran from point to point, calling and calling again; but for a long time the only answer was the long sighs the wind gave as it rushed over the level land, and lost itself with a little wail of anger amongst the old tors. Then at last came a long shout, and Dan appeared, and almost at the same moment a drop fell smartly on Kitty's cheek, then another and another, and suddenly a heavy downpour descended on them.

"I saw it coming," gasped Dan. "Look!" and Kitty looked across the land stretching below, and saw rain in a dense column rushing towards them, driven by a squall which dashed it into them pitilessly.

In little more than a moment the whole place had changed from a sunny, idyllic little paradise to a bleak, howling wilderness, lonely, weird, exposed to all the worst storms of heaven.

"Where are the others?" gasped Kitty, seizing some of the packages to run with them to the cart.

"I told them not to climb up here again, but to start for home and we would overtake them as quickly as we could. It wasn't raining then, or I'd have told them to run to the little shanty; but I should think they'd have the sense to do that," said Dan.

"Oh yes, I expect they are all right. Now then, run, but run carefully," added Kitty. "All the cups are in that basket, and Aunt Pike will be very angry if we break any."

But it was not easy to run at all, or even to hurry down that rugged slope, while carrying five baskets and a rug or two, with a squall catching them at every turn, and the short, dry grass becoming as slippery as glass with the rain; but at long last they reached the foot and the little hut, and there they found Betty struggling with all her might to get Mokus between the shafts of the cart.

"He will have to be taken out again, I expect," said Dan in an aside to Kitty. "She has probably done up every strap wrongly. It is good of her, though, to try."

"I am glad she made Tony stand in under shelter," said Kitty thankfully, as her eye fell on her little brother in the doorway of the hut. "Where is Anna? I suppose she is inside."

"You bet," said Dan shortly. "Anna knows how to take care of herself."

But Anna was not in the shanty, or anywhere within reach of their shouts.

"I expect she is ever so far towards home by now," said Betty absently, quite absorbed in the interest of harnessing Mokus. "She started to walk home as fast as ever she could. I called to her to wait, but she wouldn't listen."

"Oh, well, it's all right; she can't miss the road, and we shall soon overtake her," said Dan. "Now then, in you get."

It was great fun packing themselves into the cart. Betty and Tony, in great spirits, sat in the bottom of it, with a rug drawn over them like a tent, and two little peepholes to peer through, and were as happy and warm as could be. Kitty and Dan sat upon the seat with the other rug round their shoulders, and the moment they were ready and had gathered up the reins, Mokus, who had been standing flapping his long ears crossly when the rain struck him particularly smartly, started off at a really quick trot, which covered the ground rapidly, but rattled and jolted the cart to such an extent that it was all Dan and Kitty could do to keep their seats, while as for the two in the bottom of the cart, they were tossed about like parched peas in a frying-pan. And oh! how they all laughed! It is not always the funniest or wittiest things that cause the most laughter, and somehow to-day the sight of Mokus flying along on his little hoofs, the dreary scene, the lashing rain, themselves wrapped up like a lot of gipsies, with the risk of finding themselves at any moment tossed out and left sitting in the mud, made them laugh and laugh until they ached. And all the time Dan kept on saying the silliest things, and waving his whip about his head as though he were a Roman driving a chariot drawn by fiery horses, urging Mokus on to a more and more reckless pace, until at last they had to beg him to stop, they were aching so with laughter.

But except for some forlorn-looking geese on the common, who hissed at them as they passed, they did not meet a living creature the whole of the way they went.

"Cheer up, old ladies!" Dan shouted to the geese consolingly, "you've nothing on to spoil. If I'd been made to stand a flood as you have, I wouldn't make a fuss about a little summer shower like this."

"If you want your last glimpse of the tors," said Kitty, who knew every inch of the way, "look back now." And they all looked, and all shuddered as their eyes travelled over the spot where they had so lately been basking in the sunshine. It looked gloomy and awe-inspiring now, with black clouds lowering over it, a heavy mist wrapping it round, while at the foot the little neglected shanty added the last desolate touch to the wild scene. "Doesn't it seem impossible that we were playing there only a little while ago," said Kitty, "and I was wishing I could sleep there?" Then, with sudden recollection, "I wonder where Anna is. She must have walked very fast."

"I only hope she isn't still up there," said Dan with a laugh, waving his hand towards the tors. "Poor old Anna!"

"Oh!" squealed Betty, who loved horrors and excitements, "suppose she is, and sees us going farther and farther away from her. If she called and called, nobody would hear her, and oh, she'll be so frightened. If she had to stay there all night, I am sure she would die of fright," and Betty looked utterly horrified. "What shall we do? Isn't it egsciting!"

"No, not at all," said Dan impatiently; "don't be silly. Why should she be there? I told you all to hurry

homewards, and Anna did as she was told. That is the difference between you and Anna, you see."

"Well," said Betty thoughtfully, "I didn't do as I was told, but I think I've got the best of it—especially," she added, "if Anna *is* left behind."

Dan seemed to take it as a personal insult that she should dwell on such a possibility. "If you say anything more about Anna being left behind," he said, "I'll put you out of the cart and send you back to look for her."

"Then there would be two of us lost instead of one," said Betty aggravatingly, "and oh, wouldn't you get into a row when you got home!"

"She must be on ahead," said Kitty, anxious to make peace. "Only I didn't think she had had time to get so far."

"Perhaps some one has given her a lift," said Dan, with sudden hope. "Anna is sharp enough to take or to ask for one if she had the chance. She knows it is a tight pack for us all to get in this cart at once, and she would think Mokus would behave as badly going home as he did on the way out."

This all seemed to them so likely, that they drove on again gaily, their minds quite easy about her; all except Betty, who persisted in gazing back at the tors as long as they were in view, in the hope of seeing a signal of distress. Mokus stepped out at a pace that the carrots had never roused him to on the outward journey, yet darkness had come on before they reached Gorlay.

"Isn't it like old times," sighed Betty happily, "driving through the dark and the wet, and then reaching home, and changing and having a jolly tea by the fire, and there will be no Aunt Pike, and we will be able to stay up as late as we like—"

"But there will be Anna," said Tony. "It won't be *quite* the same."

But, alas, there was no Anna, and her absence on this particular occasion did much more to upset their evening than her presence would have done. In answer to their inquiries as to when and how she got back, they were told that she had not got back at all. No one had seen her, and a dreadful conviction began to steal over them that she would not come—that, in fact, she was lost, and probably, as Betty had suggested, wandering about those dangerous tors, frightened nearly out of her senses. What was to be done? At first they were for waiting; but then, as the rain continued to stream down, and the wind to blow gustily, they felt that it was no time for delay. Something must be done, and done quickly.

"Oh, if only father were home!" cried Kitty despairingly. But unfortunately Dr. Trenire was in Plymouth on business, and would certainly not be home that night.

Dan sprang up, and began to put on his boots and leggings. "I am going back there again," he announced. "It is only three miles or so, and I can walk it in an hour."

"But you can't go alone."

"Yes, I can; and I can get people out there to help me search, and if I find her I'll get some one to drive us home;" and flinging on his coat and cap, he was rushing out of the house before they realized what he was doing.

"But, Dan," Kitty called after him, "which way are you going?"

"The same, of course. There is but one—at least only one that Anna knows," he called back, and he raced off into the darkness before any one could say another word.

Kitty was vexed. "How foolish of him," she said. "Of course there are other ways, and Anna must have taken one of them, or we should have passed her; and he shouldn't have gone alone either, he should have taken Jabez and a lantern. What can he do if he finds her?"

"And he may get lost too," said Betty comfortingly. But Dan was already racing up through the dark wet street, too absorbed by the heroic side of his actions to spare a thought for the common sense.

Kitty dropped into a chair in a state of deep despondency, blaming herself for everything. "Why had she started for home without making sure about Anna? How wrong it was of her not to turn back! What would Aunt Pike say when she knew?" and so the thoughts poured through her mind until she was well-nigh distracted.

Tony, worn out by his long day in the fresh air, was fast asleep. Betty, exhausted by excitement and alarm, was scarcely able to keep awake. The servants were in the kitchen regaling themselves and

Jabez with supper and a dish of horrors, when suddenly Kitty sprang to her feet with the force of an idea that had come to her. She would take the carriage and Jabez, and drive very slowly and carefully by another road straight back to Helbarrow Tors. They would inquire at every house they passed, and—only she did not tell Jabez this, for fear of alarming him—if need be, they would search even the tors themselves.

It would be very difficult, she knew; but what did difficulties matter at such a time as this? With Anna lost on such a night, her father and aunt away, and she alone responsible, they must do something, they must, they must, and quickly too. She looked at the clock; it was only seven. There was just a chance that they might find Anna and have her home in warmth and safety by ten. She ran to the kitchen and broached her plan to Jabez. He winced at the prospect, but raised no objection. Indeed, they were all too greatly alarmed to object to anything. Jabez had been picturing Anna in turn killed, walking into the water, stolen, wandering about lost and crying for help, so he could hardly refuse his help in rescuing her from one of these fates.

In a very short time Prue was harnessed, and with Kitty beside him, and a pile of rugs and wraps, Jabez was driving off at a good pace, while those at home prepared fires and hot blankets and everything else they could think of.

But many long, weary hours elapsed before the fires and the hot blankets were needed, and the next day was dawning, bleak and cold, when at last, to the intense relief and excitement of the weary watchers, old Prue's step was heard coming quickly down the street, and the two servants flew out to the door. But Jabez drove straight round to the yard with his load, and there, with the help of Kitty and Dan—who was with them—they lifted down a big still bundle, which was Anna, wet through, worn out, unconscious. They carried her in very tenderly and put her to bed at once, and everything they could do for her ease and comfort they did. But though her strength revived and the dreadful exhaustion passed away, it was soon evident that she was ill—very ill, it seemed to them—and Fanny in alarm ran for Dr. Lang; and at his request telegrams were sent to Dr. Trenire and Aunt Pike, bidding them come home at once; while poor Kitty, overcome with fatigue and anxiety and remorse that this should have happened while she was in charge of them all, went and shut herself up in her room, locking out even Betty.

The story of that night's search she told later—of their long, slow drive over the bleak roads in the teeth of a high wind and a driving rain; of their close examination of every yard of the way, one walking while the other drove; and of their hopelessness when they looked at the gateways and fields, into any of which Anna might have turned, and the lanes down which she might have wandered. But of her own feelings she could not speak—the awful anxiety and remorse; the sense of responsibility and blameworthiness that filled her; her remembrance of Anna's sacrifice for Dan the night she saved his life; her dread of what they might see or hear—those were feelings too deep for words. So, too, was her agony of joy and relief when at last, almost by a miracle, they came on her lying in a linyay down a lane they had very nearly overlooked in the darkness.

How she had wandered there no one would ever know, and Anna could never tell. She must have doubled back when she found she had taken the wrong road, and then, in her fright and confusion, have gone round, and up and down, until she had lost herself far more effectually than if she had tried to. That she had met no one to ask her way of was not wonderful on such a night and in a neighbourhood where there were only half a dozen cottages altogether, and at long distances apart.

She had recognized Kitty and Jabez when they roused her, but in her relief had had a fit of hysterics which frightened them both nearly out of their wits, and then had fainted.

Poor Kitty did her best to keep calm, and she and Jabez carried Anna to the carriage, and there, wrapped in all the rugs and shawls they could muster, she lay in Kitty's arms while Jabez drove quickly home.

Their shortest and best way now was the road they had travelled so happily in the morning, so once again Kitty had a dim glimpse of the tors, standing up so lonely and desolate in the black night, lashed by the rain and swept by the wind, but she turned her eyes away, half shuddering. They were nearly home when they met Dan crawling along, hopeless and dead beat. He was soaked to the skin, his feet were galled and raw with walking in wet boots, but, worst of all, his search had been fruitless. Crawling painfully, miserably homewards, with a mind full of the fate that might have overtaken Anna—Anna, who had saved his life—was it any wonder that he broke down and cried when, on hearing wheels, and turning to ask for a lift, he recognized first old Prue, then Jabez and Kitty, and, best of all, Anna, and knew that his search was ended?

BANISHED.

Kitty was to be sent away to school. That was what that unlucky day had done for Kitty. The fiat had gone forth, and there was no escape.

Aunt Pike had been very frightened indeed when she was summoned home, and learned all about Anna's Helbarrow Tors experience, and found her seriously ill with pneumonia as a result of it. She was very angry and very indignant, and angry fright, or fright and anger combined, make the worst form of anger as a rule.

"Kitty was responsible, and there could not possibly be any excuse for her leaving the spot without her cousin," declared Mrs. Pike. "Kitty knew that there were many ways amongst which she might get lost, and how lonely it was, and she and Dan should have gone in search of poor Anna, and not have left the place until they had found her or heard for certain where she was. The idea of coming all the way home without her, and with never a thought or a care as to what had become of her! It was almost incredible!"

"I did think. I did care," pleaded Kitty. "Of course I thought she was ahead of us. I never dreamed that she could have lost her way, or of course I shouldn't have come home without looking for her."

"Then you should have dreamed, or have taken the trouble to find out. In any case, you should not have left the spot without her."

"But we really thought she was ahead of us," repeated Kitty earnestly, "and we hurried on to pick her up."

"*How* could you overtake her or pick her up, when you were hurrying as fast as you could away from her, leaving her alone, poor child, to wander about that dreadful, dreadful place, in that awful storm in the dead of night?" demanded Aunt Pike angrily.

"But—" began Kitty, then realized the hopelessness of trying to explain, and said no more.

"For the future I shall always feel," said Aunt Pike severely, "that I not only cannot trust you, Katherine, but that I can never know what mischief you may be leading the younger ones into. I am sure they would not be so wild if they hadn't you as a ringleader."

