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RUTH ARNOLD

Or, The Country Cousin

BY L. BYERLEY

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RUTH ARNOLD;
Or, The Country Cousin.

CHAPTER I.

A LETTER.

School was over, and the holidays were beginning once more, summer holidays, with all their promise of pleasure for dwellers in the country. The scent of sweet new hay was borne on the afternoon breeze, and the broad sunlight lay on fields of waving corn which would soon be ready for the sickle, and on green meadows from which the hay was being carried.

Ruth Arnold slowly wended her way home-wards along the hot dusty road, turned down a shady green lane, opened a little gate and walked up the garden path; and then, instead of running indoors as usual, she sat down in the little rose-covered porch and looked rather thoughtfully at the book in her hand.

It was a new book, a prize which had been awarded her that afternoon; but she felt very little pride in it, for she had known all through the half-year that the prize would be hers unless she was very idle or lazy. Nor did she anticipate much pleasure in reading it, for it was only a new English grammar, and grammar was not a study in which she felt particularly interested at that moment.

It was not often that Ruth sat down to think, for she was a merry lively girl; but this afternoon she felt rather discontented with her lot. The truth was that she had been at Miss Green's school, the only one in the village, ever since she was six years old; and now she had turned fourteen, and began to feel some contempt for the elementary catechisms which had been her only lesson-books, and which were certainly not calculated to make learning attractive or interesting. The mode of instruction at Miss Green's was the old-fashioned one of saying lessons by rote from the said catechisms, and when the pupils had reached the end of the book they had to begin again at the first chapter.

"I'm sure I don't know what I've learnt this half-year," said Ruth to herself. "I can't remember learning a single thing which I didn't know six months ago; and yet mother says that I must not leave school until I am fifteen. I wonder what books they use in large boarding-schools, and if they ever get beyond Mangnall's Questions in the first class. I suppose I shouldn't trouble about it if it were not for father's teaching us in the winter evenings; but he knows so much, that we see how ignorant we are."

"I didn't know that you were at home, Ruth. How long have you been here?" asked her mother's voice.

"Only a few minutes."

"Where is your prize? And why did you not show it to me?"



"Here it is, mother; but I don't much care for it. There is so little credit in getting a prize at Miss Green's, where one makes so little progress, and has to do the same thing over and over again."

"Yes," said Mrs. Arnold with a little sigh, "and so you will find it in life, dear, the same thing over and over again, every day and every year. But now," she added smiling, "as everyone is busy in the hay-field, and baby has to be nursed and the cows to be milked every day, will you help me to do one thing or the other?"

"Yes," said Ruth as she went to put on a large blue pinafore; "I'll go and help Mary with the milking."

Five minutes later she was seated on a low stool beside her favourite cow, Beauty, which had been reared on the farm, and named by Ruth herself, who petted and talked to her like an old friend. The afternoon was very warm, but still and sweet and quiet, with the summer hush upon everything, even the lowing of the cows in the farm-yard, the murmur of the brook, and the voices of the workers in the distant hay-field.

"Ah me, old Beauty!" sighed Ruth, as she pressed the milk into the pail, "mother says that it is the same thing over and over again all our lives, and I suppose it is true, but I wish I could have something different."

Beauty only lowed; but if she could have spoken English she might have said, "If *you* find life monotonous, what must it be for me? In the morning I rise and crop the grass, then I come in to be milked. I go back to the meadow and bathe in the stream or eat as much grass as I want; in the afternoon I lie under the shade of the trees and chew the cud; and in the evening I come again to be milked, and once more return to the meadows. If I have a calf of my own, it is taken from me and sent—I know not where. Yes, it is the same thing over and over again. Yet I am quite content."

Whatever Beauty meant as she lowed and looked at Ruth with her great patient eyes, the young girl did not understand, but went on thinking aloud: "Yes, it is breakfast, dinner, tea and supper every day, and mother has to see to it all; and the children to be washed and dressed and nursed, and the cows to be milked, and the cream to be skimmed; and then every year father has the ploughing, and sowing, and haying, and the har—"

"Ah, Ruth, I see you are making yourself useful," cried her father, as he entered the farm-yard followed by two merry looking boys aged respectively seventeen and twelve. It was evident from a single glance that they were Ruth's brothers, although their hands and faces were brown and sunburnt, and Will, the elder, was fully a head taller than his sister.

"Guess what Will has got for you, Ruth!" cried roguish little Ned.

"Oh, Will!" she exclaimed, looking up brightly, all her grave thoughts gone in a moment, "have you brought a new plant for my garden? No! Has Annie Price sent the pattern she promised for

my wool-work? Well then, is it the new tune-book you were talking of yesterday, with both the music and words?"

"No, you are quite wrong; and as I can't tell whether it is anything good or bad, I may as well give it to you at once. It's from a girl, I think," continued Will, as he took a letter from his pocket.

"A letter for me! Who can it be from? Yes, I see it comes from a girl by the writing. What a pretty hand! ever so much better than mine; and here is the post-mark—Busyborough; it must be from Cousin Julia," she said as she turned the letter over.

Then she opened it and began to read, while her brothers stood by full of interest, and saw a look of mingled wonder, surprise, and delight spread over her face. They waited as long as their curiosity would permit, and then both cried eagerly, "What does she say? What is it all about?"



"She wants me—that is, aunt has invited me—to spend my holidays with them at the sea-side," said Ruth, speaking very slowly, and looking as if she could hardly understand the idea of such a piece of good fortune coming in her way. "But there," she added with a sigh, as she refolded the letter and put it into her pocket and tried to banish the visions of brightness it had called forth, "of course it is quite out of the question. I couldn't go away now when every one is so busy."

She walked slowly back to the house, and tried not to think of the bright dream of pleasure the letter had suggested; but this was not an easy matter, as her father and mother were already sitting at the tea-table talking over the same subject, for Mrs. Arnold had also received a letter from Busyborough that afternoon.

CHAPTER II.

TALKING IT OVER.

"Have you read your cousin's letter, Ruth?" asked her mother as she took her seat. "Why, what makes you look so unhappy?" she exclaimed, observing the girl's grave face.

"It's very silly, I know, mother; and I didn't mean to be vexed about it," she began, "but Julia said something about my going to the sea-side with them to spend the holidays. Of course I know very well that you couldn't spare me,—but I can't help crying—just a minute, mother, that is all," said Ruth, while her tears dropped slowly.

"Don't cry, child; we'll talk it over to-night, and see what can be done," said her father cheerfully.

"But, father!" cried Ruth, starting up in surprise, her tears quite forgotten, "you don't think *really* that there is any chance of my going, do you? Just see how busy you are with the haying, and then there are the boys and the little ones——"

"Well, well, your mother and I will talk it over," he repeated, as he took up his hat and set out again for the hay-field.

The summer evening soon slipped away, and Ruth knew better than to worry her mother by asking foolish questions; but when supper was over, and her head lay at rest upon the pillow, her brain was busy, and it was a long time before sleep overtook her. Delightful visions of sea-side

places such as she had read of in her favourite books, of picnics and boating, of rambles in search of shells, rare stones and long sea-weeds, filled her mind; and as she heard the monotonous sounds of her parents' voices talking in low tones in the room beneath her, and knew that they were discussing the important question Was she to go or stay? her impatience almost got the better of her, and she longed to run downstairs and take part in the conversation.

Presently the voices ceased, there were footsteps on the stairs, the light of a candle showed through the chink of her door, the footsteps receded and a door was shut, and Ruth knew that the decision was made and her mother had gone to bed. And as she could not know the result of the conversation that night, she very wisely closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Early the next morning she was awakened by the sun shining in at her window. She rose at once, dressed quickly, and was soon downstairs, but not before her mother, who was busily preparing the breakfast. There was so much to be done before the meal was ready, so much chatter over it, and so many last words to the boys and their father before they set out for the hay-field, that Ruth could not find an opportunity to ask her mother the question that was burning upon her lips, until all trace of the meal was removed and the children had gone to play in the orchard.

Then she went upstairs to help her make the beds, and there was time for a quiet chat.

Mrs. Arnold began by inquiring, "What did your cousin say in her letter yesterday?"

"She asked if I could spend my holidays with them at the sea-side," replied Ruth, blushing with joy at the very thought.

"And you would like to go?"

"Oh yes, indeed I should, very, very much; that is—of course—if you could spare me," she added hesitatingly.

"I suppose then that you do not know what your aunt has suggested. She writes to know if we will spare you, not only for the holidays, but for a whole twelvemonth, to be a companion to your cousin and go to school with her (What are you doing with the pillows, Ruth?), to share her studies and amusements."

"Should I see none of you for a whole year?"

"I am not sure; that would depend upon your aunt."

"But—mother—you don't think of letting me go, do you?" asked Ruth, almost over-whelmed with pleasure and surprise.

"I don't know. Your father thinks it would be good for you, but I am not sure, Ruth. I am afraid whether, after living in a handsome well-appointed house, waited upon by servants, and surrounded with comforts and luxuries, you would grow discontented with our quiet country life. I know you love your home now, but I fear lest a life in town should spoil you, and make you no longer our little Ruth, but a grown-up young lady, who would feel herself above our simple joys and pleasures, and only bring herself to tolerate them from a sense of duty."

"Mother, mother!" cried Ruth, bursting into tears, "don't talk so. I'll never go away. How can you think so of me?"

"Perhaps I have done wrong to say so much to you, darling," replied her mother; "but I must tell you that your father does not fear anything of the sort for you. He says that you need to go to a good school, and that he is thankful for the opportunity which is now offered. He feels sure that you would be happy with his sister, and does not fear your growing discontented with home. Besides, as he says, when you come back you will be able to teach the younger children, and that will be a good object to have in view while you are studying. So we have determined to leave it for you to decide. We will give you to-day to think it over, and to-morrow you must tell us what you wish to do. Pray over it, Ruth, and don't let anything I have said prejudice you against the idea of going. Indeed, dear," she added in a lower tone, "I don't think I should have any fear for you if I were sure that you were not going alone, if I knew that you had an almighty Friend to be with you and guide you in the right way."

It was very rarely that Mrs. Arnold said so much to any of her children, and Ruth was quite overcome. She ran off to her own little room to give vent to her feelings, and to think over all that she had heard.

CHAPTER III.

RUTH'S DECISION.

For the first few moments Ruth felt quite determined not to leave home; but as she thought over the advantages and disadvantages of the plan her resolution wavered. How often she had wished, though vainly, to go to a good boarding-school! and now there was an opportunity for her to have a twelvemonth's education, without the great drawback of living at school among strangers and losing the comforts and freedom of home. It was true that she had only seen her aunt for a short

time several years before, and her cousins were quite unknown, except for the short notes she usually received at Christmas, with a present from Julia. Still they were relatives, and would not regard her as a stranger.

There were so many arguments for accepting her aunt's invitation: the pleasure of the sea-side trip, the change, the novelty of living in a town, of having Julia for a companion and many school-fellows of her own age; of exchanging Miss Green's school, with its catechisms and needlework, for a young ladies' college, with its modern plans of study, its classes and professors. And all these inducements had the charm of being new and untried, so that only their agreeable side appeared to view, the other being unknown.

Yet if there were fewer reasons against the plan, they were very weighty, for how would mother contrive to do without her? And how could she bear to live a year without a glimpse of the dear home faces?

"But I only help in the mornings and evenings," she mused, "for I am at school all day, and perhaps I could come home for a few days at Christmas. I'm sure I don't know what to do. I wish father and mother had settled it. It is so difficult to know how to decide."

She did not forget the advice which had been given her—to pray over the matter. Indeed, I doubt if she would in any case have come to a decision without taking counsel of her Heavenly Father, for Ruth had for years been in the habit of carrying her childish troubles and perplexities to the one unfailing Guide.

And yet she was hardly sure that she was a Christian; and although she longed to set her mother's mind at rest upon that point, she could not venture to do so just yet. Like many another child of pious parents, she had been trained to love good and hate evil; she had been taught to pray and to desire to live a Christian life; she had long since begun the never-ending conflict against evil and tried to rule her life and actions by God's Word; and yet she could not tell whether the promptings and impulses towards the Saviour which often came to her heart, were merely the result of the loving sanctified home-influence which had surrounded her from her birth, or if she had indeed become a disciple, though but a feeble one, of the meek and lowly Jesus.

In the quiet calm of a summer day, when the wind scarcely ruffles the waters of the bay, it is difficult to say whether the fair ship riding at anchor will prove herself seaworthy. It is when the storm rises in its fury and the billows dash over her that the testing time comes, and she proves the strength of her bows and the soundness of her timbers, or she sinks a hopeless wreck.

And it remained for Ruth's visit to Busyborough, to test her and prove how strong was her desire to follow Christ. If it were but a weak earth-born feeling, it would soon be upset by the winds of temptation; but if it were indeed of God, although it might be roughly handled and somewhat shaken for a time, it would come forth triumphant at last.

"Well, Ruth, what do you intend to do?" asked her father, as they sat at breakfast the next morning. "Do you intend to go to Busyborough, and find out how ignorant you are, and then set to work to study with all your might, or do you mean to be the pattern eldest scholar at Miss Green's? Do you mean to rub shoulders with others, or are you going to stay at home and fancy yourself a prodigy of wisdom and learning?"

"I think, that if you and mother can spare me, I will go to Busyborough, and rub shoulders with the others," said Ruth, steadily.

"That's right; I am glad to hear it; for although we shall miss you very much, I am sure the change will benefit you. Go and learn all the good you can, and tell us all about it when you come back. Ah! your mother looks grave: I know she rather fears your picking up some fantastical notions and growing to look down on your own people. But I don't fear it. I look forward to seeing my little Ruth again next summer, grown somewhat taller, perhaps, and wiser too, but still always my own Ruth."

"Yes, father," she answered, with something like a sob.

But Will, the eldest brother, who found that his father's speech and Ruth's face were getting too much for his feelings, jumped up and seized his hat, saying in his queer way that he must be off to the hay-field if there was a prospect of showers, and he hoped Ruth would not run away before he came back.

The other members of the family soon dispersed; and although Ruth's departure was for days the all-absorbing topic of conversation, it was generally referred to in a cheery way, and not in what Will called "the sentimental strain."

