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At the Seaside.

Troublesome Comforts

By **GERALDINE ROBERTSON GLASGOW**

**THOMAS NELSON AND SONS
LONDON, EDINBURGH
DUBLIN, AND
NEW YORK**

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TROUBLESOME COMFORTS.

CHAPTER I.

Mrs. Beauchamp sat in a stuffy third-class carriage at Liverpool Street Station, and looked wistfully out of the window at her husband. Behind her the carriage seemed full to overflowing with children and paper parcels, and miscellaneous packages held together by straps. Even the ticket collector failed in his mental arithmetic when nurse confronted him with the tickets.

"There's five halves and two wholes," she said, "and a dog and a bicycle."

"All right, madam," he said politely, "but I don't see the halves."

"There's Miss Susie, and Master Dick, and Miss Amy," began nurse distractedly, "and the child in my arms; and now there's Master Tommy disappeared."

"He's under the seat," said Dick solemnly.

"Come out, Tom," said his father, "and don't be such an ass."

Tom crawled out, a mass of dust and grime, not in the least disconcerted.

"I thought I could travel under the seat if I liked," he said.

"Oh, if you *like!*" said his father; but nurse, with a look of despair, caught at his knickerbockers just as he was plunging into the dust again. "Not whilst I have power to hold you back, Master Dick," she said.—"No, sir, you haven't got the washing of him, and wild horses won't be equal to it if he gets his way."

"Well, keep still, Tommy," said his father.

Tommy squirmed and wriggled, but nurse's hand was muscular, and the strength of despair was in her grip. Mrs. Beauchamp realized that in a few minutes the keeping in order of the turbulent crew would fall to her, but for the present she tried to shut her ears to Susie's domineering tones and Tommy's scornful answers. Susie always chose the most unsuitable moments for displays of temper, and Mrs. Beauchamp sighed as she looked at the firm little mouth and eager blue eyes. She felt so very, very sorry to be leaving Dick the elder in London—so intolerably selfish. Her voice was full of tender regret.

"It seems so horrid of me, Dick. It is *you* who ought to be having the holiday, not me."

"Oh, I shall manage quite well," said Mr. Beauchamp cheerfully. "It is rather a bore being kept in London, of course, away from you and the chicks"—this came as an afterthought—"but I hope you will find it plane sailing. I want it to be a *real* rest to you, old woman."

His eyes wandered past her sweet, tired face to the fair and dark heads beyond, of which she was the proud possessor, and his sigh was not altogether a sigh of disappointment. Mrs. Beauchamp glanced at them too, and the anxious line deepened between her eyes. She pushed back with a cool hand the loose hair on her forehead. "It is an ideal place for children," she said—"sand and shells; and they can bathe from the lodgings."

"You will be good to your mother, boys," said Mr. Beauchamp. He was directly appealing to Tommy, but he included the whole family in his sweeping glance. "Don't overpower her.—And, Susie, you are the eldest; you must be an example."

Susie flounced out her ridiculously short skirts with a triumphant look round. "I *am* a help, aren't I, mother?" she said.

"Sometimes, dear," said her mother, with rather a tired smile.

"And you won't bother about me, Christina?" he said.

"How can I help it, darling?"

She leant farther out of the window, but one hand held firmly to Amy's slim black legs—Amy had scrambled up on to the seat, and was pushing the packages in the rack here and there, searching for something.

"There is the guard; we are just off, I suppose. O Dick, how I wish you were coming too! But I will write as often as I can.—Susie, be quiet. I cannot hear myself speak."

"Well, mother," said Susie, shaking back her hair, and poking the point of her parasol between the laces of Dick's boots, "look at the way he has laced himself up; you said yourself he was to do it tidily. And his face is smutty already; look at him."

"Good-bye, Dick," said Mrs. Beauchamp. The train was moving smoothly out of the station, and she leant out as far as she dared, to get a last look at the erect figure.—"There, Susie, father is out of sight. Leave the boys alone."

Susie frowned.

"She'd better," said Tommy, in a choked voice.

"Now you're going to be naughty," said Susie.—"I know they are, mother—they always begin like that; they're clawing at me with their sticky fingers. Mother, tell them not to; I didn't say anything."

"You are a beastly blab," said Tommy defiantly.

"Tom, what a word! Sit down by nurse and look out of the window.—Susie, it is really your fault—you are so interfering."

"I'm not interfering," said Susie, aggrieved. "I'm helping you to keep them in order."

"Well, *don't*. I would rather manage them alone.—Don't squabble, boys; there's plenty of room for every one."

"O mother—" said Amy.

Mrs. Beauchamp still held unconsciously on to the slim black leg, but the sudden movement of the train had jerked Amy off the seat. She clung for a moment to the rack, but her hand slipped, and she fell headlong on to the opposite seat, and there was a dull thud as her head crashed on to a little wooden box.

"It's all right, darling," her mother said, and she held her close in her comforting arms.

CHAPTER II.

Amy was a good little girl, and she tried very hard not to cry; but she sat pressed very close to her mother's side, with her large blue eyes full and overflowing with tears. Dick, who was very tender-hearted, begged her to eat his toffee, which would have been comforting; but nurse would not allow it at any price.

"No, Miss Amy," she said, "I won't hear of it—not in your pretty blue dress. And don't lean upon your mamma; you'll wear the life out of her."

Amy pressed her soft cheek against her mother's arm, and looked up in her face with her tearful blue eyes. She was relieved to see just the shadow of a smile.

"Give me Master Alick, nurse," said Mrs. Beauchamp; "I am afraid he has toothache.—There! see, Alick, all the pretty green fields going past outside."

"It's *us* that is going past," said Dick.

"Hold me too, mother," said Amy suddenly; "take me in your arms like you do Alick."

"But Alick will cry if I put him down. See, I can manage like that; there is room for both of you."

She made a large lap, and Amy scrambled on to it. It was like a nest with two birds in it—not very restful, perhaps, to the nest, but quite delightful for the birds. They were very good little birds, too, and they did not quarrel; and presently Amy nudged mother's arm, and spoke in the tiniest whisper. "One of the birds has gone to sleep," she said.

Alick's eyes were shut, and his round, flushed face was lying on mother's hand. When she tried to take it gently away he stirred, and squeaked restlessly.

"Let's pretend he's a cuckoo and push him out," suggested Tom.

"Tommy!" said his mother.

"Oh, I didn't mean him to fall far," said Tommy—"just a kind of roll."

"Not the kind you eat," said his mother.

"No, dear, I couldn't let you; he would be startled even if he wasn't hurt."

"A train's so stupid," said Tommy, yawning.

Susie was on the alert in an instant.

"There! I knew he was going to be naughty," she said delightedly. "Soon he'll be pulling the cord, or trying to break the glass, or doing something else he oughtn't to. When he begins like that he's generally very tiresome."

"Hush, Susie," said her mother; "see how good Dick is."

"And me!" cried Tommy.

"Yes, you are good too."

"When you're sleeping," added nurse.

"There, Miss Prig!" said Tom.

"There, mother!" cried Susie, in the same breath.

"Well, Susie, it is your own fault."

Susie flounced away to the farther end of the carriage, and sat looking at the reflection of herself in the glass. She saw a little girl with short blue skirts and a shady hat. When she took off the hat she could see very large, brown eyes and a cross mouth, and the more she looked the crosser it got. There was a fascination about that cross little mouth. It seemed to Susie that she sat there a long while, whilst nobody took any notice of her. In the reflection she could see baby asleep on mother's lap, with mother's hand tucked under his cheek. He looked a darling; but Susie frowned and looked away. Amy was sitting "in mother's pocket"—that was what nurse called it—and Susie felt unreasonably vexed. Dick and Tommy were leaning out of the window buying buns—Tommy was paying. They were at a station, and there were heaps of buns. Susie saw the cross mouth in the reflection quiver and close tightly; the brown eyes blinked—she almost thought the Susie in the reflection was going to cry.

"Nobody cares," she said to herself miserably. "Mother doesn't care; she loves Amy and Alick more than me. The boys hate me; they will eat all the buns, and I shall die of hunger. I wish—"

"Susie," said mother's voice, "the children are stifling me. Come and have tea; we have bought such a lot of buns. Will you help me put baby down in your corner? and you might give him your jacket for a pillow."

Susie could see nothing, but she kept her eyes on the reflection in the window, with a fascinated stare.

"Susie, I *want* you," said her mother gently.

In a minute Susie had swept the tears away with her sleeve, and had launched herself across the rocking carriage, and flung her arms round her mother's neck.

"Gently, gently, darling," said mother, smiling. "I haven't got a hand—Alick is holding it so fast—but I missed you, Susie. There is something there, outside, that I wanted to be the first to show you."

Susie, still rather subdued, leant as far out of the window as the bars allowed, and let the wind from the engine blow the curls about her face. Away, far on the horizon, was a silver line, as straight as if it had been ruled with a ruler, and a shining white speck showed against the yellow evening sky.

"What is it?" said Susie, breathlessly.

"It is the *sea*," her mother told her, "and the white sails of the ships are going out with the tide."

"Mother, I mean never to be naughty again," said Susie suddenly; "only I know that to-morrow I shall forget, and be as horrid as I was to-day."

Susie was tired, and more tears seemed imminent. The train was slowing down, and the screeching of the engine almost drowned her voice.

"Pick up the parcels, and be quite ready to jump out," said Mrs. Beauchamp hastily. "Susie, you must not grow perfect *too* suddenly; I shouldn't know you!"

CHAPTER III.

The next day was radiantly beautiful, and Susie started well. Directly after breakfast the four elder ones trooped down to the sands with spades and buckets, whilst Alick, left alone with nurse, waved his good-byes from the balcony. Mrs. Beauchamp looked after them a little anxiously; but Susie in her best mood was so very trustworthy that she smoothed the anxious line out of her forehead, and turned back with a restful sigh to the empty room and the silence.

And out on the beach things went swimmingly. They made sand castles and moats, and the rising tide flowed in just as they wished it to. Like another Canute, Tom flung defiance to the waves, and shouted himself hoarse; and then, to his immense surprise, the little ripples swept smoothly back, and left a crumbled castle, and white foamy ridges that looked like soap.

"Come on, Susie," he said; "it's no fun when there's no water in it. Let's go over to the rocks and look for insects."