Kitty's cheeks flamed with indignation. *She* could not be trusted! *She* led the others into mischief! Her eyes darkened with anger at the injustice, for all the trouble had been caused by Anna deciding, in her pig-headed way, that she knew a short cut home, and would take it without waiting for the others and the donkey. She had thought she would get home first and be able to laugh at them and Mokus. She herself had admitted as much.

Kitty's mind travelled back over that night search—the cold, the wet, the horror of it, her own exhaustion and Dan's; then she came back again suddenly to the present, and Aunt Pike's voice saying,
—

"You know, Katherine, I have had to overlook more than one serious piece of ill-behaviour on your part since I have been here. Of course I put down much to the lawless, careless way in which you grew up, but, at the same time, I must admit that, after that very unpleasant episode with Lettice Kitson, I have never felt really quite easy in allowing Anna to be much with you. I could not avoid feeling that you were having anything but a good influence over her, and but for your poor father's sake—"

Kitty's cheeks were white enough now, and her eyes were very wide and full of indignation as she met her aunt's stern gaze, but there was no fear or shame in them. She opened her lips, but before a word escaped them she closed them again, hesitated, and then walked quickly away. And the next thing she knew was that she was to be sent away, and when she heard it she thought her heart would break indeed.

Her father, though most reluctantly, had agreed to the plan, because he could see no prospect of peace or happiness for her at home. He very often in those days sighed deeply from a heavy heart, for his home was very different from what he had hoped it would be. It was true that things were more orderly, but the old careless joyousness, the muddle and confusion, seemed now vastly preferable.

Aunt Pike had never approved of Kitty. Her careless, dreamy nature was a constant offence in her eyes; her sudden impulses, her want of concentration, her idle moods, when she sat just thinking and thinking and doing nothing, irritated Mrs. Pike beyond endurance. They were as opposite to each other in tastes and natures as any two persons could be, and neither could understand or make allowance for the other. And Dr. Trenire, seeing all this, and how they irritated and annoyed each other, saw how bad

it was, too, for Kitty's character, and at last consented, though very, very reluctantly, to Mrs. Pike's strongly-urged proposals that Kitty should be sent to a boarding-school.

Poor Kitty! If ever there was in this world one poor little mortal more stricken with home-sickness than another, that poor little mortal was Kitty. She loved every inch of the house and garden, of Gorlay, and of her county, and every person and animal who made up her home and her home life—loved all, too, with such an intensity that she felt it would be utterly impossible to live day after day away from them.

It was a relief to her to hear that the school she was to go to was no farther off than Plymouth, but beyond that she took no interest in it, for the school was of Mrs. Pike's selecting, and wicked Kitty detested it before she even knew anything about it, and made up her mind to go on detesting it, no matter what it turned out to be. To her it was simply a prison, and she could not and would not try to love her jailers. She felt, too, a conviction that her aunt would have told Miss Pidsley, the headmistress, all the story of the suspicion which had rested on her, and told it from her own point of view, of course.

There was one good outcome of the resentment Kitty bore her aunt for "getting her sent away," as she put it—it made her determine not to let Mrs. Pike see how much she felt it, and so helped her to bear up bravely. Helped her, that is, to bear up by day, but oh the nights! Oh, those long, miserable nights of heart-break and homesickness, when the pain was so intense as almost to drive her to appeal on her knees to Aunt Pike to let her stay at home, to promise abjectly to be and do all that she could wish. And there were those other terrible moments, too, when misery nearly drove her to tell the truth about Anna and Lettice.

Those were, perhaps, the hardest impulses of all to fight, for she knew that but to speak would mean, probably, that she would be considered fit to remain in her home, and Anna it would be who would be sent away.

All her life after Kitty was thankful that she had had the strength given her to resist this temptation, but it was a very real one at the time. There was to be no delay in sending her away. She was to go at the end of the Christmas holidays, and active preparations for her outfit began at once. To Betty this was most enthralling, and largely made up for the painful part, but Kitty took no interest in it whatever. Not even the fact of having a new Inverness and umbrella, and four new dresses all at once, not to speak of gloves, and hats, and shoes, and a number of other things, could rouse her to any sense of pleasure.

She was very sorry later, and wept many a bitter tear over the new blotter her father bought her, and the nice muff and boa he gave her. When it was too late, she could never see them without remembering the delight with which he unwrapped them and gave them to her, the expectant look in his kind eyes of the pleasure they would bring to her, and of her own coldness, her unsmilingness, the indifference with which she took them and laid them down with scarcely a glance, yet all the while her heart was breaking, breaking with her love for him and all he did for her. How could she care what she wore, or did, or used, if she was exiled from him!

Then came the day when Mrs. Pike took her to her school and left her. It was a wet, stormy day, and Kitty sat looking through the streaming windows at the rain-swept country with a heart as stormy. But though everything looked old and worn, and as unbeautiful as the day itself, she gained some consolation from the sight. "The next time I see them," she thought, gazing wistfully at the trees and houses, the bridges and fields, "I shall be going home! home! home!"

"Yes, but thirteen long weeks must elapse first," came the next thought.

"But what are thirteen weeks?" said the worn-looking objects cheerfully. "Nothing! We have seen years pass by, and thirteen weeks are but so many moments, flying already."

Then at last they reached their station, and their journey was over; but in all the years to come, never, never again would Kitty Trenire pass the long, ugly rows of squalid backs of houses just outside the station, and dull depressing streets, never again would she enter that station itself, without living through once more and tasting again the misery, the strangeness, the forlornness which filled her heart that afternoon. She might come in the height of happiness, in the company of those she loved best, with hope and joy before and behind her, but never could the sight of it all, the smells, and the sounds, fail to bring back to Kitty memories of that supremely miserable day, and through any happiness make her taste again for a moment the forlornness, the black misery which swamped her as she first stood on that draughty, dingy platform.

There was a smart tussle with the porter over the getting out of Kitty's luggage, for Aunt Pike was one of those unfortunate persons who never fail to come to words with porter or cabman, who, in fact,

rub every one the wrong way to start with by taking for granted that they are trying to shirk their duties and to cheat her.

Then came the inevitable tussle with the cabman as to the fare, during which Kitty glanced about her at the people on the platform, picking out with special interest those boys and girls who looked as though they also were going to school, and expending on them a great amount of pity which was probably in some cases quite wasted.

At last came the summons to "get in," and Kitty got into the musty old cab beside her aunt, and they were started on the last stage of their journey through rain-washed busy streets, where the people were hurrying along under umbrellas, or in omnibuses and cabs. Now and then a cab laden with luggage would lumber past them on its way to the station, and Kitty's mind would follow the people inside it through a whole long chapter of imaginary happenings until something else passed and distracted her thoughts.

By-and-by they left the streets, and came to a quiet suburb, where road after road, lined on either side with houses exactly like each other, stretched in depressing monotony. To Kitty it looked the very acme of correct, neat, yet hateful propriety, and her thoughts flew back longingly to the dear old irregular wind-swept street of Gorlay, which was to her then the most lovable and lovely spot on the face of the earth. At last, when she was almost tired of speculating on the people who lived in the houses they were passing, and of pitying them for being condemned to such a fate, the jolting cab drew up before a corner house, one of the primmest of all the houses in the dullest of all the roads they had passed that afternoon, and Kitty saw a shining brass plate on the rails at the foot of the tiny patch of trim garden, and on the brass plate "Miss Pidsley."

That was all. And this was the place that was to be her home! It was quite a small school to which she had been banished—a small private one where a few girls "who needed particular attention and training received the individual care they needed," as Aunt Pike carefully read out from the prospectus, dealing poor Kitty thus the last and most crushing insult.

If the outside of the house had been unlike home and Gorlay, the inside was even more so; the extreme neatness, the absolute spotlessness of everything, the bareness, the high, square, ugly rooms, each and all weighed on Kitty's spirits with a fresh load of depression. At the thought of being left there for months together with not a face about her that she knew, or a person who cared for her, she felt positively sick with misery. She even dreaded the moment when Aunt Pike should depart. But the moment soon came, and with a peck at Kitty's cheek, and a last request that she would make the most of the excellent opportunities for improvement now opening out before her, and a desire that she would *try* to be a good girl. Aunt Pike left her, and Kitty gazed after her with eyes aching with the tears she would not shed. She pictured her journeying home to Gorlay, saw her driving up through the street, drawing up before the old house, the door opening and the light streaming out, and Betty and Tony—and then the tears came, whether she would or no, and drowned every thought and sight and sound but that of her own misery.

No. 127 Laburnum Road was under the joint partnership of two ladies, Miss Pidsley and Miss Hammond. Miss Pidsley was the chief partner, and took the lead. She interviewed the parents, managed the house, the meals, and almost everything, while Miss Hammond's duties lay more especially with the girls, their lessons and games.

Before ever Kitty went to the school she had decided that she could not like Miss Pidsley. She declared that she knew exactly what she would be like. She would be cold, and stern, and hateful, or Aunt Pike would not have taken to her; and when Miss Pidsley came into the room to receive them, she knew that to some extent she was right. Her new mistress welcomed them—at least she shook hands with them—and she smiled—at least she half closed her eyes in a weary fashion, and widened her lips, but there was no heartiness or gladness in it. But while Kitty felt the chilliness of it, she could not help sympathizing with Miss Pidsley. To her it would have been wonderful if any one had been able to smile in such a house as that.

Presently tea was brought in, and for nearly half an hour Kitty sat holding tea and bread and butter, trying her best to swallow both, but vainly. Miss Hammond did not appear at tea. She had only just arrived, Miss Pidsley explained, and was tired. The other pupils had not yet come; there were only four of them, and they travelled by later trains from higher up the line.

After tea, Kitty, who was to have a room to herself that term as there was no room-mate for her, was shown her little bare bedroom, and there Aunt Pike said her farewells, and left her alone amidst her boxes; and there she remained crying and crying her heart out, her boxes untouched, everything forgotten but her own overpowering misery. "She could not bear it," she moaned, "she could not bear it!" She thought of her father, and Tony, and Betty, and felt sure her heart must break.

"Poor child! We all have to bear it, dear, once in our lives, and some of us many times," said a soft voice very quietly, while a soft hand was laid on her bowed head.

Kitty was so startled that she forgot her disfigured face and looked up; and when she had once looked, and her eyes met the kind eyes gazing into hers, she did not mind, for they were misty too with sympathy.

"You remind me so of the day that I first went away to school, Katherine. You are Katherine, aren't you?"

"Yes," murmured the owner of the name; "but they always call me Kitty at home, all but Aunt Pike."

"May I call you Kitty?"

"Please do," said Kitty eagerly.

"Well, dear, I want you to unpack your things now, and try to make your room less bare and unhomelike. It will look so different when you have your own pretty things about it, and will seem more your own."

"I don't want it to," said Kitty miserably. "It isn't home, and it never could be; in fact, I don't want it to."

"Oh, come now, Kitty dear, don't talk like that; call up your courage, and make the best of things. It is only for a time, only for a little time," said wily Miss Hammond; "but however short it is, it is always better to try and make it a pleasant time to look back upon. Think of that, Kitty; always when you are hesitating and feel tempted to be disagreeable, or to make things disagreeable, think of the future, and what the present will be like to look back upon."

Kitty was impressed. She looked up with a brighter, more interested face.

"Have you a mother and father?"

"Mother is dead," said Kitty softly.

"Poor child," said Miss Hammond, laying her cool fingers against Kitty's hot cheek. "For your father's sake then, dear, try to be as brave and cheerful as you can. It is sad enough for him, I am sore, to have this parting, but to know that you are grieving and unhappy will double his sadness. Besides which," she went on thoughtfully, "you know he is paying a good deal of money for your education here, and for his sake you should try to get all the good you can from what he is doing for you. Doesn't the thought of working hard for his sake comfort you?"

"Oh yes," sighed Kitty eagerly, clutching at any kind of comfort, at anything she could do for those she loved. "Oh yes, it will. I—I hadn't thought of that; but I feel now as if I must work and work—" then she broke off, embarrassed, and actually laughed at herself.

"There, I knew you had plenty of spirit," cried Miss Hammond delightedly. "Now I am going to unpack some of my boxes, and then they are going to bring me some tea to my room. Will you come and join me, dear? I am sure you can manage another tea."

"Oh yes, thank you," smiled Kitty, "I am sure I can. I would love to come."

Left alone, Kitty began at once to unpack and arrange her belongings. She felt a little choky as she took out and looked at the photographs and the various little parting gifts that had been given her, particularly when she came across a piece of spar that Tony, without saying a word to any one, must have wrapped up and tucked in amongst her things as a pleasant surprise for her. It was a very pretty bit that he had himself found, and was immensely proud of. Kitty's eyes filled as she held the little cold stone and kissed it. Then she hung up a calendar that Betty had given her, one of her own manufacture. "I shall soon be able to mark off one day," she thought with some relief.

Her room grew to look so different and so nice that she became quite interested, and rather a long time had elapsed before she tidied herself and went out in search of Miss Hammond's room. It was not difficult to find, for it was on the same landing as her own, and had Miss Hammond's name painted on the door.

"Come in," said a voice in answer to her knock. "Come in. I was just about to begin without you. Sit down here, dear, in this low chair by the table. We will have a 'plate tea' and a drawing-room tea combined;" and Kitty dropped gladly into a pretty low chair beside the tea-table, which was drawn up to the fire, and Miss Hammond drew up her chair to the other side.

"Oh, what a grand thing tea is! I love it," she exclaimed with a sigh of pleasure. It was said so girlishly and impulsively that Kitty laughed as she agreed.

"Pamela Peters has come," said Miss Hammond a moment later, "and I have asked her to tea too."

Kitty felt just a little feeling of disappointment. She did not want to meet any more strangers then; she was tired and shy, and she knew that her eyes were still swelled. She wanted, too, to have Miss Hammond to herself—she was so sympathetic and understanding, and so bright and interesting. Kitty had never before met any one like her, and was charmed.

"I will not say I want you two to be friends, or that I think you will like each other, for I know that that is the surest way to make you determine you never could, would, or should be. But I do think you will like Pamela, and I thought it would be nice for you to get to know one of your future companions a little before meeting them all together."

