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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POLLY: A NEW-FASHIONED GIRL ***

POLLY A NEW-FASHIONED GIRL

BY
L. T. MEADE

Author of "A World of Girls," "Daddy's Girl,"
"Light of the Morning," "Palace Beautiful,"
"A Girl in Ten Thousand," etc.

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Polly

“But if thou wilt be constant then,
And faithful of thy word,
I’ll make thee glorious by my pen
And famous by my sword.
I’ll serve thee in such noble ways
Was never heard before:
I’ll crown and deck thee all with bays
And love thee evermore.”

—JAMES GRAHAM.

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POLLY: A NEW-FASHIONED GIRL.

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CHAPTER I.

A GREAT MISFORTUNE.

It was an intensely hot July day—not a cloud appeared in the high blue vault of the sky; the trees, the flowers, the grasses, were all motionless, for not even the gentlest zephyr of a breeze was abroad; the whole world seemed lapped in a sort of drowsy, hot, languorous slumber. Even the flowers bowed their heads a little wearily, and the birds after a time ceased singing, and got into the coolest and most shady parts of the great forest trees. There they sat and talked to one another of the glorious weather, for they liked the heat, although it made them too lazy to sing.

It was an open plain of country, and although there were clumps of trees here and there, great clumps with cool shade under them, there were also acres and acres of common land on which the sun beat remorselessly. This land was covered with heather, not yet in flower, and with bracken, which was already putting on its autumn glory of yellow and red. Neither the bracken nor the heather minded the July heat, but the butterflies thought it a trifle uncomfortable, and made for the clumps of trees, and looked longingly and regretfully at what had been a noisy, babbling little brook, but was now a dry and stony channel, deserted even by the dragon-flies.

At the other side of the brook was a hedge, composed principally of wild roses and hawthorn bushes, and beyond the hedge was a wide dyke, and at the top of the dyke a wire paling, and beyond that again, a good-sized vegetable garden.

From the tops of the trees, had any one been energetic enough to climb up there, or had any bird been sufficiently endowed with curiosity to glance his bright eyes in that direction, might have been seen smoke, ascending straight up into the air, and proceeding from the kitchen chimneys of a square-built gray house.

The house was nearly covered with creepers, and had a trellis porch, sheltering and protecting its open hall-door. Pigeons were cooing near, and several dogs were lying flat out in the shade which the wide eaves of the house afforded. There was a flower garden in front, and a wide gravel sweep, and a tennis court and croquet lawn, and a rose arbor, and even a great, wide,

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cool-looking tent. But as far as human life was concerned the whole place looked absolutely deserted. The pigeons cooed languidly, and the dogs yapped and yawned, and made ferocious snaps at audacious and troublesome flies. But no one handled the tennis bats, nor took up the croquet mallets; no one stopped to admire the roses, and no one entered the cool, inviting tent. The whole place might have been dead, as far as human life was concerned; and although the smoke did ascend straight up from the kitchen chimney, a vagrant or a tramp might have been tempted to enter the house by the open hall door, were it not protected by the lazy dogs.

Up, however, by the hedge, at the other side of the kitchen garden, could be heard just then the crackle of a bough, the rustle of a dress, and a short, smothered, impatient exclamation. And had anyone peered very close they would have seen lying flat in the long grasses a tall, slender, half-grown girl, with dark eyes and rosy cheeks, and tangled curly rebellious locks. She had one arm raised, and was drawing herself deliberately an inch at a time along the smooth grass. Several birds had taken refuge in this fragrant hedge of hawthorn and wild roses. They were talking to one another, keeping up a perpetual chatter; but whenever the girl stirred a twig, or disturbed a branch, they stopped, looking around them in alarm, but none of them as yet seeing the prone, slim figure, which was, indeed, almost covered by the grasses. Perfect stillness once more—the birds resumed their conversation, and the girl made another slight movement forward. This time she disturbed no twig, and interrupted none of the bird gossip. She was near, very near, a tempting green bough, and on the bough sat two full-grown lovely thrushes; they were not singing, but were holding a very gentle and affectionate conversation, sitting close together, and looking at one another out of their bright eyes, and now and then kissing each other with that loving little peck which means a great deal in bird life.

The girl felt her heart beating with excitement—the birds were within a few inches of her—she could see their breasts heaving as they talked. Her own eyes were as bright as theirs with excitement; she got quite under them, made a sudden upward, dexterous movement, and laid a warm, detaining hand on each thrush. The deed was done—the little prisoners were secured. She gave a low laugh of ecstasy, and sitting upright in the long grass, began gently to fondle her prey, cooing as she talked to them, and trying to coax the terrified little prisoners to accept some kisses from her dainty red lips.

“Poll! Where’s Polly Parrot?—Poll—Poll—Poll!” came a chorus of voices. “Poll, you’re wanted at the house this minute. Where are you hiding?—You’re wanted at home this minute! Polly Parrot—where are you, Polly?”

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“Oh, bother!” exclaimed the girl under her breath; “then I must let you go, darlings, and I never, never had two of you in my arms at the same moment before. It’s always so. I’m always interrupted when I’m enjoying ecstasy. Well, good-bye, sweets. Be happy—bless you, darlings!”

She blew a kiss to the released and delighted thrushes, and stood upright, looking very lanky and cross and disreputable, with bits of grass and twig sticking in her hair, and messing and staining her faded, washed cotton frock.

“Now, what are you up to, you scamps?—can’t you let a body be?”

“Oh, Polly!”

Two little figures came tumbling down the gravel walk at the other side of the wire fence. They were hot and panting, and both destitute of hats.

“Polly, you’re wanted at the house. Helen says so; there’s a b-b-baby come. Polly Perkins—Poll Parrot, you’d better come home at once, there’s a new b-b-baby just come!”

“A *what?*” said Polly. She vaulted the dyke, cleared the fence, and kneeling on the ground beside her two excited, panting little brothers, flung a hot, detaining arm round each.

“A baby! it isn’t true, Bunny? it isn’t true, Bob? A real live baby? Not a doll! a baby that will scream and wriggle up its face! But it can’t be. Oh, heavenly! oh, delicious! But it can’t be true, it can’t! You’re always making up stories, Bunny!”

“Not this time,” said Bunny. “You tell her, Bob—she’ll believe you. I heard it yelling—oh, didn’t it yell, just! And Helen came, and said to send Polly in. Helen was crying, I don’t know what about, and she said you were to go in at once. Why, what is the matter, Poll Parrot?”

“Nothing,” said Polly, “only you might have told me about Helen crying before. Helen never cries unless there’s something perfectly awful going to happen. Stay out in the garden, you two boys—make yourselves sick with gooseberries, if you like, only don’t come near the house, and don’t make the tiniest bit of noise. A new baby—and Helen crying! But mother—I’ll find out what it means from mother!”

Polly had long legs, and they bore her quickly in a swift race or canter to the house. When she approached the porch the dogs all got up in a body to meet her; there were seven or eight dogs, and they surrounded her, impeding her progress.

“Not a bark out of one of you,” she said, sternly, “lie down—go to sleep. If you even give a yelp I’ll come out by and by and beat you. Oh, Alice, what is it? What’s the matter?”

A maid servant was standing in the wide, square hall.

“What is it, Alice? What is wrong? There’s a new baby—I’m delighted at that. But why is Helen

crying, and—oh!—oh!—what does it mean—you are crying, too, Alice.”

“It’s—Miss Polly, I can’t tell you,” began the girl. She threw her apron over her head, and sobbed loudly. “We didn’t know where you was, miss—it’s, it’s—We have been looking for you everywhere, miss. Why, Miss Polly, you’re as white, as white—Don’t take on now, miss, dear.”

“You needn’t say any more,” gasped Polly, sinking down into a garden chair. “I’m not going to faint, or do anything silly. And I’m not going to cry either. Where’s Helen? If there’s anything bad she’ll tell me. Oh, do stop making that horrid noise, Alice, you irritate me so dreadfully!”

Alice dashed out of the open door, and Polly heard her sobbing again, and talking frantically to the dogs. There was no other sound of any sort. The intense stillness of the house had a half-stunning, half-calming effect on the startled child. She rose, and walked slowly upstairs to the first landing.

“Polly,” said her sister Helen, “you’ve come at last. Where were you hiding?—oh, poor Polly!”

“Where’s mother?” said Polly. “I want her—let me go to her—*let* me go to her at once, Nell.”

“Oh, Polly——”

Helen’s sobs came now, loud, deep, and distressful. There was a new baby—but no mother for Polly any more.

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CHAPTER II.

ALL ABOUT THE FAMILY.

Dr. Maybright had eight children, and the sweetest and most attractive wife of any man in the neighborhood. He had a considerable country practice, was popular among his patients, and he and his were adored by the villagers, for the Maybrights had lived in the neighborhood of the little village of Tyrsley Dale for many generations. Dr. Maybright’s father had ministered to the temporal wants of the fathers and mothers of these very same villagers; and his father before him had also been in the profession, and had done his best for the inhabitants of Tyrsley Dale. It was little wonder, therefore, that the simple folks who lived in the little antiquated village on the borders of one of our great southern moors should have thought that to the Maybrights alone of the whole race of mankind had been given the art of healing.

For three or four generations the Maybright family had lived at Sleepy Hollow, which was the name of the square gray house, with its large vegetable garden, its sheltered clump of forest trees, and its cultivated flower and pleasure grounds. Here, in the old nursery, Polly had first opened her bright blue-black eyes; in this house Dr. Maybright’s eight children had lived happily, and enjoyed all the sunshine of the happiest of happy childhoods to the full. They were all high-spirited and fearless; each child had a certain amount of individuality. Perhaps Polly was the naughtiest and the most peculiar; but her little spurt of insubordination speedily came to nothing, for mother, without ever being angry, or ever saying anything that could hurt Polly’s sensitive feelings, had always, with firm and gentle hand, put an extinguisher on them.

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Mother was really, then, the life of the house. She was young to have such tall slips of daughters, and such little wild pickles of sons; and she was so pretty and so merry, and in such ecstasies over a picnic, and so childishly exultant when Helen, or Polly, or Katie, won a prize or did anything the least bit extraordinary, that she was voted the best playfellow in the world.

Mother was never idle, and yet she was always at leisure, and so she managed to obtain the confidences of all the children; she thoroughly understood each individual character, and she led her small brood with silken reins.

Dr. Maybright was a great deal older than his wife. He was a tall man, still very erect in his figure, with square shoulders, and a keen, bright, kindly face. He had a large practice, extending over many miles, and although he had not the experience which life in a city would have given him, he was a very clever physician, and many of his brothers in the profession prophesied eminence for him whenever he chose to come forward and take it. Dr. Maybright was often absent from home all day long, sometimes also in the dead of night the children heard his carriage wheels as they bowled away on some errand of mercy. Polly always thought of her father as a sort of angel of healing, who came here, there, and everywhere, and took illness and death away with him.

“Father won’t let Josie Wilson die,” Polly used to say; or, “What bad toothache Peter Simpkins has to-day—but when father sees him he will be all right.”

Polly had a great reverence for her father, although she loved her beautiful young mother best. The children never expected Dr. Maybright to join in their games, or to be sympathetic over their joys or their woes. They revered him much, they loved him well, but he was too busy and too

great to be troubled by their little concerns. Of course, mother was different, for mother was part and parcel of their lives.

There were six tall, slim, rather straggling-looking Maybright girls—all overgrown, and long of limb, and short of frock. Then there came two podgy boys, greater pickles than the girls, more hopelessly disreputable, more defiant of all authority, except mother's. Polly was as bad as her brothers in this respect, but the other five girls were docility itself compared to these black lambs, whose proper names were Charley and John, but who never had been called anything, and never would be called anything in that select circle, but Bunny and Bob.

This was the family; the more refined neighbors rather dreaded them, and even the villagers spoke of most of them as "wondrous rampageous!" But Mrs. Maybright always smiled when unfriendly comments reached her ears.

"Wait and see," she would say; "just quietly wait and see—they are all, every one of them, the sweetest and most healthy-minded children in the world. Let them alone, and don't interfere with them. I should not like perfection, it would have nothing to grow to."

Mrs. Maybright taught the girls herself, and the boys had a rather frightened-looking nursery-governess, who often was seen to rush from the schoolroom dissolved in tears; but was generally overtaken half-way up the avenue by two small figures, nearly throttled by two pairs of repentant little arms, while eager lips vowed, declared, and vociferated, that they would never, never be naughty again—that they would never tease their own sweet, sweetest of Miss Wilsons any more.

Nor did they—until the next time.

Polly was fourteen on that hot July afternoon when she lay on the grass and skillfully captured the living thrushes, and held them to her smooth, glowing young cheeks. Her birthday had been over for a whole fortnight; it had been a day full of delight, love, and happiness, and mother had said a word or two to the exultant, radiant child at the close. Something about her putting away some of the childish things, and taking up the gentler and nobler ways of first young girlhood now. She thought in an almost undefined way of mother's words as she held the fluttering thrushes to her lips and kissed their downy breasts. Then had come the unlooked-for interruption. Polly's life seemed cloudless, and all of a sudden there appeared a speck in the firmament—a little cloud which grew rapidly, until the whole heavens were covered with it. Mother had gone away for ever, and there were now nine children in the old gray house.

CHAPTER III.

"BE BRAVE, DEAR."

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"Wasn't father with her?" Polly had said when she could find her voice late that evening. "Wasn't father there? I thought father—I always thought father could keep death away."

She was lying on her pretty white bed when she spoke. She had lain there now for a couple of days—not crying nor moaning, but very still, taking no notice of any one. She looked dull and heavy—her sisters thought her very ill.

Dr. Maybright said to Helen—

"You must be very careful of Polly, she has had a shock, and she may take some time recovering. I want you to nurse her yourself, Nell, and to keep the others from the room. For the present, at least, she must be kept absolutely quiet—the least excitement would be very bad for her."

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"Polly never cries," said Helen, whose own blue eyes were swollen almost past recognition; "she never cries, she does not even moan. I think, father, what really upset Polly so was when she heard that you—you were there. Polly thinks, she always did think that you could keep death away."

Here poor Helen burst into fresh sobs herself.

"I think," she added, choking as she spoke, "that was what quite broke Polly down—losing mother, and losing faith in your power at the same time."

"I am glad you told me this, Helen," said Dr. Maybright, quietly. "This alters the case. In a measure I can now set Polly's heart at rest. I will see her presently."

"Presently" did not mean that day, nor the next, nor the next, but one beautiful summer's evening just when the sun was setting, and just when its long low western rays were streaming into the lattice-window of the pretty little bower bed-room where Polly lay on her white bed, Dr. Maybright opened the door and came in. He was a very tall man, and he had to stoop as he passed under the low, old-fashioned doorway, and as he walked across the room to Polly's bedside the rays of the setting sun fell on his face, and he looked more like a beautiful healing presence than ever to the child. She was lying on her back, with her eyes very wide open; her

face, which had been bright and round and rosy, had grown pale and small, and her tearless eyes had a pathetic expression. She started up when she saw her father come in, gave a glad little cry, and then, remembering something, hid her face in her hands with a moan.

Dr. Maybright sat down in the chair which Helen had occupied the greater part of the day. He did not take any notice of Polly's moan, but sat quite still, looking out at the beautiful, glowing July sunset. Wondering at his stillness, Polly presently dropped her hands from her face, and looked round at him. Her lips began to quiver, and her eyes to fill.

"If I were you, Polly," said the doctor, in his most matter-of-fact and professional manner, "I would get up and come down to tea. You are not ill, you know. Trouble, even great trouble, is not illness. By staying here in your room you are adding a little to the burden of all the others. That is not necessary, and it is the last thing your mother would wish."

"Is it?" said Polly. The tears were now brimming over in her eyes, but she crushed back her emotion. "I didn't want to get up," she said, "or to do anything right any more. She doesn't know—she doesn't hear—she doesn't care."

"Hush, Polly—she both knows and cares. She would be much better pleased if you came down to tea to-night. I want you, and so does Helen, and so do the other girls and the little boys. See, I will stand by the window and wait, if you dress yourself very quickly."

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"Give me my pocket-handkerchief," said Polly. She dashed it to her eyes. No more tears flowed, and by the time the doctor reached the window he heard a bump on the floor; there was a hasty scrambling into clothes, and in an incredibly short time an untidy, haggard-looking, but now wide-awake, Polly stood by the doctor's side.

"That is right," he said, giving her one of his quick, rare smiles.

He took no notice of the tossed hair, nor the stained, crumpled, cotton frock.

"Take my arm, Polly," he said, almost cheerfully. And they went down together to the old parlor where mother would never again preside over the tea-tray.

It was more than a week since Mrs. Maybright had died, and the others were accustomed to Helen's taking her place, but the scene was new to the poor, sore-hearted child who now come in. Dr. Maybright felt her faltering steps, and knew what her sudden pause on the threshold meant.

"Be brave, dear," he whispered. "You will make it easier for me."

After that Polly would have fought with dragons rather than shed a ghost of a tear. She slipped into a seat by her father, and crumbled her bread-and-butter, and gulped down some weak tea, taking care to avoid any one's eyes, and feeling her own cheeks growing redder and redder.

In mother's time Dr. Maybright had seldom spoken. On many occasions he did not even put in an appearance at the family tea, for mother herself and the group of girls kept up such a chatter that, as he said, his voice would not be heard; now, on the contrary, he talked more than any one, telling the children one or two most interesting stories on natural history. Polly was devoted to natural history, and in spite of herself she suspended her tea-cup in the air while she listened.

"It is almost impossible, I know," concluded Dr. Maybright as he rose from the table. "But it can be done. Oh, yes, boys, I don't want either of you to try it, but still it can be done. If the hand is very steady, and poised in a particular way, then the bird can be caught, but you must know how to hold him. Yes—what is the matter, Polly?"

"I did it!" burst from Polly, "I caught two of them—darlings—I was kissing them when—oh, father!"

Polly's face was crimson. All the others were staring at her.

"I want you, my dear," said her father, suddenly and tenderly. "Come with me."

Again he drew her hand protectingly through his arm, and led her out of the room.

"You were a very good, brave child at tea-time," he said. "But I particularly wish you to cry. Tears are natural, and you will feel much better if you have a good cry. Come upstairs now to Nurse and baby."

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"Oh, no, I can't—I really can't see baby!"

"Why not?—She is a dear little child, and when your mother went away she left her to you all, to take care of, and cherish and love. I think she thought specially of you, Polly, for you always have been specially fond of little children. Come to the nursery now with me. I want you to take care of baby for an hour, while Nurse is at her supper."

Polly did not say another word. The doctor and she went together into the old nursery, and a moment or two afterwards she found herself sitting in Nurse's little straw armchair, holding a tiny red mite of a baby on her knee. Mother was gone, and this—this was left in her place! Oh, what did God mean? thought the woe-begone, broken-hearted child.

The doctor did not leave the room. He was looking through some books, a pile of old MS. books in one corner by the window, and had apparently forgotten all about Polly and the baby. She held

the wee bundle without clasping it to her, or bestowing upon it any endearing or comforting little touch, and as she looked the tears which had frozen round her heart flowed faster and faster, dropping on the baby's dress, and even splashing on her tiny face.

Baby did not like this treatment, and began to expostulate in a fretful, complaining way. Instantly Polly's motherly instincts awoke; she wiped her own tears from the baby's face, and raising it in her arms, pressed its little soft velvet cheek to her own. As she did so, a thrill of warm comfort stole into her heart.

"Polly," said her father, coming suddenly up to her, "please take good care of baby till Nurse returns. I must go out now, I have some patients to see, but I am going to prescribe a special little supper for you, which Helen is to see you eat before you go to bed. Good-night, dear. Please ask Nurse, too, if you can do anything in the morning to help her with baby. Good-night, good-night, both of you. Why the little creature is quite taking to you, Polly!"

Dr. Maybright was about to leave the room when Polly called him back.

"Father, I must say one thing. I have been in a dreadful, dreadful dream since mother died. The most dreadful part of my dream, the blackest part, was about you."

"Yes, Polly, yes, dear."

"You were there, father, and you let her die."

Dr. Maybright put his arm round the trembling child, and drew her and the baby too close to him.

"Not willingly," he said, in a voice which Polly had never heard him use before. "Not willingly, my child. It was with anguish I let your mother go away. But Polly, there was another physician there, greater than I."

"Another?" said Polly.

"Yes, another—and He prescribed Rest, for evermore."

All her life afterwards Polly remembered these words of her father's. They calmed her great sorrow, and in many ways left her a different child.

CHAPTER IV.

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QUITE A NEW SORT OF SCHEME.

On a certain sunny morning in August, four or five weeks after Mrs. Maybright's death, six girls stood round Dr. Maybright in his study. They were all dressed in deep mourning, but it was badly made and unbecoming, and one and all looked untidy, and a little run to seed. Their ages were as varied as their faces. Helen, aged sixteen, had a slightly plump figure, a calm, smooth, oval face, and pretty gentle blue eyes. Her hair was fair and wavy; she was the tidiest of the group, and notwithstanding the heavy make of her ugly frock, had a very sweet and womanly expression. Polly, all angles and awkwardness, came next in years; she was tall and very slim. Her face was small, her hair nearly black and very untidy, and her big, dark, restless eyes reflected each emotion of her mind.

Polly was lolling against the mantelpiece, and restlessly changing her position from one leg to another; Katie, aged eleven, was something in Helen's style; then came the twins, Dolly and Mabel, and then a rather pale child, with a somewhat queer expression, commonly known in the family as "Firefly." Her real name was Lucy, but no one ever dreamt of calling her by this gentle title. "Firefly" was almost always in some sort of disgrace, and scarcely knew what it was not to live in a state of perpetual mental hot water. It was privately whispered in the family circle that Polly encouraged her in her naughtiness. Whether that was the case or not, these two had a kind of quaint, elfish friendship between them, Firefly in her heart of hearts worshipping Polly, and obeying her slightest nod or wish.

"I have sent for you, girls," said the Doctor, looking round tenderly at his six motherless daughters, "to say that I have talked over matters with Helen, and for the present at least, I am willing to give her plan a trial. I think she is right when she tells me that if it turns out successful nothing would please your mother more. It entirely depends on yourselves whether it succeeds or fails. If you are agreeable to try it, you can come to me to-morrow at this hour and tell me so. Now good-by, my dears. Helen will explain everything to you. Helen, I shall not be in for early dinner. Good-by, good-by to you all."

The Doctor nodded, looked half-abstractedly at the upturned young faces, pushed his way through the little group, and taking up a parcel of papers and a surgical case which lay near, went straight to his carriage, which was heard immediately afterwards to bowl quickly down the avenue.

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The moment he was gone Helen was surrounded by a clamorous group.

"What is it, Nell? oh, do tell us—tell us quickly," said they, one and all.

"I thought Helen looked very important these last few days," said Dolly. "Do tell us what it is, Nell, and what the plan is we are all to agree to."

"It sounds rather nice to be asked to agree to things," said Firefly. "What's the matter, Polly? You look grumpy."

"I think Helen may be allowed to speak," said Polly. "Go on, Nell, out with the budget of news. And you young ones, you had better not interrupt her, for if you do, I'll pay you out by-and-by. Now, Nell. Speak, Nell."

"It's this," said Helen.

She seated herself on the window-ledge, and Polly stood, tall and defiant, at her back. Firefly dropped on her knees in front, and the others lolled about anyhow.

"It's this," she said. "Father would like to carry on our education as much in mother's way as possible. And he says that he is willing, for a time at least, to do without having a resident elderly governess to live with us."

"Oh, good gracious!" exclaimed Polly, "was there ever such an idea thought of?"

"She'd have spectacles," said Dolly.

"And a hooked nose," remarked Katie.

"And she'd be sure to squint, and have false teeth, and I'd hate her," snapped Firefly, putting on her most vindictive face.

"Well, it's what's generally done," said Helen, in her grave, sad, steady, young voice. "You remember the Brewsters when they—they had their great sorrow—how an elderly governess came, and Aunt Maria Cameron has written to father about two already. She speaks of them as treasures; father showed me the letters. He says he supposes it is quite the usual thing, and he asked me what I'd like. Poor father, you see he must be out all day with the sick folks."

"Of course," murmured Polly. "Well, what did you answer him about the old horrors, Nell?"

"One seemed rather nice," said Helen. "She was about forty-five, and had thin grayish hair. Aunt Maria sent her photograph, and said that she was a treasure, and that father ought not to lose an hour in securing her. Her name was Miss Jenkins."

"Jenkins or Jones, I'd have given her sore bones," spitefully improvised Firefly.

"Well, she's not to come," continued Helen, "at least, not at present. For I have persuaded father to let us try the other plan. He says all our relations will be angry with him; of course, he is not likely to care for that. This is what we are to try, girls, if you are agreeable. Father is going to get the very best daily governess from Nettleship to come here every morning. She will stay until after early dinner, and then George will drive her back to town in the pony trap. And then Mr. Masters is to come twice a week, as usual, about our music, and Mr. Danvers for drawing. And Miss Wilson is to stay here most of the day to look after Bunny and Bob. That is a much better arrangement than having a resident governess, is it not?"

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"Yes," said three or four voices, but Polly was silent, and Firefly, eagerly watching her face, closed her own resolute lips.

"That is part of father's plan," continued Helen. "But the other, and more important part is this. I am to undertake the housekeeping. Father says he would like Polly to help me a little, but the burden and responsibility of the whole thing rests on me. And also, girls, father says that there must be some one in absolute authority. There must be some one who can settle disputes, and keep things in order, and so he says that unless you are all willing to do what I ask you to do, the scheme must still fall through, and we must be like the Brewsters or any other unhappy girls whose mothers are no longer with them, and have our resident governess."

"I know you won't like to obey me," continued Helen, looking anxiously round, "but I don't think I'll be hard on you. No, I am sure I shall not be hard on any of you."

"That remains to be proved," said Polly. "I don't think I like that plan. I won't give any answer at present—I'll think about it. Come along, Fly," she nodded to her younger sister, and then, lifting the heavy bottom sash of the window where Helen had been sitting, stepped lightly out, followed by the obedient Firefly.

"I don't want to obey Nell," said the little sister, clasping two of Polly's fingers with her thin, small hand. "If it was you, Poll Parrot, it would be a different thing, but I don't want to obey Nell. I don't think it's fair; she's only my sister, like the rest of them. There's nothing said in the Catechism about obeying sisters. It's only fathers and mothers, and spiritual pastors and masters."

"And all those put in authority over you," proceeded Polly, shaking her fingers free, and facing round on Firefly, in a way which caused that young person to back several inches. "If Helen once gets the authority the Catechism is on her side, not on yours."

"But I needn't promise, need I?" pouted Firefly. "If it was you, it would be different. I always did what you wanted me to do, Polly Perkins."

"Of course you did," responded Polly, in a most contemptuous voice. "Will a duck swim? I led you into mischief—of course you followed. Well, Fly, it rests with yourself. Don't obey our dear, good, gentle Nelly, and you'll have Miss Jenkins here. Won't it be fun to see her squinting at you over her spectacles when she returns your spelling-lessons. Bread and water will be your principal diet most of the week. Well, good-by now; I'm off to baby."

Polly took to her heels, and Firefly stood for a moment or two looking utterly miserable and irresolute on the wide gravel walk in the center of the flower-garden. She felt very much inclined to stamp her feet and to screw up her thin little face into contortions of rage. Even very little girls, however, won't go into paroxysms of anger when there is no one there to see. Firefly's heart was very sore, for Polly, her idol, had spoken to her almost roughly.

"I wish mother wasn't in heaven," she murmured in a grieved little voice, and then she turned and walked back to the house. The nearer she approached the study window the faster grew her footsteps. At last, like a little torrent, she vaulted back into the room, and flung her arms noisily round Helen's neck.

"I'll obey you, darling Nell," she said. "I'd much rather have you than Miss Jenkins."

And then she sobbed aloud, and really shook herself, for she felt still so angry with Polly.

"That's a good little Fly," said Helen, kissing her affectionately in return, and putting her arm round her waist, so as to establish her comfortably on her knee. The other girls were all lying about in different easy attitudes, and Firefly joined in the general talk, and found herself much comforted.

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CHAPTER V.

A SAFETY-VALVE.

"Fly caved in, didn't she?" said Polly to her eldest sister that night.

"Yes, poor little mite, she did, in a touching way," said Helen; "but she seemed in trouble about something. You know how reserved she is about her feelings, but when she sat on my knee she quite sobbed."

"I was rather brutal to her," said Polly, in a nonchalant tone, flinging up the sash of the bed-room window as she spoke, and indulging in a careless whistle.

It was bed-time, but the girls were tempted by the moonlight night to sit up and look out at the still, sweet beauty, and chatter together.

"How could you be unkind to her?" said Helen, in a voice of dismay. "Polly, dear, do shut that window again, or you will have a sore throat. How could you be unkind to poor little Fly, Poll, when she is so devoted to you?"

"The very reason," said Polly. "She'd never have gone over to you if I hadn't. I saw rebellion in that young 'un's eye—that was why I called her out. I was determined to nip it in the bud."

"But you rebelled yourself?"

"Yes, and I mean to go on rebelling. I am not Fly."

"Well, Polly," said Helen, suppressing a heavy sigh on her own account; "you know I don't want you a bit to obey me. I am not a mistressing sort of girl, and I like to consult you about things, and I want us both to feel more or less as equals. Still father says there are quite two years between us, and that the scheme cannot be worked at all unless some one is distinctly at the head. He particularly spoke of you, Polly, and said that if you would not agree we must go back to the idea of Miss Jenkins, or that he will let this house for a time, and send us all to school."

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"A worse horror than the other," said Polly. "I wouldn't be a school-girl for all you could give me! Why, the robin's nest might be discovered by some one else, and my grubs and chrysalides would come to perfection without me. No, no; rather than that—can't we effect a compromise, Nell?"

"What is it?" asked Helen. "You know I am willing to agree to anything. It is father."

"Oh, yes; poor Nell, you're the meekest and mildest of mortals. Now, look here, wouldn't this be fun?"

Polly's black eyes began to dance.

"You know how fond I always was of housekeeping. Let me housekeep every second week. Give me the money and let me buy every single thing and pay for it, and don't interfere with me

whatever I do. I'll promise to be as good as gold always, and obey you in every single thing, if only I have this safety-valve. Let me expend myself upon the housekeeping, and I'll be as good, better than gold. I'll help you, and be your right hand, Nell; and I'll obey you in the most public way before all the other girls, and as to Fly, see if I don't keep her in hand. What do you think of this plan, Nell? I, with my safety-valve, the comfort of your life, a sort of general to keep your forces in order."

"But you really can't housekeep, Polly. Of course I'd like to please you, and father said himself you were to help me in the house. But to manage everything—why, it frightens me, and I am two years older."

"But you have so very little spirit, darling. Now it doesn't frighten me a bit, and that's why I'm so certain I shall succeed splendidly. Look here, Nell, let me speak to father, myself; if he says 'yes,' you won't object, will you?"

"Of course not," said Helen.

"You are a darling—I'll soon bring father round. Now, shall we go to bed?—I am so sleepy."

The next morning at breakfast Polly electrified her brothers and sisters by the very meek way in which she appealed to Helen on all occasions.

"Do you think, Nell, that I ought to have any more of this marmalade on fresh bread? I ate half a pot yesterday on three or four slices of hot bread from the oven, and felt quite a dizzy stupid feeling in my head afterwards."

"Of course, how could you expect it to agree with you, Polly?" said Helen, looking up innocently from her place at the tea-tray.

"Had better have a little of this stale bread-and-butter then, dear?" proceeded Polly in a would-be anxious tone.

"Yes, if you will, dear. But you never like stale bread-and-butter."

"I'll eat it if you wish me to, Helen," answered Polly, in a very meek, good little voice.

The two boys began to chuckle, and even Dr. Maybright looked at his second daughter in a puzzled, abstracted way. Helen, too, colored slightly, and wondered what Polly meant. But the young lady herself munched her stale bread with the most immovable of faces, and even held up the slice for Helen to scrutinize, with the gentle, good little remark—"Have I put too much butter on it, Nell? It isn't right to waste nice good butter, is it?"

"Oh, Polly, how dreadful you are?" said Fly.

"What do you mean?" said Polly, fiercely.

She dropped her meek manners, gave one quick glare at the small speaker, and then half turning her back on her, said in the gentlest of voices, "What would you like me to do this morning, Helen? Shall I look over my history lesson for an hour, and then practise scales on the piano?"

"You may do just as you please, as far as I am concerned," replied Helen, who felt that this sort of obedience was far worse for the others than open rebellion. "I thought you wanted to see father, Polly. He has just gone into his study, and perhaps he will give you ten minutes, if you go to him at once."

This speech of Helen's caused Polly to forget her role of the meek, obedient martyr. Her brow cleared.

"Thank you for reminding me, Nell," she said, in her natural voice, and for a moment later she was knocking at the Doctor's study door.

"Come in," he said. And when the untidy head and somewhat neglected person of his second daughter appeared, Dr. Maybright walked towards her.

"I am going out, Polly, do you want me?" he said.

"Yes, it won't take a minute," said Polly, eagerly. "May I housekeep every second week instead of Nell? Will you give me the money instead of her, and let me pay for everything, and buy the food. I am awfully interested in eggs and butter, and I'll give you splendid puddings and cakes. Please say yes, father—Nell is quite willing, if you are."

"How old are you, Polly?" said Dr. Maybright.

He put his hand under Polly's chin and raised her childish face to scrutinize it closely.

"What matter about my age," she replied; "I'm fourteen in body—I'm twenty in mind—and as to housekeeping, I'm thirty, if not forty."

"That head looks very like thirty, if not forty," responded the Doctor significantly. "And that dress," glancing at where the hem was torn, and where the body gaped open for want of sufficient hooks, "looks just the costume I should recommend for the matron of a large establishment. Do you know what it means to housekeep for this family, Polly?"

"Buy the bread and butter, and the meat, and the poultry, and the tea, and the sugar, and the

citron, and raisins, and allspice, and nutmegs, and currants, and flour, and brick-bat, and hearthstone, and—and—"

Dr. Maybright put his fingers to his ears. "Spare me any more," said he, "I never ask for items. There are in this house, Polly, nine children, myself, and four servants. That makes in all fourteen people. These people have to be fed and clothed, and some of them have to be paid wages too; they have to be warmed, they have to be kept clean, in short, all their comforts of body have to be attended to; one of them requires one thing, one quite another. For instance, the dinner which would be admirably suited to you would kill baby, and might not be best for Firefly, who is not strong, and has to be dieted in a particular way. I make it a rule that servants' wages and all articles consumed in the house are paid for weekly. Whoever housekeeps for me has to undertake all this, and has to make a certain sum of money cover a certain expenditure. Now do you think, Polly—do you honestly think—that you, an ignorant little girl of fourteen, a very untidy and childish little girl, can undertake this onerous post? I ask you to answer me quite honestly—if you undertake it, are you in the least likely to succeed?"

"Oh, father, I know you mean to crush me when you speak like that; but you know you told Helen that you would like her to try to manage the housekeeping."

"I did—and, as I know you are fond of domestic things, I meant you to help her a little. Helen is two years older than you, and—not the least like you, Polly."

Polly tossed her head.

"I know that," she said. "Helen takes twice as long learning her lessons. Try my French beside hers, father; or my German, or my music."

"Or your forbearance—or your neatness," added the Doctor.

Here he sighed deeply.

"I miss your mother, Polly," he said. "And poor, poor child! so do you. There, I can't waste another minute of my time with you now. Come to my study this evening at nine, and we will discuss the matter further."

CHAPTER VI.

POLLY'S RAID.

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Polly spent some hours of that day in a somewhat mysterious occupation. Instead of helping, as she had done lately, in quite an efficient way, with the baby, for she was a very bright child, and could be most charming and attractive to the smallest living creature when she chose, she left nurse and the little brown-eyed baby to their own devices, and took up a foraging expedition through the house. She called it her raid, and Polly's raid proved extremely disturbing to the domestic economy of the household. For instance, when Susan, the very neat housemaid, had put all the bedrooms in perfect order, and was going to her own room to change her dress and make herself tidy, it was very annoying to hear Polly, in a peremptory tone, desiring her to give her the keys of the linen-press.

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"For," said that young lady, "I'm going to look through the towels this morning, Susan, to see which of them want darning, and you had better stay with me, to take away those that have thin places in them."

"Oh, dear me, Miss Polly," said Susan, rather pertly, "the towels is seen to in the proper rotation. You needn't be a fretting your head about 'em, miss. This ain't the morning for the linen-press, miss. It's done at its proper time and hour."

"Give me the key at once, Susan, and don't answer," said Polly. "There, hold your apron—I'll throw the towels in. What a lot—I don't believe we want half as many. When I take the reins of office next week, I'll put away quite half of these towels. There can't be waste going on in the house—I won't have it, not when I housekeep, at any rate. Susan, wasn't that a little round speck of a hole in that towel? Ah, I thought so. You put it aside, Susan, you'll have to darn it this afternoon. Now then, let me see, let me see."

Polly worked vigorously through the towels, holding them up to the light to discover their thin places, pinching them in parts, and feeling their texture between her finger and thumb. In the end she pronounced about a dozen unworthy of domestic service, and Susan was desired to spend her afternoon in repairing them.

"I can't, then, Miss Polly," said the much injured housemaid. "It ain't neither the day nor the hour, and I haven't got one scrap of proper darning thread left."

"I'll go to the village, then, and get some," said Polly. "It's only a mile away. Things can't be neglected—it isn't right. Take the towels, Susan, and let me find them mended to-morrow

morning;" and the young lady tripped off with a very bright color in her cheeks, and the key of the linen-press in her pocket.

Her next visit was to the kitchen regions.

"Oh, Mrs. Power," she said to the cook, "I've come to see the stores. It isn't right that they shouldn't be looked into, is it, in case of anything falling short. Fancy if you were run out of pearl barley, Mrs. Power, or allspice, or nutmegs, or mace. Oh, dear, it makes me quite shiver to think of it! What a mess you would be in, if you hadn't all your ingredients handy, in case you were making a plum-cake, or some of those dear little tea-cakes, or a custard, or something of that sort. Now, if you'll just give me the keys, we'll pay a visit to the store-room, and see what is likely to be required. I have my tablet here, and I can write the order as I look through."

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Mrs. Power was a red-faced and not a very good-humored woman. She was, however, an excellent cook and a careful, prudent servant. Mrs. Maybright had found her, notwithstanding her very irascible temper, a great comfort, for she was thoroughly honest and conscientious, but even from her late mistress Mrs. Power would never brook much interference; it is therefore little to be wondered at that Polly's voluminous speech was not very well received.

Mrs. Power's broad back was to the young lady, as she danced gleefully into the kitchen, and it remained toward her, with one ear just slightly turned in her direction, all the time she was speaking.

Mrs. Power was busy at the moment removing the fat from a large vessel full of cold soup. She has some pepper and salt, and nutmegs and other flavoring ingredients on the table beside her, and when Polly's speech came to a conclusion she took up the pepper canister and certainly flavored the soup with a very severe dose.

"If I was you, I'd get out of the hot kitchen, child—I'm busy, and not attending to a word you're talking about."

No answer could have been more exasperating to Polly. She, too, had her temper, and had no idea of being put down by twenty Mrs. Powers.

"Take care, you're spoiling the soup," she said. "That's twice too much pepper—and oh, what a lot of salt! Don't you know, Mrs. Power, that it's very wicked to waste good food in that way—it is, really, perhaps you did not think of it in that light, but it is. I'm afraid you can't ever have attended any cookery classes, Mrs. Power, or you'd know better than to put all that pepper into that much soup. Why it ought to be—it ought to be—let me see, I think it's the tenth of an ounce to half a gallon of soup. I'm not quite sure, but I'll look up the cookery lectures and let you know. Now, where's the key of the store-room—we'd better set to work for the morning is going on, and I have a great deal on my hands. Where's the key of the store-room, Mrs. Power?"

"There's only one key that I know much about at the present moment," replied the exasperated cook, "and that's the key of the kitchen-door; come, child—I'm going to put you on the other side of it;" and so saying, before Polly was in the least aware of her intention, she was caught up in Mrs. Power's stalwart arms, and placed on the flags outside the kitchen, while the door was boldly locked in her face.

This was really a check, almost a checkmate, and for a time Polly quite shook with fury, but after a little she sufficiently recovered herself to reflect that the reins of authority had not yet been absolutely placed in her hands, and it might be wisest for her to keep this defeat to herself.

"Poor old Power! you won't be here long when I'm housekeeper," reflected Polly. "It would not be right—you're not at all a good servant. Why, I know twice as much already as you do."

She went slowly upstairs, and going to the school-room, where the girls were all busying themselves in different fashions, sat down by her own special desk, and made herself very busy dividing a long old-fashioned rosewood box into several compartments by means of stout cardboard divisions. She was really a clever little maid in her own way, and the box when finished looked quite neat. Each division was labeled, and Polly's cheeks glowed as she surveyed her handiwork.

"What a very queer box," said Dolly, coming forward. "What are you so long about, Poll Parrot? And, oh, what red cheeks!"

"Never you mind," said Polly, shutting up her box. "It's finished now, and quite ready for father to see to-night. I'm going to become a very important personage, Miss Doll—so you'd better begin to treat me with respect. Oh, dear, where's the cookery book? Helen, do you know where the "Lectures on Elementary Cookery" is? Just fancy, Nell, cook doesn't know how much pepper should go to a gallon of soup! Did you ever hear of such shameful ignorance?"

"Why, you surely have not been speaking to her on the subject?" said Helen, who was busily engaged darning Bunny's socks; she raised her head and looked at Polly in some surprise as she spoke.

"Oh, have I not, though?" Polly's charming, merry face twinkled all over.

"I saw Susan crying just now," interposed Mabel. "She said Polly had been—why, what is the matter, Poll?"

"Nothing," said Poll, "only if I were you, Mabel, I wouldn't tell tales out of school. I'm going to be a person of importance, so if you're wise, all of you, you'll keep at my blind side. Oh dear! where is that cookery book? Girls, you may each tell me what puddings you like best, and what cake, and what dish for breakfast, and——"

But here the dinner gong put an end to a subject of much interest.

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CHAPTER VII.

THE GROWN-UPS.

In the evening Polly had her interview with her father. Dr. Maybright had gone through a long and fatiguing day; some anxious cases caused him disquiet, and his recent sorrow lay heavily against his heart. How was the father of seven daughters, and two very scampish little sons, to bring them up alone and unaided? How was a man's own heart to do without the sympathy to which it had turned, the love which had strengthened, warmed, and sustained it? Dr. Maybright was standing by the window, looking out at the familiar garden, which showed shadowy and indistinct in the growing dusk, when Polly crept softly into the room, and, going up to his side, laid her pretty dimpled hand on his arm.

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"Now, father," she said, eagerly, "about the housekeeping? I'm all prepared—shall we go into the subject now?"

Dr. Maybright sighed, and with an effort roused himself out of a reverie which was becoming very painful.

"My little girl," he said, pushing back the tumbled hair from Polly's sunny face. Then he added, with a sudden change of manner, "Oh, what a goose you are, Polly—you know as much about housekeeping as I do, and that is nothing at all."

"I wouldn't make bold assertions," replied Polly, saucily—"I wouldn't really, father dear; I couldn't cure a sick person, of course not, but I could make a very nice cake for one."

"Well, let's go into the matter," said the Doctor moving to his study table. "I have a quarter of an hour to give you, my dear, then I want to go into the village to see Mrs. Judson before she settles for the night; she has a nasty kind of low fever about her, and her husband is anxious, so I promised to look in. By the way, Polly, don't any of you go nearer the Judsons' house until I give you leave; walk at the other side of the village, if you must go there at all. Now, my dear, about this housekeeping. Are you seriously resolved to force your attentions upon us for a week? We shall certainly all be most uncomfortable, and severe attacks of indigestion will probably be the result. Is your heart set on this, Polly, child? For, if so—well, your mother never thwarted you, did she?"

"No, father, never—but don't talk of mother, for I don't think I can bear it. When I was with mother somehow or other, I don't know why, I, never wished for anything she did not like."

"Just so, my dear child. Turn up the lamp, if you please, Polly—sit there, will you—I want to see your face. Now I will reply to the first part of your last remark. You asked me not to speak of your mother, my dear; I certainly will mention her name to her children. She has gone away, but she is still one with us. Why should our dearest household word be buried? Why should not her influence reach you and Helen and Dolly from where she now is? She is above—she has gone into the higher life, but she can lead you up. You understand me, Polly. Thoughts of your mother must be your best, your noblest thoughts from this out."

"Yes, father, yes," said Polly. Her lips were trembling, her eyes were brimful, she clasped and unclasped her hands with painful tension.

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Dr. Maybright bent forward and kissed her on her forehead.

"Your mother once said to me," he continued, in a lighter tone, "Polly is the most peculiar and difficult to manage of all my children. She has a vein of obstinacy in her which no persuasion will overcome. It can only be reached by the lessons which experience teaches. If possible, and where it is not absolutely wrong, I always give Polly her own way. She is a truthful child, and when her eyes are opened she seldom asks to repeat the experiment."

"Mother was thinking of the hive of honey," said Polly, gravely. "When I worried her dreadfully she let me go and take some honey away. I thought I could manage the bees just as cleverly as Hungerford does, but I got nervous just at the end, and I was stung in four places. I never told any one about the stings, only mother found out."

"You did not fetch any more honey from that hive, eh, Polly?" asked the Doctor.

"No, father. And then there was another time—and oh, yes, many other times. But I did not know mother was just trying to teach me, when she seemed so kind and sympathizing, and used to say

in that voice of hers—you remember mother's cheerful voice, father?—'Well, Polly, it is a difficult thing, but do your best.'"