"No; let's stay here," said Susie. "I like watching the ships and the steamers."

"Fudge," said Tom.

"The rocks are awfully jolly, Sue," said Dickie.

But Susie shook her shoulders, and gazed straight before her. "I'm not going," she said.

"Very well; we jolly well prefer your room to your company," said Tom.—"Come on, Dick."

Susie was sitting on the ruins of the castle, with her knees drawn up and her elbows planted on them. She really was not listening to Tom a bit, for her fascinated eyes were fixed on the line of silver sea, on which the passing steamers rose and fell. Far away at the back of her mind was the consciousness that Tom was going to be naughty, and that she might prevent it; but she pushed her fingers into her ears, and gazed straight before her.

It was Amy tugging at her dress that made her turn reluctantly at last.

"Tom is calling you, Susie," she said.

"Oh, bother!" said Susie. "You can go and see what he wants."

Amy obediently struggled over the heavy sand to the fine strip of pebbles on which the boys were disporting themselves. Their boots were wet through; their shrill voices pierced Susie's poor defences.

"Susie—Susie—Susie!"

But Susie did not move.

All the same, she knew perfectly well that Amy was struggling back over the shingle and the sand, and had dropped panting at her feet, quite unable to speak for want of breath. Her little delicate face was pink with heat and excitement, and her thin legs trembled.

"They want to get a box and send Dickie out in it, like a boat," she explained.

"They haven't got a box," said Susie.

"But they say they can get one easily. It's father's; and they can tie a string on to it and drag it."

"They can ask mother," said Susie impatiently.

"Yes, I suppose so." Amy had crept nearer, and put a small, unsteady hand on her knee. "Please don't let them do it, Susie," she said; "don't let them be naughty."

"Don't bother," said Susie. "I can't help it."

She shook off Amy's hand impatiently; but she was sorry a moment afterwards. Susie often said things like that, and it was rather a comfort that Amy was always quite ready to be forgiven.

"It is so beautiful here, Amy; and I dare say they are not being naughty really. They only hope we are looking; but I'm not going to."

She resolutely turned her back upon the boys and the strip of pebbles. But Amy could not keep still; her eyes kept turning nervously to the sturdy jersey-clad figures, and presently she nudged Susie again.

"They've got the box, Susie. You can't think how deep the water is, and it looks so horrid; and Dick has a cold."

"Oh, don't bother," said Susie.

"Mother said you were to look after them, because you are the eldest," urged Amy.

"Why weren't one of you the eldest?" said Susie crossly. "I've been the eldest all my life, and I'm tired of it. Mother knows I can't manage them."

Without turning her head she knew that Amy was creeping again across the strip of pebbles. She heard her foot slipping, and the shouts of the boys when she reached them; then Amy's soft little frightened voice—and then silence.

An hour later Mrs. Beauchamp was sitting on the little balcony outside the drawing-room window. The sky was divinely blue, and the sun was dazzling. Close to her feet was a basket of stockings that needed darning, but she felt as if she must lay her needle down every now and then, to look at the gray, glittering sea, and the shifting crowd upon the beach. Her feet ached with perpetual running up and down stairs; but she was glad to think that the children were happy and good. In the room across the passage she could hear nurse singing Alick to sleep, and down in the street below a funny little procession was winding up from the sea. She rose and looked over the balcony on to the tops of two sailor hats, and what looked like two soaking mushrooms. She stared at them stupidly, wondering why the box they dragged behind them was so familiar, and why they left such a long wet trail behind them.

After them sauntered a few idle fishermen; but just for a minute she could not grasp what had happened. Then she pushed the basket on one side and ran to the drawing-room door.

Up the stairs came the hurried rush of feet, with the box bumping from stair to stair. Then the dripping family clung about her with soaked garments, and hair that looked like seaweed.

"Mother, change us, please, before nurse sees us."

"But what is it?" she cried. "How did it happen?"

"It was Tom's fault," said Susie, whimpering. "He sent Dick out to sea in the uniform case, and it has a hole in it, and it went down."

"Oh, run upstairs and change; Dick has a cough."

"He didn't drown," said Tom, "because we had tied a rope to it, and a fisherman pulled it up."

"And where is Dickie?"

"I told him to go up on the roof and dry—he's on the leads by now. It's awfully nice there; we went this morning."

"*On the roof!*—Susie, tell him to come down, whilst I get their clothes.—Tom, how can you do such things?"

"Why, you never told us not to," said Tom, with innocent eyes.

Susie crept upstairs, very white and quiet. She had been really frightened, and she had an uncomfortable feeling at the back of her mind that somehow it was her fault. She found Dick scrambling on to the roof, and hauled him in with unnecessary vigour. When she got downstairs she was sulky because her mother had not time to listen to her eager excuses, but put her hastily on one side.

"Never mind now, Susie. The first thing is to slip off your wet clothes and get dry, and then help me with the others. Give me the big towel, and untie Amy's frock."

"But, mother," argued Susie, "I couldn't guess he was going to be so naughty, could I?"

"You didn't try to guess," said Tom resentfully; "and now you are trying to make mother think you are better than me. You wouldn't hem our sails or dig with us. We had to do something."

"And now you want me to quarrel," said Susie.—"Mother, I want to explain."

"Hush, Susie! there is no time to explain now; you must tell me by-and-by."

Susie flung the towel on to the floor, and felt a great lump in her throat. Dick had to be dried and warmed, in order to stop that horrid little croaking cough; and no one cared for her excuses or explanations.

With angry tears blinding her she ran across to the nursery, and stood looking out at the silver line of sea and the bobbing ships. Alick was stretching in his cradle, and it creaked under his weight. She could see his curly head and his outstretched fat legs. He was so accustomed to

having his legs admired that he always pulled up his petticoats solemnly to exhibit them, as though pathetically hoping to get it over and have done with it.

Susie's ill-temper evaporated like smoke. She flung herself beside the cradle, and hugged Alick in her arms, leaning so closely over him that nurse, in hurrying to and fro, paused to expostulate.

"Not so close, Miss Susie, please—the child can't breathe; and I don't want you putting any of your naughtiness into his head."

"How can I, when he can't walk?" said Susie indignantly.

"Well, I wouldn't put it beyond you," said nurse. "I know you've been up to something, or you wouldn't be here now, looking as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth."

"I'm trying to be good," said Susie, still indignant.

"Well, we shan't see the result yet awhile," said nurse, "for the way you've devil-oped these holidays is past imagining."

She always pronounced it in that way, and the word held a dreary significance for Susie.

CHAPTER IV.

That horrid, teasing cough of Dick's got worse and worse, and by evening he was lying patiently in his crib, with a steaming kettle singing into the little tent of blankets that enveloped it, and a very large and very hot linseed poultice on his chest. Susie, sitting down below, could hear the hasty footsteps and the hoarse, croaking sound that always filled her with panic. Their tea was brought to them by the overworked maid, and she and Tom ate it in a depressed silence, and then sat again on the window-sill looking silently and miserably out to sea. By-and-by nurse came in hurriedly, with the news that baby was crying and had to be attended to, and that she and Tom must manage to put themselves to bed.

"I haven't time to brush your hair," nurse said regretfully; and Susie's face lightened.

"Nurse, is Dick better?" she asked breathlessly.

"He's about as bad as I've ever seen him," nurse said shortly, and turned to leave the room; but Susie clung desperately to her skirt.

"Don't go, nurse. Let me do something—let me hold baby."

"No, indeed, Miss Susie," said nurse; "you've done mischief enough already. Go to bed quietly, and try to get up right foot foremost to-morrow."

Susie went back to the window-sill, and huddled up close to Tom. With blank eyes she looked at the stars and the moon bursting from behind hurrying clouds. Even when she put her fingers into her ears that rasping cough pursued her. Tom's heavy head fell against her, and she knew he ought to be in bed; but it wanted really desperate courage to shake him into consciousness and get him up somehow to his room.

And upstairs, next to Tom's little bed, was an empty space, from which a crib had been hastily wheeled into the next room. On the floor beside it lay a vest and knickerbockers, still heavy with sea water, and a red tin pail and spade. It made Susie sick to look at them. But she got Tom at last into his bed, and covered him up. He tried to say his prayers, but he was too sleepy; and Susie hushed him at last, and crept away to her own little room in the dark.

Amy was so soundly asleep that she did not even turn; but Susie could not rest. All through the miserable hours she sat straight up in bed, looking before her with staring eyes, and listening to the uneasy movements next door.

It was almost morning when Amy woke at last and turned her startled gaze on Susie's face, but what she read there drove her out of her own bed and on to Susie's. Then she stretched out two comforting little arms and held her close.

"Don't, Susie, don't," she said breathlessly; "it wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was," said Susie harshly.

Amy rubbed her rosy cheek against Susie's sleeve, and at the touch Susie's frozen heart melted. Tears came and sobs, till the sheet was wet, and she could only speak in gasps.

"Mother *trusted* me! I am going to mother, Amy. I can't bear it any more. If Dick dies, it is me that did it. I was the only one who knew."

"Let me get your shoes," said Amy.

But Susie would not wait. She slipped out of bed on to the cold boards—a small, miserable figure, disfigured with crying—whilst Amy watched her breathlessly. She opened the door and listened. Every one seemed to be asleep, except that in the room next door she heard hushed voices and the tread of careful feet, then the rattle of a cup and Dick's cough. She opened the door as gently

as she could and looked in. The blind was up and a fire burning. The tent of blankets had been pulled down, and Dick, with the poultice still on his chest, was sitting up in bed, wrapped in a soft red shawl. By the table stood nurse, making tea; and his mother, looking pale and tired, was sitting by the crib. She looked up when the door opened, and without a word held out her arms.

Susie fairly tumbled into them.

"O mother," she kept repeating, as if nothing more would come.

"*Susie!*" said mother.

"Oh, I have been awake all night!" Susie panted out the words. "If he had died it would have been my fault. Mother, is he getting well?"

"My darling Susie," said mother, "I had not time to come to you. I never dreamt you were awake. Dick is *much* better; but he has been very bad, and he must go to sleep."

"Mother, let me tell you! I am so *wicked*. I *felt sure* they would not be really naughty; I *felt certain*—"

"Susie," said mother faintly, "I must go to sleep too. Some other time we will talk it over, but not now."