Kitty could not but agree. One stranger now, with Miss Hammond to break the ice, was infinitely preferable to four by-and-by, when she would be alone. And then came a knock at the door, and Pamela Peters walked in.

Pamela was a taller and altogether larger girl than Kitty. She looked rather older too. Perhaps a certain air of self-possession gave one that impression. Kitty gazed at her first with interest and then with wonder, for she looked as smiling and happy as though she had just reached home for the holidays, instead of returning to school for the term. She had to check her surprise while Miss Hammond introduced them and made room for Pamela at the table, but it soon returned again with double force.

"I am very glad to see you," said Pamela heartily, turning to Kitty again. "Isn't it jolly to be back?"

"Jolly!—what!—isn't it what?" stammered Kitty, at a loss to understand her.

Miss Hammond laughed. "Kitty Trenire thinks it anything but jolly; her heart is miles away from here; but I hope that in time she will find something here to care for too." And even Kitty actually felt that in time perhaps she might. In that cosy little room, and with those two new friends, it did not seem so absolutely impossible; but when Kitty's thoughts flew to Miss Pidsley, the bare, unhomelike room downstairs, and the dreary road outside, her mind began to waver, and she felt anything but hopeful.

"I *am* so glad to be back," sighed Pamela, with genuine pleasure. She was not exaggerating in the least—even Kitty could see that. "But," she added, "if you have a nice home and people to leave, it must be awfully hard. I expect it is what I feel at the end of term when I have to leave here."

"Oh, it is much worse than that; it must be," gasped Kitty, her astonishment overcoming her shyness. "But you are laughing. You really love going home, of course?"

"No, I don't. I am miserable. You see, I have no real home, only a guardian, an old man, who doesn't want me any more than I want to go, and is just as anxious as I am for the holidays to be over. He is old, and an invalid too, poor old man, and he never will have any one to stay in the house, or allow me to; so it is dull, and one doesn't feel very overjoyed at going home to it. I can assure you I find it much more exciting to come back to school. I suppose you have brothers and sisters and a real home?" looking across at Kitty with wistful eyes.

"Oh yes!" said Kitty, and then she fell to talking of them; and Miss Hammond and Pamela listened with such interest and laughter to her account of their escapades and adventures, that Kitty talked on and on, until at last they were interrupted by a cab drawing up before the house, and Miss Hammond had to go to welcome the new arrivals.

"I feel as though I knew Betty and Dan and Tony already," said Pamela as they strolled down the corridor to their rooms. "I wish I did. And your father must be a perfect dear, I think."

"He is," said Kitty warmly, but with a catch in her voice; and from that moment she loved Pamela. "I do wish," she said impulsively, "I do wish you could come and stay with us, and know them all. There isn't very much to see at Gorlay, but there are beautiful places all round it, and we could have some jolly times."

"I'd love to come," said Pamela heartily. "I know I should enjoy myself tremendously, I feel it in my bones. But don't ask me if you don't really mean it, for I shall come, I tell you plainly."

Kitty laughed, actually laughed quite gaily, and made up her mind that it should not be her fault if Pamela did not have at least one happy holiday.

The next day the girls were allowed to write home to announce their safe arrival. Kitty wrote to her father a letter full of eagerness and promises, and longings for the holidays, which made Dr. Trenire smile and sigh as he laid it away in his pocket-book, and made the house seem emptier and less itself even than it had done before. In with her father's letter Kitty put one for Betty. It was the first that young person had ever received, and it so filled her with a sense of importance that Anna and Tony said she was almost unbearable all the rest of the day. How many times she read it over no one could have counted, but at every opportune and inopportune moment it was drawn out of her pocket, until at last it grew quite frayed at the edges, and, though scarcely a word it contained was confided to the others, Betty read it again and again with compressed lips and frowning brows, and an air of seriousness that nearly drove them frantic.

There was not much in it either to give rise to all this.

"Dearest Betty," wrote Kitty, "I have so much I want to say that I don't know what to say first. I am very lonely, but one day and night are over, and one of the girls is very nice, I think. She is called Pamela Peters, and I want to bring her home with me for the holidays, because she has no father or mother, or home, or anything but a guardian, a very cross old man, and I want her to see what jolly times we have. I think I shall like another girl too, called Hope Carey. She is quite little, about your age, and is very unhappy. Her mother was very ill when she left home, and she is always thinking about her and fretting. I think it was very cruel to send her back until her mother was better. I do feel so sorry for her.

"One of the first things I did was to take off my gray stockings and put them all away. I shall give them to one of the maids. It is lovely to be without the hateful things. I wonder what you are all doing at this very minute, and if you are thinking of me. I am always thinking of you all the time, and saying, 'Another minute gone, another hour gone,' but it only seems to make the time pass more slowly. I have a bedroom to myself, I am glad to say, and it looks very nice with my things about it, but of course I don't really care for it at all. I think Miss Pidsley isn't as nasty as I thought she was when Aunt Pike was with her. I think she is ill, or worried, or something, and not so very cross. Miss Hammond, the other principal, is a dear. I like her very much. We are all going out shopping one day with Miss Hammond. We are allowed to go on one Wednesday afternoon each month. Sometimes she takes the girls to see something, or to a concert, instead of going shopping. I do not want to buy anything for myself, but I think I shall get some flowers for Miss Hammond, and something for Hope, she is so unhappy, and she has very little pocket-money. We go for excursions in the summer and have theatricals at Christmas, and you and father will be invited to those. It is rather nice, isn't it? But of course I don't take any real interest in it. I hate being here, but I am going to work hard to make the time pass. I hope Anna is better. Give Tony my love, and tell him he was a perfect dear to give me his precious piece of spar. I shall always take it with me wherever I go. I will write to him next time. Mind you write and tell me everything, and give my love to Fanny, and Jabez, and Grace, and kiss Prue and Billy for me. Kiss Prue on her dear old cheek and her soft nose.—Your loving sister,

"Kitty."

CHAPTER XVII.

"GOOD IN EVERYTHING."

Betty's satisfaction, though, ended with the day. "I am never happy one day but what I've *got* to be unhappy the next," she said plaintively to her father the following evening, when telling him her woes.

"You might put it another way," he said, smiling, "and say you are never very unhappy one day but what you are very happy the next."

Betty shook her head gravely. "But I am not," she said. "I can't be *sure* I am going to be happy, but I can be that I am going to be unhappy, and sometimes it lasts for ever so long."

"You poor little suffering martyr," said Dr. Trenire, "what is wrong now?"

"It's my stockings," said Betty solemnly.

"Whatever is wrong with your stockings? Stand still, child, can't you, and tell me."

"No," said Betty, "I can't, my legs itch so. I am sure I shall be crazy before long. I *almost* wish I'd been sent away to school too, then I could give them away, as Kitty has."

"Given away what?—her legs? What made Kitty do it, and what is wrong with the stockings? Are they new, that they have only just begun to irritate you?"

"No, they aren't new, but—well, you see, I've only just been found out."

"What *do* you mean?"

"Well, you see, Aunt Pike would make us wear these ugly, woolly, itchy things, and"—Betty's voice waxed indignant—"she wouldn't believe us when we said we couldn't, and so—well, I thought of it first—we wore our black cotton ones under these, and then we didn't feel them."

"I see," said Dr. Trenire, a smile beginning to twinkle in his eyes.

"And you were not found out?"

"Not till to-day," with a triumphant air; "but to-day there was a hole in the gray ones, and I didn't know it; but Aunt Pike saw the black showing through, and she screamed out, 'Elizabeth, *what* has happened to your leg?' And oh! I did jump so; and then I looked, and there was a great black spot, and everybody was looking and laughing. It was—oh, it was dretful, and Aunt Pike was *so* angry, she made me go home and take off the black ones; and now she has taken all my cotton ones away, and—and I've *got* to wear these, and it's—it's *awful*, it really is, daddy," and poor Betty's eyes grew pink with tears.

"I know," said her father sympathetically. "I suffer in the same way myself. Don't cry, child; it will be all right. I will explain to your aunt."

But Betty had borne much that day, and the tears, at least a few, had to come. "She said if Tony can bear it, I can; but Tony doesn't mind, he doesn't feel it; he says, though, he would never have said he didn't if he had known it would make it harder for me and Kitty."

"Loyal Tony!" laughed Dr. Trenire. "I like his spirit. Well, don't fret about it any more; you shall have some others. I think, though, that we will have some other colour; they aren't very pretty, are they?"

"Pretty!" cried Betty; "they are *'trocious*. No one else would have worn them. I'll take them off now; shall I, father?"

"Hadn't you better wait till you have some others to put on?"

"Oh no, thank you. Fanny wouldn't take long getting me some. If you will give her some money, she won't be more than a few minutes. I'll wrap my feet up in two shawls for the time."

"I see there is to be no time wasted," said Dr. Trenire. "You are a business-like young person, Betty."

"Yes," said Betty, with satisfaction. "You see, I can't do anything until I have them; and if they are going to be bought, they may as well be bought quickly."

"Your logic is admirable; but, dear, why didn't you speak to me about it before? It would have been much better than pretending to obey your aunt all these weeks, and deceiving her."

Betty looked ashamed. To have the word "deceive" used about herself without any glossing of it over made her feel very small and mean.

"We did think of it, father," she said earnestly; "but Kitty said she didn't want to seem to be always complaining about Aunt Pike."

"I see," said Dr. Trenire quietly, and he gazed for a moment gravely into the fire before he left the room.

Betty never knew what passed between her father and her aunt; but she heard no more about the gray stockings, and she wrote off delightedly to Kitty to tell her all about it.

Kitty was out when the letter came. It was the day on which the girls were taken for an afternoon's shopping or sight-seeing.

"I really must get some presents to take home to them all," she had said quite seriously to Pamela in the morning.

Pamela laughed. "There are eleven more weeks to do it in," she said.

But Kitty covered her ears. "Don't, don't," she cried—"just when I have been telling myself that time is flying, and that I haven't many more chances."

"Well, you haven't *many*," laughed Pamela. "Of course we don't go every week. I think you are wise,

though, to get your things while you have the money, and if you see things later that you like better you mustn't mind."

"I shall keep my eyes turned away from the shops," said Kitty. "Now be quiet, Pamela, while I make my list."

"Mine is ready," said Pamela, with something between a laugh and a sigh, and she held up a blank sheet.

"Haven't you any one to get anything for?" said Kitty sympathetically, sorry at once that she had talked so much about herself. "Poor Pamela!"

"Only Miss Hammond," said Pamela. "We generally give her some flowers— most of us do, at least. Rhoda Collins doesn't; she says it seems such a waste of money, as flowers fade so soon. I suggested one day that she should give Miss Hammond a cake instead, as that at any rate was useful."

"And did she?"

"No; she said one couldn't get anything very nice for a penny."

Kitty tittered. "Flowers for Miss Hammond," she wrote on her list. "What do you give to Miss Pidsley?"

"Miss Pidsley!" Pamela looked surprised at her question. "Oh, nothing. You see, Miss Hammond goes with us, and—and—well, we all like her; but Miss Pidsley—I don't know why, but I think we never thought of giving her anything. I should be afraid to."

The shopping was really great fun; the girls swarmed about the counters and wandered about the shops, going into raptures over this thing and hesitating about buying that thing, until it really seemed as though all the purchases never would be made. Yet by degrees they somehow acquired a great many curious possessions.

Kitty bought a nice pocket-book for her father, a little brooch for Betty, a book for Tony, and a penknife for Anna; but it took so long to decide on these that she left her presents for the servants to get another day, for she still had to buy her flowers for Miss Hammond, and teatime was fast approaching. The flower-shop was perhaps the most fascinating of all; the cut flowers, the ferns, and the plants in the pots were perfectly bewildering in their beauty. Kitty was in raptures, and almost wished she had bought flowers to take home to them all, instead of the things she had got.

"Father would simply love that fern," she cried, "and Betty would go wild over that little white basket with the ferns and hyacinths in it. O Pamela, I do so want it for her! I want them all!"

Pamela had not lost her head as Kitty had. "Well, the hyacinths will have faded long before you go home, Kitty, and the brooch is easier to pack."

Kitty laughed somewhat shamefacedly. Her eye was already caught by a lovely little flowering rose-bush in a pot. "I must buy that," she said with determination, "and I am going to."

"For Miss Hammond? Oh, how nice! Stupid me had never thought of a plant for her. I always get cut flowers for her room."

"It isn't for Miss Hammond," said Kitty rather shyly; "I have bought violets for her. I think I will take the rose back to Miss Pidsley."

"Miss Pidsley! You funny girl, Kitty."

"Well, at any rate I will offer it to her, and if she doesn't like it— she can't hurt me; and it does seem rather hard that she should miss all this, and not have anything taken back to her either. She seems to have all the dull, disagreeable things to do, and none of the nice ones."

"I had never thought of that," said Pamela. "I suppose she chose what should be her work, and what should be Miss Hammond's."

"Then she must be a good sort to have given all the nicest things to others to do, and have kept all the dull ones for herself," said Kitty, with the frankness with which schoolgirls discuss their elders in private.

"Come along, girls," called Miss Hammond, returning to the shop. "I have ordered tea, and it will be ready in five minutes."

By this time it was getting dark, and it was very pleasant to turn from the cold, windy streets into the snug, brightly-lighted room where tea was laid for them at a couple of tables placed in the window. The blinds were up, and they could watch the people and the busy life in the streets, or could turn their eyes inwards and look at that in the room, where every table was occupied. They were all very hungry and pleased and excited. The food was good and the tea was good, and the girls could talk and laugh to their hearts' content.

Then there was the walk home through the busy streets again, where the shops were all brilliantly lighted now, making everything look very gay and cheerful. Kitty felt the exhilaration of it tingling in her blood as she stepped along through the strange scenes which, in her eyes, were so exciting and gay and full of interest.