CHAPTER IV.

THE JOURNEY.

Several letters passed between Mrs. Arnold and her sister-in-law; and as it was arranged that

Ruth was to go the following week, there was not much time for preparation, and every spare minute was fully occupied. Her entire wardrobe had to be inspected and replenished, as far as slender means would permit; old garments were made to look as much like new as possible, and little bits of ribbon and lace which had not seen the light for years, because there were so few suitable occasions for wearing them in a quiet country place, now reappeared in the form of bows and tuckers for the neck.

As Mrs. Woburn, Ruth's aunt, lived a great many miles from Cressleigh, it was decided that her niece should go direct to Stonegate, the watering-place where they were to spend the holidays. She was therefore to take a long railway journey, quite an event in itself, as she had rarely been farther by rail than the county town, twelve miles distant, and even there she had always been accompanied by her father or mother. But just now there was so much to be done on the farm, that her father could spare neither the time nor money for a long journey, and the young girl was obliged to travel alone, a formidable undertaking, which seemed almost to spoil the anticipated pleasure of the sea-side visit.

One bright morning in the early part of July, Ruth woke with the thought, "I am really going away to-day, and perhaps I may not sleep in this dear little room for a whole year, or for six months at least."

She had rarely called her chamber a "dear little room" before; in fact, she had often grumbled because it was so small; but now that she was about to go away it had suddenly become dear, for was it not part of her home, and what place in the world could ever be so dear as home?

How strange it all seemed that morning! The coming downstairs and finding the little trunk packed and corded in the hall; the hurried breakfast, at which every one but mother talked very fast, because they had so much to say and such a short time in which to say it; the leave-takings, the good-byes, and parting injunctions.

Ruth drove off at last beside her father, feeling like one in a dream, so dimly did she see everything through the mist of tears which hung about her eyes.

There was another farewell to be said at the railway junction, for Mr. Arnold could only wait a few minutes to see her into a comfortable carriage, and then returned home to Cressleigh. When he waved his hand and the train was fairly in motion, Ruth began to realize that she was being separated for a long, long time from all whom she loved best in the world; she heaved one great sob, and crouching into a corner of the carriage gave way to a flood of tears. She wept for several minutes undisturbed, then a kind motherly-looking lady, who was sitting opposite to her, asked, "What is the matter, my dear? Are you going away to school?"

"Yes, ma'am; at least, I mean no, not yet. I am going to the sea-side to stay with my cousins for a few weeks."

"I don't think that most girls would be so distressed at the thought of a visit to the sea-side," said the old lady, smiling.

"But I'm not coming back for ever so long," replied Ruth, drying her tears, however. Then she informed her new friend how long she was going to be away, and what she hoped to see and do during her absence from home, and the old lady seemed so much interested that Ruth soon grew bright and merry, and began to notice the pretty country through which they were passing; and when the train stopped at a rustic station, where a little pony trap was waiting to convey the old lady to her own home, they felt as if they had known each other for years instead of hours, and were really very sorry to part.

The rest of the journey seemed rather dull and tedious, and it was late in the afternoon when the train drew up at the Stonegate station. There were a good many people on the platform, and Ruth was wondering if any one had come to meet her, when a lady looked in at the carriage door and inquired in a pleasant manner, "Your name is Ruth Arnold, is it not?"

"Yes, it is," she replied rather shyly, as she bent forward to look at her aunt. But that look told her a great deal.

She saw a fair placid face which she felt sure she should love, for the dark blue eyes reminded her of her father's, though the fair hair and small mouth were strangely unlike his. But there was something familiar in the tone of her voice, and when she called a cab, gave instructions about the luggage, and took her seat beside her niece, Ruth was quite at ease and felt that she was going to be happy.

"You will see Julia very soon," said Mrs. Woburn, "but this is our first day at the sea-side, and she was out when I started. I am afraid that she will be angry with me, for I know that she intended to come herself to meet you, and I think she will be disappointed."

"It was very kind of you to come," said Ruth; "I was getting quite frightened, and thought that perhaps you might not know me, and that I should be all alone in a strange place."

"There is not much fear that any one who has seen your mother would not recognise her daughter," was Mrs. Woburn's smiling reply.

"Do you think me so much like her?" asked Ruth eagerly, looking greatly pleased.

"Indeed I do. But this is our lodging. I see Julia looking out of the window."

In another minute Ruth had followed her aunt into a large cheerful sitting-room, with two bay-windows overlooking the beach and sea.

"Oh! mamma, what a shame of you to go without me!" cried a voice from the window where a young girl was standing.

"You were so late, dear," said Mrs. Woburn gently. "Here is your cousin; take her to her room; I am sure she must be tired after her long journey."

Julia, a pretty fair-haired fashionably-dressed girl, came forward and shook hands, saying, "How d'ye do, Ruth? I am glad mamma met you. Will you come upstairs?"

She led the way to a pretty bedroom, much larger than the one in which Ruth had slept at Cressleigh. There was a splendid view of the sea from the windows, and the furniture of the room was all of light polished wood; a pretty dressing-table stood between the windows, which were hung with white muslin curtains, and the hangings and cover-lids of the two little beds were snowy white.

"What a pretty room!" said Ruth, as she entered.

"Do you think so? I think it is awfully small and poky. And we are both to sleep here, which I am sure will be very inconvenient; but we couldn't get anything better, so I suppose we must put up with it. Lodgings are always the great drawback to the sea-side, you know."

Ruth did not know what reply to make, she was so taken aback by the grandeur of Julia's air and manner.

CHAPTER V.

COUSINS.

"Tea is ready, miss," said a trim maid-servant at the door of the bedroom where the two girls were talking, and Ruth followed her cousin downstairs to the large cheerful room she had entered upon her arrival.

Mrs. Woburn had already taken her seat behind the urn, and the two boys who were sitting beside her rose to meet their cousin. Ernest, the elder of the two, was a tall, thin lad of fifteen, with a pair of large brown eyes, the only striking feature in his plain but sensible face.

Rupert was a merry little schoolboy of seven, bright-eyed and curly-haired, a mischievous little sprite, no doubt, but a very affectionate lovable little fellow. He chattered continually during the meal, and did a great deal to take off the sense of shyness that Ruth felt in the company of Julia and Ernest, and her aunt asked questions about the farm-life at Cressleigh, and talked of their plans for the next few weeks.

"Oh! you will have a great deal to see," said Julia, "as this is your first visit to the sea-side. I think we had better put on our hats and go for a long walk at once, it is a shame to be indoors this lovely evening."

"That will hardly do for your cousin, dear; she looks rather tired, and we must remember that she has had a long journey to-day."

Ruth was very tired, and, much as she longed to go for a walk along the shore, she felt that that pleasure must be deferred until the next morning. But she was rather dismayed by Julia's saying, "Well, I don't see any reason for our remaining indoors. Of course Ernest won't come, he is too much taken up with that book about—shellology. So he can stay with Ruth while you come out with us."

"Why can't you call things by their right names, and say 'conchology'?" asked Ernest quietly.

"Really, Julia, I don't think we must leave your cousin this evening," said Mrs. Woburn, doubtfully.

"Don't stay at home on my account, auntie," replied Ruth, putting aside her own feelings, though she did not much like the idea of spending the evening with Ernest, such a grave, quiet boy, so very different from her brothers.

Julia carried her point, and started in a few minutes for a walk with her mother and Rupert, leaving the cousins to their own resources. Ruth took a seat near the window, and watched the waves breaking gently upon the beach, while the boy appeared to be entirely occupied with his book. It was rather dull, this first evening away from home; it seemed scarcely possible that she had really only left Cressleigh that morning, and she began to wonder if they had missed her very much, and what they were doing now, and when she should see them all again, and as she thought of the months that must elapse first she heaved a weary sigh.

The sigh roused Ernest, who had quite forgotten his companion in the charms of his book, and he at once endeavoured to make amends for his neglect in his kind but awkward way.

"Oh! I beg your pardon," he began, "I almost forgot—do you like conchology?" he asked, by way of starting a conversation.

"I don't know anything about it," was Ruth's meek reply, "but I believe it is the science of shells, is it not?"

"Yes. I thought you wouldn't care for it. Girls never do."

"Perhaps I might learn," she said humbly; "but I haven't had a chance to study any 'ologies,' they did not teach them at Miss Green's. Are you studying it as a holiday task?"

"No, for amusement. They won't let me study in the holidays, but I enjoy this. Just look at these shells, aren't they beauties?" and he showed her one of the illustrations in his book.

"Oh! how beautiful!" she exclaimed; and the boy, seeing she was interested, told her what he had been reading, and promised to get her some specimens the next day, and the time slipped rapidly by, until Mrs. Woburn and Julia returned.

"What have you been doing all the evening?" asked Julia, when they were in their room that night. "Was Ernest civil?"

"He was very kind, and showed me his book on conchology, and explained about the shells, and he is going to get me some specimens to-morrow."

"Indeed!" said Julia, rather surprised, "I should not have thought that you cared for that sort of thing."

Ruth was too tired to answer, and had soon forgotten the events of the day in sound refreshing sleep. When she awoke, the sun was shining brightly, and she was astonished to find that she had slept until half-past seven. She was accustomed to rise very early at home, and was afraid that her cousins would be shocked at her laziness, until she found that Julia was still sleeping quietly in the bed beside her.

"Julia! Julia!" she cried, "it's very late. We must get up at once."

"What is the time?" was asked drowsily.

"Half-past seven."

"Why can't you let me rest?" said Julia crossly. "We always breakfast at eight at home, but I don't intend to get up so early at the sea-side."

She closed her eyes and went to sleep again; but Ruth, who was wide awake, rose at once, dressed quickly, brushed her brown curls, and went downstairs. There was no one about, and the morning air was so fresh, and the sunshine so inviting, that she took her hat and ran down to the beach, feeling so full of joy and gladness that she could hardly restrain herself from singing, as she often did in the fields at Cressleigh. The sunlight sparkled upon the crested waves as they broke gently upon the shore, and the tide came in, slowly creeping up the shingle, now bearing away a dry piece of sea-weed and making it look alive and fresh, advancing and retreating, yet ever creeping slowly upward, until one wave almost broke over her feet and reminded her of the old and oft-repeated adage, "Time and tide wait for no man."

She hurried back, to find her aunt and cousins waiting breakfast for her; and as she told them about her morning ramble, she did not notice the unpleasant glances which Julia bestowed upon her dress, a blue cotton one, made very simply, but somewhat old-fashioned, and washed until the colour was rather faded.

"We must certainly go out this lovely morning," said Mrs. Woburn after breakfast. "Where do you think your cousin would like to go, dear?"

"Oh! we'll go to the Esplanade of course," replied Julia, as she ran off to get ready. She came down a few minutes later looking very nice in her pretty holland dress trimmed with red, and shady straw hat with muslin and lace bows, and dainty gloves.

"You don't mean to say that you are going out like that, Ruth!" she exclaimed, as she caught sight of her cousin sitting by the window still wearing her print dress and shabby straw hat.

"Yes," she replied, and was going to ask "Why not?" but the sight of her cousin's simple but pretty costume stopped her, and she blushed rosy red.

"Then of course we cannot go to the Esplanade," said Julia in a pointed manner.

CHAPTER VI.

STONEGATE.

"The Esplanade did you say, girls?" asked Mrs. Woburn, entering at that moment.

"No, mamma, we don't care about it; any other place will do," replied Julia sulkily.

"We will walk along the beach to Brill Head then," said Mrs. Woburn, "and I dare say Ernest would like to accompany us; he will find plenty of specimens there."

"Shall I stay at home, Aunt Annie?" asked Ruth timidly.

"Certainly not, unless you wish it; Julia has been longing to have you for a companion, and this will be such a delightful walk."

But the pleasure of the walk was gone for Ruth. Julia was quiet, and scarcely spoke to any one, and her mother could not understand what was the matter, and although she tried her best to bring back the look of delight to her niece's face, she was not successful. It was not until they reached Brill Head, and Ernest began his search for specimens, that Ruth recovered her wonted liveliness, and the sunshine returned to her face and the gladness to her heart, and she felt so full of life and energy that she challenged Rupert to a race.

"Just look at her, mamma!" exclaimed Julia, who was sitting beside her mother on a rustic seat. "Did you ever see any one so wild and vulgar? And that frightful dress, as old-fashioned as possible! To think of our going on the Esplanade with her!"

"Is that the reason you did not wish to go there?"

"Of course it was. Every one would have stared at her antiquated dress. Indeed, she is altogether old-fashioned; she actually asked me last night if I had any dolls, and if I went to Sunday-school. I didn't think that having a poor relation to live with us would be quite so annoying and humiliating."

Mrs. Woburn was very seldom angry with her spoiled child, but now she was thoroughly roused, and said in low distinct tones, "Remember, Julia, that you speak of my brother's daughter. While Ruth is here she will be treated as your sister. You little know what you owe to your uncle, and if I ever hear you speak in that contemptuous way of any of his family I will send you to your room at once."

Such a threat was quite strange to Julia, who at fourteen began to consider herself almost grown-up, and quite above reproof or punishment; but it was sufficiently determined to prevent her making any more remarks of the sort in her mother's hearing, though it did not increase her affection for her cousin.

During the walk home Ruth was merry as ever, romping with Rupert, chatting with that usually shy lad, Ernest, and planning an afternoon on the shore to collect sea-weeds. But Julia walked slowly beside her mother, so evidently determined to be silent that the rest of the party tacitly agreed to leave her to herself.

Mr. Woburn and his eldest son, Gerald, arrived at Stonegate that afternoon, and Ruth saw them for the first time. She soon felt at home with her uncle, a plain-featured, middle-aged man of business, but with his son she felt wonderfully shy. It seemed hardly possible that the handsome young man with the dark moustache and manly bearing could be her cousin. She had expected to see a boy two or three years older than Will, but still a boy, not a polite and self-possessed young man, who by his way of speaking to her made her feel a very little girl indeed.

"How have you been improving the shining hours, my lad?" was his greeting to Ernest.

"He has been down on the shore collecting shells for Ruth," said Julia mischievously.

"Ernest becoming a lady's man! Dear me! the country cousin is working wonders," he cried in feigned surprise.