"All right, child," said the Doctor, "I perceive that your mother's plan was a wise one. Tell me quickly what ideas you have with regard to keeping this establishment together, for it is almost time for me to run away to Mrs. Judson. I allow eight pounds a week for all household expenses, servants' wages, coal, light, food, medicine. I shall not allow you to begin with so much responsibility, but for a week you may provide our table."

"And see after the servants, please, father?" interrupted Polly, in an eager voice.

"Well, I suppose so, just for one week, that is, after Helen has had her turn. Your mother always managed, with the help of the vegetables and fruit from the garden, to bring the mere table expenses into four pounds a week; but *she* was a most excellent manager."

"Oh, father, I can easily do it too. Why it's a lot of money! four pounds—eighty shillings! I shouldn't be a bit surprised if I did it for less."

"Remember, Polly, I allow no stinting; we must have a plentiful table. No stinting, and no running in debt. Those are the absolute conditions, otherwise I do not trust you with a penny."

"I'll keep them, father—never fear! Oh, how delighted I am! I know you'll be pleased; I know what you'll say by-and-by. I'm certain I won't fail, certain. I always loved cooking and housekeeping. Fancy making pie-crust myself, and cakes, and custards! Mrs. Power is rather cross, but she'll have to let me make what things I choose when I'm housekeeper, won't she, father?"

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"Manage it your own way, dear, I neither interfere nor wish to interfere. Oh, what a mess we shall be in! But thank heaven it is only for a week. My dear child, I allow you to have your way, but I own it is with trepidation. Now I must really go to Mrs. Judson."

"But one moment, please, father. I have not shown you my plan. You think badly of me now, but you won't, indeed you won't presently. I am all system, I assure you. I see my way so clearly. I'll retrench without being mean, and I'll economize without being stingy. Don't I use fine words, father? That's because I understand the subject so thoroughly."

"Quite so, Polly. Now I must be going. Good-night, my dear."

"But my plan—you must stay to hear it. Do you see this box? It has little divisions. I popped them all in before dinner to-day. There is a lock and key to the box, and the lock is a strong one."

"Well, Polly?"

The Doctor began to get into his overcoat.

"Look, father, dear, please look. Each little division is marked with a name. This one is Groceries, this one is Butcher, this is Milk, butter, and eggs, this is Baker, this is Cheesemonger, and this is Sundries—oh yes, and laundress, I must screw in a division for laundress somehow. Now, father, this is my delightful plan. When you give me my four pounds—my eighty shillings—I'll get it all changed into silver, and I'll divide it into equal portions, and drop so much into the grocery department, so much into the butcher's, so much into the baker's. Don't you see how simple it will be?"

"Very, my dear—the game of chess is nothing to it. Goodnight, Polly. I sincerely hope no serious results will accrue from these efforts on my part to teach you experience."

The Doctor walked quickly down the avenue.

"I'm quite resolved," he said to himself, "to bring them all up as much as possible on their mother's plan, but if Polly requires many such lessons as I am forced to give her to-night, there is nothing for it but to send her to school. For really such an experience as we are about to go through at her hands is enough to endanger health, to say nothing of peace and domestic quiet. The fact is, I really am a much worried man. It's no joke bringing up seven motherless girls, each of them with characters; the boys are a simple matter—they have school before them, and a career of some sort, but the girls—it really is an awful responsibility. Even the baby has a strong individuality of her own—I see it already in her brown eyes—bless her, she has got her mother's eyes. But my queer, wild, clever Polly—what a week we shall have with you presently! Now, who is that crying and sobbing in the dark?"

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The Doctor swooped suddenly down on a shadowy object, which lay prone under an arbutus shrub. "My dear little Firefly, what *is* the matter? You ought to be in bed ages ago—out here in the damp and cold, and such deep-drawn sobs! What has nurse been about? This is really extremely careless."

"It wasn't nurse's fault," sobbed Firefly, nestling her head into her father's cheek. "I ran away from her. I hid from her on purpose."

"Then you were the naughty one. What is the matter, dear? Why do you make things worse for me and for us all just now?"

Firefly's head sank still lower. Her hot little cheek pressed her father's with an acute longing for sympathy. Instinct told him of the child's need. He walked down the avenue, holding her closely.

"Wasn't you going the other way, father?" asked Firefly, squeezing her arms tight around his neck.

"No matter, I must see you home first. Now what were those sobs about? And why did you hide yourself from nurse?"

"Cause I wanted to be down-stairs, to listen to the grown-ups."

"The grown-ups? My dear, who are they?"

"Oh, Nell, and Poll Parrot, and Katie; I don't mind about Nell and Polly, but it isn't fair that Katie should be made a grown-up—and she is—she is, really, father. She is down in the school-room so important, and just like a regular grown-up, so I couldn't stand it."

"I see. You wanted to be a grown-up too—you are seven years old, are you not?"

"I'm more. I'm seven and a half—Katie is only eleven."

"Quite so! Katie is young compared to you, isn't she, Firefly. Still, I don't see my way. You wished to join the grown-ups, but I found you sobbing on the damp grass under one of the shrubs near the avenue. Is it really under a damp arbutus shrub that the grown-ups intend to take counsel?"

"Oh no, father, no—" here the sobs began again. "They were horrid, oh they were horrid. They locked me out—I banged against the door, but they wouldn't open. It was then I came up here. I wouldn't have minded if it hadn't been for Katie."

"I see, my child. Well, run to bed now, and leave the matter in father's hands. Ask nurse to give you a hot drink, and not to scold, for father knows about it."

"*Darling* father—oh, how good you are! Don't I love you! Just another kiss—*what* a good father you are!"

Firefly hugged the tall doctor ecstatically. He saw her disappear into the house, and once more pursued his way down the avenue.

"Good!" he echoed to himself. "Never did a more harassed man walk. How am I to manage those girls?"

CHAPTER VIII.

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SHOULD THE STRANGERS COME?

Helen and Polly were seated together in the pleasant morning-room. Helen occupied her mother's chair, her feet were on a high footstool, and by her side, on a small round table, stood a large basket filled with a heterogeneous collection of odd socks and stockings, odd gloves, pieces of lace and embroidery, some wool, a number of knitting needles, in short, a confused medley of useful but run-to-seed-looking articles which the young housekeeper was endeavoring to reduce out of chaos into order.

"Oh, Polly, how you have tangled up all this wool; and where's the fellow of this gray glove? And—Polly, Polly—here's the handkerchief you had such a search for last week. Now, how often do you intend me to put this basket in order for you?"

"Once a week, dear, if not oftener," answered Polly, in suave tones. "Please don't speak for a moment or two, Nell. I'm so much interested in this new recipe for pie-crust. You melt equal portions of lard and butter in so much boiling water—that's according to the size of the pie; then you mix it into the flour, kneading it very well—and—and—and—" Polly's voice dropped to a kind of buzz, her head sank lower over the large cookery-book which she was studying; her elbows were on the table, her short curling hair fell over her eyes, and a dimpled hand firmly pressed each cheek.

Helen sighed slightly, and returned with a little gesture of resignation to the disentangling of Polly's work-basket. As she did so she seated herself more firmly in her mother's arm-chair. Her little figure looked slight in its deep and ample dimensions, and her smooth fair face was slightly puckered with anxiety.

"Polly," she said, suddenly; "Polly, leave that book alone. There's more in the world than housekeeping and pie-crust. Do you know that I have discovered something, and I think, I really do think, that we ought to go on with it. It was mother's plan, and father will always agree to anything she wished."

Polly shut up Mrs. Beaton's cookery-book with a bang, rose from her seat at the table, and opening the window sat down where the wind could ruffle her hair and cool her hot cheeks.

"This is Friday," she said, "and my duties begin on Monday. Helen, pie-crust is not unimportant

when success or failure hangs upon it; puddings may become vital, Helen, and, as to cheesecakes, I would stake everything I possess in the world on the manner in which father munches my first cheesecake. Well, dear, never mind; I'll try and turn my distracted thoughts in your direction for a bit. What's the discovery?"

"Only," said Helen, "that I think I know what makes father look so gray, and why he has a stoop, and why his eyes seem so sunken. Of course there is the loss of our mother, but that is not the only trouble. I think he has another, and I think also, Polly, that he had this other trouble before mother died, and that she helped him to bear it, and made plans to lighten it for him. You remember what one of her plans was, and how we weren't any of us too well pleased. But I have been thinking lately, since I began to guess father's trouble, that we ought to carry it out just the same as if our mother was with us."

"Yes," said Polly. "You have a very exciting way of putting things, Nell, winding one up and up, and not letting in the least little morsel of light. What is father's trouble, and what was the plan? I can't remember any plan, and I only know about father that he's the noblest of all noble men, and that he bears mother's loss—well, as nobody else would have borne it. What other trouble has our dear father, Nell? God wouldn't be so cruel as to give him another trouble."

"God is never cruel," said Helen, a beautiful, steadfast light shining in her eyes. "I couldn't let go the faith that God is always good. But father—oh, Polly, Polly, I am dreadfully afraid that father is going to lose his sight."

"What?" said Polly. "*What?* father lose his sight? No, I'm not going to listen to you, Nell. You needn't talk like that. It's perfectly horrid of you. I'll go away at once and ask him. Father! Why, his eyes are as bright as possible. I'll go this minute and ask him."

"No, don't do that, Polly. I would never have spoken if I wasn't really sure, and I don't think it would be right to ask him, or to speak about it, until he tells us about it himself. But I began to guess it a little bit lately, when I saw how anxious mother seemed. For she was anxious, although she was the brightest of all bright people. And after her death father said I was to look through some of her letters; and I found one or two which told me that what I suspected was the case, and father may—indeed, he probably will—become quite blind, by-and-by. That was—that was—What's the matter, Polly?"

"Nothing," said Polly. "You needn't go on—you needn't say any more. It's a horrid world, nothing is worth living for; pie-crust, nor housekeeping, nor nothing. I hate the world, and every one in it, and I hate *you* most of all, Nell, for your horrid news. Father blind! No, I won't believe it; it's all a lie."

"Poor Polly," said Helen. "Don't believe it, dear, I wish *I* didn't. I think I know a little bit how you feel. I'm not so hot and hasty and passionate as you, and oh, I'm not half, nor a quarter, so clever, but still, I do know how you feel; I—Polly, you startle me."

"Only you don't hate me at this moment," said Polly. "And I—don't I hate you, just! There, you can say anything after that. I know I'm a wretch—I know I'm hopeless. Even mother would say I was hopeless if she saw me now, hating you, the kindest and best of sisters. But I do, yes, I do, most heartily. So you see you aren't like me, Helen."

"I certainly never hated any one," said Helen. "But you are excited, Polly, and this news is a shock to you. We won't talk about it one way or other, now, and we'll try as far as possible not to think of it, except in so far as it ought to make us anxious to carry out mother's plan."

Polly had crouched back away from the window, her little figure all huddled up, her cheeks with carnation spots on them, and her eyes, brimful of the tears which she struggled not to shed, were partly hidden by the folds of the heavy curtain which half-enveloped her.

"You were going to say something else dreadfully unpleasant," she remarked. "Well, have it out. Nothing can hurt me very much just now."

"It's about the strangers," said Helen. "The strangers who were to come in October. You surely can't have forgotten them, Polly."

Like magic the thunder-cloud departed from Polly's face. The tears dried in her bright eyes, and the curtain no longer enveloped her slight, young figure.

"Why, of course," she said. "The strangers, how could I have forgotten! How curious we were about them. We didn't know their names. Nothing, nothing at all—except that there were two, and that they were coming from Australia. I always thought of them as Paul and Virginia. Dear, dear, dear, I shall have more housekeeping than ever on my shoulders with them about the place."

"They were coming in October," said Helen, quietly. "Everything was arranged, although so little was known. They were coming in a sailing vessel, and the voyage was to be a long one, and mother, herself, was going to meet them. Mother often said that they would arrive about the second week in October."

"In three weeks from now?" said Polly, "We are well on in September, now. I can't imagine how we came to forget Paul and Virginia. Why, of course, poor children, they must be quite anxious to get to us. I wonder if I'd be a good person to go and meet them. You are so shy with strangers,

you know, Nell, and I'm not. Mother used to say I didn't know what *mauvaise honte* meant. I don't say that I *like* meeting them, poor things, but I'll do it, if it's necessary. Still, Helen, I cannot make out what special plan there is in the strangers coming. Nor what it has to do with father, with that horrid piece of news you told me a few minutes ago."

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"It has a good deal to say to it, if you will only listen," said Helen. "I have discovered by mother's letters that the father of the strangers is to pay to our father £400 a year as long as his children live here. They were to be taught, and everything done for them, and the strangers' father was to send over a check for £100 for them every quarter. Now, Polly, listen. Our father is not poor, but neither is he rich, and if—if what we fear is going to happen, he won't earn nearly so much money in his profession. So it seems a great pity he should lose this chance of earning £400 a year."

"But nobody wants him to lose it," said Polly. "Paul and Virginia will be here in three weeks, and then the pay will begin. £400 a year—let me see, that's just about eight pounds a week, that's what father says he spends on the house, that's a lot to spend, I could do it for much less. But no matter. What are you puckering your brows for, Helen? Of course the strangers are coming."

"Father said they were not to come," replied Helen. "He told me so some weeks ago. When they get to the docks he himself is going to meet them, and he will take them to another home which he has been inquiring about. He says that we can't have them here now."

"But we must have them here," said Polly. "What nonsense! We must both of us speak to our father at once."

"I have been thinking it over," said Helen, in her gentle voice, "and I do really feel that it is a pity to lose this chance of helping father and lightening his cares. You see, Polly, it depends on us. Father would do it if he could trust us, you and me, I mean."

"Well, so he can trust us," replied Polly, glibly. "Everything will be all right. There's no occasion to make a fuss, or to be frightened. We have got to be firm, and rather old for our years, and if either of us puts down her foot she has got to keep it down."

"I don't know that at all," said Helen. "Mother sometimes said it was wise to yield. Oh, Polly, I don't feel at all wise enough for all that is laid on me. We have to be examples in everything. I do want to help father, but it would be worse to promise to help him and then to fail."

"I'm not the least afraid," said Polly. "The strangers must come, and father's purse must be filled in that jolly manner. I don't believe the story about his eyes, Nell, but it will do him good to feel that he has got a couple of steady girls like us to see to him. Now I'm arranging a list of puddings for next week, so you had better not talk any more. We'll speak to father about Paul and Virginia after dinner."

CHAPTER IX.

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LIMITS.

Even the wisest men know very little of household management, and never did an excellent and well-intentioned individual put, to use a well-known phrase, his foot more completely into it than Dr. Maybright when he allowed Polly to learn experience by taking the reins of household management for a week.

Except in matters that related to his own profession, Dr. Maybright was apt to be slightly absent-minded; here he was always keenly alive. When visiting a patient not a symptom escaped him, not a flicker of timid eyelids passed unnoticed, not a passing shade of color on the invalid's countenance but called for his acute observation. In household matters, however, he was apt to overlook trifles, and very often completely to forget what seemed to his family important arrangements. He was the kind of man who was sure to be very much beloved at home, for he was neither fretful nor fussy, but took large views of all things. Such people are appreciated, and if his children thought him the best of all men, his servants also spoke of him as the most perfect of masters.

"You might put anything before him," Mrs. Power would aver. "Bless his 'art, *he* wouldn't see, nor *he* wouldn't scold. Ef it were rinsings of the tea-pot he would drink it instead of soup; and I say, and always will say, that ef a cook don't jelly the soup for the like of a gentleman like the doctor what have no mean ways and no fusses, she ain't fit to call herself a cook."

So just because they loved him, Dr. Maybright's servants kept his table fairly well, and his house tolerably clean, and the domestic machinery went on wheels, not exactly oiled, but with no serious clog to their progress.

These things of course happened since Mrs. Maybright's death. In her day this gentlest and firmest of mistresses, this most tactful of women, kept all things in their proper place, and her

servants obeyed her with both will and cheerfulness.

On the Saturday before Polly's novitiate poor Dr. Maybright's troubles began. He had completely forgotten all about his promise to Polly, and was surprised when the little girl skipped into his study after breakfast, with her black frock put on more neatly than usual, her hair well brushed and pushed off her face, and a wonderful brown holland apron enveloping her from her throat to her ankles. The apron had several pockets, and certainly gave Polly a quaint and original appearance.

"Here I am, father," she said. "I have come for the money, please."

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"The—the what, my dear?"

Dr. Maybright put up his eye-glass, and surveyed the little figure critically.

"Are these pockets for your school-books?" he said. "It is not a bad idea; only don't lose them, Polly. I don't like untidy books scattered here and there."

Polly took the opportunity to dart a quick, anxious glance into her father's eyes—they were bright, dark, clear. Of course Helen's horrid story was untrue. Her spirits rose, she gave a little skip, and clasped her hands on the Doctor's arm.

"These are housekeeping pockets, father," she said. "Nothing at all to say to books. I'm domestic, not intellectual; my housekeeping begins on Monday, you know, and I've come for the eighty shillings now. Can you give it to me in silver, not in gold, for I want to divide it, and pop it into the little box with divisions at once?"

"Bless me," said the Doctor, "I'd forgotten—I did not know that indigestion week was so near. Well, here you are, Polly, two pounds in gold and two pounds in silver. I can't manage more than two sovereigns' worth of silver, I fear. Now my love, as you are strong, be merciful—give us only small doses of poison at each meal. I beseech of you, Polly, be temperate in your zeal."

"You laugh at me," said Polly, "Well, never mind. I'm too happy to care. I don't expect you'll talk about poisoning when you have eaten my cheesecakes. And father, dear father, you *will* let Paul and Virginia come? Nell and I meant to speak to you yesterday about them, but you were out all day. With me to housekeep, and Nell to look after everybody, you needn't have the smallest fear about Paul and Virginia; they can come and they can line your pockets, can't they?"

"My dear child, I have not an idea what you are talking about. Who *are* Paul and Virginia—have I not a large enough family without taking in the inhabitants of a desert island? There, I can't wait to hear explanations now; that is my patients' bell—run away, my dear, run away."

Dr. Maybright always saw his poorer patients gratis on Saturday morning from ten to twelve. This part of his work pleased him, for he was the sort of man who thought that the affectionate and grateful glance in the eye, and the squeeze of the hand, and the "God bless you, doctor," paid in many cases better than the guinea's worth. He had an interesting case this morning, and again Polly and her housekeeping slipped from his mind. He was surprised, therefore, in the interim between the departure of one patient and the arrival of another, to hear a somewhat tremulous tap at his study door, and on his saying "Come in," to see the pretty but decidedly ruffled face of his housemaid Alice presenting herself.

"Ef you please, Doctor, I won't keep you a minute, but I thought I'd ask you myself ef it's your wish as Miss Polly should go and give orders that on Monday morning I'm to turn the linen-press out from top to bottom, and to do it first of all before the rooms is put straight. And if I'm to unpick the blue muslin curtains, and take them down from where they was hung by my late blessed mistress's orders, in the spare room, and to fit them into the primrose room over the porch—for she says there's a Miss Virginy and a Master Paul coming, and the primrose room with the blue curtains is for one of them, she says. And I want to know from you, please, Doctor, if Miss Polly is to mistress it over me? And to take away the keys of the linen-press from me, and to follow me round, and to upset all my work, what I never stood, nor would stand. I want to know if it's your wish, Doctor?"

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"The fact is, Alice," began the Doctor—he put his hand to his brow, and a dim look came over his eyes—"the fact is—ah, that is my patients' bell, I must ask you to go, Alice, and to—to moderate your feelings. I have been anxious to give Miss Polly a lesson in experience, and it is only for a week. You will oblige me very much, Alice, by helping me in this matter."

The Doctor walked to the door as he spoke, and opened it courteously.

"Come in, Johnson," he said, to a ruddy-faced farmer, who was accompanied by a shy boy with a swelled face. "Come in; glad to see you, my friend. Is Tommy's toothache better?"

Alice said afterwards that she never felt smaller in her life than when Dr. Maybright opened the study door to show her out.

"Ef I'd been a queen he couldn't have done it more elegant," she remarked. "Eh, but he's a blessed man, and one would put up with two Miss Pollys for the sake of serving him."

The Doctor having conquered Alice, again forgot his second daughter's vagaries, but a much sterner and more formidable interview was in store for him; it was one thing to conquer Alice, who was impressionable, and had a soft heart, and another to encounter the stony visage and

rather awful presence of Mrs. Power.

"It's to give notice I've come, Dr. Maybright," she said, dropping a curtsey, and twisting a corner of her large white apron round with one formidable red hand. "It's to give notice. This day month, please, Doctor, and, though I says it as shouldn't, you won't get no one else to jelly your soups, nor feather your potatoes, nor puff your pastry, as Jane Power has done. But there's limits, Dr. Maybright; and I has come to give you notice, though out of no disrespect to you, sir."

"Then why do you do it, Mrs. Power?" said the Doctor. "You are an honest and conscientious servant, I know that from your late mistress's testimony. You cook very good dinners too, and you make suitable puddings for the children, and pastry not too rich. Why do you want to leave? I don't like change; and, if it is a question of wages, perhaps I may be able to meet you."

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"I'm obligated to you, Doctor; but it ain't that. I has my twenty-two pounds paid regular, and all found. I ain't grumbling on that score, and Jane Power was never havaricious nor grasping. I'm obligated too by what you says with respect to the pastry; but, Doctor, it ain't in mortal woman to stand a chit of a child being put over her. So I'm going this day month; and, with your leave, I'll turn the key in the kitchen-door next week, or else I'll forfeit my wage and go at once."

"Dear, dear," said the Doctor. "This is really embarrassing. I never thought that Polly's experience would upset the household economy in so marked a manner. I am really annoyed, for I certainly gave her leave to housekeep for a week."

"It isn't as I minds youth, Dr. Maybright," continued Mrs. Power. "I makes due allowances for the young, for I says to myself, 'Jane Power, you was once, so to speak, like an unfledged chick yourself;' but there's youth *and* youth, Dr. Maybright; and Miss Polly's of the kind as makes your 'air stand on hend."

"Poor Polly," said the Doctor.

"No, sir, begging your parding, if you was in the kitchen, it's 'poor Mrs. Power' you'd be a-saying. Now I don't say nothing agin Miss Nelly—she's the elder, and she have nice ways with her—she takes a little bit after my poor dear mistress; oh, what a nature was hers, blessed angel!"

Here Mrs. Power rolled her eyes skywards, and the Doctor, turning his back, walked to the window.

"Be brief," he said, "I am pressed for time."

"Sir, I was never one for long words; agen' Miss Helen I haven't a word to say. She comes down to the kitchen after breakfast as pretty as you please, and she says, 'Power,' says she, 'you'll advise me about the dinner to-day,' says she. 'Shall we have minced collops, or roast beef? And shall we have fruit tart with custard?' Pretty dear, she don't know nothink, and she owns it, and I counsel her, as who that wasn't the most hard-hearted would. But Miss Polly, she's all on wires like, and she bounds in and she says that I pepper the soup too strong, and that I ought to go to cookery schools, and ef I'll go with her that blessed minit she'll tell me what I wants in my own storeroom. There's limits. Dr. Maybright, and Miss Polly's my limits; so, ef you'll have no objection, sir, I'll go this day month."

"But I have an objection," replied Dr. Maybright. "Even Polly's experiment must not cost me a valuable servant. Mrs. Power, I have promised my little girl, and I feel more than convinced that her week's trial will ensure to you the freedom you desire and deserve in the future. Listen, I have a plan. Suppose you go for a week's holiday on Monday?"

"Oh, my word, sir! And are you to be poisoned hout and hout?"

"That is unlikely. Maggie, your kitchen-maid, is fond of cooking, and she won't quarrel with Miss Polly. Let us consider it arranged, then. A week's holiday won't do you any harm, cook, and your expenses I will defray. Now, excuse me, I must go out at once. The carriage has been at the door for some time."

CHAPTER X.

INDIGESTION WEEK.

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It was quite early on the following Monday morning when a light tap was heard outside the door of the room where Helen and Polly slept. It was a very light, modest, and uncertain tap, and it has not the smallest effect upon Helen, who lay in soft slumber, her pretty eyes closed, her gentle face calm and rounded and child-like, and the softest breathing coming from her rosy, parted lips.

Another little girl, however, was not asleep. At that modest tap up sprang a curly head, two dark, bright eyes opened wide, two white feet sprang quickly but noiselessly on to the floor, and Polly had opened the bed-room door wide to admit the short, dumpy, but excited little person of

Maggie, the kitchen-maid.

"She's a-going, Miss Polly—she's a-packing her handbox now, and putting the strap on. She's in a hawful temper, but she'll be out of the house in less than half an hour. There's a beautiful fire in the kitchen, Miss, and the pan for frying bacon is polished up so as you could 'most see yourself in it. And the egg-saucepan is there all 'andy, and the kettle fizzing and sputtering. I took cook up her breakfast, but she said she didn't want none of our poisonous messes, and she'd breakfast with her cousin in the village if we'd no objection. She'll be gone in no time now, Miss Polly, and I'm a-wanting to know when you'll be a-coming down stairs."

"I'm going to dress immediately, Maggie," said Polly. "I've scarcely slept all night, for this is an anxious moment for me. I'll join you in half an hour at the latest, Maggie, and have lots of saucepans and frying-pans and gridirons ready. Keep the fire well up too, and see that the oven is hot. There, fly away, I'll join you soon."

Maggie, who was only sixteen herself, almost skipped down the passage. After the iron reign of Mrs. Power, to work for Polly seemed like play to her.

"She's a duck," she said to herself, "a real cozy duck of a young lady. Oh, my word, won't we spin through the stores this week! Won't we just!"

Meanwhile Polly was hastily getting into her clothes. She did not wish to wake Helen, for she was most anxious that no one should know that on the first morning of her housekeeping she had arisen soon after six o'clock. Her plans were all laid beforehand, and a wonderfully methodical and well arranged programme, considering her fourteen years, was hers; she was all agog with eagerness to carry it out.

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"Oh, won't they have a breakfast this morning," she said to herself. "Won't they open their eyes, and won't Bob and Bunny look greedy. And Firefly—I must watch Firefly over those hot cakes, or she may make herself sick. Poor father and Nell—they'll both be afraid at first that I'm a little too lavish and inclined to be extravagant, but they'll see by-and-by, and they'll acknowledge deep down in their hearts that there never was such a housekeeper as Polly."

As the little maid dreamed these pleasant thoughts she scrambled somewhat untidily into her clothes, gave her hair a somewhat less careful brush than usual, and finally knelt down to say her morning prayer. Helen still slept, and Polly by a sudden impulse chose to kneel by Helen's bed and not her own. She pressed her curly head against the mattress, and eagerly whispered her petitions. She was excited and sanguine, for this was to her a moment of triumph; but as she prayed a feeling of rest and yet of longing overpowered her.

"Oh, I am happy to-day," she murmured—"but oh, mother, oh, mother, I'd give everything in all the wide world to have you back again! I'd live on bread and water—I'd spend years in a garret just for you to kiss me once again, mother, mother!"

Helen stirred in her sleep, for Polly's last impulsive words were spoken aloud.

"Has mother come back?" she asked.

Her eyes were closed, she was dreaming. Polly bent down and answered her.

"No," she said. "It is only me—the most foolish of all her children, who wants her so dreadfully."

Helen sighed, and turned her head uneasily, and Polly, wiping away some moisture from her eyes, ran out of the room.

Her housekeeping apron was on, her precious money box was under her arm, the keys of the linen-press jingled against a thimble and a couple of pencils in the front pocket of the apron. Polly was going down stairs to fulfill her great mission; it was impossible for her spirits long to be downcast. The house was deliciously still, for only the servants were up at present, but the sun sent in some rays of brightness at the large lobby windows, and the little girl laughed aloud in her glee.

"Good morning, sun! it is nice of you to smile at me the first morning of my great work. It is very good-natured of you to come instead of sending that disagreeable friend of yours, Mr. Rain. Oh, how delicious it is to be up early. Why, it is not half-past six yet—oh, what a breakfast I shall prepare for father!"

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In the kitchen, which was a large, cheerful apartment looking out on the vegetable garden, Polly found her satellite, Maggie, on the very tiptoe of expectation.

"I has laid the servants' breakfast in the 'all, Miss Polly; I thought as you shouldn't be bothered with them, with so to speak such a lot on your hands this morning. So I has laid it there, and lit a fire for them, and all Jane has to do when she's ready is to put the kettle on, for the tea's on the table in the small black caddy, so there'll be no worriting over them. And ef you please, Miss Polly, I made bold to have a cup of tea made and ready for you, Miss—here it is, if you please, Miss, and a cut off the brown home-made loaf."

"Delicious," said Polly; "I really am as hungry as possible, although I did not know it until I saw this nice brown bread-and-butter. Why, you have splendid ideas in you, Maggie; you'll make a first-rate cook yet. But now"—here the young housekeeper thought it well to put on a severe manner—"I must know what breakfast you have arranged for the servants' hall. It was good-

natured of you to think of saving me trouble, Maggie, but please understand that during this week you do nothing on your own responsibility. *I* am the housekeeper, and although I don't say I am old, I am quite old enough to be obeyed."

"Very well, Miss," said Maggie, who had gone to open her oven, and poke up the fire while Polly was speaking; "it's a weight off my shoulders, Miss, for I wasn't never one to be bothered with thinking. Mother says as I haven't brains as would go on the top of a sixpenny-bit, so what's to be expected of me, Miss. There, the oven's all of a beautiful glow, and 'ull bake lovely. You was asking what breakfast I has put in the servants' 'all—well, cold bacon and plenty of bread, and a good pat of the cooking butter. Why, Miss Polly, oh, lor, what is the matter, Miss?"

"Only that you have done very wrong, Maggie," said Polly. "You would not like to have lots of good things going up to the dining-room, and have no share yourself. I call it selfish of you, Maggie, for of course you knew you would be in the kitchen with me, and would be sure to come in for bits. Cold bacon, indeed! Poor servants, they're not likely to care for my housekeeping if that is all I provide for them! No, Maggie, when I made out my programme, I thought of the servants as well as the family. I will just refer to my tablets, Maggie, and see what breakfast I arranged for the hall for Monday morning."

While Polly was speaking Maggie opened her eyes and mouth wider and wider and when the young lady read aloud from her tablets she could not suppress an expostulatory "oh!"

"Monday—kitchen breakfast," read Polly—"Bacon, eggs, marmalade, sardines. Hot coffee, fresh rolls, if possible."

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"My word, but that is wasteful," said Maggie.

Polly's cheeks flushed. She glanced at her small handmaid, raised her hand in a reproving manner, and continued to read—

"Dining-room breakfast: Hot scones, baked muffins, eggs and bacon, deviled kidneys, scrambled eggs, a dish of kippered herrings, marmalade, honey, jam, tea and coffee. Oh, and chocolate for Firefly."

"My word, Miss," again exclaimed Maggie. "It's seven o'clock now, and the Doctor likes his breakfast sharp on the table at eight. If we has to get all this ready in an hour we had better fly round and lose no more time. I'll see to the 'all, bless your kind 'eart, Miss Polly, but we'd better get on with the dining-room breakfast, or there'll be nothing ready in anything like time. Will you mix up the cakes, Miss Polly, while I sees to the kidneys, and to the bacon and eggs, and the scrambled eggs, and the kippers. My word, but there'll be a power more sent up than can be eaten. But whatever goes wrong we should have the cakes in the oven, Miss Polly."

Polly did not altogether approve of Maggie's tone, but time did press; the kitchen clock already pointed to five minutes past seven; it was much easier to write out a programme upstairs at one's leisure in the pleasant morning-room than to carry it out in a hurry, in the hot kitchen, particularly when one's own knowledge was entirely theoretical, not practical. Yes, the kitchen was very hot, and time never seemed to fly so fast.

"First of all, open the window, Maggie; it is wrong to have rooms so hot as this," said the young housekeeper, putting on her most authoritative air.

"No, Miss, that I mustn't," said Maggie, firmly. "You'd cool down the oven in less than five minutes. Now, shall I fetch you the flour and things from the store-room, Miss? Why, dear me, your cheeks has peonyed up wonderful. You're new to it yet, Miss, but you'll soon take it quiet-like. Cold bacon is a very nice breakfast for the 'all, Miss, and cooking butter's all that servants is expected to eat of. Now shall I fetch you the flour and the roller, and the milk, Miss Polly?"

"Yes, get them," said Polly. She felt decidedly annoyed and cross. "I wish you would not talk so much, Maggie," she said, "go and fetch the materials for the hot cakes."

"But I don't know yet what I'm to get, Miss. Is it a dripping cake, or is it a cream cake, or is it a butter-and-egg cake? I'll bring you things according, Miss Polly, if you'll be so good as to instruct me."

"Oh dear, oh dear," said Polly, "you make my head go round, when you mention so many kinds of cake, Maggie. I really thought you knew something of cooking. I just want *hot cakes*. I don't care what kind they are; oh, I suppose we had better have the richest to-day. Get the material for the butter-and-egg cake, Maggie, and do be quick."

Thus admonished, Maggie did move off with a dubious look on her face in the direction of the store-room.

"She don't know nothing, poor dear," she said to herself; "she aims high—she's eat up with ambition, but she don't know nothing. It's lucky we in the 'all is to have the cold bacon. *I* don't know how to make a butter-and-egg hot cake—oh, my word, a fine scolding Mrs. Power will give us when she comes back."

Here Maggie approached the store-room door. Then she uttered a loud and piercing exclamation and flew back to Polly.

"She's gone and done us, Miss Polly," she exclaimed. "She's gone and done us! Cook's off, and

the key of the store-room in her pocket. There's nothing for breakfast, Miss Polly—no eggs, no butter, no marmalade, no sugar, no nothing."

Poor Polly's rosy, little face turned white.

"It can't be true," she said. And she flew down the passage to the store-room herself. Alas! only to peep through the key-hole, for the inhospitable door was firmly locked, and nowhere could the key be discovered.

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CHAPTER XI.

A—WAS AN APPLE PIE.

The first day of Polly's housekeeping was long remembered in the household. In the first place, the breakfast, though fairly abundant, was plain. A large piece of cold bacon graced one end of the board, a brown loaf stood on a trencher in the center, and when Helen took her place opposite the tea-tray she found herself provided with plenty of milk and sugar, certainly, and a large tea-pot of strong tea, but the sugar was brown. No butter, no marmalade, no jams, no hot cakes, graced the board. The children spoke of the fare as severe, and the Doctor's dark brown eyes twinkled as he helped his family to abundant slices of cold bacon.

"Not a word," he said, in a loud aside to his boys and girls. "I did not think it was in Polly to be so sensible. Why, we shall get through indigestion week quite comfortably, if she provides us with plain, wholesome fare like this."

Polly took her own place at the table rather late. Her cheeks were still peonyed, as Maggie expressed it, her eyes were downcast, her spirits were decidedly low, and she had a very small appetite.

After breakfast she beat a hasty retreat, and presently the boys rushed in in great excitement, to announce to Helen and Katie the interesting fact that Polly was walking across the fields accompanied by Maggie, each of them laden with a large market-basket.

"They are almost running, both of them," exclaimed Bunny, "and pretty Poll is awful cross, for when we wanted to go with her she just turned round and said we'd have a worse dinner than breakfast if we didn't leave her alone."

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"We ran away quickly enough after that," continued Bob, "for we didn't want no more cold-bacon and no-butter meals. We had a nasty breakfast to-day, hadn't we, Nell? And Poll is a bad housekeeper, isn't she?"

"Oh, leave her alone, do," said Helen. "She is trying her very best. Run out and play, boys, and don't worry about the meals."

The two boys, known in the family as "the scamps," quickly took their departure, and Katie began to talk in her most grown-up manner to Helen. Katie was a demure little damsel, she was fond of using long words, and thought no one in the world like Helen, whom she copied in all particulars.

"Poll is too ambitious, and she's sure to fail," she began. But Helen shut her up.

"If Polly does fail, you'll be dreadfully sorry, I'm sure, Katie," she said. "I know I shall be sorry. It will make me quite unhappy, for I never saw any one take more pains about a thing than Polly has taken over her housekeeping. Yes, it will be very sad if Polly fails; but I don't think she will, for she is really a most clever girl. Now, Katie, will you read your English History lesson aloud?"

Katie felt crushed. In her heart of hearts she thought even her beloved Helen a little too lenient.

"Never mind," she said to herself, "won't Dolly and Mabel have a fine gossip with me presently over the breakfast Polly gave us this morning."

Meanwhile the anxious, small housekeeper was making her way as rapidly as possible in the direction of the village.

"We haven't a minute to lose, Maggie," she said, as they trudged along. "Can you remember the list of things I gave you to buy at the grocery shop? It is such a pity you can't read, Maggie, for if you could I'd have written them down for you."

"It wasn't the Board's fault, nor my mother's," answered Maggie, glibly. "It was all on account of my brain being made to fit on the top of a sixpence. Yes, Miss, I remembers the list, and I'll go to Watson's and the butcher's while you runs on to the farm for the butter and eggs."

"You have got to get ten things," proceeded Polly; "don't forget, ten things at the grocer's. You had better say the list over to me."

"All right, Miss Polly, ten; I can tick one off on each finger: white sugar, coffee, rice, marmalade,

strawberry jam, apricot jam, mustard, pickles—is they mixed or plain, Miss Polly?—raisins, currants. There, Miss, I has them all as pat as possible.”

“Well, stop a minute,” said Polly. “I’m going to unlock my box now. Hold it for me, Maggie, while I open it. Here, I’m going to take half-a-sovereign out of the grocery division. You must take this half-sovereign to Watson’s, and pay for the things. I have not an idea how much they cost, but I expect you’ll have a good lot of change to give me. After that, you are to go on to the butcher’s, and buy four pounds of beef-steak. Here is another half-sovereign that you will have to pay the butcher out of. Be sure you don’t mix the change, Maggie. Pop the butcher’s change into one pocket, and the grocer’s change into another. Now, do you know what we are going to have for dinner?”

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“No, Miss, I’m sure I don’t. I expect it’ll sound big to begin with, and end small, same as the breakfast did. Why, Miss Polly, you didn’t think cold bacon good enough for the servants, and yet you set it down in the end afore your pa.”

Polly looked hard at Maggie. She suddenly began to think her not at all a nice girl.

“I was met by adversity,” she said. “It is wrong of you to speak to me in that tone, Maggie; Mrs. Power behaved very badly, and I could not help myself; but she need not think she is going to beat me, and whatever I suffer, I scorn to complain. To-night, after every one is in bed, I am going to make lots of pies and tarts, and cakes, and cheesecakes. You will have to help me; but we will talk of that by-and-by. Now, I want to speak about the dinner. It must be simple to-day. We will have a beef-steak pudding and pancakes. Do you know how to toss pancakes, Maggie?”

“Oh, lor’, Miss,” said Maggie, “I did always love to see mother at it. She used to toss ‘em real beautiful, and I’m sure I could too. That’s a very nice dinner, Miss, ‘olesome and good, and you’ll let me toss the pancakes, won’t you, Miss Polly?”

“Well, you may try, Maggie. But here we are at the village. Now, please, go as quickly as possible to Watson’s, and the butcher’s, and meet me at this stile in a quarter of an hour. Be very careful of the change, Maggie, and be sure you put the butcher’s in one pocket and the grocer’s in another. Don’t mix them—everything depends on your not mixing them, Maggie.”

The two girls parted, each going quickly in opposite directions. Polly had a successful time at the farm, and when she once again reached the turnstile her basket contained two dozen new-laid eggs, two or three pounds of delicious fresh butter, and a small jug of cream. The farmer’s wife, Mrs. White, had been very pleased to see her, and had complimented her on her discernment in choosing the butter and eggs. Her spirits were now once again excellent, and she began to forget the sore injury Mrs. Power had done her by locking the store-room door.

“It’s all lovely,” she said to herself; “it’s all turning out as pleasant as possible. The breakfast was nothing, they’d have forgotten the best breakfast by now, and they’ll have such a nice dinner. I can easily make a fruit tart for father, as well as the pancakes, and won’t he enjoy Mrs. White’s nice cream? It was very good of her to give it to me; and it was very cheap, too—only eighteenpence. But, dear me, dear me, how I wish Maggie would come!”

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There was no sign, however, of any stout, unwieldy young person walking down the narrow path which led to the stile. Strain her eyes as she would, Polly could not see any sign of Maggie approaching. She waited for another five minutes, and then decided to go home without her.

“For she may have gone round by the road,” she said to herself, “although it was very naughty of her if she did so, for I told her to be sure to meet me at the turnstile. Still I can’t wait for her any longer, for I must pick the fruit for my tart, and I ought to see that Alice is doing what I told her about the new curtains.”

Off trotted Polly with her heavy basket once again across the fields. It was a glorious September day, and the soft air fanned her cheeks and raised her already excited spirits. She felt more cheerful than she had done since her mother died, and many brilliant visions of hope filled her ambitious little head. Yes, father would see that he was right in trusting her; Nell would discover that there was no one so clever as Polly; Mrs. Power would cease to defy her; Alice would obey her cheerfully; in short, she would be the mainstay and prop of her family.

On her way through the kitchen-garden Polly picked up a number of fallen apples, and then she went quickly into the house, to be met on the threshold by Firefly.

“Oh, Poll Parrot, may I come down with you to the kitchen? I’d love to see you getting the dinner ready, and I could help, indeed I could. The others are all so cross; that is, all except Nell. Katie *is* in a temper, and so are Dolly and Mabel; but I stood up for you, Poll Parrot, for I said you didn’t mean to give us the very nastiest breakfast in the world. I said it was just because you weren’t experienced enough to know any better—that’s what I said, Poll.”

“Well, you made a great mistake then,” said Polly. “Not experienced, indeed! as if I didn’t know what a good breakfast was like. I had a misfortune; a dark deed was done, and I was the victim, but I scorn to complain, I let you all think as you like. No, you can’t come to the kitchen with me, Firefly; it isn’t a fit place for children. Run away now, *do*.”

Poor Fly’s small face grew longing and pathetic, but Polly was obdurate.

“I can’t have children about,” she said to herself, and soon she was busy peeling her apples and

preparing her crust for the pie. She succeeded fairly well, although the water with which she mixed her dough would run all over the board, and her nice fresh butter stuck in the most provoking way to the rolling-pin. Still, the pie was made, after a fashion, and Polly felt very happy, as she amused herself cutting out little ornamental leaves from what remained of her pastry to decorate it. It was a good-sized tart, and when she had crowned it with a wreath of laurel leaves she thought she had never seen anything so handsome and appetizing. Alas, however, for poor Polly, the making of this pie was her one and only triumph.

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The morning had gone very fast, while she was walking to the village securing her purchases, and coming home again. She was startled when she looked at the kitchen clock to find that it pointed to a quarter past twelve. At the same time she discovered that the kitchen fire was nearly out, and that the oven was cold. Father always liked the early dinner to be on the table sharp at one o'clock; it would never, never do for Polly's first dinner to be late. She must not wait any longer for that naughty Maggie; she must put coals on the fire herself, and wash the potatoes, and set them on to boil.

This was scarcely the work of an ordinary lady-like housekeeper; but Polly tried to fancy she was in Canada, or in even one of the less civilized settlements, where ladies put their hands to anything, and were all the better for it.

She had a great hunt to find the potatoes, and when she had washed them—which it must be owned she did not do at all well—she had still greater difficulty in selecting a pot which would hold them. She found one at last, and with some difficulty placed it on the kitchen-range. She had built up her fire with some skill, but was dismayed to find that, try as she would, she could get no heat into the oven. The fact was, she had not the least idea how to direct the draught in the right direction; and although the fire burned fiercely, and the potatoes soon began to bubble and smoke, the oven, which was to cook poor Polly's tart, remained cold and irresponsive.

Well, cold as it was, she would put her pie in, for time was flying as surely it had never flown before and it was dreadful to think that there would be nothing at all for dinner but potatoes.

Oh, why did not that wicked Maggie come! Really Polly did not know that any one could be quite so depraved and heartless as Maggie was turning out. She danced about the kitchen in her impatience, and began to think she understood something of the wickedness of those cities described in the Bible, which were destroyed by fire on account of their sins, and also of the state of the world before the Flood came.

"They were all like Maggie," she said to herself. "I really never heard of any one before who was quite so hopelessly bad as Maggie."

The kitchen clock pointed to the half hour, and even to twenty minutes to one. It was hopeless to think of pancakes now—equally hopeless to consider the possibilities of a beefsteak pudding. They would be very lucky if they had steak in any form. Still, if Maggie came at once that might be managed, and nice potatoes, beef-steak, apple-tart and cream would be better than no dinner at all.

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Just at this moment, when Polly's feelings were almost reduced to despair, she was startled by a queer sound, which gradually came nearer and nearer. It was the sound of some one sobbing, and not only sobbing, but crying aloud with great violence. The kitchen door was suddenly burst open, and dishevelled, tear-stained, red-faced Maggie rushed in, and threw herself on her knees at Polly's feet.

"I has gone and done it, Miss Polly," she exclaimed. "I was distraught-like, and my poor little bit of a brain seemed to give way all of a sudden. Mother's in a heap of trouble, Miss Polly. I went round to see her, for it was quite a short cut to Watson's, round by mother's, and mother she were in an awful fixing. She hadn't nothing for the rent, Miss Polly, 'cause the fruit was blighted this year; and the landlord wouldn't give her no more grace, 'cause his head is big and his heart is small, same as 'tis other way with me, Miss Polly, and the bailiffs was going to seize mother's little bits of furniture, and mother she was most wild. So my head it seemed to go, Miss Polly, and I clutched hold of the half-sovereign in the butcher's pocket, and the half-sovereign in the grocer's pocket, and I said to mother, 'Miss Polly'll give 'em to you, 'cause it's a big heart as Miss Polly has got. They was meant for the family dinner, but what's dinner compared to your feelings.' So mother she borrowed of the money, Miss Polly, and I hasn't brought home nothink; I hasn't, truly, miss."