When they reached home and the others all flew off to their rooms, Kitty stood for a moment hesitating; then, with a little added flush on her cheeks, she walked along the hall to Miss Pidsley's private room and knocked. There was a moment's silence, then "Come in," said Miss Pidsley in a voice that was not exactly encouraging, for it was that of a person who had reached the limits of her patience.

Kitty almost wished she had not come. She seemed to be doing such a dreadful thing by interrupting, and suddenly her pretty rose looked very poor and insignificant; but there was no drawing back now, so she opened the door and went in. Miss Pidsley looked up very sharply.

"Oh, surely, Katherine," she began, when she saw who it was, "it is not time for your music lesson yet?" Then she noticed that Kitty had on her hat, and had evidently only just come in.

"Oh no, Miss Pidsley," said Kitty, "there is an our yet before that. I hope I haven't interrupted you. I brought you home a little rose-tree, which I hope—I—I thought you might like it," and she put the beautiful, cheery-looking little crimson Rambler down on the table beside her.

Miss Pidsley looked completely surprised, but quite pleased. "How kind of you, Katherine—how very kind of you to think of me," she said, and Katherine noticed that her voice sounded strangely. Then her head dropped on her hand, and she gave a deep, deep sigh. "Oh," she exclaimed, and the words seemed to be forced from her, "I am *so* worried, and oh! so tired, so tired." Then she looked up again with almost an embarrassed air. "I am afraid I spoke sharply when you knocked. I feared it might be Jane again, and after the scene I have had with her I really do not want to see her for some time yet. She has quarrelled with the house-maid, and both have given me notice; and what to do I don't know, just at the beginning of term and all." Miss Pidsley talked on as though she really could not keep her troubles to herself any longer. "It has been a most trying scene; they upset me dreadfully, they were so violent."

Had any one else in the house heard the usually reserved headmistress talking so unreservedly they would have gasped with astonishment. But Kitty was too full of sympathetic interest to think of anything else. She had a little unconscious way of her own of winning confidence from the most unlikely of people, and poor Miss Pidsley, who was so weary, so overburdened with worries, so perplexed and altogether out of heart, could not refrain from pouring her troubles out to her; for, first of all, her sympathy, and, secondly, her little gift of the rose had carried her straight into Miss Pidsley's lonely, aching heart.

There was Miss Hammond, of course, for her to confide in, and Miss Hammond would have been told some of the worries by-and-by, but deep down in Miss Pidsley's heart lurked a little pain, a little trouble that Miss Hammond's advice could never lessen. Miss Hammond was attractive, charming, genial, and every one liked her; the girls all adored her. Miss Pidsley was not attractive, and she had not a genial manner, and she told herself that nobody cared for her, and that the girls feared and disliked her. And, unfortunately, this feeling, which hurt her cruelly, made her withdraw herself more and more from all but what one might call the business part of the life, and so gave the girls a real reason for feeling towards her as they did.

Fortunately Kitty had not known Miss Pidsley long enough to realize how very unlike herself she was now, so she was not at all embarrassed, but only intensely full of a desire to help.

"Miss Pidsley," she said, after a moment's pause, "if you would let me, I will write to father and ask him if he knows of any girls that would do for you. He often does hear of servants wanting places—nice ones too. You see, he knows so many poor people."

Miss Pidsley looked up surprised. She had never thought of Kitty as a possible helper in her dilemma. "It is very kind of you, Katharine, to think of it," she said warmly. "I should indeed be most grateful to your father if he could help me. He would know that the girls were respectable and nice. But I really do not like to trouble him, he is such a busy man."

"Oh, father wouldn't think it a trouble. I will write to-night," said Kitty, delighted at the prospect of being able to help. "I wish you had been with us this afternoon, Miss Pidsley; you would have enjoyed it so. We had a lovely time."

"I wish I had," said Miss Pidsley. "At any rate I should have had some tea, which is more than I got at home."

"No tea!" Kitty was shocked. No wonder she found her mistress tired and overdone. "Shall I tell them to get you some now?" she asked, moving towards the door.

"Oh no!" cried Miss Pidsley, alarmed. "I would not ask for anything while matters are in such a state in the kitchen." Then she laughed with some embarrassment at her confession of fear.

"I will go and take off my things now," said Kitty, and she left rather abruptly and ran quickly to her room.

The throwing off of her hat and coat occupied less than a minute; then, taking out from a tin box a spirit-lamp and kettle, she filled the latter and put it on to boil. That done, she ran softly down the stairs to the pantry. Fortunately for her, Nellie, the schoolroom maid, was there alone. Nellie, who was an easy-going, good-tempered girl, had been the pleased recipient of the discarded gray stockings, and had ever since showed a gratitude which was beyond Kitty's comprehension, for in her opinion it was she who had most cause to be grateful. To Nellie Kitty explained her wants, and after a brief, whispered consultation she was soon speeding back with a little jug of milk, some tea in a small teapot, and a plate of biscuits on a tray. In her room she had a pretty teacup of her own, which she meant to use.

The kettle was singing by the time she got back, and a few moments later she made her way proudly down to Miss Pidsley's room with a fragrant scent of tea marking her path. This time, when she knocked, Miss Pidsley really did think she had come for her music lesson, and a little sigh again escaped her, a sigh which turned to an exclamation of real pleasure when she saw what Kitty was bringing her. Cornish Kitty had forgotten all about sugar or a teaspoon, but Miss Pidsley needed her tea so badly she did not heed the omission, but sat down at once to enjoy to the full her little picnic meal.

When Kitty returned to her own room again she was surprised at herself for feeling so happy. "School isn't *all* bad," she said thoughtfully. "I dare say I should get quite to like it in time."

Then her eye fell on Betty's newly-arrived letter, and tearing it open, she read of all her woes and triumphs connected with the detested woollen stockings. There was a long letter from Dan too, full of a sort of laughing sympathy as well as jokes and fun, but with here and there the strain of seriousness which so often astonished Dan's friends, and made him the dear, lovable old boy he was.

"It was rough on you," he wrote, "to pack you off to school like that, and jolly unfair too; and I expect you felt you would never smile again. But you will, and before many weeks are gone by, too; and I do believe it is the best thing for both of us. We didn't make any friends at home; there was no one we cared for, and we are such a funny, reserved crew—at least that's what they say here about me, and I believe I was the best of us—in that way, I mean. It won't be so very long before we shall be going home, and, my word, it is worth while going away just to have the going home again. So cheer up, old girl; it isn't every one that can boast of a brother like me. Hurry up and write, just to show you appreciate your blessings."

"There *are* some things to make up for being away," thought Kitty, and she wrote Dan a long, bright, hopeful letter, and another to Betty.

A week or so later she wrote to her father to broach her desire to bring home Pamela with her. She thought it wise to mention it early, as it would take some time to reconcile Aunt Pike to the thought. For more than a week she had no reply and no letter from any one, and she was just beginning to worry very much about it when a letter came from her father.

"I shall be delighted to welcome your young friend," he wrote, "and I am very glad you have one you want to bring home with you. But I can only consent conditionally, for poor unfortunate Anna is down with measles, and is very unwell, poor child. I have not spoken to your aunt yet about your plan, for she is too worried about Anna, and some other matters, to bear any more agitation. If Betty and Tony do not develop measles, and I am taking every precaution to prevent its spreading, the house will be free of infection and safe for you all to come to; but should they develop it—well, it does no good to climb our hills before we reach them, and we will not anticipate any such blow. When Anna is free from infection and able to travel, her mother will take her to the sea for a thorough bracing up. I am sure you will understand how things are at present, and make the best of them if they should not turn out as you wish."

Poor Kitty! She saw at once that what her father tried not to anticipate was the possibility of her not being able to come home at all for the holidays, nor Dan either; and how could one help climbing such a hill before one came to it, or at least standing at its foot and gazing anxiously up its rough, stony sides?

"I do think Anna was born to aggravate," she said crossly, but a few moments later her anger against her cooled. "It must be horrid for her too," she added, "for she never seems to get any fun out of anything, not even out of being ill."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THREATENING CLOUDS.

But Betty and Tony behaved extremely well. They escaped the measles, and all risk of infection was over long before the end of term came—and even a first term at school must come to an end some time.

Kitty at last had but seven more slips to tear off and seven more dates to strike through, and for sheer pleasure she left them untouched. Time did not need helping along now.

Then came the last day, when the boxes stood packed and strapped and labelled, and a general air of holidays and freedom from rules pervaded the whole house. Rhoda and Cicely Collins were leaving very early. Rhoda wanted to go by the earliest train because the fares were slightly lower. Rhoda was of a saving disposition. It always gave her the greatest pleasure to be able to economize in any way, and her stores of twine and paper, old corks, scraps of writing-paper, old pens, and other things, afforded food for endless jokes amongst the rest of the girls. Cicely, on the other hand, was the exact opposite of her sister; but being the younger, and less masterful, she gave in to Rhoda, and on the day they were to go home she rose, at Rhoda's command, from her bed at six o'clock, very unwillingly though, for the saving of threepence on her journey was nothing to Cicely in comparison to the discomfort of rising early.

Hope Carey had gone home some weeks before, having fretted herself ill with anxiety about her mother. Kitty and Pamela were to wait until the eleven o'clock train, for Dan, who broke up on the same day, could join them then at their station, and they could all travel down together. It was not nearly eleven when they reached the station; but how could they stay quietly in the dull, deserted house waiting for the hours to go by? Miss Hammond saw that it was too much to expect of them, so took them down very early; for a railway station, with its bustle and life, is a capital place for making time pass.

"It all seems too lovely to be real," sighed Kitty happily. "To be going home, to be meeting Dan, to be travelling by ourselves, and to have no lessons for more than three weeks! It seems too much happiness all at once, and I am afraid I shall wake up presently and find it a dream, as I so often have. I understand now what Dan meant by saying it was almost worth going away to have the going home. I do think, though," with sudden alarm, "that Dan must have missed his train. I am sure it must be nearly afternoon."

"It is five minutes past eleven," laughed Miss Hammond, "and there is his train now coming in, and there—if I don't mistake—is Dan."

But Kitty had seen him first, and was flying down the platform to meet him. Dan, recognizing the flying figure, stood and warded her off with the umbrella and bag he had in his hands. "Now, if you kiss me here," he cried, "I shall call for help, I really shall; it is taking a mean advantage, and I am not going to stand it. I wouldn't mind if you were by yourself, but the others would be imitating you!"

Kitty laughed. "I forgot you were still a little boy," she said teasingly. "I know little boys do mind. When they are real men they don't. Come along, Dan, and speak to Miss Hammond and Pamela," and Dan followed quite sedately to make his best bow to Kitty's friends.

"You must be very thankful the holidays are come," he said solemnly to Miss Hammond. "I know, of course, how wearing Kitty is."

"I expect some of your masters feel they have cause for gratitude to-day too," laughed Miss Hammond. "Now we must hurry if we want to find nice seats. I see your train is in."

Pamela and Dan looked at each other and smiled somewhat embarrassedly; but Dan, who had been rather annoyed at first by Kitty's asking to bring home a friend with her, let his heart melt a little towards her, for he somehow felt that things were not going to be as bad as he had feared; and when they had found an empty compartment, and seemed likely to have it to themselves all the way, he

graciously thawed still more, and his spirits rose to their usual height.

Alas, though, for plans. The train was on the point of starting, the whistle had gone, and the guard was just about to signal to the engine-driver, when there was a shout and a rush, and with a "Here you are, ma'am!" a porter laid hold of the handle of their door, flung it open, almost pushed two ladies in, threw in some bags and parcels after them, and banged the door to again. Off started the engine with a jerk which threw the ladies on to the seat opposite Kitty, who, with dismayed face and sinking spirits, had already recognized them as Lady Kitson and Lettice.

"She will be with us all the time, and everything is spoilt," she groaned inwardly. She was intensely disappointed. "Strangers would not have been so bad, or any one but those particular two."

Pamela was sitting in the corner opposite her, and Dan was in the corner at the other end of her seat. Lady Kitson and Lettice were at first too cross and too much shaken to notice any one; but presently, having recovered and arranged their packages, and settled down in their seats, they glanced about the compartment, and, with a look of not very pleased surprise, recognized their companions.

"Oh, how do you do, Dan?" said Lady Kitson, and smiled quite affably on him, but to Kitty she vouchsafed only the merest acknowledgment.

Lettice blushed hotly when she saw Kitty, and gave her one of her broad, meaning smiles.

"How do you do?" said Kitty very stiffly, and with no shadow of a smile.

"How is your poor little cousin, Dan?" said Lady Kitson presently. "I hope she is growing strong again after her two serious illnesses?"

"Yes, thank you," said Dan. "She has gone away for change of air."

"Oh, indeed. I am glad she is able to. It was so alarming her being so ill. Oh, I heard about your shocking behaviour in leaving her behind to walk home by herself, on *such* a night too, and in such a wild spot."

"I am afraid you haven't heard the right story, Lady Kitson," said Dan gravely, but with a flash of his eye.

Lady Kitson smiled a most aggravating little smile. "Oh, I think so," she said meaningly. Then, "You are not all going away with Anna, I hope," she remarked severely. "I am sure the poor child must require perfect peace and great care."

"No, Aunt Pike has gone with her. We are going home, and Kitty's friend is coming to stay with us," and Dan looked towards Pamela. "May I introduce Miss Pamela Peters—Lady Kitson, Miss Kitson," said Dan very formally, and growing very red.

Pamela smiled and bowed very prettily to Lady Kitson. Lady Kitson stared at Pamela, but gave her only the vaguest of acknowledgments. Lettice nodded as though her neck were loose at the joint.

"You don't mean to say that while Mrs. Pike is away your poor father is going to have you all on his hands, and a stranger as well? Poor Dr. Trenire. I really think it is too much for him, he looks so ill and worn already. He really needs a holiday more than do any of you."