Ruth felt the hot blood rushing to her cheeks, though she tried to look as if she had not heard the remark; but it spoiled her pleasure in seeking for shells, and she decided mentally that she should never like Cousin Gerald. The arrival of her brother seemed to have restored Julia's good-humour, and when in the evening he proposed a stroll on the pier she gladly assented, and the whole party set out to hear the band which played there two or three evenings in the week.

Ruth thought that she had never known anything so charming as that evening. It was so pleasant to sit in a sheltered corner listening to the finest music she had ever heard, played by a military band and accompanied by the gentle splash of the waves against the pier; to feel the cool fresh sea-breeze blowing around her, and to see the gay dresses of the ladies as they walked up and down talking to their friends, until by-and-by the quiet stars came out and the silver moon shone upon the scene.

Julia was not contented to sit still and look on; she begged Gerald to let her promenade with him, and for a few minutes he gratified her whim; but Ruth, although she had changed the dress which had proved so obnoxious that morning, did not consider herself to be attired richly enough to mingle with the gay throng that passed and re-passed her in her quiet corner.

"What do you think of Gerald?" asked Julia, when the two girls had retired to their bedroom that evening. "Is he not very handsome?"

"Yes," said Ruth, glad that her cousin had asked a question to which she could give her assent so easily. "But I didn't know that he was so old; I expected he would be a boy."

"He is only nineteen," said Julia; "but I am sure he looks older."

"Only nineteen! Why, Will is seventeen, and he is quite a boy compared with Cousin Gerald."

"That is very likely, for he has been brought up in the country, and that makes a great difference. Now I am sure that Gerald knows quite as much as most men do, and I think it is too bad for father to treat him like a boy."

"Does he?" asked Ruth innocently.

"Yes; he won't even allow him to have a latch-key, and then he complains if Gerald is rather late home in the evening, and he has to sit up for him. And even mamma annoys him dreadfully sometimes by calling him 'her dear boy.'"

"I thought mothers did that even when their sons were quite grown up," said Ruth.

"I don't think they should," was Julia's reply. "But it is quite too bad of papa to expect poor Gerald to slave away in that office all day. He is quite a tyrant, and grudges the poor fellow any pleasure."

"Julia! Julia! I am sure it is very wrong of you to talk in that way of your parents," cried Ruth reproachfully. "Don't you know the Bible says, 'Honour thy father and mother'?"

"What an old-fashioned, tiresome creature you are!" muttered Julia in a sleepy voice.

CHAPTER VII.

A POOR RELATION.

"When are we to have the picnic, mamma?" asked Julia at breakfast the next morning.

"Any day will suit me; but as your father and Gerald will only be here for a short time, I think we must arrange to have it as early as possible the week after next."

"Let us have it on Monday. Yes, Monday," cried Rupert and Julia together.

"I am going out boating on Monday," said Gerald lazily.

"Tuesday or Wednesday," suggested Mrs. Woburn.

"I am engaged for Tuesday also, but Wednesday is clear, I believe," replied the young man in a careless manner, as if it did not signify much to him whether he formed one of the party or not.

"How horrid of you to put it off so long," exclaimed his sister angrily. "I daresay Wednesday will be wet."

"*Nous verrons*," he replied, as he sauntered from the room with his hands in his pockets. He looked in again at the door to say, "I shall not be back until the evening, mother;" and in another moment the banging of the front-door told them that he had left the house.

"It is too bad of Gerald to go off like that the very first day he is here," said Julia. "I suppose he has taken his bicycle and gone out with his friends, the Goodes. Horrid people! Yes, there he is," she cried as Gerald and two other young men on bicycles passed the house bowing and smiling towards the window where the two girls were standing.

"Gerald out with the Goodes? I wish he would choose some other companions," said Mr. Woburn, who had scarcely noticed their previous conversation.

"You see how papa finds fault with him," whispered Julia to her cousin.

"Ruth, I want you to come to my room for a few minutes," said Mrs. Woburn; and her niece followed her upstairs.

"I should like you to try on these things and see how they fit you," she said, as she pointed to some pretty dresses spread out on the bed. There was a pale pink, trimmed with dainty white lace; a figured sateen covered with tiny rosebuds, and finished off here and there with knots and bows of rose-coloured ribbon; a simple holland dress trimmed with white braid, and a shady straw hat with bows of lace and a tiny bunch of rosebuds. Ruth gazed at the garments with admiration and astonishment, then she glanced at her own shabby print frock, blushed rosy red, and the tears began to gather in her eyes.

"What is the matter, Ruth? Do you not like them?" asked her aunt kindly.

"They are very pretty, and you are very kind, auntie; but I would rather not wear them," said the girl, trying hard to repress the tears of mortification that stood in her eyes.

"But, my dear, they have been bought on purpose for you to wear at the sea-side. Do at least try them."

"Thank you, auntie, I would much rather not do so;" and Ruth turned aside to the window, from which she could see nothing for the mist before her eyes caused by the storm of passion and pride surging within her breast.

There was no reply, and when she looked round again she found that she was alone. The sunshine was streaming into the room, shining upon the white hat and the pretty dresses, just such garments as Ruth would have chosen if she had had an opportunity of buying such a stock of clothes for herself. But she remembered Julia's words and manner the previous morning, and felt so proud and angry that she deliberately shut her eyes as she walked out of the room, and gave not a thought to her aunt's kindness.

"It is too bad! I'll not stand it!" she murmured. "I did not come here to be treated like a poor relation. If they don't like me as I am, I will go home again. Yes, I'll go and tell auntie so at once," she continued, her pride rising higher and higher until she reached the bay-windowed drawing-room where her aunt was sitting with Ernest. She did not observe his presence, but went straight to her aunt, her cheeks crimson and her eyes flashing.

"Aunt Annie," she said as calmly as her emotion would permit, "Aunt Annie, I think that I had better go home."

"My dear child, what is the matter?" cried Mrs. Woburn, dropping her work in her amazement.

"I think that if you don't like me as I am, I had better go home," she repeated.

"What do you mean?" asked her aunt, still more perplexed; while Ernest looked up from his book and inquired, "Has Julia been annoying her?"

"No," said Ruth; "but, oh, auntie! I can't bear to be—a poor relation, and—and have clothes given me."

The pent-up sobs would have their way at last, and the girl sank down beside her aunt, who tried to soothe and comfort her.

"Have those dresses troubled you so much, dear?" she asked gently. "I had no idea that that was the cause of your annoyance, but fancied you did not like the style in which they were made. If I had thought that you would have any objection I would have acted differently; but as your mother —"

"Did mother know that you were getting them for me?" inquired Ruth.

"Yes, and she wrote to say that she should be glad for you to be treated in every way like your cousin. And you must never think, dear, that we regard you as 'a poor relation.' Remember that your father is my brother, and whatever I give you has been paid for, and far more than paid for, years ago."

"Thank you, auntie; I am glad to know that," she said quietly.

"I did not think you were so proud, Ruth," whispered Ernest as she left the room, and went up to her own chamber to have a good cry over her foolish behaviour. But, to her dismay, Julia was there dressing for a walk, an occupation which she knew would take her a considerable time.

Oh, how she longed for her little room at home, where she had so often taken her childish troubles, or for a quiet nook upon the shore, such as she had often read of, but which is rarely to be found in a fashionable watering-place. There was no solitude for her just then, and she was obliged to fight the battle within silently, while her companion rallied her upon her mournful looks and red eyes; and to send up her prayer for help from the heart, without using the lips. But help came, and she conquered at last the pride and temper of which she was now thoroughly ashamed. She was anxious to obtain her aunt's forgiveness for the rude reception of her kindness, and tried to make amends by arraying herself in the pink dress and pretty hat, which she showed to Julia, saying how kind it was of auntie to get such lovely things for her. By-and-by when she had an opportunity she said in a low voice, "I am very sorry that I was so proud and rude just now, auntie. I'll try to behave better in future."

And Mrs. Woburn, looking at her niece's dress, saw that her repentance was not only expressed in words.

CHAPTER VIII.

SEA-SIDE PLEASURES.

A week spent at Stonegate had taught Ruth more of her own frailties and weaknesses, and had shown her more of the various sorts of people of which the world is composed, than she would have learnt in a whole year spent in the quiet sheltered seclusion of her home at Cressleigh.

The novelty, the continued round of pleasure, the excitement and gaiety, were bewildering and delightful to the simple country girl. It seemed to her that she had been suddenly transported from the commonplace ordinary work-a-day world in which she had hitherto dwelt, to a fairyland of sunshine, music, and pleasure. It was almost impossible at times to realize that the sun which brightened the Esplanade, and gilded the edge of the rippling waves, was the same sun which was shining upon her father's harvest-field at home, upon the labourers toiling at the sickle, the women binding the sheaves, and the servants briskly moving hither and thither, all as busy as

bees throughout the whole of the long summer day.

Everything at the sea-side was new to Ruth, and she exulted in the freshness and novelty of all around her, for she was still at that happy age

"When all things pleased, for life itself was new,
And the heart promised what the fancy drew."

Alas, that that time is being gradually shortened, and that children say good-bye at such an early age to the simple pleasures of youth!

How few years there are in which one can be young, and how many in which one must be old!

But Ruth was still young, far younger in her capacity to enjoy than Julia, who was her junior by some months. She was in good health, with fine animal spirits, and had not tasted half the pleasures which had already grown stale to her cousin. The boating, the chatter, the strolls, the music on the pier, the glorious sunsets, the very stones and shells upon the beach, the fresh breezes and the ever-changing sea, all contributed to afford her such pleasure as it would have been impossible for Julia to feel, because she, poor child, was already disenchanted at fourteen, was already wearied with frequent repetition of the amusements which were new to her cousin, and also because she had imbibed the idea that it was ill-bred, and a mark of ignorance, to show or even to *feel* extreme pleasure in anything, yet was ever selfishly seeking some new gratification.

"You appear to be enjoying yourself very much, Ruth," observed her aunt, as she sat beside her on the pier the evening before the day arranged for the picnic.

"How can I help it, auntie? You are so kind, and everything is so enchanting," was the enthusiastic reply.

"I think that many of the richest people here would give all they possess to have that child's keen sense of delight," remarked Mrs. Woburn to her husband, as Ruth tripped away to join her cousins.

"Oh, Julia," she exclaimed, "what a charming piece the band has been playing!"

"That old thing!" replied the other contemptuously. "It is the overture to 'La Sonnambula,' and I perfectly hate it, for I learnt it at school ages ago, and Signor Touchi used to get awfully angry about it."

Julia often acted as a sort of wet blanket upon her cousin's enthusiastic outbursts; though it was a long time before the country girl learnt to express her delight in the usual formula of a fashionable young lady, "Very charming," or "Awfully nice," pronounced in a manner which seems to imply, "Just tolerable."

Wednesday morning rose clear and bright, and soon after sunrise Ruth peeped out of the window to see if the weather were favourable, and when she saw the sunshine she could remain in bed no longer, but dressed quickly and ran down to the beach, her favourite retreat in the early morning, and the only place where she ever found an opportunity for quiet thought amidst all the excitement of pleasure-seeking.

What a long time it seemed since she had left home! And yet it was only a few days. What would her mother think, she wondered, of the life she was leading now? She had only received one short letter from her, written after all the rest of the household were in bed, and Ruth could guess how very busy every one was, although there was but a casual reference to the fact in the letter.

"I hope that mother is not doing too much," she mused, "it was very kind of her to let me have so much pleasure; but how hard it would be to go back now after all this gaiety. I trust that I am not getting spoilt, yet——"

"Have you been looking for anemones, Ruth?" asked a boyish voice beside her. "This is not the place to find them."

"I had no idea that you were near, Ernest," was her reply, "but I have not been looking for anything, only thinking."

"Well, it is almost breakfast time now. You know that we are to be early this morning on account of the picnic to which you are all going."

"But surely you are going with us?" said Ruth in surprise.

"No," he answered quietly, "I should only be in the way. Gerald and his fellows don't want me, and Julia and her friends only snub me and think me a nuisance, and of course I am too old to romp and be petted like little Ru. So I shall have a quiet day on the shore collecting fresh specimens, and you shall see them to-morrow. Now we must go in to breakfast."

Ernest had grown very fond of his country cousin, who was so different from his sister and her friends that she could actually take an interest in his pursuits, and who, under her father's guidance, had learnt many interesting facts of natural history which the town-bred boy had never had opportunities of observing.

Breakfast was a hurried meal, and directly it was over there followed the bustle of preparation for the day's excursion. Hampers were sent off, duly packed with all kinds of delicacies; Rupert was running up and down stairs continually, and getting in the way as much as Ernest, who remained stationary near the door; while Julia rushed from her room to her mother's, declaring that she was quite certain they would all be late, and then ran back to ask Ruth to help her to dress.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PICNIC.

Everything was ready at last, and the whole family started for the pier, where they were to meet their friends. Such a crowd of people surrounded them upon their arrival, that Ruth, who merely knew a few of them slightly, felt quite over-whelmed, and wished that her usual companion, Ernest, had been beside her.

The steamer which had been chartered for the occasion now came alongside the pier, and every one was occupied with the business of embarking. When all the party were safely on board, Ruth found herself amongst a number of strangers, far away from Julia, who had evidently quite forgotten her, and was laughing and chatting with a little group of girls at the other end of the vessel. Her aunt was entertaining the ladies, and her uncle walking up and down the deck in earnest conversation with two gentlemen; Rupert was trying to get on the paddle-box, and there was no one near her but Gerald, the facetious leader of a knot of young men. Ruth felt very lonely and rather sorrowful; she had been eagerly anticipating this picnic, and now she seemed to be quite neglected, while every one else was gay and happy. She had not the courage to make her way through the visitors to reach Julia at the other end of the boat, for she had an undefined feeling that if she went she would not be welcomed there. Her thoughts flew back to the one spot of earth where she was always wanted and ever welcomed, and she heaved a little sigh.

"What is the matter, my fair coz?" asked Gerald, who was standing near and heard the sigh. "Are the Fates very unpropitious?"

"No, Cousin Gerald," she answered shyly.

She could not understand the young man who patronized her, and talked to her as if she were a little child, and she fancied that he was making fun of her.

"Then why do you sigh?" he inquired.