"But I can't sleep," said Susie, "unless I tell you first."

"Come, Susie, try. I am sure it would be a great comfort to make excuses; but, just for once, choose the harder part, and say nothing. You and I, Susie, must get our beauty-sleep."

She stroked the flaxen pigtail and gently unloosed Susie's clinging hands.

"Come, let me tuck you in," she said.

"Nurse is going to stay with Dick. Susie, I am very, very tired."

Susie's sobs ceased suddenly, and she stood up straight. It was the hardest battle she had ever fought, but she was never one for half measures. In perfect silence she allowed her mother to lead her away and tuck her comfortably into the little bed, where Amy patiently waited for her, and then, still silently, she put her two arms round her mother and hugged her.

"Oh, thank you, Susie," mother said gratefully.

CHAPTER V.

Dick took many days to get well, and all the time his crib remained in the corner of his mother's room. The red pail and spade were tidied away, and his knickerbocker suit was put out of sight; and in the afternoon, when the house was empty, and nurse, and Susie, and Amy, and Tom, and baby were all out on the sands, his mother used to read delightful stories to him, whilst he lay and watched her with round, wondering eyes. His cough was troublesome at night, but however often he twisted, and turned, and choked, there was the familiar face bending over him, her arm beneath his head.

Dick was a very kind little boy, and he tried always to cough under the bed-clothes, so as not to wake her, but it was no use. However carefully he coughed, her eyes always opened at once.

"I am taking away your peace-time," he said, over and over again. And she always answered, "Never mind, darling; I *could* not sleep if you wanted me."

"You look so funny," he said once.

"Perhaps I am tired, Dickie."

But she smiled as she spoke, and he felt relieved. It was when she was too tired to smile that her face was strange.

And Susie's behaviour was quite angelic. She was happy and busy, and brimful of good resolutions. She gave up many and many a morning on the sands to play with Dick, and to let her mother go out to walk or shop. Her astonishing meekness was a constant surprise to Tom, and he was relieved by occasional flashes of temper, which showed him that the old Susie was only sleeping, not dead!

But at last Dick was able to be wheeled down to the sands in Alick's perambulator, and perhaps it was the joy of his recovery that turned Susie's head, or perhaps she was tired of her long spell of goodness, but whatever the reason, she was particularly teasing and tiresome. She did not like to see her mother sitting close to Dick, ready to wheel him home if he was tired; and she would not allow her to read in peace, but kept breaking in with silly questions and remarks.

"You never let *me* sit in your pocket," she said at last crossly.

"My dear Susie"—mother shut her book with a very faint sigh—"there is not room for all of you on my lap. I should have to nurse an arm or a leg at a time."

"You could *make* room," said Susie.

"She would be like the donkey that wanted to be a lap-dog, wouldn't she, mother?" said Tom. "It sat upon its master's lap."

Every one laughed, except Susie.

"Well, I'm not a donkey," she said, "and I'm not a lap-dog; and, besides, you want to yourself."

"No, I don't," said Tom stoutly. "I hate to sit on any one's lap; if you are so anxious you can sit on nurse's."

Susie's eyes threatened to overflow.

"Oh, don't cry, Susie," said her mother, in alarm, "or I shall have to put up my umbrella. Go and build a castle with Tom, and take Amy. I trust her to you. Nurse and I must get the babies home."

Susie always rose to any demand made upon her, and was proud of being trusted. She gathered Dick's shells and seaweed and glittering stones skilfully into his pail, and was really helpful in rolling up the rugs and cushions. She was so pleased to see his rather thin, unsteady legs gathering strength as they wobbled slowly over the sand. When she put her arm round him, she was proud to feel that he really needed support. At the foot of the wooden steps leading up the cliff his mother took him in her arms. She was looking tired and pale, but she smiled very sweetly at Susie.

"My kind little daughter," she said; and Susie beamed.

When she got back to Tom and Amy she found that they were not alone: two other children, a boy and a girl, with bare feet and tucked-up skirts, were standing talking to them.

The boy had black eyes and black hair, and the girl was the image of him; her long, thin legs were like pipe stems, and she spoke in a loud, domineering voice.

"We have watched you all the week," she said, "and we made up our minds to know you. We thought we had better wait until your mother and nurse were out of sight, in case they forbid us to come. Us two are twins."

"Oh, they wouldn't forbid you," said Amy, with hasty politeness.

The boy smiled in a superior way. "They *might*" he said. "Nurses generally do. We are not particularly good, and nurses are so narrow-minded."

"We are reckless," said the girl. "Our names are Dot and Dash."

"They're pretty good names," said Tom.

"They fit us," said the twins in a breath.

"Both of we were taken out of church last Sunday," said Dot, in an explanatory way and with an air of pride. "When the clergyman came from inside the railings, Dash forgot he was in church, and he jumped up and said quite loud, 'Shut the gate.'"

"Whatever for?" said Tom.

"You see," said Dash, with his air of modest pride, "I always spend the time thinking how many sheep I could pen into the pews, and how many cows I could get behind the railings. I think it could be seventeen *with a squash*, but of course, if you left the gate open, the cows would get into the sheep pens; so, when I saw him go out and leave the bar up, I felt I must run and shut it, and I spoke out loud. I didn't really mean to, but father marched us out of church, and he wouldn't let me explain."

"I suppose you oughtn't to have been thinking of cows and sheep in church," said Amy, in her surprised little voice.

"Shut up, Miss Prig," said Dash; and Amy was obediently silent.

"Shall we play together?" said the twins, with one voice.

"It would be jolly," said Tom.—"Wouldn't it, Susie?"

"Well, you mustn't tell your people," they said, "but every morning after your babies go in we might have a jolly game."

"Mother wouldn't mind, would she, Susie?" said Amy.

"We don't want your opinion," said Tom loftily.

Amy blushed till the tears came. "Would she?" she repeated desperately.

"There's no harm in playing," said Susie.

All her good resolutions were slipping away, and her voice grew excited. Susie was always so carried away by the spirit of adventure, and she forgot so easily. These sands, and the silver sea full of monsters! The black rocks and seaweed—no nurse to bother about wet stockings—no babies who needed a good example! Susie's spirits rose.

"There wouldn't be any harm," she cried eagerly, "and we might have some jolly games. We only wouldn't tell mother, because it might worry her."

"Mother can walk on the rocks," cried Amy eagerly.

"I don't believe it," said Dash. "I don't believe an old woman like that can walk a bit—not like we can."

"Not as fast as us," said Susie.—"Don't be tiresome, Amy; it isn't mother who is tiresome—it's nurse."

"Well, we'll meet to-morrow," said the twins, speaking together, as they generally did, at the top of rather squeaky voices.

They pulled Susie to one side.

"Don't tell the other one," they said, in hoarse whispers; "she'd go and tell."

"She's very young," said Susie, in quick apology, as she ran off.

"Both of we has pails," shouted the twins after her, "and we can bring cake."

"We are not allowed curranty cake," said Susie reluctantly.

"Bosh," said the twins. "Who's to know? We come of a very gouty family, and we may eat curranty cake."

"I dare say a little piece wouldn't matter," said Susie.

"O Susie," said Amy, as she plodded breathlessly over the sand to the steps, "she called mother an old woman!"

"Well?" said Susie.

"She is the most young and the most beautiful lady I have ever seen," said Amy, with flushed cheeks.

"Yes, of course," said Susie.

"They seemed rather rude," said Amy.

"It isn't being rude, it's being *reckless*. Didn't you hear them say so?"

"Aren't they the same, Susie?"

"Not at all," said Susie, with her nose in the air. "It's *older* to be reckless; it's much easier to be rude. But you mustn't tell, Amy."

"O Susie, I'll try not," said Amy; "but when mother asks me I don't know what to do."

"Well, you can hold your tongue," said Susie sharply.

CHAPTER VI.

Susie felt a little excited next morning when she remembered the twins, and all the time she was digging moats and piling up sand castles she had one eye fixed on the active figures of her new friends, who, with bare legs and shrill voices, attracted a good deal of attention. Once she tried timidly to "draw" nurse on the subject, but nurse was not responsive.

"Those are rather splendid children," she said wistfully.

"Where?" said nurse, lifting a calculating eye from the heel of the stocking she was knitting, and looking vaguely round the horizon.

"There—on the rock," said Susie eagerly. "Tom and I want to go on the rocks so much, and those children could help us; they are so very—so very *reckless*."

"So very rude," said nurse dispassionately.

The very words Amy had used. The angry blood flew into Susie's face.

"I don't know what you mean by rude," she said obstinately. "It's very dull sitting here and making castles with babies; and Tom and I want to go on the rocks."

"Well, your mamma will take you some day, when she feels better," said nurse. "She's had a wearing time since she came. No doubt it's a trial to see other children, with no decent nurse to look after them, running wild and shouting like wild Indians; but I have my duty to you and your mamma, and you must just bear it as best you can. You should take example by Miss Amy and be contented, and be glad to think you have Master Dick back with you again."

"Mother always makes a fuss about Dick," said Susie.

"Well," said nurse, rising with difficulty and shaking the sand from her dress, "I'm going to take

the little ones in, Miss Amy and all. She can play with Master Dick whilst I get baby to sleep. Perhaps you will help me, Miss Susie?"

Of course Susie would help; her face lightened at the thought! All the jealous lines disappeared as if by magic. Alick's little hands felt like rose leaves on her face. She forgot the twins, forgot to be cross, as she folded her arms tightly round him. She had half a mind to go in with them and have a nice nursery game; but when she hesitated and looked back, she saw Tom waving impatiently, and it was difficult to say no.

She handed Alick to nurse, and stood staring after him as he leant his round red face over her shoulder and waved his chubby hands. When they all disappeared on to the parade at the top of the cliff she turned and flew over the sands.

"Take off your shoes and stockings," shouted the twins; "us both always do." And Susie, without a thought, unlaced her boots, and flung them hither and thither, never stopping to look behind her or to be sure that they were safe. The water was quite warm and the sea was sapphire blue. It was a very low tide, and the rocks stretched away to a long, low island, crowned with grass, where a few nimble goats perched on unlikely crags. From rock to rock flew Susie's active feet, but Dot was always ahead; and so, slipping, splashing, torn by the rocks, drenched with the warm spray, Susie revelled in a long hour of liberty. She was wild with excitement, eager to come again, full of reckless promises.