"Father looks ill!" gasped Kitty. It was the first hint she had had of any such thing, and a sudden cold fear filled her heart. She forgot her dislike of Lady Kitson and Lettice, and the wrong they had done her. "Is father really ill, Lady Kitson?" she asked anxiously, leaning towards her. "He has never mentioned it to me, nor has Aunt Pike."

"He is too good and unselfish to complain," said Lady Kitson coldly. "You should use your own eyes, and not wait for him to *tell* you he is ill. He has not actually told *me* that he is, but I can see that he looks overworked and unwell, and certainly not fit to battle with a houseful of noisy, restless boys and girls."

"Of course we shouldn't be noisy if father was not well," said Kitty, with quiet dignity. She was feeling intensely uncomfortable on Pamela's account as well as her father's. Lady Kitson's remarks were not polite to their guest.

Lady Kitson sat back in her seat and unfolded a paper, as though to intimate that she had no more to say. Lettice crossed over and sat beside Kitty, evidently intending to talk to her, but Kitty could not bring herself to be friendly to her late school-fellow; besides which, she had Pamela to talk to, and there was this news about her father to fill her mind.

"He can't be very ill," said Pamela comfortingly, seeing Kitty's quiet distress. "Your aunt or Betty would have said something to you about it. While I am with you I can take the children out all day long if you like, so that you can keep the house quiet, and we won't be any trouble. But of course you must send me home if it is not convenient for me to stay."

"But it will be," cried Kitty, trying to throw off her fears, and she crossed over and sat by Pamela.

When, though, they presently stopped at Gorlay Station, all her troubles vanished, for the time at any rate, for there on the platform stood her father, and Betty, and Tony, all apparently as well and jolly as could be, while old Prue and the carriage waited in the road outside.

"Father is here! Father is here to meet us and drive us home!" she cried joyfully, and, forgetting Pamela and Lady Kitson, and all the rugs and bags and everything, she was out on the platform and in his arms almost before the train had come to a stand-still.

Dan waited, and with well-feigned if not real patience helped out Lady Kitson and her possessions; then he too flew. "Come along!" he shouted to Pamela, forgetting his shyness. Pamela, though, with a wistful little smile on her lips, collected their belongings without much haste, and followed him, but very slowly.

For a moment she felt herself almost an intruder, but it was only for a moment; for Dr. Trenire, looking over the heads of Dan and Kitty, saw her, and guessing who she was, went at once and met her with such a cordial greeting that she felt herself one of them from that moment; and Kitty, remorseful for her forgetfulness, brought up Betty and Tony to be introduced. Then Pamela was made to sit up in the carriage beside the doctor, with Kitty and Tony on the back seat, while Dan and Betty mounted to the top of the omnibus, and off they started in the gayest of spirits. Prue, who could never endure to let any other horse pass her, insisted on racing the 'bus the whole way home, to the amusement of every one. Betty and Tony shrieked with delight, Kitty sat beaming with a happiness so great as to seem almost unreal, while Pamela sat quietly taking it all in, and revelling in it, yet with a touch of sadness as she realized for the first time in her life how very much she had missed.

"Oh, isn't it like old times," sighed Kitty happily, "to be together again, and by ourselves. Father, are you frightened by the thought of us all?"

Dr. Trenire laughed. "Not really frightened," he said. "You see, I can always send for your aunt. She assured me she would return at once if I found you all unmanageable."

"Oh," said Kitty gravely, "then we will promise not to be *quite* unmanageable, but just bad enough."

At that moment Lady Kitson's carriage overtook them, and her ladyship looked out and smiled and bowed to the doctor as she passed. "Don't you let them wear you out, doctor," she cried.

Kitty, with sudden recollection, leaned forward and studied her father's face earnestly—as much, at least, as she could see of it. "Father," she said anxiously, "Lady Kitson told us that you were not at all well. Aren't you?"

She had unconsciously expected, or at least hoped for, a prompt and strong reassurance; but her father did not answer for a moment, and then but half-heartedly. "I haven't been quite up to the mark," he said quietly, "but," looking round and seeing the anxiety on her face, "it is nothing to worry about, dear. I would have told you if it had been. I am rather overworked and tired, that is all. It has been a very heavy winter of illness and anxiety. I shall be better now the spring has come, and I have you all home to liven me up. We must try and give Pamela a happy time, and you must take her to all your pet haunts."

But Dr. Trenire was not as well as he led them to believe; and though Kitty was not observant enough to notice such signs as a slower, heavier step, a want of energy in setting about his work, a flagging appetite, she did notice that he was quieter and graver, and had not such spirits as of old.

Pamela became at once a favourite with every one. Even Jabez unbent, and was not always suspecting her of some mischief or other.

"What part of the county do 'ee come from, miss?" he asked when first he was introduced.

"I am afraid I don't belong to this county at all," said Pamela apologetically. "I am not a Cornishwoman."

Jabez looked disappointed, but he tried his best not to make her feel her sad position more than she could help. "Well now, that's a pity; but there, we can't always help ourselves, can we, miss? and 't isn't for we to make 'ee feel it more'n you do a'ready. We've all on us got something to put up with."

Whereabouts up along do 'ee come from, miss, if 't isn't a rude question?"

"Devon," said Pamela, smiling at the old man. "It might be ever so much worse, mightn't it? Do give me some comfort, Jabez,"

"Well, yess, miss," he answered, willing to cheer her if he could. "And maybe 'twas only an accident. Your parents 'd gone there to live, or something of that sort. Accidents will happen to the most deserving."

"Yes," sighed Pamela, "I feel it was a mistake, for directly I came here I felt at home, and I had never done so before."

"You'll be sorry to go back, miss."

"Sorry!" cried Pamela. "I can't bear to think of it. I never was so happy in my life, and never enjoyed my holidays before."

It was a very simple holiday too, but each day was full of happiness. One by one the four introduced Pamela to their best-beloved haunts. They made excursions to Wenmere Woods, to Helbarrow Tors, to the moors and the river. Very frequently, too, some of them went for drives with Dr. Trenire far out into the country, over wild moorland, or through beautiful valleys, and Pamela loved these drives as much as anything, and felt she could listen for hours while the doctor told her the story of some old cairn, or the legend of a holy well or wayside cross.

Once they all went to Newquay to visit Aunt Pike and Anna, and spent a long, glorious day on the beautiful sands, paddling in and out of the rock pools in search of rare sea-weeds, and anemones, and shells.

"I didn't know your aunt was so old," said Pamela later, when she and Kitty were talking over the events of the day. "You did not tell me she was."

"No," said Kitty thoughtfully, "I didn't think she was. I noticed it to-day myself, but I never did before. She does look quite old, doesn't she?" appealing to Pamela, as though still doubting her own eyes. "I don't think she looked so last term. She seemed quite altered to-day somehow, so small and shrivelled, or something."

But other interests soon drove the matter from Kitty's mind, and she thought no more about it until Mrs. Pike and Anna returned to Gorlay a few days before the end of the holidays to see to Dan's and Kitty's outfits, and by that time Kitty was far too miserable at the prospect of returning to school to give more than a passing thought to her aunt's changed appearance.

Anna was quite strong again, though her old nervous, restless manner had not left her, and she still had the same difficulty in meeting one's eyes fairly and squarely.

"Your cousin looks as though she had something on her mind," said Pamela. "Do you think she has?"

"I don't know," said Kitty; "at least I don't think it would trouble her much if she had. She didn't really enjoy herself at Newquay. She says she is very glad to be home again, and I should think she would be too," added poor homesick Kitty. "I am sure I should get well here quicker than anywhere," and Pamela agreed.

"I think it was nonsense of Dan to say it was worth while to go away to have the pleasure of coming home," she moaned when the last day came. "I am sure *nothing* could make up to me for the misery of going, and I think it is worse the second time than the first."

Poor Kitty's woe was so great that at last her father was driven to expostulate. "Kitty dear, do try to be brave," he pleaded. "I am not very well, and I cannot bear to see you so unhappy. You make it very hard for others, dear, by taking your trials so hardly."

Kitty looked and felt very much ashamed. "I hadn't thought of that," she said; "but, father, it is really very hard to bear. You don't know how miserable I feel."

"How will you bear greater troubles when they come, as they are sure to?"

"There couldn't be greater ones," said foolish Kitty.

"My dear, my dear, don't say such things. This is, after all, but a short temporary parting, when we could all come together if needs be. There are some that last a lifetime," he added sadly, and Kitty knew he was thinking of her dead mother. A few moments later he spoke more cheerfully. "I am going

up with you to-morrow," he said. "Perhaps that will comfort you a little."

Kitty looked delighted, but Dr. Trenire did not tell her that when he had left her at her school he was going to consult a doctor about his own health; for he intended to let no one know that he was bound on such an errand until he had heard the verdict, and only then if it was absolutely necessary.

However, the consultation proved that it was absolutely necessary, and a few days later the following letter reached Kitty:—

"My Dearest Kitty,—I have to send you some news which is not good, but you must not think it very bad. A few days ago I was told by a medical man that I must take a long holiday and a sea voyage as soon as possible, and he dared me to stay away less than three months. I am obeying him because I want to feel stronger than I have lately, and I do not believe in asking a clever man's advice and then refusing to act upon it. So I am getting a *locum tenens* here for a time, and as soon as I have introduced him to my patients I shall start on a cruise somewhere. I have not yet decided where. But before I go I shall certainly come and spend a day with you, my dear, to talk things over. I will write to Miss Pidsley and arrange it all. Your aunt will look after Betty and Tony very carefully, as you know, while I am away, and they have promised me to be happy and good, so that I may not be worried about them. They are a good little pair, on the whole, and I feel quite satisfied about Tony at any rate.

"You must promise not to fret or worry about my health or my absence. The doctor told me to keep as free from anxieties as possible, so, if you want to help me—and I know you will—you must be as happy and do as well at school as you possibly can—that will help me more than anything—and write to me letters full of smiles. I know you know how to, and I shall count on hearing frequently. In about three months' time I hope we may all be journeying home together to keep our summer holidays. I shall be back in time, I promise you, and will arrange so that I can meet you and Dan.

"I shall be writing again in a day or two.—

"Your affectionate Father."

When first she opened this letter and mastered its contents, Kitty turned cold and faint with the shock it brought her. At once her imagination pictured her father ill, dying, or going away from them all and dying at sea.

"He's more ill than he will say, I know," she moaned. "Father never tells the worst. O father! Father! and I am not even at home to be with him. If I could see him I should know; but here I am in prison, and — and I can't know what is happening at home!" and Kitty collapsed on her bed, sobbing pitifully.

"Katherine! Katherine! what is the matter, child?" Miss Pidsley, hearing sounds of grief, opened the door and looked in, then she walked in and closed it behind her.

"I have had such dreadful news," moaned Kitty. "Father is very ill— I know he is worse than he says—and I am not there, and—and I am here a prisoner. Read what he says, Miss Pidsley."

Miss Pidsley laid her strong hand on Kitty's trembling arm. "Dear, you must know that if your father wanted you, or thought it necessary that you should be home, that he would send for you, and you could go at once, so do not feel yourself a prisoner." Then she read the letter slowly and carefully through.

"Isn't it dreadful?" sighed Kitty, looking up at her as she laid the letter down.

"It is a trouble for you certainly, dear," said Miss Pidsley. "But I think you have every reason to hope that your father may soon be well and strong again, and in the meantime I see he has given you plenty to do for him. Don't let him know that you are not able or willing to do what he asks you to."

"What has he asked me to do?" cried Kitty, starting up eager to begin then and there.

Miss Pidsley held out the letter, and pointed out one particular paragraph. "If you want to help me—and I know you will—you must be as happy and do as well at school as you possibly can. That will help me more than anything."

"But that can't really help him, and—and it is so difficult." Kitty looked up into Miss Pidsley's face very dolefully.

"But it does help, dear, more than you can imagine. Nothing would worry your father more than to feel you were unhappy. Do try, for his sake. You can't refuse his request, can you?"

"No," said Kitty mournfully, "I can't. I—I will try, but—it is very hard to begin at once, isn't it? One is

frightened and unhappy before one knows one is going to be, and then it is so hard to forget it again and try to feel brave and happy, and all that sort of thing; and oh, it does seem so dreadful that father should be ill, and have to go away from us. I can hardly believe it."

"You must try not to think of it in that way, dear, but think that he has been ill for some time without being able to do anything to make himself well again, and that now he is about to be cured, and if he has rest and change and an easy mind every day will see him a little stronger and happier. He has worked hard and long, and often, probably, when he has been feeling quite unfit; but now he is going to have a real rest, and to enjoy himself. It is good to think of, isn't it?"

"Oh yes," cried Kitty, much more cheerfully, "and I hope he will get off soon, for I know he will get no rest while he is in Gorlay. I have never known father have a holiday."

"Then let us all try to make it a really happy one now," said Miss Pidsley, and she went away leaving Kitty much comforted.

Three days later Dr. Trenire came up to say "good-bye," and at the end of a long, pleasant day together, happy in spite of the parting before them, Kitty bade him "good-bye" with a brave and smiling face, and sent him back to Gorlay cheered and comforted, and with at least one care less on his mind; for in his heart he had been dreading that day, because of Kitty's grief at parting.

CHAPTER XIX.

BETTY'S ESCAPE.

June had come, a brilliantly fine June, and overpoweringly hot. Wind-swept, treeless Gorlay lay shadeless and panting under the blazing sun, and the dwellers there determined that they preferred the cutting winds and driving rains to which they were better accustomed.

Dr. Trenire had gone, and Betty and Tony had been inconsolable. The "locum," Dr. Yearsley, had come, and Jabez had long since announced that he had no great opinion of him, coming as he did from one of the northern counties.

"I don't say but what he may be a nice enough gentleman," he said; "but coming from so far up along it stands to reason he can't know nothing of we or our ailments. I s'pose the master had his reasons for choosing him, but it do seem a pity."