"I have nothing else to do," she said, smiling.

"Has Julia left you without any introduction? Well, we will soon remedy that," he said as he led her towards a very fair young girl, dressed in blue and white, and having introduced the two girls he left them talking, and strolled off with a friend.

Ruth's companion was by no means shy, she had a great deal to say, and began by making remarks upon the people on board, and telling little scraps of their personal histories.

"You see that old gentleman walking with Mr. Woburn. That is Mr. Amass, the banker. They say that he is awfully rich, but I am sure that he is a terrible screw. Only look at his wife, and see how shabbily she dresses. Don't you see her over there with the daisies in her bonnet? And that is her niece, Miss Game, flirting with Mr. Trim. Ah! he is walking away now; he prefers a chat with Edith Thorpe. How amused they look! I suppose he is telling her what Miss Game has been saying. Yes, I am sure they are laughing at her!"

"But surely," said Ruth, looking rather shocked, "he would not be so rude as to talk to a young lady, and then go away and laugh at her!"

"My dear child," replied the other, laughing, "every one does it, more or less."

"But are none of them *friends*? Do none of them care for each other sufficiently to refrain from laughing?" asked Ruth earnestly.

"Very few persons care enough for their friends to be quiet about their follies and weaknesses," replied this worldly-wise young lady, and then she continued her running commentary upon the visitors until the steamer arrived at its destination, a beautiful little bay where the water was so clear that one could see the sea-weeds growing underneath. Tall trees grew not far from the shore, and upon a slight eminence was situated an old castle, not possessing many historical associations, but in a fairly good state of preservation, and much frequented by pleasure parties from Stonegate.

The older ladies at once made their way to a shady nook under the trees, and the rest of the party strolled about the grounds in twos and threes until a tempting repast had been spread, not upon the grass, but upon long wooden tables in the castle yard.

Ruth was utterly astonished. Her ideas of a picnic were gathered from the simple and joyous little parties held in the woods near her home, when the hamper, filled with cold meat, tartlets, and

milk or lemonade, was sent on in the milk cart or one of the farm wagons, a white cloth was spread under the shade of a tree, and the whole party sat on the grass round it, and were merry and lively, regarding the little accidents which would occasionally happen as so much cause for mirth.

But this sumptuous collation, with its garnished dishes of poultry and joints, salads, tarts, jellies, blancmange, ices and champagne, with various fruits, all tastefully arranged, and the accessories of glass and flowers, silver forks and spoons, and long seats, with waiters hurrying about, made a picnic quite a different affair, and—Ruth was unfashionable enough to think—took away all the fun of it. She could see that her aunt was somewhat anxious, and was quite as vexed at any slight accident which occurred as if she had been giving a party in her own house.

Of course there were several toasts and a good deal of speech-making, and a considerable quantity of champagne was drunk before the guests left the tables and dispersed, some to the tennis court, others to explore the castle, and a few to take a country walk in the green lanes.

The afternoon was very warm, but the hush of the summer's stillness was broken by the merry voices of the girls as they made their way through the old castle and peeped out of the windows at their friends in the tennis court below. There was a continual flutter of light dresses through the low doorways and up the dingy stairs, and merry sounds of laughter echoed through the empty chambers. It was the first castle that romantic little Ruth had ever seen; and although she could not gather much of its history from the little books sold at the gate, she tried to imagine the scenes that had been enacted there, to people it with knights in armour, and to fancy that the girlish faces which peeped through the windows were those of "fayre ladyes" of bygone days.

She was aroused from her day-dream by a scream from one of the girls, and saw Gerald, looking white and scared, hurrying towards a small door leading to the keep. The tennis players ceased their game, all eyes were turned in one direction, and a frightened whisper ran through the crowd as Mr. Woburn hastened across the ground. On the very edge of a broken tottering wall projecting from the side of the keep sat Rupert—ever an adventurous little fellow—his face white and his legs dangling. He had crept up into the keep alone, and climbed as high as he could, just to give them all a fright. And he had succeeded, but not without risk to himself, for the shriek of terror which some one gave upon seeing him had awakened him to a sense of his danger, and looking down upon the terrified faces below he grew frightened and almost lost the power to keep his seat. It was a terrible moment, and every one paused in horror-stricken silence.



"That's right, Ruey, sit still!" cried a clear, ringing voice. "Shall I come up to keep you company? But you must get to the other end of the wall. Don't try to crawl; push yourself along like this," cried Ruth, sitting on a low fence and propelling herself sideways, clutching it with her hands on either side, quite regardless of the notice she was attracting. It was the best thing she could have done, for the boy, hearing her cheery tones and seeing that the faces below were no longer upturned in terror, began to regain his courage, and imitated his cousin's movements, thus getting farther and farther from the dangerous corner and nearer to the firmer masonry of the keep, through which the young men were hurrying to his rescue. Slowly and awkwardly he shuffled along, and reached the end of the wall just as Ruth reached the end of her fence, for she had kept on all the time for the sake of example.

"Thank God he is safe!" cried Mr. Woburn, as Gerald caught the little fellow in his arms and disappeared within the walls of the building.

"And this young lady has saved him," said a gentleman who had just appeared upon the scene. He

had been taking a country ramble, had seen the boy's danger from a considerable distance, and arrived, almost breathless, in the castle yard just as Rupert was lifted from his perilous position.

"If he had fainted or turned giddy he must have fallen, and that wall would not have borne another person. Indeed, if the boy had not been a very light weight, I am afraid it would have given way;" and as if to verify his words a small piece of stone, which had probably been loosened by the boy's movements, came crashing down from the wall.

Ruth was now the universal object of attention, and she felt dreadfully bashful and awkward as one after another gathered round her and praised "her wonderful presence of mind," and "her remarkable courage." "So fearless, too," said one young dandy, who would not on any account have risked his dainty limbs. "I really thought she was going to climb up and fetch him down."

"I should not have been surprised if she had done so," said a young lady near him.

The poor girl blushed, and began to wonder if she had done rightly in calling out so loudly and drawing every one's attention to herself, for her mother had always told her that a young girl should seek to avoid notice.

"And yet," she thought, "it cannot be wrong. I only wanted to cheer little Ru, and I could not stop to think of any other way."

CHAPTER X.

BUSYBOROUGH.

The appearance of little Rupert in the castle yard diverted attention from his blushing cousin, while friends and relatives crowded round him to scold, applaud, or pet, as they deemed fit. His mother, overcome by the anxiety and suspense of those terrible moments, fainted directly he was brought down to her, but was soon restored, and grew very anxious that the affair should not interfere with the happiness of her guests. Some, indeed, proposed returning at once to Stonegate, but they were overruled by the younger members of the party, who were anxious to remain until the moon had risen, and also by Mrs. Woburn's desire not to curtail their enjoyment; and it was finally settled that the steamer should not return until ten o'clock.

Tea, coffee, and other refreshments were handed round, and the interrupted games were resumed and carried on until the summer evening grew chilly. The dew began to fall, and gave warning that it was too late for out-of-door sports, and drove them into the shelter of the old castle, where the young people proposed a dance. There was a spacious room in the lower part of the building which had been often used for such a purpose, and after hunting up a village musician and pressing him into their service, hats and wraps were thrown aside and the dancing commenced. Ruth did not understand the steps, but sat down near the married ladies and looked on at what, to her unaccustomed eyes, was a gay and lively scene. Yet she could not enter into it as she had entered into the pleasures of the preceding days. She could not forget the alarm of the afternoon; she was sure that her aunt was feeling ill and weary, and she felt that the gaiety around was rather ill-timed and out of harmony with the feelings of the hostess. The hours passed slowly to those who were merely looking on, but at ten the dancing ceased, the old fiddler was dismissed, and amidst a great deal of laughter and chatter the gay party left the castle and made their way to the steamer.

The moon was shining brilliantly, and the walls of the old castle gleamed in its light or were hidden in dense shadow by the surrounding trees. The steamer lay in the little bay just below, every inch of her visible in the moonlight, and all agreed that it was a perfect night for a water trip.

Ruth longed for a little quiet, and strove to escape from her lively companions, whose mirth did not accord with her feelings. She sat in a sheltered corner, and looked at the vast expanse of water and at the quiet stars keeping watch overhead. Nothing so much reminded her of home as the stars, which shone upon her just as they had shone at home, and with the thought of home came a remembrance of the Heavenly Father of whom she had thought so little lately, but who had watched over her unceasingly and had helped her that day to save her little cousin from a horrible fate.

Mr. Woburn and Gerald returned to Busyborough a few days after the picnic, and the remaining weeks of the sea-side holiday passed all too quickly for Ruth, who was never tired of the delights of sea and shore and all the varied amusements that Stonegate afforded.

Still, she was anxious to commence her studies at the young ladies' college her cousin attended, and spent many an hour thinking of it and trying to imagine what the school, the governesses, and the pupils would be like. It was of little use to question Julia, who always declared that she "didn't want to be bothered about school in the holidays," and that Ruth would soon find out "how horrid it was."

It was in September that they bade farewell to Stonegate and left for Busyborough. The days were growing shorter and colder, and as the railway journey occupied two or three hours it was

late in the day when they reached their destination, and the street lamps and shop windows were all aglow with gas-light.

What a large noisy place it seemed to country-bred Ruth, as their cab rattled through street after street brilliantly lighted, down long roads, past handsome houses and gardens, until it stopped before a large many-windowed house, with a long flight of stone steps and a small garden, enclosed by massive iron railings.

Rupert and Julia ran up the steps and disappeared, and Ruth followed her aunt into the tile-paved hall, where two servants were waiting to receive them. It was a home-coming to all the others, but to the country cousin it was quite strange and new.

"It is good to be at home again," said Mrs. Woburn. "Come, Ruth, I will show you your room."

She led the way upstairs and opened the door of a pleasant little room, furnished tastefully with every requisite for a young girl's apartment. Everything was so pretty, and the bright fire burning in the grate gave the room such a cosy look, that Ruth was delighted, and tried to express her grateful thanks, but was simply bidden to make herself at home and to be very happy.

Left alone in the room which was to be her own, she began to look around her and to admire the pretty French bedstead, the light modern furniture, and the pictures, bookshelves, and brackets upon the walls. How much larger and more elegant it was than the tiny room which had been hers at Cressleigh! She felt that she was indeed growing farther away from the old life every day. "If it were not for Julia, and the fact that I am so far from home, I could be perfectly happy here," was her mental comment.

They were two large "if's," and Julia was the one which occupied the principal share of her thoughts. She did not "take to" her cousin, neither did she try to make the best of the very apparent fact that their tastes were dissimilar. Instead of seeking for points on which they could agree, she allowed her mind to dwell continually upon their diversity, and was beginning to return her cousin's ill-concealed contempt for her rustic and unfashionable notions by a growing scorn and proud dislike, which though at first secretly cherished could not fail to show themselves in time.

CHAPTER XI.

SCHOOL-GIRL GOSSIP.

Studies will be resumed on Tuesday, 25th inst. Such was the intimation sent out by Miss Elgin, the principal of the ladies' college which the girls were to attend.

Accordingly on Tuesday morning Ruth accompanied her cousin to Addison College, where she was kindly received by Miss Elgin, and introduced to several of the girls, who seemed friendly and agreeable.

The lofty spacious schoolroom, with its comfortable seats and desks, its splendid maps and numerous modern appliances and convenient arrangements, the school library, with its rows of standard authors in uniform binding, the music-room, the pianos—in fact, the whole establishment exceeded Ruth's brightest dreams of school; and her desire for knowledge, which had somewhat lessened during her sojourn at the sea-side, seemed at once to be kindled afresh.

She answered readily the questions given to test her previously acquired knowledge, and it soon became evident that what she professed to know had been thoroughly learnt. In English studies she was pronounced fairly proficient for her age; but in French, music, and other accomplishments she was very backward, and she found that she would have to work very hard in order to obtain a good place in her class.

The work of the morning was so novel and interesting to Ruth, that she was quite astonished when the bell rang for recess, and the girls trooped off to an anteroom, where their tongues were unloosed and the pleasures and events of the holidays were discussed, with many other topics.

"Have you heard the news about Mr. Stanley?" asked a bright lively girl, Ethel Thompson by name, the gossip and news-monger of the school.

"No; what is it?" cried several voices.

"Well, you must keep it to yourselves, you know," she said in a confidential tone, "but he has failed, he is a bankrupt."

"Are you sure it is true?" asked one and another.

"How do you know?"

"I am sure it is quite true, for my father was talking about it last night, and of course I understood how it was that Mabel's place was vacant this morning," continued Ethel.

"Vacant! I should think it was! You don't suppose she would show her face here, do you?" exclaimed Julia Woburn. "Of course no one would take any notice of her. Only fancy the idea of

being seen with a bankrupt's daughter!" she added scornfully.

"Well, it is not *her* fault." "I suppose she could not help it," said one or two of the girls.

"If it is not her fault it is her father's, and of course it is a great disgrace to the family. I shouldn't think they would ever hold up their heads again," remarked Julia proudly.

"It is very sad." "I always thought them rich." "Mabel was never proud," began a chorus of voices, but the luncheon bell ringing at that moment put an end to the conversation.

The subject was not forgotten, however, and was referred to again in the afternoon, when the girls were preparing to return home.

"What do you think the Stanleys will do?" asked a girl of Ethel Thompson, who having brought the news was expected to know everything relating to her unfortunate school-fellow's family affairs.

"I don't know," replied Ethel. "Perhaps Mr. Stanley will begin business again, men do sometimes, you know; or he may go away from the town and start elsewhere."

"The best thing he can do, I consider," cried Julia. "I can't conceive how people can show themselves in a place where every one knows they have failed. I am sure I could not do it. But some persons have coarse natures and do not feel things as much as others."

"I am quite sure that the Stanleys have feelings as keen as any of us," remarked a shy quiet-looking girl. "You know how sensitive poor Mabel is, and I do hope that if she comes back we shall all be kind to her and not let her know that we have ever heard about her father's misfortunes."

"That may be your opinion, Nora Ellis," said Julia, "but for my part I do not choose to associate with a bankrupt's daughter. If she should return here, of course no one would speak to her; but I do not suppose that there is any fear of it. Miss Elgin would be making a great mistake if she were to receive Mabel Stanley, and would be ruining her school and acting against her own interests."