Maggie's narrative was interspersed with very loud sobs, and fierce catches of her breath, and her small eyes were almost sunken out of sight.

"Oh, I know you're mad with me," she said, in conclusion. "But what's dinner compared with mother's feelings. Oh, Miss Polly, don't look at me like that!"

"Get up," said Polly, severely. "You are just like the people before the Flood; I understand about them at last. I cannot speak to you now, for we have not a moment to lose. Can you make the oven hot? There are only potatoes for dinner, unless the apple tart can be got ready in time."

"Oh, lor'! Miss Polly, I'll soon set that going—why, you has the wrong flue out, Miss. See now, the heat's going round it lovely. Oh, what an elegant pie you has turned out, Miss Polly! Why, it's quite wonderful! You has a gift in the cookery line, Miss. Oh, darling Miss Polly, don't you be a-naming of me after them Flooders; it's awful to think I'm like one of they. It's all on account of

mother, Miss Polly. It would have gone to your heart, Miss Polly, if you seen mother a-looking at the eight-day clock and thinking of parting from it. Her tears made channels on her cheeks, Miss Polly, and it was 'heart-piercing to view her. Oh, do take back them words, Miss Polly. Don't say as I'm a Flooder."

Polly certainly had a soft heart, and although nothing could have mortified her more than the present state of affairs, she made up her mind to screen Maggie, and to be as little severe to her as she could.

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CHAPTER XII.

POTATOES—MINUS POINT.

Dr. Maybright had reason again to congratulate himself when he sat down to a humble dinner of boiled potatoes.

"If this regimen continues for a week," he said, under his breath, "we must really resort to tonics. I perceive I did Polly a gross injustice. She does not mean to make us ill with rich living."

The doctor ate his potatoes with extreme cheerfulness, remarking as he did so on their nutritive qualities, and explaining to his discontented family how many people lived on these excellent roots. "The only thing we want," he said, "is a red herring; we might then have that most celebrated of all Irish dishes—'potatoes and point.'"

"Do tell us what that is, father," said Helen, who was anxious to draw the direful glances of the rest of the family from poor Polly.

"'Potatoes and point,'" said Dr. Maybright, raising his head for a moment, while a droll glance filled his eye, "is a simple but economical form of diet. The herring is hung by a string over the center of the board, and each person before he eats his potato points it at the herring; by so doing a subtle flavor of herring is supposed to be imparted to the potato. The herring lasts for some time, so the diet is really a cheap one. Poll, dear, what is the matter? I never saw these excellent apples of the earth better cooked."

Polly was silent; her blushing cheeks alone betrayed her. She was determined to make a good meal, and was sustained by the consciousness that she had not betrayed Maggie, and the hope that the apple-tart would prove excellent.

It certainly was a noble apple-pie, and the faces of the children quite cheered up at the sight of it. They were very hungry, and were not particular as to the quality of the crust. Mrs. White's cream, too, was delicious, so the second part of Polly's first dinner quite turned out a success.

After the meal had come to an end, Helen called her second sister aside.

"Polly," she said, "I think we ought to speak to father now about the strangers' coming. Time is going on, and if they come we ought to begin to prepare for them, and the more I think of it the more sure I am that they ought to come."

"All right," said Polly. "Only, is this a good time to speak to father? For I am quite sure he must be vexed with me."

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"You must not think so, Polly," said Helen, kissing her. "Father has given you a week to try to do your best in, and he won't say anything one way or another until the time is up. Come into his study now, for I know he is there, and we really ought to speak to him."

Polly's face was still flushed, but the Doctor, who had absolutely forgotten the simplicity of his late meal, received both the girls with equal affection.

"Well, my loves," he said, "can I do anything for you? I am going for a pleasant drive into the country this afternoon. Would you both like to come?"

"I should very much," said Helen; but Polly, with a somewhat important little sigh, remarked that household matters would keep her at home.

"Well, my dear, you must please yourself. But can I do anything for either of you now? You both look full of business."

"We are, father," said Polly, who was always the impetuous one. "We want to know if Paul and Virginia may come."

"My dear, this is the second time you have spoken to me of those deserted orphans. I don't understand you."

"It is this, father," explained Helen. "We think the children from Australia—the children mother was arranging about—might come here still. We mean that Polly and I would like them to come,

and that we would do our best for them. We think, Polly and I do, that mother, even though she is not here, would still like the strangers to come."

"Sit down, Helen," said the Doctor; the harassed look had once again come across his face, and even Polly noticed the dimness in his eyes.

"You must not undertake too much, you two," he said. "You are only children. You are at an age to miss your mother at every turn. We had arranged to have a boy and girl from Australia to live here, but when your mother—your mother was taken—I gave up the idea. It was too late to stop their coming to England, but I think I can provide a temporary home for them when they get to London. You need not trouble your head about the strange children, Nell."

"It is not that," said Polly. "We don't know them yet, so of course we don't love them, but we wish them to come here, because we wish for their money. It will be eight pounds a week; just what you spend on the house, you know, father."

"What a little economist!" said Dr. Maybright, stretching out his hand and drawing Polly to him. "Yes, I was to receive £400 a year for the children, and it would have been a help, certainly it would have been a help by and by. Still, my dear girls, I don't see how it is to be managed."

"But really, father, we are so many that two more make very little difference," explained Helen. "Polly and I are going to try hard to be steady and good, and we think it would certainly please mother if you let the strangers come here, and we tried to make them happy. If you would meet them, father, and bring them here just at first, we might see how we got on."

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"I might," said the Doctor in a meditative voice, "and £400 is a good deal of money. It is not easily earned, and with a large family it is always wanted. That's what your mother said, and she was very wise. Still, still, children, I keep forgetting how old you are. In reality you are, neither of you, grown up; in reality Polly is quite a child, and you, my wise little Nell, are very little more. I have offended your aunt, Mrs. Cameron, as it is, and what will she say if I yield to you on this point? Still, still——"

"Oh, father, don't mind what that tiresome Aunt Maria says or thinks on any subject," said Polly. "Why should we mind her, she wasn't mother's real sister. We scarcely know her at all, and she scarcely knows us. We don't like her, and we are sure she doesn't like us. Why should she spoil our lives, and prevent our helping you? For it would help you to have the strangers here, wouldn't it, father?"

"By and by it would," answered the Doctor. "By and by it would help me much."

Again the troubled expression came to his face and the dimness was perceptible in his eyes.

"You will let us try it, father," said Helen. "We can but fail; girls as young as us have done as much before. I am sure girls as young as we are have done harder things before, so why should not we try?"

"I am a foolish old man," said the Doctor. "I suppose I shall be blamed for this, not that it greatly matters. Well, children, let it be as you wish. I will go and meet the boy and girl in London, and bring them to the Hollow. We can have them for a month, and if we fail, children," added the Doctor, a twinkle of amusement overspreading his face, "we won't tell any one but ourselves. It is quite possible that in the future we shall be comparatively poor if we cannot manage to make that boy and girl from Australia comfortable and happy; but Polly there has taught us how to economize, for we can always fall back on potatoes and point."

"Oh—oh—oh, father," came from Polly's lips.

"That is unkind, dear father," said Helen.

But they both hung about his neck and kissed him, and when Dr. Maybright drove away that afternoon on his usual round of visits, his heart felt comparatively light, and he owned to himself that those girls of his, with all their eccentricities, were a great comfort to him.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE ATTIC.

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There is no saying how Polly's week of housekeeping might have ended, nor how substantial her castle in the air might have grown, had not a catastrophe occurred to her of a double and complex nature.

The first day during which Polly and Maggie, between them, catered for and cooked the family meals, produced a plain diet in the shape of cold bacon for breakfast, and a dinner of potatoes, minus "point." But on the Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of that week Maggie quite redeemed her character of being a Flooder, and worked under Polly with such goodwill that, as

she herself expressed it, her small brains began to grow. Fortunately, Mrs. Ricketts, Maggie's mother, was not obliged to meet her rent every day of the week, therefore no more of Polly's four pounds went in that direction. And Polly read Mrs. Beaton's Cookery-book with such assiduity, and Maggie carried out her directions with such implicit zeal and good faith, that really most remarkable meals began to grace the Doctor's board. Pastry in every imaginable form and guise, cakes of all descriptions; vegetables, so cooked and so flavored, that their original taste was completely obliterated; meats cooked in German, Italian, and American styles; all these things, and many more, graced the board and speedily vanished. The children became decidedly excited about the meals, and Polly was cheered and regarded as a sort of queen. The Doctor sighed, however, and counted the days when Nell and Mrs. Power should once more peacefully reign in Polly's stead. Nurse asked severely to have all the nursery medicine bottles replenished. Firefly looked decidedly pasty, and, after one of Polly's richest plum-cakes, with three tiers of different colored icings, Bunny was heard crying the greater part of one night. Still the little cook and housekeeper bravely pursued her career of glory, and all might have gone well, and Polly might have worn a chastened halo of well-earned success round her brow for the remainder of her natural life, but for the catastrophe of which I am about to speak.

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday the family fared richly, and the household jogged along somehow, but on Friday morning Dr. Maybright suddenly surprised his girls by telling them that unexpected business would call him to London immediately. He could not possibly return before Monday, but he would get a certain Dr. Strong to see after his patients, and would start for town by the mid-day train.

The Doctor's portmanteau was quickly packed, and in what seemed a moment of time after the receipt of the letter he had kissed his family and bidden them good-by. Then her four younger sisters and the boys came round Polly with a daring suggestion.

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"Let's sit up late, to-night, and have a real, jolly supper," they begged. "Let's have it at nine o'clock, up in the large garret over the front of the house; let it be a big supper, all kinds of good things; ginger-beer and the rest, and let's invite some people to come and eat it with us. Do Poll—do Poll, darling."

"But," said Polly—she was dazzled by this glorious prospect—"I haven't got a great deal of money," she said, "and Nurse will be very angry, and Helen won't like it. For you know, children, you two boys and Firefly, you are never allowed to sit up as late as nine o'clock."

"But for once, Poll Parrot," exclaimed the three victims; "just for once. We are sure father would not care, and we can coax Nell to consent; and Nurse, as to Nurse, she thinks of no one but baby; we won't choose the garret over baby. Do, do, do say 'yes,' darling Poll."

"The dearest cook in all the world!" exclaimed Bunny, tossing his cap in the air.

"The queen of cake-makers," said Bob, turning head over heels.

"The darlingest princess of all housekeepers," echoed Firefly, leaping on her sister, and half-strangling her with a fierce embrace.

"And we'll all subscribe," said the twins.

"And it will really be delightfully romantic; something to remember when you aren't housekeeper," concluded Katie.

"I'd like it awfully," said Polly, "I don't pretend that I wouldn't, and I've just found such a recipe for whipped cream. Do you know, girls, I shouldn't be a bit surprised—I really shouldn't—if I turned out some meringues made all by myself for supper. The only drawback is the money, for Mrs. White does charge a lot for cream, and I don't mind owing to you all, now that you are nice and sympathetic, that the reason you had only potatoes for dinner on Monday was because Maggie and I met with a misfortune; it was a money trouble," continued Polly, with an important air, "and of course children like you cannot understand what money troubles mean. They are wearing, very, and Maggie says she thinks I'm beginning to show some crow's feet around my eyes on account of them. But never mind, I'm not going to cast the shadows of money troubles on you all, and this thing is not to be spoken of, only it makes me very short now."

"But we'll help you, Poll," said all the eager voices. "Let's fetch our purses and see what we can spare."

In a twinkling many odd receptacles for holding money made an appearance, and the children between them found they could muster the noble sum of six shillings. All this was handed to Polly, who said, after profound deliberation, that she thought she could make it go furthest and make most show in the purchase of cream and ginger-beer.

"I'll scrape the rest together, somehow," she said, in conclusion, "and Maggie will help me fine. Maggie's a real brick now, and her brains are growing beautifully."

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But there was another point to be decided—Who were to be invited to partake of the supper, and was Nurse to be told, and was Helen to be consulted?

Certainly Polly would not have ventured to carry out so daring a scheme without Helen's consent and cooperation, if it had not happened that she was away for the day. She had taken the opportunity to drive into the nearest town five miles away with her father, and had arranged to

spend the day there, purchasing several necessary things, and calling on one or two friends.

"And it will be much too late to tell Nell when she comes back," voted all the children. "If she makes a fuss then, and refuses to join, she will spoil everything. We are bound too, to obey Helen, so we had much better not give her the chance of saying 'no.' Let us pretend to go to bed at our usual hour, and say nothing to either Nurse or Helen. We can tell them to-morrow if we like, and they can only scold us. Yes, that is the only thing to do, for it would never, never do to have such a jolly plan spoilt."

A unanimous vote was therefore carried that the supper in the garret was to be absolutely secret and confidential, and, naughty as this plan of carrying out their pleasure was, it must be owned that it largely enhanced the fun. The next point to consider was, who were to be the invited guests? There were no boys and girls of the children's own class in life within an easy distance.

"Therefore there is no one to ask," exclaimed Katie, in her shortest and most objectionable manner.

But here Firefly electrified her family by quoting Scripture.

"When thou makest a supper," she began.

All the others rose in a body and fell upon her. But she had started a happy idea, and in consequence, Mrs. Ricketts' youngest son and daughter, and the three very naughty and disreputable sons of Mrs. Jones, the laundress, were invited to partake of the coming feast.

The rest of the day passed to all appearance very soberly. Helen was away. The Doctor's carriage neither came nor went; the Doctor himself, with his kindly voice, and his somewhat brusque, determined manner, awoke no echoes in the old house. Nurse was far away in the nursery wing, with the pretty, brown-eyed baby and the children; all the girls and the little boys were remarkably good.

To those who are well acquainted with the habits and ways of young folks, too much goodness is generally a suspicious circumstance. There is a demure look, there is an instant obedience, there is an absence of fretfulness, and an abnormal, although subdued, cheerfulness, which arouses the watchful gaze of the knowing among mothers, governesses, and nurses.

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Had Nurse been at dinner that day she might have been warned of coming events by Bunny's excellent behavior; by Bob's rigid refusal to partake twice of an unwholesome compound, which went by the name of iced pudding; by Firefly's anxiety to be all that a good and proper little girl should be. But Nurse, of course, had nothing to say to the family dinner. Helen was away, the Doctor was nearing the metropolis, and the little boys' daily governess was not dining with the family.

These good children had no one to suspect them, and all went smoothly; in short, the wheels of the house machinery never seemed more admirably oiled.

True, had any one listened very closely there might have been heard the stealthy sound of shoeless feet ascending the rickety step-ladder which led to the large front garret. Shoeless feet going up and down many, many times. Trays, too, of precious crockery were carried up, baskets piled with evergreens and flowers were conveyed thither, the linen cupboard was ruthlessly rifled for snowy tablecloths and table napkins of all descriptions. Then later in the day a certain savory smell might have been perceived by any very suspicious person just along this special passage and up that dusty old ladder. For hot bread and hot pastry and hot cakes were being conveyed to the attic, and the sober twins themselves fetched the cream from the farm, and the ginger beer from the grocer's.

No one was about, however, to suspect, or to tell tales if they did suspect.

Helen came home about seven o'clock, rather tired, and very much interested in her purchases, to find a cozy tea awaiting her, and Polly anxious to serve her. The twin girls were supposed to be learning their lessons in the schoolroom, Katie was nowhere to be seen, and Helen remarked casually that she supposed the young ones had gone to bed.

"Oh, yes," said Polly, in her quickest manner.

She turned her back as she spoke, and the blush which mantled her brown face was partly hidden by her curly dark hair.

"I am very hungry," said Helen. "Really, Polly, you are turning out an excellent housekeeper—what a nice tea you have prepared for me. How delicious these hot cakes are! I never thought, Polly, you would make such a good cook and manager, and to think of your giving us such delicious meals on so little money. But you are eating nothing yourself, love, and how hot your cheeks are!"

"Cooking is hot work, and takes away the appetite," said Polly.

She was listening in agony that moment, for over Helen's head certain stealthy steps were creeping; they were the steps of children, leaving their snug beds, and gliding as quietly as possible in the direction of the savory smells and the dusty ladder and the large dirty, spidery—but oh, how romantic, how fascinating—front attic. Never before did Polly realize how many creaky boards there were in the house; oh, surely Helen would observe those steps; but, no, she

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cracked her egg tranquilly, and sipped her tea, and talked in her pleasantest way of Polly's excellent cooking, and of her day's adventures.

Time was going on; it would soon be eight o'clock. Oh, horrors, why would the Rickettses and Mrs. Jones's three boys choose the path through the shrubbery to approach the house! The morning room, where Helen was taking her tea, looked out on the shrubbery, and although it was now quite dark in the world of nature, those dreadful rough boys would crack boughs, and stumble and titter as they walked. Polly's face grew hotter and her hands colder; never did she bless her sister's rather slow and unsuspecting nature more than at this moment, for Helen heard no boughs crack, nor did the stealthy, smothered laughter, so distinctly audible to poor Polly, reach her ears.

At ten minutes to eight Helen rose from the table.

"I'm going up to Nurse to show her what things I have bought for baby," she said. "We are going to short-coat baby next week, so I have a good deal to show her, and I won't be down again for a little bit."

"All right," said Polly, "I have plenty to do; don't worry about me till you see me, Nell."

She danced out of the room, and in excellent spirits joined a large and boisterous party in the front attic. Now, she assured her family and her guests, all would go well; they were safely housed in a distant and unused part of the establishment, and might be as merry and as noisy as they pleased; no one would hear them, no one would miss them, no one would suspect them.

And all might have gone according to Polly's programme, and to this day that glorious feast in the attic might have remained a secret in the private annals of the house of Maybright, but for that untoward thing which I am about to tell.

At that very moment while the Maybrights, the Rickettses, and the Joneses were having delightful and perfectly untrammelled intercourse with each other, a very fidgety old lady was approaching the Hollow, being carefully conducted thither in a rickety fly. A large traveling trunk was on the box seat of the fly, and inside were two or three bandboxes, a couple of baskets, a strap bursting with railway rugs, cloaks, and umbrellas, and last, but not least, a snarling little toy terrier, who barked and whined, and jumped about, and licked his mistress's hand.

"Down, Scorpion," exclaimed Mrs. Cameron; "behave yourself, sir. You really become more vicious every day. Get in that corner, and don't stir till I give you leave. Now, then, driver," opening the window and poking her head out, "when are we getting to Sleepy Hollow? Oh! never, never have I found myself in a more outlandish place."

"We be a matter of two miles from there, ma'am," said the man. "You set easy, and keep yourself quiet, for the beast won't go no faster."

Mrs. Cameron subsided again into the depths of the musty old fly with a groan.

"Outlandish—most outlandish!" she remarked again. "Scorpion, you may sit in my lap if you like to behave yourself, sir. Well, well, duty calls me into many queer quarters. Scorpion, if you go on snarling and growling I shall slap you smartly. Yes, poor Helen; I never showed my love for her more than when I undertook this journey: never, never. Oh! how desolate that great moor does look; I trust there are no robbers about. It's perfectly awful to be in a solitary cab, with anything but a civil driver, alone on these great moors. Well, well, how could Helen marry a man like Dr. Maybright, and come to live here? He must be the oddest person, to judge from the letter he wrote me. I saw at once there was nothing for me but to make the stupendous effort of coming to see after things myself. Poor dear Helen! she was a good creature, very handsome, quite thrown away upon that doctor. I was fond of her; she was like a child to me long ago. It is my duty to do what I can for her orphans. Now, Scorpion, what is the matter? You are quite one of the most vicious little dogs I have ever met. Oh, do be quiet, sir."

But at that moment the fly drew up with a jolt. The driver deliberately descended from his seat, and opened the door, whereupon Scorpion, with a snarl and bound, disappeared into the darkness.

"He's after a cat," remarked the man, laconically. "This be the Hollow, ma'am, if you'll have the goodness to get out."

"Sleepy Hollow," remarked Mrs. Cameron to herself, as she steadily descended. "Truly I should think so; but I am much mistaken if I don't wake it up."

CHAPTER XIV.

AUNT MARIA.

"Ef you please, Miss Helen," said Alice, the neat housemaid, putting in her head at the nursery

door, "there's a lady downstairs, and a heap of luggage, and the nastiest little dog I ever saw. He has almost killed the Persian kitten, Miss, and he is snarling and snapping at every one. See, he took this bit out of my apron, miss. The old lady says as her name is Mrs. Cameron, and she has come to stay; and she'd be glad if you'd go down to her immediately, Miss Helen."

"Aunt Maria!" said Helen, in an aghast voice. "Aunt Maria absolutely come—and father away! Nursie, I must fly down—you will understand about those flannels. Oh! I am sorry Aunt Maria has come. What will Polly say?"

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Helen felt a curious sinking at her heart as she descended the stairs; but she was a very polite and well-mannered girl, and when she went up to Mrs. Cameron she said some pretty words of welcome, which were really not overdone. Mrs. Cameron was a short, stout person; she always wore black, and her black was always rusty. She stood now in the middle of the drawing-room, holding Scorpion in her arms, with her bonnet-strings untied, and her full, round face somewhat flushed.

"No, my dear, you are not particularly glad to see me," she said, in answer to Helen's gentle dignified greeting. "I don't expect it, child, nor look for it; and you need not waste untruths upon me, for I always see through them. You are not glad to see me, and I am not surprised, for I assure you I intend to make myself disagreeable. Helen, your father is a perfect fool. Now, my dear, you need not fire up; you would say so if you were as old as me, and had received as idiotic an epistle from him."

"But I am not as old as you, and he is my father," said Helen, steadily. "I don't tell untruths, Aunt Maria, and I am glad to see you because—because you were fond of mother. Will you come into the dining-room now, and let me get you some tea?"

Helen's lips were quivering, and her dark blue eyes were slightly lowered, so that Aunt Maria should not notice the tears that filled them. The old lady, however, had noticed these signs of emotion, and brave words always pleased her.

"You aren't a patch on your mother, child," she said. "But you remind me of her. Yes, take me to my room first, and then get me a good substantial meal, for I can tell you I am starving."

Helen rang the bell.

"Alice," she said to the parlor maid, who speedily answered the summons, "will you get the rose room ready as quickly as possible? My aunt, Mrs. Cameron, will stay here for the night. And please lay supper in the dining-room. Tell Mrs. Power—oh, I forgot—see and get as nice a supper as you can, Alice. You had better speak to Miss Polly."

"Yes, Miss," said Alice. Then she paused, hesitated, colored slightly, and said, in a dubious manner, "Is it the rose room you mean, Miss Helen? That's the room Miss Polly is getting ready for Miss Virginy, and there ain't no curtains to the window nor to the bed at present."

"Then I won't sleep in that bed," said Mrs. Cameron. "I must have a four-poster with curtains all round, and plenty of dark drapery to the windows. My eyes are weak, and I don't intend to have them injured with the cold morning light off the moor."

"Oh, Aunt Maria, the mornings aren't very light now," answered Helen. "They are——"

But Mrs. Cameron interrupted her.

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"Don't talk nonsense, child. In a decent place like Bath I own the day may break gradually, but I expect everything contrary to civilized existence here. The very thought of those awful commons makes me shiver. Now, have you, or have you not, a four-poster, in which I can sleep?"

Helen smothered a slight sigh. She turned once again to Alice.

"Will you get my father's room ready for Mrs. Cameron," she said, "and then see about supper as quickly as possible? Father is away for a few days," she added, turning to the good lady. "Please will you come up to Polly's and my room now to take off your things?"

"And where is Polly?" said Mrs. Cameron. "And why doesn't she come to speak to her aunt? There's Kate, too, she must be a well-grown girl by now, and scarcely gone to bed yet. The rest of the family are, I presume, asleep; that is, if there's a grain of sense left in the household."

"Yes, most of the children are in bed," replied Helen. "You will see Polly and Katie, and perhaps the twins, later on, but first of all I want to make you comfortable. You must be very tired; you have had a long journey."

"I'm beat out, child, and that's the truth. Here, I'll lay Scorpion down in the middle of your bed; he has been a great worry to me all day, and he wants his sleep. He likes to get between the sheets, so if you don't mind I'll open the bed and let him slip down."

"If you want me to be truthful, I do mind very much," said Helen. "Oh, you are putting him into Polly's bed. Well, I suppose he must stay there for the present."

Mrs. Cameron was never considered an unamiable person; she was well spoken of by her friends and relations, for she was rich, and gave away a great deal of money to various charities and benevolent institutions. But if ever any one expected her to depart in the smallest particular from her own way they were vastly mistaken. Whatever her goal, whatever her faintest desire, she

rode roughshod over all prejudices until she obtained it. Therefore it was that, notwithstanding poor Helen's protest, Scorpion curled down comfortably between Polly's sheets, and Mrs. Cameron, well pleased at having won her point, went down to supper.

Alas, and alas! the supper provided for the good lady was severe in its simplicity. Alice, blushing and uncomfortable, called Helen out of the room, and then informed her that neither Polly nor Maggie could be found, and that there was literally nothing, or next to nothing, in the larder.

"But that can't be the case," said Helen, "for there was a large piece of cold roast beef brought up for my tea, and a great plate of hot cakes, and an uncut plum cake. Surely, Alice, you must be mistaken."

"No, Miss, there's nothing downstairs. Not a joint, nor a cake, nor nothing. If it wasn't that I found some new-laid eggs in the hen-house, and cut some slices from the uncooked ham, I couldn't have had nothing at all for supper—and—and——"

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"Tut, tut!" suddenly exclaimed a voice in the dining-room. "What's all this whispering about? It is very rude of little girls to whisper outside doors, and not to attend to their aunts when they come a long way to see them. If you don't come in at once, Miss Helen, and give me my tea, I shall help myself."

"Find Polly, then, as quick as you can, Alice," exclaimed poor, perplexed Helen, "and tell her that Aunt Maria Cameron has come and is going to stay."

Alice went away, and Helen, returning to the dining-room, poured out tea, and cut bread-and-butter, and saw her aunt demolishing with appetite three new-laid eggs, and two generous slices of fried ham.

"Your meal was plain; but I am satisfied with it," she said in conclusion. "I am glad you live frugally, Helen; waste is always sinful, and in your case peculiarly so. You don't mind my telling you, my dear, that I think it is a sad extravagance wearing crape every day, but of course you don't know any better. You are nothing in the world but an overgrown child. Now that I have come, my dear, I shall put this and many other matters to rights. Tell me, Helen, how long does your father intend to be away?"

"Until Monday, I think, Aunt Maria."

"Very well; then you and I will begin our reforms to-morrow. I'll take you round with me, and we'll look into everything. Your father won't know the house when he comes back. I've got a treasure of a woman in my eye for him—a Miss Grinsted. She is fifty, and a strict disciplinarian. She will soon manage matters, and put this house into something like order. I had a great mind to bring her with me; but I can send for her. She can be here by Monday or Tuesday. I told her to be in readiness, and to have her boxes packed. My dear, I wish you would not poke out your chin so much. How old are you? Oh, sixteen—a very gawky age. Now then, that I am refreshed and rested, I think that we'll just go round the house."

"Will you not wait until to-morrow, Aunt Maria? The children are all asleep and in bed now, and Nurse never likes them to be disturbed."

"My dear, Nurse's likes or dislikes are not of the smallest importance to me. I wish to see the children asleep, so if you will have the goodness to light a candle, Helen, and lead the way, I will follow."

Helen, again stifling a sigh, obeyed. She felt full of trepidation and uneasiness. Why did not Polly come in? Why had all the supper disappeared? Where were Katie and the twins? How strangely silent the house was.

"I will see the baby first," said Mrs. Cameron. "In bed? Well, no matter, I wish to look at the little dear. Ah, this is the nursery; a nice, cheerful room, but too much light in it, and no curtains to the windows. Very bad for the dear baby's eyes. How do you do, Nurse? I have come to see baby. I am her aunt, her dear mother's sister, Maria Cameron."

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Nurse curtseyed.

"Baby is asleep, ma'am," she said. "I have just settled her in her little crib for the night. She's a good, healthy child, and no trouble to any one. Yes, ma'am, she has a look of her dear blessed ma. I'll just hold down the sheet, and you'll see. Please, ma'am, don't hold the light full in the babe's eyes, you'll wake her."

"My good woman, I handled babies before you did. I had this child's mother in my arms when she was a baby. Yes, the infant is well enough; you're mistaken in there being any likeness to your late mistress in her. She seems a plain child, but healthy. If you don't watch her sight, she may get delicate eyes, however. I should recommend curtains being put up immediately to these windows, and you're only using night-lights when she sleeps. It is not *I* that am likely to injure the baby with too much light. Good evening, Nurse."

Nurse muttered something, her brow growing black.

"Now, Helen," continued Mrs. Cameron, "we will visit the other children. This is the boys' room, I presume. I am fond of boys. What are your brothers' names, my dear?"

"We call them Bob and Bunny."

"Utterly ridiculous! I ask for their baptismal names, not for anything so silly. Ah! oh—I thought you said they were in bed: these beds are empty."

So they were; tossed about, no doubt, but with no occupants, and the bedclothes no longer warm; so that it could not have been quite lately that the truants had departed from their nightly places of rest. On further investigation, Firefly's bed was also found in a sad state of *déshabillé*, and it was clearly proved, on visiting their apartments, that the twins and Katie had not gone to bed at all.

"Then, my dear, where are the family?" said Mrs. Cameron. "You and that little babe are the only ones I have yet seen. Where is Mary? where is Katharine? Where are your brothers? My dear Helen, this is awful; your brothers and sisters are evidently playing midnight pranks. Oh, there is not a doubt of it, you need not tell me. What a good thing it is that I came! Oh! my poor dear sister; what a state her orphans have been reduced to! There is nothing whatever for it but to telegraph for Miss Grinsted in the morning."

"But, my dear auntie, I am sure, oh! I am sure you are mistaken," began poor Helen. "The children are always very well behaved—they are, indeed they are. They don't play pranks, Aunt Maria."

"Allow me to use my own eyesight, Helen. The beds are empty—not a child is to be found. Come, we must search the house!"

Helen never to her dying day forgot that eerie journey through the deserted house, accompanied by Aunt Maria. She never forgot the sickening fear which oppressed her, and the certainty which came over her that Polly, poor, excitable Polly, was up to some mischief.

Sleepy Hollow was a large and rambling old place, and it was some time before the searchers reached the neighborhood of the festive garret. When they did, however, there was no longer any room for doubt. Wild laughter, and high-pitched voices singing many favorite nursery airs and school-room songs made noise enough to reach the ears even of the deafest. "John Peel" was having a frantic chorus as Helen and her aunt ascended the step-ladder.

"For the sound of his horn brought me from my bed,
And the cry of his hounds which he ofttimes led,
Peel's 'View Hulloo!' would awaken the dead,
Or the fox from his lair in the morning."

"Very nice, indeed," said Aunt Maria, as she burst open the garret door. "Very nice and respectful to the memory of your dear mother! I am glad, children, that I have come to create decent order in this establishment. I am your aunt, Maria Cameron."

CHAPTER XV.

PUNISHMENT.

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There are occasions when people who are accused wrongfully of a fault will take it patiently: there was scarcely ever known to be a time when wrongdoers did so.

The children in the garret were having a wild time of mirth and excitement. There was no time for any one to think, no time for any one to do aught but enjoy. The lateness of the hour, the stealthy gathering, the excellent supper, and, finally, the gay songs, had roused the young spirits to the highest pitch. Polly was the life of everything; Maggie, her devoted satellite, had a face which almost blazed with excitement.

Her small eyes twinkled like stars, her broad mouth never ceased to show a double row of snowy teeth. She revolved round her brothers and sisters, whispering in their ears, violently nudging them, and piling on the agony in the shape of cups of richly creamed and sugared tea, of thick slices of bread-and-butter and jam, and plum cake, topped with bumpers of foaming ginger-beer.

Repletion had reached such a pass in the case of the Ricketts brother and sister that they could scarcely move; the Jones brothers were also becoming slightly heavy-eyed; but the Maybright children fluttered about here and there like gay butterflies, and were on the point of getting up a dance when Aunt Maria and the frightened Helen burst upon the scene.

It required a much less acute glance than Aunt Maria's to point out Polly as the ringleader. She headed the group of mirth-seekers, every lip resounded with her name, all the other pairs of young eyes turned to her. When the garret door was flung open, and Aunt Maria in no measured tones announced herself, the children flew like frightened chickens to hide under Polly's wing. The Rickettses and Joneses scrambled to their feet, and ran to find shelter as close as possible to headquarters. Thus, when Polly at last found her voice, and turned round to speak to Aunt Maria, she looked like the flushed and triumphant leader of a little victorious garrison. She was quite carried away by the excitement of the whole thing, and defiance spoke both in her eyes and

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manner.

"How do you do, Aunt Maria?" she said. "We did not expect you. We were having supper, and have just finished. I would ask you to have some with us, only I am afraid there is not a clean plate left. Is there, Maggie?"

Maggie answered with a high and nervous giggle, "Oh, lor', Miss Polly! that there ain't; and there's nothing but broken victuals either on the table by now. We was all hungry, you know, Miss Polly."

"So perhaps," continued Polly, "you would go downstairs again, Aunt Maria. Helen, will you take Aunt Maria to the drawing-room? I will come as soon as I see the supper things put away. Helen, why do you look at me like that? What's the matter?"

"Oh, Polly!" said Helen, in her most reproachful tones.

She was turning away, but Aunt Maria caught her rather roughly by the shoulder.

"Do *all* this numerous party belong to the family?" she said. "I see here present thirteen children. I never knew before that my sister had such an enormous family."

Helen felt in far too great a state of collapse to make any reply; but Polly's saucy, glib tones were again heard.

"These are our visitors, Aunt Maria. Allow me to introduce them. Master and Miss Ricketts, Masters Tom, Jim, and Peter Jones. This is Maggie, my satellite, and devoted friend, and—and —"

But Aunt Maria's patience had reached its tether. She was a stout, heavily made woman, and when she walked into the center of Polly's garrison she quickly dispersed it.

"March!" she said, laying her hand heavily on the girl's shoulder. "To your room this instant. Come, I shall see you there, and lock you in. You are a very bad, wicked, heartless girl, and I am bitterly ashamed of you. To your room this minute. While your father is away you are under my control, and I *insist* on being obeyed."

"Oh, lor'!" gasped Maggie. "Run," she whispered to her brother and sister. "Make for the door, quick. Oh, ain't it awful! Oh, poor dear Miss Polly! Why, that dreadful old lady will almost kill her."

But no, Polly was still equal to the emergency.

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"You need not hold me, Aunt Maria," she said, in a quiet voice, "I can go without that. Good night, children. I am sorry our jolly time has had such an unpleasant ending. Now then, I'll go with you, Aunt Maria."

"In front, then," said Aunt Maria. "No loitering behind. Straight to your room."

Polly walked down the dusty ladder obediently enough; Aunt Maria, scarlet in the face, stumped and waddled after her; Helen, very pale, and feeling half terrified, brought up the rear. All went well, and the truant exhibited no signs of rebellion until they reached the wide landing which led in one direction to the girl's bedroom, in the other to the staircase.

Here Polly turned at bay.

"I'm not going to my room at present," she said. "If I've been naughty, father can punish me when he comes home. You can tell anything you like to father when he comes back on Monday. But I'm not going to obey you. You have no authority over me, and I'm not responsible to you. Father can punish me as much as he likes when you have told him. I'm going downstairs, now; it's too early for bed. I've not an idea of obeying you."

"We will see to that," said Aunt Maria. "You are quite the naughtiest child I ever came across. Now then, Miss, if you don't go patiently, and on your own feet, you shall be conveyed to your room in my arms. I am quite strong enough, so you can choose."

Polly's eyes flashed.

"If you put it in that way, I don't want to fuss," she said. "I'll go there for the present, but you can't keep me there, and you needn't try."

Aunt Maria and Polly disappeared round the corner, and poor Helen stood leaning against the oak balustrade, silently crying. In three or four minutes Aunt Maria returned, her face still red, and the key of the bedroom in her pocket.

"Now, Helen, what is the matter? Crying? Well, no wonder. Of course, you are ashamed of your sister. I never met such a naughty, impertinent girl. Can it be possible that Helen should have such a child? She must take entirely after her father. Now, Helen, stop crying, tears are most irritating to me, and do no good to any one. I am glad I arrived at this emergency. Matters have indeed come to a pretty crisis. In your father's absence, I distinctly declare that I take the rule of my poor sister's orphans, and I shall myself mete out the punishment for the glaring act of rebellion that I have just witnessed. Polly remains in her room, and has a bread and water diet until Monday. The other children have bread and water for breakfast in the morning, and go to bed two hours before their usual time to-morrow. The kitchenmaid I shall dismiss in the morning,

giving her a month's wages in lieu of notice. Now, Helen, come downstairs. Oh, there is just one thing more. You must find some other room to sleep in to-night. I forbid you to go near your sister. In fact, I shall not give you the key. You may share my bed, if you like."

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"I cannot do that, Aunt Maria," said Helen. "I respect you, and will obey you as far as I can until father returns, and tells us what we really ought to do. But I cannot stay away from Polly to-night for any one. I know she has been very naughty. I am as shocked as you can be with all that has happened, but I know too, Aunt Maria, that harsh treatment will ruin Polly; she won't stand it, she never would, and mother never tried it with her. She is different from the rest of us, Aunt Maria; she is wilder, and fiercer, and freer; but mother often said, oh, often and often, that no one might be nobler than Polly, if only she was guided right. I know she is troublesome, I know she was impertinent to you, and I know well she did very wrong, but she is only fourteen, and she has high spirits. You can't bend, nor drive Polly, Aunt Maria, but gentleness and love can always lead her. I *must* sleep in my own bed to-night, Aunt Maria. Oh, don't refuse me—please give me up the key."

"You are a queer girl," said Aunt Maria. "But I believe you are the best of them, and you certainly remind me of your mother when you speak in that earnest fashion. Here, take the key, then, but be sure you lock the door when you go in, and when you come out again in the morning. I trust to you that that little wild, impertinent sister of yours doesn't escape—now, remember."

"While I am there she will not," answered Helen. "Thank you, auntie. You look very tired yourself, won't you go to bed now?"

"I will, child. I'm fairly beat out. Such a scene is enough to disturb the strongest nerves. Only what about the other children? Are they still carousing in that wicked way in the garret?"

"No. I am sure they have gone to bed, thoroughly ashamed of themselves. But I will go and see to them."

"One thing more, child. Before I go to bed I should like to fill in a telegraph form to Miss Grinsted. If she gets it the first thing in the morning she can reach here to-morrow night. Well, Helen, again objecting; you evidently mean to cross me in everything; now what is the matter? Why has your face such a piteous look upon it?"

"Only this, Aunt Maria. Until father returns I am quite willing to obey you, and I will do my best to make the others good and obedient. But I do think he would be vexed at your getting Miss Grinsted until you have spoken to him. Won't you wait until Monday before you telegraph for her?"

"I'll sleep on it, anyhow," replied Mrs. Cameron. "Good night, child. You remind me very much of your mother—not in appearance, but in the curious way you come round a person, and insist upon having everything done exactly as you like. Now, my dear, good night. I consider you all the most demoralized household, but I won't be here long before matters are on a very different footing."

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The bedroom door really closed upon Aunt Maria, and Helen drew a long breath.

Oh, for Monday to arrive! Oh, for any light to guide the perplexed child in this crisis! But she had no time to think now. She flew to the garret, to find only the wreck of the feast and one or two candles flickering in their sockets. She put the candles out, and went next to the children's bedrooms. Bob and Bunny, with flushed faces, were lying once more in their cribs, fast asleep. They were dreaming and tossing about, and Nurse stood over them with a perplexed and grave face.

"This means nightmare, and physic in the morning," said the worthy woman. "Now, don't you fret and worry your dear head, Miss Helen, pet. Oh, yes, I know all about it, and it *was* a naughty thing to do, only children will be children. Your aunt needn't expect that her old crabbed head and ways will fit on young shoulders. You might go to Miss Firefly, though, for a minute, Miss Helen, for she's crying fit to break her heart."

Helen went off at once. Firefly was a very excitable and delicate child. She found the little creature with her head buried under the clothes, her whole form shaken with sobs.

"Lucy, darling," said Helen.

The seldom-used name aroused the weeping child; she raised her head, and flung two thin arms so tightly round Helen's neck that she felt half strangled.

"Oh, it's so awful, Nell; what will she do to poor Polly! Oh, poor Polly! Will she half kill her, Nell?"

"No, Fly—how silly of you to take such an idea into your head. Fly, dear, stop crying at once—you know you have all been naughty, and Polly has hurt Aunt Maria, and hurt me, too. You none of you knew Aunt Maria was coming, but I did not think you would play such a trick on me, and when father was away, too."

"It wasn't Polly's fault," said Firefly, eagerly. "She was tempted, and we were the tempters. We all came round her, and we did coax, so hard, and Polly gave way, 'cause she wanted to make us happy. She's a darling, the dearest darling in all the world, and if Aunt Maria hurts her and she dies, I—I—"

The little face worked in a paroxysm of grief and agony.

"Don't, Fly," said Helen. "You are much too tired and excited for me to talk calmly to you to-night. You have been naughty, darling, and so has Polly, and real naughtiness is always punished, always, somehow or another. But you need not be afraid that any real harm will happen to Polly. I am going to her in a moment or two, so you need not be in the least anxious. Now fold your hands, Fly, and say 'Our Father.' Say it slowly after me."

Firefly's sobs had become much less. She now lay quiet, her little chest still heaving, but with her eyes open, and fixed with a pathetic longing on Helen's face.

"You're nearly as good as mother," she said. "And I love you. But Polly always, always must come first. Nell, I'll say 'Our Father,' only not the part about forgiving, for I can't forgive Aunt Maria."

"My dear child, you are talking in a very silly way. Aunt Maria has done nothing but her duty, nothing to make you really angry with her. Now, Fly, it is late, and Polly wants me. Say those dear words, for mother's sake."

There was no child at Sleepy Hollow who would not have done anything for mother's sake, so the prayer was whispered with some fresh gasps of pain and contrition, and before Helen left the room, little Lucy's pretty dark eyes were closed, and her small, sallow, excitable face was tranquil.

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CHAPTER XVI.

DR. MAYBRIGHT *versus* SCORPION.

Dr. Maybright returned to his home on Monday evening in tolerably good spirits. He had gone up to London about a money matter which caused him some anxiety; his fears were, for the present at least, quite lulled to rest, and he had taken the opportunity of consulting one of the greatest oculists of the day with regard to his eyesight. The verdict was more hopeful than the good Doctor had dared to expect. With care, total blindness might be altogether avoided; at the worst it would not come for some time. A certain regimen was recommended, overwork was forbidden, all great anxiety was to be avoided, and then, and then—Well, at least the blessed light of day might be enjoyed by the Doctor for years to come.

"But you must not overwork," said the oculist, "and you must not worry. You must read very little, and you must avoid chills; for should a cold attack your eyes now the consequences would be serious."

On the whole this verdict was favorable, and the Doctor returned to Sleepy Hollow with a considerable weight lifted from his mind. As the train bore him homeward through the mellow, ripened country with the autumn colors glorifying the landscape, and a rich sunlight casting a glow over everything, his heart felt peaceful. Even with the better part of him gone away for ever, he could look forward with pleasure to the greeting of his children, and find much consolation in the love of their young hearts.

"After all, there never were girls quite like Helen and Polly," he said to himself. "They both in their own way take after their mother. Helen has got that calm which was always so refreshing and restful in her mother; and that little scapegrace of a Polly inherits a good deal of her brilliancy. I wonder how the little puss has managed the housekeeping. By the way, her week is up to-day, and we return to Nell's and Mrs. Power's steadier regime. Poor Poll, it was shabby of me to desert the family during the end of Indigestion week, but doubtless matters have gone fairly well. Nurse has all her medicine bottles replenished, so that in case of need she knew what to do. Poor Poll, she really made an excellent cake for my supper the last evening I was at home."

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The carriage rolled down the avenue, and the Doctor alighted on his own doorsteps; as he did so he looked round with a pleased and expectant smile on his face. It was six o'clock, and the evenings were drawing in quickly; the children might be indoors, but it seemed scarcely probable. The little Maybrights were not addicted to indoor life, and as a rule their gay, shrill voices might have been heard echoing all over the old place long after sunset. Not so this evening; the place was almost too still; there was no rush of eager steps in the hall, and no clamor of gay little voices without.

Dr. Maybright felt a slight chill; he could not account for it. The carriage turned and rolled away, and he quickly entered the house.

"Polly, where are you? Nell, Firefly, Bunny," he shouted.

Still there was no response, unless, indeed, the rustling of a silk dress in the drawing-room, a somewhat subdued and half-nervous cough, and the unpleasant yelping of a small dog could have been construed into one.

"Have my entire family emigrated? And is Sleepy Hollow let to strangers?" murmured the Doctor.

He turned in the direction of the rustle, the cough, and the bark, and found himself suddenly in the voluminous embrace of his sister-in-law, Mrs. Cameron.

"My dear Andrew, I am pleased to see you. You have been in the deep waters of affliction, and if in my power I would have come to you sooner. I had rheumatism and a natural antipathy to solitude. Still I made the effort, although a damper or more lonely spot would be hard to find. I don't wonder at my poor sister's demise. I got your letter, Andrew, and it was really in reply to it that I am here. Down, Scorpion; the dog will be all right in a moment or two, my dear brother, he is only smelling your trousers."

"He has a very marked way of doing so," responded the Doctor, "as I distinctly feel his teeth. Allow me, Maria, to put this little animal outside the window—a dog's bite given even in play is not the most desirable acquisition. Well, Maria, your visit astonishes me very much. Welcome to Sleepy Hollow. Did you arrive to-day? How did you find the children?"

"I came here on Friday evening, Andrew. The children are as well as such poor neglected lambs could be expected to be."

Dr. Maybright raised his eyebrows very slightly.