"We'll go as far as the island another day," said Dot, "but we have to choose a low tide. Aren't you glad now that you didn't go home and play like a baby?"

Susie was hastily rubbing the sand out of her toes and hunting for her stockings. Her feet were very cold, and her fingers seemed thumbs. She did not answer Dot. She did not feel quite sure what to say; things always looked so different before and after, and what nurse had said about a *wearing time* stuck in her mind.

"Well, aren't you?" said Dot impatiently.

"No," said Susie bluntly.

She stopped to lace Tom's boots, and then looked up with a face that had grown suddenly red.

"I can't help it," she said desperately, "but I never *am* glad afterwards."

She went on lacing laboriously, whilst Tom lay on his face kicking and plunging about. Dot looked at her curiously.

"But you wanted to come on the rocks?" she said.

"Oh yes," said Susie. "I shall always want to come, but I shall be sorry afterwards. I think I ought to warn you because I am like that. I can't help it. It is silly of nurse," she went on, as she tied the lace in a draggled knot. "Why shouldn't we play with you? I feel *perfectly certain*—" She seemed to remember using those words before on an unfortunate occasion, so she hastily changed them. "I am *quite sure* that you are a very good companion. Me and Tom couldn't learn any harm from you."

She was persuading herself, not the twins, but it was a twin who answered.

"We can have lots of fun," said Dot, "and no one will know. The first chance we will cut over the rocks to the town and buy some sweets."

"Generally I have to look after the little ones," said Susie.

"Well, no one would eat them if they stayed here alone till you came back, would they, stupid?"

"No," said Susie, rather shortly.

She was not quite sure that she liked being called "stupid."

"I can't think how all this sand has got into your stockings," said nurse. "I should hope you didn't paddle after I left you, against my orders!"

There was silence, and in another moment Susie would have told the truth, but before the words came faltering out nurse spoke again.

"But there! I can trust you, with all your troublesome ways," she said.

And this time Susie *could not* speak.

CHAPTER VII.

As time went on it grew so perilously easy to be deceitful! No one thought of doubting them—no one thought of asking what they did when they were left alone.

Day after day, as nurse's toiling figure disappeared up the wooden steps on to the cliff, Dash and Dot burst round the corner of the rocks, and almost without a word spoken, Susie's shoes and stockings were flung to the winds, and she was scampering at headlong speed from pool to pool, with Tom at her heels—like a wild creature, and in a condition that would have fairly horrified poor nurse, who held that all well-conducted young ladies, like the Queen of Spain, should have no visible legs!

Really, in her heart, Susie did not like the twins so very much. They were wild and unkempt, and very boisterous; their twinkling black eyes radiated mischief, but it was the sort of mischief that bewildered Susie and rather frightened her. Nurse puzzled over her mangled stockings and the hideous rents in her skirts, and Mrs. Beauchamp's patient fingers grew stiff with darning; but whilst Susie flew about the rocks, careless and dishevelled, she always forgot how sorry she was going to be afterwards, and how uncomfortable her conscience was at night.

"I really won't go again," she said to herself time after time; and yet the first sight of the twins splashing round the rocks scattered all her good resolutions to the winds.

"I am glad I can trust you," her mother often said. "You are a comfort to me."

"Troublesome comforts I should call them," nurse said; and, like many of nurse's wise sayings, it was remembered by Susie, and left a little sting in her memory.

This afternoon she came to the beach quite resolved to withstand temptation, and to play demurely with the little ones. It had rained all morning, and now Tom had gone to the town with his mother to buy some new sand-shoes. For some time Susie was perfectly happy building castles of sand and letting the rising tide flow into her moat. Nurse was indulgent enough to waste a few of her valuable minutes in making a scarlet flag and mounting it on a wooden knitting-pin, whilst Dick and Amy busily ornamented its base with fan shells. Dick was the king, with Alick for his knight—rather a top-heavy knight, with wayward legs—and Susie and Amy were the besieging army, fighting with desperate courage as long as they had breath.

Susie flung herself panting on the sand. "Isn't it funny, nurse," she said, "that all the bad men were good kings, and all the good men had to be beheaded?"

"I don't know much about any king, Miss Susie," said nurse, "except King Henry the Eighth, and *his* beheading was on the other side. He was a bad man if you like, and I never had any patience with him."

"Oh, I forgot him," said Susie; "and I wouldn't say that King Edward was a bad man exactly, though he is a good king; but he isn't what you would call *prime*, is he?"

"Oh no, my dear, not prime," said nurse.

"And Charles the Second wasn't prime either," said Susie.

"I don't know about him, my dear," said nurse. "But to go back to King Henry. I always felt very much for poor Annie Bullen. A monster of iniquity I call him, dressed up in his ermine and fallals, and not a policeman or a judge daring to say him nay."

"How nice it is that common gentlemen don't behave like kings!" said Amy. "If I was a queen, I would throw my crown away when it was time for my beheadal."

"No, you'd cry," said Dick solemnly.

"I wouldn't," said Susie. "I'd march proudly out with my lovely hair floating in the wind, and my swannish neck rising out of a black velvet dress, and I'd stand on the block and say, 'I *will* my limbs—that means my legs and arms—to the four quarters of the country, and my heart to the tyrant who broke it.'"

"Much he'd want it," said Tom disdainfully.

But Susie stood declaiming on the sand-hill, inspired by her own eloquence, and gazed at with admiration by Amy for a courage she could not match.

"O Susie, how brave you are!" she said. "They'd have to kill you to get at it; you couldn't get at your heart till you were dead. I don't believe I could ever be as brave as that. I know I should cry."

"It's called *weep*, my dear," said nurse, "when it's done by kings and queens."

"Well, I should weep," said Amy. "And I make my wills quite differently to Susie. I made a will this morning when it rained. You know you said you were going to give me a paint-box on my birthday, nurse! Well, if I live till my birthday, I'm going to leave it back to you in my will."

"You needn't trouble, Miss Amy," said nurse, "because if you don't live till your birthday I can keep it."

"But that wouldn't be my *will*," said Amy, puzzled.

"But it would be your wish, my dear, which comes to the same thing."

"Well, mine would be my will, but it wouldn't be my wish," said Susie. "It would be history, and things in history are never so bad as things that happen to yourself."

"But it *would* happen to yourself if it was *your* legs and arms you gave away," said Amy.

"And I dare say it was just as bad to have your head cut off a hundred years ago as it would be to-day," said nurse—"I mean for the people themselves."

"Do you think," said Susie, "that the Jews and people who had their teeth pulled out by the king for fun felt it just as much as we do when we go to the dentist?"

"*For fun!*" said Dick, in a horrified voice.

"Did they have gas?" said Amy.

"Gas!" said Susie, with a superior smile. "How silly you are, Amy! They had no gas then—only candles, or perhaps lamps. And I don't see how they could pull out teeth with lamps; do you?"

"No," said Amy, in a small, mortified voice.

"I daresay," nurse went on, as if there had been no interruption, "that it would have been easier for Miss Susie to have been brave in a history book than if the trial came to her here."

"I don't see why," argued Susie.

"Well, we are made so," said nurse. "Other people's trials are a deal easier to bear than our own. Now you've been good children to-day, and I'll make a surprise for tea as a reward. I'm going to leave you Master Dick for an hour, Miss Susie; and you'll look after him well, and when I wave you'll bring him in. Don't sit down any longer, but have a bit of play on the sand; it's getting chilly, and it looks like more rain."

"All right," said Susie.

She was filled with light-hearted joy, and nurse's praise warmed her heart; nurse so seldom praised her. She helped Alick's wilful legs to the foot of the steps and watched him out of sight.

"I am so very glad I have made up my mind to be good," she said to herself; "it is *perfectly easy* if you make up your mind. I wish the twins would come and want me to leave Dick, or go on the rocks, or do something naughty. I would just stand here and look at them with my large innocent eyes and my gentle smile, and I would say, '*Never*, twins! Nurse has trusted him to me, and I have turned over a new leaf. I would not touch the rocks with my bare feet, not for a king's ransom.'"

"Susie," cried Dick.

"Yes," said Susie impatiently.

"Come here, Susie," he said again—"quick, I'm so wet!"

"Oh, bother," said Susie.

She turned slowly, still inspired by her own eloquence; and there, straight before her, as if they had walked out of the sunset, stood the twins, with black hair waving, and bare, wet legs.

"Come on!" they shouted breathlessly. "It's a perfectly heavenly afternoon for the rocks, but it's awfully late; you've kept us waiting an hour whilst your nurse simply *clacked*."

"All right," said Susie.

It was really all wrong, but she had forgotten her promises, her resolutions, her boasted courage. At the first demand of the enemy she laid down her weapons and surrendered the fort, and in another moment she too was flying bare-footed over the rocks, with Dick stumbling laboriously after her.

"Susie"—his shrill, faint voice pursued her—"Susie, my shoes is wet; come back!"

"Come on," cried Susie.

"My feet is tired. Susie, *it's Dick*."

But Susie was far ahead.

"Susie!" he called again.

Wet and miserable, he sat stolidly down upon a rock.

"If Susie leaves me I shall *weep*," he said out loud.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was growing dusk, and the line of gold upon the sea had merged into the gray twilight around. A drizzling rain fell like a veil between Susie and the shore, and suddenly she remembered that for some time she had not heard Dick's pleading voice. Instantly all the excitement and pleasure of the stolen hour fell away from her, and with a frightened pang at her heart she began a frantic

search over the slippery rocks, flying in heedless haste and shouting as she ran.

Her terror and tears impressed even the twins, though they were a little inclined to mock. They too rushed and splashed from rock to rock, making difficult and dangerous leaps that only bare toes made possible. The pools between the rocks were full of water, and there was no yellow reflection now from the wind-tossed sky. Susie felt despairing; but suddenly, almost at her feet, she heard Dick's uncomplaining little voice, "It's *me*, Susie. I knew you would come back; I am so glad. My toe has got hurt, and I have sitted here till all my clothes has got wet."

"How tiresome he is!" said Dot impatiently. "What a tiresome, silly little boy! That's always the way with babies; they spoil all your fun."

"I'm not a baby," said Dick defiantly.

"Well, you're very like one. Every one will know now, and a jolly row you've got us into."