Aunt Pike did not approve of the newcomer, but for another reason. "He was so foolish about the children," she complained. "It is very nice to say you are fond of them, but it is perfectly absurd to make so much of them; it only encourages them to be forward and opinionated, and puts them out of their place." And to balance all this Aunt Pike herself became a little more strict than usual, and very cross. It may have been that she felt the heat very trying, and perhaps was not very well, but there was no doubt that she was very irritable and particular at that time—more so than she used to be—and nothing that the children did was, in her eyes, right.

Anna was irritable too, but there was much excuse for her, for having had pneumonia in the winter, and measles in the spring, her mother was determined that she should not have bronchitis, or rheumatism, or pneumonia again in the summer, and through that overpoweringly hot weather poor Anna was condemned to go about clothed in a fashion which might have been agreeable in the Highlands in January, but in Gorlay in the summer was really overwhelming, and kept poor Anna constantly in a state bordering on heat apoplexy, or exhaustion and collapse.

Had Dr. Trenire been at home he would have interfered, and rescued her from her wraps and shawls, heavy serge frock, woollen stockings, and innumerable warm garments; or, perhaps, if Anna had not been so afraid of her mother, but had appealed to her candidly and without fear, she might have obtained relief. This, unfortunately, was not Anna's way, for Anna's ways were still as crooked and shifty as her glances. She would think out this plan and that plan to avoid the only one that was straightforward and right, though it must be said for her that she did try to be more open and honourable—at times she tried quite hard; but since Kitty had gone, and she had been so much with her mother, all her old foolish fears of her had come back with renewed strength, and all her old mean ways and crooked plans for getting her own way and escaping scoldings.

Now, instead of asking to be relieved from some of her burdensome clothing, she made up her mind to destroy the things she detested most, and trust to not being found out; or, if she was found out—well, "the things must have been lost at the laundry." This seemed to her an excellent explanation.

So, one day when her mother was out and Betty and Tony had gone for a drive with Dr. Yearsley, Anna betook herself to the garden with some of her most loathed garments under her arm, and a box of matches in her pocket. A bonfire on a summer's day is easy to ignite, and there was just sufficient breeze to fan the flame to active life, so Anna was in the midst of her work of destruction almost before she realized it. But, while waiting for her mother to depart, Anna had forgotten that the time was hurrying on towards Betty's and Tony's return. In fact, they drove up but a moment or so after she had left the house on her guilty business.

"Miss Anna has gone up the garden," said Fanny in answer to Betty's inquiries; and Betty, following her slowly, was in time to see a blaze leaping up, and a cloud of smoke and sparks. She quickened her steps, for something interesting seemed to be happening. "Surely Anna isn't trying to smoke out that wasps' nest," she thought in sudden alarm. "She will be stung to death if she is," and Betty took to her heels to try to stop her. But when she got past the rows of peas and beans that had hidden Anna, she saw that what her cousin was poking up was not a wasps' nest, but a heap that was blazing on the ground.

"What are you doing?" gasped Betty excitedly. "What a lovely fire!"

At the sound of a voice Anna spun round quickly, the very picture of frightened guilt; but when she saw Betty her fear turned to anger, hot and uncontrollable because she was frightened.

"You are always spying and prying after me," she cried passionately. "Why can I never have a moment to myself? Other people can, and why can't I?"

Poor Anna was hot and overdone, and her nerves were so much on edge that she scarcely knew what she was doing or saying. But Betty had no knowledge of nerves, and under this unfair accusation she could make no allowance for her cousin, and her temper rose too.

"How dare you say I pry and spy! You know it is not true, Anna. I only came to ask you to play with us, and—and how was I to know that you were doing something that you didn't want any one to see? Why don't you want any one to see you? What are you burning?" Betty stepped nearer and looked more closely. "O Anna, it is your clothes that you are burning. Oh, how did it happen? You didn't do it on purpose, did you?"

"It doesn't matter to you how it happened. If *you* don't want to wear things you hate, you just go and tell tales to your father. You can get everything you want. But I haven't any one to stick up for me, and I've *got* to do things for myself."

"Then you set this on fire on purpose! Oh, how wicked; and they cost such a lot too! I wonder you aren't afraid to be so wicked!" cried Betty indignantly.

"I don't care," said Anna, trying to put on a bold front. "I never did want the things, and I never shall. I should die if I went about much longer a perfect mountain of clothes. How would you like to wear a 'hug-me-tight' under a serge coat in this weather?"

"Not at all. But what shall you say to Aunt Pike?"

"I shan't say anything; but I suppose you will," sneered Anna. "I do wish you wouldn't be always poking and prying about where you are not wanted. You might know that people like to be left alone sometimes."

"I am sure," cried Betty, quite losing her temper at that, "I would leave you quite alone always, if I could; and I am *not* a sneak, and that you know. It would have been better for Kitty if I had been. I don't know how you can say such things as you do, Anna, when you know what we have had to bear for you. I suppose you think I don't know that it was you who should have been sent away from Miss Richards's, and not Kitty! But I do know—I have known it all the time, though Kitty wouldn't tell me—and I think that you and Lettice Kitson are the two meanest, wickedest girls in all the world to let Kitty bear the blame all this time and never clear her. But after this—"

"Betty!" Aunt Pike's voice rose almost to a scream to get above the torrent of Betty's indignation. "How *dare* you speak to Anna so! How *dare* you say such shocking things! You dreadful, naughty child, you are in such a passion you don't know what you are saying, and you are making Anna quite ill! Look at her, poor child!—Anna dear, come to me; you look almost fainting, and I really don't wonder."

Anna was certainly ghastly white, and trembling uncontrollably, but as much at the sight of her mother as from Betty's fiery onslaught. "Yes—I do feel faint," she gasped, but she was able to walk quickly to her mother's side, and to lead her at a brisk step away from that smouldering heap on the ground.

"Poor child, I will take you to your room. You must lie down and keep very quiet for a time.—Elizabeth, follow us, please, and wait for me in the dining-room. I will come and speak to you there when I have seen to Anna. In the meantime try to calm yourself, and prepare to apologize for the dreadful things I heard you saying."

Betty did not reply, nor for a few moments did she attempt to follow. Her aunt's determination to believe Anna all that was good and innocent and injured, and herself and Kitty all that was mean and bad, increased her resentment a thousand times. Betty could never endure injustice.

"I won't apologize. I won't. I can't. I couldn't. I have nothing to apologize for," she thought indignantly. "It is Aunt Pike who ought to do that, and Anna, and ask us to forgive them. I've a good mind to tell everything. I think it is my duty to Kitty and all of us!" and Betty strutted down the garden looking very determined and important. Her childlike face was undaunted, her little mouth set firm.

"It is my duty to all of us," she kept repeating to herself; "it really is. I am not going to let Kitty bear the blame always. I know that most people feel quite sure that she really did carry those letters, and then wouldn't own up, but told stories about it, and Aunt Pike has never been nice to her since, and Lady Kitson scarcely speaks to her, and Miss Richards doesn't speak at all, and—and that mean Anna won't clear her, and—"

"Well, Elizabeth, I have come to hear your explanations and apologies for your shocking attack on Anna."

"It was Anna who attacked me," said Betty. "It was only when she called me a pry and a spy that I—that I—"

"Hurled all sorts of wicked accusations at her. Oh, I heard you. You said the most shocking and untrue things in your passion."

"I didn't say a word that wasn't true," said Betty firmly, "and—and Anna knows it. Anna could have cleared Kitty, but she wouldn't, and I am not going to let Kitty bear the blame for her and Lettice any longer; and if they won't clear her, I will. Anna called me a sneak, and I said she was mean and bad, and I meant it; and so she is, to let Kitty go on bearing the blame and the disgrace all her life because she is too honourable to tell how mean they are."

"Did you say that Anna knew who went to Lettice with that letter that night, and that—it wasn't Kafcherine?" asked Aunt Pike, but so quietly and strangely that Betty was really quite frightened by her curious voice and manner.

"Oh, I wish I had not told," was the thought that rushed through her mind, while her cheeks grew hot with nervousness. But it was too late now to draw back; she must stick to her guns. "Yes," she said, but with evident reluctance. "Ask Anna, please. I—I mustn't say any more. Father wouldn't like—"

"Was it—Anna—herself?" asked Mrs. Pike, still in that strange low voice, only it sounded stranger and farther away this time.

"Oh, I can't tell you! I can't tell you!" cried Betty, shrinking now from telling the dreadful truth.

"There—is—no—need to," gasped Aunt Pike; but she spoke so low that Betty hardly heard the words, and the next moment the poor, shocked, stricken mother had slipped from her chair to the ground unconscious.

Betty saw her fall, and flew from the room screaming for help. Help was not long in coming. Dr. Yearsley ran from the study and the servants from the kitchen, and very soon they had raised her and laid her on the couch. But none of the restoratives they applied were of any avail, and presently they carried her upstairs and laid her on her bed.

But before that had happened, Betty, terrified almost out of her senses by the result of her indiscretion, had flown—flown out of the room and out of the house.

"Oh, what have I done! what have I done!" she moaned. "Father didn't want her to know, and Kitty didn't want her to, and now I have told her and it has killed her. I am sure I have killed her. And father is away, and Kitty—oh, what can I do? I can never go home any more. P'r'aps if I'm lost they'll be sorry and will forgive me," and Betty ran on, nearly frantic with fear, and weeping at the pathetic picture of her own disappearance.

The next morning Kitty, on her way from the music-room, where she had been practising before breakfast, saw the morning's letters lying on the hall table, and amongst them one directed to herself in Betty's hand. Without waiting to have it given to her in the usual way, she picked it up, and, little

dreaming of the news it held, opened it at once.

"Dear Kitty," she read, "I have run away for ever, and I am never going home any more. I think I have killed Aunt Pike. I told her something, and she fell right down on the floor. She was dead, I am sure, and I ran away. I am too frightened to go home, so do not ask me to. I am going to earn my living. I am hiding at the farm. Mrs. Henderson thinks I am going home soon, but I am not; and if she won't let me sleep here, I shall sleep in the woods. To-morrow I shall try to get a place as a servant or something. I wish I looked older, and that I had one of your long skirts. I can put my hair up, but my dress is so short. Good-bye for ever.—

"Your loving Betty."

"S.P.—Give my love to father if he will except it from me, and tell him I did not mean to be a bad child to him."

Kitty stood staring blankly at the letter, scarcely able to grasp its meaning. It seemed too wild, too improbable to be true. Betty had run away; was frightened, desperate, too frightened to go home; had been out all night alone; and they were all far away from her, all but Tony. Kitty felt stunned by the unexpectedness and greatness of the trouble, but she realized that she must act, and act quickly.

Miss Pidsley and Miss Hammond were gone to an early service at the church, but it never occurred to Kitty to wait for them and consult them. She only realized that a train left for Gorlay in twenty minutes' time, and that if she could catch it she could be at home in little more than two hours, and on the spot to seek for Betty. She cleared the stairs two at a time, and in less than three minutes was flying down them again and out of the house, buttoning her coat as she went, and had vanished round the corner and down the road. She felt absolutely no fear of meeting her teachers, for it never entered her head that she was doing anything wrong. Miss Pidsley had once said that if she was wanted at home she could go, and Kitty had never, since then, felt herself a prisoner at school. She did hope that she might not meet them, or any one else she knew, for time was very precious, and explanations would cause delay; but that they might forbid her to go never once entered her head. Her mind was full of but one thought—Betty was lost, and no one but herself had any clue as to her whereabouts.

But the only person that Kitty met was a telegraph boy. Miss Pidsley and Miss Hammond, coming home by another route, met the telegraph boy too at the gate, and took the telegram from him.

"Oh," exclaimed Miss Pidsley as she opened it and mastered its contents, "dear, dear! This brings bad news for Katherine Trenire. Listen," and she read aloud, "Mrs. Pike seriously ill. Send Miss Trenire at once. Yearsley."

"Shall I break it to the poor child?" asked Miss Hammond anxiously.

"Please."

Miss Hammond hurried into the house and to the schoolroom, but Kitty was not there. Then she went to the music-room, but there was no Kitty there; then by degrees they searched the whole house and garden, but in vain, and at last stood gazing at each other, perplexed and alarmed. Kitty, with never a thought of all the trouble she was causing, had caught her train and was speeding home, little dreaming, though, of all that lay before her, for in her alarm for Betty she had quite failed to grasp the other and more serious news that Betty had written; and, as the long minutes dragged by, and the train seemed but to crawl, it was only for Betty that her anxiety increased, as her mind had time to dwell on what had happened, and picture all the dreadful things that might have occurred to her.

"It was a wet night, and it was a very dark one, and such strange sounds fill a wood at night, and—oh, I hope she kept away from the river! If anything chased her, and she ran, and in the darkness fell in—O Betty, Betty!"

Then "Gorlay at last!" she cried in intense relief as she recognized the well-known landmarks. Long before the train could possibly draw up, she got up and stood by the door with the handle in her hand, a sense of strangeness, of unreality, growing upon her. She felt as though she were some one else, some one older and more experienced, who was accustomed to moving amidst tragedies and the serious events of life. Even the old familiar platform, the white palings, the 'bus and the drowsy horses that she knew so well, seemed to her to have changed too, and to wear quite a different aspect.

"I feel like a person just waking out of a dream, not knowing whether it is dream or reality," she thought to herself as she opened the door and stepped out on to the platform. "I suppose I am not dreaming?"

But as she stood there for a moment trying to collect herself, Weller, the 'busman, came up to her, and he was real enough, and his anxious face was no dream-face.

"Good-morning, missie," he said sympathetically. "I'm sorry enough, I'm sure, to see you come home on such an errant. 'Tis wisht, sure enough."

Kitty was startled. She thought he was referring to Betty, and wondered how he could know of her escapade. "You knew she was gone?" she asked anxiously.

The man looked shocked. "Gone! Is she, poor lady? Law now, miss, you don't say so! I hadn't heard it. She was just conscious when I called fore this morning to inquire, and they 'ad 'opes that she'd rally."