"I was not aware they were neglected," he said. "I am sorry they strike you so. I also have a little natural antipathy to hearing children compared to sheep. But where are they? I have been away for four days, and am in the house five minutes, and not the voice of a child do I hear? Where is Helen—where is my pretty Poll? Don't they know that their father has arrived?"

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"I cannot tell you, Andrew. I have been alone myself for the last two or three hours, but I ordered your tea to be got ready. May I give you some? Shall we come to the dining room at once? Your family were quite well three hours ago, so perhaps you and I may have a quiet meal together before we trouble about them any further. I think I may claim this little indulgence, as only properly respectful to your wife's sister, Andrew."

"Yes, Maria, I will have tea with you," said the Doctor. The pleased, bright look of anticipation had altogether now left his face; it was careworn, the brow slightly puckered, and many lines of care and age showed round the lips.

"I will just go upstairs and wash my hands," said Dr. Maybright. "Then I will join you in the dining-room."

He ran up the low stairs to his own room; it was not only full of Aunt Maria's possessions, but was guarded by the faithful Scorpion, who had flown there in disgust, and now again attacked the Doctor's legs.

"There is a limit," he murmured, "and I reach it when I am bitten by this toy terrier."

He lifted Scorpion by his neck, and administered one or two short slaps, which sent the pampered little animal yelping under the bed; then he proceeded down the passage in search of some other room where he might take shelter.

Alice met him; her eyes glowed, and the color in her face deepened.

"We are all so glad you are back, sir," she said, with an affectionate tone in her voice. "And Miss Helen has got the room over the porch ready, if you'd do with it for a night or two, sir. I've took hot water there, sir, for I saw the carriage coming up the drive."

"Thank you, Alice; the porch room will do nicely. By the way, can you tell me where all the children are?"

But Alice had disappeared, almost flown down the passage, and the Doctor had an uncomfortable half suspicion that he heard her sob as she went.

Dr. Maybright, however, was not a fanciful person—the children, with the exception of baby, were all probably out. It was certainly rather contrary to their usual custom to be away when his return was expected, still, he argued, consistency in children was the last thing to be expected. He went downstairs, therefore, with an excellent appetite for whatever meal Mrs. Cameron might have provided for him, and once more in tolerably good spirits.

There are some people who habitually, and from a strong sense of duty, live on the shady side of life. Metaphorically speaking, the sunshine may almost touch the very path on which they are treading, but they shrink from and avoid it, having a strong preference for the shade, but considering themselves martyrs while they live in it. Mrs. Cameron was one of these people. The circumstances of her life had elected plenty of sunshine for her; she had a devoted and excellent husband, an abundant income, and admirable health. It is true she had no children, and it is also true that she had brought herself by careful cultivation to a state of chronic ill-temper. Every one now accepted the fact that Mrs. Cameron neither wished to be happy, nor was happy; and when the Doctor sat down to tea, and found himself facing her, it was with very somber and disapproving eyes that she regarded him.

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"Well, Andrew, I must say you look remarkably well. Dear, dear, there is no constancy in this world, that is, amongst the male sex."

Here she handed him a cup of tea, and sighed lugubriously. The Doctor accepted the tea with a slight frown; he was a peaceable man, but as he said, when chastising Scorpion, "there are limits."

"If you have no objection, Maria," he said, curtly, "we will leave the subject of my personal appearance and the moral question which you have brought forward out of our conversation."

Then his voice and manner changed; he put on a company smile, and continued, without any pause, "How is your husband? Is he as great an antiquary as ever? And do you both continue to like living in Bath?"

Mrs. Cameron was a strong and determined woman, but she was no match for the Doctor when he chose to have his own way. For the remainder of the meal conversation was languid, and decidedly commonplace; once only it brightened into animation.

"I wonder where Scorpion can be?" said the good lady; "I want to give him his cream."

"I fear he is under punishment," said the Doctor. "If I judge of him aright, Scorpion is something of a coward, and is not likely to come into the same room where I am for some time."

"What do you mean? Surely you have not been cruel to him?"

"Cruel to be kind. Once again he attempted to eat my legs, and I was obliged to administer one or two sharp slaps—nothing to hurt; you will find him under your bed. And now I really must go to look for my family."

Dr. Maybright left the room, and Mrs. Cameron sat still, scarlet with annoyance and indignation.

"How could Helen have married such a man?" she said to herself. "I never can get on with him—never. How cowardly it was of him to hurt the little dog. If it was not for the memory of poor dear Helen I should leave here by the first train in the morning; but as it is, I will not stir until I have established Miss Grinsted over this poor, misguided household. Ah, well! duty is ever hard, but those who know Maria Cameron are well acquainted with the fact that she never shirked it. Yes, I will stay; it will be very unpleasant, but I must go through it. What very abrupt manners the Doctor has! I was just preparing to tell him all about that wicked Polly when he jumped up and left the room. Now, of course, he will get a wrong impression of the whole thing, for the other children all take her part. Very bad manners to jump up from the tea table like that. And where *is* Helen?—where are they all? Now that I come to think of it, I have seen nothing of any one of them since the early dinner. Well, well, if it were not for poor Helen I should wash my hands of the whole concern. But whoever suffers, dear little Scorpion must have his cream."

Accordingly Mrs. Cameron slowly ascended the stairs, armed with a saucer and a little jug, and Scorpion forgot the indignities to which he had been subjected as he lapped up his dainty meal.

Meanwhile, the Doctor having explored the morning room and the schoolrooms, having peeped into the conservatory, and even peered with his rather failing sight into the darkness outside, took two or three strides upstairs, and found himself in the presence of Nurse and baby.

"Well, Pearl," he said, taking the little pure white baby into his arms, looking into its wee face earnestly, and then giving it a kiss, which was sad, and yet partook of something of the nature of a blessing.

"Baby goes on well, Nurse," he said, returning the little creature to the kind woman's arms. Then he looked into her face, and his own expression changed.

"What is the matter?" he said, abruptly. "You have been crying. Is anything wrong? Where have all the children vanished to?"

"You have had your tea, sir?" said Nurse, her words coming out in jerks, and accompanied by fresh sobs. "You have had your tea, and is partial rested, I hope, so it's but right you should know. The entire family, sir, every blessed one of them, with the exception of the babe, has took upon themselves to run away."

CHAPTER XVII.

WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

Nurse's news astonished the Doctor very much. He was not a man, however, to show all he felt. He saw that Nurse was on the verge of hysterics, and he knew that if he did not take this startling and unpleasant piece of information in the most matter-of-fact way, he would get nothing out of her.

"I hope matters are not as bad as you fear," he said. "Sit down in this chair, and tell me what has occurred. Don't hurry yourself; a few moments more or less don't signify. Tell your tale quietly, in

your own way.”

Thus administered, Nurse gasped once or twice, looked up at the Doctor with eyes which plainly declared “there never was your equal for blessedness and goodness under the sun,” and commenced her story in the long-winded manner of her class.

The Doctor heard a garbled account of the supper in the attic, of the arrival of Mrs. Cameron, of the prompt measures which that good lady took to crush Polly, of Firefly’s grief, of the state of confusion into which the old house was thrown. She then went on to tell him further that Polly, having refused to submit or repent in any way, Mrs. Cameron had insisted on her remaining in her own room, and had at last, notwithstanding all Helen’s entreaties, forbidden her to go near her sister. The housekeeping keys were taken away from Polly, and Mrs. Cameron had further taken upon herself to dismiss Maggie. She had sent a telegram to Mrs. Power, who had returned in triumph to Sleepy Hollow on Saturday night.

“Miserable is no word for what this household has been,” said Nurse. “There was Miss Polly—naughty she may have been, dear lamb, but vicious she ain’t—there was Miss Polly shut up in her room, and nobody allowed to go near her; and Mrs. Cameron poking her nose into this corner and into that, and ordering *me* about what I was to do with the babe; and poor Miss Helen following her about, for all the world like a ghost herself, so still and quiet and pitiful looking, but like a dear angel in her efforts to keep the peace; and there was Alice giving warning, and fit to fly out of the house with rage, and Mrs. Power coming back, and lording it over us all, more than is proper for a cook to do. Oh, sir, we has been unhappy! and for the first time we really knew what we had lost in our blessed mistress, and for the first time the children, poor darlings, found out what it was to be really motherless. The meals she’d give ‘em, and the way she’d order them—oh, dear! oh, dear! it makes me shiver to think of it!”

“Yes, Nurse,” interrupted the Doctor. “It was unfortunate Mrs. Cameron arriving when I was absent. I have come back now, however, and all the troubles you have just mentioned are, of course, at an end. Still you have not explained the extraordinary statement you made to me when I came into the room. Why is it that the children have run away?”

“I’m a-coming to that, sir; that’s, so to speak, the crisis—and all brought about by Mrs. Cameron. I said that Miss Polly was kept in her room, and after the first day no one allowed to go near her. Mrs. Cameron herself would take her up her meals, and take the tray away again, and very little the poor dear would eat, for I often saw what come out. It would go to your heart, sir, that it would, for a healthier appetite than Miss Polly’s there ain’t in the family. Well, sir, Miss Helen had a letter from you this morning, saying as how you’d be back by six o’clock, and after dinner she went up to Miss Polly’s door, and I heard her, for I was walking with baby up and down the passage. It was beautiful to hear the loving way Miss Helen spoke, Doctor; she was kneeling down and singing her words through the keyhole. ‘Father’ll be home to-night, Polly,’ she said—‘keep up heart, Poll dear—father’ll be home to-night, and he’ll make everything happy again.’ Nothing could have been more tender than Miss Helen’s voice, it would have moved anybody. But there was never a sound nor an answer from inside the room, and just then Miss Firefly and Master Bunny came rushing up the stairs as if they were half mad. ‘O Nell, come, come quick!’ they said, ‘there’s the step-ladder outside Poll’s window, and a bit of rope and two towels fastened together hanging to the sill, and the window is wide open!’ Miss Helen ran downstairs with a face like a sheet, and by and by Alice came up and told me the rest. Master Bunny got up on the stepladder, and by means of the rope and the bedroom towels managed to climb on to the window sill, and then he saw there wasn’t ever a Miss Polly at all in the room. Oh, poor dear! he might have broke his own neck searching for her, but—well, there’s a Providence over children, and no mistake. Miss Polly had run away, that was plain. When Miss Helen heard it, and knew that it was true, she turned to Alice with her face like a bit of chalk, and tears in her eyes, and, ‘Alice,’ she said, ‘I’m going to look for Polly. You can tell Nurse I’ll be back when I have found Polly.’ With that she walked down the path as fast as she could, and every one of the others followed her. Alice watched them getting over the little turnstile, and down by the broad meadow, then she came up and let me know. I blamed her for not coming sooner, but—what’s the matter, Doctor?”

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“I am going to find Polly and the others,” said Dr. Maybright. “It’s a pity no older person in the house followed them; but so many can scarcely come to harm. It is Polly I am anxious about—they cannot have discovered her, or they would be home before now.”

The Doctor left the nursery, ran down-stairs, put on his hat, and went out. As he did so, he heard the dubious, questioning kind of cough which Mrs. Cameron was so fond of making—this cough was accompanied by Scorpion’s angry snarling little bark. The Doctor prayed inwardly for patience as he hurried down the avenue in search of his family. He was absolutely at a loss where to seek them.

“The broad meadow only leads to the high-road,” he said to himself, “and the high-road has many twists and turns. Surely the children cannot have ventured on the moor; surely Polly cannot have been mad enough to try to hide herself there.”

It was a starlight night, and the Doctor walked quickly.

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“I don’t know where they are. I must simply let instinct guide me,” he said to himself; and after walking for three quarters of an hour instinct did direct him to where, seated on a little patch of green turf at one side of the king’s highway, were three solitary and disreputable-looking little

figures.

"Father!" came convulsively from three little parched throats; there was a volume in the cry, a tone of rapture, of longing, of pain, which was almost indescribable. "Father's come back again, it's all right now," sobbed Firefly, and immediately the boys and the little girl had cuddled up to him and were kissing him, each boy taking possession of a hand, and Firefly clasping her arms round his neck.

"I know all about it, children," explained the Doctor. "But tell me quickly, where are the others? where is Polly?"

"Oh, you darling father!" said Firefly, "you darling, you darling! let me kiss you once again. There, now I'm happy!"

"But tell me where the others are, dear child."

"Just a little way off. We did get so tired, and Helen said that Polly must have gone on the moor, and she said she must and would follow her."

"We were so tired," said Bunny.

"And there was a great nail running into my heel," explained Bob.

"So we sat down here, and tried to pretend we were gipsies," continued Firefly. "The moon was shining, and that was a little wee bit of comfort, but we didn't like it much. Father, it isn't much fun being a gipsy, is it?"

"No, dear; but go on. How long is it since you parted from the others?"

"Half an hour; but it's all right. Bunny, you can tell that part."

Bunny puffed himself out, and tried to speak in his most important manner.

"Nell gave me the dog-whistle," he said, "and I was to whistle it if it was real necessary, not by no means else. I didn't fancy that I was a gipsy. I thought perhaps I was the driver of a fly, and that when I blew my whistle Nell would be like another driver coming to me. That's what I thought," concluded Bunny. But as his metaphors were always extremely mixed and confusing, no one listened to him.

"You have a whistle?" said the Doctor. "Give it to me. This is a very dangerous thing that you have done, children. Now, let me see how far I can make the sound go. Oh, that thing! I can make a better whistle than that with my hand."

He did so, making the moor, on the borders of which they stood, resound with a long, shrill, powerful blast. Presently faint sounds came back in answer, and in about a quarter of an hour Helen and her three sisters, very tired and faint, and loitering in their steps, came slowly into view.

Oh, yes; they were all so glad to see father, but they had not seen Polly; no, not a trace nor sound could be discovered to lead to Polly's whereabouts.

"But she must not spend the night alone on the moor," said the Doctor. "No, that cannot be. Children, you must all go home directly. On your way past the lodge, Helen, desire Simpkins and George to come with lanterns to this place. They are to wait for me here, and when they whistle I will answer them. After they have waited here for half an hour, and I do not whistle back, they are to begin to search the moor on their own account. Now go home as fast as you can, my dears. I will return when I have found Polly, not before."

The moon was very brilliant that night, and Helen's wistful face, as she looked full at her father, caused him to bend suddenly and kiss her. "You are my brave child, Nell. Be the bravest of all by taking the others home now. Home, children; and to bed at once, remember. No visiting of the drawing-room for any of you to-night."

The Doctor smiled, and kissed his hand, and a very disconsolate little party turned in the direction of Sleepy Hollow.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WIFE OF MICAH JONES.

If ever there was a girl whose mind was in a confused and complex state, that girl was Polly Maybright. Suddenly into her life of sunshine and ease and petting, into her days of love and indulgence, came the cold shadow of would-be justice. Polly had done wrong, and a very stern judge, in the shape of Aunt Maria Cameron, was punishing her.

Polly had often been naughty in her life; she was an independent, quick-tempered child; she had

determination, and heaps of courage, but she was always supposed to want ballast. It was the fashion in the house to be a little more lenient to Polly's misdemeanors than to any one else's. When a very little child, Nurse had excused ungovernable fits of rage with the injudicious words, "Poor lamb, she can't help herself!" The sisters, older or younger, yielded to Polly, partly because of a certain fascination which she exercised over them, for she was extremely brilliant and quick of idea, and partly because they did not want her to get into what they called her tantrums. Father, too, made a pet of her, and perhaps slightly spoiled her, but during mother's lifetime all this did not greatly matter, for mother guided the imperious, impetuous, self-willed child, with the exquisite tact of love. During mother's lifetime, when Polly was naughty, she quickly became good again; now matters were very different.

Mrs. Cameron was a woman who, with excellent qualities, and she had many, had not a scrap of the "mother-feel" within her. There are women who never called a child their own who are full of it, but Mrs. Cameron was not one of these. Her rule with regard to the management of young people was simple and severe—she saw no difference between one child and another. "Spare the rod and spoil the child," applied equally in every case, so now, constituting herself Polly's rightful guardian in the absence of her father, she made up her mind on no account to spare the rod. Until Polly humbled herself to the very dust she should go unforgiven. Solitary confinement was a most safe and admirable method of correction. Therefore unrepentant Polly remained in her room.

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The effects, as far as the culprit was concerned, were not encouraging. In the first place she would not acknowledge Mrs. Cameron's right to interfere in her life; in the next harshness had a very hardening effect on her.

It was dull in Polly's room. The naughtiest child cannot cry all the time, nor sulk when left quite to herself, and although, whenever Mrs. Cameron appeared on the scene, the sulks and temper both returned in full force, Polly spent many long and miserable hours perfectly distracted with the longing to find something to do. The only books in the room were Helen's little Bible, a copy of "Robinson Crusoe," and the Dictionary. For obvious reasons Polly did not care to read the Bible at present. "Robinson Crusoe" she knew already by heart, but found it slightly amusing trying to make something of the sentences read backwards. The Dictionary was her final resource, and she managed to pass many tedious hours working straight through it page after page. She had got as far as M, and life was becoming insupportable, when about the middle of the day, on Monday, she was startled by a cautious and stealthy noise, and also by a shadow falling directly on her page. She looked up quickly; there was the round and radiant face of Maggie glued to the outside of the window, while her voice came in, cautious but piercing, "Open the window quick, Miss Polly, I'm a-falling down."

Polly flew to the rescue, and in a moment Maggie was standing in the room. In her delight at seeing a more genial face than Aunt Maria's, Polly flung her arms round Maggie and kissed her.

"How good of you to come!" she exclaimed. "And you must not go away again. Where will you hide when Aunt Maria comes to visit me? Under the bed, or in this cupboard?"

"Not in neither place," responded Maggie, who was still gasping and breathless, and whose brown winsey frock showed a disastrous tear from hem to waist.

"Not in neither place," she proceeded, "for I couldn't a-bear it any longer, and you ain't going to stay in this room no longer, Miss Polly; I nearly brained myself a-clinging on to the honeysuckle, and the ivy-roots, but here I be, and now we'll both go down the ladder and run away."

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"Run away—oh!" said Polly, clasping her hands, and a great flood of rose-color lighting up her face.

She ran to the window. The housemaid's step-ladder stood below, but Polly's window was two or three feet above.

"We'll manage with a bit of rope and the bedroom towels," said Maggie, eagerly. "It's nothing at all, getting down—it's what I did was the danger. Now, be quick, Miss Polly; let's get away while they're at dinner."

It did not take an instant for Polly to decide. Between the delights of roaming the country with Maggie, and the pleasure of continuing to read through the M's in Webster's Dictionary, there could be little choice. On the side of liberty and freedom alone could the balance fall. The bedroom towels were quickly tied on to the old rope, the rope secured firmly inside the window-sill, and the two girls let themselves swing lightly on to the step-ladder. They were both agile, and the descent did not terrify them in the least. When they reached the ground they took each other's hands, and looked into each other's faces.

"You might have thought of bringing a hat, Miss Polly."

"Oh, never mind, Maggie. You do look shabby; your frock is torn right open."

"Well, Miss, I got it a-coming to save you. Miss Polly, Mrs. Power's back in the kitchen. Hadn't we better run? We'll talk afterwards."

So they did, not meeting any one, for Mrs. Cameron and the children were all at dinner, and the servants were also in the house. They ran through the kitchen garden, vaulted over the sunken fence, and found themselves in the little sheltered green lane, where Polly had lain on her face

and hands and caught the thrushes on the July day when her mother died. She stood almost in the same spot now, but her mind was in too great a whirl, and her feelings too excited, to cast back any glances of memory just then.

"Well, Maggie," she said, pulling up short, "now, what are your plans? Where are we going to? Where are we to hide?"

"Eh?" said Maggie.

She had evidently come to the end of her resources, and the intelligent light suddenly left her face.

"I didn't think o' that," she said: "there's mother's."

"No, that wouldn't do," interrupted Polly. "Your mother has only two rooms. I couldn't hide long in her house; and besides, she is poor, I would not put myself on her for anything. I'll tell you what, Maggie, we'll go across Peg-Top Moor, and make straight for the old hut by the belt of fir-trees. You know it, we had a picnic there once, and I made up a story of hermits living in the hut. Well, you and I will be the hermits."

"But what are we to eat?" said Maggie, whose ideas were all practical, and her appetite capacious.

Polly's bright eyes, however, were dancing, and her whole face was radiant. The delight of being a real hermit, and living in a real hut, far surpassed any desire for food.

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"We'll eat berries from the trees," she said, "and we'll drink water from the spring. I know there's a spring of delicious water not far from the hut. Oh! come along, Maggie, do; this is delightful!"

An old pony, who went in the family by the stately name of Sultan, had been wont to help the children in their long rambles over the moor. They were never allowed to wander far alone, and had not made one expedition since their mother's death. It was really two years since Polly had been to the hut at the far end of Peg-Top Moor. This moor was particularly lonely, it was interspersed at intervals with thickets of rank undergrowth and belts of trees, and was much frequented on that account by gipsies and other lawless people. Polly, who went last over the moor, carried the greater part of the way on Sultan's friendly back, had very little idea how far the distance was. It was September now, but the sun shone on the heather and fern with great power, and as Polly had no hat on her head, having refused to take Maggie's from her; she was glad to take shelter under friendly trees whenever they came across her path.

At first the little girls walked very quickly, for they were afraid of being overtaken and brought back; but after a time their steps grew slow, their movement decidedly languid, and Maggie at least began to feel that berries from the trees and water from the spring, particularly when neither was to be found anywhere, was by no means a substantial or agreeable diet to dwell upon.

"I don't think I like being a hermit," she began. "I don't know nought what it means, but I fancy it must be very thinning and running down to the constitootion."

Polly looked at her, and burst out laughing.

"It is," she said, "that's what the life was meant for, to subdue the flesh in all possible ways; you'll get as thin as a whipping-post, Mag."

"I don't like it," retorted Maggie. "May-be we'd best be returning home, now, Miss Polly."

Polly's eyes flashed. She caught Maggie by the shoulder.

"You are a mean girl," she said. "You got me into this scrape, and now you mean to desert me. I was sitting quietly in my room, reading through the M's in Webster's Dictionary, and you came and asked me to run away; it was your doing, Maggie, you know that."

"Yes, miss! yes, Miss!"

Maggie began to sob. "But I never, never thought it meant berries and spring-water; no, that I didn't. Oh, I be so hungry!"

At this moment all angry recriminations were frozen on the lips of both little girls, for rising suddenly, almost as it seemed from the ground at their feet, appeared a gaunt woman of gigantic make.

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"May-be you'll be hungrier," she said in a menacing voice. "What business have you to go through Deadman's Copse without leave?"

Maggie was much too alarmed to make any reply, but Polly, after a moment or two of startled silence, came boldly to the rescue.

"Who are you?" she said. "Maggie and I know nothing of Deadman's Copse; this is a wood, and we are going through it; we have got business on the other side of Peg-Top-Moor."

"That's as it may be," replied the woman, "this wood belongs to me and to my sons, Nathaniel and Patrick, and to our dogs, Cinder and Flinder, and those what goes through Deadman's Copse

must pay toll to me, the wife of Micah Jones. My husband is dead, and he left the wood to me, and them as go through it must pay toll."

The woman's voice was very menacing; she was of enormous size, and going up to the little girls, attempted to place one of her brawny arms on Polly's shoulder. But Polly with all her faults possessed a great deal of courage; her eyes flashed, and she sprang aside from the woman's touch.

"You are talking nonsense," she said. "Father has over and over told me that the moor belongs to the Queen, so this little bit couldn't have been given to your husband, Micah Jones, and we are just as free to walk here as you are. Come on, Maggie, we'll be late for our business if we idle any longer."

But the woman with a loud and angry word detained her.

"Highty-tighty!" she said. "Here's spirit for you, and who may your respected papa be, my dear? He seems to be mighty wise. And the wife of Micah Jones would much like to know his name."

"You're a very rude unpleasant woman," said Polly. "Don't hold me, I won't be touched by you. My father is Dr. Maybright, of Sleepy Hollow, you must know his name quite well."

The wife of Micah Jones dropped a supercilious curtsy.

"Will you tell Dr. Maybright, my pretty little dear," she said, "that in these parts might is right, and that when the Queen wants Deadman's Copse, she can come and have a talk with me, and my two sons, and the dogs, Cinder and Flinder. But, there, what am I idling for with a chit like you? You and that other girl there have got to pay toll. You have both of you got to give me your clothes. There's no way out of it, so you needn't think to try words, nor blarney, nor nothing else with me, I have a sack dress each for you, and what you have on is mine. That's the toll, you will have to pay it. My hut is just beyond at the other side of the wood, my sons are away, but Cinder and Flinder will take care of you until I come back, at nine o'clock. Here, follow me, we're close to the hut. No words, or it will be the worse for you. On in front, the two of you, or you, little Miss," shaking her hand angrily at Polly, "will know what it means to bandy words with the wife of Micah Jones."

The woman's face became now very fierce and terrible, and even Polly was sufficiently impressed to walk quietly before her, clutching hold of poor terrified Maggie's hand.

The hut to which the woman took the little girls was the very hermit's hut to which their own steps had been bent. It was a very dirty place, consisting of one room, which was now filled with smoke from a fire made of broken faggots, fir-cones, and withered fern. Two ugly, lean-looking dogs guarded the entrance to the hut. When they saw the woman coming, they jumped up and began to bark savagely; poor Maggie began to scream, and Polly for the first time discovered that there could be a worse state of things than solitary confinement in her room, with Webster's Dictionary for company.

"Sit you there," said the woman, pushing the little girls into the hut. "I'll be back at nine o'clock. I'm off now on some business of my own. When I come back I'll take your clothes, and give you a sack each to wear. Cinder and Flinder will take care of you; they're very savage dogs, and can bite awful, but they won't touch you if you sit very quiet, and don't attempt to run away."

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CHAPTER XIX.

DISTRESSED HEROINES.

If ever poor little girls found themselves in a sad plight it was the two who now huddled close together in the hermit's hut. Even Polly was thoroughly frightened, and as to Maggie, nothing but the angry growls of Cinder restrained the violence of her sobs.

"Oh, ain't a hermit's life awful!" she whispered more than once to her companion. "Oh! Miss Polly, why did you speak of Peg-Top Moor, and the hermit's hut, and berries and water?"

"Don't be silly, Maggie," said Polly, "I did not mention the wife of Micah Jones, nor these dreadful dogs. This is a misfortune, and we must bear it as best we can. Have you none of the spirit of a heroine in you, Maggie; don't you know that in all the story-books, when the heroines run away, they come to dreadful grief? If we look at it in that light, and think of ourselves as distressed heroines, it will help us to bear up. Indeed," continued Polly, "if it wasn't for my having been naughty a few days ago, and perhaps father coming back to-night, I think I'd enjoy this—I would really. As it is——" Here the brave little voice broke off into a decided quaver. The night was falling, the stars were coming out in the sky, and Polly, standing in the door of the hut, with her arm thrown protectingly round Maggie's neck, found a great rush of loneliness come over her.

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During those weary days spent in her bed-room, repentance, even in the most transient guise,

had scarcely come near her. She was too much oppressed with a sense of injustice done to herself to be sorry about the feast in the attic. In short, all her time was spent in blaming Aunt Maria.

Now with the lonely feeling came a great soreness of heart, and an intense and painful longing for her mother. Those fits of longing which came to Polly now and then heralded in, as a rule, a tempest of grief. Wherever she was she would fling herself on the ground, and give way to most passionate weeping. Her eyes swam in tears now, she trembled slightly, but controlled herself. On Maggie's account it would never do for her to give way. The ugly dogs came up and sniffed at her hands, and smelt her dress. Maggie screamed when they approached her, but Polly patted their heads. She was not really afraid of them, neither was she greatly alarmed at the thought of the wife of Micah Jones. What oppressed her, and brought that feeling of tightness to her throat, and that smarting weight of tears to her eyes, were the great multitude of stars in the dark-blue heavens, and the infinite and grand solitude of the moors which lay around.

The night grew darker; poor Maggie, worn out, crouched down on the ground; Polly, who had now quite made friends with Cinder, sat by Maggie's side, and when the poor hungry little girl fell asleep, Polly let her rest her head in her lap. The dogs and the two children were all collected in the doorway of the hut, and now Polly could look more calmly up at the stars, and the tears rolled silently down her cheeks.

It was in this position that, at about a quarter to nine, Dr. Maybright found her. Some instinct seemed to lead him to Peg-Top Moor—a sudden recollection brought the hut to his memory, a ringing voice, and gay laugh came back to him. The laugh was Polly's, the words were hers. "Oh, if there could be a delightful thing, it would be to live as a hermit in the hut at the other side of Peg-Top Moor!"

"The child is there," he said to himself. And when this thought came to him he felt so sure that it was a true and guiding thought that he whistled for the men who were to help him in the search, and together they went to the hut.

Cinder and Flinder had got accustomed to Polly, whom they rather liked; Maggie they barely tolerated; but the firm steps of three strangers approaching the hut caused them to bristle up, to call all their canine ferocity to their aid, and to bark furiously.

But all their show of enmity mattered nothing in such a supreme moment as this to Polly. No dogs, however fierce, should keep her from the arms of her father. In an instant she was there, cuddling up close to him, while the men he had brought with him took care of Maggie, and beat off the angry dogs.

"Father, there never was any one as naughty as I have been!"

"My darling, you have found that out?"

"Yes, yes, yes! and you may punish me just whatever way you like best, only let me kiss you now. Punish me, but don't be angry."

"I'm going to take you home," said Doctor, who feared mischief from Polly's present state of strong excitement. "I expect you have gone through a fright and have had some punishment. The minute, too, we find out that we are really naughty, our punishment begins, as well as our forgiveness. I shall very likely punish you, child, but be satisfied, I forgive you freely. Now home, and to bed, and no talk of anything to-night, except a good supper, and a long restful sleep. Come, Polly, what's the matter? Do you object to be carried?"

"But not in your arms, father. I am so big and heavy, it will half kill you."

"You are tall, but not heavy, you are as light as a reed. Listen! I forbid you to walk a step. When I am tired there are two men to help me. Simpkins, will you and George give Maggie a hand, and keep close to us. Now, we had better all get home as fast as possible."

It was more than half-past ten that night before Polly and the Doctor returned to Sleepy Hollow. But what a journey home she had! how comforting were the arms that supported her, how restful was the shoulder, on which now and then in an ecstasy to love and repentance, she laid her tired head! The stars were no longer terrible, far-off, and lonely, but near and friendly, like the faces of well-known friends. The moor ceased to be a great, vast, awful solitude, it smelt of heather, and was alive with the innumerable sounds of happy living creatures—and best of all, mother herself seemed to come back out of the infinite, to comfort the heart of the sorrowful child.

CHAPTER XX.

LIMITS.

"And *now*, Maria, I want to know what is the meaning of all this," said the Doctor.

It was late that night, very late. Polly was in bed, and Helen lay in her little white bed also close to Polly's side, so close that the sisters could hold each other's hands. They lay asleep now, breathing peacefully, and the Doctor, being satisfied that no serious mischief had happened to any of his family, meant to have it out with his sister-in-law.

Mrs. Cameron was a very brave woman, or at least she considered herself so; it was perfectly natural that people should fear her, she did not object to a little wholesome awe on the parts of those who looked up to her and depended on her words of wisdom. To be afraid on her own part was certainly not her custom, and yet that evening, as she sat alone in the deserted old drawing-room, and listened to the wind as it rose fitfully and moaned through the belt of fir-trees that sheltered the lawn; as she sat there, pretending to knit, but listening all the time for footsteps which did not come, she did own to a feeling which she would not describe as fear, but which certainly kept her from going to bed, and made her feel somewhat uncomfortable.

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It was about eleven o'clock that night when Dr. Maybright entered the drawing-room. He was a tall man with a slight stoop, and his eyes looked somewhat short-sighted. Tonight, however, he walked in quickly, holding himself erect. His eyes, too, had lost their peculiar expression of nearness of vision, and Mrs. Cameron knew at once that she was in for a bad time.

"And now, Maria, I want to know what is the meaning of all this," he said, coming up close to her.

She was standing, having gathered up her knitting preparatory to retiring.

"I don't understand you, Andrew," she answered, in a somewhat complaining, but also slightly alarmed voice. "I think it is I who have to ask for an explanation. How is it that I have been left alone this entire evening? I had much to say to you—I came here on purpose, and yet you left me to myself all these hours."

"Sit down, Maria," said the Doctor, more gently. "I can give you as much time as you can desire now, and as you will be leaving in the morning it is as well that we should have our talk out to-night."

Mrs. Cameron's face became now really crimson with anger.

"You can say words like that to me?" she said—"your wife's sister."

"My dear wife's half-sister, and until now my very good friend," retorted the Doctor. "But, however well you have meant it, you have sown dissension and unhappiness in the midst of a number of motherless children, and for the present at least, for all parties, I must ask you, Maria, to return to Bath."

Mrs. Cameron sank now plump down into her chair. She was too deeply offended for a moment to speak. Then she said, shortly:

"I will certainly return, but from this moment I wash my hands of you all."

"I hope not," said the Doctor. "I trust another time you will come to me as my welcome and invited guest. You see, Maria"—here his eyes twinkled with that sly humor which characterized him—"it was a mistake—it always is a mistake to take the full reins of government in any house uninvited."

"But, Andrew, you were making such a fool of yourself. After that letter of yours I felt almost hopeless, so for poor Helen's sake I came, at *great* personal inconvenience. Your home is most dreary, the surroundings appalling in their solitude. No wonder Helen died! Andrew, I thought it but right to do my best for those poor children. I came, the house was in a state of riot, you have not an idea what Polly's conduct was. Disrespectful, insolent, impertinent. I consider her an almost wicked girl."

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"Stop," said the Doctor. "We are not going to discuss Polly. She behaved badly, I grant. But I think, Maria, when you locked her up in her room, and forbade Helen to go to her, and treated her without a spark of affection or a vestige of sympathy; when you kept up this line of conduct for four long days, you yourself in God's sight were not blameless. You at least forgot that you, too, were once fourteen, or perhaps you never were; no, I am sure you never were what that child is with all her faults—noble."

"That is enough, Andrew, we will, as you say, not discuss Polly further. I leave by the first train that can take me away in the morning. You are a very much mistaking and ill-judging man; you were never worthy to be Helen's husband, and I bitterly grieve that her children must be brought up by you. For Helen's sake alone, I must now give you one parting piece of advice, it is this: When Miss Grinsted comes, treat her with kindness and consideration. Keep Miss Grinsted in this house at all hazards, and there may be a chance for your family."

"Miss Grinsted!" said the Doctor. "Who, and what do you mean?"

"Andrew, when I introduce you to such a lady I heap coals of fire on your head. Miss Grinsted alone can bring order out of chaos, peace out of strife. In short, when she is established here, I shall feel at rest as far as my dear sister's memory is concerned."

"Miss Grinsted is not going to be established in this house," said the Doctor. "But who is she? I never heard of her before."

"She is the lady-housekeeper and governess whom I have selected for you. She arrives at mid-day

to-morrow."

"From where?"

"How queerly you look at me, Andrew. Nobody would suppose you were just delivered from a load of household care and confusion. Such a treasure, too, the best of disciplinarians. She is fifty, a little angular, but capital at breaking in. What is the matter, Andrew?"

"What is Miss Grinsted's address?"

"Well, well; really your manners are bearish. She is staying with an invalid sister at Exeter at present."

"Will you oblige me with the street and number of the house?"

"Certainly; but she can scarcely get here before mid-day now. Her trains are all arranged."

"The name of the street and number of the house, if you please, Maria."

"Vere Street, No. 30. But she can't be here before twelve or one to-morrow, Andrew."

"She is never to come here. I shall go into the village the first thing in the morning, and send her a telegram. She is never to come here. Maria, you made a mistake, you went too far. If you and I are to speak to each other in the future, don't let it occur again. Good-night; I will see that you are called in good time in the morning."

It was useless either to argue or to fight. Dr. Maybright had, as the children sometimes described it, a shut-up look on his face. No one was ever yet known to interfere seriously with the Doctor when he wore that expression, and Aunt Maria, with Scorpion under her arm, hobbled upstairs, tired, weary, and defeated.

"I wash my hands of him and his," she muttered; and the unhappy lady shed some bitter tears of wounded mortification and vanity as she laid her head on her pillow.

"I know I was severe with her," murmured the Doctor to himself, "but there are some women who must be put down with a firm hand. Yes, I can bear a great deal, but to have Maria Cameron punishing Polly, and establishing a housekeeper and governess of her own choosing in this family is beyond my patience. As I said before, there are limits."

CHAPTER XXI.

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THE HIGH MOUNTAINS.

Helen and Polly slept late on the following morning. They were both awakened simultaneously by Nurse, who, holding baby in her arms, came briskly into the room. Nurse was immediately followed by Alice, bearing a tray with an appetizing breakfast for both the little girls.

"The Doctor says you are neither of you to get up until you have had a good meal," said Nurse. "And, Miss Polly, he'd like to have a word with you, darling, in his study about eleven o'clock. Eh, dear, but it's blessed and comforting to have the dear man home again; the house feels like itself, and we may breathe now."

"And it's blessed and comforting to have one we wot of away again," retorted Alice. "The young ladies will be pleased, won't they, Nurse?"

"To be sure they will. You needn't look so startled, loveys, either of you. It's only your aunt and the dog what is well quit of the house. They're on their road to Bath now, and long may they stay there."

At this news Helen looked a little puzzled, and not very joyful, but Polly instantly sat up in bed and spoke in very bright tones.

"What a darling father is! I'm as hungry as possible. Give me my breakfast, please, Alice; and oh, Nurse, mightn't baby sit between us for a little in bed?"

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"You must support her back well with pillows," said Nurse. "And see as you don't spill any coffee on her white dress. Eh! then, isn't she the sweetest and prettiest lamb in all the world?"

The baby, whose little white face had not a tinge of color, and whose very large velvety brown eyes always wore a gentle, heavenly calm about them, smiled in a slow way. When she smiled she showed dimples, but she was a wonderfully grave baby, as though she knew something of the great loss which had accompanied her birth.

"She is lovely," said Polly. "It makes me feel good even to look at her."

"Then be good, for her sake, darling," said Nurse, suddenly stooping and kissing the bright,

vivacious girl, and then bestowing another and tenderer kiss on the motherless baby. "She's for all the world like Peace itself," said Nurse. "There ain't no sort of naughtiness or crossness in her."

"Oh, she makes me feel good!" said Polly, hugging the little creature fondly to her side.

Two hours later Polly stood with her father's arm round her neck: a slanting ray of sunlight was falling across the old faded carpet in the study, and mother's eyes smiled out of their picture at Polly from the wall.

"You have been punished enough," said the Doctor. "I have sent for you now just to say a word or two. You are a very young climber, Polly, but if this kind of thing is often repeated, you will never make any way."

"I don't understand you, father."

The Doctor patted Polly's curly head.

"Child," he said, "we have all of us to go up mountains, and if you choose a higher one, with peaks nearer to the sky than others, you have all the more need for the necessary helps for ascent."

"Father is always delightful when he is allegorical," Polly had once said.

Now she threw back her head, looked full into his dearly-loved face, clasped his hands tightly in both her own, and said with tears filling her eyes, "I am glad you are going to teach me through a kind of story, and I think I know what you mean by my trying to climb the highest mountain. I always did long to do whatever I did a little better than any one else."

"Exactly so, Polly; go on wishing that. Still try to climb the highest mountain, only take with you humility instead of self-confidence, and then, child, you will succeed, for you will be very glad to avail yourself of the necessary helps."

"The helps? What are they, father? I partly know what you mean, but I am not sure that I quite know."

"Oh, yes, you quite know. You have known ever since you knelt at your mother's knee, and whispered your prayers all the better to God because she was listening too. But I will explain myself by the commonest of illustrations. A shepherd wanted to rescue one of his flock from a most perilous situation. The straying sheep had come to a ledge of rock, from where it could not move either backwards or forwards. It had climbed up thousands of feet. How was the shepherd to get it? There was one way. His friends went by another road to the top of the mountain. From there they threw down ropes, which he bound firmly round him, and then they drew him slowly up. He reached the ledge, he rescued the sheep, and it was saved. He could have done nothing without the ropes. So you, too, Polly, can do nothing worthy; you can never climb your high mountain without the aid of that prayer which links you to your Father in heaven. Do you understand?"

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"Yes, I understand," said Polly; "I see. I won't housekeep any more for the present, father."

"You had better not, dear; you have plenty of talent for this, as well as for anything else you like to undertake, but you lack experience now, and discretion. It was just all this, and that self-confidence which I alluded to just now, which got my little girl into all this trouble, and caused Aunt Maria to think very badly of her. Aunt Maria has gone, so we will say nothing about her just at present. I may be a foolish old father, Polly, but I own I have a great desire to keep my children to myself just now. So I shall give Sleepy Hollow another chance of doing without a grownup housekeeper. Your governesses and masters shall come to teach you as arranged, but Helen must be housekeeper, with Mrs. Power, who is a very managing person, to help her. Helen, too, must have a certain amount of authority over you all, with the power to appeal to me in any emergency. This you must submit to, Polly, and I shall expect you to do so with a good grace."

"Yes, father."

"I have acceded to your wishes in the matter of bringing the Australian children here for at least six months. So you see you will have a good deal on your hands; and as I have done so at the express wish of Helen and yourself, I shall expect you both to take a good deal of responsibility, and to be in every sense of the word, extra good."

Polly's eyes danced with pleasure. Then she looked up into her father's face, and something she saw there caused her to clasp her arms round his neck, and whisper eagerly and impulsively:

"Father, dear, what Helen told me is *not* true—is it?"

"You mean about my eyes, Polly? So Helen knows, and has spoken about it, poor girl?"

"Yes, yes, but it isn't true, it can't be?"

"Don't tremble, Polly. I am quite willing to tell you how things really are. I don't wish it to be spoken of, but it is a relief to trust some one. I saw Sir James Dawson when in town. He is the first oculist in England. He told me that my sight was in a precarious state, and that if matters turned out unfavorably it is possible, nay probable, that I may become quite blind. On the other hand, he gives me a prescription which he thinks and hopes will avert the danger."

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"What is it? Oh! father, you will surely try it?"

"If you and the others will help me."

"But what is it?"

Dr. Maybright stroked back Polly's curls.

"Very little anxiety," he said. "As much rest as possible, worries forbidden, home peace and rest largely insisted upon. Now run away, my dear. I hear the tramp of my poor people. This is their morning, you remember."

Polly kissed her father, and quietly left the room.

"See if I'm not good after that," she murmured. "Wild horses shouldn't drag me into naughtiness after what father has just said."

PART II.

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CHAPTER I.

A COUPLE OF BARBARIANS.

All the young Maybrights, with the exception of the baby, were collected in the morning-room. It was the middle of October. The summer heat had long departed, the trees were shedding their leaves fast, the sky had an appearance of coming wind and showers; the great stretch of moorland which could be seen best in winter when the oaks and elms were bare, was distinctly visible. The moor had broad shadows on it, also tracts of intense light; the bracken was changing from green to brown and yellow color—brilliant color was everywhere. At this time of year the moors in many ways looked their best.

The Maybright children, however, were not thinking of the landscape, or the fast approach of winter, they were busily engaged chattering and consulting together. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and they knew that the time left for them to prepare was short, consequently their busy fingers worked as well as their tongues. Helen was helping the twins and the little boys to make up a wreath of enormous dimensions, and Polly, as usual, was flitting about the room, followed by her satellite Firefly. As usual, too, Polly was first to remark and quickest to censure. She looked very much like the old Polly; no outward change was in the least visible, although now she yielded a kind of obedience to the most gentle and unexacting of sisters, and although she still vowed daily to herself, that she, Polly, would certainly climb the highest mountain, and for father's sake would be the best of all his children.

"How slow you are, Nell," she now exclaimed, impatiently; "and look what a crooked 'E' you have made to the end of 'WELCOME.' Oh, don't be so slow, boys! Paul and Virginia will be here before we are half ready."

"They can't come before six o'clock," said Helen. "We have two hours yet left to work in. Do, dear, pretty Polly, find something else to take up your time, and let the twins and the boys help me to finish this wreath."

"Oh, if you don't want me," said Polly, in a slightly offended voice. "Come along, Fly, we'll go up and see if Virginia's room is ready, and then we'll pay a visit to our baby. You and I won't stay where we are not wanted. Come along."

Fly trotted off by her elder sister's side, a great light of contentment filling her big eyes. The two scampered upstairs, saw that a cozy nest was all ready for the Australian girl, while a smaller room at the other side of the passage was in equal readiness for the boy.

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"Oh, what darling flowers!" said Firefly, running up to the dressing table in the principal bedroom, and sniffing at the contents of a dainty blue jar. "Why, Polly, these buds must be from your own pet tea-rose."

"Yes," said Polly, in a careless voice, "they are; I picked them for Virginia this morning. I'd do anything for Virginia. I'm greatly excited about her coming."

"You never saw her," said Firefly, in an aggrieved voice. "You wouldn't give me your tea-roses. I don't think it's nice of you to be fonder of her than you are of me. And Nursie says her name isn't Virginia."

"Never mind, she's Virginia to me, and the boy is Paul. Why, Fly, what a jealous little piece you are. Come here, and sit on my lap. Of course I'm fond of you, Fly, but I'm not excited about you. I know just the kind of nose you have, and the kind of mouth, and the kind of big, scarecrow eyes, but you see I don't know anything at all about Virginia, so I'm making up stories about her, and pictures, all day long. I expect she's something of a barbarian, both she and her brother, and isn't

it delicious to think of having two real live barbarians in the house?"

"Yes," said Firefly, in a dubious voice. "I suppose if they are real barbarians, they won't know a bit how to behave, and we'll have to teach them. I'll rather like that."