"I'll tell you what," said Dash, in a hissing whisper into Susie's ear. "Let's run back to the shore, and then they'll think he went alone."

"Come on, Susie, or we shall be drenched," said Dot. "When once we've got on our shoes and stockings we can easily rush out and rescue him. Look at the white horses, and the waves against the island. We are really a good way out, but we could rescue him in two minutes, and your mother would be *grateful* to us."

But Susie was not listening. The twins' suggestions beat on her brain, and found no entrance. All the best of Susie—the real, comfortable Susie—brimming over with a love that was almost motherly, was in the kind, quivering face she bent over Dick as he held out his tired arms.

In a minute she was down beside him, stroking and folding him close, till his sobbing breaths were stifled on her shoulder.

"Oh, do come on, Susie!" said the twins; "we can't stay another minute. If you won't leave him you'll be caught, and you will never be allowed to play with us again."

Susie looked up, bewildered, into the twins' anxious faces. What did it matter if she were caught, or blamed, or punished? The idea of leaving Dick, even to make a sensational rescue, never entered her head for a minute. *Leave him*, frightened and alone, out on the dark rocks! As she had herself said, such a little while ago, "not for a king's ransom." She only wanted the twins to go and leave her in peace, and so she told them with that plainness of speech which to Susie seemed to suit the occasion. "Please, please go," she said. "I can carry him quite well after he has rested a little bit."

"You will be found out," said the twins warningly.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Susie.

"It seemed to matter a good deal a little while ago," said Dot resentfully.

"Nothing matters now," said Susie, "except to get Dick home."

"Well, you can't rest long," said Dash, "because the tide's coming in."

Susie looked vaguely at the island behind her, with the waves splashing against its sides, and then at the glistening rocks that made rough stepping-stones to land. She had no idea about the tides; she only knew that on some days the rocks showed more above the water than on others, but there were always rocks. She shook her head impatiently.

"I know all about the tide," she said. "I am perfectly certain I can get home all right."

"Oh, you're always perfectly certain," said Dot.

"So I am," said Susie.

"Well, good-night," said Dash. "Don't fiddle about too long with Dick, that's all."

"Good-night," said Susie cheerfully.

She saw the two active figures leaping away into the twilight, splashing from rock to rock, till they became gray and indistinct like moving shadows. She felt suddenly chilled and lonely, and the silence and gloom enveloped them—a forlorn little group in the midst of the growing dark.

"Dickie," said Susie presently, "we must start back before it gets any darker. I think it's going to pour. If I put my arm round you, do you think you can walk?"

"Why, the water would go over my head," said Dick.

He pushed out a fat leg and let it dangle against the rock; already the white spray was splashing over it. Susie stared at it incredulously. When the twins left, it had been a shallow pool, and they had waded through it.

"Oh, hurry up, Dick!" she said, in a sudden panic. "Mother will be frightened."

"It's fun, though," said Dick.

Fun! The word did not seem at all the right word to Susie, but she said nothing. She knew now in

a flash what the twins meant by the rising tide, but all she saw was her mother's face with the fear on it.

But Susie had not been the eldest of the little family for so many years for nothing. She knew that, whatever happened, Dick must not get bronchitis, and she put her own fear bravely on one side to think of him.

First she slipped over the rock, and found that it reached her waist, and that every wave made it more difficult to stand. With Dick on her back it would be impossible; and the long links of the chain of rocks stretched such a weary way with those shining pools between. The wind roared against the island, and the spray dashed up it; but Susie remembered the grass and the goats, and a gleam of hope sprang up within her.

"O Dick, we are close to the island," she said. "I had quite forgotten. We must clamber over the rocks and get there; and, Dickie darling, even if your foot hurts, you will be brave."

"I will be brave, Susie," said Dick.

The rocks were slippery, and the seaweed popped under their feet like little guns; but jumping, slipping, clinging together, they reached the foot of the island, and then began the difficult scramble upwards. Dick hung heavily on to Susie's skirt, and his little feet were torn and bruised. But Susie's courage was the courage of hope, not of despair. She lifted him over difficult places, and clung to edges of the cliff where it seemed as if even the seagulls had not room to stand. Once she found a narrow track, but she lost it again in the darkness, and still she felt the splash of the waves and heard the startled birds crying overhead. Never, never had Susie been so tired; but those pursuing waves chased her up, and by-and-by she felt dry crags under her feet, and then welcome grass—wet with rain, not sea.

Drawing long, sobbing breaths, Susie sank down and drew Dickie into her arms. In the far, far distance little lights were twinkling in the town, and Susie's heart gave a passionate leap; it wanted to annihilate time and space, and carry her home.

"Mother, mother, mother!" she cried under her breath.

Dick was wet and tired, but he was too excited to lie still. He lay in the hollow of Susie's lap, with his wet feet curled up into her skirt, and his round eyes shining.

"We can't be drowned now, Susie," he said, smiling.

Susie had to make quite an effort before her stiff lips would speak.

"No, Dickie, we are quite safe," she said; "but the ledge is so narrow you must not fidget about. I am going to make you a dear little bed like a bird's nest."

"I don't want to stay here all night," he said.

"But there are goats here."

"I don't want there to be goats," he said again.

"I only mean," said Susie, "that if God can take care of the goats, He can take care of us too."

"I would rather," said Dickie, after a pause, "that He would put us back into our cribs."

"Perhaps He will," said Susie; "but you must sit quite still, and let me creep down and try if there is any other way to get to shore."

"No, Susie, you mustn't go," said Dick, whimpering. "I won't cry if you are here, but if you go I shall—I shall *weep*," he said.

"O darling Dick, don't," said Susie imploringly. "Perhaps mother will come to the shore and see us, or perhaps the twins will tell her, or perhaps the fishermen will bring a boat."

"I shall *weep*," repeated Dick firmly. After that he did not speak again, but he put his two chubby arms so tightly round her neck that he nearly choked her. "I won't *let* you go," he said sleepily.

Susie felt in despair. "I must go, Dick. I don't see what else I can do."

"You said yourself"—Dick's voice was sleepier, and he nestled closer—"you said yourself that God would take care of us and the goats."

Dick was so determined that Susie was afraid to try to get away. She was sure that he would insist on coming too, and that she would never be able to do that terrible scramble again. Susie's active brain flashed from point to point in a moment of time, and it seemed to her that there was, after all, nothing particular to be gained by going down on to the rocks. No one could see her through the mist and darkness, and her feeble voice would never be heard through the wind. Dick was almost asleep, and the ledge was sheltered. *If* she could get him to sleep! She rolled him out of her arms, keeping her arm as a pillow under his head. Then with her free hand she unfastened her serge skirt and tucked it round him. When he coughed, she slipped off her flannel petticoat and wrapped it round his head and throat, and almost before he had shut his eyes she heard his even breathing.

"O darling Dick!" said Susie, under her breath.

She crept as near to him as she could, sheltering him in the crevice of the cliff. Her one flimsy petticoat was soaked, and her legs felt like ice; but those little choking snores filled her with a joy almost too great for words.

The rain beat in her face and flicked her wet hair against it like the lash of a whip; but Susie felt nothing except the warm comfort of the little body behind her, saw nothing but the gleaming row of lights that marked the Parade. All her heart moved in one passionate cry, "If mother will only forgive me!" And then she realized, with a glow of happiness, that she had never really doubted it; that she had known quite well all the time that there would be no need for tears or protestations—mother would understand.

The stars came out and the leaping waves seemed to fall asleep, whilst Susie, with wide-awake eyes, settled herself for the interminable night. But nature is very kind to the remorseful sinner as well as to the happy and the innocent, and presently her head fell back against Dick's comfortable, cosy shoulder, and she too fell into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

Meanwhile Tom and Mrs. Beauchamp had bought the sand-shoes and various other little necessaries, had had tea in an Oriental coffee shop, and, as the climax of a delightful afternoon, were coming home on the top of a tram—a leisurely proceeding that gave plenty of time for enjoyment. The weather had clouded over early in the afternoon, but they were halfway home before a fine rain began to fall and to blot out the shimmering sea. Just at sunset it cleared up for a little while, and a long path of gold stretched straight away to the horizon, showing the rocks and the island silhouetted very clear and black against a pale yellow sky.

"Mother," said Tom suddenly, "do the goats ever come down to drink?"

"What goats?"

"The goats on the island?"

"And do they drink what?"

"The sea."

"Oh dear no, Tom; they would not drink the sea-water—it is much too salt. I expect they stay on the island all the summer and come home in winter. I know their masters go and look after them at low tide."

"Well, is it low tide now?" persisted Tom.

Mrs. Beauchamp peered into the dusk.

"No; it is nearly high, I think. There is very little of the rocks to be seen."

"Well, there is something scrambling about on the island, quite low down, and it looks just like goats."

"Sea-birds, Tom?"

"They don't *scramble*," said Tom.

"Well, fishermen perhaps. Show me where you see them."

But the black dots had disappeared. The fine drizzling rain had come on again, and the island was misty; heavy clouds were banked on the horizon, and it had grown suddenly cold and dark.

"Come inside, Tom," said Mrs. Beauchamp; "hold on to the rail and don't tumble off. Isn't it pleasant to think of the warm, cosy nursery and supper?"

"Is it supper-time?" asked Tom, amazed.

"Well, it is past six, and we are a good way from home yet. I hope all the family were safe under shelter before the rain came on. Do you see the white horses dashing up the sides of the island? It looks very cold, doesn't it?"

"I'm glad I'm not a goat," said Tom.

"So am I! See, there are the Parade lights. Get all the parcels together, and be ready to jump off when we stop."

A shopping expedition alone with mother was always a great treat. There was so much to tell afterwards—so many parcels to open and examine. Tom scampered up the Parade in advance of Mrs. Beauchamp's soberer footsteps, so it was he who first caught sight of nurse's face when the door was opened to his clamorous knock.

"Go up to the nursery, Master Tom," she said.

Tom dashed on merrily, and a minute later he heard his mother's voice in the hall, with a quick

note of anxiety in it.

"What is it, nurse?"

"It's Miss Susie," said nurse, "and Master Dick."

Tom hung over the banisters to hear more.

"I left them out on the beach for a bit, whilst I came in to make the tea; and they had my orders to come when I signalled, but they never took no notice. So I ran down to the beach, and there wasn't a sign of them; and there was nothing more that I could do till you came home."