"I daresay Miss Elgin will do as she thinks best," retorted Ethel Thompson, sorry to have raised a storm which it was not easy to subdue.

Julia and Ruth did not reach school the following morning until nearly ten o'clock, the hour at which Miss Elgin's pupils assembled for their morning classes.

They had scarcely entered the cloak-room before they became aware that something unusual had occurred, something which was evidently connected with the young girl standing apart from the rest, at the end of the room, and looking tearful and timid. In a moment Ruth guessed, from the scornful expression of her cousin's face, that the new-comer was Mabel Stanley who had been so freely discussed the previous day, and that the poor child had met with a very cool reception on her return to school.

Pity for the unfortunate girl, indignation at the freezing glances bestowed upon her, mingled perhaps with a vague idea of vexing Julia, caused Ruth to make a sudden resolution to befriend her; and when upon entering the schoolroom she found that their desks were side by side, she did not delay to take advantage of the fact and endeavour to set Mabel at ease by referring to her occasionally for help in little matters of school routine with which she (Ruth) was unacquainted. The questions were politely answered, but her sensitive neighbour seemed either too proud or too shy to respond to her friendly advances.

"Ruth Arnold," exclaimed Julia in the cloak-room at the close of the day, when Mabel Stanley had dressed quickly in silence and taken her departure with only a half-whispered "Good-afternoon" to Ruth, "did you know that the girl you have been sitting next all day is the very one we were talking about yesterday?"

"Yes, I imagined so," was the quiet reply.

"But I thought you knew that we had all determined to cut her if she came back, and not to say one word more to her than we were really obliged," continued Julia.

"Why?" asked Ruth sharply.

"Because she has no business here, because she degrades the school. A bankrupt's daughter ought not to come here," said Julia haughtily, "and I hope you will not associate with her."

Ruth's eyes were flashing and her cheeks crimson as she retorted angrily, "That is no reason why I should not be friendly with her; and indeed, Julia, I do not intend to ask you whom I am to choose for my friends."

"Do as you like, and go your own way," said Julia with a scornful laugh. "Mabel must be destitute of all fine feeling, but perhaps you have a fancy for people of that sort. If any one belonging to me had ever been a bankrupt, I should never show my face in the town again."

She left the house a moment later with one or two of her chosen friends, and Ruth was slowly walking home alone, trying to swallow her indignation, and letting the cool breeze fan her hot cheeks, when Ethel Thompson overtook her.

"I really think," she began, "that Julia has been terribly down on Mabel, and I am glad that you took her part and would not give in. Our coolness to her to-day was all Julia's doing, and I know that she is wild with you, for she cannot bear to be crossed. But Mabel has not done anything; and after all, I don't see why we should cut her to please Julia, who wants to dictate to every one."

Ruth made an indifferent reply, and hastened to change the subject, for she did not care to discuss her cousin's shortcomings with one whom she knew but slightly.

Very few words passed between the cousins upon their return home that evening; but on their way to school the next morning Julia asked scornfully, "Do you still intend to cultivate your aristocratic acquaintance, Ruth?"

"I shall do as I please," said the other shortly.

The girls at Miss Elgin's were mostly the children of wealthy parents, but unhappily many of them, though rich and fashionable, were sadly lacking in refinement of heart and mind. Money was the god revered and worshipped in most of their homes, the one thing talked of and held in honour, and it was not surprising that the girls, from constantly hearing their neighbours' worth reckoned solely by the amount of money they possessed, had come to regard it as the chief good, and to consider the want of it as something like a crime. Julia had been reared in a somewhat different atmosphere, but she had adopted the tone of her school-fellows, and even surpassed them in scorn and disdain for those who were poor or unfortunate.

But she was about to meet with a terrible humiliation.

CHAPTER XII.

JULIA'S HUMILIATION.

A tender conscience is easily aroused, and Ruth's had been troubling her since the previous afternoon. She knew that although she had done right in befriending Mabel she had not done it in a Christian spirit. She almost decided that she ought to beg her cousin's pardon, and was even thinking what it would be advisable to say, when Julia's question stirred her worst feelings to activity, and she answered curtly that she should do as she pleased.

A lively conversation was being carried on in the cloak-room, but suddenly ceased as they entered. The exciting cause of it was Ethel Thompson, whose busy tongue often brought both herself and others into trouble. She had carried home a full account of the quarrel between the cousins the day before, and had concluded by imitating Julia's haughty manner when she said, "If any one belonging to me had ever been a bankrupt, I should never show my face in the town again."

"Humph! Did she say that?" asked Mr. Thompson. "Well 'people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.'"

"Why do you say that?" inquired Ethel curiously.

"Because her own father failed some years ago."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Oh yes, I remember it very well, though I suppose it must have been quite nine or ten years ago, time flies so fast. But he is a very prosperous man now."

Ethel did not wait to hear more, but went to school next day full of the idea of humbling Julia by means of this wonderful piece of news. She had already whispered it to two or three girls when the cousins appeared at the door and the bell rang for class.

Julia was rather late, and in her hurry she placed her hat upon the nearest vacant peg, which happened to be Mabel Stanley's. Mabel entered at that moment, and seeing that her peg was occupied, quietly asked Julia to remove her hat. She did so with a very bad grace, and without saying a word hastened to join her companions in the schoolroom.

"How shamefully Julia Woburn treats that poor child!" said one of the elder girls who lingered in the cloak-room, "and I hear that it is simply because Mr. Stanley has failed in business."

"Yes," replied the other, "and what makes it more disgraceful is—that her own father was a bankrupt not very long ago!"

"Her father? Mr. Woburn? Surely you are mistaken!"

"No, indeed. Ethel Thompson brought the information this morning, and is quite full of it."

It so happened that Julia was returning to the cloak-room for a book which she had forgotten, when she heard her own name mentioned, and pausing for an instant on the threshold overheard all that was said.

She ran in and confronted the two girls, her eyes flashing and her heart beating fast, and exclaimed, "Did Ethel really say that? How dare she tell such an untruth!"

"Perhaps it was only a joke," said the girl who had spoken first.

"It is a slander, an insult, and I'll not stand it!" said Julia indignantly.

They reasoned with her and endeavoured to calm her, but only partially succeeded in soothing her before she returned to the schoolroom. Her face still wore an angry sullen expression, and she carefully avoided Ethel Thompson throughout the morning. Not one lesson could she say, and she begged to be excused her arithmetic and French on the plea of a severe headache.

After study hours, when the girls met in recess time, Julia proudly demanded of Ethel what she meant by spreading such false statements about her family; and Ethel replied that all she had said was true, and added that when she heard it she was no longer surprised at Julia's treatment of Mabel, but saw a reason for it.

Julia, finding that Ethel's report had gained credence among her school-fellows, was half wild with mortification and rage; and declaring that she would remain there no longer to be insulted, she dressed herself and went home, leaving her companions somewhat alarmed at the storm their foolish conversation had raised.

They had not reflected that one of the most fruitful sources of quarrels among school-girls is—silly gossip about their relatives and friends.

While Mr. and Mrs. Woburn were sitting at luncheon they were startled by hearing a violent knock at the door, and the next moment Julia, dressed in her walking attire, rushed into the room, regardless of everything but the one idea which possessed her mind, and exclaimed, "Father, tell me, did you ever fail? Were you ever a bankrupt?"

Mr. Woburn's face changed suddenly, and grew stern and pale.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because they have slandered you and insulted me at school, but I told them it was false."

"It *was*—true," said Mr. Woburn slowly, "but I fail to see what can have brought it up now."

"True!" cried Julia, bursting into tears, and sobbing hysterically. "Then I can never go to Miss Elgin's again."

She threw herself upon the sofa, and for some minutes was unable to speak, so violent was her passion and anger. In vain her father demanded an explanation of her strange behaviour, and her mother tried to calm and soothe her.

"Leave her to me," she said at last. "I am quite at a loss to understand the matter, but she will tell me when she is better."

Before the sobs had altogether subsided Ruth entered the room: for Miss Elgin, hearing of Julia's sudden departure, had imagined that her headache had increased, and at once despatched her cousin to follow her.

"Perhaps you can explain what has happened," said her aunt. "Why have the girls been talking of your uncle's business affairs?"

"Well, the fact is, auntie, that Mabel Stanley came to school yesterday, and Julia was cross and rude to her because her father has failed, and then the girls made up this tale to humble her, and she flew into a rage and came home."

"Now I understand. But the tale was true, nevertheless. Now, Julia dear, don't sob. I think I had better tell you all about it, that you may understand for yourselves."

"I think you know, Julia, that when your father started in life he had not much capital, and began business in a small way. But he did very well until there came a time of commercial depression, and a man who owed him a considerable sum of money died insolvent. Then your father found that he was so much embarrassed that he thought the wisest and most honourable course would be to divide what he had amongst his creditors at once. He gave up everything to them, and was hesitating what he should do for a living. Just at that time my father died and left all his little property to me and my brother (your father, Ruth). My money would not have been sufficient to start another business, but your father came to our help, and offered to lend his share of the money. Then my husband was able to start again, and prospered. All his creditors were paid in full long ago, and my brother's money was repaid with interest, though nothing, I am sure, can ever repay his kindness in lending it to us at that particular time, for I fear that he must have been straitened for years by his generous deed. Now you understand, Ruth, why I told you that everything I gave you had been more than paid for long ago, though I did not know that it would be necessary to tell you how."

Ruth was silent and thoughtful. Her aunt's words gave her the clue to many things which she had never been able to comprehend. She guessed now why her father sometimes looked regretfully at a large and excellent farm a short distance from his own.

"You ought to have taken that farm," she had once heard a neighbour remark to him.

"Ah! the time for that is gone by," was his reply.

She believed now that the opportunity of taking it had occurred while the money was embarked in her uncle's business, and that when it was free the farm and the family had soon absorbed it, for the land was not very good, and there had been several bad harvests lately.

"Why did you never tell me before?" asked Julia peevishly, from the sofa.

"Why, dear? Well, you know it is never pleasant to talk about our failures. Your father has not referred to the subject, even to me, for years, and I could see that he was exceedingly annoyed by your mention of it just now. You were but an infant at the time, and it is so long ago that it seemed to have been forgotten. But I have looked back sometimes since we have grown rich, and thought with pleasure of my brother's kindness."

"Still it is true," whined Julia, "and," she added passionately, "I can never look at Ethel Thompson or any of the girls again."

"That is very silly," said her mother.

"Indeed I cannot—never—*never*, and I am the most wretched girl in England, and shall never be happy again!"

Her sobs were renewed with redoubled violence, and she looked really ill from vexation and passion. Mrs. Woburn gave her some cooling medicine and persuaded her to go to bed.

But Ruth did not pity her cousin. She worked alone at her lessons that evening, and when the thought of Julia crossed her mind her lips tightened and she said to herself, "She deserves to be ill. She treated Mabel unkindly, and now it has come back to her, and she is suffering for it. Yes, she deserves it." And before she went to rest that night she read in her little Bible a few verses about the sin of pride, with a mental reference to Julia, and also some passages concerning retribution, and wrong-doing coming home to the sinner.

She was not following in the footsteps of the Lord, who hates sin, yet loves the sinner, but thought only of her cousin's just punishment, and wondered how she would bear to meet all her school-fellows again. She was not cherishing the love that vaunteth not itself, that is not puffed up, that rejoiceth not in iniquity; the love that never faileth, and that covers a multitude of sins.

Was there not something of the spirit of the Pharisee in Ruth's heart? Was she not beginning to sit in the seat of the scornful, and to look down upon her cousin from her superior position? Well, pride must have a fall, sooner or later, whether it be pride of position or pride of heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

HARD AT WORK.

Ruth went to school alone the next morning, for Julia was so unwell from the excitement of the day that she seemed quite ill and feverish, and was scarcely able to lift her head from the pillow. Her eyes had dark rims round them, her head ached terribly, and she was certainly quite unfit to attend to her studies and to meet her school-fellows.

None of the girls liked to ask Ruth what had happened after her return home, and they scarcely ventured to inquire for her cousin. They evidently felt that they had gone too far, and began to speak kindly to Mabel and to treat her in their usual manner.

But the poor girl could not easily forget the slights she had received, and amid their new-born kindness she turned naturally to the one who had befriended her while the others behaved rudely. She soon grew quite intimate with Ruth, and even ventured to speak of the trouble which had befallen her father that summer, and of her future prospects.

"Of course," she said, "papa would not have thought of allowing me to remain at such an expensive school as Miss Elgin's, but grandmamma has kindly promised to pay the expenses of my education for two years, and if I study hard for that time I hope that I shall be able to teach, and to help papa and mamma."

Ruth could thoroughly sympathise with her friend, and entered into her feelings, her hopes and aspirations, for was she not working with the same object in view? Did she not desire to help *her* father and mother by teaching the younger children?

Thus their friendship grew and strengthened during Julia's absence, which lasted quite a week.

She, poor child, was quite unstrung, and for two or three days the very mention of school brought on a fit of hysterical crying, and she begged that she might be allowed to go to some boarding-school at a distance, anywhere—away from Busyborough. Mrs. Woburn was inclined to yield to her wish; but her father would not hear of such a thing, and declared that she had brought all the trouble upon herself by her own folly, and she must bear the consequences of it. He was, in fact, excessively angry with his spoilt child, and believed that her return to school would be a severe punishment which she richly deserved.

When Mr. Woburn spoke in that decided way there was nothing to be done but to obey. His wife, however, called upon Miss Elgin, and explained the reason of Julia's absence, begging that she would ask the girls to receive her kindly, without referring to the cause of the quarrel, as she had already suffered a good deal.

Miss Elgin was astonished to hear of the affair, which had perplexed and puzzled her not a little; for, as her pupils had all felt themselves more or less to blame in the matter, they had all kept it from her knowledge, and she had only guessed from their reticence, and the air of mystery with which they received every allusion to their absent school-fellow, that something was wrong. Before morning school she called the girls together, told them how pained and grieved she had been, and gave them a little lecture upon the duty of ruling the tongue, and the folly of valuing people only for their wealth or position instead of their goodness and virtue. The girls listened in silence, and when Julia returned, looking very much ashamed and humbled after her vain boasting, they made no allusion to her fiery outburst, and in a few days she had regained her old place in the school and everything went on as usual.