"Oh, you'll have to be awfully good, Fly, for they'll copy you in every way; no sulking or sitting crooked, or having untidy hair, or you'll have a couple of barbarians just doing the very same thing. Now, jump off my lap, I want to go to Nurse, and you may come with me as a great treat. I'm going to undress baby. I do it every night; and you may see how I manage. Nurse says I'm very clever about the way I manage babies."

"Oh, you're clever about everything," said Fly, with a prolonged, deep-drawn breath. "Well, Polly, I do hope one thing."

"Yes?"

"I do hope that the barbarians will be very, very ugly, for after you've seen them you won't be curious any more, and after you know them there won't be any stories to make up, and then you won't love them better than me."

"What a silly you are, Fly," responded Polly.

But she gave her little sister's hand an affectionate squeeze, which satisfied the hungry and exacting heart of its small owner for the present.

Meanwhile the enormous wreath progressed well, and presently took upon important position over the house doorway. As the daylight was getting dim, and as it would, in the estimation of the children, be the cruellest thing possible if the full glories of the wreath were not visible to the eyes of the strangers when they approached Sleepy Hollow, lamps were cunningly placed in positions where their full light could fall on the large "Welcome," which was almost the unaided work of the twins and their small brothers.

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But now six o'clock was drawing near, and Polly and Firefly joined the rest of the children in the hall. The whole house was in perfect order; an excellent supper would be ready at any moment, and there was little doubt that when the strangers did appear they would receive a most hearty welcome.

"Wheels at last!" said Bunny, turning a somersault in the air.

"Hurrah! Three cheers for the barbarians!" sang out Firefly.

"I do hope Virginia will be beautiful," whispered Polly, under her breath.

Helen went and stood on the doorsteps. Polly suddenly raised a colored lamp, and waved it above her head.

"Welcome" smiled down from the enormous wreath, and shone on the features of each Maybright as the Doctor opened the door of the carriage, and helped a tall, slender girl, and a little boy in a black velvet suit, to get out.

"Our travelers are very hungry, Polly," he said, "and—and—very tired. Yes, I see you have prepared things nicely for them. But first of all they must have supper, and after that I shall prescribe bed. Welcome, my dear children, to Sleepy Hollow! May it be a happy home to you both."

"Thank you," said the girl.

She had a pale face, a quantity of long light hair, and dreamy, sleepy eyes; the boy, on the contrary, had an alert and watchful expression; he clung to his sister, and looked in her face when she spoke.

"Do tell us what you are called," said Polly. "We are all just dying to know. Oh! I trust, I do trust that you are really Paul and Virginia. How perfectly lovely it would be if those were your real names."

The tall girl looked full into Polly's eyes, a strange, sweet, wistful light filled her own, her words came out musically.

"I am Flower," she said, "and this is David. I am thirteen years old, and David is eight. Father sent us away because after mother died there was no one to take care of us."

A sigh of intense interest and sympathy fell from the lips of all the young Maybrights.

"Come upstairs, Flower; we know quite well how to be sorry for you," said Helen.

She took the strange girl's hand, and led her up the broad staircase.

"I'll stay below," said David. "I'm not the least tired, and my hands don't want washing. Who's the jolliest here? Couldn't we have a game of ball? I haven't played ball since I left Ballarat. Flower wouldn't let me. She said I might when I came here. She spoke about coming here all the time, and she always wanted to see your mother. She cried the whole of last night because your mother was dead. Now has nobody got a ball, and won't the jolliest begin?"

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"I'll play with you, David," said Polly. "Now catch; there! once, twice, thrice. Aren't you starving?"

I want my tea, if you don't."

"Flower said I wasn't to ask for anything to eat now that your mother is dead," responded David. "She said it wasn't likely we'd stay, but that while we did I was to be on my good behavior. I hate being on my good behavior; but Flower's an awful mistress. Yes, of course, I'm starving."

"Well, come in to tea, then," said Polly, laughing. "Perhaps you will stay, and anyhow we are glad to have you for a little. Children, please don't stare so hard."

"I don't mind," said David. "They may stare if it pleases them; I rather like it."

"Like being stared at!" repeated Firefly, whose own sensitive little nature resented the most transient glance.

"Yes," responded David, calmly; "it shows that I'm admired; and I know that I'm a very handsome boy."

So he was, with dark eyes like a gipsy, and a splendid upright figure and bearing. Far from being the barbarian of Polly's imagination, he had some of the airs and graces of a born aristocrat. His calm remarks and utter coolness astonished the little Maybrights, who rather shrank away from him, and left him altogether to Polly's patronage.

At this moment Helen and the young Australian girl came down together. David instantly trotted up to his sister.

"She thinks that perhaps we'll stay, Flower," pointing with his finger at Polly, "and in that case I needn't keep up my company manners, need I?"

"But you must behave well, David," responded Flower, "or the English nation will fancy we are not civilized."

She smiled in a lovely languid way at her brother, and looked round with calm indifference at the boys and girls who pressed close to her.

"Come and have tea," said Helen.

She placed Flower at her right hand. The Doctor took the head of the table, and the meal progressed more or less in silence. Flower was too lazy or too delicate to eat much. David spent all his time in trying to make Firefly laugh, and in avoiding the Doctor's penetrating glance. The Maybrights were too astonished at the appearance of their guests to feel thoroughly at ease. Polly had a sensation of things being somehow rather flat, and the Doctor wondered much in his inward soul how this new experiment would work.

CHAPTER II.

A YOUNG QUEEN.

It did not work well as far as Polly was concerned. Whatever she was at home, whatever her faults and failings, whatever her wild vagaries, or unreasonable moods, she somehow or other always managed to be first. First in play, first in naughtiness, first at her lessons, the best musician, the best artist, the best housekeeper, the best originator of sports and frolics on all occasions, was Polly Maybright. From this position, however, she was suddenly dethroned. It was quite impossible for Polly to be first when Flower was in the room.

Flower Dalrymple had the ways and manners of a young queen. She was imperious, often ungracious, seldom obliging, but she had a knack of getting people to think first of her, of saying the sort of things which drew attention, and of putting every other little girl with whom she came into contact completely in the shade.

In reality, Polly was a prettier girl than Flower. Her eyes were brighter, her features more regular. But just as much in reality Polly could not hold a candle to Flower, for she had a sort of a languorous, slumberous, grace, which exactly suited her name; there was a kind of etherealness about her, an absolutely out-of-the-common look, which made people glance at her again and again, each time to discover how very lovely she was.

Flower was a perfect contrast to David, being as fair as he was dark. Her face had a delicate, creamy shade, her eyes were large and light blue, the lashes and eyebrows being only a shade or two darker than her long, straight rather dull-looking, yellow hair. She always wore her hair straight down her back; she was very willowy and pliant in figure, and had something of the grace and coloring of a daffodil.

Flower had not been a week in the Maybright family before she contrived that all the arrangements in the house should be more or less altered to suit her convenience. She made no apparent complaint, and never put her wishes into words, still she contrived to have things done

to please her. For instance, long before that week was out, Polly found herself deprived of the seat she had always occupied at meals by her father's side. Flower liked to sit near the Doctor, therefore she did so; she liked to slip her hand into his between the courses, and to look into his face with her wide-open, pathetic, sweet eyes. Flower could not touch coffee at breakfast, therefore by common consent the whole family adopted tea. In the morning-room Flower established herself in mother's deep arm-chair, hitherto consecrated by all rights and usages to Helen. As to Polly, she was simply dethroned from her pedestal, her wittiest remarks fell flat, her raciest stories were received with languid interest. What were they compared to the thrilling adventures which the young Australian could tell when she pleased! Not, indeed, that Flower often pleased, she was not given to many words, her nature was thoroughly indolent and selfish, and only for one person would she ever really rouse and exert herself. This person was David; he worshipped her, and she loved him as deeply as it was in her nature to love any one. To all appearance, however, it mattered very little who, or how Flower loved. On all hands, every one fell in love with her. Even Polly resigned her favorite seat for her, even Helen looked without pain at mother's beloved chair when Flower's lissome figure filled it. The younger children were forever offering flowers and fruit at her shrine. Nurse declared her a bonny, winsome thing, and greatest honor of all, allowed her to play with little Pearl, the baby, for a few minutes, when the inclination seized her. Before she was a week in the house, not a servant in the place but would have done anything for her, and even the Doctor so far succumbed to her charms as to pronounce her a gracious and lovable creature.

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"Although I can't make her out," he often said to himself, "I have an odd instinct which tells me that there is the sleeping lioness or the wild-cat hidden somewhere beneath all that languid, gracious carelessness. Poor little girl! she has managed to captivate us all, but I should not be surprised if she turned out more difficult and troublesome to manage than the whole of my seven daughters put together."

As Flower and David had been sent from Australia especially to be under the care and guidance of Mrs. Maybright, the Doctor felt more and more uncertain as to the expediency of keeping the children.

"It is difficult enough to manage a girl like Polly," he said to himself; "but when another girl comes to the house who is equally audacious and untamed—for my Polly is an untamed creature when all's said and done—how is a poor half-blind old doctor like myself to keep these two turbulent spirits in order? I am dreadfully afraid the experiment won't work; and yet—and yet £400 a year is sadly needed to add to the family purse just now."

The Doctor was pacing up and down his library while he meditated. The carpet in this part of the room was quite worn from the many times he walked up and down it. Like many another man, when he was perplexed or anxious he could not keep still. There came a light tap at the library door.

"Come in!" said the Doctor; and to his surprise Flower, looking more like a tall yellow daffodil than ever, in a soft dress of creamy Indian silk, opened the door and took a step or two into the room.

She looked half-shy, half-bold—a word would have sent her flying, or a word drawn her close to the kind Doctor's side.

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"Come here, my little girl," he said, "and tell me what you want."

Flower would have hated any one else to speak of her as a little girl, but she pushed back her hair now, and looked with less hesitation and more longing at the Doctor.

"I thought you'd be here—I ventured to come," she said.

"Yes, yes; there's no venturing in the matter. Take my arm, and walk up and down with me."

"May I, really?"

"Of course you may, puss. Now I'll warrant anything you have walked many a carpet bare with your own father. See! this is almost in holes; those are Polly's steps, these are mine."

"Oh—yes—well, father isn't that sort of man. I'll take your arm if I may, Doctor. Thank you. I didn't think—I don't exactly know how to say what I want to say."

"Take time, my dear child; and it is no matter how you put the words."

"When I heard that there was no mother here, I did not want to stay long. That was before I knew you. Now—I came to say it—I do want to stay, and so does David."

"But you don't really know me at all, Flower."

"Perhaps not really; but still enough to want to stay. May I stay?"

Flower's charming face looked up inquiringly.

"May I stay?" she repeated, earnestly. "I do wish it!—very much indeed."

Dr. Maybright was silent for a moment.

"I was thinking about this very point when you knocked at the door," he said, presently. "I was

wondering if you two children could stay. I want to keep you, and yet I own I am rather fearful of the result. You see, there are so many motherless girls and boys in this house."

"But we are motherless, too; you should be sorry for us; you should wish to keep us."

"I am very sorry for you. I have grown to a certain extent already to love you. You interest me much; still, I must be just to you and to my own children. You are not a common, everyday sort of girl, Flower. I don't wish to flatter you, and I am not going to say whether you are nice or the reverse. But there is no harm in my telling you that you are out of the common. It is probable that you may be extremely difficult to manage, and it is possible that your disposition may—may clash with those of some of the members of my own household. I don't say that this will be the case, mind, only it is possible. In that case, what would you expect me to do?"

"To keep me," said Flower, boldly, "and, if necessary, send away the member of the household, for I am a motherless girl, and I have come from a long way off to be with you."

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"I don't quite think I can do that, Flower. There are many good mothers in England who would train you and love you, and there are many homes where you might do better than here. My own children are placed here by God himself, and I cannot turn them out. Still—what is the matter, my dear child?"

"I think you are unjust; I thought you would be so glad when I said I wanted to stay."

"So I am glad; and for the present you are here. How long you remain depends on yourself. I have no intention of sending you away at present. I earnestly wish to keep you."

Another tap came to the study door.

"If you please, sir," said Alice, "blind Mrs. Jones is in the kitchen, and wants to know most particular if she can see you."

"How ridiculous!" said Flower, laughing.

"Show Mrs. Jones in here, Alice," said the Doctor.

His own face had grown a shade or two paler.

"Blind people often speak in that way, Flower," he said, with a certain intonation in his voice which made her regard him earnestly.

The memory of a rumor which had reached her ears with regard to the Doctor's own sight flashed before her. She stooped suddenly, and with an impulsive, passionate gesture kissed his hand.

Outside the room David was waiting.

"Well, Flower, well?" he asked, with intense eagerness.

"I spoke to him," said Flower. "We are here on sufferance, that's all. He is the dearest man in all the world, but he is actually afraid of me."

"You are rather fierce at times, you know, Flower. Did you tell him about—about——"

"About what, silly boy?"

"About the passions. You know, Flower, we agreed that he had better know."

A queer steely light came into Flower's blue eyes.

"I didn't speak of them," she said. "If I said anything of that sort I'd soon be packed away. I expect he's in an awful fright about that precious Polly of his."

"But Polly is nice," interposed David.

"Oh, yes, just because she has a rather good-looking face you go over to her side. I'm not at all sure that I like her. Anyhow, I'm not going to play second fiddle to her. There now, Dave, go and play. We're here on sufferance, so be on your good behavior. As to me, you need not be the least uneasy. I wish to remain at Sleepy Hollow, so, of course, the passions won't come. Go and play, Dave."

Firefly called across the lawn. David bounded out of the open window, and Flower went slowly up to her own room.

There came a lovely day toward the end of October; St. Martin's summer was abroad, and the children, with the Doctor's permission, had arranged to take a long expedition across one of the southern moors in search of late blackberries. They took their dinner with them, and George, the under-gardener, accompanied the little party for protection. Nurse elected, as usual, to stay at home with baby, for nothing would induce her to allow this treasured little mortal out of her own keeping; but the Doctor promised, if possible, to join the children at Troublous Times Castle at two o'clock for dinner. This old ruin was at the extreme corner of one of the great commons, and was a very favorite resort for picnics, as it still contained the remains of a fine old banqueting-hall, where in stormy or uncertain weather a certain amount of shelter could be secured.

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The children started off early, in capital spirits. A light wind was blowing; the sky was almost

cloudless. The tints of late autumn were still abroad in great glory, and the young faces looked fresh, careless, and happy.

Just at the last moment, as they were leaving the house, an idea darted through Polly's brain.

"Let's have Maggie," she said. "I'll go round by the village and fetch her. She would enjoy coming with us so much, and it would take off her terror of the moor. Do you know, Helen, she is such a silly thing that she has been quite in a state of alarm ever since the day we went to the hermit's hut. I won't be a moment running to fetch Mag; do let's have her. Firefly, you can come with me."

Maggie, who now resided with her mother, not having yet found another situation—for Mrs. Power had absolutely declined to have her back in the kitchen—was a favorite with all the children. They were pleased with Polly's proposal, and a chorus of "Yes, by all means, let's have Maggie!" rose in the air.

Flower was standing a little apart; she wore a dark green close-fitting cloth dress; on her graceful golden head was a small green velvet cap. She was picking a late rose to pieces, and waiting for the others with a look of languid indifference on her face. Now she roused herself, and asked in a slightly weary voice:

"Who is Maggie?"

"Maggie?" responded Helen, "she was our kitchenmaid; we are all very fond of her—Polly especially."

"Fond of a kitchen-maid? I don't suppose you mean that, Helen," said Flower. "A kitchen-maid's only a servant."

"I certainly mean it," said Helen, with a little warmth. "I am more or less fond of all our servants, and Maggie used to be a special favorite."

"How extraordinary!" said Flower. "The English nation have very queer and plebeian ways about them; it's very plebeian to take the least notice of servants, except to order them to obey you."

"On the contrary," retorted Polly; "it's the sign of a true lady or gentleman to be perfectly courteous to their dependents, and if they deserve love, to give it to them. I'm fond of Maggie; she's a good little girl, and she shall come to our picnic. Come along, Firefly."

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"I certainly will have nothing to say to Polly while she associates with a servant," said Flower, slowly, and with great apparent calmness. "I don't suppose we need all wait for her here. She can follow with the servant when she gets her. I suppose Polly's whims are not to upset the whole party."

"Polly will very likely catch us up at the cross-roads," said Helen, in a pleasant voice. "Come, Flower, you won't really be troubled with poor little Maggie; she will spend her day probably with George, and will help him to wash up our dinner-things after we have eaten. Come, don't be vexed, Flower."

"I vexed!" said Flower. "You are quite mistaken. I don't intend to have anything to say to Polly while she chooses a kitchen-maid for her friend, but I dare say the rest of you can entertain me. Now, Mabel and Dolly, shall I tell you what we did that dark night when David and I stole out through the pantry window?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" exclaimed the twins. The others all clustered round eagerly.

Flower had a very distinct voice, and when she roused herself she could really be eloquent. A daring little adventure which she and her brother had experienced lost nothing in the telling, and when Polly, Firefly, and Maggie, joined the group, they found themselves taken very little notice of, for all the other children, even Helen, were hanging on Flower's words.

"Oh, I say, that isn't fair!" exclaimed Polly, whose spirits were excellent. "You're telling a story, Flower, and Firefly and I have missed it. Maggie loves stories, too; don't you, Mag? Do begin again, please, Flower, please do!"

Flower did not even pretend to hear Polly's words—she walked straight on, gesticulating a little now and then, now and then raising her hand in a slightly dramatic manner. Her clear voice floated back to Polly as she walked forward, the center of an eager, worshipping, entranced audience.

Polly's own temper was rather hasty, she felt her face flushing, angry words were bubbling to her lips, and she would have flown after the little party who were so utterly ignoring her, if David had not suddenly slipped back and put his hand on her arm.

"I know the story," he said; "so I needn't stay to listen. She's adding to it awfully. We didn't use any ropes, the window is only three feet from the ground, and the awful howling and barking of the mastiff was made by the shabbiest little cur. Flower is lovely, but she does dress up her stories. I love Flower, but I'll walk with you now, if you'll let me, Polly."

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"You're very kind, David," said Polly. "But I don't know that I want any one to walk with me, except Maggie. I think Flower was very rude just now. Oh, you can stay if you like, David—I don't mind, one way or another. Isn't this south moor lovely, Maggie? Aren't you glad I asked you to come with us?"

"Well, yes, Miss, I be. It was good-natured of you, Miss Polly, only if there's stories a-going, I'd like to be in at them. I does love narrations of outlandish places, Miss. Oh, my word, and is that the little foreign gentleman? It is a disappointment as I can't 'ear what the young lady's a-telling of."

"Well, Maggie, you needn't be discontented. I am not hearing this wonderful story, either. David, what are you nudging me for?"

"Send her to walk with George," whispered David. "I want to say something to you so badly, Polly."

Polly frowned. She did not feel particularly inclined to oblige any one just now, but David had a pleading way of his own; he squeezed her arm affectionately, and looked into her face with a world of beseeching in his big black eyes. After all it was no very difficult matter to get at Polly's warm heart. She looked over her shoulder.

"George, will you give Maggie a seat beside you," she said. "No, none of the rest of us want to drive. Come on, David. Now, David, what is it?"

"It's about Flower," said David. "She—she—you don't none of you know Flower yet."

"Oh, I am not sure of that," replied Polly, speaking on purpose in a very careless tone. "I suppose she's much like other girls. She's rather pretty, of course, and has nice ways with her. I made stories about you both, but you're not a bit like anything I thought of. In some ways you're nicer, in some not so nice. Why, what is the matter, David? What are you staring at me so hard for?"

"Because you're all wrong," responded David. "You don't know Flower. She's not like other girls; not a bit. There were girls at Ballarat, and she wasn't like them. But no one wondered at that, for they were rough, and not like real ladies. And there were girls on board the big ship we came over in, and they weren't rough, but Flower wasn't a bit like them either. And she's not like any of you, Polly, although I'm sure you are nice, and Helen is sweet, and Fly is a little brick. Flower is not like any other girl I have ever seen."

"She must be an oddity, then," said Polly. "I hate oddities. Do let's walk a little faster, David."

"You are wrong again," persisted David, quickening his steps. "An oddity is some one to laugh at, but no one has ever dreamed of laughing at Flower. She is just herself, like no one else in the world. No, you don't any of you know her yet. I suppose you are every one of you thinking that she's the very nicest and cleverest and perfectest girl you ever met?"

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"I'm sure we are not," said Polly. "I think, for my part, there has been a great deal too much fuss made about her. I'm getting tired of her airs, and I think she was very rude just now."

"Oh, don't, Polly, you frighten me. I want to tell you something so badly. Will you treat it as a great, enormous secret? will you never reveal it, Polly?"

"What a queer boy you are," said Polly. "No, I won't tell. What's the mystery?"

"It's this. Flower is sometimes—sometimes—oh, it's dreadful to have to tell!—Flower is sometimes not nice."

Polly's eyes danced.

"You're a darling, David!" she said. "Of course, that sister of yours is not perfect. I'd hate her if she was."

"But it isn't that," said David. "It's so difficult to tell. When Flower isn't nice, it's not a small thing, it's—oh, she's awful! Polly, I don't want any of you ever to see Flower in a passion; you'd be frightened, oh, you would indeed. We were all dreadfully unhappy at Ballarat when Flower was in a passion, and lately we tried not to get her into one. That's what I want you to do, Polly; I want you to try; I want you to see that she is not vexed."

"I like that," said Polly. "Am I to be on my 'P's and Q's' for this Miss Flower of yours? Now, David, what do you mean by a great passion? I'm rather hot myself. Come, you saw me very cross about the lemonade yesterday; is Flower worse than that? What fun it must be to see her!"

"Don't!" said David, turning pale. "You wouldn't speak in that way, Polly, if you knew. What you did yesterday like Flower? Why, I didn't notice you at all. Flower's passions are—are— But I can't speak of them, Polly."

"Then why did you tell me?" said Polly. "I can't help her getting into rages, if she's so silly."

"Oh, yes, you can, and that's why I spoke to you. She's a little vexed now, about your having brought the—the kitchen-maid here. I know well she's vexed, because she's extra polite with every one else. That's a way she has at first. I don't suppose she'll speak to you, Polly; but oh, Polly, I will love you so much, I'll do anything in all the world for you, if only you'll send Maggie home!"

"What are you dreaming of?" said Polly. "Because Flower is an ill tempered, proud, silly girl, am I to send poor little Maggie away? No, David, if your sister has a bad temper, she must learn to control it. She is living in England now, and she must put up with our English ways; we are always kind to our servants."

"Then it can't be helped," said David. "You'll remember that I warned you—you'll be sorry afterwards! Hullo, Flower—yes, Flower, I'm coming."

He flew from Polly's side, going boldly over to what the little girl was now pleased to call the ranks of the enemy. She felt sorry for a moment, for Firefly had long since deserted her. Then she retraced her steps, and walked by Maggie's side for the rest of the time.

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CHAPTER III.

NOT LIKE OTHERS.

It was still early when the children reached Troublous Times Castle. Dr. Maybright would not be likely to join them for nearly an hour. They had walked fast, and Polly, at least, felt both tired and cross. When the twins ran up to her and assured her with much enthusiasm that they had never had a more delightful walk, she turned from them with a little muttered "Pshaw!" Polly's attentions now to Maggie were most marked, and if this young person were not quite one of the most obtuse in existence, it is possible she might have felt slightly embarrassed.

"While we're waiting for father," exclaimed Polly, speaking aloud, and in that aggressive tone which had not been heard from her lips since the night of the supper in the attic—"while we're waiting for father we'll get the banqueting-hall ready. Maggie and I will see to this, but any one who likes to join us can. We don't require any assistance, but if it gives pleasure to any of the others to see us unpack the baskets, now is the time for them to say the word."

"But, of course, we're all going to get the dinner ready," exclaimed Dolly and Katie, in voices of consternation. "What a ridiculous way you are talking, Polly! This is all our affair; half the fun is getting the dinner ready. Isn't it, Nell?"

"Yes, of course," said Helen, in her pleasant, bright voice. "We'll all do as much as we can do to make the banqueting-hall ready for father. Now, let's get George to take the hampers there at once; and, Flower, I thought, perhaps, you would help me to touch up the creepers here and there, they do look so lovely falling over that ruined west window. Come, Flower, now let's all of us set to work without any more delay."

"Yes, Flower, and you know you have such a way of making things look sweet," said David, taking his sister's hand and kissing it.

She put her arm carelessly round his neck, stooped down, and pressed her lips to his brow, then said in that light, arch tone, which she had used all day, "David is mistaken. I can't make things look sweet, and I'm not coming to the banqueting-hall at present."

There was a pointed satire in the two last words. Flower's big blue eyes rested carelessly on Maggie, then they traveled to where Polly stood, and a fine scorn curled her short, sensitive upper lip. The words she had used were nothing, but her expressive glance meant a good deal. Polly refused to see the world of entreaty on David's face—she threw down her challenge with equal scorn and a good deal of comic dignity.

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"It's a very good thing, then, you're not coming to the banqueting-hall, Flower," she said. "For we don't want people there who have no taste. I suppose it's because you are an Australian, for in England even the cottagers know a little about how to make picnics look pretty. Maggie is a cottager at present, as she's out of a situation, so it's lucky we've brought her. Now, as every one else wants to come, let them, and don't let's waste any more time, or when father comes, we really will have nothing ready for him to eat."

"Very well," said Flower. "Then I shall take a walk by myself. I wish to be by myself. No, David you are not to come with me, I forbid it."

For a quarter of a second a queer steely light filled her blue eyes. David shrank from her glance, and followed the rest of the party down a flight of steps which led also into the old banqueting-hall.

"You've done it now," he whispered to Polly. "You'll be very, very sorry by-and-by, and you'll remember then that I warned you."

"I really think you're the most tiresome boy," said Polly. "You want to make mysteries out of nothing. I don't see that Flower is particularly passionate; she's a little bit sarcastic, and she likes to say nasty, scathing things, but you don't suppose I mind her! She'll soon come to her senses when she sees that we are none of us petting her, or bowing down to her. I expect that you and your father have spoiled that Flower of yours over in Ballarat."

"You don't know Flower a bit," responded David. "I warned you. You'll remember that presently. Flower not passionate! Why, she was white with passion when she went away. Well, you wait and see."

"I wish you'd stop talking," responded Polly, crossly. "We'll never have things ready if you chatter so, and try to perplex me. There's poor Fly almost crying over that big hamper. Please, David, go and help her to get the knives, and forks, and glasses out, and don't break any glasses, for we're always fined if we break glasses at picnics."

David moved away slowly. He was an active little fellow as a rule, but now there seemed to be a weight over him. The vivaciousness had left his handsome dark little face; once he turned round and looked at Polly with a volume of reproach in his eyes.

She would not meet his eyes, she was bending over her own hamper, and was laughing and chatting gayly with every one who came within her reach. The moment Flower's influence was removed Polly became once more the ringleader of all the fun. Once more she was appealed to, her advice asked, her directions followed. She could not help admitting to herself that she liked the change, and for the first time a conscious feeling of active dislike to Flower took possession of her. What right had this strange girl to come and take the lead in everything? No, she was neither very pretty nor very agreeable; she was a conceited, ill-tempered, proud creature, and it was Polly's duty, of course it was Polly's duty, to see that she was not humored. Was there anything so unreasonable and monstrous as her dislike to poor little Maggie? Poor little harmless Maggie, who had never done her an ill-turn in her life. Really David had been too absurd when he proposed that Maggie should be sent home. David was a nice boy enough, but he was not to suppose that every one was to bow down to his Queen Flower. Ridiculous! let her go into passions if she liked, she would soon be tamed and brought to her senses when she had been long enough in England.

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Polly worked herself up into quite a genuine little temper of her own, as she thought, and she now resolved, simply and solely for the purpose of teasing Flower, that Maggie should dine with them all, and have a seat of honor near herself. When she had carelessly thought of her coming to the picnic, she, of course, like all the others, had intended that Maggie and George should eat their dinner together after the great meal was over; and even Helen shook her head now when Polly proposed in her bright audacious way that Maggie should sit near her, in one of the best positions, where she could see the light flickering through the ivy, which nearly covered the beautiful west window.

"As you like, of course, Polly," responded Helen. "But I do think it is putting Maggie a little out of her place. Perhaps father won't like it, and I'm sure Flower won't."

"I'll ask father myself, when he arrives," answered Polly, choosing to ignore the latter part of Helen's speech.

The banqueting-hall, which was a perfect ruin at one end, was still covered over at the other. And it was in this portion, full of picturesque half-lights and fascinating dark corners, that the children had laid out their repast. The west window was more than fifty feet distant. It was nearly closed in with an exquisite tracery of ivy; but as plenty of light poured into the ruin from the open sky overhead, this mattered very little, and but added to the general effect. The whole little party were very busy, and no one worked harder than Polly, and no one's laugh was more merry. Now and then, it is true, an odd memory and a queer sensation of failure came over her. Was she really—really to-day, at least—trying to climb successfully the highest mountain? She stifled the little voice speaking in her heart, delighted her brothers and sisters, and even caused a smile to play round David's grave lips as she made one witty remark after another. Firefly in particular was in ecstasies with her beloved sister, and when the Doctor at last appeared on the scene the fun was at its height.

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The moment he entered the banqueting-hall Polly went up to him, put on her archest and most pleading expression, and said in a tone of inquiry:

"It's all so delightful, and such a treat for her. And you don't mind, do you father?"

"I don't know that I mind anything at this moment, Polly, for I am hungry, and your viands look tempting of the tempting. Unless you bid me not to come to the feast, I shall quarrel with no other suggestion."

"Oh! you darlinest of fathers; then you won't be angry if poor Maggie sits next me; and has her dinner with us? She is a little afraid of the moor, and I wanted to cure her, so I brought her to-day, and she will be so happy if she can sit next me at dinner."

"Put her where you please, my dear; we are not sitting on forms or standing on ceremony at present. And now to dinner, to dinner, children, for I must be off again in an hour."

No one noticed, not even David, that while the Doctor was speaking a shadow stole up and remained motionless by the crumbling stairs of the old banqueting-hall; no one either saw when it glided away. Polly laughed, and almost shouted; every one, Flower excepted, took their places as best they could on the uneven floor of the hall; the white tablecloth was spread neatly in the middle. Every one present was exceedingly uncomfortable physically, and yet each person expressed him or herself in tones of rapture, and said never was such food eaten, or such a delightful dinner served.

For a long time Flower was not even missed; then David's grave face attracted the Doctor's attention.

"What is the matter, my lad?" he said. "Have you a headache? Don't you enjoy this *al fresco* sort

of entertainment? And, by the way, I don't see your sister. Helen, my dear, do you know where Flower is? Did not she come with you?"

"Of course she did, father; how stupid and careless of me never to have missed her."

Helen jumped up from the tailor-like position she was occupying on the floor.

"Flower said she would take a little walk," she continued. "And I must say I forgot all about her. She ought to have been back ages ago."

"Flower went by herself for a walk on the moor!" echoed the Doctor. "But that isn't safe; she may lose her way, or get frightened. Why did you let her go, children?"

No one answered; a little cloud seemed to have fallen on the merry party. Polly again had a pinprick of uneasiness in her heart, and a vivid recollection of the highest mountain which she was certainly not trying to climb.

The Doctor said he would go at once to look for Flower.

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CHAPTER IV.

A YOUNG AUSTRALIAN.

David was quite right when he said his sister was not like other girls. There was a certain element of wildness in her; she had sweet manners, a gracious bearing, an attractive face; but in some particulars she was untamed. Never had that terrible strong temper of hers been curbed. More than one of the servants in the old home at Ballarat had learnt to dread it. When Flower stormed, her father invariably left home, and David shut himself up in his own room. Her mother, an affectionate but not particularly strong-minded woman, alone possessed sufficient courage to approach the storm-tossed little fury. Mrs. Dalrymple had a certain power of soothing the little girl, but even she never attempted to teach the child the smallest lessons of self-control.

This unchecked, unbridled temper grew and strengthened with Flower's growth. When under its influence she was a transformed being, and David had good reason to be afraid of her.

In addition to an ungovernable temper, Flower was proud; she possessed the greatest pride of all, that of absolute ignorance. She believed firmly in caste; had she lived in olden days in America, she would have been a very cruel mistress of slaves. Yet with it all Flower had an affectionate heart; she was generous, loyal, but she was so thoroughly a spoiled and untrained creature that her good qualities were nearly lost under the stronger sway of her bad ones.

After her mother's death Flower had fretted so much that she had grown shadowy and ill. It was then her father conceived the idea of sending her and David to an English family to train and educate. He could not manage Flower, he could not educate David. The Maybrights were heard of through a mutual friend, and Flower was reconciled to the thought of leaving the land and home of her birth because she was told she was going to another mother. She dried her eyes at this thought, and was tolerably cheerful during the voyage over. On reaching England the news of Mrs. Maybright's death was broken to her. Again Flower stormed and raged; she gave poor little David a dreadful night, but in the morning her tears were dried, her smile had returned, and she went down to Sleepy Hollow with the Doctor in fairly good spirits.

The young Maybrights were all on their best behavior—Flower was on hers, and until the day of the picnic all went well.

It did not take a great deal to rouse first the obstinate pride of this young Australian, and then her unbridled passions. Associate with a servant? No, that she would never, never do. Show Polly that she approved of her conduct? Not while her own name was Flower Dalrymple. She let all the other happy children go down to the banqueting-hall without her, and strode away, miserable at heart, choking with rage and fury.

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The Dalrymples were very wealthy people, and Flower's home in Ballarat was furnished with every luxury. Notwithstanding this, the little girl had never been in a truly refined dwelling-house until she took up her abode in old-fashioned Sleepy Hollow. Flower had taken a great fancy to Helen, and she already warmly loved Dr. Maybright. She was wandering over the moor now, a miserable, storm-tossed little personage, when she saw his old-fashioned gig and white pony "Rowney" approaching. That old gig and the person who sat in it—for Dr. Maybright drove himself—began to act on the heart of the child with a curious magnetic force. Step by step they caused her to turn, until she reached Troublous Times Castle almost as soon as the Doctor. She did not know why she was coming back, for she had not the remotest idea of yielding her will to Polly's. Still she had a kind of instinct that the Doctor would set things right. By this she meant that he would give her her own way and banish Maggie from the scene of festivity.

The banqueting-hall at the old castle could be reached by two ways: you might approach it quite

easily over the green sward, or you might enter a higher part of the castle, and come to it down broken steps.

The Doctor chose one way of approaching the scene of the feast, Flower another. She was about to descend when she heard voices: Polly was eagerly asking permission for Maggie to dine with them; the Doctor, in his easy, genial tones, was giving it to her. That was enough. If Flower had never known before what absolute hatred was like, she knew it now. She hated Polly; ungovernable passion mounted to her brain, filled her eyes, lent wings to her feet; she turned and fled.

Although the month was October, it was still very hot in the middle of the day on the open moor. Flower, however, was accustomed to great heat in her native home, and the full rays of the sun did not impede her flight. She was so tall and slight and willowy that she was a splendid runner, but the moor was broken and rough, interspersed here and there with deep bracken, here and there with heather, here and there again with rank clumps of undergrowth. The young girl, half blinded with rage and passion, did not see the sharp points of the rocks or the brambles in her path. Once or twice she fell. After her second fall she was so much bruised and hurt, that she was absolutely forced to sit still in the midst of the yellow-and-brown bracken. It was in a bristling, withered state, but it still stood thick and high, and formed a kind of screen all round Flower as she sat in it. She took off her cap, and idly fanned her hot face with it; her yellow head could scarcely be distinguished from the orange-and-gold tints of the bracken which surrounded her. [Pg 100]

In this way the Doctor, who was now anxiously looking for Flower, missed her, for he drove slowly by, not a hundred yards from her hiding-place.

As Flower sat and tried to cool herself, she began to reflect. Her passion was not in the least over; on the contrary, its most dangerous stage had now begun. As she thought, there grew up stronger and stronger in her heart a great hatred for Polly. From the first, Flower had not taken so warmly to Polly as she had done to Helen. The fact was, these girls were in many ways too much alike. Had it been Polly's fate to be born and brought up in Ballarat, she might have been Flower over again. She might have been even worse than Flower, for she was cleverer; on the other hand, had Flower been trained by Polly's wise and loving mother, she might have been a better girl than Polly.

As it was, however, these two must inevitably clash. They were like two queen bees in the same hive; they each wanted the same place. It only needed a trifle to bring Flower's uneasy, latent feeling against Polly to perfection. The occasion arose, the match had fired the easily ignited fuel, and Flower sat now and wondered how she could best revenge herself on Polly.

After a time, stiff and limping, for she had hurt her ankle, she recommenced her walk across the moor. She had not the least idea where her steps were leading her. She was tired, her feet ached, and her great rage had sufficiently cooled to make her remember distinctly that she had eaten no dinner; still, she plodded on. From the time she had left Troublous Times Castle she had not encountered an individual, but now, as she stepped forward, a man suddenly arose from his lair in the grass and confronted her. He was a black-eyed, unkempt, uncouth-looking person, and any other girl would have been very much afraid of him. He put his arms akimbo, a disagreeable smile crossed his face, and he instantly placed himself in such a position as completely to bar the girl's path.

An English girl would have turned pale at such an apparition in so lonely a place, but Flower had seen bushmen in her day, and did not perceive anything barbarous or outlandish in the man's appearance.

"I'm glad I've met you," she said, in her clear dulcet voice, "for you can tell me where I am. I want to get to Sleepy Hollow, Dr. Maybright's place—am I far away?"

"Two miles, as the crow flies," responded the man.

"But I can't go as the crow flies. What is the best way to walk? Can't you show me?"

"No-a. I be sleepy. Have you got a coin about you, Miss?"

"Money? No. I left my purse at home. I have not got a watch either, nor a chain, but I have got a little ring. It is very thin, but it is pure gold, and I am fond of it. I will give it to you if you will take me the very nearest way to Sleepy Hollow." [Pg 101]

The man grinned again. "You *be* a girl!" he said, in a tone of admiration. "Yes, I'll take you; come."

He turned on his heel, shambled on in front, and Flower followed.

In this manner the two walked for some time. Suddenly they mounted a ridge, and then the man pointed to where the Doctor's house stood, snug in its own inclosure.

"Thank you," said Flower.

She took a little twist of gold off her smallest finger, dropped it into the man's dirty, open palm, and began quickly to descend the ridge in the direction of the Hollow. It was nearly three o'clock when she entered the cool, wide entrance-hall. The house felt still and restful. Flower acknowledged to herself that she was both tired and hungry, but her main idea to revenge herself on Polly was stronger than either fatigue or hunger. She walked into the dining-room, cut a thick

slice from a home-made loaf of bread, broke off a small piece to eat at once, and put the rest into her pocket. A dish of apples stood near; she helped herself to two, stowed them away with the bread in the capacious pocket of her green cloth dress, and then looked around her. She had got to Polly's home, but how was she to accomplish her revenge? How strike Polly through her most vulnerable point?

She walked slowly upstairs, meditating as she went. Her own little bower-like room stood open; she entered it. Polly's hands had been mainly instrumental in giving choice touches to this room; Polly's favorite blue vase stood filled with flowers on the dressing-table, and a lovely photograph of the Sistine Madonna which belonged to Polly hung over the mantelpiece. Flower did not look at any of these things. She unlocked a small drawer in a dainty inlaid cabinet, which she had brought with her from Ballarat, took out two magnificent diamond rings, a little watch set with jewels, and a small purse, very dainty in itself, but which only held a few shillings. She put all these treasures into a small black velvet bag, fastened the bag round her neck by a narrow gold chain, and then leaving her room, stood once more in a contemplative attitude on the landing.

She was ready now for flight herself, for when she had revenged herself on Polly, she must certainly fly. But how should she accomplish her revenge? what should she do? She thought hard. She knew she had but little time, for the Doctor and the children might return at any moment.

In the distance she heard the merry laugh of Polly's little sister, Pearl. Flower suddenly colored, her eyes brightened, and she said to herself:

"That is a good idea; I will go and have a talk with Nurse. I can find out somehow from Nurse what Polly likes best."

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She ran at once to the nurseries.

"My dear Miss Flower," exclaimed Nurse. "Why, wherever have you been, Miss? I thought you was with the others. Well! you do look tired and fagged."

"I have walked home," said Flower, carelessly. "I didn't care to be out so long; picnics are nothing to me; I'm accustomed to that sort of thing on a big scale at Ballarat, you know. I walked home, and then I thought I'd have a chat with you, if you didn't mind."

"For sure, dear. Sit you down in that easy chair, Miss Flower; and would you like to hold baby for a bit? Isn't she sweet to-day? I must say I never saw a more knowing child for her age."

"She is very pretty," said Flower, carelessly. "But I don't think I'll hold her, Nurse. I'm not accustomed to babies, and I'm afraid she might break or something. Do you know I never had a baby in my arms in my life? I don't remember David when he was tiny. No, I never saw anything so young and soft and tiny as this little Pearl; she *is* very pretty."

"Eh, dear lamb," said Nurse, squeezing the baby to her heart, "she's the very sweetest of the sweet. Now you surprise me, Miss Flower, for I'd have said you'd be took up tremendous with babies, you has them winsome ways. Why, look at the little dear, she's laughing even now to see you. She quite takes to you, Miss—the same as she does to Miss Polly."

"She takes to Polly, does she?" said Flower.

"Take to her? I should say so, Miss; and as to Miss Polly, she just worships baby. Two or three times a day she comes into the nursery, and many and many a time she coaxes me to let her bathe her. The fact is, Miss Flower, we was all in a dreadful taking about Miss Polly when her mamma died. She was quite in a stunned sort of state, and it was baby here brought her round. Ever since then our little Miss Pearl has been first of all with Miss Polly."

"Give her to me," said Flower, in a queer, changed voice. "I've altered my mind—I'd like to hold her. See, is she not friendly? Yes, baby, kiss me, baby, with your pretty mouth. Does she not coo— isn't she perfect? You are quite right, Nurse. I do like to hold her, very much indeed."

"I said she'd take to you, Miss," said Nurse, in a gratified voice.

"So she does, and I take to her. Nurse, I wonder if you'd do something for me?"

"Of course I will, my dear."

"I am so awfully hungry. Would you go down' to the kitchen and choose a nice little dinner for me?"

"I'll ring the bell, Miss Dalrymple. Alice shall bring it to you on a tray here, if you've a mind to eat it in the nursery."

"But I do want you to choose something; do go yourself, and find something dainty. Do, Nursie, please Nursie. I want to be spoiled a little bit; no one ever spoils me now that my mamma is dead."

"Bless the child!" said good-natured and unsuspecting Nurse. "Of course I'll go, if you put it that way, Missy. Well, take care of baby, Miss Flower. Don't attempt to carry her; hold her steady with your arm firm round her back. I'll bring you your dinner in ten minutes at latest, Miss."

CHAPTER V.

FORSAKEN.

The moment Nurse's footsteps died away Flower sprang to her feet, snatched up a white wool shawl, which lay over the baby's cot, wrapped it round her, and flew downstairs with the little creature in her arms.

Out through a side door which stood open ran Flower, down by the shrubbery, over the stile, and in a few moments she was out again on the wide, wild, lonely moor with Polly's pet pressed close to her beating heart. Long before Nurse had returned to the nursery Flower had reached the moor, and when poor, distracted Nurse discovered her loss, Flower had wriggled herself into the middle of a clump of young oak-trees, and was fondling and petting little Pearl, who sat upright on her knee. From her hiding-place Flower could presently hear footsteps and voices, but none of them came near her, and for the present baby was contented, and did not cry. After a time the footsteps moved further off, and Flower peeped from her shelter.

"Now, baby, come on," she said. She wrapped the shawl again firmly round the little one, and started with a kind of trotting motion over the outskirts of the moor. She was intensely excited, and her cheeks were flushed with the first delicious glow of victory. Oh, how sorry Polly would be now for having attempted to oppose her. Yes, Polly would know now that Flower Dalrymple was not a person to be trifled with.

She was really a strong girl, though she had a peculiarly fragile look. The weight of the three months' old baby was not very great, and for a time she made quite rapid progress. After she had walked about a mile she stood still to consider and to make her plans. No more ignorant girl in all England could perhaps be found than this same poor silly, revengeful Flower; but even she, with all her ideas Australian, and her knowledge of English life and ways simply null and void, even she knew that the baby could not live for a long time without food and shelter on the wide common land which lay around. She did not mean to steal baby for always, but she thought she would keep her for a month or two, until Polly was well frightened and repentant, and then she would send her back by some kind, motherly woman whom she was sure to come across. As to herself, she had fully made up her mind never again to enter the doors of Sleepy Hollow, for it would be impossible for her, she felt, to associate with any people who had sat down to dinner with the kitchen-maid. Holding the baby firmly in her arms, Flower stood and hesitated. The warm fleecy white shawl sheltered little Pearl from all cold, and for the present she slept peacefully.

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"I must try and find some town," thought Flower. "I must walk to some town—the nearest, I suppose—with baby. Then I will sell one of my rings, and try to get a nice woman to give me a lodging. If she is a motherly person—and I shall certainly look out for some one that is—I can give her little Pearl when I get tired of her, and she can take her back to Sleepy Hollow. But I won't give Pearl up for the present; for, in the first place she amuses me, and in the next I wish Polly to be well punished. Now I wonder which is the nearest way to the town? If I were at Ballarat, I should know quickly enough by the sign-posts placed at intervals all over the country, but they don't seem to have anything of the sort here in barbarous England. Now, how shall I get to the nearest town without meeting any one who would be likely to tell Dr. Maybright?"

Flower had scarcely expressed herself in this fashion before once again the rough-looking man crossed her path. She greeted him quite joyfully.

"Oh! you're just the person I want," she exclaimed. "I've got my purse now, and a little money in it. Would you like to earn a shilling?"