"How long ago?" asked Mrs. Beauchamp.

All of a sudden the tired look had come back to her face. She was anxious, but she was not frightened.

"It was about five I called to them, and it's past six now."

"Have you any idea where they are?"

"Well, I've heard Miss Susie speak of the town and buying sweets; and she's that audacious by times she might have dragged the poor child off without stopping to think—and it's a long three miles, and a regular downpour coming on."

Simultaneously both mother and nurse turned back to the pavement and looked critically at the sky and the sea. There was very little to be seen but scurrying clouds and one or two misty stars, but the boom of the waves on the shore was loud and importunate. Without a word they came in and shut the door.

"I don't think they *can* be on the beach," said their mother, as cheerfully as she could, "but it is like looking for a needle in a haystack. I will go and speak to the policeman and the fishermen."

She spoke wearily, and the anxious line deepened between her eyes, as she stood irresolutely on the steps, looking into the darkness and feeling the lashing of the fine rain against her face. A sickening wave of fear rolled over her, but nurse could not tell it by her voice.

"No doubt they started for the town—Susie is thoughtless. Open my umbrella, please, nurse, and keep their supper hot."

"I *do* hope Master Dick don't get his nasty cough back," said nurse.

"Oh, I don't think he will," said Mrs. Beauchamp.

She ran down the steps, holding her umbrella firmly, and battling with the gusts of wind that swept the Parade. The insistent thunder of the waves sounded very dreary.

She ran over to the sea wall and down the wooden steps on to the beach. Two or three fishermen were sheltering close under the cliff; the wind was so loud that she had to shout at them to be heard.

"Have you been here long?" she said.

"Yes, most of the day." A short black pipe was removed to allow of the remark.

"Have you seen some children playing about—a little girl in a red jersey, a boy in a sailor suit?"

The answer was very deliberate. A great many boys and girls had been playing on the sands—there always were a "rack" of them—the rain came and swamped them. He hadn't noticed no red jersey in particular.

"Did you see any of them on the rocks?"

No; but then they might have been, for he hadn't been looking that way.

"But *some* of you would have seen them," Mrs. Beauchamp urged. "If two children had been scrambling on the rocks at sunset, some of you would have noticed them?"

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Is it high tide?" she asked.

"In another hour." And some one added out of the darkness, "Don't you be feared, ma'am; children and chickens come home to roost."

Mrs. Beauchamp thanked him gratefully and felt comforted.

Again she wearily climbed the steps, and flew rather than walked down the long Parade. The flickering gas lamps showed between patches of darkness, the rain drizzled on, and she felt helpless and bewildered, not knowing where to turn next. Wherever Dickie was, bronchitis must be dogging his footsteps, and all the time she seemed to hear Susie's voice appealing to her. Poor Susie! who always came back to her best friend—who was always so sorry afterwards!

She spoke to the policeman at the corner of the Parade, and he was very determined. He would go to the police station and give notice, he said; but there wasn't the least use in her wearing herself out by running on into the town. He knew the young lady from No. 17 quite well by sight

—a very sensible young lady!—and he was as certain as that he stood there that she had not passed him since five o'clock. She was on the beach then with the little boy and some other young ladies and gentlemen; he had seen them himself. They were playing and shouting, and having a fine time. No, he was quite certain he wasn't making a mistake; he knew her by her face, and her brown plaits, and her scarlet jersey. She certainly was playing with other children.

Mrs. Beauchamp tried to push aside the urgent fear that was knocking at her heart. If even the policeman had confidence in Susie, should her mother be behindhand? She told the policeman, for his information and her own comfort, that she was only frightened because the little boy had been ill, and it was such a cold, wet night, but at the same time she thought she would walk round to the town by the beach. "And you will go to the police station? Some one may have seen them. I cannot feel satisfied doing nothing."

"If you take my advice, lady," said the policeman, "you should go home first. Perhaps they'll have got back, or perhaps the other young lady could give you an idea. Children know a good deal of each other's ways."

The advice was sensible and practical, and Mrs. Beauchamp was relieved at any definite suggestion. Amy might possibly know something about the others which she had not confided to nurse. She caught at the hope, and fought her way back before the wind, up the long, wet Parade, until she stood, drenched and breathless, at the door.

Nurse opened it almost on her knock, and peered anxiously behind her into the dark, but Mrs. Beauchamp shook her head.

"No, I have done nothing," she said, in a strained voice. "I can't think what to do—no one has seen them, nurse."

Her voice trembled a little, but she tried to smile. She would not break down.

"I want to speak to Amy, nurse, and Master Tom; but Amy is less excitable. Send them to me on the stairs here; we must not wake baby."

"I've questioned them," said nurse, "but they don't seem to know anything. They'll be ready enough to tell if they do; they are very upset."

Mrs. Beauchamp sat upon the lowest stair, with her anxious eyes fixed on the nursery door. They were curiously like Susie's eyes, but with a sweeter expression. They were smiling still, but it was such a sad smile that after one look Amy flew helter-skelter downstairs and flung herself into the welcoming arms.

"Amy," said her mother gently, "don't cry now; I haven't time. I am anxious about Dickie's bronchitis"—it was curious how she clung to the belief that it was only the bronchitis that troubled her—"it is so rainy and cold! Do you know where Susie has gone?"

"No, mother," said Amy. She knelt upon the stair with her pale little face pressed against her mother's cheek.

"Think, Amy," Mrs. Beauchamp urged.

"I have thoughted and thoughted," said Amy, "and I can only remember that once, a long time ago, the twins said—"

"What twins?"

"Oh, I forgot you didn't know. They are twins, and they are friends of Susie's. They are very reckless on the rocks, and sometimes Susie went too."

"But when, Amy?"

"I don't know," said Amy, with literal truthfulness. "They didn't tell me; they said I was a baby." Amy's eyes filled. "I wish Susie could be found," she said.

"But you are helping me to find her," said her mother. "Now I have something to go on.—Did you know, Tom? Have you ever been on the rocks with the twins?"

"They told me not to tell," said Tom sturdily.

"But, Tom, that does not matter; it is right to break such a promise."

"If you break your promise you go to hell," said Tom.

"No, no, Tom—not when it is a matter—a matter of life and death. Do you think they went on the rocks to-night?"

"I will tell you if you want me to," said Tom, "but Susie will be angry. I don't know if she went to-day; so there!"

"Did you ever go?"

"Heaps and heaps of times," said Tom.

"And who are the twins?"

"I don't know."

"But their *name*, Tom?" she urged.

"I truly don't know, mummy."

"O Tom!"

Tom too had broken down, and his arms were round her neck.

"O mother, Susie didn't mean to go. She often and often didn't want to. Don't be angry with Susie. Nurse often said, 'I can't think where you get your stockings in such a mess.' But the twins asked Susie, and she went; often and often she didn't want to—"

"Poor Susie," said Mrs. Beauchamp.

"And you needn't think she's drowned," said Tom, "because Susie knows quite well how to walk on seaweed. She wouldn't be such a silly as to be drowned."

Tom's testimony and the policeman's! She alone—Susie's mother—had been faithless and unbelieving. She began to regain her confidence in Susie. She got up a minute later with a more hopeful smile. As she shook out her wet umbrella she stooped to kiss Amy's eager face.

"It is so much easier to find four people than two," she said, "particularly when two of them are twins, and one wears a scarlet jersey. Some one must have seen such a noisy crew, and there is less chance of their having disappeared."

"Susie isn't such a silly as all that," said Tom, with serene confidence.

Mrs. Beauchamp's eyes shone, and when Tom opened the door she looked out, over his head, into the deepening night. A few stars had struggled through the clouds, and the moon shone fitfully above the island. It looked very big and black and peaceful, and Mrs. Beauchamp paused for a moment and looked back at it.

"*If*," she said to herself, and then again "*if*" out loud.

But whatever the disturbing thought might be, she would not give it entrance. She fixed her mind resolutely on the twins and the red jersey, and pinned her hopes on the police inspector.

CHAPTER X.

But it was extraordinarily difficult to find any clue to the missing family, and the long, miserable hours passed, and brought Mrs. Beauchamp no nearer to the twins. She trudged up and down the Parade, to the police station, and down the steps to the beach, over and over again, with feet so tired that they almost refused to carry her.

The wet pavement reflected the flickering gas-lamps. One by one the lights in the windows were put out, and late visitors hurried home. She clung to the policeman's solid tramp with a lingering hope, but she was growing desperate; and over everything was the fine rain, coming in gusts from a cloudy sky, wetting her hair, her face, and soaking her skirts. It was a miserable night, and the police inspector deeply sympathized with her. He went along the town road and cross-examined the policeman. He made inquiries and issued orders, and took upon himself to beg the pale, tired lady to go home and wait and see what turned up. But Mrs. Beauchamp felt that to sit at home doing nothing would be intolerable. She shook her head and turned again on to the Parade, and with her went Susie's light feet, so real, so active, that she almost saw the red jersey on a level with her shoulder, and those brown, defiant eyes. For it was of Susie that her mind was full—poor Susie, who had "often and often not wanted to go," but who had gone.

It was easier for little Dickie; all his life it would be easier for Dick than for this eager, forgetful, repentant daughter, whose passionate sorrow always came too late.

Mrs. Beauchamp leaned over the railing at the top, and looked down on to the sands, debating whether it was worth another effort. The group of fishermen still stood close under the shelter of the cliff; their gruff voices floated up to her, and gave her a feeling of companionship. She ran down on to the beach, but when she stood in front of them she felt it impossible to speak. One by one they rose awkwardly, and gazed at her in an embarrassing silence, but making no suggestion, so that it was she who spoke first.

"I have not found them; I cannot trace them anyhow. Can none of you help me?"

Her sweet, impatient voice appealed to them rather hopelessly, and there was no response.

"I'm willing to do what I can," one of them said at last. "At daylight I'll bring round my boat and go over the rocks. It's an ebb tide."

"Oh no," she said, and shuddered. "I can't sit still till daylight—indeed I cannot. It is only ten o'clock now."

"It's a fair offer, lady," said the man.

"But it is going to be a fine night," she pleaded. "The rain is over. If I could find the twins of

whom my children speak! Can you not help me? You are at least men."