"Then they have found her; but—but is she ill? Did she get hurt?—the river!—O Weller, do tell me quickly. I came home on purpose to go to look for her. Is she very ill?" Poor Kitty was nearly exhausted with anxiety and the shocks she had received.

Weller looked puzzled. "Why," he said slowly, "I never heard nothing about any river. She was took ill and fell down in the room, missie. Haven't you heard? They told me they was going to tellygraff for you so soon as the office was open, 'cause your poor aunt said your name once or twice—almost the only words they've been able to make out since she was took ill; and with the master away and you the eldest, they thought you ought to be sent for."

Then the rest of Betty's letter came back to her mind, and as the importance of it was borne in on her, Kitty's heart sank indeed in the face of such a double trouble.

"Oh, if only father were home!" was her first thought. "But even if we send at once he can't be here for ever so long." A moment later, though, she remembered his health, and how bad such news would be for him, with all those miles between, too; and she felt that unless it was absolutely necessary, they must spare him this trouble.

Rowe, the driver, came forward to help her to her seat. "I think you'd best go outside, missie," he said gently, "you'm looking so white. P'r'aps the air'll do 'ee good. I'm afraid you've had a bad shock."

"I—I think I have," gasped Kitty, as, very grateful for his sympathy, she mounted obediently.

Then Weller, who had suddenly disappeared, came back carrying a cup of steaming tea and a plate of bread and butter. "Drink this, missie, and eat a bit," he said, clambering carefully up with his precious burden, "then you'll feel better. You look as if you hadn't tasted nothing but trouble lately," he added sympathetically, as he arranged the tray on the seat beside her, and hurried down again to escape any thanks.

Tears of gratitude were in Kitty's eyes as she ate and drank; and from sheer desire to show how much she appreciated his kindness, she finished all he had brought her, knowing that that would gratify him more than any thanks could.

She certainly felt better for the food, and more fit to face the long drive home; and never to her life's end did she forget that drive on that sunny June morning—the dazzling white dusty road stretching before them, the hedges powdered with dust, the scent of the dog-roses and meadow-sweet blossoming so bravely and sending up their fragrance, in spite of their dusty covering, to cheer the passers-by. Then, when at last they reached the town, familiar faces looked up and recognized her, and most of them greeted her sympathetically.

It was all so natural, so unchanged; yet to Kitty, seeing it for the first time with eyes dazed with trouble, it seemed as though she had never seen it before—at least, not as it looked to her now. She tried to realize that it was only she who had changed, that all the rest was just as it had always been. She felt suddenly very much older, that life was a more serious and important thing than it had been—so serious and important that it struck her as strange that any one could smile or seem gay.

With kind thoughtfulness Rowe did not stop at all on his way as usual, but drove the 'bus straight up to the house at once. As they drew near, Kitty, glancing up to speak to him, saw him look anxiously up over the front of the house. "It's all right," he murmured to himself; then aloud he said more cheerfully, "I'm hoping, missie, you may find your poor aunt better," and Kitty knew that he had feared lest they might find the blinds drawn down.

CHAPTER XX.

KITTY'S HANDS ARE FULL.

As soon as the 'bus had drawn up, the door of the house was flung open and Fanny tore out. "Oh, my dear!" she cried, almost lifting her little mistress down bodily in her plump arms. "Oh, my dear Miss Kitty, I'm that glad to see 'ee! They said as the tellygram couldn't reach 'ee in time to catch that train, but I knew better. I knew if you got that there message you'd come by that early train, even if it *had* started."

"What telegram?" asked Kitty. "I haven't had one."

"Why, to tell 'ee to come 'ome 'cause Mrs. Pike is so ill. And if it haven't reached 'ee, why the postmaster-general ought to be written to 'bout it. But," breaking off with sudden recollection, "you'm come; and if you didn't get that tellygram, whatever made 'ee to? You didn't have no token, did 'ee?"

"I had Betty's letter," said Kitty, trying to sort things out in her mind. "That was all I had, and that brought me. I expect I had left before the telegram reached. I remember now I passed a boy on my way to the station. But what about Betty? Have you heard anything? Has she come back? Have you sent in search of her? Weller told me about poor Aunt Pike—oh, Isn't it dreadful, Fanny! Two such awful things to happen in one day! But he didn't know anything about Betty, and I didn't tell him. She hasn't been found, I suppose? I must go. I think I may be able to find her if I start at once—but there is Aunt Pike. What must I do first?" despairingly. "I *must* find Betty. She has no one else to look after her, while Aunt Pike has you."

"If you wants Miss Betty, you'll find her in her bedroom," said Fanny, looking somewhat cross and puzzled. "I don't know, I'm sure, why you're making such a to-do about seeing her, when there's so much else to think on. Miss Betty's all right, and so is—Why, Miss Kitty, what's the matter? You ain't feeling bad, are you?" cried Fanny in great alarm, for poor Kitty had dropped, white and limp, and trembling uncontrollably, into a chair in the hall.

"Oh no—no. I'm all right. Only—I'm so—so glad. I have been so frightened about her; but I am *so* glad—so—I came to—to try to find her. No one knew I had come, and all the way I was thinking of her out all night in the dark and rain; and then the good news came, and it—made me feel—feel—" Kitty's head fell forward again, and the world seemed to rock and sway, and recede farther and farther from her, when a voice said, "Leave her to me," and some one lifted her up and laid her on a couch, and then something was held to her lips and her nose, and presently Kitty began to feel that the rest of the world was not so very, very far off after all, and then she sighed and opened her eyes, and saw a strange face looking down at her. It was rather a tired, anxious face, but it smiled very kindly at Kitty.

"Better now?" asked Dr. Yearsley.

"Yes, thank you," whispered Kitty. "How funny!"

"I am glad you can see any fun in it," said the doctor with the ghost of a smile. "It is the only funny thing that has happened in this unlucky house for the last day or two. But it isn't the sort of humour I appreciate."

"I am so sorry," said Kitty, trying to rise, "only I have never fainted before, and it seemed so odd that I should. It is a horrid feeling."

"Yes, not the sort of thing you want to repeat. But perhaps it will cheer Jabez. We have had two catastrophes, and he has got it into his head that there has got to be a third. Perhaps this will count as the third, and the spell be broken. Now lie still, and rest for a little while and have some food. You are exhausted, and I want strong reliable helpers, not any more patients," with a smile that robbed his words of any harshness. "You and I have our hands full."

Kitty smiled up at him bravely. "I am ready to do anything I am wanted to. How is Aunt Pike?" anxiously. "May I see her? Is she very ill?"

Dr. Yearsley looked grave. "I will answer your questions backwards. Yes, to be quite frank with you, as the head of your family for the present, she is seriously ill. She has had a stroke of paralysis, and at first I thought I must send to your father; but I was very unwilling to worry him, and I waited a little to see how things went. I am thankful to say she has rallied a little, and if she goes on improving, even though it is but slightly, I am hoping he may be spared the bad news until we can send him better news with it. I don't want to worry him if I can help it."

"Oh no," said Kitty earnestly, "and he would worry dreadfully at being so far away." She felt very kindly towards the doctor for his thoughtfulness for her father.

"You shall see your aunt later. She has asked for you many times, but we hardly knew whether she was conscious or not when she spoke. She must be kept very quiet though, and free from all anxiety. I have got in a nurse for her. Don't be frightened. You see there was no one here with the time or knowledge to give her the attention she required, and it was a very serious matter. I sent for you because, if she really wants to see you, and it would relieve her mind in any way to do so, it is important that you should be here, and the children needed some one to—"

"Oh," cried Kitty, remorseful that she should have forgotten her all this time, "Anna! What a state she must be in about her mother. How is Anna?"

"Yes, poor Anna," echoed Dr. Yearsley with a sigh, "she is in a very distressed state. I wish you could calm her, and get her to pull herself together a little."

"I will try," said Kitty gravely. "And there is Betty. I am longing to see her."

"I doubt Miss Betty's complete joy at seeing you," smiled the doctor. "I think there may be some embarrassment mingled with her pleasure. Her return was—well, *she* might think it ignominious. Luckily no one in the house but myself knows that she had really run away. I am afraid, though, that she has something on her mind that is troubling her—something in connection with Mrs. Pike's illness."

Kitty recalled Betty's letter, and her heart sank. She became so white, and looked so troubled, that the doctor tried to comfort her. "Whatever she may have said or done," he explained excusingly, "she did in utter ignorance, of course, of any ill result being likely to follow, and she cannot be blamed entirely for the disaster. Mrs. Pike has been seriously unwell for some time; in fact, I had ventured to speak to her about her health, and warned her, but she resented my advice. Believe me, that what has happened would have happened in any case; any little upset would have brought it about; but Betty may have precipitated matters."

Kitty listened with wide, grave eyes; her heart was heavy and anxious, her mind full of awe and care. How terribly serious life had become all at once; how real and possible every dreadful thing seemed, when so many came into one's life like this.

As she left the doctor, walking away with heavy, tired steps, he looked after her, half pitying, half admiring.

"She has had some hard knocks to-day, poor child," he said to himself, "but she has plenty of sense and plenty of pluck. At any rate I hope so, for she will need both, I fancy, in the time that lies before her."

Kitty, making her way slowly up the stairs to Betty's room and her own, was again impressed with that curious sensation of being some one else, of seeing everything for the first time. How strangely things came about, she thought. Here she was, back in her home again, as she had so often longed to be, but oh how different it was from what she had pictured—no joy in coming, no one to meet her, a stranger to welcome her, the house silent and strange. Could it be really she, Kitty Trenire, walking alone up the old, wide, familiar staircase as though she had never gone away or known that brief spell of school life? Could she really be come back to her own again, as mistress of her father's house? It seemed so—for a time, at any rate. Kitty felt very serious, and full of awe at the thought, and as she slowly mounted the dear old stairs a little very eager, if unspoken, prayer went up from her heavy heart.

Then she reached the door of her room and Betty's, and knocked.

"Who is there?" demanded Betty's voice. "Me. Kitty."

"Kitty What, Kitty! Oh—h—h!" There was a rush across the room, then a pause. "I—I don't think you had better come in," gasped Betty. "You'll never want to see me again if you do."

"Don't be silly. Why, Betty, whatever has happened?" cried Kitty, as she opened the door and stepped into an almost perfectly dark room. "Are you ill?"

"No," miserably, "I wish I was, then p'r'aps you'd be sorry; and if I was to die you might forgive me, but you can't unless I do die."

"O Betty, what *have* you done?" cried Kitty, growing quite alarmed.

"Is she—is she dead?" asked Betty in an awful whisper.

"Who? Poor Aunt Pike? No; Dr. Yearsley told me she is just ever so slightly better."

"Oh!" gasped Betty, a world of relief in her sigh, "I *am* so glad. Then I ain't a—a murderess—at least not yet. I've been afraid to ask, and nobody came to tell me, and I—O Kitty, it was I made her tumble down like that in a fit or something, and I was *so* frightened. I will never tell any one anything any more."

"You will tell me what it was that you told Aunt Pike that upset her so?"

"I don't think I can," said Betty. "You will hate me so, and so will father—that is why I wanted to hide for ever from all of you; but," with sudden indignation, "that silly old 'Rover' brought me back. Oh, it was dreadful!"

"What was?" asked Kitty patiently. She knew Betty's roundabout way of telling a story, and waited. "What did you tell Aunt Pike? Do tell me, Betty dear. I ought to know before I see her."

Betty dropped on to the window-seat and covered her face with her hands. "Don't look at me; I don't want to see you look mad with me. It was Aunt Pike's fault first of all. If she hadn't said nasty—oh, horrid things about you, I shouldn't have told her what I did, but—but she made me, Kitty; I couldn't help it, and—and I told her right out that Anna could have cleared you long ago, and that she and Lettice were mean and dishonourable to let you bear the blame for them all this time. And when she spoke after that, her voice sounded so—oh, so dreadful, as if she was talking in her sleep, or was far away, or drowning, and she looked—oh, her face frightened me, and then she said, 'Did—Anna— know?' all slow and gaspy like that, as if she hadn't any breath, and I said 'Yes'—I *had* to say 'yes' then, hadn't I? Of course I didn't know it would make her ill, but she fell right down, all of a heap, and oh, I nearly died of fright, and I ran and ran all the way to Wenmere Woods, and I meant never to come back again—never! And it was all Mrs. Henderson's fault that I did come—at least Mrs. Henderson's and Bumble's, and," drawing herself up with great dignity, "I am never going to speak to either of them again. When I had had my tea—she gave me cream and jam, but not any ham—and when I had played about for a little while, she told me she thought I had better be going home, as I was alone; and at last I had to tell her I was never going home any more, and I would be her little servant, if she would take me, only no one must ever see me, or I should be discovered, but she wasn't a bit nice as she generally is. She said, 'Oh, nonsense; little girls mustn't talk like that. I am going to Gorlay to chapel, and I will take you back with me.'

"Then I knew it wasn't any good to ask her to help me, and that I must sleep in the wood with all the wild beasts and things"—Betty's face and her story grew more and more melodramatic—"and as soon as she had gone to put on her bonnet, I ran into the woods for my life. I expect when she came down again and didn't see me she thought I had gone home. I don't think anybody went to look for me, and I think it was very unkind of them, for I might have been eaten up, for all they knew, by wild beasts—"

"Oh no," said Kitty, rousing for the first time from the shock and distress Betty's revelations had thrown her into. "There is nothing in the woods more savage than rabbits and squirrels."

Betty looked hurt. "Oh yes, there is," she protested, "or I shouldn't have gone up and kept close to the railway lines. I saw something, quite large, staring at me with great savage eyes, and if it wasn't a wolf, I am sure it was a badger or—or a wild-cat."

"Did it fly at you?"