"Sure-ly," said the man. "But I'd a sight rather 'arn two," he added.

"I'll give you two. I have not got much money, but I'll certainly give you two shillings if you'll help me now. I have got a little baby here—a dear little baby, but she's rather heavy. I am running away with her to revenge myself on somebody. I don't mind telling you that, for you look like an outlaw yourself, and you'll sympathize with me. I want you to carry baby for me, and to take us both to the nearest town. Do you hear? Will you do it?"

"Sure-ly," said the man, favoring Flower with a long, peculiar glance.

"Well, here's baby; you must be very careful of her. I'll give you *three* shillings after you have taken her and me to the nearest town; and if you are really kind, and walk quickly, and take us to a nice restaurant where I can have a good dinner—for I am awfully hungry—you shall have something to eat yourself as well. Now walk on in front of me, please, and don't waste any more time, for it would be dreadful if we were discovered."

The man shambled on at once in front of Flower; his strong arms supported little Pearl comfortably, and she slumbered on in an unbroken dream.

The bright sunlight had now faded, the short October day was drawing in, the glory and heat of the morning had long departed, and Flower, whose green cloth dress was very light in texture,

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felt herself shivering in the sudden cold.

"Are you certain you are going to the nearest town?" she called out to the man.

"Sure-ly," he responded back to her. He was stepping along at a swinging pace, and Flower was very tired, and found it difficult to keep up with him. Having begged of him so emphatically to hurry, she did not like to ask him now to moderate his steps. To keep up with him at all she had almost to run; and she was now not only hungry, cold, and tired, but the constant quick motion took her breath away. They had left the border of the moor, and were now in the middle of a most desolate piece of country. As Flower looked around her she shivered with the first real sensation of loneliness she had ever known. The moor seemed to fill the whole horizon. Desolate moor and lowering sky—there seemed to be nothing else in all the world.

"Where is the nearest town?" she gasped at last. "Oh, what a long, long way off it is!"

"It's miles away!" said the man, suddenly stopping and turning round fiercely upon her; "but ef you're hungry, there's a hut yer to the left where my mother lives. She'll give you a bit of supper and a rest, ef so be as you can pay her well."

"Oh, yes, I can pay her," responded Flower. The thought of any shelter or any food was grateful to the fastidious girl now.

"I am very hungry and very tired," she said. "I will gladly rest in your mother's cottage. Where is it?"

"I said as it wor a hut. There are two dawgs there: be you afeard?"

"Of *dogs*? I am not afraid of anything!" said Flower, curling her short lip disdainfully.

"You *be* a girl!" responded the man. He shambled on again in front, and presently they came in sight of the deserted hermit's hut, where Polly and Maggie a few weeks before had been led captive. A woman was standing in the doorway, and by her side, sitting up on their haunches, were two ugly, lean-looking dogs.

"Down, Cinder and Flinder!" said the woman. "Down you brutes! Now, Patrick, what have you been up to? Whatever's that in your arms, and who's a-follering of yer?"

"This yer's a babby," said the man, "and this yer's a girl. She," pointing to Flower, "wants to be took to the nearest town, and she have money to pay, she says."

"Oh! she have money to pay?" said the wife of Micah Jones—for it was she. "Them as has money to pay is oilers and oilers welcome. Come in, and set you down by the fire, hinney. Well, well, and so you has brought a babby with you! Give it to me, Pat. What do you know, you great hulking feller! about the tending of babbies?"

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The man gladly relinquished his charge, then pointed backwards with his finger at Flower.

"She's cold and 'ungry, and she has money to pay," he said.

"Come in, then, Missy, come in; yer's a good fire, and a hunk of cheese, and some brown bread, and there'll be soup by-and-by. Yes," winking at her son, "there'll be good strong soup by-and-by."

Flower, who had come up close to the threshold of the hut, now drew back a step or two. At sight of the woman her courage had revived, her feeling of extreme loneliness had vanished, and a good deal of the insolence which often marked her bearing had in consequence returned to her.

"I won't go in," she said. "It looks dirty in there and I hate dirt. No, I won't go in! Bring me some food out here, please. Of course I'll pay you."

"Highty-tighty!" said the woman. "And is wee babby to stay out in the cold night air?"

"I forgot about the baby," said Flower. "Give her to me. Is the night air bad for babies?" she asked, looking up inquiringly at the great rough woman who stood by her side.

Flower's utter and fearless indifference to even the possibility of danger had much the same effect on Mrs. Jones that it had upon her son. They both owned to a latent feeling of uneasiness in her presence. Had she showed the least trace of fear; had she dreaded them, or tried in any way to soften them, they would have known how to manage her. But Flower addressed them much as she would have done menials in her kitchen at home. The mother, as well as the son, muttered under her breath—"Never see'd such a gel!" She dropped the baby into Flower's outstretched arms, and answered her query in a less surly tone than usual.

"For sure night air is bad for babes, and this little 'un is young. Yes, werry young and purty."

The woman pulled aside the white fluffy shawl; two soft clear brown eyes looked up at her, and a little mouth was curved to a radiant smile.

"Fore sure she's purty," said the woman. "Look, Patrick. She minds me o'—well, never mind. Missy, it ain't good for a babe like that to be out in the night air. You're best in the house, and so is the babe. The dawgs shan't touch yer. Come into the house, and I'll give yer what supper's going, and the babe, pretty crittur, shall have a drink of milk."

"I would not injure the baby," said Flower. She held both arms firm round it, and entered the smoky, dismal hut.

The wife of Micah Jones moved a stool in front of the fire, pushed Flower rather roughly down on it, and then proceeded to cut thick hunches of sour bread and cheese. This was quite the coarsest food Flower had ever eaten, and yet she never thought anything more delicious. While she ate the woman sat down opposite her.

"I'll take the babe now and feed it," she said. "The pretty dear must be hungry."

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It was not little Pearl's way to cry. It was her fashion to look tranquilly into all faces, and to take calmly every event, whether adverse or otherwise. When she looked at Flower she smiled, and she smiled again into the face of the rough woman who, in consequence, fed her tenderly with the best she had to give.

"Is the soup done?" said the rough man, suddenly coming forward. "It's soup I'm arter. It's soup as'll put life into Miss, and give her a mind to walk them miles to the nearest town."

The woman laughed back at her son.

"The soup's in the pot," she said. "You can give it a stir, Pat, if you will. Nathaniel will be in by-and-by, and he'll want his share. But you can take a bowl now, if you like, and give one to Missy."

"Ay," said the man, "soup's good; puts life into a body."

He fetched two little yellow bowls filled one for Flower, stirring it first with a pewter spoon.

"This'll put life into you, Miss," he said.

He handed the bowl of soup to the young girl. All this time the woman was bending over the baby. Suddenly she raised her head.

"'Tis a bonny babe," she said. "Ef I was you, Pat, I wouldn't stir Missy's soup. I'd give her your own bowl. I has no quarrel with Miss, and the babe is fair. Give her your own soup, Patrick."

"It's all right, mother, Miss wouldn't eat as much as in my bowl. You ain't 'ungry enough for that, be you, Miss?"

"I am very hungry," said Flower, who was gratefully drinking the hot liquid. "I could not touch this food if I was not *very* hungry. If I want more soup I suppose I can have some more from the pot where this was taken. What is the matter, woman? What are you staring at me for?"

"I think nought at all of you," said the woman, frowning, and drawing back, for Flower's tone was very rude. "But the babe is bonny. Here, take her back, she's like—but never mind. You'll be sleepy, maybe, and 'ud like to rest a bit. I meant yer no harm, but Patrick's powerful, and he and Nat, they does what they likes. They're the sons of Micah Jones, and he was a strong man in his day. You'd like to sleep, maybe, Missy. Here, Patrick, take the bowl from the girl's hand."

"I do feel very drowsy," said Flower. "I suppose it is from being out all day. This hut is smoky and dirty, but I'll just have a doze for five minutes. Please, Patrick, wake me at the end of five minutes, for I must, whatever happens, reach the nearest town before night."

As Flower spoke her eyes closed, and the woman, laying her back on some straw, put the baby into her arms.

"She'll sleep sound, pretty dear," she said. "Ef I was you I wouldn't harm her, just for the sake of the babe," she concluded.

"Why, mother, what's took you? I won't hurt Missy. It's her own fault ef she runs away, and steals the baby. That baby belongs to the doctor what lives in the Hollow; it's nought special, and you needn't be took up with it. Ah, here comes Nathaniel. Nat, I've found a lass wandering on the moor, and I brought her home, and now the mother don't want us to share the booty."

Nathaniel Jones was a man of very few words indeed. He had a fiercer, wilder eye than his brother, and his evidently was the dominant and ruling spirit.

"The moon's rising," he said; "she'll be at her full in half an hour. Do your dooty, mother, for we must be out of this, bag and baggage, in half an hour."

Without a word or a sigh, or even a glance of remorse, Mrs. Jones took the cap from Flower's head, and feeling around her neck discovered the gold chain which held the little bag of valuables. Without opening this she slipped it into her pocket. Flower's dainty shoes were then removed, and the woman looked covetously at the long, fine, cloth dress, but shook her head over it.

"I'd wake her if I took it," she said.

"No, you wouldn't, I drugged the soup well," said Pat.

"Well, anyhow, I'll leave her her dress. There's nought more but a handkerchief with a bit of lace on it."

"Take the baby's shawl," said Nathaniel, "and let us be off. If the moon goes down we won't see the track. Here, mother, I'll help myself to the wrap."

"No, you won't," said the woman. "You don't touch the babe with the pale face and the smile of Heaven. I'm ready; let's go."

The dogs were called, and the entire party strode in single file along a narrow path, which led away in a westerly direction over Peg-Top Moor.

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CHAPTER VI. WITHOUT HER TREASURE.

"There is a great fuss made about it all," said Polly.

This was her remark when her father left the pleasant picnic dinner and drove away over the moor in search of Flower.

"There is a great fuss made over it all. What is Flower more than any other girl? Why should she rule us all, and try to make things uncomfortable for us? No, David, you need not look at me like that. If Flower has got silly Australian notions in her head, she had better get rid of them as fast as possible. She is living with English people now, and English people all the world over won't put up with nonsense."

"It isn't Flower's ways I mean," said David. "Her ways and her thoughts aren't much, but it's—it's when she gets into a passion. There's no use talking about it—you have done it now, Polly!—but Flower's passions are awful."

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David's eyes filled slowly with tears.

"Oh, you are a cry-baby," said Polly. She knew she was making herself disagreeable all round. In her heart she admired and even loved David; but nothing would induce her to say she was sorry for any part she had taken in Flower's disappearance.

"Everything is as tiresome as possible," she said, addressing her special ally, Maggie. "There, Mag, you need not stare at me. Your brain will get as small as ever again if you don't take care, and I know staring in that stupid way you have is particularly weakening to the brain. You had better help George to pack up, for I suppose Nell is right, and we must all begin to think of getting home. Oh, dear, what a worry it is to have to put up with the whims of other people. Yes, I understand at last why father hesitated to allow the strangers to come here."

"I wouldn't grumble any more, if I were you, Polly," said Helen. "See how miserable David looks. I do hope father will soon find Flower. I did not know that David was so very fond of her."

"David is nervous," retorted Polly, shortly. Then she turned to and packed in a vigorous manner, and very soon after the little party started on their return walk home. It was decidedly a dull walk. Polly's gay spirits were fitful and forced; the rest of the party did not attempt to enjoy themselves. David lagged quite behind the others; and poor Maggie confided to George that somehow or other, she could not tell why, they were all turning their eyes reproachful-like on her. The sun had gone in now in the heavens, and the children, who had no sunshine in their hearts just then, had a vivid consciousness that it was late autumn, and that the summer was quite at an end.

As they neared the rise in the moor which hid Sleepy Hollow from view, David suddenly changed his position from the rear to the van. As they approached the house he stooped down, picked up a small piece of paper, looked at it, uttered a cry of fear and recognition, and ran off as fast as ever he could to the house.

"What a queer boy David is!" was on Polly's lips; but she could scarcely say the words before he came out again. His face was deadly white, he shook all over, and the words he tried to say only trembled on his lips.

"What is it, David?" said the twins, running up to him.

"She'll believe me now," said David.

He panted violently, his teeth chattered.

"Oh! David, you frighten us! What can be the matter? Polly, come here! Nell, come and tell us what is the matter with David."

The elder girls, and the rest of the children, collected in the porch. Polly, the tallest of all, looked over the heads of the others. She caught sight of David's face, and a sudden pain, a queer sense of fear, and the awakening of a late remorse, filled her breast.

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"What is it, David?" she asked, with the others; but her voice shook, and was scarcely audible.

"She's done it!" said David. "The baby's gone! It's Flower! She was in one of her passions, and

she has taken the baby away. I said she wasn't like other girls. Nurse thinks perhaps the baby'll die. What is it?—oh, Polly! what is it!" For Polly had given one short scream, and, pushing David and every one aside, rushed wildly into the house.

She did not hear the others calling after her; she heard nothing but a surging as of great waves in her ears, and David's words echoing along the passages and up the stairs "Perhaps the baby will die!" She did not see her father, who held out his arms to detain her. She pushed Alice aside without knowing that she touched her. In a twinkling she was at the nursery door; in a twinkling she was kneeling by the empty cot, and clasping the little frilled pillow on which baby's head used to rest passionately to her lips.

"It's true, then!" she gasped, at last. "I know now what David meant; I know now why he warned me. Oh Nursie! Nursie! it's my fault!"

"No, no, my darling!" said Nurse; "it's that dreadful young lady. But she'll bring her back. Sure, what else could she do, lovey? She'll bring the little one back, and, by the blessing of the good God, she'll be none the worse for this. Don't take on so, Miss Polly! Don't look like that, dear! Why, your looks fairly scare me."

"I'll be better in a minute," said Polly. "This is no time for feelings. I'll be quiet in a minute. Have you got any cold water? There's such a horrid loud noise in my ears."

She rushed across the room, poured a quantity of water into a basin, and laved her face and head.

"Now I can think," she said. "What did Flower do, Nurse? Tell me everything; tell me in very few words, please, for there isn't a moment—there isn't half a moment—to lose."

"It was this way, dear: she came into the room, and took baby into her arms, and asked for some dinner. She didn't seem no way taken with baby at first, but when I told her how much you loved our little Miss Pearl, she asked me to give her to her quite greedy-like, and ordered me to fetch some dinner for herself, for she was starving, she said. I offered that Alice should bring it; but no, she was all that I should choose something as would tempt her appetite, and she coaxed with that pretty way she have, and I went down to the kitchen myself to please her. I'll never forgive myself, never, to the longest day I live. I wasn't ten minutes gone, but when I come back with a nice little tray of curry, and some custard pie, Miss Flower and the baby were away. That's all—they hasn't been seen since."

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"How long ago is that, Nurse?"

"I couldn't rightly tell you, dearie—maybe two hours back. I ran all round the moor anywhere near, and so did every servant in the house, but since the Doctor come in they has done the thing properly. Now where are you going, Miss Polly, love?"

"To my father. I wish this horrid noise wouldn't go on in my head. Don't worry me, Nurse. I know it was my fault. I wouldn't listen to the warning, and I would provoke her, but don't scold me now until I have done my work."

Polly rushed downstairs.

"Where's father?" she asked of Bunny, who was sobbing violently, and clinging in a frantic manner to Firefly's skirts.

"I—I don't know. He's out."

"He's away on the moor," said Fly. "Polly, are you really anxious about baby Pearl?"

"I have no time to be anxious," said Polly. "I must find her first. I'll tell you then if I'm anxious. Where's Nell, where are the twins?"

"On the moor; they all went out with father."

"Which moor, the South or Peg-Top?"

"I think the South moor."

"All right, I'm going out too. What's the matter, Fly? Oh, you're not to come."

"Please, please, it's so horrid in the house, and Bunny does make my dress so sobby with crying into it."

"You're not to come. You are to stay here and do your best, your very best, for father and the others when they come home. If they don't meet me, say I've gone to look for baby and for Flower. I'll come back when I've found them. If *they* find baby and Flower, they might ask to have the church bells rung, then I'll know. Don't stare at me like that, Fly; it was my fault, so I must search until I find them."

Polly ran out of the house and down the lawn. Once again she was out on the moor. The great solitary commons stretched to right and left; they were everywhere, they filled the whole horizon, except just where Sleepy Hollow lay, with its belt of trees, its cultivated gardens, and just beyond the little village and the church with the square, gray tower. There was a great lump in Polly's throat, and a mist before her eyes. The dreadful beating was still going on in her heart, and the surging, ceaseless waves of sound in her ears.

Suddenly she fell on her knees.

"Please, God, give me back little Pearl. Please, God, save little Pearl. I don't want anything else; I don't even want father to forgive me, if You will save little Pearl."

Most earnest prayers bring a sense of comfort, and Polly did not feel quite so lonely when she stood again on her feet, with the bracken and the fern all round her.

She tried hard now to collect her thoughts; she made a valiant effort to feel calm and reasonable. [Pg 112]

"I can do nothing if I get so excited," she said to herself. "I must just fight with my anxious spirit. My heart must stay quiet, for my brain has got to work now. Let me see! where has Flower taken baby? Father and Nell and the others are all searching the South moor, so I will go on to Peg-Top. I will walk slowly, and I will look behind every clump of trees, and I will call Flower's name now and then; for I am sure, I am quite, quite sure that, however dreadful her passion may have been, if Flower is the least like me, she will be dreadfully sorry by now—dreadfully sorry and dreadfully frightened—so if she hears me calling she will be sure to answer. Oh, dear! oh, dear! here is my heart speaking again, and my head is in a whirl, and the noises are coming back into my ears. Oh! how fearfully I hate Flower! How could she, how could she have taken our darling little baby away? And yet—and yet I think I'd forgive Flower; I think I'd try to love her; I think I'd even tell her that I was the one who had done most wrong; I think I'd even go on my knees and beg Flower's pardon, if only I could hold baby to my heart again!"

By this time Polly was crying bitterly. These tears did the poor child good, relieving the pressure on her brain, and enabling her to think calmly and coherently. While this tempest of grief, however, effected these good results, it certainly did not improve her powers of observation; the fast-flowing tears blinded her eyes, and she stumbled along, completely forgetting the dangerous and uneven character of the ground over which she walked.

It was now growing dusk, and the dim light also added to poor Polly's dangers. Peg-Top Moor had many tracks leading in all directions. Polly knew several of these, and where they led, but she had now left all the beaten paths, and the consequence was that she presently found herself uttering a sharp and frightened cry, and discovered that she had fallen down a fairly steep descent. She was slightly stunned by her fall, and for a moment or two did not attempt to move. Then a dull pain in her ankle caused her to put her hand to it, and to struggle giddily to a sitting position.

"I'll be able to stand in a minute," she said to herself; and she pressed her hand to her forehead, and struggled bravely against the surging, waving sounds which had returned to her head.

"I can't sit here!" she murmured; and she tried to get to her feet.

In vain!—a sharp agony brought her, trembling and almost fainting, once more to a sitting posture. What was she to do?—how was she now to find Flower and the baby? She was alone on the moor, unable to stir. Perhaps her ankle was broken; certainly, it was sprained very badly.

CHAPTER VII.

MAGGIE TO THE RESCUE.

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When the Maybrights returned home from their disastrous picnic at Troublous Times Castle, Maggie and George brought up the rear. In consequence of their being some little way behind the others, Maggie did not at once know of the fact of Flower's disappearance with the baby. She was naturally a slow girl; ideas came to her at rare intervals; she even received startling and terrible news with a certain outward stolidity and calm. Still, Maggie was not an altogether purposeless and thoughtless maiden; thoughts occasionally drifted her way; ideas, when once born in her heart, were slow to die. When affection took root there it became a very sturdy plant. If there was any one in the world whom Maggie adored, it was her dear young mistress, Miss Polly Maybright. Often at night Maggie awoke, and thought, with feelings of almost worship, of this bright, impulsive young lady. How delightful that week had been when she and Polly had cooked, and housekeeped, and made cakes and puddings together! Would any one but Polly have forgiven her for taking that pound to save her mother's furniture? Would any one in all the world, except that dear, warm-hearted, impulsive Polly, have promised to do without a winter jacket in order to return that money to the housekeeping fund? Maggie felt that, stupid as she knew herself to be, slow as she undoubtedly was, she could really do great things for Polly. In Polly's cause her brain could awake, the inertia which more or less characterized her could depart. For Polly she could undoubtedly become a brave and active young person.

She was delighted with herself when she assisted Miss Maybright to descend from her bed-room window, and to escape with her on to the moor, but her delight and sense of triumph had not been proof against the solitude of the sad moor, against the hunger which was only to be satisfied with berries and spring water, and, above all, against the terrible apparition of the wife of Micah

Jones. What Maggie went, through in the hermit's hut, what terrors she experienced, were only known to Maggie's own heart. When, however, Mrs. Ricketts got back her daughter from that terrible evening's experience, she emphatically declared that "Mag were worse nor useless; that she seemed daft-like, and a'most silly, and that never, never to her dying day, would she allow Mag to set foot on them awful lonely commons again."

Mrs. Ricketts, however, was not a particularly obstinate character, and when Polly's bright face peeped round her door, and Polly eagerly, and almost curtly, demanded that Maggie should that very moment accompany her on a delightful picnic to Troublous Times Castle, and Maggie herself, with sparkling eyes and burning cheeks, was all agog to go, and was now inclined to pooh-pooh the terrors she had endured in the hermit's hut, there was nothing for Mrs. Ricketts to do but to forget her vow and send off the two young people with her blessing.

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"Eh, but she's a dear young lady," she said, under her breath, apostrophizing Miss Maybright. "And Mag do set wonderful store by her, and no mistake. It ain't every young lady as 'ud think of my Maggie when she's going out pleasuring; but bless Miss Polly! she seems fairly took up with my poor gel."

No face could look more radiant than Maggie's when she started for the picnic, but, on the other hand, no young person could look more thoroughly sulky and downcast than she did on her return. Mrs. Ricketts was just dishing up some potatoes for supper when Maggie flung open the door of the tiny cottage, walked across the room, and flung herself on a little settle by the fire.

"You're hungry, Mag," said Mrs. Ricketts, without looking up.

"No, I bean't," replied Maggie, shortly.

"Eh, I suppose you got your fill of good things out with the young ladies and gentlemen. It ain't your poor mother's way to have a bit of luck like that, and you never thought, I suppose, of putting a slice or two of plum cake, or maybe the half of a chicken, in your pocket, as a bit of a relish for your mother's supper. No, no, that ain't your way, Mag; you're all for self, and that I will say."

"No, I ain't mother. You has no call to talk so. How could I hide away chicken and plum cake, under Miss Polly's nose, so to speak. I was setting nigh to Miss Polly, mother, jest about the very middle of the feast. I had a place of honor close up to Miss Polly, mother."

"Eh, to be sure!" exclaimed Mrs. Ricketts.

She stopped dishing up the potatoes, wiped her brow, and turned to look at her daughter, with a slow expression of admiration in her gaze.

"Eh," she continued, "you has a way about you, Mag, with all your contrariness. Miss Polly Maybright thinks a sight on you, Mag; seems to me as if maybe she'd adopt you, and turn you into a real lady. My word, I have read of such things in story-books."

"You had better go on dishing up your supper, mother and not be talking nonsense like that. Miss Polly is a very good young lady, but she hasn't no thought of folly of that sort. Eh, dear me," continued Maggie, yawning prodigiously "I'm a bit tired, and no mistake."

"That's always the way," responded Mrs. Ricketts. "Tired and not a word to say after your pleasuring; no talking about what happened, and what Miss Helen wore, and if Miss Firefly has got on her winter worsted stockings yet, and not a mention of them foreigners as we're all dying to hear of, and not a word of what victuals you ate, nor nothing. You're a selfish girl, Maggie Ricketts, and that I will say, though I am your mother."

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"I'm sleepy," responded Maggie, who seemed by no means put out by this tirade on the part of her mother. "I'll go up to bed if you don't mind, mother. No, I said afore as I wasn't hungry."

She left the room, crept up the step-ladder to the loft, where the family slept, and opening the tiny dormer window, put her elbows on the sill and gazed out on the gathering gloom which was settling on the moor.

The news of the calamity which had befallen Polly had reached Maggie's ears. Maggie thought only of Polly in this trouble; it was Polly's baby who was lost, it was Polly whose heart would be broken. She did not consider the others in the matter. It was Polly, the Polly whom she so devotedly loved, who filled her whole horizon. When the news was told her she scarcely said a word; a heavy, "Eh!—you don't say!" dropped from her lips. Even George, who was her informer, wondered if she had really taken in the extent of the catastrophe; then she had turned on her heel and walked down to her mother's cottage.

She was not all thoughtless and all indifferent, however. While she looked so stoical and heavy she was patiently working out an idea, and was nerving herself for an act of heroism.

Now as she leant her elbows on the sill by the open window, cold Fear came and stood by her side. She was awfully frightened, but her resolve did not falter. She meant to slip away in the dusk and walk across Peg-Top Moor to the hermit's hut. An instinct, which she did not try either to explain away or prove, led her to feel sure that she should find Polly's baby in the hermit's hut. She would herself, unaided and alone, bring little Pearl back to her sister.

It would have been quite possible for Maggie to have imparted her ideas to George, to her

mother, or to some of the neighbors. There was not a person in the village who would not go to the rescue of the Doctor's child. Maggie might have accompanied a multitude, had she so willed it, to the hermit's hut. But then the honor and glory would not have been hers; a little reflection of it might shine upon her, but she would not bask, as she now hoped to do, in its full rays.

She determined to go across the lonely moor which she so dreaded alone, for she alone must bring back Pearl to Polly.

Shortly before the moon arose, and long after sunset, Maggie crept down the attic stairs, unlatched the house door, and stepped out into the quiet village street. Her fear was that some neighbors would see her, and either insist on accompanying her on her errand, or bring her home. The village, however, was very quiet that night, and at nine o'clock, when Maggie started on her search, there were very few people out. [Pg 116]

She came quickly to the top of the small street, crossed a field, squeezed through a gap in the hedge, and found herself on the borders of Peg-Top Moor. The moon was bright by this time, and there was no fear of Maggie not seeing. She stepped over the ground briskly, a solitary little figure with a long shadow ever stalking before her, and a beating, defiant heart in her breast. She had quite determined that whatever agony she went through, her fears should not conquer her; she would fight them down with a strong hand, she would go forward on her road, come what might.

Maggie was an ignorant little cottager, and there were many folk-lore tales abroad with regard to the moor which might have frightened a stouter heart than hers. She believed fully in the ghost who was to be seen when the moon was at the full, pacing slowly up and down, through that plantation of trees at her right; she had unswerving faith in the bogey who uttered terrific cries, and terrified the people who were brave enough to walk at night through Deadman's Glen. But she believed more fully still in Polly, in Polly's love and despair, and in the sacredness of the errand which she was now undertaking to deliver her from her trouble.

From Mrs. Ricketts' cottage to the hermit's hut there lay a stretch of moorland covering some miles in extent, and Maggie knew that the lonely journey she was taking could not come to a speedy end.

She knew, however, that she had got on the right track and that by putting one foot up and one foot down, as the children do who want to reach London town, she also at last would come to her destination.

The moon shone brightly, and the little maid, her shadow always going before her, stepped along bravely.

Now and then that same shadow seemed to assume gigantic and unearthly proportions, but at other times it wore a friendly aspect, and somewhat comforted the young traveler.

"It's more or less part of me," quoth Maggie, "and I must say as I'm glad I have it, it's better nor nought; but oh ain't the moon fearsome, and don't my heart a-flutter, and a pit-a-pat! I'm quite sure now, yes, I'm quite gospel sure that ef I was to meet the wife of Micah Jones, I'd fall flat down dead at her feet. Oh, how fearsome is this moor! Well, ef I gets hold of Miss Pearl I'll never set foot an it again. No, not even for a picnic, and the grandest seat at the feast, and the best of the victuals."

The moon shone on, and presently the interminable walk came to a conclusion. Maggie reached the hermit's hut, listened with painful intentness for the baying of some angry dogs, pressed her nose against the one pane of glass in the one tiny window, saw nothing, heard nothing, finally lifted the latch, and went in.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HERMIT'S HUT.

It was perfectly dark inside the hut, for the little window, through which the moon might have shone, was well shrouded with a piece of old rug. It was perfectly dark, and Maggie, although she had stumbled a good deal in lifting the latch, and having to descend a step without knowing it, had all but tumbled headlong into the tiny abode, had evoked no answering sound or stir of any sort.

She stood still for a moment in the complete darkness to recover breath, and to consider what she was to do. Strange to say, she did not feel at all frightened now; the shelter of the four walls gave her confidence. There were no dogs about, and Maggie felt pretty sure that the wife of Micah Jones was also absent, for if she were in the hut, and awake, she would be sure to say, "Who's there?" quoth Maggie, to her own heart; "and ef she's in the hut, and asleep, why it wouldn't be like her not to snore."

The little girl stood still for a full minute; during this time she was collecting her faculties, and that brain, which Polly was pleased to call so small, was revolving some practical schemes.

"Ef I could only lay my hand on a match, now," she thought.

She suddenly remembered that in her mother's cottage the match-box was generally placed behind a certain brick near the fireplace; it was a handy spot, both safe and dry, and Maggie, since her earliest days, had known that if there was such a luxury as a box of matches in the house, it would be found in this corner. She wondered if the wife of Micah Jones could also have adopted so excellent a practice. She stepped across the little hut, felt with her hands right and left, poked about all round the open fireplace, and at last, joy of joys, not only discovered a box with a few matches in it, but an end of candle besides.

In a moment she had struck a match, had applied it to the candle, and then, holding the flickering light high, looked around the little hut.

A girl, crouched up against the wall on some straw, was gazing at her with wide-open terrified eyes; the girl was perfectly still, not a muscle in her body moved, only her big frightened eyes gazed fixedly at Maggie. She wore no hat on her head; her long yellow hair lay in confusion over her shoulders; her feet were shoeless, and one arm was laid with a certain air of protection on a wee white bundle on the straw by her side.

"Who are you?" said Flower, at last. "Are you a ghost, or are you the daughter of the dreadful woman who lives in this hut? See! I had a long sleep. She put me to sleep, I know she did; and while I was asleep she stole my purse and rings, and my hat and shoes. But that's nothing, that's nothing at all. While I was asleep, baby here died. I know she's quite dead, she has not stirred nor moved for hours, at least it seems like hours. What are you staring at me in that rude way for, girl? I'm quite sure the baby, Polly's little sister, is dead."

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Nobody could speak in a more utterly apathetic way than Flower. Her voice neither rose nor fell. She poured out her dreary words in a wailing monotone.

"I know that it's my fault," she added; "Polly's little sister has died because of me."

She still held her hand over the white bundle.

"I'm terrified, but not of you," she added; "you may be a ghost, stealing in here in the dark; or you may be the daughter of that dreadful woman. But whoever you are, it's all alike to me. I got into one of my passions. I promised my mother when she died that I'd never get into another, but I did, I got into one to-day. I was angry with Polly Maybright; I stole her little sister away, and now she's dead. I am so terrified at what I have done that I never can be afraid of anything else. You need not stare so at me, girl; whoever you are I'm not afraid of you."

Maggie had now found an old bottle to stick her candle into.

"I am Miss Polly's little kitchen-maid, Maggie Ricketts," she replied. "I ain't a ghost, and I haven't nothing to say to the wife of Micah Jones. As to the baby, let me look at it. You're a very bad young lady, Miss Flower, but I has come to fetch away the baby, ef you please, so let me look at it this minute. Oh, my, how my legs do ache; that moor is heavy walking! Give me the baby, please, Miss Flower. It ain't your baby, it's Miss Polly's."

"So, you're Maggie?" said Flower. There was a queer shake in her voice. "It was about you I was so angry. Yes, you may look at the baby; take it and look at it, but I don't want to see it, not if it's dead."

Maggie instantly lifted the little white bundle into her arms, removed a portion of the shawl, and pressed her cheek against the cheek of the baby.

The little white cheek was cold, but not deadly cold, and some faint, faint breath still came from the slightly parted lips.

When Maggie had anything to do, no one could be less nervous and more practical.

"The baby ain't dead at all," she explained. "She's took with a chill, and she's very bad, but she ain't dead. Mother has had heaps of babies, and I know what to do. Little Miss Pearl must have a hot bath this minute."

"Oh, Maggie," said Flower. "Oh, Maggie, Maggie!"

Her frozen indifference, her apathy, had departed. She rose from her recumbent position, pushed back her hair and stood beside the other young girl, with eyes that glowed, and yet brimmed over with tears.

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"Oh, what a load you have taken off my heart!" she exclaimed. "Oh, what a darling you are! Kiss me, Maggie, kiss me, dear, dear Maggie."

"All right, Miss. You was angry with me afore, and now you're a-hugging of me, and I don't see no more sense in one than t'other. Ef you'll hold the baby up warm to you, Miss, and breathe ag'in her cheek werry gentle-like, you'll be a-doing more good than a-kissing of me. I must find sticks, and I must light up a fire, and I must do it this minute, or we won't have no baby to talk about, nor fuss over."

Maggie's rough and practical words were perhaps the best possible tonic for Flower at this moment. She had been on the verge of a fit of hysterics, which might have been as terrible in its consequences as either her passion or her despair. Now trembling slightly, she sat down on the little stool which Maggie had pulled forward for her, took the baby in her arms, and partly opening the shawl which covered it, breathed on its white face.

The little one certainly was alive, and when Flower's breath warmed it, its own breathing became stronger.

Meanwhile, Maggie bustled about. The hermit's hut, now that she had something to do in it, seemed no longer at all terrible. After a good search round she found some sticks, and soon a bright fire blazed and crackled, and filled the tiny house with light and warmth. A pot of water was put on the fire to warm, and then Maggie looked round for a vessel to bathe the baby in. She found a little wooden tub, which she placed ready in front of the fire.

"So far, so good!" she exclaimed; "but never a sight of a towel is there to be seen. Ef you'll give me the baby now, Miss, I'll warm her limbs a bit afore I put her in the bath. I don't know how I'm to dry her, I'm sure, but a hot bath she must have."

"I have got a white petticoat on," said Flower. "Would that be any use?"

"Off with it this minute, then, Miss; it's better nor nought. Now, then, my lamb! my pretty! see ef Maggie don't pull you round in a twinkling!"

She rubbed and chafed the little creature's limbs, and soon baby opened her eyes, and gave a weak, piteous cry.

"I wish I had something to give her afore I put her in the bath," said Maggie. "There's sure to be sperits of some sort in a house like this. You look round you and see ef you can't find something, Miss Flower."

Flower obediently searched in the four corners of the hut.

"I can't see anything!" she exclaimed. "The place seems quite empty."

"Eh, dear!" said Maggie: "you don't know how to search. Take the baby, and let me."

She walked across the cabin, thrust her hand into some straw which was pressed against the rafters, pulled out an old tin can and opened it. [Pg 120]

"Eh, what's this?" she exclaimed. "Sperits? Now we'll do. Give me the baby back again, Miss Flower, and fetch a cup, ef you please."

Flower did so.

"Put some hot water into it. Why, you ain't very handy! Miss Polly's worth a dozen of you! Now pour in a little of the sperit from the tin can—not too much. Let me taste it. That will do. Now, baby—now, Miss Polly's darling baby!—I'll wet your lips with this, and you'll have your bath, and you'll do fine!"

The mixture was rubbed on the blue lips of the infant, and Maggie even managed to get her to swallow a few drops. Then, the bath being prepared by Flower, under a shower of scathing ridicule from Maggie, who had very small respect, in any sense of the word, for her assistant, the baby was put into it, thoroughly warmed, rubbed up, and comforted, and then, with the white fleecy shawl wrapped well around her, she fell asleep in Maggie's arms.

"She'll do for the present," said the kitchen-maid, leaning back and mopping a little moisture from her own brow. "She'll do for a time, but she won't do for long, for she'll want milk and all kinds of comforts. And I tell you what it is, Miss Flower, that my master and Miss Polly can't be kept a-fretting for this child until the morning. Some one must go at once, and tell 'em where she is, and put 'em out of their misery, and the thing is this: is it you, or is it me, that's to do the job?"

"But," said Flower—she had scarcely spoken at all until now—"cannot we both go? Cannot we both walk home, and take the baby with us?"

"No, Miss, not by no means. Not a breath of night air must touch the cheeks of this blessed lamb. Either you or me, Miss Flower, must walk back to Sleepy Hollow, and tell 'em about the baby, and bring back Nurse, and what's wanted for the child. Will you hold her, Miss? and shall I trot off at once?—for there ain't a minute to be lost."

"No," said Flower, "I won't stay in the hut. It is dreadful to me. I will go and tell the Doctor and Polly."

"As you please, Miss. Maybe it is best as I should stay with little Missy. You'll find it awful lonesome out on the moor, Miss Flower, and I expect when you get near Deadman's Glen as you'll scream out with terror; there's a bogey there with a head three times as big as his body, and long arms, twice as long as they ought to be, and he tears up bits of moss and fern, and flings them at yer, and if any of them, even the tiniest bit, touches yer, why you're dead before the year is out. Then there's the walking ghost and the shadowy maid, and the brown lady, the same color as the bracken when it's withering up, and—and—why, what's the matter, Miss Flower?"

"Only I respected you before you talked in that way," said Flower. "I respected you very much,

and I was awfully ashamed of not being able to eat my dinner with you. But when you talk in such an awfully silly way I don't respect you, so you had better not go on. Please tell me, as well as you can, how I'm to get to Sleepy Hollow, and I'll start off at once."

"You must beware of the brown lady, all the same."

"No, I won't beware of her; I'll spring right into her arms."

"And the bogey in Deadman's Glen. For Heaven's sake, Miss Flower, keep to the west of Deadman's Glen."

"If Deadman's Glen is a short cut to Sleepy Hollow, I'll walk through it. Maggie, do you want Nurse to come for little Pearl, or not? I don't mind waiting here till morning; it does not greatly matter to me. I was running away, you know."

"You must go at once," said Maggie, recalled to common sense by another glance at the sleeping child. "The baby's but weakly, and there ain't nothing here as I can give her, except the sperits and water, until Nurse comes. I'll lay her just for a minute on the straw here, and go out with you and put you on the track. You follow the track right on until you see the lights in the village. Sleepy Hollow's right in the village, and most likely there'll be a light in the Doctor's study window; be quick, for Heaven's sake, Miss Flower?"

"Yes, I'm off. Oh, Maggie, Maggie! what do you think? That dreadful woman has stolen my shoes. I forgot all about it until this minute. What shall I do? I can't walk far in my stockings."

"Have my boots, Miss; they're hob-nailed, and shaped after my foot, which is broad, as it should be, seeing as I'm only a kitchen-maid. But they're strong, and they are sure to fit you fine."

"I could put my two feet into one of them," responded Flower, curling her proud lip once again disdainfully. But then she glanced at the baby, and a queer shiver passed over her; her eyes grew moist, her hands trembled.

"I will put the boots on," she said. And she slipped her little feet, in their dainty fine silk stockings, into Maggie's shoes.

"Good-by, Miss; come back as soon as you can," called out the faithful waiting-maid, and Flower set off across the lonely moor.

CHAPTER IX.

AN OLD SONG.

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It took a great deal to frighten Polly Maybright; no discipline, no hard words, no punishments, had ever been able to induce the smallest sensation of fear in her breast. As to the moor, she had been brought up on it; she had drank in its air, and felt its kindly breath on her cheeks from her earliest days. The moors were to Polly like dear, valued, but somewhat stern, friends. To be alone, even at night, in one of the small ravines of Peg-Top Moor had little in itself to alarm the moorland child.

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It took Polly some time to realize that she was absolutely unable to stir a step. Struggle as she might, she could not put that badly-injured foot to the ground. Even she, brave and plucky as she was, had not the nerve to undergo this agony. She could not move, therefore she could do nothing at present to recover little Pearl. This was really the thought which distressed her. As to sleeping with her head pressed against the friendly bracken, or staying on Peg-Top Moor all night, these were small considerations. But not to be able to stir a step to find the baby, to feel that Flower was carrying the baby farther and farther away, and that Polly's chance of ever seeing her again was growing less and less, became at last a thought of such agony that the poor little girl could scarcely keep from screaming aloud.

"And it was all my fault!" she moaned. "I forgot what father said about climbing the highest mountain. When David came to me, and told me that Flower was subject to those awful passions, I forgot all about my mountain-climbing. I did not recognize that I had come to a dangerous bit, so that I wanted the ropes of prayer and the memory of mother to pull me over it. No, I did nothing but rejoice in the knowledge that I didn't much like Flower, and that I was very, very glad to tease her. Now I am punished. Oh, oh, what shall I do? Oh, if baby is lost! If baby dies, I shall die too! Oh, I think I'm the most miserable girl in all the world! What shall I do? Why did mother go away? Why did Flower come here? Why did I want her to come? I made a mess of the housekeeping, and now I have made a mess of the visit of the strangers. Oh, I'm the sort of girl who oughtn't to go a step alone!—I really, really am! I think I'm the very weakest sort of girl in all the world!"

Polly sobbed and sobbed. It was not her custom to give way thus utterly, but she was in severe pain of body, and she had got a great shock when the loss of little Pearl had been announced by

David.

"What shall I do?" she moaned and sobbed. "Oh, I'm the sort of girl who oughtn't to go a step alone."

While she cried all by herself on the moor, and the friendly stars looked down at her, and the moon came out and shone on her poor forsaken little figure, an old verse she used to say in her early childhood returned to her memory. It was the verse of a hymn—a hymn her mother was fond of, and used often to sing, particularly about the time of the New Year, to the children.

Mrs. Maybright had a beautiful voice, and on Sunday evenings she sang many hymns, with wonderful pathos and feeling, to her children. Polly, who cared for music on her own account, had loved to listen. At these times she always looked hungrily into her mother's face, and a longing and a desire for the best things of all awoke in her breast. It was at such times as these that she made resolves, and thought of climbing high and being better than others.

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Since her mother's death, Polly could not bear to listen to hymns. In church she had tried to shut her ears; her lips were closed tight, and she diligently read to herself some other part of the service. For her mother's sake, the hymns, with that one beautiful voice silent, were torture to her; but Polly was a very proud girl, and no one, not even her father, who now came nearest to her in all the world, guessed what she suffered.

Now, lying on the moor, her mother's favorite hymn seemed to float down from the stars to her ears:

"I know not the way I am going,
But well do I know my Guide;
With a trusting faith I give my hand
To the loving Friend at my side."

"The only thing that I say to Him
As He takes it is, 'Hold it fast!
Suffer me not to lose my way,
And bring me home at last!'"

It did not seem at all to Polly that she was repeating these words herself; rather they seemed to be said to her gently, slowly, distinctly, by a well-loved and familiar voice.

It was true, then, there was a Guide, and those who were afraid to go alone could hold a Hand which would never lead them astray.

Her bitter sobs came more quietly as she thought of this. Gradually her eyes closed, and she fell asleep.

When Flower started across the moor it was quite true that she was not in the least afraid. A great terror had come to her that night; during those awful minutes when she feared the baby was dead, the terror of the deed she had done had almost stunned her; but when Maggie came and relieved her of her worst agony, a good deal of her old manner and a considerable amount of her old haughty, defiant spirit had returned.

Flower was more or less uncivilized; there was a good deal of the wild and of the untamed about her; and now that the baby was alive, and likely to do well, overwhelming contrition for the deed she had done no longer oppressed her.

She stepped along as quickly as her uncomfortable boots would admit. The moonlight fell full on her slender figure, and cast a cold radiance over her uncovered head. Her long, yellow hair floated down over her shoulders; she looked wonderfully ethereal, almost unearthly, and had any of the villagers been abroad, they might well have taken her for one of the ghosts of the moor.

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Flower had a natural instinct for finding her way, and, aided by Maggie's directions, she steered in a straight course for the village. Not a soul was abroad; she was alone, in a great solitude.

The feeling gave her a certain sense of exhilaration. From the depths of her despair her easily influenced spirits sprang again to hope and confidence. After all, nothing very dreadful had happened. She must struggle not to give way to intemperate feelings. She must bear with Polly! she must put up with Maggie. It was all very trying, of course, but it was the English way. She walked along faster and faster, and now her lips rose in a light song, and now again she ran, eager to get over the ground. When she ran her light hair floated behind her, and she looked less and less like a living creature.

Polly had slept for nearly two hours. She awoke to hear a voice singing, not the sweet, touching, high notes which had seemed to fall from the stars to comfort her, but a wild song:

"Oh, who will up and follow me?
Oh, who will with me ride?
Oh, who will up and follow me
To win a bonny bride?"

For a moment Polly's heart stood still; then she started forward with a glad and joyful cry.

"It is Flower! Flower coming back again with little Pearl!" she said, in a voice of rapture. "That is

Flower's song and Flower's voice, and she wouldn't sing so gayly if baby was not quite, quite well, and if she was not bringing her home."

Polly rose, as well as she could, to a sitting posture, and shouted out in return:

"Here I am, Flower. Come to me. Bring me baby at once."

Even Flower, who in many respects had nerves of iron, was startled by this sudden apparition among the bracken. For a brief instant she pressed her hand to her heart. Were Maggie's tales true? Were there really queer and unnatural creatures to be found on the moor?

"Come here, Flower, here! I have sprained my ankle. What are you afraid of?" shouted Polly again. Then Flower sprang to her side, knelt down by her, and took her cold hand in hers. Flower's slight fingers were warm; she was glowing all over with life and exercise.

"Where's baby?" said Polly, a sickly fear stealing over her again when she saw that the queer girl was alone.

"Baby? She's in the hermit's hut with Maggie. Don't scold me, Polly. I'm very sorry I got into a passion."

Polly pushed Flower's fingers a little away.