"Why, ma'am"—it was a new voice that answered her—"if it's children you want, I'll find them fast enough if they are on shore; it's only the sea that keeps her own. A set of lubberly men that can't help a lady in distress! That's not how the Royal Navy acts. And don't you cry, lady. Lads and lasses don't get mislaid as easy as that; bad halfpennies come back to their moorings. We'll knock at every door in the town before we give up."

He was an old man, but there was a very different note in his voice from the flabby sympathy of the other men. He put out his pipe with a horny thumb, and gave a rather contemptuous look round the lounging group of longshoremen. "Royal Navy" was written all over him—in his keen eyes, his upright carriage, and his kindly, respectful manner. At the confidence in his voice Mrs. Beauchamp's wavering hope steadied, but she suddenly felt the strain of the anxiety and fatigue. As she turned she stumbled over something small and black that the ebb-tide had left in the ridge of damp seaweed on the beach. She slipped and recovered herself, for the old man's hand was on her arm.

"Steady, ma'am," he said cheerfully; "it's only a bit of an old boot."

"A bit of a boot!" The object swam before Mrs. Beauchamp's eyes, her hands trembled. "It is a child's," she said, and there was anguish in her voice.

"Oh, well"—he picked it up and flung it on one side—"the sea don't give up boots without the feet they held. Wherever the little girl is, ma'am, she's gone without her boots. Carry on."

The Royal Navy, as the senior service, went first, and Mrs. Beauchamp stumbled after him; but there was new hope springing in her heart. His sturdy common-sense had infected her. Was it she only who doubted Susie—who had no confidence in her common-sense? The sea gives back only what it takes, and it had given back only Susie's empty boot.

Stumbling, dizzy, tired out, she still felt a divine peace at her heart as she heard the comfortable, steady steps beside her, and saw the fine, weather-beaten face, with its clear, keen eyes.

"You see, ma'am," he said, "longshoremen are good lads enough for sunshine and fair weather, but it's the Royal Navy you look to when it comes to foul weather and storm. That's where I got my training, and it stands by you. Maybe you'd like to rest a bit and let me go on? I'll knock at every door in the place before I give in, and I'll bring them children with me."

"No, oh no," she said. Her voice was hoarse with fatigue, but was undaunted. "I shall sail humbly in the wake of the Royal Navy. Only, tell me what you mean to do."

He stood for a moment under a lamp, and his keen eyes seemed to see through her. "I propose to begin with the first street out of the Parade," he said, "and so on, by sections. I'll go first where I'm known. There can't be such a rack of twins in the town that they can't be traced. Trust me, lady."

"I *do!* I *do!*" she said; "but I feel frightened."

"Where's your faith, ma'am?" he said, rather sternly.

"I am sure I don't know," she said, with a faint smile. "It may be the will—the will of—Providence—that the children should not come home."

The old man stood still again, and raised his cap from a silvery head.

"There's One above as won't let him go too far," he said. "We have our orders, which is enough for me. Carry on."

And really faith or fortune did seem to befriend Mrs. Beauchamp at last. It was just after they had knocked at the second closed door, and had received a very short negative to their inquiry, which the maidservant evidently considered to be an ill-timed joke, that a door on the opposite side of the road opened suddenly, and a great stream of light flashed out.

There were some confused farewells, a gathering up of skirts, and laughter; and in a minute the Royal Navy was standing at the salute before the master of the house.

"The lady and I are looking for some twins, sir."

Instead of the ready "No" they half expected, the man paused, and smiled whimsically.

"Well, what have the little beggars been doing now?" he said.

Never had any words sounded quite so sweet to Mrs. Beauchamp. She too came into the circle of light, and lifted her sweet, tired, beseeching face.

"My children were playing with the twins this evening," she said, "and they have never come home. Of course they may not be *your* twins; but we hope—"

"Come in, come in," he interrupted, holding the door hospitably open until it had swallowed them all up. "Of course it is my twins. No one else's twins are ever half so troublesome."

And then he sent a great, jovial shout up the stairs,—

"Dot and Dash, you are wanted!"

CHAPTER XI.

Instantly there were a scuffle in the upper passage and a rush of bare feet to the top of the stairs. Mrs. Beauchamp, looking up, saw two slim figures in white, and in another minute she was confronted by two pairs of the very brightest and most daring black eyes she had ever seen.

Without a moment's hesitation Dot hurled herself against the slight figure in the hall, and began a confused, breathless, incoherent statement. "I could not sleep. Neither of us have slept all night. Susie said she knew about the tides; she said she was quite certain"—most familiar words in Mrs. Beauchamp's ears—"that she would get home all right. But Dick had hurt his foot, and we left her on the rocks, sitting quite in a pool. And it has rained so ever since; and perhaps she is on the rocks still, and it is pitchy dark, and both of us feel as if we couldn't bear it."

She paused for breath, but Mrs. Beauchamp's arms tightened round her—always so ready to hold and comfort.

"Thank you," she said, very quietly; "you are giving me great comfort. They would not *stay* on the rocks, would they?"

"No, of course not." Dot spoke with comforting certainty. "They would clamber on to the island if the tide was high; but it is so terrifying in the dark. And it was our fault—Susie didn't want to come."

"It was a pity," said Mrs. Beauchamp.

Her eyes, over Dot's dishevelled head, flew to the doorway, and met those other alert eyes that understood and answered their question. When did a woman in distress ever appeal in vain to the Royal Navy?

"I'll get my boat out, and be ready in a quarter of an hour," he said. "You can meet me by the steps, lady, and you'd best bide in shelter as long as you can."

"Thank you. Can you?—is it possible? Those men said I must wait till daylight."

"Lubberly loafers," said the Royal Navy. "In the Service things are ordered different."

He opened the door and went out. Through the opening Mrs. Beauchamp caught a glimpse of sailing clouds and starlight.

Dot was pressing on her again.

"Please forgive us if Susie gets home; it has been so miserable. I knew Dash wasn't asleep because of his breathing. It has been dreadful for you and for Susie, but it is worse for us."

Her voice fell to a husky whisper; her great black eyes were full of passionate entreaty; she shivered in her thin nightdress.

"My poor, poor children"—there was nothing but the sweetest sympathy in Mrs. Beauchamp's comforting touch—"I forgive you *now*—now while Susie is out there and I am still waiting for her. I will let you know directly we are back and they are safe. You must let me go now."

Their father had disappeared, and Dash came hurrying downstairs in a shamefaced, sidelong fashion to be comforted. He did not like being left beyond the reach of consolation. But Mrs. Beauchamp disengaged the clinging arms.

"We will sit up till we know about them," Dot said, with tears.

"No; you must go to bed and wait there," Mrs. Beauchamp said firmly. "I know," she went on hurriedly, as there were signs of another storm, "that it is far harder; but duties like that *are* hard, and it is the only thing you can do to help."

"Very well," said Dot, with commendable meekness.

"Very well," echoed Dash.

"Here, get back to bed." The master of the house, booted and mackintoshed, had come back into the hall, and the twins scampered up the stairs at the unaccustomed sternness of his voice. He had a glass of wine and some biscuits in his hand, and he spoke almost as severely to Mrs. Beauchamp as he had done to the twins. "Of course I am going with you. I have rugs and mackintoshes and some brandy. Can you suggest anything else? No," as she returned the half-emptied glass; "drink *all* the wine. I *insist* on it."

Mrs. Beauchamp obeyed mechanically. She seemed to feel new life, a sense of protection, an atmosphere of help; there was some one else to command and to decide.

The last sight she saw as she went out into the night was Dot's fuzzy head leaning over the banisters at a dangerous angle.

CHAPTER XII.

Outside the rain had lessened, and the stars shone more securely. Without a word she hurried down the cross street and on to the Parade by her companion's side, but her feet no longer lagged. Hope had sprung anew in her heart, and as they turned the corner she looked up at him smiling.

"I only know you as 'the father of the twins,'" she said, "and it is a long address."

"My name is Amherst." Then a moment later, as they picked their way across the muddy road to the top of the steps, "I have been trying all this time to find a reason, and I can only frame an excuse—*they have no mother!*"

"Oh, poor twins!" she said.

The tide was distinctly lower, and the wind had died down. The long waves rolled in with almost oily smoothness, and showed no ridge of foam when they broke upon the beach. Patches of seaweed caught and reflected the moonlight.

The old sailor was baling out the boat, and half a dozen hands held her to the shore. An air of excitement pervaded every one, and one or two men offered their services rather sheepishly; but the Royal Navy did not need assistance.

He settled Mrs. Beauchamp in the bow, with the rugs for a cushion; then he pushed off with his oar, and in another minute they were gliding out from under the shadow of the cliff, making straight for the island in front of them.

Mr. Amherst had taken the other oar, and was rowing bow. On their left little crests of half-submerged rocks showed black against the sea, and on the far horizon the false dawn made a silver line between sky and sea.

Mrs. Beauchamp held the lines mechanically and leant forward, straining her eyes to steer for a possible landing-place; but the beating of her heart had quieted down, and she had a curious feeling that she was drifting, drifting, in this solemn silence, out of a region of torturing fear into the peaceful harbour of a dream.

The twist of the oars in the rowlocks, the rhythmical dip, and the ripple of water against the boat were restful in their monotony. She felt her eyes closing as something slipped through her fingers—Susie's boot, with its long damp laces! She looked at her lap in horror, and tried to push the dreadful object away; but there was nothing there, excepting the wet lines that had fallen from her fingers. Some one put out a rough, kind hand to steady her, and she straightened herself with a start, meeting the old sailor's keen eyes.

"Carry on, ma'am, carry on." Then, a moment later, "Way enough!"

In a minute Mr. Amherst had caught at the crags and drawn the boat alongside, and Ben had sent his voice pealing up against the cliff in a volume of sound that was absolutely terrifying.

"Hullo! Hullo—oo!"

A few frightened sea-birds flew out of the crevices in the cliff and wheeled about their heads, but there was no other sound. Mrs. Beauchamp's eyes filled with agonized tears, but the sailor's cheeriness was infectious.

"I'll wake them," he said.

Again his voice went up into the night, as if he defied the poor defences of the dark.

"Hullo! Hullo—oo!"

"Susie!" cried Mrs. Beauchamp, in her thinner treble.