Lessons, classes, exercises, and lectures were crowded into each day. Ruth had plenty to do, and found that she must work very hard if she wished to succeed, and to take a good place in the school. She was astonished to see how indolent some of the girls were; to find that many of them did not care for knowledge for its own sake, but regarded their lessons as a trouble, and were continually begging to be allowed to leave off this or that study. And she was still more surprised and shocked to find how many of the exercises were merely copied from old books, with perhaps a few slight mistakes inserted to prevent suspicion. On more than one occasion, Ruth gave offence by refusing to lend her books for this purpose, or to avail herself of proffered assistance; but she persevered steadily, and declared that she would rather make a few mistakes than evade a difficulty which she could not surmount, as she would be sure to meet it again.

Miss Elgin was not long in perceiving that Ruth was a conscientious girl, anxious to learn, and in many little ways she contrived to help and encourage her.

As the weather grew colder and winter advanced, the old home-life at the farm seemed very far away, and somehow the home letters were not so full of interest as they had once been. How trivial and childish it seemed to read about the new kittens, the chickens, the nuts in the woods, and the apples in the orchard, and the many little details with which the children's letters were filled, when one was studying chemistry and reading Milton and Shakespeare. Her mother's letters were always welcome, but they were very rare.

The comfort and luxury of her new home were beginning to make a visible alteration in her. Already she looked and felt quite a different person from the little Ruth Arnold who sometimes milked the cows, or helped with the house-work when the servants were busy. Her brown curls had long since given place to a long plait like Julia's, her clothes were of richer materials and made in a more fashionable style, and she had what seemed at first an abundant supply of pocket-money. The only day on which she really longed to be back at Cressleigh was Sunday. It had always been such a happy day at the farm, the only rest day of the busy father and mother, and always spent with the children. There were of course certain duties which could not be neglected, but these were quickly done, and then the whole family went together to the house of God. In the afternoon the children all went to Sunday-school, where Will was promoted to the post of teacher, and Mr. and Mrs. Arnold had a quiet hour together with no one but the baby to disturb them. There was rarely any service in the evening, but it was a pleasant time for the children, who in fine summer weather sat on the lawn and sang their favourite hymns, or on winter evenings gathered round the old piano in the well-worn parlour while their mother or Ruth played, or listened while their father talked or read some good and interesting book. All went to bed early, and rose in the morning refreshed and strengthened by the joy and repose of the day of rest.

But Sunday at Busyborough was quite a different matter. Every one was expected to attend public worship once during the day, but Gerald was often missing, and the others did not appear to take much pleasure in going. Mr. Woburn had a pew in a handsome church close by, and also at a large Nonconformist chapel in the neighbourhood. His wife usually attended the latter, but Julia preferred the church, where the service was very elaborate. She hated long sermons, she said, and liked to have something to look at. Ruth accompanied her once or twice, but found the morning service, to which she had been accustomed all her life, so differently rendered that at first she could hardly follow it. The dear old Psalms, which had always been read at Cressleigh by the clergyman and the people led by the parish clerk, sounded so strange and unfamiliar when chanted by a surpliced choir. The intoning, the processions, and everything else, were so strange, that Ruth was afraid to join in the service.

After going a few times she decided to accompany her aunt, for although the service of the chapel was unfamiliar she was able to enter into the spirit of it, and could appreciate and enjoy the sermon delivered by a clever and eloquent preacher.

The family dined early on Sundays, and then the miserable part of the day began for Ruth. There was "nothing to do on Sundays," Julia said, and indeed there seemed to be no occupation provided. No one thought of going to Sunday-school, as Ruth had once timidly suggested, although Julia sometimes went to church when there was a special musical service. At other times she would begin to read; then she would fidget or strum on the piano, greatly to the annoyance of her father, who always took a Sunday afternoon nap, and of Ernest, who buried himself in a book. Gerald went out, Rupert got into all sorts of mischief, and Ruth was left to her

own devices.

In the evening the girls wrote their Scripture exercises, under cover of which Julia often did other lessons, though this was quite contrary to the express orders of her father, who was very anxious that his children should have a "proper regard for the day." There was continual bickering, many disputes and petty quarrels, and when bed-time came every one was weary and cross, and seemed glad the day was over. No wonder that Ruth often longed and sighed for one of the happy old Sundays at home.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ADVENTURE.

Gerald was less known to his cousin than any other member of the family, for he spent very little time in her society. He usually rose late, and after a hasty breakfast hurried away to the office whither his father had already gone. The girls did not see him again until six o'clock when he returned to dinner, frequently going out directly it was over to spend the evening with his friends.

Yet, although Ruth saw but little of him, that little astonished her. She could never forget that he was only a year or two older than Will. A year or two made a great difference, she knew, but could Will ever become such a well-dressed fashionable young man, who grumbled at his mother if the dinner was not to his mind, scolded the servants, and argued and talked to his father just as if he were a man of his own age?

Ruth thought not, and hoped not.

The short November days were cold and dreary, school duties seemed to increase, and the girls were beginning to talk of the coming examinations, and to look forward to the Christmas holidays and festivities.

In spite of hard work Ruth found it a difficult matter to do all her lessons thoroughly, and although she was strong and healthy and not easily fatigued, the effort was beginning to tell upon her.

One fine Wednesday her aunt persuaded her to take a holiday. The rest was very pleasant, but she had a certain amount of work to finish by the end of the week, and sat up rather late the next night over her French translation. She was obliged to give up at last, and went to bed quite dissatisfied with her evening's work. But when she laid her head upon the pillow sleep quite forsook her. She tossed and turned, but all in vain, sleep would not come; her mind was full of the paragraph she had been endeavouring to translate, and she felt sure that she could do it much better, if only it were not so late.

Might she not scribble down a few of the sentences which had puzzled her, but were now quite clear? Of course her aunt would not like it, but then she need never know. It could not be any worse to write than to lie in bed and think, she argued, and it would be such a relief to get it done.

She sprang out of bed, turned up the gas, put on her pretty flannel dressing gown and woollen shoes, drew up a comfortable easy-chair, and then remembered that she had left all her books and papers downstairs, in the little room opening out of the hall where she and Julia prepared their lessons.

"Never mind, I can get it without disturbing any one," she said, as she lighted a bedroom candle and crept downstairs very softly in her woollen shoes, shading the candle as she passed the bedroom doors that the light might not be seen.

The house was very still and quiet: not a sound was to be heard but the ticking of the great clock in the hall. Ruth did not look at it, she did not care to know the time, for she was sure it was very late. The little study looked cold and desolate by the light of her solitary candle, and the ashes in the grate still moved and made a slight rustling which sounded very plainly. Ruth had just gathered up her books and papers when the hall clock struck close to her, one long solemn stroke.

One o'clock! It was very late she owned, and very lonely down there.

Hark! what was that? Surely the clock was striking again. No, it was a different sound and came from the front-door. Some person was evidently trying to open it. Ruth's heart stood still. All the terrible stories she had ever heard of burglars and midnight robberies came to her mind, and at the same time the unpleasant conviction that she had stepped aside from the path of duty and thus brought herself into danger.

Her presence of mind was quite gone. She feared that her candle might attract attention, but dared not extinguish it and be alone in the dark with—she knew not whom. Holding her breath she stood for a moment gazing fixedly towards the door. It was opened softly and cautiously, and the figure of a man entered the hall and carefully fastened the bolts of the door. Ruth was too

terrified to scream, and as the light of her candle fell upon his face she suddenly recognised her cousin—*Gerald*.

He started when he saw the light and his little cousin's scared pale face, and exclaimed, "What is the matter, Ruth?"

"Oh, Gerald, how you have frightened me!" she said, trembling violently. "Where have you been?"

"What are you doing here?" he asked, evading her question.

"I couldn't sleep, and came down to fetch my books, and I—I heard you at the door, and thought you were a burglar."

"Do you often stroll about at night?" he inquired curiously.

"No, indeed. And I have been so terrified that I am sure I will never do it again. I am very sorry, but I will tell auntie all about it to-morrow," she said, taking her candle and moving towards the stairs.

"Ruth," said Gerald, in an agitated whisper, "wait a minute."

She turned so that the light fell full upon his face, and saw that he looked white and anxious.

"May I ask you, as a favour, not to mention your adventure with the burglar? Perhaps it would be better for both of us to be silent about to-night's occurrence."

"Why? Where have you been, Gerald? You went to bed before ten o'clock, and"—a thought struck her—"how came the door to be unbolted?"

"Now, Ruth," he said coaxingly, "I know you are a good-natured little thing, and I don't believe you would do me a bad turn. You know the governor is always down upon me, won't let me have a latch-key, and says I must be in by half-past ten. A fellow can't live without a little pleasure, and if the governor won't let me have it I must take it. But don't say a word, there's a dear, or you will get me into an awful row."

"But it is so wrong to deceive your father and mother," urged Ruth, thinking that after all Gerald was not so "grown-up" as he seemed. "Do you often go out at night?"

"No, very seldom."

It was not true, but he was anxious to conciliate her.

"Well, Ruth, shall we promise each other that we won't say a word about to-night?"

"I don't know. I don't mind telling auntie what I have done, though I know it was wrong and foolish, but, of course, I don't want to get you into trouble. Yet—I can't tell lies——"

"Of course not; I wouldn't wish it. But you can be silent—yes, I believe you can—and I want you to promise me on your word as a good little cousin, that you will not mention what has happened to any one."

"Very well," she said, turning away slowly.

"Gerald, will you promise me something?"

"Anything you like."

They were almost upstairs now, and he was anxious for her to be silent.

"Promise that you won't go out at night again without letting your father know."

"I'll promise," was his whispered reply; and they separated.

Another moment, and Ruth was in her own room, but without the books for which she had gone downstairs. She had forgotten them and the translation in her astonishment about Gerald, and when she lay in bed once more her mind was full of her strange adventure, and she began to wonder if she had done right in giving her promise so quickly, without any reflection.

A promise was to her a sacred thing, not to be lightly given or easily broken, but she comforted herself with the thought that she was really doing good to her cousin. Had he not promised her in return that he would give up these forbidden pleasures? And was not that something to rejoice over?

She did not know enough of the world to reflect that one who wilfully deceived his parents was hardly likely to keep a promise so readily made to his little country cousin.

CHAPTER XV.

EXAMINATION.

After the events of that night Gerald took more notice of Ruth, spoke kindly to her, and often

remarked upon her studious industry, usually to his sister's disparagement. Although she was not very fond of Julia, Ruth could not help feeling that this must be very galling to her, for Julia certainly seemed more fond of Gerald than of any other person, and she felt his sarcastic remarks very keenly.

He appeared to be keeping his promise, for he came down to breakfast in good time and did not look so pale and languid as usual. But Ruth soon forgot both Gerald and her promise for a time in a matter of great importance to herself—the school examination.

She had been working steadily throughout the term, and was very anxious to pass the examination creditably, more especially as, in addition to the usual prizes, Miss Elgin had offered one for general improvement, which she was very desirous of obtaining. It would, she knew, be such a joy to her father and mother, who were expecting great things of her, and their pride and approval would be more to her than the honour of receiving the prize.

In English studies Ruth had made very considerable progress, and did not much fear the result of the examination, but she was not so sure about French. That was always her weak point, perhaps on account of the very English fashion in which she had learnt it at Miss Green's. Still she persevered with it, and had some hopes of success.

But when the hour of the examination came, and the papers were given out, her courage almost failed.

There were grammatical questions, phrases to be explained, and short sentences to be translated into French. These she understood fairly, but the paragraph that filled her with dismay was a short French poem of three verses to be put into English prose. She read it again and again, but, from the idioms and inversions it contained, totally failed to comprehend its meaning. Indeed, she could see from the significant glances which—talking being forbidden—were exchanged between the girls, that she was not the only one who failed to appreciate the beauty, or even the sense of the poem.

"It's of no use," she sighed; "I must leave it and answer some questions. If I have time afterwards, I may, perhaps, do one verse."

For a whole hour there was not a sound to be heard but the scratching of busy pens and the rustling of papers or the tapping of idle fingers, waiting to put down the thoughts that would not come.

Julia was writing very fast. She was more proficient in French than in any other study. She liked it, and easily caught the sounds, and was very proud of the fact that she had once spent a few days in Paris with her mother. She had also profited by her friendship with a French girl, one of Miss Elgin's boarders, who had come to the place quite unable to speak English. Julia had taken a fancy to mademoiselle, and in conversation with her picked up several unusual phrases, and became familiar with many of the idioms, though her knowledge of the grammar was still very meagre.

The poem which perplexed the other girls was less difficult to her than the grammatical questions, and she wrote away busily translating it. She was seated at a desk just in front of Ruth, who looked up after writing her answers, wondering what she could do about the poem. The time allowed for the paper was drawing to a close. Julia had finished her translation, and was holding it in her hand, reading it over to see if it required any correction. Her writing was large, firm, and clear, and as she held up the paper Ruth's eye fell upon it, and, almost unconsciously, she read the whole of her cousin's translation.

The meaning of the poem was no longer a mystery to her. She understood it now, and could easily translate it.

Without stopping to think if it were right or wrong, she seized her pen and wrote the words as they came to her mind. Naturally enough they were almost identical with those she had read on her cousin's paper. But she did not stop to think, and had scarcely finished the last word when the clock struck, and the papers were immediately collected, Ruth's not having been even read over.

"How many questions did you answer?" "What have you done?" "How *did* you get on with that dreadful translation?" asked the girls of each other when school hours were over and their tongues were once more unloosed.

"I suppose that you have done it, Julia, you are so clever at French," said Ethel.

"It really wasn't difficult," replied Julia carelessly. "What have you done, Ruth?"

"I think I answered nearly all the questions," was the reply.

"And the poem?"

"Yes, I did it."

Julia looked rather surprised, but she said nothing, though several of the girls were loud in their exclamations of wonder that Ruth should even have attempted it.

She listened rather impatiently to their remarks, for already she felt ashamed of the advantage she had taken, and would gladly have seized the paper upon which her translation was written

and thrown it upon the fire.