"I don't want to be angry," she said. "I've been asking God to keep me from being angry. I did wrong myself, I did very wrong, only you did worse; you did worse than I did, Flower."

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"I don't see that at all. At any rate, I have said I am sorry. No one is expected to beg pardon twice. How is it you are out here, lying on the moor, Polly? Are you mad?"

"No. I came out to look for baby, and for you."

"But why are you here? You could not find us in that lazy fashion."

"Look at my foot; the moonlight shines on it. See, it is twisted all round. I fell from a height and hurt myself. I have been lying here for hours."

"Poor Polly! I am really sorry. I once strained my foot like that. The pain was very bad—very, very bad. Mother kept my foot on her knee all night; she bathed it all night long; in the morning it was better."

"Please, Flower, don't mind about my foot now. Tell me about baby. Is she ill? Have you injured her?"

"I don't know. I suppose I did wrong to take her out like that. I said before, I was sorry. I was frightened about her, awfully frightened, until Maggie came in. I was really afraid baby was dead. I don't want to speak of it. It wasn't true. Don't look at me like that. Maggie came, and said that little Pearl lived. I was so relieved that I kissed Maggie, yes, actually, although she is only a kitchen-maid. Maggie got a warm bath ready, and put baby in, and when I left the hut she was sound asleep. Maggie knew exactly what to do for her. Fancy my kissing her, although she is only a kitchen-maid!"

"She is the dearest girl in the world!" said Polly. "I think she is noble. Think of her going to the hermit's hut, and finding baby, and saving baby's life. Oh, she is the noblest girl in the world, miles and miles above you and me!"

"You can speak for yourself. I said she behaved very well. It is unnecessary to compare her to people in a different rank of life. Now, do you think you can lean on me, and so get back to Sleepy Hollow?"

"No, Flower. I cannot possibly stir. Look at my foot; it is twisted the wrong way."

"Then I must leave you, for Maggie has sent me in a great hurry to get milk, and comforts of all sorts, for baby."

"Please don't stay an instant. Run, Flower. Why did you stay talking so long? If father is in the house, you can tell him, and he will come, I know, and carry me home. But, oh! get everything that is wanted for baby first of all. I am not of the smallest consequence compared to baby. Do run, Flower; do be quick. It frets me so awfully to see you lingering here when baby wants her comforts."

"I shan't be long," said Flower. She gathered up her skirts, and sped down the path, and Polly gave a sigh of real relief.

CHAPTER X.

LOOKING AT HERSELF.

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That night, which was long remembered in the annals of the Maybright family as one of the dreariest and most terrible they had ever passed through, came to an end at last. With the early dawn Polly was brought home, and about the same time Nurse and Maggie reappeared with baby on the scene.

Flower, after she had briefly told her tidings, went straight up to her own room, where she locked the door, and remained deaf to all entreaties on David's part that he might come in and console her.

"She's always dreadful after she has had a real bad passion," he explained to Fly, who was following him about like a little ghost. "I wish she would let me in. She spends herself so when she is in a passion that she is quite weak afterwards. She ought to have a cup of tea; I know she ought."

But it was in vain that David knocked, and that little Fly herself, even though she felt that she hated Flower, brought the tea. There was no sound at the other side of the locked door, and after a time the anxious watchers went away.

At that moment, however, had anybody been outside, they might have seen pressed against the window-pane in that same room a pale but eager face. Had they looked, too, they might have wondered at the hard lines round the young, finely-cut lips, and yet the eager, pleading watching in the eyes.

There was a stir in the distance—the far-off sound of wheels. Flower started to her feet, slipped the bolt of her door, ran downstairs, and was off and away to meet the covered carriage which was bringing baby home.

She called to George, who was driving it, to stop. She got in, and seated herself beside Nurse and baby.

"How is she? Will she live?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"God grant it!" replied the Nurse. "What are you doing, Miss Flower? No, you shan't touch her."

"I must! Give her to me this moment. There is Dr. Maybright. Give me baby this moment. I must, I *will*, have her!"

She almost snatched the little creature out of Nurse's astonished arms, and as the carriage drew up at the entrance steps sprang out, and put the baby into Dr. Maybright's arms.

"There!" she said; "I took her away, but I give her back. I was in a passion and angry when I took her away; now I repent, and am sorry, and I give her back to you? Don't you see, I can't do more than give her back to you? That is our way out in Victoria. Don't you slow English people understand? I was angry; now I am sorry. Why do you all stand round and stare at me like that? Can anybody be more than sorry, or do more than give back what they took?"

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"It is sometimes impossible to give back what we took away, Flower," replied the Doctor, very gravely.

He was standing in the midst of his children; his face was white; his eyes had a strained look in them; the strong hands with which he clasped little Pearl trembled. He did not look again at Flower, who shrank away as if she had received a blow, and crept upstairs.

For the rest of the day she was lost sight of; there was a great deal of commotion and excitement. Polly, when she was brought home, was sufficiently ill and suffering to require the presence of a doctor; little Pearl showed symptoms of cold, and for her, too, a physician prescribed.

Why not Dr. Maybright? The children were not accustomed to strange faces and unfamiliar voices when they were ill or in pain. Polly had a curious feeling when the new doctor came to see her; he prescribed and went away. Polly wondered if the world was coming to an end; she was in greater pain than she had ever endured in her life, and yet she felt quiet and peaceful. Had she gone up a step or two of the mountain she so longed to climb? Did she hear the words of her mother's favorite song, and was a Guide—the Guide—holding her childish hand?

The hour of the long day passed somehow.

If there was calm in Polly's room, and despair more or less in poor Flower's, the rest of the house was kept in a state of constant excitement. The same doctor came back again; doors were shut and opened quickly; people whispered in the corridors. As the hours flew on, no one thought of Flower in her enforced captivity, and even Polly, but for Maggie's ceaseless devotion, might have fared badly.

All day Flower Dalrymple remained in her room. She was forgotten at meal-times. Had David been at home, this would not have been the case; but Helen had sent David and her own little brothers to spend the day at Mrs. Jones's farm. Even the wildest spirits can be tamed and brought to submission by the wonderful power of hunger, and so it came to pass that in the evening a disheveled-looking girl opened the door of her pretty room over the porch, and slipped along the passages and downstairs. Flower went straight to the dining-room; she intended to provide herself with bread and any other food she could find, then to return to her solitary musings. She thought herself extremely neglected, and the repentance and sense of shame which she had more or less experienced in the morning and the memory of Dr. Maybright's words and

the look in her grave eyes had faded under a feeling of being unloved, forsaken, forgotten. Even David had never come near her—David, who lived for her. Was she not his queen as well as sister? Was he not her dutiful subject as well as her little brother?

All the long day that Flower had spent in solitude her thoughts grew more and more bitter, and only hunger made her now forsake her room. She went into the dining-room; it was a long, low room, almost entirely lined with oak. There was a white cloth on the long center table, in the middle of which a lamp burnt dimly; the French windows were open; the blinds were not drawn down. As Flower opened the door, a strong cold breeze caused the lamp to flare up and smoke, the curtains to shake, and a child to move in a restless, fretful fashion on her chair. The child was Firefly; her eyes were so swollen with crying that they were almost invisible under their heavy red lids; her hair was tossed; the rest of her little thin face was ghastly pale.

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"Is that you, Flower?" she exclaimed. "Are you going to stay here? If you are, I'll go away."

"What do you mean?" said Flower. "*You* go away? You can go or stay, just as you please. I have come here because I want some food, and because I've been shamefully neglected and starved all day. Ring the bell, please, Fly. I really must order up something to eat."

Fly rose from her chair. She had long, lanky legs and very short petticoats, and as she stood half leaning against the wall, she looked so forlorn, pathetic, and yet comical, that Flower, notwithstanding her own anger and distress, could not help bursting out laughing.

"What is the matter?" she said. "What an extraordinary little being you are! You look at me as if you were quite afraid of me. For pity's sake, child, don't stare at me in that grewsome fashion. Ring the bell, as I tell you, and then if you please you can leave the room."

There was a very deep leather arm-chair near the fireplace. Into this now Flower sank. She leant her head comfortably against its cushions, and gazed at Firefly with a slightly sarcastic expression.

"Then you don't know!" said Fly, suddenly. "You sit there and look at me, and you talk of eating, as if any one could eat. You don't know. You wouldn't sit there like that if you really knew."

"I think you are the stupidest little creature I ever met!" responded Flower. "I'm to know something, and it's wonderful that I care to eat. I tell you, child, I haven't touched food all day, and I'm starving. What's the matter? Speak! I'll slap you if you don't."

"There's bread on the sideboard," said Fly. "I'm sorry you're starving. It's only that father is ill; that—that he's very ill. I don't suppose it is anything to you, or you wouldn't have done it."

"Give me that bread," said Flower. She turned very white, snatched a piece out of Fly's hand, and put it to her lips. She did not swallow it, however. A lump seemed to rise in her throat.

"I'm faint for want of food," she said in a minute. "I'd like some wine. If David was here, he'd give it to me. What's that about your father? Ill? He was quite well this morning; he spoke to me."

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She shivered.

"I'm awfully faint," she said in a moment. "Please, Fly, be merciful. Give me half a glass of sherry."

Fly started, rushed to the sideboard, poured a little wine into a glass, and brought it to Flower.

"There!" she said in a cold though broken-hearted voice. "But you needn't faint; he's not your father; you wouldn't have done it if he was your father."

Flower tossed off the wine.

"I'm better now," she said.

Then she rose from the deep arm-chair, stood up, and put her two hands on Fly's shoulder.

"What have I done? What do you accuse me of?"

"Don't! You hurt me, Flower; your hands are so hard."

"I'll take them off. What have I done?"

"We are awfully sorry you came here. We all are; we all are."

"Yes? you can be sorry or glad, just as you please! What have I done?"

"You have made father, our own father—you have made him ill. The doctor thinks perhaps he'll die, and in any case he will be blind."

"What horrid things you say, child! I haven't done this."

"Yes. Father was out all last night. You took baby away, and he went to look for her, and he wasn't well before, and he got a chill. It was a bad chill, and he has been ill all day. You did it, but he wasn't your father. We are all so dreadfully sorry that you came here."

Flower's hands dropped to her sides. Her eyes curiously dilated, looked past Fly, gazing so intently at something which her imagination conjured up that the child glanced in a frightened way over her shoulder.

"What's the matter, Flower? What are you looking at?"

"Myself."

"But you can't see yourself."

"I can. Never mind. Is this true what you have been telling me?"

"Yes, it's quite true. I wish it was a dream, and I might wake up out of it."

"And you all put this thing at my door?"

"Yes, of course. Dr. Strong said—Dr. Strong has been here twice this evening—he said it was because of last night."

"Sometimes we can never give back what we take away." These few words came back to Flower now.

"And you all hate me?" she said, after a pause.

"We don't love you, Flower; how could we?"

"You hate me?"

"I don't know. Father wouldn't like us to hate anybody."

"Where's Helen?"

"She's in father's room."

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"And Polly?"

"Polly is in bed. She's ill, too, but not in danger, like father. The doctor says that Polly is not to know about father for at any rate a day, so please be careful not to mention this to her, Flower."

"No fear!"

"Polly is suffering a good deal, but she's not unhappy, for she doesn't know about father."

"Is baby very ill, too?"

"No. Nurse says that baby has escaped quite wonderfully. She was laughing when I saw her last. She has only a little cold."

"I am glad that I gave her to your father myself," said Flower, in a queer, still voice. "I'm glad of that. Is David anywhere about?"

"No. He's at the farm. He's to sleep there to-night with Bob and Bunny, for there mustn't be a stir of noise in the house."

"Well, well, I'd have liked to say good-by to David. You're quite sure, Fly, that you all think it was I made your father ill?"

"Why, of course. You know it was."

"Yes, I know. Good-by, Fly."

"Good-night, you mean. Don't you want something to eat?"

"No. I'm not hungry now. It isn't good-night; it's good-by."

Flower walked slowly down the long, low, dark room, opened the door, shut it after her, and disappeared.

Fly stood for a moment in an indifferent attitude at the table. She was relieved that Flower had at last left her, and took no notice of her words.

Flower went back to her room. Again she shut and locked her door. The queer mood which had been on her all day, half repentance, half petulance, had completely changed. It takes a great deal to make some people repent, but Flower Dalrymple was now indeed and in truth facing the consequences of her own actions. The words she had said to Fly were quite true. She had looked at herself. Sometimes that sight is very terrible. Her fingers trembled, her whole body shook, but she did not take a moment to make up her mind. They all hated her, but not more than she hated herself. They were quite right to hate her, quite right to feel horror at her presence. Her mother had often spoken to her of the consequences of unbridled passion, but no words that her mother could ever have used came up to the grim reality. Of course, she must go away, and at once. She sat down on the side of her bed, pressed her hand to her forehead, and reflected. In the starved state she was in, the little drop of wine she had taken had brought on a violent headache. For a time she found it difficult to collect her thoughts.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WORTH OF A DIAMOND.

Flower quite made up her mind to go away again. Her mood, however, had completely changed. She was no longer in a passion; on the contrary, she felt stricken and wounded. She would go away now to hide herself, because her face, her form, the sound of her step, the echo of her voice, must be painful to those whom she had injured. She shuddered as she recalled Firefly's sad words:

"Father says it is wrong to hate any one, but, of course, we cannot love you."

She felt that she could never look Polly in the face again, that Helen's gentle smile would be torture to her. Oh, of course she must go away; she must go to-night.

She was very tired, for she had really scarcely rested since her fit of mad passion, and the previous night she had never gone to bed. Still all this mattered nothing. There was a beating in her heart, there was a burning sting of remorse awakened within her, which made even the thought of rest impossible.

Flower was a very wild and untaught creature; her ideas of right and wrong were of the crudest. It seemed to her now that the only right thing was to run away.

When the house was quiet, she once more opened her little cabinet, and took from thence the last great treasure which it contained. It was one solitary splendid unset diamond. She had not the least idea of its value, but she knew that it would probably fetch a pound or two. She had not the least notion of the value of money or of the preciousness of the gem which she held in her hand, but she thought it likely that it would supply her immediate needs.

The house was quite still now. She took off her green cloth dress, put on a very plain one of black cashmere, slipped a little velvet cap on her head, wrapped a long white shawl round her, and thus equipped opened her door, and went downstairs.

She was startled at the foot of the stairs to encounter Maggie. Maggie was coming slowly upwards as Flower descended, and the two girls paused to look at one another. The lamps in the passages were turned low, and Maggie held a candle above her head; its light fell full on Flower.

"You mustn't go to Miss Polly on no account, Miss Flower," said Maggie, adopting the somewhat peremptory manner she had already used to Flower in the hermit's hut. "Miss Polly is not to be frightened or put out in any way, leastways not to-night."

"You mean that you think I would tell her about Dr. Maybright?"

"Perhaps you would, Miss; you're none too sensible."

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Flower was too crushed even to reply to this uncomplimentary speech. After a pause, she said:

"I'm not going to Polly. I'm going away. Maggie, is it true that the—that Dr. Maybright is very ill?"

"Yes, Miss, the Doctor's despert bad."

Maggie's face worked; her candle shook; she put up her other hand to wipe away the fast-flowing tears.

"Oh, don't cry!" said Flower, stamping her foot impatiently. "Tears do no good, and it wasn't you who did it."

"No, Miss, no, Miss; that's a bit of a comfort. I wouldn't be you, Miss Flower, for all the wide world. Well, I must go now; I'm a-sleeping in Miss Polly's room to-night, Miss."

"Why, is Polly ill, too?"

"Only her foot's bad. I mustn't stay, really, Miss Flower."

"Look here," said Flower, struck by a sudden thought, "before you go tell me something. Your mother lives in the village, does she not?"

"Why, yes, Miss, just in the main street, down round by the corner. There's the baker's shop and the butcher's, and you turn round a sharp corner, and mother's cottage is by your side."

"I've a fancy to go and see her. Good-night."

"But not at this hour, surely, Miss?"

"Why not? I was out later last night."

"That's true. Well, I must go to Miss Polly now. Don't you make any noise when you're coming in, Miss! Oh, my word!" continued Maggie to herself, "what can Miss Flower want with mother? Well, she is a contrairy young lady mischievous, and all that, and hasn't she wrought a sight of

harm in this yer house! But, for all that, mother'll be mighty took up with her, for she's all for romance, mother is, and Miss Flower's very uncommon. Well, it ain't nought to do with me, and I'll take care to tell no tales to Miss Polly, poor dear."

The night was still and calm; the stars shone peacefully; the wind, which had come in gusts earlier in the evening, had died down. It took Flower a very few minutes to reach the village, and she wasn't long in discovering Mrs. Ricketts' humble abode.

That good woman had long retired to rest, but Flower's peremptory summons on the door soon caused a night-capped head to protrude out of a window, a burst of astonishment to issue from a wonder-struck pair of lips, and a moment later the young lady was standing by Mrs. Ricketts' fireside.

"I'm proud to see you, Miss, and that I will say. Set down, Miss, do now, and I'll light up the fire in a twinkling."

"No, you needn't," said Flower. "I'm hot; I'm burning. Feel me; a fire would drive me wild."

"To be sure, so you are, all in a fever like," said Mrs. Ricketts, laying her rough hand for a moment on Flower's dainty arm. "You'll let me light up the bit of a paraffin lamp, then, Miss, for it ain't often as I have the chance of seeing a young lady come all the way from Australy."

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"You can light the lamp, if you like," said Flower. "And you can stare at me as much as you please. I'm just like any one else, only wickeder. I've come to you, Mrs. Ricketts, because you're Maggie's mother, and Maggie's a good girl, and I thought perhaps you would help me."

"I'm obligated for the words of praise about my daughter, Miss. Yes, she don't mean bad, Maggie don't. What can I do to help you, Miss? Anything in my power you are kindly welcome to."

"Have you ever seen a diamond, Mrs. Ricketts?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, Miss."

"Diamonds are very valuable stones, you know."

"Maybe, Miss. They ain't in my way. I wish you'd let me light you a bit of fire, Miss Flower. You'll have the chills presently, Miss, for you're all of a burning fever now."

"You can do anything you like in the way of fire by-and-by. I have a diamond here. Shall I show it to you?"

"Oh, law, Miss, I'm sure you are condescending."

"Come over close to the paraffin lamp. Now you shall see. Doesn't it sparkle!"

Mrs. Ricketts dropped a curtsey to the gem, which, unpolished as it was, cast forth strange reflections, giving her, as she afterwards explained, a "queer feel" and a sense of chill down the marrow of her back.

"This is very valuable," said Flower. "I don't know what it is worth, but my father gave it to my mother, and she gave it to me. She said it would be well for me to have it in case of emergency. Emergency has come, and I want to sell this stone. It is very likely that whoever buys it from me will become rich. Would you like it? You shall have it for what money you have in the house."

"Oh, law, Miss! but I'm a very poor woman, Miss."

Mrs. Ricketts curtseyed again, and drew closer. "For all the world, it looks as if it were alive, Miss."

"All valuable diamonds look as if they lived. If this were cut and polished it would dazzle you."

"And if I had it, I could sell it for a good bit of money?"

"I am sure you could. I don't know for how much, but for more than I am likely to get from you."

"I'd like to pay Miss Polly back that pound as Maggie took from her."

"Don't worry me about your debts. Will you have this beautiful uncut diamond for the money you have in the house?"

Mrs. Ricketts did not reply for a moment.

"I have nine shillings and fourpence-halfpenny," she said at last, "and to-morrow is rent day. Rent will be eight shillings; that leaves me one-and-fourpence-half penny for food. Ef I give you all my money, Miss, how am I to pay rent? And how are the children to have food to-morrow?"

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"But you can sell the diamond. Why are you so dreadfully stupid? You can sell the diamond for one, two, or perhaps three pounds. Then how rich you will be."

"Oh, Miss! there's no one in this yer village 'ud give away good money for a bit of a stone like that; they'd know better. My word! it do send out a sort of a flame, though; it's wondrous to look upon!"

"People will buy it from you in a town. Go to the nearest town, take it to a jeweler, and see how rich you will be when you come out of his shop. There, I will give it to you for your nine-and-

fourpence-half penny."

Flower laid the diamond in the woman's hand.

"It seems to burn me like," she said. But all the same her fingers closed over it, and a look of greed and satisfaction filled her face.

"I don't know if I'm a-doin' clock right," she said, "for perhaps this ain't worth sixpence, and then where's the rent and the food? But, all the same, I don't like to say no to a pretty lady when she's in trouble. Here's the nine-and-fourpence-halfpenny, Miss. I earned it bit by bit by washing the neighbors' clothes; it wasn't easy come by; there's labor in it, and aches and dead-tiredness about it. You take it, Miss. I only trust the diamond will repay what I loses on that nine-and-fourpence-half penny."

Flower handled the money as if she thought it dirty.

Without a word she slipped it into the pocket of her dress.

"I am going away," she said. "They are angry with me at Sleepy Hollow. I have done wrong. I am not a bit surprised. I'm going away, so as not to cause them any more trouble."

"Oh, law, now, Miss! but they'll fret to part with you."

"No they won't. Anyhow, it isn't your affair. I'm going away as soon as I possibly can. Can you tell me where the nearest railway station is?"

"There's none closer than Everton, and that's a matter of five mile from here."

"I must get there as quickly as possible. What road shall I take?"

"Do you think, Miss, I'd let a pretty young lady like you trape the lanes in the dead of night? No, no; carrier goes between two and three in the morning. You might go with him, if you must go."

"That is a good thought. Where does the carrier live?"

"Three doors from here. I'll run round presently and tell him to call."

"Thank you. Do you think nine-and-fourpence-halfpenny will take me to Bath?"

"To Bath, Miss? It might, if you condescended to third class."

"Third class will do very well. Did you ever hear Polly Maybright speak of an aunt of hers, a Mrs. Cameron?"

Mrs. Ricketts, whose back was half turned to Flower while she shut and locked the box out of which she had taken the precious nine-and-fourpence-halfpenny, now sprang to her feet, and began to speak in a tone of great excitement.

"Did I hear of her?" she exclaimed. "Did I hear of the woman—for lady she ain't—what turned my Maggie out of her good place, and near broke Miss Polly's heart? Don't mention Mrs. Cameron, please, Miss Flower, for talk of her I won't; set eyes on her I wouldn't, no, not if I was to receive a pound for it!"

"You needn't get so excited," said Flower; "you have not got to see Polly's aunt; only I thought perhaps you could give me her address, for I am going to her to-morrow."

"I wouldn't, Miss, if I was you."

"Yes, you would if you were me. What is Mrs. Cameron's address?"

"I don't know as I can rightly tell you, Miss."

"Yes, you must. I see you know it quite well."

"Well then, well then—you won't like her a bit, Miss Flower."

"What's her address?"

"Jasper Street; I think it's Jasper Street."

"And the number? She doesn't live in the whole of Jasper Street."

"Now, was it a one and a six or a one and a seven?" queried Mrs. Ricketts. "Oh, Miss! if I was you, I wouldn't go near her; but I think her number is a one and a seven."

"Seventeen, you mean."

"Yes, that's it; I was never great at counting."

RELICS AND A WELCOME.

Mrs. Cameron's house in Bath was decidedly old-fashioned. It was a large, solemn, handsome mansion; its windows shone from constant cleaning; its paint was always fresh, its Venetian blinds in perfect order.

When a certain wild, untidy, almost disreputable-looking girl ran up its snow-white steps, and rang its highly polished brass bell, the neat parlor maid who answered her summons stared at her, and doubted a good deal if Mrs. Cameron could see her.

"You had better step into the hall for a moment," said the maidservant, "and I'll inquire if my missis is at leisure; but if it's the new housemaid's place you've come after——"

Flower gasped; she drew herself up, raised her hand, and took off her small black velvet cap.

"You forget yourself!" she said, with a haughtiness which did not ill become her, notwithstanding her untidy and dishevelled state. "My name is Flower Dalrymple, and I have come from Sleepy Hollow. Please let your mistress know directly."

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The parlor maid, who saw her mistake, was profuse in apologies.

She showed Flower into a dismal-looking dining room, and went upstairs.

"Who is it, Ann?" asked an anxious voice as she prepared to ascend the richly-carpeted stairs.

A door was opened at the end of the passage, and a fusty, dusty-looking little man put in an appearance.

"Who is it, Ann? Any one for me?"

"A young lady as wants to see the missis, sir. Oh, Mr. Cameron! what a deal of dust you has brought out into the 'all!"

The little man looked meekly down at his dusty garments.

"I have just been unpacking my last crate of curiosities from China, Ann. Where is the young lady? Perhaps she would like to see the relics."

"No, sir, that I'm sure she wouldn't; she's all blown and spent like. She's for all the world like a relic herself."

Ann tripped lightly upstairs, and Mr. Cameron, pushing his spectacles high up on his bald forehead, looked with an anxious glance to right and left. Then very quickly on tiptoe he crossed the hall, opened the dining-room door, and went in.

"How are you, young lady? If you are very quick, I can get you into my sanctum sanctorum. I am just unpacking Chinese relics. I trust, I hope, you are fond of relics."

Flower started to her feet.

"I thought, I certainly thought, Polly said *Mrs. Cameron*," she remarked. "I don't think I shall be at all afraid to live with you. I don't exactly know what Chinese relics are, but I should love to see them."

"Then quick, my dear, quick! We haven't a minute to spare. She's sure to be down in a jiffy. Now then, step on tiptoe across the hall. Ann has the quickest ears, and she invariably reports. She's not a nice girl, Ann isn't. She hasn't the smallest taste for relics. My dear, there's an education in this room, but no one, no one who comes to the house, cares to receive it."

While the little man was talking, he was rushing across the wide hall, and down a long passage, Flower's hand clasped in his. Finally he pushed open a baize-lined door, hastily admitted himself and Flower, and closed it behind them. The sanctum sanctorum was small, stuffy, dusty, dirty. There were several chairs, but they were all piled with relics, two or three tables were also crammed with tokens of the past. Flower was very weary, the dust and dirt made her sneeze, and she looked longingly for even the smallest corner of a chair on which to seat herself.

"I do want some breakfast so badly," she began.

"Breakfast! My love, you shall have it presently. Now then, we'll begin. This case that I have just unpacked contains teeth and a small portion of a jawbone. Ah! hark! what is that? She is coming already! Will that woman never leave me in peace? My love, the object of my life, the one object of my whole life, has been to benefit and educate the young. I thought at last I had found a pupil, but, ah, I fear she is very angry!"

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The sound of a sharp voice was heard echoing down the stairs and along the passage, a sharp, high-pitched voice, accompanied by the sharper, shriller barking of a small dog.

"Zeb! I say, Zeb! Zebedee, if you have taken that young girl into your sanctum, I desire you to send her out this moment."

The little man's face grew pale; he pushed his spectacles still higher on his forehead.

"There, my love, do you hear her? I did my best for you. I was beginning your education."

"Zeb! Zeb! Open the door this minute," was shouted outside.

"You'll remember, my love, to your dying day, that I showed you three teeth and the bit of jawbone of a Chinaman who died a thousand years ago."

"Zeb!" thundered the voice.

"Yap! yap! yap!" barked the small dog.

"You must go, my dear. She's a powerful woman. She always has her way. There, let me push you out. I wouldn't have her catch sight of me at this moment for fifty pounds."

The green baize door was opened a tiny bit, a violent shove was administered to Flower's back, and she found herself in the arms of Mrs. Cameron, and in extreme danger of having her nose bitten off by the infuriated Scorpion.

"Just like Zebedee!" exclaimed the good lady. "Always struggling to impart the dry bones of obsolete learning to the young! Come this way, Miss—Miss—what's your name?"

"Dalrymple—Flower Dalrymple."

"An outlandish title, worthy of Sleepy Hollow. I have not an idea who you are, but come into the dining-room."

"Might I— might I have a little breakfast?"

"Bless me, the child looks as if she were going to faint! Ann, Ann, I say! Down, Scorpion! You shall have no cream if you bark any more. Ann, bring half a glass of port wine over here, and make some breakfast for Miss—Miss Rymples as fast as you can."

"*Dalrymple*, please!"

"Don't worry me, child. I can't get my tongue round long names. Now, what is it you are called? Daisy? What in the world have you come to me for, Daisy?"

"I'm Flower—"

"Well, and isn't Daisy a flower? Now then, Daisy Rymples, tell your story as quickly as possible. I don't mind giving you breakfast, but I'm as busy as possible to-day. I've six committee meetings on between now and two o'clock. Say your say, Daisy, and then you can go."

"But I've come to stay."

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"To *stay*? Good gracious! Scorpion, down, sir! Now, young lady, have you or have you not taken leave of your senses?"

"No, really. May I tell you my story?"

"If you take ten minutes over it; I won't give you longer time."

"I'll try to get it into ten minutes. I'm an Australian, and so is David. David is my brother. We came over in the *Australasia* about six weeks ago. Dr. Maybright met us in London, and took us down to Sleepy Hollow."

"Bless the man!—just like him. Had he any responsible matron or spinster in the house, child?"

"I don't know; I don't think so. There was Helen and Polly and—"

"I don't want to hear about Polly! Go on; your ten minutes will soon be up. Go on."

"A couple of days ago we went on a picnic—I have a way of getting into awful passions—and Polly—Polly vexed me."

"Oh, she vexed you? You're not the first that young miss has vexed, I can tell you."

"She vexed me; I oughtn't to have minded; I got into a passion; I felt awful; I ran away with baby."

"Goodness me! what is the world coming to? You don't mean to say you have dared to bring the infant here, Daisy?"

"No, no. I ran away with her on to the moors. I was so frightened, for I thought baby had died. Then Maggie came, and she saved her life, and she was brought home again."

"That's a good thing; but I can't see why you are troubling me with this story."

"Yesterday morning I gave baby back to Dr. Maybright. He's not like other people; he looked at me, and his look pierced my heart. He said something, too, and then for the first time I began to be really, really sorry. I went up to my room; I stayed there alone all day; I was miserable."

"Served you right if you were, Daisy."

"In the evening I was so hungry, I went down for food. I met Firefly; she told me the worst."

"Then the baby died? You really are an awful girl, Daisy Rymples."

"No. The baby is pretty well, and Polly, who sprained her foot running after me, is pretty well; but it's—it's Dr. Maybright—the best man I ever met—a man who could have helped me and made me a—a good girl—he's very, very ill, and they think he may die. He wasn't strong, and he was out all night looking for baby and me, and he got a bad chill, and he—he may be dead now. It was my doing; Fly told me so."

Flower laid her head on the table; her long sustained fortitude gave way; she sobbed violently.

Her tears stained Mrs. Cameron's snowy table-linen; her head was pressed down on her hands; her face was hidden. She was impervious in her woe to any angry words or to the furious barking of a small dog.

At last a succession of violent shakes recalled her to herself.

"*Will* you sit up?—spoiling my damask and shedding tears into the excellent coffee I have made for you. Ah, that's better; now I can see your face. Don't you know that you are a very naughty, dangerous sort of girl?"

"Yes, I know that quite well. Mother always said that if I didn't check my passion I'd do great mischief some day."

"And right she was. I don't suppose the table-linen will ever get over those coffee stains mixed with tears. Now, have the goodness to tell me, Daisy, or Ivy, or whatever you are called, why you have come to tell this miserable, disgraceful story to me."

"Fly said they none of them could love me now."

"I should think not, indeed! No one will love such a naughty girl. What have you come to me for?"

"I thought I could stay with you for a little, until there was another home found for me."

"Oh, ah! Now at last we have come to the bottom of the mystery. And I suppose you thought I'd pet you and make much of you?"

"I didn't. I thought you'd scold me and be very cross. I came to you as a punishment, for Polly always said you were therossest woman she ever met."

"Polly said that? Humph! Now eat up your breakfast quickly, Daisy. I'm going out. Don't stir from this room until I come back."

Mrs. Cameron, who had come down-stairs in her bonnet, slammed the dining-room door after her, walked across the hall, and let herself out. It did not take her many minutes to reach the telegraph office. From, there she sent a brief message to Helen Maybright:

"Sorry your father is ill. Expect me this evening with Daisy Rymple."

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CHAPTER XIII.

VERY ROUGH WEATHER.

With all her easy and languishing ways, Flower Dalrymple had often gone through rough times. Her life in Australia had given to her experiences both of the extreme of luxury and the extreme of roughing, but never in the course of her young life did she go through a more uncomfortable journey than that from Mrs. Cameron's house in Bath to Sleepy Hollow. It was true that Scorpion, Mrs. Cameron, and Flower, traveled first-class; it was true also that where it was necessary for them to drive the best carriages to be procured were at their service; but, as on all and every occasion Scorpion was king of the ceremonies these arrangements did not add to Flower's comfort. Mrs. Cameron, who felt seriously angry with the young girl, addressed all her conversation to the dog, and as the dog elected to sit on Flower's lap, and snapped and snarled whenever she moved, and as Mrs. Cameron's words were mostly directed through the medium of Scorpion at her, her position was not an agreeable one.

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"Ah-ha, my dear doggie!" said the good lady. "Somebody has come to the wrong box, has she not? Somebody thought I would take her in, and be kind to her, and pet her, and give her your cream, did she not? But no one shall have my doggie's cream; no, that they shan't!"

"Mrs. Cameron," said Flower, when these particularly clever and lucid remarks had continued for nearly an hour, "may I open the window of the carriage at this side? I'm quite stifling."

Mrs. Cameron laid a firm, fat hand upon the window cord, and bent again over the pampered Scorpion.

"And is my doggie's asthma not to be considered for the sake of somebody who ought not to be here, who was never invited nor wished for, and is now to be returned like a bad penny to where she came from? Is my own dearest little dog to suffer for such a person's whims? Oh, fie! oh, fie!"

Well, come here my Scorpion; your mistress won't reject you."

For Flower, in a fit of ungovernable temper, had suddenly dashed the petted form of Scorpion to the ground.

The poor angry girl now buried herself in the farthest corner of the railway carriage. From there she could hear Mrs. Cameron muttering about "somebody's" temper, and hoping that "somebody" would get her deserts.

These remarks, uttered several times, frightened Flower so much that at last she looked up, and said, in a queer, startled voice:

"You don't think Dr. Maybright is going to die? You can't be so awfully wicked as to think that."

"Oh, we are wicked, are we, Scorpion?" said Mrs. Cameron, her fat hand gently stroking down Scorpion's smooth fur from tip to tail. "Never mind, Scorpion, my own; never mind. When the little demon of temper gets into somebody she isn't quite accountable, is she?"

Flower wondered if any restraining power would keep her from leaping out of the window.

But even the weariest journey comes to an end at last, and twenty-four hours after she had left Sleepy Hollow, Flower, feeling the most subdued, the most abject, the most brow-beaten young person in Christendom, returned to it. Toward the end of the journey she felt impervious to Mrs. Cameron's sly allusions, and Scorpion growled and snapped at her in vain. Her whole heart was filled with one over-powering dread. How should she find the Doctor? Was he better? Was he worse? Or had all things earthly come to an end for him; and had he reached a place where even the naughtiest girl in all the world could vex and trouble him no longer?

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When the hired fly drew up outside the porch, Flower suddenly remembered her first arrival—the gay "Welcome" which had waved above her head; the kind, bright young faces that had come out of the darkness to greet her; the voice of the head of the house, that voice which she was so soon to learn to love, uttering the cheeriest and heartiest words of greeting. Now, although Mrs. Cameron pulled the hall-door bell with no uncertain sound, no one, for a time at least, answered the summons, and Flower, seizing her opportunity, sprang out of the fly and rushed into the house.

The first person she met, the very first, was Polly. Polly was sitting at the foot of the stairs, all alone. She had seated herself on the bottom step. Her knees were huddled up almost to her chin. Her face was white, and bore marks of tears. She scarcely looked up when Flower ran to her.

"Polly! Polly! How glad I am you at least are not very ill."

"Is that you, Flower?" asked Polly.

She did not seem surprised, or in any way affected.

"Yes, my leg does still ache very much. But what of that? What of anything now? He is worse! They have sent for another doctor. The doctor from London is upstairs; he's with him. I'm waiting here to catch him when he comes down, for I must know the very worst."

"The very worst!" echoed Flower in a feeble tone.

She tumbled down somehow on to the stair beside Polly, and the next instant her death-like face lay in Polly's lap.

"Now, my dear, you need not be in the least frightened," said a shrill voice in Polly's ears. "A most troublesome young person! a most troublesome! She has just fainted; that's all. Let me fetch a jug of cold water to pour over her."

"Is that *you*, Aunt Maria?" said Polly. "Oh, yes, there was a telegram, but we forgot all about it. And is that Scorpion, and is he going to bark? But he mustn't! Please kneel down here, Aunt Maria, and hold Flower's head. Whatever happens, Scorpion mustn't bark. Give him to me!"

Before Mrs. Cameron had time to utter a word or in any way to expostulate, she found herself dragged down beside Flower, Flower's head transferred to her capacious lap, and the precious Scorpion snatched out of her arms. Polly's firm, muscular young fingers tightly held the dog's mouth, and in an instant Scorpion and she were out of sight. Notwithstanding all his fighting and struggling and desperate efforts to free himself, she succeeded in carrying him to a little deserted summer pagoda at a distant end of the garden. Here she locked him in, and allowed him to suffer both cold and hunger for the remainder of the night.

There are times when even the most unkind are softened. Mrs. Cameron was not a sympathetic person. She was a great philanthropist, it is true, and was much esteemed, especially by those people who did not know her well. But love, the real name for what the Bible calls charity, seldom found an entrance into her heart. The creature she devoted most affection to was Scorpion. But now, as she sat in the still house, which all the time seemed to throb with a hidden intense life; when she heard in the far distance doors opening gently and stifled sobs and moans coming from more than one young throat; when she looked down at the deathlike face of Flower—she really did forget herself, and rose for once to the occasion.

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Very gently—for she was a strong woman—she lifted Flower, and carried her into the Doctor's study. There she laid her on a sofa, and gave her restoratives, and when Flower opened her

dazed eyes she spoke to her more kindly than she had done yet.

"I have ordered something for you, which you are to take at once," she said. "Ah! here it is! Thank you, Alice. Now, Daisy, drink this off at once."

It was a beaten-up egg in milk and brandy, and when Flower drank it she felt no longer giddy, and was able to sit up and look around her.

In the meantime Polly and all the other children remained still as mice outside the Doctor's door. They had stolen on tiptoe from different quarters of the old house to this position, and now they stood perfectly still, not looking at one another or uttering a sound, but with their eyes fixed with pathetic earnestness and appeal at the closed door. When would the doctors come out? When would the verdict be given? Minutes passed. The children found this time of tension an agony.

"I can't bear it!" sobbed Firefly at last.

But the others said, "Hush!" so peremptorily, and with such a total disregard for any one person's special emotions, that the little girl's hysterical fit was nipped in the bud.

At last there was a sound of footsteps within the room, and the local practitioner, accompanied by the great physician from London, opened the door carefully and came out.

"Go in and sit with your father," said one of the doctors to Helen.

Without a word she disappeared into the darkened room, and all the others, including little Pearl in Nurse's arms, followed the medical men downstairs. They went into the Doctor's study, where Flower was still lying very white and faint on the sofa. Fortunately for the peace of the next quarter of an hour Mrs. Cameron had taken herself off in a vain search for Scorpion.

"Now," said Polly, when they were all safely in the room—she took no notice of Flower; she did not even see her—"now please speak; please tell us the whole truth at once."

She went up and laid her hand on the London physician's arm.

"The whole truth? But I cannot do that, my dear young lady," he said, in hearty, genial tones. "Bless me!" turning to the other doctor, "do all these girls and boys belong to Maybright? And so you want the whole truth, Miss—Miss——"

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"I'm called Polly, sir."

"The whole truth, Polly? Only God knows that. Your father was in a weak state of health; he had a shock and a chill. We feared mischief to the brain. Oh, no, he is by no means out of the wood yet. Still I have hope of him; I have great hope. What do you say, Strong? Symptoms have undoubtedly taken a more favorable turn during the last hour or two."

"I quite agree with you, Sir Andrew," said the local practitioner, with a profound bow.

"Then, my dear young lady, my answer to you, to all of you, is that, although only God knows the whole truth, there is, in my opinion, considerable hope—yes, considerable. I'll have a word with you in the other room, Strong. Good-by, children; keep up your spirits. I have every reason to think well of the change which has set in within the last hour."

The moment the doctors left the room Polly looked eagerly round at the others.

"Only God knows the truth," she said. "Let us pray to Him this very minute. Let's get on our knees at once."

They all did so, and all were silent.

"What are we to say, Polly?" asked Firefly at last. "I never did 'aloud prayers' since mother died."

"Hush! There's the Lord's Prayer," said Polly. "Won't somebody say it? My voice is choking."

"I will," said Flower.

Nobody had noticed her before; now she came forward, knelt down by Polly's side, and repeated the prayer of prayers in a steady voice. When it was over, she put up her hands to her face, and remained silent.

"What are you saying now?" asked Firefly, pulling at her skirt.

"Something about myself."

"What is that?" they all asked.

"I've been the wickedest girl in the whole of England. I have been asking God to forgive me."

"Oh, poor Flower!" echoed the children, touched by her dreary, forsaken aspect.

Polly put her arms round her and kissed her.

"We have quite forgiven you, so, of course, God will," she said.

"How noble you are! Will you be my friend?"

"Yes, if you want to have me. Oh, children!" continued Polly, "do you think we can any of us ever

do anything naughty again if father gets better?"

"He will get better now," said Firefly.

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CHAPTER XIV.

A NOVEL HIDING-PLACE.

Whether it was the children's faith or the children's prayer, certain it is that from that moment the alarming symptoms in connection with Dr. Maybright's illness abated. It was some days before he was pronounced out of danger, but even that happy hour arrived in due course, and one by one his children were allowed to come to see him.

Mrs. Cameron meanwhile arranged matters pretty much as she pleased downstairs. Helen, who from the first had insisted on nursing her father herself, had no time to housekeep. Polly's sprained ankle would not get well in a minute, and, besides, other circumstances had combined to reduce that young lady's accustomed fire and ardor. Consequently, Mrs. Cameron had matters all her own way, and there is not the least doubt that she and Scorpion between them managed to create a good deal of moral and physical disquietude.

"Well," she said to herself, "when all is said and done, that poor man who is on the flat of his back upstairs is my sainted Helen's husband; and if at such a time as this Maria Cameron should harbor ill-will in her heart it would but ill become the leader of some of the largest philanthropic societies in Bath. No, for the present my place is here, and no black looks, nor surly answers, nor impertinent remarks, will keep Maria Cameron from doing her duty."

Accordingly Mrs. Power gave a month's notice, and Alice wept so profusely that her eyes for the time being were seriously injured. Scorpion bit the new kitchen-maid Jane twice, who went into hysterics and expected hydrophobia daily. But notwithstanding these and sundry other fracas, Mrs. Cameron steadily pursued her way. She looked into account-books, she interviewed the butcher, she dismissed the baker, she overhauled the store-room, and after her own fashion—and a disagreeable fashion it was—did a good deal of indirect service to the family.

Flower in particular she followed round so constantly and persistently that the young girl began to wonder if Mrs. Cameron seriously and really intended to punish her, by now bereaving her of her senses.

"I don't think I can stand it much longer," said Flower to Polly. "Last night I was in bed and asleep when she came in. I was awfully tired, and had just fallen into my first sleep, when that detestable dog snapped at my nose. There was Mrs. Cameron standing in the middle of the room with a lighted candle in her hand. 'Get up,' she said. 'What for?' I asked. 'Get up this minute!' she said, and she stamped her foot. I thought perhaps she would disturb your father, for my room is not far away from his, so I tumbled out of bed. 'Now, what is the matter?' I asked. 'The matter?' said Mrs. Cameron. '*That's* the matter! and *that's* the matter! and *that's* the matter!' And what do you think? She was pointing to my stockings and shoes, and my other clothes. I always do leave them in a little heap in the middle of the floor; they're perfectly comfortable there, and it doesn't injure them in the least. Well! that awful woman woke me out of my sleep to put them by. She stood over me, and made me fold the clothes up, and shake out the stockings, and put the shoes under a chair, and all the time that fiendish dog was snapping at my heels. Oh, it's intolerable! I'll be in a lunatic asylum if this goes on much longer!"

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Polly laughed; she could not help it; and Firefly and David, who were both listening attentively, glanced significantly at one another.

The next morning, very, very early, Firefly was awakened by a bump. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, and murmured, "All right!" under her breath.

"Put something on, Fly, and be quick," whispered David's voice from the door.

Firefly soon tumbled into a warm frock, a thick outdoor jacket, and a little fur cap; her shoes and stockings were tumbled on anyhow. Holding her jacket together—for she was in too great a hurry to fasten it—she joined David.

"I did it last night," he said; "it's a large hole; he'll never be discovered there. And now the thing is to get him."

"Oh, Dave, how will you manage that?"

"Trust me, Fly. Even if I do run a risk, I don't care. Anything is better than the chance of Flower getting into another of her passions."

"Oh, anything, of course," said Fly. "Are you going to kill him, Dave?"

"No. The hole is big; he can move about in it. What I thought of was this—we'd sell him."

"Sell him? But he isn't ours."

"No matter! He's a public nuisance, and he must be got rid of. There are often men wandering on the moor who would be glad to buy a small dog like Scorpion. They'd very likely give us a shilling for him. Then we'd drop the shilling into Mrs. Cameron's purse. Don't you see? She'd never know how it got there. Then, you understand, it would really have been Mrs. Cameron who sold Scorpion."

"Oh, delicious!" exclaimed Fly. "She'd very likely spend the money on postage stamps to send round begging charity letters."

"So Scorpion would have done good in the end," propounded David. "But come along now, Fly. The difficult thing is to catch the little brute."