"No, but it looked at me as if it wanted to, and I ran until I came to the railway; and after a long time, when it was nearly dark, I saw some red lights coming and heard a noise, and that was the 'Rover.' I—I didn't like the woods at night, so I went up and shouted and signalled to Dumble, and asked him if he knew anybody who wanted a servant, 'cause I'd left home for good, and wanted a 'place.' I didn't tell him who I was, and I thought he wouldn't know me. After he had thought for a minute or two, he said yes, he reckoned he could put me in a good 'place,' if I'd come along of him. So I got up in the carriage—I had it all to myself—and oh it was lovely going along in the dark and seeing the fire come out of the funnel! But," growing very serious and dignified again, "I consider Dumble the *most* dishonourable man I *ever* met, and I'll *never* speak to him again—*never*; and I'll *have* to leave Gorlay 'cause I can't never meet him again, for he ackshally took me up in his arms when the 'Rover' stopped at the wharf, and—well, I was rather sleepy and I didn't see where I was going, but of course I *trusted* him, and when I opened my eyes—why, I was home! Oh, I was *so* angry I didn't know what to do, and I'm never going to speak to Dumble again. I hope I never see him."

The corners of Kitty's mouth twitched, but she did not dare to laugh. "I expect he thought he was doing right," she said excusingly. "He couldn't have helped you to run away; he would have been sent to jail. And oh, Betty, I am so glad you did come home; there is trouble enough without losing you too. I was so frightened about you all the way down in the train—"

"Did you get my letter?"

"Yes; it was that that brought me. I didn't know anything about Aunt Pike until I got to Gorlay Station."

Betty crept over from her window-seat and stood by Kitty as she sat on her little bed. "Kitty, do you hate me for telling that to Aunt Pike?"

"Hate you!" cried Kitty. "As though I ever could, dear. I am sorry she was told—but—but I know you couldn't help it, Bet. I couldn't have myself if it had been you, and she had said unkind things about you."

Then Betty flung her arms about Kitty's neck and began to sob heavily. "I do love you so, Kitty! I do. I really do. I think you are the splendidest girl in all the world, and—and I'll never do anything to make you sorry any more, if I can help it."

Kitty held her little sister very tightly to her, and with Betty's head resting on her breast, and her cheek laid on Betty's curly head, they talked, but talk too intimate to be repeated.

At last Kitty got up. "Where's Tony?" she asked. "I have to find each of you separately, and it seems as if I shall never see all, I want to stay so long with each. Betty, where is Tony? He is all right, isn't he?"

"Oh yes. He went to try and make Anna stop screaming, and I think he has done it. I haven't heard her for a long time."

Kitty made her way to Anna's room, and tapped gently at the door. At first there was no reply, then through the keyhole came a whisper. "Who is there? You must be very quiet, please. Anna is asleep." It was Tony's voice, but by the time Kitty had opened the door he was back on his chair by Anna's sofa, waving a fan gently, as he had been doing for so long that his poor little arms and back ached. His face was very flushed and weary-looking, but his eyes glanced up bright with satisfaction.

"She is gone to sleep, she'll be better now;" but at sight of Kitty the fan was dropped and Anna forgotten, and nurse Tony flew across the room and into his sister's arms.

"Oh, I'm so glad! oh, I'm so glad!" he said again and again and again. "There wasn't anybody but me and Dr. Yearsley, and I was frightened 'cause I didn't know what to do, and everything seemed wrong. I wish daddy was home; but it won't be so bad now you are here," and he snuggled into her arms with a big, big sigh of relief, and put his little hot hands up continually to pat her face and convince himself that she had not vanished again. And thus they sat, held in each other's arms and watching the sleeping Anna, until the handle was gently turned, and Betty appeared in the door-way. A very pale, weary Betty she looked now she was away from her own darkened room.

"Kitty, Dr. Yearsley is looking for you. I think Aunt Pike is awake and asking for you." Then, as Kitty hurried past her, "He says she is a little better, only ever so little; but it is good news, isn't it? She will get well, won't she, Kitty? Oh, do say 'yes,'" and Betty, who had never before bestowed any love or thought on her aunt, had as much as she could do to keep her tears back.

It was a very nervous, trembling Kitty who presently entered the large, dim bedroom where Aunt Pike, so helpless and dependent now, lay very still and white on her bed. Kitty almost shrank back as she first caught sight of her, half fearing the change she should see. But the only change in the face she had once so dreaded was the expression.

When Dr. Yearsley bent over her, and said cheerfully, "Here she is; here is Kitty," the white lids lifted slowly, and Aunt Pike's eyes looked at her as they had never looked before. Kitty went over very close to her, and kissed her.

"I am so sorry," she said sympathetically, "that you are ill, Aunt Pike, but so glad you are a little, just a little bit better."

Mrs. Pike did not answer her; she seemed to have something on her mind that she must speak of, and she could grasp nothing else. "I—I have been—very—unjust—to you," she gasped, speaking with the greatest difficulty. "You—should—have—told me."

"No, no," said Kitty eagerly, bending and kissing her again, "you haven't. You didn't know. I meant you never to know."

"Anna—knew. She—should—"

Kitty bent down, speaking eagerly. "Anna did more for me—for us all."

She saved Dan's life—in that fire."

The poor invalid looked up with a gleam of pleasure in her eyes. "Did she? I am—very glad; but it—it did not excuse—the other. That is—beyond forgiveness."

"Oh no!" cried Kitty warmly, "nothing is that. It is all forgiven long ago, and we will never think of it again."

Aunt Pike's hand was almost helpless, but Kitty felt it press hers ever so slightly, and stooping down she laid her fresh warm cheek against her aunt's cold one. "You must make haste and get well," she said affectionately, "and then we shall all be happy again."

"It-doesn't matter. No one cares," gasped the poor invalid, tears of weakness creeping out from between her lids.

"Oh, you mustn't say that," cried Kitty sturdily. "You must get well for all our sakes. Anna cares, and I care very much. We all care, more than we thought we did till we knew you were ill."

"Anna," whispered the invalid, "is she—all—right?"

"Yes, Tony has soothed her to sleep, and is sitting by her, and I am going to sit by you while you go to sleep. Dr. Yearsley says you mustn't talk any more now," and Kitty, seated in a chair by her aunt's bedside, held her helpless hand lovingly until she had fallen into the easiest sleep she had had yet. By-and-by the nurse came back, and Kitty was free to move.

"I think I must go and talk to Fanny now," she thought, and she made her way to the kitchen, thinking very soberly the while.

"Fanny," she said, "you and I have to steer this ship between us, and for the honour of the ship we must do it as well as ever we can. I—I am afraid I am not very much good, but I am going to try hard; and I think we shall be able to manage it between us, don't you?" wistfully. "Of course having strangers in the house makes it more difficult; but we will do our best, won't we?"

"That we will, Miss Kitty," said Fanny heartily, "and between us all we ought to be able to do things fitty."

The strangers, Dr. Yearsley and Mrs. Pike's nurse, made housekeeping a more serious matter certainly, and illness complicated things; but Aunt Pike's reign, though unpleasant in many ways, had made others easier for Kitty. The house was in good order, rules had been made and enforced. Fanny and Grace had learned much, and profited a good deal by the training, and, best of all, all worked together with a will to make things go smoothly.

There was hope and good news to cheer them too. Aunt Pike grew daily better; by very, very slow degrees, it is true, but still there were degrees. Good news came from their traveller too—news of restored health, good spirits, and, presently, a longing to be at home and at work again.

And then, so quickly did the busy days fly, they had only a very few left to count to the return of the two absent ones, for Dr. Trenire and Dan were to meet and travel home together. Then the last day came, and the last hour, and then—Kitty found herself once more with her father's arms about her.

"Why, father," she cried, standing back and studying carefully his cheerful, sunburnt face, and his look of health and strength, "you are more like the old father than you have been for ever so long."

Dr. Trenire burst into a roar of hearty laughter. "Well," he cried, "after my spending three months in trying to renew my youth, I do think you might have called me a 'young father.' Never mind, Kitty, I feel young, which is more than you do, I expect, dear, with all the cares you have had on your shoulders lately. I suppose you have left Miss Pidsley finally," with a smile, "and I have to pay her a term's fees for nothing?"

Kitty looked a little ashamed of herself as she smiled ruefully. "Yes. I don't seem able to stay at any school more than one term, do I? I think you had better give up trying, father, and keep me home altogether now."

"I think I had," said her father seriously. "I think I can't try again to get on without you, dear—even," quizzically, "if there isn't always boiling water when Jabez gets his head knocked."

THE LAST.

Aunt Pike grew slowly and gradually stronger, and in time was able to be dressed, and could sit up in her chair. But she knew, and the doctors knew, that she would never again be the same strong, active woman that she was before. The doctors had hopes that in time she would be able to walk again, and take up some of her old ways and duties; but she herself was not so hopeful, and with the prospect before her of a long spell of invalidism, she insisted on leaving Dr. Trenire's home for one of her own.

The doctor and all protested warmly, but Aunt Pike was determined. "Kitty can look after the house now better than she could," she said, "and I shall be glad of the rest and quiet. I shall not leave Gorlay. I want to be near you all, so that if Kitty wants any advice I shall be at hand to give it."

So, seeing that her heart was set upon it, and feeling that the quieter, less busy home would be better for her, Dr. Trenire gave in, and they all set to work to find a house to suit her. But here they found a task which taxed all their time and patience. It had to be a small house, sheltered yet sunny, of a moderate rent, but in a good position; it must have, as well as a sitting-room, a room on the ground floor that Mrs. Pike could turn into a bedroom, and it must have a garden with no steps—a rarity in hilly Gorlay.

There were not very many houses in Gorlay, and very few to let; certainly few with all, or even half, of the advantages Mrs. Pike demanded; and at last in despair the doctor had to prevail on an old friend and patient of his own to move from his house and give it up to the invalid, which, marvellous to tell, he did, and, even more marvellous, the house pleased Aunt Pike immensely. The garden was made to suit her by removing all the steps and replacing them with sloping, winding paths and various other cunning devices; and the doctor saw that everything that could add to her comfort was done for her. Then came the great excitement of furnishing the house and stocking the garden.

But before all this had happened, Anna had provided them with a great and glad surprise, though at the same time a painful one; for the only wish of all concerned was that the past should lie buried, and the stupid, regrettable incident that had caused so much sorrow should be forgotten.

They were all seated at tea one day—the children and Dr. Trenire around the table, and Aunt Pike in her big chair near the window—when suddenly the door was burst open, and Anna, whose absence had set them all wondering, walked in.

"I have done it!" she cried excitedly. "I have told them all—Lady Kitson and Miss Richards and Miss Matilda—and—and now," sobbing hysterically with nervous excitement, "I want to go away from Gorlay. I can't stay here. I want to get away from every one until—until they have forgotten. I'd like to go to Kitty's school. May I, mother?"

"Told all what?" asked Mrs. Pike eagerly, ignoring all of Anna's outcry but that.

"Told them all about that—that evening, and me and Lettice. I wanted to try to forget it, and I couldn't until I had told them all."

"O Anna, I wish you hadn't," cried Kitty, greatly distressed lest the mention of the old trouble should be too agitating for her aunt. But, to her surprise, Mrs. Pike looked up with such pleasure in her eyes as had not been seen in them for a very long time.

"Have you really, Anna?" she cried gladly. "Oh, I am so thankful, child. That will do me more good than anything," and she drew Anna down to her and kissed her very tenderly. "Yes, dear," with an understanding of Anna's feelings such as she had never shown before, "you shall go away to school for a time. You shall go to Miss Pidsley's next term, if you like. I am sure it is the best plan."

So Anna went away to school, and Aunt Pike moved into her new home in time to receive her on her return for the Christmas holidays. A nurse-companion was engaged to live with Mrs. Pike and take care of her; but never a day passed but what Kitty went to sit with her, to tell her the news or ask her advice. The others went frequently too—Tony regularly, and Dan daily when he was at home. Betty went sometimes, but not so gladly, for she never quite got over the fright of that dreadful day, and a terrible lurking dread that she might accidentally shock her aunt again, and once more hear that strange, far-away voice, and see her falling, falling. But Kitty never failed; and Kitty was, perhaps, the best beloved of them all by the aunt who had tried, and been so tried by, them.

"You see, Kitty was the only one who willingly kissed me and called me 'dear,'" the poor invalid confessed one day to the doctor as they sat together in the firelight talking over many things—"the only

one since Michael died; and cold, reserved folk such as I remember these things."

"She has a warm heart has my Kitty," said the doctor softly, "and a generous one;" then, fearing as usual the effect of any emotion on the invalid, "She told me that if I came here I was to look about me and see if she had left her gloves about. She thinks she lost one on the way here, but may have dropped the other in the house, as she is almost certain she had one with her. It doesn't much matter, though; they were very full of holes, oddly enough," with a smile.

Aunt Pike's mouth twitched a little at the corners as she opened her work-basket and took out two rather shabby gloves. "One was under the table; some one picked up the other in the garden. They are not holey now; I have mended them. But I expect Kitty would never find it out if you did not tell her."

"A year or two ago she would not have," said her father, as he took the gloves and put them in his pocket, "but I think she would now."

"She has changed," said Aunt Pike gently. "We all have."

"Yes, she has changed—in some respects; in others I hope she never may."

"I think you need not fear that, John," said Aunt Pike sympathetically. Silence fell on them both for a few moments, then Mrs. Pike spoke again. "John, will you be sure to tell Kitty to come here to-morrow, and Dan and all of them in fact, to welcome Anna home for the Christmas holidays? I have a surprise in store for them too, but you mustn't breathe a word of it. Pamela is coming too, to spend part of her holidays with us. I thought she would do Anna good. Then perhaps you would like to have her with you for the rest of the time. We mustn't forget that she was Kitty's friend first. But don't you breathe a word of this to Kitty."

"Very well," said the doctor; then, with a pretended sigh, he added, "I am thankful, though, that my Christmas puddings and things are already made, for I foresee there will be nothing more done now. You wicked woman, to plot so against my peace and comfort."

But Aunt Pike did not look repentant, she only chuckled. "Even housekeepers must have a holiday at Christmas," she said, "and I am sure yours deserves a good one."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KITTY TRENIRE ***

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