But it had gone out of her possession and was hers no longer.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DOWNWARD STEP.

"I can't think what has happened to Ruth, she is not at all like her usual self," remarked Ernest that evening.

He had been playfully teasing his cousin about her studies, when she suddenly answered him sharply, burst into a violent flood of tears, and ran away to her own room.

"She is crosser than ever," said Julia.

"Poor child!" sighed Mrs. Woburn; "I am afraid she has been working too hard. I am glad for her sake that the holidays are so near. She is so anxious to do well, and to-day's examination has tried her sadly."

Meanwhile Ruth, upstairs in her own room, was sobbing bitterly, and thinking hard thoughts of herself. The examination *had* tried her, but not half as much as the loss of self-respect she had felt since she gave up her papers that morning with the translation which was certainly not the result of her own work.

"I wish I had never left home," she thought; "everything is going wrong, it is so difficult to do right here. If only I had not seen Julia's translation. If I had never promised Gerald that I would not mention about his coming in so late. Oh, I wish I were back at Cressleigh!"

With the thought of home, which to her troubled mind seemed so calm and peaceful, came the remembrance of her mother's words, "I should have no fear for you if I were sure that you were not going alone, if I knew that you had an almighty Friend with you to lead you in the right way."

She knew that she had strayed out of the right way, and she had not far to seek for the reason. Ever since she came to Busyborough she had been growing careless about the things of eternity, and had ceased to take delight in reading God's Word and in prayer.

The Bible upon her dressing-table was read daily, it is true, and both morning and evening Ruth knelt for a few moments in prayer. But the sweet meaning was gone from the texts, and the prayer was little better than a form; there was no life in either.

When the young girl went to live at her uncle's house, she found that the lives of those with whom she came into daily contact were not ruled by the same principles and motives as her own. At first she grieved and prayed for her cousins, then she became self-sufficient and wise in her own conceit; and having once allowed the unchristian spirit of pride and dislike for Julia to creep into her heart and take possession, other evils had quickly followed, and had gradually drawn her farther and farther away from her Saviour. She began to see it all that night, and to realize how far off she was; but the knowledge only increased her wretchedness, and made her more miserable. Suddenly a thought struck her. Would it not be wise and right to go to Miss Elgin before school the next morning, to confess that she had yielded to temptation, and to ask that the obnoxious translation might at once be burnt?

But Ruth angrily resisted the notion. Confess that *she*, who bore the character of the most conscientious and trustworthy girl in the school, had stooped to do the very thing which she had so often censured in others? No, never. It would be too degrading and humiliating. Perhaps, after all, Julia's translation was not correct. There might be many faults in her own, and it was very unlikely that she would get a high number of marks for her French paper.

Thus she tried to quiet her conscience, and to banish uncomfortable suggestions. It was the 22nd of December, and the prizes were to be given away on the 23rd. It was not yet known who were to receive them, and, as school work was virtually over, there was a good deal of talk and speculation concerning them. Finishing touches were being given to drawings and maps, desks were being put in order, and books arranged, all in preparation for the festive morrow.

"Miss Arnold, will you go at once to Miss Elgin, in the library?" said one of the teachers in charge of the restless chattering crowd of girls.

Ruth obeyed, and left the room with a heightened colour, and the girls began to wonder why she had been summoned.

"It is about the prize for general improvement, I believe," said Ethel Thompson. "I heard Miss Elgin telling Miss Lee that she thought Ruth deserved it for 'her steady and conscientious work.'"

"Well, there is no doubt that she has worked hard," said one of her companions.

"Come in," said Miss Elgin, in response to Ruth's tap at the library door. "Sit down, dear; I want to ask you a question."

The governess was seated in her study chair, looking over the piles of examination papers heaped upon the table, and entering the numbers of marks in a small red book.

"I want to ask you a question," she repeated. "Did any one help you with your French paper?"

Ruth was taken aback. She did not wish to tell a falsehood, and yet she felt that she could not, *could* not confess now. Her face grew crimson, and a crowd of thoughts surged through her brain. The form in which the question was put tempted her, and she argued with herself, "No one helped me. How could Julia help me without knowing? I helped myself." And after a moment's pause, in which she seemed to be listening for her own reply, her lips moved and repeated the expression of her thoughts, "No—no one helped me."

"Excuse my asking you, but your paper was so remarkably good that I could hardly understand your having so few faults, especially in the translation, which was really difficult. I suppose," she added with a smile, "that you have already concluded that your steady application and diligent work will meet with their deserved reward. That will do. You may go now."

She returned to the schoolroom in silence, her mind full of two ideas: the first, that she had obtained the prize; the second, that she had deceived Miss Elgin.

"But I have not told an untruth," she argued with her conscience. "I was asked if any one helped me. Julia did not help me. I only saw and read her paper accidentally."

It was very trying work, arguing with conscience when a number of chattering girls were buzzing about, laughing and asking questions, and Ruth gave several sharp and pettish replies to their inquiries, and was rallied upon her silence and her grave face.

How often it happens that our hardest battles have to be fought in the midst of a crowd, that our moments of sharpest agony and keenest remorse come at a time when we long for solitude, but cannot obtain it, but must go on speaking and acting as if our minds were quite at ease, and full of nothing but the trifling affairs of the moment.

Ruth's conscience was very active, and would keep reminding her that it was not yet too late to go and confess to Miss Elgin. But she put it off. Alas! every moment that had elapsed since she gave up the paper rendered such a task more difficult; the longer she concealed her fault the more serious it became. Looking quite pale and wretched, she returned home that afternoon with a splitting headache. Her aunt was quite troubled about her, though she tried to make light of it, and Mr. Woburn said cheerily, "You must make haste and get well for to-morrow, Ruth. I suppose you will have a grand prize to bring home after all this term's work."

"Indeed, I would rather not go to-morrow morning," she replied sincerely, as she wished them good-night.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRIZE.

But when the morning came she could find no plausible excuse for absenting herself from the prize-giving. Her head was better, though she still looked pale, and Mrs. Woburn, who was to accompany the two girls, would not hear of her remaining at home.

Sick at heart, and anxious for the whole business to be over, Ruth followed her aunt and cousin into the schoolroom, where the desks had been cleared away, and the drawings and work of the pupils were arranged for exhibition.

A number of visitors had already arrived, and were walking round inspecting the drawings, etc., and chatting in little groups, until Mr. Redcliffe, a gentleman of influence and wide repute, entered the schoolroom and took his seat. He made a little speech upon the value of education, complimented Miss Elgin upon her excellent system of instruction and the proficiency of her pupils, and said a few words of congratulation and encouragement to each of the girls as they came forward to receive their prizes.

Ruth's turn came last, and perhaps on that account his words to her were even kinder and more appreciative. He considered that the prize for general improvement was perhaps better worth having than any other, because, in order to gain it, one must indeed have proved worthy, he said to the blushing girl who stood before him, trembling and full of shame, which, however, appeared to be humility.

The longed-for moment had come at last, and Ruth held in her hand the prize for which she had worked and striven. Yes, she had gained it, but at what a cost!

At the cost of truth and honour, of right principle and self-respect. It was a very poor exchange for them, and the unhappy girl would gladly have given it up, would have borne any disappointment, anything but the humiliation of confession, to have been her old light-hearted innocent self again. But she had done wrong, and although she shrank from pain, she had to bear what, in her state of mind, was indeed a trial—the kind congratulations of her school-fellows, and

the praises of her teacher and friends. Even when she reached home the trial was not over, for her uncle and cousins had each some kind word to say.

"And now, my dear, you must write to your father and mother," said Mrs. Woburn that afternoon. "How proud and delighted they will be to hear of your success!"

That letter! It was the hardest task of all to write and tell her parents what she knew would give them so much pleasure, while she was concealing the fact which would, if known, give them far greater pain. She spent the afternoon writing and re-writing it, and at last sent off a stiff, constrained little note, informing them that she had been successful, and hoped they were all well.

When Mrs. Arnold received the letter, she read it again and again. She felt convinced, from the absence of any playful remarks, from Ruth's unusual brevity and lack of detail, that something was wrong; but she knew that if her daughter did not write freely she could not *force* her confidence. So she carried the trouble to her Heavenly Father, and asked Him to lead and guide her absent child.

Christmas was upon them almost before Ruth was aware of it, the gayest and most festive Christmas time that she had ever known, a round of parties, pleasure and merriment. It needs a mind at peace to be able to enter into and enjoy the innocent pleasures of life, and to feel no bitterness when they are past. And Ruth, in spite of the presents she received, the parties to which she was invited, and the pretty dresses she wore, was troubled in mind, and therefore unhappy.

Two things weighed heavily upon her, her own deceit, and her promise to Gerald.

She had been so carefully trained, and so early taught the difference between right and wrong, that she could not look upon her prize without being reminded of the temptation to which she had so suddenly yielded, and the equivocation to which she had resorted in order to hide it.

Then her promise to Gerald troubled her greatly. She felt almost sure, though she could not prove it, that he was not keeping his word. He came down in the morning very late, looking pale and haggard, scarcely tasted his breakfast, and hurried away to the office; and when he returned in the evening either pooh-poohed his mother's anxious inquiries about his health, or answered her curtly and snappishly.

Everything was going wrong, Ruth said to herself continually.

She had done very wrong, had taken a false step, and she felt truly enough that no power on earth could alter that fact. And having once started on a downward path it seemed of no use to try to stop and to do better in future: she must give up all her struggles to do right, and go down, down. It requires a very hardened sinner to forget the past, and begin again as if nothing had happened; or a very humble Christian to start again, after repeated failures, in dependence upon God. Ruth's self-sufficiency was gone, and she sadly admitted to herself that she was no better than Julia and the other girls. She had given up reading her Bible now, thinking its sweet messages were not for her, a wayward, erring one, and would scarcely dare to pray even for the safety and well-being of the dear ones at home. Too broken-spirited to make resolutions which she felt herself to be too weak to carry out, afraid to open her Bible and read therein her own condemnation, and feeling that her sin had raised a barrier, which she was unable to remove, between herself and God, the New Year began in sorrow and sadness. "Your sins have separated between you and your God." These words were continually in her mind, and the remembrance of the peace and joy which she had once felt in thinking of the things belonging to the kingdom only made her more miserable.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SO AS BY FIRE.

"Hark! what was that?" exclaimed Ruth one night, starting up in bed.

She had been half-dozing, half-dreaming, when she was startled by a slight noise downstairs, as if something had fallen.

"I believe it is Gerald. I will go down at once, and tell him that as he has not kept his word I am no longer bound by my promise."

She sprang out of bed, slipped on her dressing-gown and shoes, and hurried downstairs, anxious to meet her cousin before he went up to his room, and to get rid of the embargo which rested so heavily upon her.

Down the stairs and into the hall she went without meeting him. The front-door was fastened and bolted securely. Had she been mistaken, or had he already gone to his room?

One moment she stood in perplexity and doubt. Then hearing a slight noise, and seeing a bright light shining under the door of the little study, she turned the handle and opened the door to

enter, but stepped back, half-blinded by the cloud of smoke which immediately enveloped her. The next moment she discovered the form of Gerald, who was evidently asleep in his chair, bending over the table, upon which were some blazing papers. The table itself was on fire, and the cloth that covered it was smouldering and giving forth volumes of smoke.



Ruth gave a piercing scream, which alarmed the household, rushed into the room, caught up the heavy rug and threw it over the table, seized her cousin by the arm, and tried with all her might to drag him from the room.

Before she succeeded in arousing him her aunt and uncle came to her relief, drawn thither by her cry of alarm. They were soon followed by the terrified servants, who, under Mr. Woburn's direction, quickly extinguished the fire and removed Gerald.

The young man was soon restored to consciousness, and started up with a bewildered look, but his face assumed an expression of fear and horror as he gradually realized how narrowly he had escaped from a dreadful death.

"Oh, Gerald! How did it occur?" asked his mother, giving utterance to the question which had been uppermost in the minds of all.

"Don't ask," he almost groaned; "and yet you must know it, sooner or later."

"Do tell everything, Gerald," implored Ruth, who, now that the terror and excitement were over, stood pale and shivering. "It was partly my fault, you know; I ought not to have made that promise."

Thus entreated, Gerald told them the story of his faults and follies; of his midnight carousals and their discovery by Ruth, of his overwhelming love of pleasure, of half-hours stolen from the office during his father's absence and of work neglected. He went on to say that the chief clerk had told him, a few days before, that he really must inform Mr. Woburn how shamefully neglected were the books under his son's care; that he dreaded his father's anger, and promised to write up the books and finish his work before the end of January. For this purpose he had brought home the books and worked at them stealthily by night until drowsiness overtook him, and he probably knocked over the candle which had done the mischief.

Mr. Woburn felt more anger than he dared to show at such a time, just after his son's deliverance from a horrible fate, and he turned the subject by applauding Ruth's presence of mind and bravery.

"Don't praise me, I can't bear it! I am as bad as Gerald!" she sobbed, and rushed away to her own room.

Before daylight the next morning Mrs. Woburn was at her door with a steaming cup of coffee.

"Drink this, my dear," she said. "How your hand trembles! I was afraid that you would feel ill after your dreadful fright. Indeed, dear," she said, her eyes full of tears, "I can never thank you, never feel half grateful enough for your brave rescue of my poor Gerald."

"Don't say that, auntie. If—if anything had happened, it would have been my fault. I ought to have told you of his wrong-doing long ago."

"It was only your goodness of heart, darling," said her aunt kindly.

"But it wasn't *right*, auntie. I deceived you. Oh dear! I feel such a bundle of deceit. I've deceived

every one," she said under a sudden impulse. "No, don't stop me; I must tell you all about it."

Then she poured into her ear the whole story of the prize as well as her promise to Gerald, and finished by saying that she had been perfectly miserable all through the holidays.

Mrs. Woburn was surprised and somewhat shocked at this recital; but she was good-natured, and her sense of wrong had been growing dull so many years that she failed to understand Ruth's emotion.

"Poor child!" she said gently, "it has been very bad for you, but it is all over now, and you will do better in future."

"Oh, auntie, how can I?" she exclaimed, as she thought what a different reply her mother would have made.