It was still very early in the morning, and the corridors and passages were quite dark. David and Fly, however, could feel their way about like little mice, and they soon found themselves outside the door of the green room, which was devoted to Mrs. Cameron. [Pg 146]

"Do you feel this?" said David, putting out his hand and touching Fly. "This is a long towel; I'm winding part of it round my hand and arm. I don't want to get hydrophobia, like poor Jane. Now, I'm going to creep into Mrs. Cameron's room so quietly, that even Scorpion won't wake. I learned how to do that from the black people in Australia. You may stand there, Fly, but you won't hear even a pin fall till I come back with Scorpion."

"If I don't hear, I feel," replied Fly. "My heart does thump so. I'm just awfully excited. Don't be very long away, Dave."

By this time David had managed to unhasp the door. He pushed it open a few inches, and then lay flat down on his face and hands. The next moment he had disappeared into the room, and all was profoundly still. Fly could hear through the partly open door the gentle and regularly kept-up sound of a duet of snoring. After three or four minutes the duet became a solo. Still there was no other sound, not a gasp, not even the pretense of a bark. More minutes passed by. Had David gone to sleep on the floor? Was Scorpion dead that he had ceased to snore?

These alarming thoughts had scarcely passed through her mind before David rejoined her.

"He's wrapped up in this towel," he said. "He's kicking with his hind legs, but he can't get a squeak out; now come along."

Too careless and happy in the success of their enterprise even to trouble to shut Mrs. Cameron's door, the two children rushed downstairs and out of the house. They effected their exit easily by opening the study window. In a moment or two they were in the shrubbery.

"The hole isn't here," said David. "Somebody might find him here and bring him back, and that would never do. Do you remember Farmer Long's six-acre field?"

"Where he keeps the bull?" exclaimed Fly. "You haven't made the hole there, Dave?"

"Yes, I have, in one corner! It's the best place in all the world, for not a soul will dare to come near the field while the bull is there. You needn't be frightened, Fly! He's always taken home at night! He's not there now. But don't you see how he'll guard Scorpion all day? Even Mrs. Cameron won't dare to go near the field while the bull is there."

"I see!" responded Fly, in an appreciative voice. "You're a very clever boy, Dave. Now let's come quick and pop him into the hole."

Farmer Long's six-acre field was nearly a quarter of a mile away, but the children reached it in good time, and Fly looked down with interest on the scene of David's excavations. The hole, which must have given the little boy considerable labor, was nearly three feet deep, and about a foot wide. In the bottom lay a large beef bone. [Pg 147]

"He won't like it much!" said David. "His teeth aren't good; he can only eat chicken bones, but hunger will make him nibble it by-and-by. Now, Fly, will you go behind that furze bush and bring me a square, flat board, which you will find there?"

"What a funny board!" said Fly, returning in a moment. "It's all over little square holes."

"Those are for him to breathe through," said David. "Now, then, master, here you go! You won't annoy any one in particular here, unless, perhaps, you interfere with Mr. Bull's arrangements. Hold the board over the top of the hole, so, Fly. Now then, I hope you'll enjoy yourself, my dear amiable little friend."

The bandage which firmly bound Scorpion's mouth was removed. He was popped into the hole, and the wooden cover made fast over the top. The children went home, vowing eternal secrecy, which not even tortures should wring from them.

At breakfast that morning Mrs. Cameron appeared late on the scene. Her eyes were red with weeping. She also looked extremely cross.

"Helen, I must request you to have some fresh coffee made for me. I cannot bear half cold coffee. Daisy, have the goodness to ring the bell. Yes, my dear children, I am late. I have a sad reason for being late; the dog is nowhere to be found."

A gleam of satisfaction filled each young face. Fly crimsoning greatly, lowered her eyes; but David looked tranquilly full at Mrs. Cameron.

"Is it that nice little Scorpion?" he asked. "I'm awfully sorry, but I suppose he went for a walk."

Mrs. Cameron glanced with interest at David's sympathetic face.

"No, my dear boy, that isn't his habit. The dear little dog sleeps, as a rule, until just the last moment. Then I lift him gently, and carry him downstairs for his cream."

"I wonder how he likes that bare beef bone?" murmured Fly, almost aloud.

"He's sure to come home for his cream in a moment or two!" said David.

He gave Fly a violent kick under the table.

"Helen," said Mrs. Cameron, "be sure you keep Scorpion's cream."

"There isn't any," replied Helen. "I was obliged to send it up to father. There was not nearly so much cream as usual this morning. I had scarcely enough for father."

"You don't mean to tell me you have used up the dog's cream?" exclaimed Mrs. Cameron. "Well, really, that *is* too much. The little animal will starve, he can't touch anything else. Oh, where is he? My little, faithful pet! My lap feels quite empty without him. My dear children, I trust you may never love—*love* a little creature as I love Scorpion, and then lose him. Yes, I am seriously uneasy, the dog would not have left me of his own accord."

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Here, to the astonishment of everybody, and the intense indignation of Mrs. Cameron, Fly burst into a scream of hysterical laughter, and hid her face in Polly's neck.

"What a naughty child!" exclaimed the good lady. "You have no sympathy with my pet, my darling! Speak this minute. Where is the dog, miss?"

"I expect in his grave," said Fly.

Whereupon Dave suddenly disappeared under the table, and all the others stared in wonder at Fly.

"Firefly, do you know anything?"

"I expect Scorpion is in his grave. Where is the use of making such a fuss?" responded Fly.

And she made a precipitate retreat out of the window.

All the remainder of that day was occupied in a vain search for the missing animal. Mrs. Cameron strongly suspected Firefly, but the only remark the little girl could be got to make was:

"I am sure Scorpion is in his grave."

Mrs. Cameron said that was no answer, and further insisted that the child should be severely punished. But as in reply to that, Helen said firmly that as long as father was in the house no one should punish the children but him, she felt, for the present, at least, obliged to hold her sense of revenge in check.

After Fly had gone to bed that night, David crept into her room.

"I've done it all now," he said. "I sold Scorpion to-night for a shilling to a man who was walking across the moor, and I have just popped the shilling into Mrs. Cameron's purse. The horrid little brute worked quite a big hole in the bottom of the grave, Fly, and he nearly snapped my fingers off when I lifted him out to give him to Jones. But he's away now, that's a comfort. What a silly thing you were, Fly, to burst out laughing at breakfast, and then say that Scorpion was in his grave."

"But it was so true, David. That hole looked exactly like a grave."

"But you have drawn suspicion upon you. Now, Mrs. Cameron certainly doesn't suspect me. See what she has given me: this beautiful new two-shilling piece. She said I was a very kind boy, and had done my best to find her treasure for her."

"Oh, Dave, how could you take it!"

"Couldn't I, just! I'm not a little muff, like you. I intend to buy a set of wickets with this. Well, good-night, Fly; nobody need fear hydrophobia after this good day's work."

CHAPTER XV.

A DILEMMA.

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A night's sleep had by no means improved Mrs. Cameron's temper. She came downstairs the next morning so snappish and disagreeable, so much inclined to find fault with everybody, and so little disposed to see the faintest gleam of light in any direction, that the children almost regretted Scorpion's absence, and began to wonder if, after all, he was not a sort of safety-valve for Mrs. Cameron, and more or less essential to her existence.

Hitherto this good woman had not seen her brother-in-law; and it was both Helen's and Polly's constant aim to keep her from the sick room.

It was several days now since the Doctor was pronounced quite out of danger; but the affection of his eyes which had caused his children so many anxious fears, had become much worse. As the London oculist had told him, any shock or chill would do this; and there was now no doubt whatever that for a time, at least, he would have to live in a state of total darkness.

"It is a dreadful fate," said Helen to Polly. "Oh, yes, it is a dreadful fate, but we must not complain, for anything is better than losing him."

"Anything truly," replied Polly. "Why, what is the matter, Flower? How you stare."

Flower had been lying full-length on the old sofa in the school-room; she now sprang to her feet, and came up eagerly to the two sisters.

"Could a person do this," she said, her voice trembling with eagerness—"Could such a thing as this be done: could one give their eyes away?"

"Flower!"

"Yes, I mean it. Could I give my eyes to Dr. Maybright—I mean just do nothing at all but read to him and look for him—manage so that he should know everything just through my eyes. Can I do it? If I can, I will."

"But, Flower, you are not father's daughter," said Polly in an almost offended tone. "You speak, Flower—you speak as if he were all the world to you."

"So he is all the world to me!" said Flower. "I owe him reparation, I owe him just everything. Yes, Helen and Polly, I think I understand how to keep your father from missing his eyes much. Oh, how glad I am, how very glad I am!"

From that moment Flower became more or less a changed creature. She developed all kinds of qualities which the Maybrights had never given her credit for. She had a degree of tact which was quite astonishing in a child of her age. There was never a jarring note in her melodious voice. With her impatience gone, and her fiery, passionate temper soothed, she was just the girl to be a charming companion to an invalid.

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However restless the Doctor was, he grew quieter when Flower stole her little hand into his; and when he was far too weak and ill and suffering to bear any more reading aloud, he could listen to Flower as she recited one wild ballad after another.

Flower had found her mission, and she was seldom now long away from the Doctor's bedside.

"Don't be jealous, Polly," said Helen. "All this is saving Flower, and doing father good."

"There is one comfort about it," said Polly, "that as Aunt Maria perfectly detests poor Flower, or Daisy, as she calls her, she is not likely to go into father's room."

"That is true!" said Helen. "She came to the room door the other day, but Flower was repeating 'Hiawatha,' and acting it a little bit—you know she can't help acting anything she tries to recite—and Aunt Maria just threw up her hands and rolled her eyes, and went away."

"What a comfort!" said Polly. "Whatever happens, we must never allow the dreadful old thing to come near father."

Alack! alas! something so bad had happened, so terrible a tragedy had been enacted that even Flower and Hiawatha combined could no longer keep Mrs. Cameron away from her brother-in-law's apartment.

On the second day after Scorpion's disappearance, the good woman called Helen aside, and spoke some words which filled her with alarm.

"My dear!" she said, "I am very unhappy. The little dog, the little sunbeam of my life, is lost. I am convinced, Helen! yes, I am convinced, that there is foul play in the matter. You, every one of you, took a most unwarrantable dislike to the poor, faithful little animal. Yes, every one of you, with the exception of David, detested my Scorpion, and I am quite certain that you all know where he now is."

"But really, Aunt Maria," said Helen, her fair face flushing, "really, now, you don't seriously suppose that I had anything to say to Scorpion's leaving you."

"I don't know, my dear. I exonerate David. Yes, David is a good boy; he was attached to the dog, and I quite exonerate him. But as to the rest of you, I can only say that I wish to see your father on the subject."

"Oh! Aunt Maria! you are not going to trouble father, so ill as he is, about that poor, miserable

little dog?"

"Thank you, Helen! thank you! poor miserable little dog indeed. Ah! my dear, you have let the cat out of the bag now. Yes, my dear, I insist on seeing your father with regard to the *poor, miserable little dog*. Poor, indeed, am I without him, my little treasure, my little faithful Scorpion." Here Mrs. Cameron applied her handkerchief to her eyes, and Helen walked to the window, feeling almost driven to despair.

"I think you are doing wrong!" she said, presently. "It is wrong to disturb a man like father about any dog, however noble. I am sure I am right in saying that we, none of us, know anything about Scorpion's disappearance. However, if you like, and rather than that father should be worried, I will send for all the children, and ask them the question one by one before you. I am absolutely sure that they won't think Scorpion worth a lie."

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CHAPTER XVI.

FIREFLY.

Helen experienced some little difficulty in getting her scattered brothers and sisters together. She could not get any of them to think seriously of Scorpion's departure. They laughed and lingered over their own pursuits, and told Helen to her face that she made a great fuss about nothing; in short, the best part of an hour had gone by before the Maybrights and the two Dalrymples assembled in Mrs. Cameron's presence in the morning room.

"It is just this, children," said Helen. "Aunt Maria feels very low about Scorpion; you see she loved him." Groans here came audibly from the lips of Bob and Bunny. "Yes!" said Helen, looking severely at her two little brothers, "Aunt Maria did love Scorpion. She feels very lonely without him, and she has taken an idea into her head that one or other of you had something to say to his disappearance. Of course I know that none of you could be so cruel and heartless, but to satisfy Aunt Maria, I have asked you all to come here just to tell her that you did nothing to make Scorpion run away."

"Only we are very glad he did run away!" said Bob, "but as to touching him, why, I wouldn't with a pair of tongs."

"I wish to say a word!" said Mrs. Cameron. She came forward, and stood looking very flushed and angry before the assembled group. "I wish to say that I am sure some of you in your malice deprived me of my dog. I believe David Dalrymple to be innocent, but as to the rest of you, I may as well say that I do not believe you, whatever you may tell me."

"Well, after that!" exclaimed all the children.

"I suppose, Helen, after that we may go away?" said Firefly, who was looking very pale.

"No, Miss!" said Aunt Maria, "you must stay. Your sister Helen does not wish me to do anything to disturb your father, but I assure you, children, there are limits even to my patience, and I intend to visit him this morning and tell him the whole story, unless before you leave the room you tell me the truth."

Firefly's sallow little face grew whiter and whiter. She glanced imploringly at David, who looked boldly and unconcernedly back at her; then, throwing back his head, he marched up to Mrs. Cameron's side.

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"You believe that *I* am innocent, don't you?" he said.

"Certainly, my dear boy. I have said so."

"In that case, perhaps you would not mind my going out a little way on the moor and having a good look round for the dog, he *may* have wandered there, you know, and broken his leg or something." Mrs. Cameron shuddered. "In any case," continued David, with a certain air of modest assurance, which became him very much, "it seems a pity that I should waste time here."

"Certainly; go, my dear lad," answered Mrs. Cameron. "Bring my little innocent suffering treasure back with you, and I will give you half a crown."

David instantly left the room, unheeding a short, sharp cry which issued from Firefly's lips as he passed her.

Most of the other children were laughing; it was impossible for them to think of anything in connection with Scorpion except as a joke.

"Listen, Aunt Maria," said Helen. "I am afraid you must not treat my brothers and sisters as you propose. Neither must you trouble father without the doctor's permission. The fact is, Aunt Maria, we are Maybrights, and every one who knows anything about us at all *must* know that we

would scorn to tell a lie. Our father and our dear, dear mother—your sister whom you loved, Aunt Maria, and for whose sake you are interested in us—taught us to fear a lie more than anything, *much* more than punishment, *much* more than discovery. Oh, yes, we have heaps and heaps of faults; we can tease, we can be passionate, and idle, and selfish; but being Maybrights, being the children of our own father and mother, we can't lie. The fact is, we'd be afraid to."

Helen's blue eyes were full of tears.

"Bravo! Helen!" said Polly, going up to her sister and kissing her. "She says just the simple truth, Aunt Maria," she continued, flashing round in her bright way on the old lady. "We *are* a naughty set—you know that, don't you?—but we can't tell lies; we draw the line there."

"Yes, we draw the line there," suddenly said Firefly, in a high-pitched voice, which sounded as if it was going to crack.

"I admire bravery," said Mrs. Cameron, after a pause. "Ask your questions, Helen. For my dead sister's sake I will accept the word of a Maybright. 'Pon my word, you are extraordinary young people; but I admire girls who are not afraid to speak out, and who uphold their parents' teaching. Ask the children quickly, Helen, if they know anything about the dog, for after David's hint about his having strayed on that awful moor, and perhaps having broken one of his dear little legs, I feel more uncomfortable than ever about him. For goodness' sake, Helen! ask your question quickly, and let me get out on the moor to look for my dog."

"Children," said Helen, coming forward at once, "do you know anything about Scorpion's loss, anything? Now, I am going to ask you each singly; as you answer you can leave the room. Polly, I begin with you."

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One by one the Maybrights and Flower answered very clear and emphatic "No's" to Helen's question, and one by one they retired to wait for their companions in the passage outside.

At last Helen put the question to Firefly. Two big, green-tinted hazel eyes were raised to her face.

"Yes, Helen, I do know," replied Firefly.

Mrs. Cameron uttered a shriek, and almost fell upon the little girl, but Helen very gently held her back.

"One minute," she said. "Firefly, what do you know?"

"I'm not going to tell you, Helen." The child's lips quivered, but her eyes looked up bravely.

"Why so? Please, Aunt Maria, let me speak to her. Why won't you tell what you know, dear Fly?"

"Because I promised. There, I won't say a word more about it. I do know, and I won't tell; no, I won't ever, ever tell. You can punish me, of course, Aunt Maria."

"So I will, Miss. Take that slap for your impertinence. Oh! if you were my child, should not I give you a whipping. You know what has happened to my poor *dear* little dog, and you refuse to tell. But you shall tell—you wicked cruel little thing—you shall, you must!"

"Shall I take Firefly away and question her?" asked Helen. "Please, Aunt Maria, don't be too stern with her. She is a timid little thing; she is not accustomed to people blaming her. She has some reason for this, but she will explain everything to her sister Nell, won't you, darling?"

The child's lips were trembling, and her eyes filling with tears.

"There's no use in my going away with you, Helen," she replied, steadily. "I am willing Aunt Maria should punish me, but I can't tell because I'm a Maybright. It would be telling a lie to say what I know. I don't mind your punishing me rather badly, Aunt Maria."

"Oh, you don't, don't you?" said Aunt Maria. "Listen; was not that the sound of wheels?"

"The doctor to see father," explained Helen. "I ought to go."

"Excuse me, my dear, I particularly wish to see your father's medical adviser this morning. I will not detain him long, but I have a question I wish to put to him. You stay with your little sister, Helen. I shall be back soon."

Mrs. Cameron trotted out of the room. In about ten minutes, with an exultant look on her face, she returned. Firefly was now clasped tightly in Helen's arms while she sobbed her heart out on her breast.

"Well, Helen, has this *most* impertinent, naughty child confessed?"

"She has not," said Helen. "I don't understand her; she seems in sore trouble. Dear little Fly!"

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"Dear little Fly,' indeed! Naughty, wicked little Fly, you mean. However, my dear, I have come to tell you that I have just had an interview with the excellent doctor who attends your father. He has gone up to see him now. He says he does not want to see you at all to-day, Helen. Well, I spoke to Dr. Strong, and he was *astonished*—absolutely astonished, when he heard that I had not yet been permitted to see my brother-in-law. I told him quite frankly that you girls were jealous of my influence, and used his (Dr. Strong's) name to keep me out of my poor brother's room. 'But my dear madam,' he said, 'the young ladies labor under a mistake—a vast, a monstrous mistake.

Nothing could do my poor patient more good than to see a sensible, practical lady like yourself! 'Then I may see him this afternoon?' I asked. 'Undoubtedly, Mrs. Cameron,' he replied; 'it will be something for my patient to look forward to.' I have arranged then, my dear Helen, to pay a visit to your father at three o'clock to-day."

Helen could not repress a sigh.

Mrs. Cameron raised her eyebrows with a certain suggestive and aggravating gesture.

"Ah, my dear," she said, "you must try to keep under that jealous temperament. Jealousy fostered in the heart overshadows and overclouds all life. Be warned in time."

"About this child," said Helen, drawing Firefly forward, "what is to be done about her? You will be lenient, won't you, Aunt Maria, for she is very young?"

"By the way," said Mrs. Cameron, with the manner of one who had not heard a word of Helen's last speech, "is this naughty little girl attached to her father?"

Firefly raised her tear-dimmed face.

"He is my darling——" she began.

"Ah, yes, my dear; I detest exaggerated expressions. If you love him, you can now prove it. You would not, for instance, wish to give him anxiety, or to injure him?"

"Oh, no, oh, no! I would rather die."

"Again that sentimental exaggeration; but you shall prove your words. If you have not confessed to me before three o'clock to-day all you know about the loss of my treasured dog Scorpion, I shall take you into your father's sick room, and in his presence dare you to keep your wicked secret to yourself any longer."

"Oh, you don't mean that," said Firefly. "You can't be so awfully cruel. Nell, Nell, do say that Aunt Maria doesn't mean that."

The child was trembling violently; her little face was white as death, her appealing eyes would have softened most hearts.

"Oh, Nell, what shall I do if I make father worse again? For I can't tell what I know; it would be a lie to tell it, and you said yourself, Nell, that no Maybright told lies."

Mrs. Cameron smiled grimly.

"I have said it," she remarked; "it all rests with yourself, Firefly. I shall be ready either to hear your confession or to take you to your father at three o'clock to-day."

With these words the good lady walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

TO THE RESCUE.

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An hour later a wildly anxious and disconsolate little figure might have been seen knocking at Polly's door. No answer from within. A moment of suspense on the part of the little figure, followed by another and louder knock; then the small, nervous fingers turned the handle of the door, and Firefly pushed her head in and peered anxiously round.

Oh, dear! oh, dear! No Polly was in the room. And why did the great eight-day clock in the hall strike twelve? Why, on this morning of all mornings, should time go on wings? Firefly had great faith in Polly's powers of helping her. But the moments were too precious to waste them in trying to find her. She had another search to make, and she must set out at once. No, not quite at once. She clasped her hands to her beating little heart as an idea came to her on which she might act. A delicious and yet most sorrowful idea, which would fill her with the keenest pain, and yet give her the very sweetest consolation. She would go and get a kiss from her father before she set out on the search, which might be a failure. Very swiftly she turned, flew down the long gallery which led to Dr. Maybright's room, and went in.

Dr. Strong had paid his visit and gone away. Firefly's heart gave a bound of delight, for her father was alone. He was lying supported high in bed with pillows. His almost sightless eyes were not bandaged, they were simply closed; his hands, with their long, sensitive, purposeful fingers lay on the white sheets in a restful attitude. Already the acute hearing of the blind had come to him, and as Firefly glided up to the bedside, he turned his head quickly. Her two small hands went with a kind of bound into one of his. His fingers closed over them.

"This is my Fly," said the Doctor; "a very excited and feverish Fly, too. How these small fingers flutter! What is it, my darling?"

"A kiss, father," said Fly, "a great *hug* of a kiss! please, please. I want it so awfully badly."

"Climb up on the bed, and put your arms round me. Is that all right? My dear little one, you are not well."

"I'm quite well, now, while I'm loving you. Oh! aren't you just the darlinest of all darling fathers? There, another kiss; and another! Now I'm better."

She glided off the bed, pressed two long, last fervent embraces on the Doctor's white hand, and rushed out of the room.

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"I'm lots stronger now," she said to herself. "*Whatever* happens, I'll have those kisses to hold on to and remember; but nothing shall happen, for I'm going to find David; he is sure to put things right for me."

Meanwhile, Polly's absence from her room was accounted for, also the fact of Fly finding her father alone. It was seldom that this dearly loved and favorite father, physician, and friend, was left to indulge in solitude. It was the privilege of all privileges to sit by him, read to him, and listen to his talk; and a girl, generally two girls, occupied the coveted chairs by his bedside. On this morning, however, poor Helen was detained, first by Aunt Maria, and then by necessary housekeeping cares; and Polly and Flower were deeply engrossed over a matter of considerable importance.

When Polly had replied in the negative to Helen's question, she lingered for a moment in the passage outside the morning-room, then started off to find Nurse and little Pearl. Flower, however, waited with a feeling of curiosity, or perhaps something more, to hear what the others would say. She was witness, therefore, through the open door, of Firefly's curious mixture of avowal and denial, and when Mrs. Cameron went away to consult the doctor who attended Dr. Maybright, she coolly waited in an adjoining room, and when the good woman returned, once more placed herself within earshot. No Maybright would dream of eavesdropping, but Flower's upbringing had been decidedly lax with regard to this and other matters.

In full possession, therefore, of the facts of the catastrophe which was to overpower poor little Fly and injure Dr. Maybright, she rushed off to find Polly. Polly was feeling intensely happy, playing with and fondling her sweet little baby sister, when Flower, pale and excited, rushed into the room. Nurse, who had not yet forgiven Flower, turned her back upon the young lady, and hummed audibly. Flower, however, was far too much absorbed to heed her.

"Listen, Polly! you have got to come with me at once. Give baby back to Nurse. You must come with me directly."

"If it is anything more about Scorpion, I refuse to stir," answered Polly. "If there is a creature in this world whom I absolutely loathe, it's that detestable little animal!"

"You don't hate him more than I do," said Flower. "My news is about him. Still, you must come, for it also means Firefly and your father. They'll both get into awful trouble—I know they will—if we don't save them."

"What?" said Polly; "what? Take baby, please, Nurse. Now, what is it, Flower?" pulling her outside the nursery door. "What *has* that horrid Scorpion to do with Fly and father?"

"Only this: Fly has confessed that she knows what has become of him, but she's a dear little brick and won't tell. She says she's a Maybright, and they don't tell lies. Three cheers for the Maybrights, if they are all like Fly, say I! Well, the little love won't tell, and Mrs. Cameron is fit to dance, and what does she do but gets leave from Dr. Strong to see your father, and she's going to drag Fly before him at three o'clock to-day, and make a fine story of what happened. She holds it over Fly that your father will be made very ill again. Very likely he will, if *we* don't prevent it."

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"It's horrible!" said Polly; "but *how* can we prevent it, Flower?"

"Oh, easily enough. *You* must guard your father's room. Let no one in under any pretense whatever until I have found David."

"What do you mean by finding David? What can David have to say to it?"

"Oh! has he not? Poor Fly! David has got her into his toils. David is at the bottom of all this, I am convinced. I guessed it the moment I saw him go up so boldly to Mrs. Cameron and pretend to be sorry about the dog. *He* sorry about Scorpion! He hates him more than any of us."

"But then—I don't understand; if that is so, David told a deliberate lie, Flower."

Flower colored.

"We have not been brought up like the Maybrights," she said. "Oh, yes, *we* could tell a lie; we were not brought up to be particular about good things, or to avoid bad things. We were brought up—well, just anyhow."

Polly stole up to Flower and kissed her.

"I am glad you have come to learn of my father," she said. "Now do tell me what we are to do for poor, poor Fly. Do you think David is guilty, and that he has got Fly to promise not to tell?"

"Yes, that is what I think. David must be found, and got to confess, and so release Fly of her

promise before three o'clock. David is a dreadful boy to find when he takes it into his head to hide on purpose; but I must look for him, and in the meantime will you guard your father, Polly?"

"As a dragon," said Polly. "You may trust me about that at least. I will go to his room at once to make all things safe, for there is really no trusting Aunt Maria when she has a scheme of vengeance with regard to *that dog* in her head. Good-by, Flower; I'm off to father."

Polly turned away, and Flower ran quickly downstairs. She knew she had not a moment to lose, for David, as she expressed it, was a very difficult boy to find when he took it into his head to hide himself.

Flower had not been on the moor since that dreadful day when she had taken the baby away. So much had happened since then, so many dreadful things had come to pass, that she shuddered at the bare thought of the great and desolate moorland. Nevertheless she guessed that David would hide there, and without a moment's hesitation turned her steps in the direction of Peg-Top Moor. She had walked for nearly half an hour, and had reached rather a broad extent of table-land, when she saw—their little figures plainly visible against the sky—two children, nearly a quarter of a mile away, eagerly talking together. There was not the least doubt as to their identity; the children—a boy and a girl—were David and Fly. Fly was holding David's arm, and gesticulating and talking eagerly; David's head was turned away. Flower quickened her steps almost into a run. If only she could reach the two before they parted; above all things, if she could reach them before David saw her!

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Alas and alas! she was too late for this. David suddenly pushed his little companion a couple of feet away from him, and to all appearance vanished into the solid ground.

Fly, crying bitterly, began to run to meet Flower. Flower held out her arms as the little girl approached.

"What is it, Firefly? Tell me, has David confessed?"

"Oh, what do you know about it, Flower? Oh, what am I to do, what am I to do?"

"You are to go quietly home," said Flower, speaking in a voice of authority. "You are to go quietly home, and leave this matter in my hands. I know all about it, and just what David has done. He has bound you by a sort of oath, you poor little thing—you dear, brave little thing! Never mind, Fly; you leave David to me. I expect I shall find him now—that is, if you don't keep me too long talking. Go home, and leave matters to me."

"But Flower—Flower, you do comfort me a little; but Flower, it will soon be three o'clock, and then—and then—oh, dear father! Oh, it is so dreadful!"

"No, you silly mite; it is not dreadful at all. Polly is in charge of the Doctor. She is sitting with him now, and the door is locked, and the key is in Polly's pocket, and she has promised me not to open that door to any one—no, Fly, not to a hundred of your Aunt Marias—until I bring David home."

Fly's face underwent a transformation. Her big eyes looked full up into Flower's. A smile flitted across her quivering lips. With a sudden, passionate gesture, she stooped down and kissed Flower's fingers, then ran obediently back in the direction of Sleepy Hollow.

"She is a perfect little darling!" said Flower to herself. "If Master David does not rue it for making her suffer, my name is not Flower Dalrymple."

She ran on swiftly. She was always very quick and light in her movements. Soon she came to the place where David had to all appearance disappeared. She did not stay there long. She ran on to where the bracken grew thick and long, then suddenly lay flat down on the ground, and pressed her ear close to Mother Earth. What she heard did not satisfy her. She rose again, repeating the same process several times. Suddenly her eyes brightened; she raised her head, and listened attentively, then she whistled a long peculiar note. There was no answer, but Flower's face retained its watchful, intent expression. She laid her head down once more close to the ground, and began to speak, "David, David, I know you are there; there is no use in your hiding. Come here, I want you, I, Flower. I will give you two minutes, David; if you don't come then I'll keep the threat I made when you made me angry with you at Ballarat."

A perfect silence followed Flower's words. She still lay flat on the ground. One of the minutes flew by.

"I'll keep my word, David!" she said again. "You know me; you know what my threat means. Three-quarters of a minute more, half a minute, then I'll go home, and I'll do what I said I would do when you made me angry at Ballarat."

Again there was silence, but this time quickly broken; a boy's black head appeared above the bracken, a little brown hand was held out, and David, without troubling himself to move a hair's breadth, looked full into his sister's face.

"I don't want to lose you, Flower!" he said. "You are the only person in all the world I care two-pence about. Now what's the row?"

"You're a cowardly boy, David, and I'm ashamed of you; come with me this minute."

CHAPTER XVIII.

OH, FIE! POLLY.

While these events were taking place, and the children in their various ways were preparing check-mate for Aunt Maria Cameron, that good lady was having a by no means unexciting experience of her own. After her housekeeping cares were over, after she had interviewed Mrs. Power, and made Alice thoroughly uncomfortable; after, in short, meaning it all the while for the best, she had succeeded in jarring the whole household machinery to the utmost, it was her custom morning after morning to retire with Scorpion into the seldom used drawing-room, and there, seated comfortably in an old-fashioned arm-chair, with her feet well supported on a large cushion, and the dog on her lap, to devote herself to worsted work. Not crewel work, not church embroidery, not anything which would admit of the use of modern art colors, but genuine, old-fashioned worsted work. Mrs. Cameron delighted in the flaring scarlets, pinks, greens, blues, and mauves of thirty years ago. She admired with all her soul the hard, staring flowers which these colors produced. They looked, she said, substantial and durable. They *looked* like artificial flowers; nobody could mistake them for the real article, which was occasionally known to be the case with that flimsy, in her opinion, ugly, art embroidery. No, no, Mrs. Cameron would not be smitten by the art craze. "Let nature *be* nature!" she would say, "and worsted work be worsted work, and don't let us try to clash the poor things into one, as that wretched art-school is always endeavoring to do." So each morning Mrs. Cameron plied her worsted needle, and Scorpion slumbered peacefully on her knee. She liked to sit with her back to the light, so that it should fall comfortably on her work, and her own eyes be protected from an extensive and very beautiful view of the south moor.

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Mrs. Cameron hated the moor; it gave her, as she expressed it, "the creeps," and on all occasions she avoided looking at it. On this morning, as usual, she took out her large roll of worsted work, and prepared to ground a huge, impossible arum lily. Her thoughts, however, were not, as usual, with her work. Her cheeks were flushed, and her whole face expressed annoyance and anxiety.

"How I miss even his dear little playful bite!" she said aloud, a big tear falling on her empty lap. "Ah, my Scorpion! why did I love you, but to lose you? How true are the poet's words:

'I never loved a dear gazelle.'

Well, I must say it, I seldom came across more wicked, heartless children than the Maybrights and Daisy Rymple. David is really the only one of the bunch worth rearing. Ah, my poor sister! your removal has doubtless spared you many sorrows, for what could you expect of the future of such a family as yours? Now, what is that? This moor is enough to keep anybody's nerves in a state of tension. What *is* that awful sound approaching the house?"

The noise in question was the unmistakable one of a woman's loud sobbing. It came nearer and nearer, gaining in fullness and volume as it approached the house.

Mrs. Cameron was always intensely curious. She threw open the drawing-room window; and as the sufferer approached, effectually stopped her progress with her own stout person.

"Now, my dear, good creature, what is this most unpleasant sound? Don't you know that it is frightfully bad-mannered to cry in that loud, unrestrained fashion? Pray restrain yourself. You are quite childish. You cannot know what real affliction means. Now, if you had lost a—a— If, my poor woman, you had lost a dear little dog!"

"Is it a dog?" gasped Mrs. Ricketts, for it was she. "Is it a dog? Oh, my word! Much you know about 'flections and such-like! Let me go to the house, ma'am. It isn't to you as I has come to tell my tale."

"Then let me inform you that you are going to tell it to no one else. Here I stand, and here I remain until you choose to explain to me the reason of your loud bursts of uncontrollable grief. During the illness of its master I am the mistress here, and either you speak to me or you go home."

Mrs. Ricketts had by this time so far restrained her sobs as to be able to take a long and very acute glance at the lady in question. Doubtless she was face to face with the formidable Mrs. Cameron, that terrible personage who had got her Maggie dismissed, and who had locked up poor darling Miss Polly for days in her bedroom.

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There was no one, perhaps, in the world whom Mrs. Ricketts more cordially disliked than this good lady, but all the same, it was now her policy to propitiate her. She smoothed, therefore, her brow, dried her eyes, and, with a profound courtesy, began her tale.

"Ef you please, ma'am, it's this way; it's my character that's at stake. I always was, and always will be, honest of the honest. 'Ard I works, ma'am, and the bread of poverty I eats, but honest I am, and honest I brings up those fatherless lambs, my children."

Mrs. Cameron waved one of her fat hands impressively.

"Pardon me, my good woman. I am really not interested in your family. Pray come to the point, and then go home."

"To the p'int, ma'am? Oh, yes, I'll come to the p'int. This is the p'int ef you please, ma'am," and she suddenly thrust, almost into Mrs. Cameron's dazzled face, the splendid gleam and glitter of a large unset diamond. "This is the p'int, ma'am; this is what's to take my character away, and the bread out of the mouths of my innocent children."

Mrs. Cameron never considered herself a worldly woman. She was undoubtedly a very Christian-minded, charitable, good woman, but all the same, she loved fine houses and big dinners and rich apparel, and above all things she adored jewelry. Flowers—that is, natural flowers—had never yet drawn a smile out of her. She had never pined for them or valued them, but jewels, ah! they were worth possessing. She quite gasped now, as she realized the value of the gem which Mrs. Ricketts so unceremoniously thrust under her nose.

"A diamond! Good gracious! How did you come by it? A most valuable diamond of extraordinary size. Give it to me this moment, my good dear creature! and come into the drawing-room. You can step in by this open window. We won't be disturbed in here. I suppose you were weeping in that loud and violent manner at the thought of the grief of the person who had lost this treasure?"

"No, ma'am, I were a sobbing at the grief of her what 'ad it. Oh, my word! And the young lady said for sure as I'd get nine-and-fourpence halfpenny for it. No, ma'am, I won't go into the 'ouse, thank you. Oh, dear! oh, dear! the young lady did set store by it, and said for certain I'd get my nine-and-fourpence halfpenny back, but when I took the stone to the shop to-day, and asked the baker to give me some bread and let this go partly to pay the account, he stared at me and said as I wasn't honest, and he thrust it back in my hand. Oh, dearie me! oh, dearie me! the foreign young lady shouldn't have done it!"

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"I am very sure that you're honest, my good creature! Now, do tell me about this stone. How did you come by it?"

"It was the young lady, ma'am; the young lady from Australia."

"Daisy Rymple, do you mean?"

"Miss Flower she called herself, ma'am. She come to me in sore plight late one evening, when we was all in bed, and 'Mrs. Ricketts,' said she, dear lamb, 'will you help me to go away to Mrs. Cameron, to Bath? I want the money to go third class to Bath. Can you let me have nine shillings and fourpence halfpenny, Mrs. Ricketts? and I'll give you this for the money!' and she flashed that bit of a glittering stone right up into my eyes. My word, I thought as I was blinded by it. 'You'll get most like two pounds for it, Mrs. Ricketts,' she said, 'for my father told me it was worth a sight of money.' That's how I come by it, ma'am, and that's the way I was treated about it to-day."

Mrs. Cameron slowly drew out her purse.

"I will give you two sovereigns for the stone!" she said. "There, take them and go home, and say nothing about the money. It will be the worse for you if you do; now go quickly home."

Mrs. Ricketts' broad face was one glow of delight. She dropped another courtesy, and tried to articulate some words of thanks, but Mrs. Cameron had already disappeared into the drawing-room, where she now sat, holding the diamond in the palm of her open hand.

She knew enough about precious stones to guess at something of its probable value. The idea of in this way possessing herself of Flower's diamond never for a moment entered her head, but she was worldly-minded enough to wish that it could be her own, and she could not help owing to a feeling of satisfaction, even to a sense of compensation for the loss of Scorpion, while she held the beautiful glittering thing in her open palm.

Even Flower rose in her estimation when she found that she had possessed a gem so brilliant. A girl who could have such a treasure and so lightly part with it was undoubtedly a simpleton—but she was a simpleton who ought to be guarded and prized—the sort of young innocent who should be surrounded by protecting friends. Mrs. Cameron felt her interest in Flower growing and growing. Suppose she offered to release the Doctor of this wearisome burden. Suppose she undertook the care of Flower and her diamond herself.

No sooner did this thought occur to Mrs. Cameron, than she resolved to act upon it. Of course the Doctor would be delighted to part with Flower. She would see him on the subject at once.

She went slowly upstairs and knocked with a calm, steady hand at the door of the dressing-room which opened into Dr. Maybright's apartment. No sound or reply of any kind came from within. She listened for a moment, then knocked again, then tried to turn the handle of the door. It resisted her pressure, being locked from within.

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Mrs. Cameron raised her voice. She was not a person who liked to be opposed, and that locked door, joined to that most exasperating silence, became more than trying. Surely the Doctor was not deaf as well as blind. Surely he must hear her loud demands, even though a dressing-room stood between his room and the suppliant without.

And surely the Doctor would have heard, for a more polite man never lived, were it not for that all mischievous and irrepressible Polly. But she, being left in charge, had set her sharp brains to work, and had devised a plan to outwit Mrs. Cameron. The dressing-room in question contained a double baize door. This door was seldom or never used, but it came in very conveniently now, for the furtherance of Polly's plan. When it was shut, and thick curtains also drawn across, and when, in addition, the door leading into Dr. Maybright's room was securely fastened and curtained off, Polly felt sure that she and her father might pass their morning in delicious quietude. Not hearing Mrs. Cameron, she argued with herself that no one *could* possibly blame her for not letting her in. Therefore, in high good humor, this young lady sat down to read, work, and chatter gayly. As the Doctor listened, he said to himself that surely there never was in the world a sweeter or more agreeable companion than his Polly.

With all her precautions, however, as the hours flew by, sundry muffled and distant sounds did penetrate to the sick chamber.

"What a peculiar noise!" remarked the Doctor.

"Can it be mice?" queried Polly's *most* innocent voice.

More time passed.

Suddenly the sharp and unmistakable sound of gravel being flung against the window forced the young lady to go to ascertain what was the matter.

On looking out, she saw what caused her to utter an amazed exclamation.

Mrs. Cameron, very red in the face, and holding the lost Scorpion in one encircling arm, while the other was thrown firmly round a most sulky-looking David; Firefly, pale and with traces of tears on her face; Flower, looking excited and eager—all stood under the window. This group were loud in demanding instant admission to the Doctor's room.

"What is it, what is it?" questioned the patient from the bed.

"Oh, you are *not* strong enough to see them, father."

"To see whom?"

"Aunt Maria—Scorpion—the children."

"Yes, I am quite strong enough. Let them come up at once."

"But father!"

"But Polly! You don't suppose seriously that your Aunt Maria can disturb my equanimity?"

"Oh! She will worry you with so many tales."

"About my very naughty family?"

"Yes, yes; you had much better not see her."

"Because she wants me to get a chaperon for you?"

"Oh! yes—oh! don't see her."

"My dear, you can trust me; you happen to be *my* children, not hers. I would rather have the matter out. I knew there was something wrong from the way little Fly kissed my hand this morning. Show the deputation outside the window into the audience chamber at once, Polly."

So admonished, the curtains had to be drawn back, the baize door reopened, and Polly—a most unwilling hostess—had to receive her guests. But no words can describe the babel of sounds which there and then filled the Doctor's room; no words can tell how patiently the blind man listened.

Aunt Maria had a good tale to tell, and it lost nothing in the telling. The story of Scorpion's disappearance; of the wickedness of David and Fly; of the recovering of the little animal from the man who had bought it, through Flower's instrumentality; all this she told, following up with the full and particular history of the sale of a valuable diamond. At last—at long last—the good lady stopped for want of breath.

There was a delicious pause, then the Doctor said, quietly:

"In short, Maria, you have never come across such absolutely wicked children as the Maybrights and Dalrymples?"

"No, Andrew—never! never!"

"It is lucky they are not your children?"

"Thank Heaven!"

"Would it not be well to leave them to me? I am accustomed to them."

"Yes; I wash my hands of you all; or no—not quite of you all—I heap coals of fire on your head, Andrew; I offer to relieve you of the charge of Daisy Rymple."

"Of Flower?—but she is one of the worst of us."

Here Flower ran over, crouched down by the Doctor, and put one of her hands into his.

"But I will be good with you," she said with a half-sob.

"Hear her," said the Doctor. "She says she will be good with me. Perhaps, after all, Maria, I *can* manage my own children better than any one else can."

"Daisy is not your child—you had better give her to me."

"I can't part with Flower; she is an excellent reader. I am a blind man, but she scarcely allows me to miss my eyes."

Flower gave a low ecstatic sob.

"And you will allow her to part with valuable gems like this?"

"Thanks to you, Maria, she has recovered her diamond."

"Andrew, I never met such an obstinate, such a misguided man! Are you really going to bring up these unfortunate children without a chaperon?"

"I think you must allow us to be good *and* naughty in our own way."

"Father is looking very tired, Aunt Maria," here whispered Polly.

"My dear, *I* am never going to fatigue him more. Andrew, I wash my hands of your affairs. Daisy, take your diamond. At least, my little precious dog, I have recovered *you*. We return to Bath by the next train."

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CHAPTER XIX.

ONE YEAR AFTER.

"Helen, here's a letter."

"Yes. Who is it for?"

"I think it's for us all. See: 'the Misses Maybright and Miss Dalrymple.'"

"Well, where's Flower? We can't open it till Flower comes down. It must be—yes, it must be about father! You know it was yesterday his eyes were to be operated on."

"As if I didn't know it, Nell! I never closed my eyes last night. I felt nearly as bad as that awful day a year ago now. I wish I might tear open this envelope. Where is Flower? Need we wait for her?"

"It would be unkind not to wait! No one feels about father as Flower does."

"David, please call her this instant!"

David flew out of the room, and Polly began to finger the precious letter.

"It's thick," she said; "but I don't think there's much writing inside. Yes," she continued, "Flower is certainly very sensitive about father. She's a dear girl. All the same, I'm sometimes jealous of her."

"Oh, dear Polly! why?"

"Father thinks so much of her. Yes, I know it's wrong, but I do feel a little sore now and then. Not often though, and never when I look into Flower's lovely eyes."

"She is very sweet with father," said Helen. "It seems to me that during this past year she has given up her very life to him. And did you ever hear any one read better?"

"No, that's one of the reasons why I'm devoured with jealousy. Don't talk to me about it, it's an enemy I haven't yet learnt to overcome. Ah! here she comes."

"*And Fly, and the twins!*" echoed Helen. "Here's a letter from father, Flower. At least, we think so. It's directed to us and to you."

A tall, very fair girl, with soft, shining eyes, and a wonderful mane of yellow hair came up and put her arm round Polly's neck. She did not smile, her face was grave, her voice shook a little.

"Open the letter, Helen," she exclaimed impatiently.

"Don't tremble so, Flower," said Polly.

[Pg 166]

But she herself only remained quiet by a great effort, as Helen unfastened the thick envelope, opened the sheet of paper, and held it up for many eager pairs of eyes to read:

“MY CHILDREN:—I see again, thank God.
“Your Father and loving Friend.”

“There!” said Polly. “Oh, I can’t talk about it. Flower, you are silly to cry. Will no one dance a hornpipe with me? I’ll choke if I don’t laugh. You’re the one to dance, Fly. Why, you are crying, too. Ridiculous! Where’s the letter? Let’s kiss it all round. That’ll make us better. His own blessed writing! Isn’t he a darling? Was there ever such a father?”

“Or such a friend?” exclaimed Flower. “I said long ago, and I say again now, that he’s the best man in the world, and I do really think that some day he’ll turn me into a good girl.”

“Why, you’re the nicest girl I know now,” said Polly.

And then they kissed each other.

THE END

Transcriber’s Notes

1. Punctuation has been normalized to contemporary standards.
2. Frontispiece relocated to after title page.
3. Typographic errors corrected in original:
 - p. 7 *aways* to *always* (“*always did think*”)
 - p. 8 *breat-and-butter* to *bread-and-butter*
 - p. 102 *nuseries* to *nurseries* (“*to the nurseries*”)
 - p. 154 *by* to *my* (“*jealous of my influence*”)
 - p. 159 *life* to *like* (“*looked like artificial flowers*”)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POLLY: A NEW-FASHIONED GIRL ***

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