And this time there *was* an answer—a cry small and faint; not at all like Susie's boisterous everyday voice, but human. Ben was out of the boat in a minute, scrambling from peak to peak, and shouting as he went.

Mrs. Beauchamp sat down with an uncertain movement, and covered her face with her hands; whilst Mr. Amherst, clinging to the rock for fear the ebbing tide should carry them out to sea, spoke to her with whimsical entreaty. "Mrs. Beauchamp, please don't faint until Nelson comes back! Pull yourself together—he *expects* us to do our duty; and, besides, you will frighten the children."

The last suggestion had an instantaneous effect. From that calm region where love and despair were alike forgotten she came back with a conscious effort to the unsteady boat, and Mr. Amherst's alarmed eyes, and the lapping water against the bow.

"That's right," said Mr. Amherst, with great relief in his voice. "I really didn't know how to get to you. Listen!"

"Safe!" The great voice came pealing down the cliff, waking the echoes on the shore, and with a sort of incredulous joy Mrs. Beauchamp listened to the sturdy steps coming slowly, surely, carefully down, with a little ripple of shale following them.

She clutched at the gunwale of the boat until she hurt her hands, and strained her eyes for the sight she longed to see. First there came the stalwart figure of the sailor with a bundle in his arms, and behind him a slim, bare-footed, bareheaded, stumbling little creature, who almost fell into the expectant arms waiting for her.

"He's quite warm, mother." It was Susie's voice, faint, eager, appealing, caught by deep sobs. "He has never coughed once—he has never *moved*. He is quite warm; feel him."

"O Susie! And you?"

"Me! Oh, I'm all right," said Susie, wondering. "I did take care of him; I tried my very best."

"But where are your clothes, Susie? And it rained so."

"They are round Dick," said Susie. "Mother, they kept him beautifully warm."

The men jumped into the boat and pushed off. The little bundle of flannel and serge that held Dickie rolled quite comfortably to the bottom of the boat; but Susie's mother held two frozen feet in her warm hands and said nothing. Words did not come easily.

Presently Susie spoke again in that strained whisper. "Mother, when I went to sleep I dreamt a ferryman came for us, and his boat was close to the shore, and we were stepping in when you called me back. I knew your voice, and you said 'Susie' quite plainly. I wouldn't go, and I wouldn't let him take Dick! I screamed and held him tight, and the ferryman said we must pay him, all the same; and then you gave him two pennies, and he went away."

"Susie, I *did* call. In my heart I have called all night."

"Yes, I know," said Susie. "When I woke and saw the sailor, I thought it was the ferryman."

"I *had* paid," said Mrs. Beauchamp.

"Oh, I knew you would," said Susie.

Mrs. Beauchamp took the rug that Mr. Amherst threw to her, and folded it close and warm about Susie's wet locks and damp body; and presently the difficult, sobbing breaths grew quieter, but her mother knew that she was not asleep by the fierce pressure of her fingers.

The day was breaking as the boat was beached, and a dozen willing hands pulled her high and dry. The sea-birds were awake, fluttering about the head of the island; the ebbing tide had left the rocks very black and bare.

When they set Susie on her feet she was too stiff to stand alone, and never for one moment did she loose her hold of her mother's dress. It was the Royal Navy that finally took her into wonderfully tender keeping, and carried her up the steps and along the Parade, and laid her, still wrapped in the rug, on her own white bed, that nurse had made comfortably ready.

Dickie woke flushed and warm from his rosy sleep when they brought him in, and looked at the old sailor with round, bewildered eyes.

"Is it Father Neptune?" he asked.

"No, darling, no."

"Oh, I see he hasn't got his three-pronged fork. Is it Nelson then?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Mrs. Beauchamp, and her laugh was very near tears.—"You will tell the twins at once, please," she said to Mr. Amherst as she said good-bye. "I cannot bear to feel that they may be awake and waiting."

But Dot and Dash had not passed a sleepless night of misery. Long ago, tired out with sorrow, they had fallen asleep on the nursery window-sill, and dreamt that they were sailing on unknown seas in fairy boats!

CHAPTER XIII.

And the wonderful part of it all was that Susie was not even ill! She slept "into the middle of next week," as nurse expressed it; but it was a deep, steady, peaceful sleep, quite undisturbed by any commotion around her. Amy sat most of the morning crouched up on the floor, just inside the room, and waited for the opening of those brown eyes; whilst nurse had even got Dick and baby safely dressed and out on the sands before Susie's eyelids quivered, and she stretched her stiff limbs, and started up with a cry, "Mother!"

"My darling Susie!"

"O mother! I was so afraid you were a dream."

"Then what are you?"

"A *troublesome comfort*. Nurse said so, and it is true."

She sat straight up in bed, with her knees drawn up and her hands clasped round them. Her hair was rough, and there were no little stiff pigtailed tellings of nurse's energetic brushing. On her hands there were bruises and scratches that hurt her; but nothing mattered now that she was within reach of the comfortable arms, and could lay her head on the blue serge knee.

"Mummy, is Dick well?"

"Quite well, darling."

"Mother"—she pressed closer and hid her face—"I am sorry, but I don't know how to say it. I didn't like the twins to think me a baby, and I felt quite certain that I could get back."

"Perhaps you are too certain, darling."

"You mean," said Susie, "that there is too much talk and too little *do*."

"Perhaps that *is* what I mean, Susie; but when I try to think about it clearly I only see a poor little cold, frightened child, and Dick as warm as toast."

"I never thought about it, mother. I only prayed and prayed that he might not get bronchitis."

"It is because you did not think about it that I love you, Susie."

"I will try and be better," said Susie humbly.

Straight across the room she caught sight of a reflection in the glass, and she sat suddenly more upright and gazed at it. It reminded her of that reflection in the train; but this mouth was smiling, not set into sulky lines—these eyes were not full of angry tears!

"Oh, I am perfectly certain I can be good," cried Susie eagerly.

The reflection in the glass seemed to hesitate; the sparkling eyes fell, and Susie's face went down upon her knees.

She groaned in despair.

"It seems as if I couldn't help it," she said. "I am always perfectly certain."

"And I am perfectly certain that I hear your breakfast on the stairs," said Mrs. Beauchamp, "and that is the important thing."

She raised Susie's crimson face, and smoothed the rebellious hair, and patted the pillow into a comfortable shape. Every good nurse knows that tears and protestations must wait their time, and that little patients cannot be allowed the luxury of repentance!

Susie would have liked to pour out volumes of self-reproach and ease her burdened heart, so it was perhaps one little step in the right direction when she resolutely closed her lips and welcomed Amy and the breakfast with a smile.

She came downstairs in the afternoon and lay on the horsehair sofa in the sitting-room, and held a sort of levée of her visitors. Tom was subdued, and the twins were envious—nothing uncommon ever happened to them! They knew too much or were too cautious, but they sat on two stools by the window and followed Mrs. Beauchamp's movements with their uncanny eyes, until the concentrated gaze made her nervous.

"Both of we would like to be your children," said Dash suddenly.

Mrs. Beauchamp tried to feel grateful for the compliment, and to hide the dismay it inspired.

"It seems rather hard," Dot added, "that Susie should have everything—*and* a mother too—and we haven't."

"Perhaps you may share me," she suggested.

But the twins viewed the position gloomily. "Us two like things of our own," they said.

"Well, you can't have mother," said Dick doggedly. "You can have our buckets when we leave, and my boat, and Amy's shells."

"Oh, not my shells," cried Amy, aggrieved.

"That's selfish of you," said Tom; "but I have a proper collection, and you haven't. You can have nurse," he generously added.

"Oh no, not nurse," said Dick.

"And that's greedy," said Tom: "you want every one."

"Yes, I do," said Dick sturdily.

"Us two," said Dot suddenly, "have adopted you for our mother. It is the only way we can have you for our own."

"You can't have her," cried Tom indignantly; "she's ours."

"That doesn't matter," said Dot; "us two have settled it. She can't help us adopting her. We are

her kind of children now.—Aren't we, father?"

Mr. Amherst removed the twins before it came to blows, and left the excited family sitting silently in the dusky room.

Mrs. Beauchamp, very tired and peaceful, was drawing a dispirited darning needle through very worn stockings, and by Susie's sofa sat an upright figure with keen eyes and silver hair.

"The little lady will be sleeping soon," he said. He rose and held out a horny hand.

"In a softer bed than she had last night," said Mrs. Beauchamp gently.

"Well, as we make our bed so we lie in it," he said.

"Yes," said Susie, in a subdued voice.

He paused and smiled at her.

"But so much we didn't know of went to the making of the bed," he said, "that perhaps little missy lay softly enough after all."

"It is a pity about Miss Susie's boot," nurse said regretfully. "Of course it's a mercy the poor child was brought back safe; and never shall I forget what we suffered unknowing. But talking of beds brings back that boot to me, and it's no use telling me it doesn't matter, for it's sheer waste of the pair."

Life in London seemed rather tame to the little Beauchamps after that summer holiday, with the paddling and the boats, the rocks and the island! They took as much of it all home as they could convey in biscuit tins, and buckets, and cardboard boxes. But, after all, one cannot shut the ocean into a glass aquarium or hold the sunset on a palette, and there were many things that only memory could bring back to them—the sea-birds wheeling against the blue sky, for instance, the ebbing and flowing tide, the miles of seaweed on the beach, and one night the memory of which will only die with Susie.

Dick has long forgotten it, for he lay "very softly" in the bed that Susie made for him; but at any moment Susie can shut her eyes and hear the trampling of the surf and the beating of the rain, and see the misty stars!

The twins have taken their adopted mother very seriously, and have established her in the citadel of their hearts. Like the pirates that they are, they have stolen her love, and love her passionately in return. Their undivided affection does not give her a very peaceful life, but it is certainly never dull, and the bold black eyes have grown very dear to her.

The traditions of the Royal Navy are always the mainspring of life in the Beauchamps' nursery; they "carry on" under the auspices of Nelson, and in obedience to his signal they do what England expects! Duty is their watchword, and Ben is their model. Nurse often stands amazed at an obedience that is almost alarming; but when she begins to think that Miss Susie or Master Tom is growing too good to live, she is generally reassured by some quite unlooked-for crime, and, to her relief, the "troublesome comforts" remain troublesome.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TROUBLESOME COMFORTS ***

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