"I must tell Miss Elgin," she said resolutely; "and I suppose all the girls must know, and Julia, and—and father and mother."

"Do you think that necessary, dear? You are very sorry, I am sure. Is not that enough?"

"Nothing can make it right, I know, auntie; but I cannot, and will not, deceive them any longer."

Ruth burst into a fit of hysterical crying, and was only quieted by her aunt's promise to go with her that very day to call upon Miss Elgin.

"Poor Ruth seems quite ill," said Mrs. Woburn at breakfast-time. "I persuaded her to stay in bed a little while, and I think she will be better soon. She has made quite a confession to me."

"What was it about?" inquired Julia.

Then, according to her niece's wish, she repeated the whole story, concluding with the remark that, after all, it was not quite such a serious matter as the poor child seemed to think. She remembered that girls used to copy when she went to school, and they worked so hard now that it really was somewhat excusable.

"You would think it was serious if you heard Ruth denounce it," was Julia's reply. "She could never say enough against it, and pretended to be so much better than any of us. To think of her having looked over me! I couldn't have believed it!"

Ernest made no remark, though he listened attentively to the conversation.

The visit to Miss Elgin, which Mrs. Woburn did not consider necessary, was a very trying ordeal. *She* certainly did not make light of the matter, although she did not think it would be advisable to tell the girls; it would be sufficient for them to know that Ruth was under her displeasure.

"I feared at first that there was something wrong," she said, "but I could not doubt your word, Ruth; I have always trusted to your high principle and honour. Henceforth I must act differently, and you must not expect to be trusted."

There was no palliation of the offence, which she surveyed from her high stand-point of justice alone.

"Now, Ruth, your troubles are over," said her aunt gaily as they returned home.

"Over! Are they?" she sighed wearily to herself, "when I have to write home, and to live next term under Miss Elgin's displeasure, and all my life with the remembrance of this behind me!"

It was a great trial to have to write home to dispel her mother's fond hopes and her father's pride in her; to tell them that their Ruth was not the frank, open, truth-loving girl they had always believed her; to prove to them that one of their children could stoop to equivocation and deceit. Yes, it was a hard and bitter task, and she shed a good many tears over it as she wrote, almost oblivious of everything else in the little study, where the traces of the fire still remained.

Presently she raised her head, and saw Ernest looking at her—not curiously, but with a kind, compassionate gaze.

"Ruth," he said, in a low tone, "I am awfully sorry for you, but I can't understand why you should be so unhappy *now*."

"I shall always be wretched," said Ruth bitterly; "all my life, I expect."

"I—I thought when first you came here that you were a Christian," said the boy timidly.

"I thought so too," sobbed Ruth, "but I suppose I was wrong. Everything goes wrong here, and that happy time is so far away."

"But if you have confessed to God, and have His forgiveness, the happiness will come again."

"Confess to *Him*? How could I? He is such a long way off now, and there is such a gulf between that I cannot pray to Him."

"Oh, Ruth; you are making a great mistake. You know that Jesus died on purpose to put away sin, to break down the wall, to bridge over the gulf. He is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. It is you that have changed, not Christ. Go to Him at once; it is of no use humbling yourself and confessing to others if you stop away from Him. He only can forgive and send peace."

"Your sins have separated between you and your God," said Ruth solemnly.

"The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin," replied her cousin.

"Ernest, you are a Christian!" said Ruth suddenly.

"Yes, I hope so," replied the boy, reddening as his shyness and self-consciousness returned.

"Why did you never talk to me before?" asked Ruth; "you might have helped me so much. I thought I was all alone and better than the rest."

"It was wrong, I know," he replied, "but I am so foolish I cannot talk about these things; yet I felt so sorry for you just now, for I thought you had forgotten."

"Forgotten what?"

"How much God loves you. 'Like as a father pitieth his children,' you know, Ruth."

She made no reply, but slipped away to her own room to lay her heavy burden at the feet of the Crucified One.

I remember hearing some years ago of a little child who, being reprov'd for some naughty deed, seemed very unhappy, and was seen to steal into a room close by, where he knelt down and lisped in his baby tones, "Dear God, *mis'able*." How much there was in that tiny prayer, that one word! It was indeed the essence of heartfelt prayer, the laying down of the soul's burden.

Ruth could hardly find words in which to express the cry of her heart, but when she went downstairs half an hour later there was a peaceful look upon her face and a gladness in her very step which had been wanting since she came to Busyborough. She had sought and obtained pardon, and had rejoiced once more in the sweet texts which she read in her Bible. She added a long postscript to her home letter, and that night Ernest found upon his dressing-table a little twisted note containing these words—

"Dear Ernest,—Thank you for ever and ever.

"Your forgiven and happy cousin,

"RUTH."

CHAPTER XIX.

LIVING IT DOWN.

The holidays were over about the end of January, and Ruth once more accompanied her cousin to Addison College. But she entered the schoolroom in a different spirit, distrusting self and relying only upon Divine help.

She had need enough of grace and strength, for the day had not passed before the girls noticed that Miss Elgin had lost confidence in her and was inclined to regard her with distrust and suspicion, and they wondered greatly what had caused the change. Julia of course was questioned, and without really wishing to do her cousin an injury she gradually let out the facts concerning the prize. The girls took different views of the case, according to their liking for Ruth and their sense of right and wrong. There was a great deal of talk for a few days, and then the matter was forgotten by all but Miss Elgin, whose manner was a constant reminder of the affair.

As for Ruth herself, she could *almost* say, "None of these things move me," so trivial did they seem; for she was rejoicing in the consciousness of forgiveness and pardon, her heart was resting after its wanderings, filled with the "peace which passeth all understanding." The sheep had come back to the fold, there to abide, to find its shelter safer and sweeter than ever.

Mrs. Arnold's reply to her daughter was at once tender, sorrowful, hopeful and motherly. She grieved over what had happened, but rejoiced that her child had no longer any secret to hide from her; she pointed out the only path of safety, and commended her to the care and keeping of the loving Father who had watched over her during all her waywardness and had brought her back to Himself.

That letter aroused an intense longing for home, for a glimpse of all the dear faces which she had not seen for seven long months. August seemed so far away, though each day brought it nearer. Ernest had quite relapsed into his usual shy, quiet manner, and it was only occasionally that he was willing to talk with his cousin upon the one subject which was a bond of union between them.

A change took place in the household early in March, for Gerald left home. His accident and subsequent explanations opened his father's eyes to shortcomings which he had for some time suspected, yet it was also the means of establishing a better relation between them.

The injury which the fire had caused to the books was a most serious matter, and not even several weeks' work was able to repair the mischief. The whole matter was necessarily known to all the clerks, and Mr. Woburn decided that his son must no longer remain in his office, where he

had been able persistently to shirk his duties. Gerald was thankful to have a chance of starting afresh, away from his old associates, and gladly fell in with his father's proposal that he should leave Busyborough, and take a situation which was easily procured for him in another town.

Julia openly lamented his going, and also cried over it a good deal in secret, for she was very much attached to her eldest brother, and had regarded Ruth far more kindly ever since the night when she had been the means of saving him.

"I used to think that you hated Gerald," she said to her cousin one day, "and he seemed so kind and polite to you, and so cross to me, that I grew jealous and couldn't bear you;" and Ruth was somewhat amused to overhear Julia remark to a friend that she thought she (Ruth) "had really improved of late."

Study, lessons, classes, essays, and practice were again the important matters to which attention was directed daily, and there was little time for recreation or amusement until Easter, when Gerald returned for a few days, and there was a fortnight's respite from the apparently endless round of school duties.

A day's excursion of about ten miles into the country, in search of primroses and other wild flowers, greatly revived Ruth's longing for home. It seemed so strange to think that the Cressleigh woods were studded with primroses and anemones, and that she would not gather them nor see the woods until the flowers had all vanished.

One more term's work, and then—hurrah for home! Such were her thoughts when she returned to school again after her brief holiday; and as it would probably be her last term, she determined to work with redoubled vigour and energy to acquire the knowledge which she would afterwards be able to impart to her young brothers and sisters.

Miss Elgin's coolness and distrust considerably abated, when she saw Ruth working diligently and bearing with patience the petty taunts and slights of her school-fellows. Her influence was greater than it had been. She no longer found fault with the other girls in the spirit of the Pharisee, but spoke compassionately, knowing what it was to be tempted and to fall, and her companions were more inclined to follow the example of one who was striving to do right than to be influenced by the precepts of a self-sufficient paragon.

There were still many slips and shortcomings, but she neither concealed nor made light of them; she simply confessed herself in the wrong and began again in the strength which comes from above.

So the term passed, and Ruth, who believed that her school-days were nearly over, began to take a mournful pleasure in thinking, "This is the last time I shall ever do this or that," and drew many plans for her future life.

Miss Elgin said that it was a pity for her to leave school when she was learning so much and making such satisfactory progress; but Ruth somewhat propitiated her by saying that she would work hard and keep up her studies at home.

But how little we know what the future will bring!

Just before the holidays, Ruth received a letter which contained the alarming news that one of the younger children was ill with scarlatina, and that she would be obliged to postpone her return home for at least a few weeks. She was anxious to go at once and help her mother in her work of nursing, but her parents would not allow her to run the risk of entering the infected house.

It was disappointing, more especially as she had just gained a handsome prize, which was indeed fairly hers by right of industry and patience.

Yet after all it was no great hardship to go to the sea-side again with her aunt and cousins to spend the summer holidays. The reports from Cressleigh were not encouraging. Letter after letter brought the news that another of the home-birds had been stricken with fever, and for a week they were all in terrible anxiety about Daisy, the youngest child and pet of the household. But her life was spared, and she began to recover slowly.

The summer days passed quickly at the sea-side, and when September came Ruth cherished a faint hope that she might be allowed to return home. A letter from her father, however, dispelled any such idea. He said that although the invalids were going on well there was a great deal of fever in the neighbourhood, and the doctor did not consider that it would be safe for her to return for several months. He thought, therefore, that she could not do better than accept her aunt's kind offer that she should return with her to Busyborough, and continue to attend Addison College until Christmas, or even Easter.

Ruth was again disappointed, but she knew that useless murmurs would be a poor return for her aunt's kindness. So she put a brave face upon the matter, and wiped away the tears that would come. Like David of old, she encouraged herself in the Lord, and once more took up her daily duties in the form of lessons and study.

CHAPTER XX.

HOME AGAIN.

It was Easter again before Ruth was allowed to return to Cressleigh. How little she had thought when she left it that she would not see the old home and its inmates for nearly two years!

But the time had really passed, and the day had come at last when she must bid farewell to school-days and Busyborough, and take leave of her aunt, uncle, and cousins. Partings are never pleasant when we are leaving those we love, and Ruth had grown very fond of them all during her protracted visit. Julia's animosity had been allayed long since, and Mrs. Woburn had grown to love her niece as a daughter. She had been for some time the peace-making element of the household, and a great favourite with Rupert, who was growing a fine sturdy boy. Ernest was sorry to lose her, though, as usual, he was not profuse in his expressions of regret. The shy, awkward boy was developing into a clever but somewhat reserved young man. Ruth had understood him far better than any of his own family, and he knew that he should miss her sadly.

The farewells at the house and good-byes at the railway station were painful, and it was a tearful face of which Mrs. Woburn caught a last glimpse through the carriage window; but when the train started, Ruth's mind was so full of joyful anticipations of her welcome home that she could not feel sad. She wondered, as she leaned back and closed her eyes, what they would think of her, whether her father would think her improved or spoiled, and she began to reflect how much she had learnt, and what experience she had gained of the world and of her own heart during her absence. It seemed to her that the Ruth Arnold who had left home nearly two years ago was a very simple, ignorant little girl, whom she could think of as quite apart from herself.

So busy was she with her thoughts that she scarcely noticed her fellow-passengers leaving the carriage one by one, until she was aroused by a cry of "All change here." Was that Crook Junction? Yes, surely. Then she was only ten miles from home.

She hastened from the carriage to look after her luggage, and was astonished to hear a familiar voice say, "Ruth." It was her father. How kind of him to come to meet her! In a few minutes both father and daughter were seated in another carriage travelling on the loop line to Cressleigh, and Ruth was talking very fast, trying to tell all the events of two years in five minutes, and stopping again and again to ask a question or to recognise some familiar landmark.

Primroses were blooming everywhere, and the country looked gay with them.

"The children were remarking last night," said her father, "that the spring has decorated all Cressleigh in honour of your return."

"Here we are at last!" cried Ruth, as the train stopped at the well-known little station with its little garden-strip of bright flowers beside the platform. And there was Will, dear old Will, grown such a handsome fellow, waiting in the station-yard with the brown mare in the old light cart.

After a hasty greeting came the drive home along the lanes, where the trees were bursting into leaf, and the hedgerows were gay with starry blossoms, and the air was delicious after the smoke of a large town.

The children were waiting at the gate, and a little group stood in the porch to receive her. It was indeed a home-coming, and the poor girl was almost bewildered by the kissing, the waving, the shouting, the questions, the entreaties to "look at this," and "come and see that." Mrs. Arnold was obliged to dismiss the whole party after Ruth had duly admired the floral decorations in the hall, and had commented upon the many inches added to the various members of the family during her absence, and secured her a few minutes' quiet by carrying her off to her own room.

How tiny and bare it looked after her comfortable, pretty room at Busyborough, and yet so snug and sweet! How delightfully fresh was the breeze that blew about the white dimity curtains, and what a wide range of country she could see instead of a vista of windows, roofs, and chimneys-pots! Yes, indeed, though simple and plain, it was "Home, sweet home," and there was no other place in the world like it.

Tea followed, a merry, noisy meal, for every one had so much to say, and although Ruth talked very fast she was not able to reply to half the questions that were put to her. But the exertion and excitement of the day had made her feel weary, and she was thankful when the evening drew to a close, and her father took down the big Bible and read a psalm; and in the prayer that followed he gave thanks for her safe return, and prayed that she might be a comfort and blessing to all the household. When Ruth lay in her little bed that night her last conscious thought was of the day's changes and the morrow's duties, and she asked that He who had guided her in the past would be with her in the future, and that He would help her in her work as the eldest daughter at home, as He had guided and helped her in her life at Busyborough as The Country Cousin.

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